

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Virtually every kind of fruit tree must be pruned in order for it to bear good fruit. Fresh growth from the past few years produces the most fruit. With grape vines, each year most of the branches must be removed so only a few remain. Each bud which remains will produce 2-4 clusters of grapes. Some of those buds will produce upwards of 15-20 foot branches. That is why pruning each year is absolutely necessary, especially if you fertilize. Spraying for pests is important too, but pruning is the most essential way to care for grapes.

Pruning is creative. Its fun. You get to choose which branches will be the producers by guessing which branches will produce the most. In pruning you also plan for the future. If the main vine starts to get too old, then letting a shoot close to the base of the vine become the new vine improves production. Pruning is about getting the most out of one's vines. It's not about deciding a vine is worthless and pulling it out. Vines last a very long time. There are not good and bad vines. It's a matter of knowing what's best for the vine and doing that. Isn't that a great image of the spiritual life? We are being cared for by a vine grower that knows what we need to grow and be fruitful.

God is working with us to produce fruit. The chances and changes in our lives are like pruning. They force us to grow and new growth produces good fruit. Problem is we tend not to like the chances and changes of life. But those are the very edge which give us life. If we hunker down and get real comfortable then we have already begun to spiritually and physically die. A vine which finds itself in the cozy shade and will no longer produce shoots. It will die and dry up. Vines don't typically die because vines are tough. That's why they make great swings into creeks and ponds.

Again, the vine analogy is wonderful. John is telling us that God has made us well. We are tough and our vinedresser knows how to grow good fruit. God will not stop working with us to produce new growth and new life. So pruning is a life giving process. It's not an "angry God" experience. Judgment is the creative edge of our lives. God's judgment challenges us to consider how we might respond to the chances and changes of life—both our own and others' lives. How we respond to grief, to disappointments, to new challenges. The new challenges don't stop until life is done.

So let us not resist the pruning hand of our God. There is grace in the pruning sheers. God is working with us for good, for true beauty, for new growth and life which absolutely will produce fruit. It might not be what we're expecting or that for which we hope. The new growth might not be spectacular or something you'll find on television or in the newspaper. But new growth produces good fruit. New growth and good fruit will always come to those who are willing to be pruned. God is a good vinedresser. The pruning is uncomfortable at times, but very rewarding. It is never too late to receive the pruning of our good God.

Now we have all known folks who have come to resist the pruning hand of God. Everyone is pruned. It comes to everyone who breathes. It's not for a select few. But we choose how we will respond. Some become bitter, hateful, greedy, violent, and lacking in compassion as they resist the pruning. The challenge is to open ourselves to the chances and changes of life so that we may grow into the new life that comes from uncomfortable realities.

John describes these as thrown away branches which are gathered and burned. This is not punishment,

this is reality. But in this metaphor even the burnings can become fertilizer for new growth. Nothing, no one is lost in God's economy!

Each day we can either live and grow, OR recoil from life and die. Seize the moment, do not fear! The Creator Vinedresser is at work in us. Let us not fear the pruning or run from the cutting. Let us instead look forward to the new growth. Faith calls us to trust in the midst of things we do not understand or enjoy. Let us watch for the new growth. It is happening right now. All of the impossible situations which cause us to fear and despair, these are oddly enough, the source of our life and fruitfulness. The Spirit is at work in all of us. Right now.

One word of clarification. Our pruning God will bring new life from very difficult situations. This does not mean that God ever takes pleasure in our pain. God takes pleasure in healing.

When our own choices result in our pain, God is calling us to walk away from destructive choices. The pruning is to choose life rather than pain and death. This is also true of violent relationships. Emotional, financial, psychological and physical violence are unacceptable. Our pruning God can bring new growth and healing in these destructive relationships if each party is willing to learn new patterns of behavior. These are always very difficult, but you are surrounded by people who do or will care about you and they will help you if you ask for help. If you aren't sure where to start, you can talk to me. I am here to listen.

A last word of encouragement. Remember, God made you tough. God is not going to cast you away. If you sense God's pruning work in your life, you are still under God's mercy. And if you are breathing, you are still under God's mercy. Today is always a new day. Today is the day we can say yes to God's pruning action in our lives. Adversity is the stuff of new life and good fruit.

Pray about your adversity. Pray about your pain, frustration, sorrow, and longing for peace. Let us not run from God but run to God.

Amen.