



# COVID-19 (Coronavirus)

**Keep The Remain Thing The Main Thing**

By Steve Carter

### **John 15:1-10**

When crisis strikes, one of the first reactions for many leaders and Christ followers is to get busy or escape to some counterfeit god. In John 15, with the cross in his purview, scholars believe Jesus stops by a vineyard to offer his disciples a fresh reminder of what he desires for them to REMAIN IN HIM in every season. This sermon will unpack the three essentials to Keep The Remain Thing the Main Thing. Steve Carter will bring insight from his time with a vinedresser in South Africa that will help you teach your people how they can 1) Trust the Pruning 2) Trust the Process 3) Trust the Promise so that they can Keep The Remain Thing The Main Thing.

## **Backstory**

Scholars often talk about how powerful the 5 chapters of John 13-17 are. We often separate John 15 from its place squarely in the middle of these powerful 5 chapters. Remember John 13 is when Jesus is washing his disciples feet. They're in the upper room. And then the conversation comes where Jesus begins to talk to them about his body as bread and his blood as wine being poured out. During this conversation he leans over and says: "one of you is going to betray me." Each of the disciples reclining at the table begin to wonder who is it. WHO IS IT?

Jesus says, "it's the person I hand this piece of bread to." I'm sure each of the disciples are squirming in this moment doing whatever it takes to not make eye contact. The scriptures tell us that Jesus offers Judas a piece of bread. Then Judas takes the bread and leaves immediately. John 13 is a story of betrayal. John 14 is Jesus comforting the disciples where Jesus is talking about the Father and the Holy Spirit.

## **Opening**

These are interesting days. Numbers rise by the minute of people who have become infected with COVID-19 which has affected every single person who walks this planet. How times have changed, in the last two weeks we have gone from dropping our kids off at school and heading to the office to transforming our homes to become a home school and business center. Everything has changed.

I have often heard from pastors and authors that the responsibility of the preacher is to "Keep the Main Thing The Main Thing." At first glance, this makes total sense. As Jesus is moving towards the cross, he stops by a vineyard in John 15 to offer up one of his final messages to his disciples. He knows what they are feeling, the

John 16 is Jesus talking about the work of the Holy Spirit where Jesus unpacks what this Advocate and Counselor will do. The Holy Spirit will tell you where you think you're right in your own strength, what places in your life are broken, wrong and out of alignment with Christ, and it will remind you in the future who is ultimately victorious.

John 17 is Jesus' manifesto where He is praying for believers, praying for His disciples and praying that we would find unity as His followers.

Many scholars hold this belief that Jesus started in John 13 in the upper room, having this conversation, taking on a serving towel, washing feet, showcasing the beauty of communion. From there they believe Jesus takes his disciples from that upper room down through the Kidron Valley, making his way to the Garden of Gethsemane and on his way they believe he stops at a nearby vineyard.

Welcome to John 15.

uncertainty, fear and anxiety that is just under the surface. For many of us when growing pressures are at hand, one of the first priorities to go when crisis strikes is our personal time with Christ. In ten verses, Jesus uses the word "remain" 10 times. The word "remain" is often translated as "abide" which comes from the word "abode" which means "to make your home in." Jesus keeps saying over and over again to "remain, abide, abode, to make your home" in Him. Jesus wants his disciples to "Keep The Remain Thing The Main Thing." Today, I will take you to a vineyard and help you learn the three essentials to Keep The Remain Thing The Main Thing.

**Read John 15:1-10**

## 1. Trust The Pruning.

The vine was the nationalistic symbol to the Hebrew people. Isaiah 5, Psalm 80, Ezekiel, Jeremiah and Hosea all write about this. Even at the very top of King Herod's temple were these 6ft cluster of a vine filled with these golden grapes. The vine was a symbol of favor and blessing from God for the people. Jesus declares "I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener." Jesus is saying he is the fulfillment of all the hopes and desire the people have.

