

Am I on? Look at that. It's always the other way. That's exactly right. That's exactly right.

Hey, we're glad to have you all here this morning. People who are visiting for the first time. Welcome to Sherwood Oaks. People who have been here for a long, long time. Glad to see you guys again.

Hope the week has been great. And yeah, we're in the middle of a series here. We're getting ready to wrap it up. Alan will close it out next week, but today we're finishing or getting close to the end, and we're going to talk about pruning. The series is called Flourish.

And this is sort of what God wants for us. He wants our lives to be flourishing, meaning we're fruitful, we're leafing out, we're growing the way we need to grow. We started out in Psalm 1 where we talked about the kind of man grows and flourishes. He's like a tree planted by rivers of water. And we looked at the picture of that.

But when we grow, certain things happen and certain things then become required. So to get us kicked off, I want to talk about something that happened about two years ago when I purchased my house. I remember walking up to the front of the house and just being. Just being enamored by the. It's an old house and had this beautiful hedge in the front of the house and covered almost the entire front.

When you walked up on the front porch, it felt like you were in a little bit of a tree house. It was. It was tall, it was thick. It provide a lot of privacy if you're on the porch from the road and all the traffic there. But I noticed real quickly that it was a monster.

It was a little bit out of control. And while it was nice for privacy, keeping it managed was a bear. You had to get ladders out. You couldn't reach across it. It was so big.

Maybe I got a picture of it here. Do I have a picture? Oh, yeah, there it is. Look at that. Yeah.

Yeah, that is a healthy looking hedge right there. So for two years, every time I went on the porch, I was confronted by the reality of this, of this hedge. And the reality was this. It needs to be pruned back. So finally, last fall, when growth had slowed for the season, I sent Robert out with a chainsaw, gave him some brief instructions, and then trusted him and that shrub to God.

And he was gone for maybe. I don't know, Robert, it didn't take you long, 15, 20 minutes. He came in and goes, it's done. And I went outside, and here's. Here's what I saw.

Now you laugh, but anyone who has pruned a tree knows that this is sort of what. Alan's shaking his head. This is what pruning often

requires, a very brutal approach. Yeah, it hurt. It hurt my heart.

Even though I knew it was coming, even though I knew it needed to be done, I'm like, yikes. And immediately you try to like, okay, how can we distract the eye from this? So you put some fake plants on the porch, just hoping people will look at that and not at that. If you've never seen anyone prune, it can be a traumatic experience. A couple years back, we were working in the summer out here, and I remember Matt Kanhoye had this big electric tree, and he was topping or bringing the canopy up quite a bit, and I thought maybe a couple of feet would be sufficient.

I think he went up 20ft and just, Just, just took everything out. Like, now you out there today and you go, oh, that tree looks fantastic. It no longer bears the marks of that, what I consider a very rough haircut that he gave that thing. But things grow back. To see a lush and vibrant plant reduced to some sort of misshapen monstrosity, alarming at the outset, but gardeners prune to help a plant flourish.

Can I get an amen from the gardeners? So the Bible describes God as a gardener who prunes. Get this. He prunes both the unhealthy branches in our lives. And also this is life transforming right here.

He also prunes the healthy branches. Did you hear me say that? The unhealthy and the healthy branches. Now, why does he do that? He does that to make our lives flourish.

If you don't understand why he does it, it can be uncomfortable, it can be confusing, it can be traumatic. But when you understand why and you understand that God promises that new life and greater growth is on the other side of pruning, well, it makes it a little bit easier. So I'm going to have you turn in your Bibles to John chapter 15, and I'm going to pray as you do so. And we'll dig into the reasons God prunes us. Father, so many of us are like that hedge one, walking down the sidewalk, driving by the road at 30 miles an hour.

That thing looks amazing. But when you get close, you realize there's some problems. And so we may look like we've got it all together. We may look like our lives are sorted out just the way they need to be. But you see, oftentimes what we can't see.

You see the areas of our lives that are keeping us from living the flourishing and fruitful life that you have, you have promised us and you've designed us to experience. So as we open your word today, we pray that you would open our eyes and our hearts to the value of the pruning work you do in us and to recognize when that's happening and give thanks for it. So we pray for that. In Jesus name, amen. So if you're In John chapter 15, that's great.

You got a Bible app, you got your phone open, you've got an actual Bible. Remember those when people actually carried Bibles with leather? We got one right there. Henry Settler, the Amish guy brought a real Bible. Anyone else got a real Bible in the room?

Look at that. I see two or three out there. The rest of you, if you're using a phone, hold it up. Let's just get get credit, okay? We got some phones.

