

Flourish

Week 4: Pruned

Walmart created a bit of a stir on social media recently. For the first time in 20 years, they changed their logo. And companies do this from time to time. They want to keep their brand looking modern and fresh, so they update colors and designs. After 20 years, the people in charge of these things at Walmart thought it was time for a, “comprehensive brand refresh.”

So, here’s their old logo (show image). The familiar blue and yellow star. Pretty recognizable around the world. But they wanted something modern and fresh, so this is what they came up with...(show image 2).

Now, if you’re having trouble seeing the difference, you’re not alone. This hardly looks like a “comprehensive brand refresh.” If anything, it looks like they just selected the text and hit “CTRL+B” to make the font bold. Which is why social media users had a lot of fun mocking it. They couldn’t believe someone got paid for this.

I read an interesting article from Forbes about why the online world was so angry about this new logo. And, aside from the online world just being angry about everything, they pointed out a couple of reasons that I thought were interesting.

The first reason is that we typically prefer just sticking with the status quo. The majority of people don’t like change. They prefer things to just remain the same. The school of thought behind this is called Loss Aversion Bias, which states: “the response to losses is stronger than the response to corresponding gains.” In other words, the pain of losing something is stronger than the pleasure of getting something new.

So, if you’ve ever set your alarm earlier in the morning because you wanted to get up and workout, but then just kept hitting snooze because you wanted to keep sleeping...the pain of losing sleep was stronger than the pleasure of getting up and working out...that’s Loss Aversion Bias, and it’s one of the reasons why we don’t like change. It can feel painful.

Another reason why the new Walmart logo received so much backlash is because people believe they know more, and can do a better job, than the “experts” can. Most of us have a cognitive bias that overestimates our knowledge and ability. It’s the group of guys sitting at Cloverleaf “solving the world’s problems.” There’s something in all of us that thinks if we were in charge, things would be done right, or that we could do it better. The truth is, we are overly confident in our own correctness.

I think these two things get to the heart of what we’re talking about today. We don’t like change because it can feel painful, and we think we know what is best and how it should be done. But, Scripture confronts both of these things in us. Scripture teaches us to surrender control of our life to the Lord because HE knows best. It says that, when we put our faith in

Jesus, we start a process of transformation. Our old way of living is snipped away, piece by piece, to make room for the new creation God is forming inside of us.

When we confess Jesus to be our Lord and Savior, we're saying that He knows best, so we're giving control of our life over to Him to shape and mold us into His image. But then we quickly take back control because transformation can be painful sometimes and we think we know best. And what I find in my own life is that there's this constant battle over who's in control. Who's way am I going to follow?

I want to surrender to the Lord and live a transformed life, but when it requires something of me that feels hard to give, I go my way instead. The pain of losing control feels stronger than the joy of transformation that I actually desire. When the wisdom of God's Word confronts my own "wisdom," I think I know best and that I'm the expert of my life. So I trust my own knowledge and ability because I think I know better, even though I can look back on a string of moments in my life where going my way didn't work out very well.

But our Heavenly Father is faithful and patient with us. And we can trust that any change he makes in our life is for our good and because He knows what we ultimately need...or need to let go of...to flourish in life. I think that's what Jesus is getting at in our text today. Look at it with me...(READ John 15:1-2)

Over the last couple of weeks, we've talked about how Jesus is the vine and we are the branches. When we remain connected with Him, we grow stronger. Our lives flourish. He alone can satisfy and sustain us because He is the true vine. And at the end of verse 1, Jesus says that the Father is the gardener. In John 15, God is described as the good gardener who is always pruning the branches. He sees our true potential and lovingly cuts back anything that gets in the way of it.

And that's what pruning is. It's cutting back the limbs and leaves and twigs that keep the plant from flourishing. And even though pruning is cutting something away, there's a sense of pain and loss, what is gained is so much better. The plant receives more nourishment and sunlight. It's able to grow healthier and stronger and bear more fruit.

A vineyard in the Napa Valley puts it like this on their website...

"Why do we prune? Because if the vine is not pruned it reverts very quickly to its wild nature, climbing everywhere with its long sinewy trunk and tiny scraggly bunches of uneven grapes. Every year we need to assess the growth of the vines, and decide whether to prune them back harder, or to let them grow a bit bigger, or return them to the same size and shape they were the year before." -Matthiasson Wines

Pruning is an act of care and attention. It's done to get the most fruit out of the branch. Which is why God prunes us. And sometimes that pruning can be painful. We'd rather keep

that old stuff on us, even if it is stealing life away from us. We might think that God is cutting off too much, too quickly and that we'd do it better if He just gave the sheers over to us.