But then he adds that his Father is the gardener. His Father is the one with the shears. The one that is pruning. The one with the grander vision for the vine. (*Show a beautiful picture of a vineyard and then one close up on a vine with a great cluster of grapes.*)

The gardener desires that a branch will bear the best kind of fruit, the king that when people taste and see will know that the gardener is good. Read Verse 2, "The gardener cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while ever branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful."

One of the key roles of a gardener or aka vinedresser is to prune. There are two types of pruning. The first is called "Thinning" where the vinedresser inspects each branch on the vine. (*Show drawing or draw this yourself.*)

Vines want to grow and branches will grow quite quickly. The gardener must inspect which branches will bear the best kind of fruit, which branches can handle the elements and will be able to handle stress. The gardener understands that a vine only has so many units of energy and they want these units of energy not being dispersed

to so many branches but to a few specific branches. I don't know about you; but before COVID-19 my life was quickly overwhelmed with responsibilities. My life looked like this vine.

Overcrowded...

Overscheduled...

Overwhelmed..

This season allows us an amazing opportunity to recenter, refocus and reprioritize what is most essential for us to bear the best kind of fruit in this season. This begins in time with Christ and will quickly move to our schedule. People can tell me all the time what they believe is most important to them and my first response is, "show me your schedule" because what we schedule, what we put in ink is what we really value. For many of us, we're running, chasing, and if we're honest running on fumes. The gardener wants to thin stuff out, to reprioritize so that we can bear the best kind of fruit. The kind that is sustainable through every season, crisis and circumstance. One of my mentors once told me, "scheduling is one of the most spiritual acts a Christ follower can ever do. It's the chance to declare daily, weekly, monthly and yearly what they truly value."

If you were to give God the shears, are there any branches in your life that need to be thinned out? Any places where you have overcommitted yourself and are unable to give your very best? Think if you were able to take those units of energy towards what you're really passionate about...what might God actually do and bear in your life?

## 2. Trust The Process.

When Theo Epstein left the Boston Red Sox and came to be the general manager of the Chicago Cubs he preached this message over and over, "Trust the Process." He believed so deeply in the plan that if they stayed committed to it that they would win a World Series. And in 2016, after 108 years of not winning they finally did to the surprise and amazement of every Chicago Cubs fan.

The second way that a gardener will prune is called "pinching." Every branch of the vine has a shoot that grows, and those shoots are what produce grapes.

Gardeners don't want grapes to grow randomly. Sometimes if the grapes grow too quickly and a storm comes they will not last. Sometimes the shoots want to produce so bad that if the gardener does not start the pinching process the groups will not be good enough for the wine. So the gardeners pinch the shoots so that more of the vines sustenance and energy can build up so these grapes will be the very best. (*Show drawing*)

Essentially what the gardener is saying to the branch is "not now!"

A mentor once told me, "God usually answers our prayers with 3 responses, "yes, no and not now."

For some of us, we were all ready to go, this dream vacation, this new business idea, a wedding ceremony, a new job and then all of a sudden we were forced to hear the words "not now" due to COVID-19.

What gets even more difficult is when we look at someone else whether on social media or on our team or in our family where they seem to be producing and thriving. It's hard for the human soul when God says "not now" to us and "yes" to someone else. But what if we actually trusted the gardener? What if we actually believed that this isn't some kind of punishment (which so many sincere Christ followers choose to believe at times) but rather God preparing us for something more?

A vinedresser once was asked, "when a gardener plants the vine, how soon will they allow it to bear fruit?"

His answer was "three years!"

Quick question, "how long was Jesus with his disciples?

Three years! Jesus is coming to the end of his time on earth, he stops at a vineyard and says, after three years, its time for you to bloom!

Let's take this even farther.