Look at that. The phones are outnumbering the leather bound Bibles right now. But that's all right. It's God's word, no matter what shape or form it comes in. So John chapter 15, verses 1 and 3.

We've read this verse a couple of times over the course of this series, but let's just read it again. It goes like this. In fact, if you want to read along, you can. I am the true vine and my father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.

You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself. It must remain in the vine. And neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

So that's our kickoff verse here. And that's going to sort of frame what we talk about later. We're going to focus on pruning. And as we said, pruning can feel, as we're going through that process, very traumatic. It can look dramatic and it can feel traumatic, but there are very good reasons that God prunes us.

So I told the boys, I said, be listening because there's going to be a test on this on the way home. So I'm going to tell you too. There's three. I'm going to talk about three reasons. See if you can figure them out.

The first one I'm going to give you to he prunes to keep us healthy.

We've all got plants. Maybe some of you have plastic ones. Those are really easy to take care of. I understand. I've got some real ones.

And here's what I notice, that every plant that I've got eventually has a brown leaf, a dead leaf, or a twig or something that needs to be pulled off of that. Those are dead parts, maybe diseased parts, maybe injured parts. And when you're walking by, you just pull them off, you just flick them off. This is probably what we think of first. We think of pruning.

Where God is pruning us to make us healthy. The gardener is pruning the plant to get off the bad stuff. It's important to do so because

those little weak spots, those brown spots, those dead spots, are ideal spots, ideal opportunities for pests. Pests rarely stick to one plant, they move to other plants. So if you're providing a safe harbor for a pest in this plant, there's a good chance the plant next to it is going to be affected as well.

Plants love to colonize other plants. And so when we trim away the bad and we get rid of it, it not only keeps that plant healthy, but it helps and aids the health of the plants around it. Trimming away the bad not only keeps it healthy, but it keeps the things around it healthy as well. So when we talk about God pruning in our lives, we think about the. The sinful hurts, the habits, the hangups that hinder us from living the life God intended for us, that.

That hinder us from looking like God wants us to be, from being as healthy as Jesus has called us to be. Those little parts of our lives that we, that we hang on to can not only harm us. But here's something that we need to remember. It can also infect the lives of others around us. It can affect our children, our spouses, our friends and family, the people we work with.

Those little things that God wants to prune and we will not let him do it can not just hurt us, but it can hurt others. That's why God says, let me prune this. Let me prune it away. And he asked, now when I'm pruning my plants, I don't require them to assist me in this, but God does. God says, I want you to be part of the pruning process.

I need your buy in on this. In Colossians 3. 8, here's what Paul tells us. He reminds us of this, that we must rid ourselves of all such things as these. Anger, rage, malice, slander, filthy language, from your lips.

Don't lie to each other, since you've taken off your old self with its practices and having put on the new self which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. In other words, Jesus says, don't hang on to the stuff that I want to prune away. Don't fight me on this. Instead, Hebrews 12 says it this way. Throw off eagerly.

Get rid of it. Throw it away. Everything that hinders and sin that so easily entangles. Because not only are you helping you, not only are you getting healthier, but the people around you are getting healthier as well. Pruning away the dead branches is good.

Good. It's a good thing. Amen. But notice it's not just the bad, unhealthy branches that Jesus prunes. In verse 2.

Back there in John 15, he prunes also good branches.

That can be hard to understand at times. Now, wait, why is God taking that away from me? Everything's going so good here. Why all of a

sudden is that ministry shutting down? Why are they asking me to move into this new role?

Why is this happening? I don't understand. Everything seems to be going great gangbusters. That hedge is enormous. Well, he prunes to manage growth.

Is growth a problem? Well, those giant shrubs were a problem. Ideally, those shrubs would cover up the foundation of the house and provide some aesthetic value to the landscaping. But these had been neglected to the point where they were out of control. They needed to be right size.

Have you heard that term before? Right sizing is just bringing things back to the point where they are perfect for the spot and for the need that is required. Right sized, we think about that oftentimes. I'm not going to preach on the size of homes, but right sizing is looking and going, what do I need? That's what I want.

What do I not need? I can get rid of that. And right sizing, God does this with us. We're out of control growth when it interferes with the master gardeners, with God's plan for us. God says, I want to prune that back because sometimes we get out of control.

Anyone agree with me on that? For many years my life was marked by a lot of activity, a lot of good things for really good causes that took a lot of time and took a lot of energy. Now, at the time, I had time and I had energy, and so giving myself into those things wasn't necessarily bad and I could do it and no one was the wiser that it may not have been the best use of my time and energy. They were good branches, you might say, oh, look, good things. You're helping here and you're helping here and you're doing this, and you got.

