

Fuel for the Mission

John 15:1-6

Last week we talked about the difficulty of living on mission because a change of direction and ownership has to take place in our lives. Jesus doesn't allow his disciples to continue to live for themselves in pursuit of the things of this world. He calls us to deny ourselves from going that way and for the rest of our lives follow him on his mission. That means there are things that we really, really want in this world that we are going to have to give up. Following Christ is going to cost us and that is a change that can be very difficult for us to make.

But we also talked about how following Christ is like making an investment and the return on that investment is going to be incredible. The rewards in heaven are going to be far greater than the cost. So making the change will be worth it. But for most of us, from what we can see, that return on our investment is still years, if not decades away. And we have to continue to be faithful throughout this time here on earth in the midst of the difficulty of the day-to-day struggles of living on mission. There will be plenty of days where our flesh is weak and the desire to give up and turn back to the world will be strong. So how are we going to persevere in living out our mission in the days that we have left here on earth?

The kids and I have been burning quite a bit of brush leftover from last fall's tree trimming and we've also been burning some scrap lumber that was cluttering up my garage, and I've been teaching them the basics about building a fire and how to keep a good fire burning. You need heat, fuel, and oxygen to get a fire started, and once it's going, you have to keep adding fuel or the fire is going to burn out. The same is true in our lives if we are going to continue to live on mission. Knowing that there are incredible rewards waiting for us at the end is very helpful to keep us going in the right direction, but it isn't enough for us to endure from day to day. We also need regular fuel to keep our zeal for the Lord and his mission burning hot in our lives.

So this morning we are going to look at what that fuel is, where it comes from and how it empowers us. We're going to look at a passage from the gospel of John where Jesus was teaching his disciples in the last evening before he was crucified. He used a new analogy to help them see their purpose in life, which we've talked about a lot in this series. In previous weeks we've seen him talk about becoming

fishers of men and being the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Today he uses the analogy of a grapevine. So he begins by introducing the idea to them to help them see their purpose and where the fuel for the mission comes from.

Read John 15:1-3

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. ² Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. ³ Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.

So he sets up this idea of a grapevine, something that was common to them and to us – some of you even have grapevines on your property. There's the main trunk, the branches, and the fruit that make up the grapevine, and then there's the vinedresser who does the pruning. The primary purpose of the vine is that it will produce a bountiful harvest of fruit, so if the vinedresser finds branches that aren't producing, he removes them. And with the good branches that are producing fruit, he prunes them by cutting off the excess growth so that they produce even more fruit.

So this vine is a picture of Jesus and his followers. By that time there were many people that were following him, but most of them were following him for the wrong reasons. They weren't really devoted to him and his mission, they were just along for the ride. Jesus says they were the branches on the vine that weren't producing any fruit. If you have a grapevine, you know exactly what he's talking about. Every year there are dead, unproductive branches that have to be cut off because they aren't doing the vine any good. They aren't accomplishing their purpose, so you cut them off so the vine can focus its energy on the healthy branches. These represent the people who call themselves Christians but aren't living for Christ and joining him in his mission. They are living for themselves and pursuing the things of this world. They are like salt that has lost its saltiness or an oil lamp that's been placed under a basket – they aren't fulfilling their purpose. It's another reminder as we've seen in previous weeks that being a Christian isn't just about getting saved; it's about joining Christ in his mission.

But then there are the healthy branches. These are Jesus' true disciples who are committed to him and his mission. They are producing fruit because they're carrying out their purpose in life. They're living for Christ by living lives that shine

for God. So with them, the vinedresser skillfully prunes back excess growth and offshoots that are going in the wrong direction. He does that so they don't expend their energy in empty pursuits, and so they'll produce even more fruit.

That's what God does in our lives when he convicts us of sin and calls us to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him, like we looked at last week. He doesn't want us pursuing the things of this world as our primary purpose, so he takes us through a pruning process that includes self-denial, submission, and obedience. He does this through the indwelling presence of his Spirit and through his word. Jesus said to his disciples, *"Already you are clean (or "pruned") because of the word that I have spoken to you."* They had been listening to Jesus' teaching and making changes in their lives. God was pruning them. When we allow God's word to shape our lives by repenting of sin and walking in obedience to him, we are being pruned by the great Vinedresser so that we will accomplish our purpose more and more.

So you can see that this is another helpful analogy for understanding our purpose, but the main point is in what Jesus says next when he uses it to teach us where the fuel comes from that we need in order to continue carrying out our purpose here on earth.

Read John 15:4-6.

