

Session 8 • The Tree and Its Fruit

Matthew 7:15-20; John 15:1-11; Psalm 1

Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group opens their sealed guesses from Session 1 and lets the Scriptures judge them: fruit, not gifts, feelings, or fame, is how the Spirit's work is known, and fruit comes only from abiding in the vine.

Catholic Touchstone. Jesus is the true vine and we the branches; cut off from him we can do nothing, and united to him we bear the fruit the Father is glorified by (John 15:5, 8; CCC 755, 787).

What You Need to Know

This is the study's hinge night. Seven sessions ago each participant sealed an answer to one question: what signs would you look for to recognize that someone is growing as a disciple of Jesus? Tonight the envelopes open, and then Jesus answers the question himself, twice: once negatively (Matthew 7, how to spot the counterfeit) and once positively (John 15, where the real thing comes from). Run the opening as a ritual, not a joke: envelopes returned sealed to their writers, a quiet minute to reread, volunteers sharing what they wrote or how their answer has changed, volunteered answers grouped on a whiteboard by kind, and then the texts read. No answer is read without permission. Let Scripture do the sorting.

Matthew 7:15-20 is Jesus' own discernment protocol, given about false prophets: credentials, sheep's clothing, even prophecy and mighty works in his name (7:22), none of it decisive. "You will know them by their fruits" brackets the paragraph, opening and closing it (7:16, 20). Note carefully what Jesus does not say: he does not commission fruit inspectors with power to condemn souls (7:1 stands earlier in the same chapter). He gives a test for recognizing, especially for recognizing what to follow and what to flee.

John 15 then answers the question Matthew raises: if fruit is the evidence, what is the cause? Not self-generated effort but attachment that obeys: "abide" saturates the eleven verses, and Jesus glosses it himself, abiding in his love by keeping his commandments (15:10). The branch's whole job is to stay connected, cooperating with the life that flows; this resolves the tension felt since Session 5: fruit cannot be manufactured, and now we learn why. The Father prunes what bears fruit so it bears more (15:2), which dignifies suffering without explaining it away.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Psalm 1 planted this image in Session 2: the blessed man is a tree planted by streams of water, yielding fruit in season, leaf unwithering. Jeremiah 17:7-8 repeats it: the one who trusts in the Lord is a tree by water, unafraid in drought, never ceasing to bear fruit. Scripture pictures the righteous person as a well-watered tree: rooted, watered, fruitful.

Israel herself was the Lord's vine, planted and tended, and the prophets grieve her wild grapes (Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80:8-16). When Jesus says "I am the true vine," he claims to be everything Israel was planted to be, and he makes his people branches of himself; Paul's grafting image in Romans 11 is this image's cousin. The image the group has been circling for seven weeks was Israel's story all along.

Voices of the Church

St. Augustine

Tractates on the Gospel of John 81 (summary)

Preaching through John 15, St. Augustine dwells on the branch's two possibilities: on the vine, fruit; off the vine, the fire. But his stress falls on the comfort: Christ did not say "without me you can do little," he said nothing. The humility that admits it is the same act as the abiding that receives everything.

St. Bonaventure

The Mystical Vine (Vitis Mystica), traditionally attributed (summary)

A meditation on Christ the vine has come down under the Seraphic Doctor's name, its attribution debated, its vision beloved: the vine was pruned, bound, and pierced, and its wine was his blood. Abiding is union with the crucified and risen Lord, above all in the Eucharist, where the fruit of the vine becomes the cup of salvation.

St. Teresa of Avila

Life, chapter 11 (summary)

Teaching beginners to pray, St. Teresa describes four ways a garden is watered: bucket from a well, waterwheel, a channeled stream, and finally rain, when the Lord waters it himself. The labor lessens as the soul learns to receive. Her garden is Psalm 1 and John 15 in one picture: our work is real, and it is never the water.

Catechism Connection

CCC 755 gathers the biblical image: the Church is the cultivated field, the vineyard of God, and the true vine is Christ, who gives life and fruitfulness to the branches: to us, abiding in him through the Church.