Those are all good things. You're the mayor of downtown, Tim. Well, I am, aren't I? Thank you very much. I appreciate you noticing.

But here's what happens. God says, yeah, you're a little out of control. I'm gonna prune you and I'm gonna do it in a very interesting way. I'm gonna bring two people into your life that are gonna require time and attention from you. Now, I tried to keep that up for a while.

I tried to keep it going. It became very aware that is not. That is not going to be possible. My life and my schedule needed some pruning. It looked admirable.

It even looked. It even looked impressive, maybe for some people. But it was not flourishing and it was no longer fruitful. It was just there. So God used two teenagers to prune my life back.

And so while there are still some parts of that life that I go, oh,

that was really cool. That was a really cool season. That was really cool what we did. I am learning what Paul told Timothy when he said, listen, godliness with contentment, know your place, know your job, know your space. Do what I've asked you to do.

Don't go looking for trouble. Godliness with contentment, where God has put you great gain. I'm telling you right now, I am finding much more fruitfulness. I am flourishing now in this new season, much more than I was in the old season. So if you can say amen to that, say amen to that, all that other stuff.

I don't miss that. Because saying no to good things means I can say yes to better things. I can say yes to the best things. My life's more fruitful and flourishing when I allow God to prune the extra unnecessary out of it. Some of you are going through that right now, where you are finding yourself trying to figure out how to do everything.

And learning to say no to good things so that you can say yes to better things is key to participating with God in his pruning process. Now God's pruning us to maintain growth. Controlling our growth is not just about limiting growth. It's also about pruning us so that we can be more fruitful and grow more. It stimulates growth.

It makes us more productive and can make us more vigorous. There's this thing called density pruning. Density pruning is when the pruner gets inside the plant and starts cutting away the inside of the plant to let light come in. This is. You see this oftentimes with fruit trees where you will.

You will clean out the inside so the light can get in and more fruit can grow on the inside of the plant. Now, when I think about this, I immediately go to David's prayer in Psalm 139, where he says this. He says, search me, God. Know my heart. Get in there, snip away, Test me, know my anxious thoughts.

See if there's anything offensive, any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. David says, lord, I give you permission to get into my. Into my life and do some density pruning. Examine my feelings, my thoughts and behaviors. And if there's stuff in there that needs to be removed to make me more fruitful, do that from the inside out.

Cut out what is keeping me from living the flourishing life that you want to give me. A life that isn't defined by how big and impressive we are. Do you understand that? It's not about how big and impressive we look from the street. It's about how fruitful and flourishing we are.

That's what God wants for us. Now, the third way and the third reason

God prunes us is to shape us. Now, this is the fun one for me. For thousands of years, gardeners have trained and sculpted plants to form hedges. Espaliers.

That's a good word, a good French word. You know what an espalier is? It's where they take fruit trees or fruit and they train them against a wall, and they create this beautiful little, like, zigzag patterns or lattice patterns with branches. So you look at it, and there's this beautiful design on this stone wall. It's really, really cool.

Topiaries. Anyone got a fake topiary outside their front door? Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. I mean, who has time to shape those? You can go buy them at Lowe's and they're already there, and they're never going to grow or anything.

Fake plants are not. Are sometimes the best solution. But topiaries are really cool. But my favorite. My favorite is bonsai.

Anyone? Anyone? Be a fan of bonsai? So if you've ever watched a bonsai artist work, what they do is they take what really is just an ordinary little shrub. Not much, not anything too special.

But they slowly and surely snip away everything that is not the picture of the tree they're sculpting. In a sense, they're sculpting live material this little shrub, they slowly and gently snip away a branch here or a twig there. And then they use these little copper wires or aluminum wires to reshape. They wrap it around the branch, and then they move it. And they can be pretty.

Pretty aggressive. Sometimes aggressive, sometimes gentle. Here's the. You have to know what kind of plant you're working with to know whether to go aggressive or go gentle with this. And bit by bit, they retrain these branches into new shapes and new forms that the branch probably wouldn't have grown into on its own.

But the artist knows the artist has a vision. The artist creates this thing, and those little wires hold that thing in position until it learns the new habit, the new pattern, the new energy flowing through it. And that energy changes and transforms that the line of that branch. Now, again, the artists have to know how to work with different species of trees. Some are very flexible.

Some are more rigid. But the artist knows this, and the artist is in no rush. This is not a weekend project. This is over years that they create these beautiful, beautiful, beautiful sculptures. It's a slow process, because if you rush the process, you could break the branch.