But, as our Good Gardener, we can trust that anything He prunes from us is for our good. It's so our lives can flourish and bear more fruit of His love, joy, peace... He has a vision of what your life could look like, so He is constantly pruning and bringing you more into alignment with His heart and the image of Jesus.

So, **why does God prune us?** I think it's the same reason why gardeners prune their plants. God prunes us **to remove what is diseased and dying.**

Those secret sins we hope no one finds out about, that toxic relationship that leaves us feeling empty, the habits that hurt us and others...those things suck the life out of us and they have a way of affecting every part of our life. They are the diseased and dying parts of our old life that keep us from living fully as the new creation Jesus makes us, and so God wants to prune them away for our good.

God also prunes us **to remove what is stealing nutrients from us.** In gardening, these things are called *sucker shoots*. Sucker shoots are branches or stems that grow off the plant, but don't bear any fruit. They just steal nutrients from the healthy branches. And often times, sucker shoots grow in response to stress or an injury to the plant and if they're not removed, it actually makes the plant more vulnerable to damage.

And all of us have sucker shoots in our life that are stealing nutrients from us. A few years ago, I realized one of mine was social media. It had gotten to the point that it was robbing me of joy and peace and kindness. The Lord had to prune it away from me. Last Fall, it became my News app. I had to remove it for a little bit because it was stealing time away from the Word.

Sucker shoots rob our lives of the nutrients we need to flourish and bear fruit. It's one of the reasons I don't golf! They say you're never more like Jesus than when you serve, but I'm never LESS like Jesus than when I play golf! That's a sucker shoot I'm happy to let God cut off. Is there something in your life that's stealing nutrients from you, keeping you from flourishing? Maybe the Lord wants to start pruning it today?

He also prunes us **to make healthy branches stronger.** God cuts back the bad to make room for the good, but sometimes He cuts back the good to make room for the better. Remember what Jesus said in verse 2? **"Every branch that *does* bear fruit he prunes so that it will be *even more fruitful.*"**

God loves us so much that He will sometimes prune away the good because He has something even better in mind for us. God doesn't just settle for "good enough" in our lives. He refines us, cutting away even the smallest parts so our lives can bear the most fruit.

As our good gardener, we can trust that God prunes us for our good. It may not always feel that way and we may sometimes prefer He just leave us alone or leave it up to us, but He knows what's best for us and what will truly make us flourish, so He lovingly and gently prunes away everything else.

Do you believe that today? Do you trust that God is a good gardener who loves you and that you can turn the sheers over to? [Get comfy...time for reflection.]

I'm going to read some things that God may want to prune in your life today, just like He wants to prune in my life. And if you trust that God is good and loving and kind and has your best in mind, I want you to pray a dangerous prayer today. If there's one of them that hits you after I read it, I want you to just linger there for a moment and pray for God to do His work in you. To prune you so that your life can bear more fruit and flourish.

Are there any dead and diseased branches in your life that need to go? Any addictions you need to seek help with? Any toxic relationships that aren't honoring you or the Lord? Anything hidden in darkness that you need to pull out into the light?

Is there any bitterness in you that is poisoning the branch of your life? Keeping you from being fully connected to the Vine? Being nourished so you can bear fruit? Is there someone you need to give grace to today? Someone you need to forgive, even if it's yourself?

Are there any fears or insecurities you're holding onto that are holding you back from bearing fruit in your life? Are there good things on your calendar that need to be cut back to make room for better things? Anything you give your time and attention to that could be used from something more? Is there anything you have a white-knuckled grip on that you need to start letting go of to be the person God is making you to be?

God, help us believe you are a good Gardener and to turn control of our lives over to you because you know what is best for us. You know what will lead us to the flourishing life we desire. Prune us, Lord, into the image of Jesus so that our lives will bear more fruit of your love and peace and joy and kindness. May we not refuse it, but may we receive your pruning with trust, knowing there is a greater purpose to it than what we can even imagine. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Communion Setup

Invitation: The truth is, we all need the Good Gardener. Without Him, we're like branches cut off, unable to produce life on our own. But through Jesus, we can experience forgiveness, renewal, and the abundant life God created us for.

If you've been trying to do life on your own, apart from the vine, Jesus is inviting you to something better. He's inviting you to trust in Him, to allow Him to prune and shape your life so that you can grow into the person He created you to be.

You don't have to have it all figured out. You don't have to clean yourself up first. Jesus meets you where you are and offers you a life of connection, growth, and purpose in Him.

If you're ready to take that step, to trust in the Good Gardener and follow Jesus, we'd love to walk alongside you. Don't leave today without letting someone know. Jesus is ready to give you a new beginning...a life rooted in His love and overflowing with His grace.