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Description

“I am the vine and you are the branches,” said Jesus. Join us as we learn about both the science and the art of tending grapevines and how the Bible uses vineyard stories to teach us about living a life that grows from Christ.

Course Outline

Week/Session 1	Planting: learning to read the landscape
Week/Session 2	Pruning: cutting back so we can grow
Week/Session 3	Protecting: recognizing and dealing with threats
Week/Session 4	Harvesting: knowing when the time is right



About this study



This study is the result of a collaboration between Salem Lutheran Church and Pleasant Hill Winery, both in Brenham, Texas. The winery is directly across the street from the church and this study finally gave us all a chance to get to know our neighbors better. But it also proved to be a *fantastic* bible study! There are so many parallels between the tending of a vineyard and the tending of our lives. No wonder the bible used vines and vineyards so often as a metaphor for our faith.

You may not be so lucky as to have a vineyard across the street from your church. Hopefully, you have one in your area and, if so, I hope they will be willing to partner with you like Bob and Jeanne Cottle of Pleasant Hill did with us. We met on Sunday afternoons, an hour before their closing time. It provided a group of 15-20 people each week who paid for a wine tasting and a cheese tray. And those who came got to learn a lot about the work of a vintner, have a meaningful discussion, and enjoy some great wine! Everybody wins!

The weekly structure we used was that the pastor/leader would introduce the topic of the day, the vintner would talk about that from a vine-grower's perspective, the pastor would read a scripture passage that connects to the topic, maybe offer their own reflections a bit and then pose some questions for group discussion. All throughout, we were being served our next tastings, but getting them in advance might also work well.

Bob was gracious enough to volunteer his own participation and talk about the work of a vintner from his perspective. I hope your vintner will be so willing as well. If they aren't (or if you are hosting your study someplace other than a vineyard) I've supplied some basic information and a website for further investigation for each session.

My colleague at Salem, Pastor Charles Parnell, and I co-taught this study. We did the study over four weeks, which worked very well for us. Another option would be a one-day retreat with four sessions (though you will have to pace yourselves with the wine!).

A final joy to share is that this study drew people whose presence we wouldn't have enjoyed with a different study. Several single people in their twenties came out. Other people who don't always attend adult education came. And with a minimal amount of publicity in the community, we even had a couple attend who were not members of our church. Word got out and I had people from other churches ask if we would do it again in the future so they could attend.

But above all, it was great fun. I think everyone walked away knowing something more about vineyards, something more about each other, something more about the bible, and something more about themselves. What more can you ask for from a four-week bible study? I hope you adapt this and make it your own. Cheers!

Christ's peace,
Rev. Rich Nelson

Week/Session 1

Planting: learning to read the landscape

Introduction

The word, “vineyard” appears in the NRSV translation of the Bible over 100 times, grapes or grapevines 50 times, to plant or sow 238 times, and to harvest or reap 144 times.

What is it about the act of planting, tending, and harvesting that is so central to the Bible? Usually when the Bible speaks about planting and harvesting, it points us to a larger concern:

Is the community being faithful to God’s commands?

Are we, by our lives, sowing good seed?

When is it time to harvest?

Can we harvest and enjoy what we did not plant and tend?

Where does our life come from, what is our source?

Over the next four weeks, we are going to take time to reflect on the rich parallels between the act of planting, pruning, protecting and harvesting a vineyard and the ways in which God calls us to be mindful in planting what will last, pruning for growth, protecting against threats, and harvesting at the right time, so that we may produce “abundant fruit.” The parallels between the two are incredibly abundant, as you will see.

And we are going to enjoy some really fantastic wine!

Three key considerations in planting a vineyard

Climate

The grapevine prefers the temperate climate in which it evolved, with warm, dry summers and mild winters. Winters of sustained cold kill grapevines. High humidity promotes vine disease.

Slope

Orientation: North-south rows maximize sun exposure. Northeast-southeast rows reduce sunburn problems in warm climates. The vines need full sun, because sunlight plays a major part in fruit sugar development. The site should also have good air flow and a southern exposure; gently sloping site with southern exposure is ideal as it typically has the warmest temperatures. Grapes like to be planted on a slope to help keep air moving and to prevent frost from settling. The best slope is to the east or

southeast, but a south or southwest slope is also good. Planting parallel to prevailing winds increases air circulation. The slope also helps protect them from severe wind.