And the Scriptures is clear that God does not break or bruise the reed. He is very careful with us. The bonsai artist moves surely, slowly, gently. But eventually they create something extraordinarily

beautiful. I think we have a picture of one that I thought was just amazing.

So this is this little bonsai tree. I mean, look at that. Are you not impressed by that? Oh, I think that's at Epcot. That's cool.

I love these little. These little miniature worlds that are created by this artist. The Bible says in Ephesians that we are God's workmanship. We are his little bonsai project. Corinthians says that we're being transformed into something that befits God's glory.

Like different trees used for bonsai. Each of us is different. Some of us are very flexible. Some of us are just a little bit more rigid. Nudge your neighbor if you think they may be the latter.

That means he prunes each of us differently. Listen to this very carefully. He prunes each of us differently. He. He doesn't prune me.

He doesn't shape me like he prunes and shapes you. Romans talks about this when it says that we're one body. That's true. But we have many members, and those members do not all have the same function. God has a different end in mind for each one of us, so we don't get hung up on what God is doing with that person.

Instead, we heed Paul's instruction to the Romans when he tells us, he says, I appeal to you therefore brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable God, which is your spiritual worship. In other words, if we're wise, we will submit to the wisdom of the master gardener. And as he makes each of us into something uniquely beautiful that brings him glory, we can submit to it knowing that the end is great. Good pruning can be uncomfortable, mostly because it's disorienting. When we see something that's very familiar to us, whether good or bad, leave or change.

That's unsettling. Isn't it? Like we like things to remain comfortably the same. And God says, I, I, I'm not going to let that happen. I'm going to use circumstances and people and new opportunities and new challenges to turn you into something that I have in mind for you.

When you feel this discomfort, know that discomfort is the pruning process he uses in our lives. Discomfort is very often the means by which he moves us into the next thing. So he doesn't use literal chainsaws, but he does use challenging and changing circumstances and relationships. In these places, our unhealthy and unresolved habits, hurts and hangups get exposed so that they can be healed and then released. Sometimes it's like those tornadoes that rip through our area every the 15 years and they just, it's like clear cutting and it just leaves it feeling a little raw.

But you give that a couple of years and you drive back and you go,

look how amazing this is. Healed and restored. It's not the same, but God's purpose is moving. Those moments where we just feel like God has taken a chainsaw. It can feel traumatic, but there's a hidden and beautiful purpose in it.

I love this quote from Charles Spurgeon when he talks about the way God uses storms in our lives to do a good pruning work. Here's what he said. He says we need winds and tempests to exercise our faith, to tear off the rotten branches of our self reliance, and to root us more firmly in Christ. Even these storms serve a purpose now. Sometimes it's not so much a storm as it is simply a new direction of the wind.

Like a kid who's getting his very first haircut screaming even though he's not in any pain at all. That new experience, that new shift in the direction of the wind can be traumatic and scary for us. But take a deep breath, look around and see how God is using very tender and very gentle ways to help us into a new place of flourishing. Because as we obey, he will redirect our steps, he'll redirect our limbs. He'll push us in new directions.

He'll. He'll move our energy in new ways and bring better things into our lives so that we find it natural and easy to let go of the old and say, I am embracing the new thing that God is doing. And if we're willing to say yes to that, then we're going to experience spiritual growth. This is the place where we experience the peace and contentment, where we live within the limits that the Master Gardener has set forth us. Our faith is going to be strengthened as we learn how he does this, how he works his will in our lives, and the good things that come out of it when we can look back and go, oh, my word, look what has happened in the last two years.

Where I was then and now where I am now. It was hard. There was a season where it was uncomfortable. But look what God has done. In the end, we understand that God's methods are designed to prosper us and not to harm us.

And then, bit by bit, as he moves us and shapes us, we begin to take on more and more his likeness, his image, the vision that he has for us. We flourish. Now, I want that for me. I want that for us. But it means that we need to do this one thing.

We need to remain in him as we prepare for a time of communion. I want to go back to verse 4 of John 15, where Jesus says it again and again and again. Remember, as Alan said last week so many times, this word remain shows up. It's important that we remain in Him. Jesus says, remain in me as I also remain in you.

No branch can bear fruit by itself. It must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. Remain in me. Don't try to do life on your own.

I think about Mary and Martha from Alan's sermon last week. Don't try to do it all on your own. Don't try to prune yourself. This is the key. Participate with God's pruning.

Don't try to get in there and do it yourself. You'll put your eye out. I'll tell you that it can be dangerous. Just rest in God's love for you. Walk where he sends you.

