

PRUNED ON PURPOSE

Sometimes greater fruitfulness
requires letting go of good things.



For years, I assumed that fruitfulness meant doing more.

More ministry.
More opportunities.
More gatherings.
More events.
More people.
More activity.

It makes sense.

If something is good, do more of it. If you want to reach more people, offer more things. If you want greater impact, expand.

But I have learned that some of the most fruitful seasons of my life have come through subtraction.

Jesus used a much better word for it: **pruning**.

“Every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit” - Jesus (John 15:2)

Notice what gets pruned. *The fruitful branch.*

We usually wait until something is dying before we consider cutting it back. Jesus gives us a very different picture. Sometimes pruning isn't about removing what is bad, broken, or unsuccessful.

Sometimes something is removed precisely because there is greater fruit ahead.

I learned this at Walt Disney World.

When we first arrived, I had a pretty clear picture of what we were going to do. We were going to plant a church for Cast Members. I had been a pastor for years. Church was the world I knew. So naturally, we began doing what you do when you're trying to get a church started.

We did what our church planting training had taught us to do. We looked for a core group of Christians who could help us build the church. We gathered people. We started Bible studies. We planned launch events. We connected with Christian Cast Members who might become part of what we were building. We kept trying to gather enough people to create momentum and eventually become the church we had imagined.

None of that was wrong. Some of it even worked.

That was part of the problem.

We would have just enough success to convince ourselves to keep going. A gathering would go well. People would show up. Something encouraging would happen. We would think, Maybe we're finally getting somewhere.

So we pushed harder.

I used to describe those years as pushing a wheelbarrow full of cement uphill. We could move it. We were strong enough to keep pushing. Every once in a while, we could even look back and see that we had made some progress.

But it was exhausting.

Not because we were afraid of hard work. We had spent our lives in ministry and knew that anything worthwhile required effort. This was different. It felt like everything required us to push. We were constantly trying to create momentum, generate interest, gather people, and keep things moving.

The harder we worked, the more energy it seemed to require. We could keep pushing the wheelbarrow uphill, but eventually we had to ask ourselves why it was so heavy in the first place.

Eventually, we reached the point where we had to ask ourselves a very simple question:

What are we doing?

So we stopped. Not slowed down. Stopped.

That was harder than it sounds because stopping felt a lot like failing. We had come to plant a church. Pastors plant churches by gathering people, preaching, teaching, worshiping, discipling, organizing, multiplying, and building something. If we stopped doing those things, what exactly were we doing here?

But stopping gave us something we hadn't had in a while: enough space to pay attention.

And once we stopped trying so hard to make our vision work, we began to notice something that had been happening right in front of us.

There was fruit. It just wasn't where we expected it to be.

Our greatest fruitfulness wasn't among Cast Members who were already following Jesus. And those Cast Members weren't particularly interested in the worship services, Bible studies, or worship events we were working so hard to create.

But they would come to our house for dinner. They would meet us for coffee. They would sit around our table and talk for hours.

And those conversations were different. There was no program to attend and no religious environment they had to enter. We were simply sharing life. They talked about relationships,

disappointments, fears, hopes, questions, and the things happening in their lives. And somewhere in those conversations, Jesus would enter the story.

We weren't trying to get them to come to church. We were discovering that we could bring Jesus into the relationships we already had.

We had spent so much energy trying to build something we thought people needed, while Jesus seemed to be producing fruit somewhere much simpler. Around a dinner table. Across a cup of coffee. In relationships with Cast Members who might never have attended one of the things we were working so hard to create.

The harvest was showing us where the fruit was.

But seeing it was one thing. Following it was another.

Because the hardest things to prune weren't programs. They were parts of me.

I had a vision of what church was supposed to look like. I had spent decades as a pastor. I knew how to lead worship, preach, organize gatherings, and build ministry. Those weren't bad things. They were gifts God had given me, and they had produced fruit in other seasons.

But without realizing it, those gifts were also shaping what I assumed God wanted us to build next.

To follow the fruit, I had to surrender more than a ministry strategy.

I had to surrender my vision of the church I thought we were supposed to become. I had to loosen my grip on my reputation as a pastor. I even had to become willing to lay down gifts that had helped define me for years.

That was difficult. But it was also freeing.

I began to realize that my calling wasn't to prove that I could build the church I had imagined. My calling was to pay attention to what Jesus was already doing and join Him there.

As the pruning continued, our lives became simpler. Our focus became clearer. And we were able to invest ourselves more fully in the people and places where we were actually seeing fruit.

Looking back, that season of pruning became one of the best seasons of my life.

I have also learned that pruning doesn't always happen voluntarily.

Sometimes we choose to prune. We recognize that our lives have become overcrowded. We notice that too many good things are competing for the same limited time, attention, and energy. We begin asking what deserves the best of us and what we need to release.

Other times, pruning happens to us. A door closes. A role ends. An opportunity disappears. Something we worked hard to build comes to an end. A season we thought would continue

doesn't. Involuntary pruning can feel like failure while we're living through it. But sometimes we look back years later and realize that losing something created room for fruit we couldn't yet see.

There are clues that pruning may be needed.

Chronic exhaustion, burnout, loss of joy, resentment, and chronic criticism can all be signals worth paying attention to. None of these automatically means something needs to end. Jesus Himself became tired, and faithfulness can be costly. But when these things become our normal posture, they deserve our attention.

We can spend enormous amounts of energy trying to manage our exhaustion better when the deeper question may be whether we should still be carrying everything we're carrying.

We can become increasingly critical of a ministry, organization, leader, or group of people when the deeper question may be whether something needs to change in what we are giving ourselves to.

Sometimes burnout isn't telling us to try harder. It's telling us to prune.

Pruning isn't simply about having less to do. It is about creating room to invest ourselves more fully in what is bearing fruit. That matters to our ministries, our families, our relationship with Jesus, and to us.

Where Is the Fruit?

Take a few minutes and look honestly at where your time, energy, and attention are going.

What are you carrying simply because you have always carried it?

What once produced fruit but may belong to another season?

Where are you experiencing chronic exhaustion, resentment, or criticism?

Don't immediately assume those things need to go. Simply notice them.

Then ask a different set of questions:

Where do you sense life?

Where are relationships deepening?

Where are people responding?

Where does your presence seem to matter?

Where do you see Jesus already at work?

Then ask the harder question:

What good thing might need to be pruned so I can give myself more fully to where God is already producing fruit?

There will always be more good things we could do than we have life to give them. Some of the things God invites us to release may have been genuinely good. They may have been fruitful. They may have been part of our lives for years. They may even have become part of how we understand ourselves.

But the Gardener sees something we cannot yet see: more fruit.

Sometimes the way forward begins by letting something go.