Soil

Most grapes require full sun, moderate amounts of water and a rich, well-draining, slightly acidic soil. When selecting the planting site, avoid heavy clay, waterlogged or consistently dry soils; sandy loam soils are ideal.

If a vintner/expert is not available to speak to these things, the following website will be helpful for leaders to educate themselves:

<http://winegrapes.tamu.edu/grape-growing/starting-a-vineyard-2/site-assessment/>

Scripture and Discussion

Bible connection: Isaiah 5:1-4

1 Let me sing for my beloved
my love-song concerning his vineyard:
My beloved had a vineyard
on a very fertile hill.

2
He dug it and cleared it of stones,
and planted it with choice vines;
he built a watchtower in the midst of it,
and hewed out a wine vat in it;
he expected it to yield grapes,
but it yielded wild grapes.

3
And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem
and people of Judah,
judge between me
and my vineyard.

4
What more was there to do for my vineyard
that I have not done in it?
When I expected it to yield grapes,
why did it yield wild grapes?

Discussion Questions:

1. When have we planted something that did not produce the fruit we expected?
2. Did we plant in the wrong climate? The wrong location? The wrong soil?
3. When have we planted something that grew beyond our wildest expectations? What made the difference?
4. With upcoming decisions in our lives, how can we make sure we are paying attention to all of the factors that may be God's way of telling us this is the right place and time or it is not?

Week/Session 2

Pruning: cutting back so we can grow

Introduction

Cutting back is hard for us to do. After putting so much energy into making something grow, it can be really hard to step back from it, or to cut it off and throw it away.

But if we don't we find that we will inevitably become over-extended in too many different directions. Everything we produce at that point is weak and underdeveloped because we simply don't have the energy, time and resources to grow things to their full potential. We can "produce a lot of grapes" but they will all be small, undernourished, underdeveloped and maybe even unusable.

So today we are focusing in on the important work of pruning. As a society we are horrible at this. Being "busy" and "tired" are considered badges of honor, proof that we are producing. However, sometimes heavy pruning is exactly what is necessary to be able to produce good fruit in our lives. How can we get to a place where we can say, "right now I'm taking time for rest and reflection in my life so I can grow and prepare for what's to come"?

The importance of pruning

- Grapes should be pruned in winter or very early spring, before the buds begin to swell and after the threat of harsh cold temperatures has passed.
- During the first three years after planting, grapevines are establishing their roots and growing their stems. Remove fruit during the first two years - vines are not strong enough to support it.
- Heavy pruning produces the best quality fruit, while light pruning results in large yields of poor quality. Also, if you want to produce bigger fruits, cut off every third bunch the moment they form so that more energy goes into developing the remaining fruit.
- Typically 70-90 percent of the new growth is removed on a mature vine each year. Leave 3-4 buds per foot of cordon length (horizontal trunk on the vine).
- Fruit production generally occurs in the fourth or fifth year after planting. Grapevines generally don't require much fertilizer, so fertilize sparingly. In early spring, apply about eight to ten ounces of 10-10-10 or 10-20-20 fertilizer.

If a vintner/expert is not available to speak to these things, the following website will be helpful for leaders to educate themselves:

<http://winegrapes.tamu.edu/grape-growing/vineyard-management/pruning/>

Scripture and discussion

Bible connection: John 15:1-11

15 “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. 2 He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. 3 You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. 4 Abide in me as I abide in you. Just 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. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. 6 Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. 7 If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8 My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. 9 As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. 10 If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. 11 I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

Discussion Questions:

1. Jesus says God is the vinegrower and “every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.” When have you experienced pruning in your life?
2. Did you recognize it as necessary pruning at the time or did it just hurt and confuse?
3. What does it mean to you to “abide in the vine” of Jesus?
4. Jesus says the result of bearing much fruit in being his disciples is a “complete joy.” Does this ring true for you?
5. What in your life right now might God be pruning (or encouraging you to prune) so you can bear better fruit? Can you relax and allow that to happen, trusting that it is both good and necessary?