It takes three years for a vine to bear fruit. The gardener

is cutting, pruning, thinning and pinching. Then he takes those grapes, and the grapes go through the wine process. The grapes are bottled up and then a good bottle of wine finds itself on a shelf in a store waiting. A really good bottle of wine gets purchased and then gets put in a cellar for a few more years. So its about a 9 year process to get a good bottle of wine.

I say all of this because when I look at a bottle of wine, in Hebrew it was a symbol of blessing, favor and joy. But its also a picture of the process of Hope. Here's why, I'll sit with people who tell me their story and as they share the pain points and struggles I'll often they are being pruned. That the good gardener with His shears is cutting stuff away. Or I'll hear people say, "why can't I have this now? Why can't I be married now? Why not me?" And I'll just sit there thinking that the good gardener is just pinching and saying "not now."

Every bottle of wine is a picture of hope because of what the gardener is doing. So as i sit there, I'll often respond "I know this doesn't make sense right now, but I know you will come to the other side of this and its going to be an incredible bottle of wine." The process is the story of how God is forming, shaping, thinning, pruning and molding you to become a fantastic bottle of wine. You must know that you can not microwave spiritual formation. It takes time just like a good bottle of wine.

### 3. Trust The Promise.

In verse 5 Jesus says, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."

Do you believe that? Apart from me you can do nothing.

If we're honest there are probably times where we've lived in such a way that proclaims, "I am the vine and Jesus you are a branch and if you don't bear fruit in my life I will cut you off."

Jesus is trying to reframe for us that He is the vine. He is the one who gives you all sustenance and energy. He is the one that allows us to bear fruit. Apart from Christ we can do nothing sustainable over time. Nothing that will last. Nothing that will flourish past your life and everyone of us wants to leave a legacy. We want to leave the kind of legacy that our kids and grandkids, our community,

and church family would respect. When you Keep The Remain Thing The Main Thing you will leave a legacy because you will bear the best king of long lasting, kingdom lasting fruit.

But I know many of you might be listening saying, "but you don't know what I've done pastor! You don't understand how I have sabotaged relationships with key family members or how I have trainwrecked my marriage, business, or friendships due to brokenness and addiction."

All I would say is I hear you AND can I show you one more drawing from the vineyard. Have you ever wondered how they create different wine blends? It's basically the creation of new grapes through the process of grafting. Here's how they do it.

**(Draw the base of a vine with no branches)**

This is the base of a vine, the gardener will cut off the top where branches are being produced. Then the vine begins to "weep and bleed" - actual vinedresser language. Then the gardener makes a "t" cut (**show drawing**) in the middle of the vine. They wait a few days and then add the new seeds of the grapes they want to merge with the vine. Then they bandage the seeds in the "t" cut and a few days later remove the bandage and three years later if done properly is bearing fruit!

I don't know about you; but when I hear that I hear the GOSPEL!

Church - this is my story!

My brokenness, my sin, my shame, all the wrongs that I have committed towards God, myself, others and this world were placed into that "t" cut known as the CROSS. And the Holy Spirit began a new work in me, I went from fear to Love, from despair to joy, from anxiety to peace, from stress to patience, from anger to kindness, from pride to goodness, from jealousy to faithfulness, from fits of rage to gentleness, from not able to control my selfish desire to self control. This is what God did. This is what the gardener is continuing to do in me.

AND THIS IS WHAT HE WANTS TO DO IN YOU!

Will you let Him?

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This is His promise, if you remain in Jesus you will bear much fruit. You will bear the fruit of the spirit! Can you even imagine what this would mean for you? For every relationship you have?

But it begins with you choosing to trust.

***Make an invitation to follow Christ.***

***Make a challenge to grab hold of these three essentials to Keep The Remain Thing The Main Thing.***

***(Maybe invite your church to read through the book of John or Luke or an epistle like Ephesians)***

***Close with casting vision for what God could do with a church where every single person who calls this church home chose to Trust the pruning, Trust the process and Trust the promise by declaring each and everyday that they would Keep the Remain Thing The Main Thing!***

***Pray.***