⁴ Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. ⁵ I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

So he continues to use the idea of the grapevine and focuses in on the relationship between the healthy branches and the main trunk. Everyone knows that if a branch is cut off or separated from the main part of the vine it is going to shrivel up and die. It certainly can't produce any fruit. It has been cut off from its only source of water and nutrients. The main trunk has everything it needs for life and to be able to produce fruit, so if it's going to accomplish its purpose, it has to abide, or remain connected to the vine.

Jesus is the vine and we are the branches. And the only way we are going to continue to carry out our purpose and live on mission through the ups and downs of life is by abiding in Christ. We have to remain connected to the vine, and I believe he has an active, relational connection in mind that involves love, trust, and dependence on him. I picture a branch being grafted into a tree – the branch gets connected and the sap starts to flow. His life-giving Spirit flows into us like sap flowing into the branches of a vine. If we aren't connected – if we try to live the Christian life apart from him, we will shrivel up and die. We won't produce any fruit. We will turn back to living for the things in this world. Christ has everything we need in order to live for him and carry out his mission. We need his life, love, and Spirit flowing into us, like sap flowing into the branches, and that happens as we intentionally cultivate our relationship with him. He is the fuel we need in order to live on mission.

I went grocery shopping on Friday night. You know when the worst time is to go grocery shopping? When your stomach is empty. You might have two things on your list, but if you walk into that store hungry, you'll probably walk out of there with a cart full of food. But if you walk into that store with a full stomach, chances are you will just get the two things on your list. When your hunger is satisfied, you're able to focus on your mission. You don't get distracted by all the other things that could fill you up because you're already full. But when you're hungry, you're easily distracted. Your mouth starts to water, and everything looks good. You might even forget about the reason you went to the store in the first place.

Our souls are a lot like our stomachs – they can be empty or full; they can feel hungry or satisfied. And what Jesus says to his disciples in the analogy of the grapevine is that they need to abide in him so that their souls are satisfied in him, so that his life and love is flowing into them and filling them and fueling them for the mission. It's what they need to be able to focus on the mission. There is a hunger deep in our souls that needs to be satisfied by the Spirit of the living Christ flowing into us. David writes about this in Psalm 42 where he says, *"As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. ² My soul thirsts for God, for the living God."* When we connect with Jesus, we find what we need for our souls to be satisfied. And when that happens, we are able to stay focused on the mission and fulfill our purpose. We don't get distracted by the things in this world. We're able to deny ourselves and follow Jesus.

When we don't stay connected to him, we go through life hungry and seek to be satisfied by the things in this world. Like going grocery shopping on an empty stomach, the things in this world make our mouths water. They become distractions. We're drawn to them to try to find purpose and fulfillment. And we become like a branch that's been disconnected from the vine. We can't produce fruit and don't carry out our mission.

So if you and I are going to be followers of Christ who are producing fruit by living on mission, we have to be intentional about connecting and cultivating our relationship with Christ. He is the fuel that we need for the mission. I'm not a NASCAR fan, but I do know enough to know that the only way those cars are going to be able to finish that race is if they slow down every once in awhile and pull in for a pit stop. They need new tires, more fuel, and a clean windshield or they're never going to finish. The same is true for us. We need to stop for regular pitstops for refueling in order to continue in the mission.

David wrote about what this looked like in his life in Psalm 63: *"O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. ² So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. ³ Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you. ⁴ So I will bless you as long as I live; in your name I will lift up my hands. ⁵ My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food, and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips, ⁶ when I remember you upon my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night; ⁷ for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy. ⁸ My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me."*

David's ways of cultivating his relationship with God included things like going out on the roof of his palace on a starlit night, which he describes as God's sanctuary. It was there that he beheld his power and glory. He experienced his steadfast love that was better than anything in this life and it brought praise to his lips. He also spent time meditating on the Lord in prayer in the privacy of his bedroom at night and it was there that his soul was satisfied, like feasting at a banquet.

Each of us can cultivate our relationship with Christ in similar ways. There isn't a one-size-fits-all formula for connecting with him, but it usually involves things like finding a time and place where you can be alone with God. It's helpful to have a

Bible and a prayer journal to write down your thoughts. You might listen to worship music and spend time singing or praying or meditating on him. I try to take time as soon as I wake up or get to the office to write in my prayer journal and read a devotional book. And my goal isn't to learn more stuff about God, it's to experience relationship with him; to grow in the awareness of his presence in my life and his love for me. I need to feel his presence and his love for me because it's then when my soul is satisfied. I also try to take a day a month to get out of the office and go to the woods on a nice day or a retreat center up north. My goal is to connect with Jesus, so that his life is flowing into me and satisfying my soul.

It's probably going to look different for you based on your situation, but the important thing is that every single one of us pays attention to this critical aspect of our lives. We can't live on mission and carry out our purpose if we don't abide in Christ. He is the fuel that we need and without abiding in him we will begin to dry up and turn to the things of this world.