



Discussion Guide

Pruning for more—John 15.1-8

Getting Started: 10 minutes

o What would you like more of in life? What would you be willing to do to get it?

Setting the Stage: *More is always better, or so the saying goes. In many cases more isn't a bad thing. More hair. More time. More love. More money. More. . . doesn't sound like too bad of a thing. Most of the time it isn't that hard to get. The next time you head through the drive-thru just say "Super-size me" and see what happens. My guess is you'll get a good bit more. More isn't that hard to get; that is, unless we are talking about life as it is meant to be. Life, more of the real life the way God intended it, seems to elude us. We spend no small amount of time and energy pursuing it and yet it is still just out of our reach. So what's the deal? Is it that there really isn't more to be had or is it something else? My guess is the answer lies in the latter. The next time you talk to God just say "Super-size me" and see what happens. My guess is the answer that comes back will be something like, "Sure, I'll give you more. I just want more of you in return." Maybe that is where the real sticking point in getting more lies.*

Diving Into the Text: 60 minutes (The following questions are intended to provide your group with a simple road map through the text. Feel free to use these questions in ways that best fit your group and the dynamics of your own meeting.)

- Read John 15.1-8.
- What are the different roles involved in bearing fruit, arriving at the "more" of the Christian life?
- According to Jesus, how do these roles relate and work together?
- Simply put, God's role is to change us and provide more life and our role is to remain, to give Him more of ourselves. In your mind, what does it mean to surrender to God?
- What might surrender look like? How might one go about surrendering?
- Think about your life. What areas do you feel are surrendered to God? What areas remain to be surrendered?
- What was involved in surrendering certain areas of your life? What happened as a result?
- What, if anything, keeps you from surrendering more of yourself to God? Can you explain?
- How might we encourage one another this week to surrender more of ourselves to God?

Wrapping Up: 20 minutes

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Group Notes

Pruning for more: John 15.1-8

Context and Background

John: The Gospel of John is the fourth Gospel and the most unique of the four. It was perhaps the most influential Gospel in the earliest days of the Christian movement. The book of John differs from the other three Gospels in that it has no mention of Jesus' birth and little information about Jesus' ministry in Galilee. In contrast to the other Gospels, John focuses on Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem, his final dialogue with his disciples, and the use of signs and metaphors to point to the divinity of Jesus. Some have noted that John's Gospel is decidedly more "theological" than the other three Gospels. This is not to say that theology is missing from Matthew, Mark and Luke. Rather, John's heavy use of dialogue in contrast to action in the other Gospels and the focus of these dialogues on the thematic topics of faith, life, love, regeneration, and truth provide a more explicit theology than the implicit theology found in the other Gospels. In reading John, one readily discovers information about Jesus that is not found in the other three Gospels and vice versa. Further, one can see that the timeline of Jesus' ministry is decidedly different. These differences can be due to the nature of the Gospels. Matthew, Mark, and Luke seek to record the actions and sayings of Jesus and present them in a loose order while John seems more interested in presenting the actual order of Jesus' ministry. Second, John is concerned with a very narrow aspect of Jesus' ministry, that which took place in Jerusalem while the other Gospel authors attempted to detail the entire ministry of Jesus. Finally, the audience of John is different thus requiring different needs. The audience for Mark and Luke were probably Gentile and therefore less familiar with the customs and happenings of the Jewish people. There is good evidence that Matthew was writing to a Jewish audience and yet was influenced by Mark's Gospel and thus this framework is incorporated into his Gospel with adjustments to account for his audience. That is, Matthew, Mark and Luke incorporate particulars in their Gospels due to their specific audiences. John, on the other hand, seems to attempt to transcend audiences. He therefore places his emphasis on universal truths that lead his audience to faith (John 20.30-31), universals such as light, life, truth, bread and water. His point in so doing may be to clarify questions his audience had about Jesus. Thus, they are not hearing the story of Jesus for the first time but in this Gospel we are encountering a thoughtful response to those who have heard and are reacting to the story of Jesus.

Remain: The word "remain" or "abide" is central to the teaching of Jesus in John 15. The basic idea of the word is that of staying in the realm or sphere in which one finds himself. In the context, this realm or sphere is an intimate relationship with Christ in which Christ is the real or true source of life. At first blush, the word can imply an absence of movement. Certainly an absence of movement is encouraged as one is encouraged to stay in a deep relationship with Jesus. However, Jesus uses the word to encourage effort in fostering this relationship. One is to remain in the same way that Jesus remains; that is, a person is to seek to relate to Christ in the same devotion and affection with which he relates to his followers. The idea is more akin to surrender or giving of oneself fully to a deep relationship with Jesus.

The Text

The nature of the relationship (John 15.1-3): In John 15, Jesus is in the midst of his final discussion with his disciples, a discussion which will prepare them for life after the cross. He has just finished explaining the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of his followers. The Spirit will be the ongoing presence of Jesus for the disciples (John 14.15-18). Jesus fully intends that his relationship with his disciples would not end after the cross. With this in mind, Jesus turns to describe the nature of the disciples' ongoing relationship with Jesus. A relationship with Jesus was one in which Jesus became the true or real vine and the Father became the gardener. With these words, Jesus delineates the separate roles of our Triune God. The Spirit provides connection to Jesus (John 14.15-18). Jesus provides and is the true source of life (John 15.1), and the Father is the one that fosters or directs this life found in Christ (John 15.1b-2). Thus, life is found only through a relationship with Jesus made possible by the Spirit. No one need look further than Jesus to find life for his words make one clean (John 15.3). However, growth in this life comes under the care of the Father. The Father prunes—cleanses in the language of the NT—those who are in a relationship with Jesus. The result of this cleansing is that one bears fruit or experiences judgment in realizing their separation from Jesus. The nature of the bearing of fruit is not explained. However, in the Gospel of John, one might understand this fruit to include both action and virtue; action in the bearing of witness and virtue in the development of love for God, fellow disciples and the world.

The outcome of the relationship (John 15.4-8): According to Jesus, those that remain in relationship with him find that the Father grows real life in them. This is the outcome of a true relationship with Jesus. Growth in virtue and action cannot come apart from a relationship with Jesus which allows for God's cleansing action. That growth in true virtue and action cannot occur apart from a relationship with Jesus leads to the natural implication that the followers of Jesus must work to foster their relationship with Jesus. This is done by seeking to remain in Jesus. To remain in Jesus is simply Jesus' shorthand for emphasizing the effort necessary on the part of his followers for fostering their relationship with him (see *Remain*). To remain means that one seeks to devote themselves in an ever-increasing way to the person of Jesus through the Holy Spirit. It is to surrender to Jesus as the one who sustains and provides real life. In this surrender, the natural outcome is that the Father works in the life of the believer to cleanse them from that which hinders the outworking of this life in both action and virtue.

Application: The process of experiencing life as God intends for people has two roles: God's role and ours. God's role is to transform us. He provides real life through Jesus and works in us to cleanse us from that which keeps us from experiencing true life on a daily basis. Our role is simply to surrender to this work at God's hands through a relationship with Jesus. As we seek to surrender our lives in an ever-increasing way to Jesus we discover our lives further transformed, filled with God's intended life.

