

“The Garden of Good Works”

On the last six Wednesdays we have used the Bible’s imagery of gardens to give us an overview of God’s plan of salvation for us. It started in the Garden of Promise, a garden that began as a perfect paradise but was ruined by the fall into sin. That six week walk through the Bible’s gardens concluded last week in the Garden of Paradise, the heavenly garden where we will enjoy forever a restored paradise. In each of our garden stops we have seen Jesus, the One who was promised, the One who came to suffer and to die, the One who forgives our sins and will return to welcome us into glory. Tonight we continue that garden theme as we hear the words of Jesus describing the good works that a Christian with a living faith produces. We might call this stop the Garden of Good Works.

Jesus describes that garden for us in John 15:1-5. We heard earlier how Jesus and his disciples had gathered together to celebrate the Passover. The words of our sermon text are taken from their time together that evening, as recorded by the Apostle John. **“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”**

The vine and the branches...bearing fruit...It was not mere coincidence that Jesus used the picture of a *grapevine* to teach about good works on the same night that he used *grape wine* to institute the Lord’s Supper. Our ability to produce good works comes from him. And he gives himself to us in the Lord’s Supper.

Good works do not save us. Good works do not even make a Christian. If, as a pastor, I told you to do something and you went out and did it, you would not for that reason be a Christian. In fact, there are many unbelievers who seemingly do far more and better things than many Christians.

Rather, a true good work is a grateful response to the fact that we are already saved. Such a response is only possible if I believe that I am in fact saved by Jesus’ death and resurrection. In other words, true good works that please God spring from faith that trusts in Jesus for salvation. The Bible says, **“Everything that does not come from faith is sin”** (Romans 14:23). In another place it says, **“Without faith it is impossible to please God”** (Hebrews 11:6). We might call a good work a fruit of faith, something that faith produces. That was just what Jesus did when he said, **“Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me”** (verse 4).

God wants our fruits of faith, our Christian living, to increase continually. The alternative is to be cut off from Christ. For God will not tolerate anything that is not a good work. Jesus said, **“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful”** (verses 1,2).

Yes, even as we stay believers, God doesn’t take us as we are. He keeps trimming sin from us. Sometimes God uses suffering for that purpose. For example, he might deprive us of health or some pleasure or even of a loved one in order to help us kill our love for ourselves and rely only on him. He strengthens us to live lives of service to him, and our fruits of faith grow.

But how can we grow if we don't have it in us to grow like this? What if we feel only our weaknesses, our wrong desires, our disinterest in serving the Lord? Jesus answers that question when he says, **"You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you"** (verse 3). In other words, he forgives us our sins. By forgiving us, God counts it as though he has pruned all sin from you and me completely. He has declared us holy in Christ. His forgiveness is our sap. It's the nectar that we need to stay alive spiritually and to grow in good works.

You see, the more we realize the extent of our own sin, the more we realize what Jesus Christ did for us. The better we fathom how low we are capable of going, the higher we are lifted by his amazing mercy. The more appalled we are at our own potential for ugliness, the more intensely we love him who rescued us in spite of it. The more we cringe at how driven our unholy nature is to self-satisfaction, the more we can only gaze with adoring fascination at him who devoted every waking moment, every ounce of energy to save our lives and not his own.

What other response is there but to love such a Lord? And loving him, we don't ever want to do wrong by him again. He has won our hearts, our gratitude, our loyalty! Our desire to sin starts to die off. Our desire to serve him comes to life. Whatever he wants—somehow we want to please him. In fact, God the Holy Spirit personally uses Christ's forgiveness to equip us for that very purpose in living.

As forgiven children of God, God looks at everything we do and considers it holy—an act contributing to the work of his kingdom and attributing glory to him. We can think, "Wow! Here I wanted to live for him and serve him and now he takes it even further so that he sees *everything* I do as being holy? *Everything* I do as a believer contributes to his kingdom and gives him glory? For Jesus' sake he takes pleasure in what I do even when it is the most routine, menial task?" If he is so kind that he considers my feeble attempts to show him gratitude great and holy things, doesn't the thought of it make you want to do more?

And now Christ our true Vine feeds us and fills us with his own holiness, forgiveness, and love in a special way in the Lord's Supper. In this sacrament we receive his body and blood – Christ himself. Everything he obtained by keeping God's commands; by suffering, dying, and being buried; by descending into hell; by rising from the dead; by ascending into heaven; and by being seated at God's right hand he gives to us along with himself and makes it ours in this sacrament.

Through faith in his words, "This is my body; this is my blood," we are truly supplied and taken care of. Now we are enabled to offer ourselves to one another as he has offered himself to us. Christ's command to believers is this: **"Love each other as I have loved you"** (Jn 15:12).

Martin Luther wrote about the effect of receiving the Lord's Supper in our lives:

Now this is the fruit, that even as we have eaten and drunk the body and blood of Christ the Lord, we in turn permit ourselves to be eaten and drunk, and say the same words to our neighbor, "Take, eat and drink:" and this by no means in jest, but in all seriousness, meaning to offer yourself with all your life, even as Christ did with all that he had, in the sacramental words. . . . We must take and repeat them to our neighbor, not by the mouth alone, but by our actions, saying, "Behold my dear brother, I have received my Lord; he is mine, and I have more than enough and great abundance. Now you take what I have, it shall be yours, and I place it at your disposal. If it is necessary for me to die for you, I will even do that."

This is how we serve Christ in the Garden of Good Works. Amen.