Week/Session 3

Protecting: recognizing and dealing with threats

Introduction

After all the hard work of planting, tending, and pruning vines, there is still no guarantee of a good harvest. Many things can affect or imperil the fruitfulness of vines, such as weather, diseases, insects, fungi and wildlife. In the process of protecting a vineyard, a vintner must also allow for some small losses, knowing when a few insects or pests are to be considered just part of the cost of doing business and when it is time to take action to protect the vines. It takes an attentive and wise vintner to usher a vine through each new stage to ensure it reaches maturity.

Likewise, we can often feel as if threats are coming at us from many potential directions. We must protect and care for what we have planted to insure we don't sabotage our own work or allow small things that aren't dealt with to ruin what we have begun. And we too must allow for some small losses from time to time. We cannot fight every battle and knowing which to choose is of utmost importance.

Protecting vines from Disease and Pests

- Airflow is necessary to prevent powdery mildew. If the foliage is too dense, it will not dry out after rains and mildew can set in. It first attacks the leaves and then can settle into the fruit, causing it to shrivel. Small pruning may be necessary.
- Not all insects are enemies of vines and so it is important to become wise and discerning about what you are observing.
- Depending on location, Aphids, Japanese Beetles, Grape Berry Moths, Mealybugs and Flea Beetles are all potential enemies to watch out for.
- However, some insects can be beneficial such as Ladybugs which eat the Aphids and Fire Ants (yes, Fire Ants!) which do not eat grapes or the vines but do help aerate the soil around them.
- There are very few living creatures which will not eat grapes, however. Common wildlife that eat grapes from vineyards include squirrels, rabbits, raccoons, foxes, deer and opossums. Birds are a common problem, sometimes requiring netting to ward off.
- And snakes also enjoy hiding camouflaged among the vines.
- And of course it is important to keep down the weeds.

If a vintner/expert is not available to speak to these things, the following website will be helpful for leaders to educate themselves:

<https://www.gardeningknowhow.com/edible/fruits/grapes/treating-grapevine-problems.htm>

Scripture and Discussion

Bible connection: Luke 13:6-9

6 Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. 7 So he said to the gardener, ‘See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?’ 8 He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. 9 If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

Discussion Questions:

1. How do we allow for proper “airflow” in our lives to give the Holy Spirit room to blow through us?
2. When we sense something is threatening what we have planted, where do we turn for help to know what to do?
3. Some pests are bad for us. Some pests are also actually good for us. How do we become wise enough to discern the difference between the two?
4. Sometimes, a vintner will have to do a “green harvest” which is to take all the fruit off the vine because it is a loss and allow the vines to focus on growing their roots for hopefully better luck next year. What are some examples of “green harvests” we’ve had to do to avoid expending energy on something that will never become good fruit?
5. When things don’t bear the fruit we expected for several years, how do we discern when it is time to chop it down and when it’s time to fertilize it and give it a chance for another year?



Week/Session 4

Harvesting: knowing when the time is right

Introduction

Knowing when to harvest grapes is as much an art as it is a science. It varies season to season. It varies from one grape variety to the next. And a lot of it depends on the kind of wine you intend to make with the grapes. For instance, sparkling wines usually use a grape that is harvested earlier than the same kind of wine that is not sparkling.

It is ultimately up to the vintner to determine by sight, touch and taste when the grapes have become the fruit that is necessary to make the wine they intend to make. This requires a “discerning palate,” the ability to know when something has reached its peak ripeness. We too need to develop a “discerning palate” to know in our lives when something has reached fruition. If we pick it too early it will be underripe and bitter. If we pick it too late it will be too mushy or have begun to dry up. A lot of the timing depends on what we want to make out of what we have planted.

Knowing when and how to Harvest

- It's not just when a grape looks right, but when it tastes right that you know it is time to harvest.
- You can use tools such as a refractometer to help you gauge ripeness but you still need to know when the taste is right.
- The longer a grape hangs on the vine, the more sugar it will have and the less acidity.
- The more sugar it has, the higher the resulting alcohol content will be.
- Let the fruit hang too long and you risk losing it to disease or dehydration.
- And you have to take a sample from different places in the vineyard because not all the vines may ripen at the same time.
- If possible, take a tour of your vineyard's production facility.