Do what he asks you to do. Simply obey. And God will do the pruning very naturally. It will not require a chainsaw. It will Require a little scissor here, a little scissor there.

Follow his direction, stay connected to him. And if you do, he promises that our lives will bear much fruit. But you may be here this morning and go, yeah, I'm not at all connected to Jesus. My branch is not connected to the vine. Well, the scripture gives us some bad news in that regard.

Let's do the bad news first, and then we'll hit the good news. The bad news is this, that without being attached to Jesus, you aren't going to bear the kind of fruit that lasts. It may look good for a season, but for a very short season, because a branch that's not attached to anything, it's not going to last long, a couple of hours. Fruit that lasts requires you to be attached to the vine.

But there is a way for a random branch to start bearing fruit. Anyone know where I'm going with this? There's something called grafting. Anyone heard that term before? Grafting?

We got someone in the back, Melissa. I mean, I'm blanking right now, Lane. Oh, my word. Yeah, I would have got there tomorrow morning, Lane. I promise.

Something called grafting. And grafting is where the gardener strips a cut off the branch of everything that could SAP nutrients from the branch. So there's this random branch, and the master gardener takes this random branch and just trims it down to the nubbins. Really anything that looks potentially useful. The master gardener says, sorry, that's only going to SAP strength away from what I want to do.

So he gets that little branch all trimmed up, takes some bark at the end of it, trims that off, too, and just leaves that raw wood exposed. And when he's done with the branch, he turns his attention to the vine or the tree or the trunk, the thing that's got real SAP flowing through it. And what he does is he takes that knife and he digs into it, and he cuts a little spot out of it, and he digs a little deeper and a little deeper and a little deeper, and he keeps going. He keeps going.

When he's got a slit or a hole or a cut that's big enough for that branch over there to slot into, he puts in there. But he has to. He has to damage. Has to damage the vine before he can attach the branch. That damaging process is called bleeding.

He has to bleed the vine. But when he does that, when he cuts into the vine like that, he begins to relate. The vine begins to release the SAP, and that SAP is called bleeding. The gardener takes that extra Branch, the one that he stripped of everything that looked halfway decent. And he tucks it there into the vine, fits it snugly there into the cut portion, and then he wraps it tightly.

What happens is the SAP from the vine begins to flow into that discarded branch. Over time, the SAP will nourish that branch. And over more time, that branch will leaf and flower and bear fruit. Now, there's a beautiful picture here, isn't there? Jesus is that vine.

Jesus surrendered his life to the Father in order that we who were far from God. The scripture says discarded branches, dead branches, might be brought back to life again. And he was wounded for our transgressions. The scripture says he was pierced for our iniquities. The love of God for us allowed Jesus to say yes to the digging in and the bleeding.

He offered his life for us and then we were reattached. Because of his obedience, we were able now to be reattached to the vine. And we were wrapped tight. The scripture calls it cords of kindness that draw us close to God. We were wrapped tight to Him.

And if you're here this morning and that is your story, then you can say, yes, I am. I am fruitful. I am leafing out, I am flowering. I'm even bearing fruit. Fruit.

Because that's what that accomplished. When we say yes to that, we say, yes, I'm willing to be attached to Jesus. This is how it works today as we share in this time of communion. If you need to surrender your life to the vine, to Jesus, this is the day to do it. But if you're already a disciple of Jesus, then I want this time to be an opportunity for you to pray that, that.

That density prayer that, that density pruning prayer of David. Remember it where he says, search me, God, I'm here. And I may look pretty good on the outside, I may look pretty impressive from the street, but I know there's stuff inside that, that, that you want to clean out and clear out. Because I know that your desires I be more flourishing, more fruitful. So search me, God, know my heart, test me, know my anxious thoughts, see if there's any offensive way in me, and lead me then to this way, everlasting, this life and this way of flourishing and fruitfulness.

Let's pray. Jesus, you opened your life so that we might receive the true and abundant, the flourishing life that only you can give. As we take the elements of communion this morning, the bread and the cup, those two elements take us back to the cross, to that moment where you gave your life for us. You allow the Father.

You allowed the Father to pierce and break you so that we might be grafted onto you.

Father. That's amazing love. Amazing grace.

It makes us astounded at the goodness of God. Meet us here in this moment in Jesus name. Amen.

Thank you for listening to this message from Sherwood Oaks Christian Church. Did you know you can watch all of our video content, both current and past, on our YouTube channel. Visit [YouTube.com sherwoodoaks](https://www.youtube.com/sherwoodoaks) to watch messages, series and complete worship services.