If a vintner/expert is not available to speak to these things, the following website will be helpful for leaders to educate themselves:

<http://agrilife.org/winegrapes/files/2015/11/ripening.pdf>

Scripture and Discussion

Bible connection: John 4:31-38

31 Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, “Rabbi, eat something.” 32 But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.” 33 So the disciples said to one

another, “Surely no one has brought him something to eat?” 34 Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. 35 Do you not say, ‘Four months more, then comes the harvest’? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. 36 The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. 37 For here the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps.’ 38 I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.”

Discussion Questions:

1. Just like the vintner must keep alert and stay in tune with the varied ripening times for the grapes, Jesus says we can’t rely on things happening at the exact time when we expect. We may think we have four more months, but look around, he says, the time is already here! Has something good ever happened at an unexpected time for you?
2. Jesus says that sometimes we get to reap what we didn’t sow. How do we graciously receive the gifts that have been handed down to us?
3. How can we take heart when we are called upon to sow that which we may never get to reap? In other words, sometimes we are called to “pay it forward” and do the right thing even if we won’t get any reward ourselves from it.
4. Looking at our lives, what are the “tastes” we can look for to know when the time is right? How can we better listen for God’s guidance to know when to act and when to wait?
5. What in your life are you waiting to come to fruition? How can we develop the necessary patience and constant attentiveness to know when the time is right to harvest what we have planted and move forward?



*Photo by Pastor Charles Parnell
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This marble piece came from Corinth. It shows a lion eating grapes. According to his guide, the lion is the church and the grapes are Jesus.

Other Resources

Viticulture Resources

<http://winegrapes.tamu.edu>

<http://www.diynetwork.com/how-to/outdoors/gardening/growing-grapevines>

<https://www.arborday.org/trees/fruit/care-grape.cfm>

Bible Study Resources

<http://www.biblestudytools.com/topical-verses/bible-verses-about-drinking-alcohol/>

<http://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionaries/eastons-bible-dictionary/wine.html>

Books for even deeper dives:

Grounded by Diana Butler Bass

<http://a.co/dP3j9GC>

The Vine Speaks by Cindy Steinbeck

<http://a.co/937iWR0>

God Gave Wine by Kenneth Gentry

<http://a.co/98TuCRw>

Wine and the Word by Kurt Senske

<http://a.co/2UHgCbs>

Just a few of the many other vine/vineyard/harvest scriptures:

Matthew 20:1-16

20 “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. 2 After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. 3 When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; 4 and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. 5 When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. 6 And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ 7 They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ 8 When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ 9 When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. 10 Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. 11 And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, 12 saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ 13 But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? 14 Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. 15 Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ 16 So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

Mark 4:26-29

26 He also said, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, 27 and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. 28 The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. 29 But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come."

Mark 12:1-12

12 Then he began to speak to them in parables. "A man planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a pit for the wine press, and built a watchtower; then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. 2 When the season came, he sent a slave to the tenants to collect from them his share of the produce of the vineyard. 3 But they seized him, and beat him, and sent him away empty-handed. 4 And again he sent another slave to them; this one they beat over the head and insulted. 5 Then he sent another, and that one they killed. And so it was with many others; some they beat, and others they killed. 6 He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' 7 But those tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' 8 So they seized him, killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard. 9 What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others. 10 Have you not read this scripture:

'The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;

11 this was the Lord's doing,
and it is amazing in our eyes'?"

12 When they realized that he had told this parable against them, they wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowd. So they left him and went away.

Mark 14:22-25

22 While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is my body." 23 Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. 24 He said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. 25 Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God."

Revelation 14:17-20

17 Then another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle. 18 Then another angel came out from the altar, the angel who has authority over fire, and he called with a loud voice to him who had the sharp sickle, "Use your sharp sickle and gather the clusters of the vine of the earth, for its grapes are ripe." 19 So the angel swung his sickle over the earth and gathered the vintage of the earth, and he threw it into the great wine press of the wrath of God. 20 And the wine press was trodden outside the city, and blood flowed from the wine press, as high as a horse's bridle, for a distance of about two hundred miles.