CCC 787 on communion with Jesus: he spoke of a vital communion between himself and his followers under the image of the vine and the branches; apart from him we can do nothing.

CCC 1108 names the sap: in every liturgical action the Spirit brings us into communion with Christ to form his Body; the Spirit is like the sap of the Father's vine bearing fruit on its branches.

CCC 2074 draws the moral consequence: united to Christ we bear much fruit, and cut off from him we can do nothing; the fruitfulness of the whole Christian moral life flows from this union.

Thread Watch

Threads in play

Vine (resolved tonight). Planted in Session 1, watered every week since. When John 15 is read, name the thread explicitly and let the group feel the arrival: the chapter we saved for tonight was the answer the whole time.

Sealed guess (opened tonight). The ritual is the session. Guard the tone: no guess is mocked; every guess is weighed. Return each person's own envelope unopened, give two quiet minutes for private comparison, then invite volunteers to share what they wrote or what has changed; group only what is volunteered. Afterward, ask what changed in their understanding and which passages did the changing.

Shoot of Jesse. Next session opens the Gifts. If anyone asks tonight how gifts relate to fruit, say one sentence, they flow from the same Spirit, and promise next week's full answer.

Session Goals

1. Run the sealed-guess opening as a genuine ritual and let Scripture sort the answers.
2. Establish fruit as Jesus' own criterion, while heading off the fruit-inspector distortion.
3. Resolve the Vine thread: grace-first union with Christ is the cause of fruit, enabling rather than replacing our real cooperation.
4. Land pruning as the Father's work on fruitful branches, dignifying suffering.

Time Note

Runs 85-90 minutes; the guess ritual needs 15-20 unhurried minutes. If short, cut Build question 5 (Isaiah 5 vineyard) and give the Bonaventure voice in one sentence at the Eucharist mention.

Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Come, Holy Spirit, sap of the true vine. Tonight we open our old answers and ask you for your own. Give us honesty about our guesses, wonder at the word, and the will to abide. Amen.

Win · Opening Questions

1. Before the envelopes come back: does anyone remember what they wrote seven weeks ago? Has your answer changed?
2. How do you usually decide whether a public Christian, a preacher, an author, an influencer, is trustworthy?

Build · Into the Text

Opening the Guesses · 15-20 minutes

Return each participant's own envelope, still sealed, and give two quiet minutes to open and reread. Invite volunteers to read their answer aloud or say how their thinking has changed; no one's answer is read without permission. On a whiteboard, group what is shared (feelings; ways of living; gifts and wonders; religious activity; fruit and character; other), noting aloud that the groups overlap. Do not evaluate anything yet. When the board is full, say: now let us hear the Lord speak to our question. Then read Matthew 7:15-20 aloud. After the reading, say plainly: growth in the fruit of the Spirit is an important sign of a life responding to him, and sound teaching and conduct matter with it; but God's grace is at work in a person before mature character shows, and none of us can see another's heart or measure all God is doing in them.

1. Jesus brackets this paragraph with the same sentence, verses 16 and 20: "You will know them by their fruits." From what we shared and from this passage: what does Jesus point discernment toward, and how do moral habits like honesty and kindness connect with fruit (Galatians 5:22-23)?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

He points to fruit: character and its works over time. Moral habits like honesty and kindness are not a rival category: done in love, they are fruit, and Galatians 5:22-23 names exactly such habits. What Jesus sets aside are credentials (sheep's clothing can be worn) and, in the verses immediately following, even dramatic spiritual gifts: many will say "did we not prophesy in your name... and do many mighty works in your name?", and he will declare he never knew them (7:22-23). Feelings, fame, and even wonders can counterfeit; a life of love, joy, peace, patience, and the rest, sustained over years, is the far weightier sign.

2. Compare Matthew 7:1-5 with Matthew 7:15-20. What kind of judgment does Jesus warn against, and what kind of discernment does he ask us to practice?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Jesus warns against the judgment that condemns persons, enjoys the verdict, and ignores the log in its own eye (7:1-5); he asks for the discernment that reads visible fruit to know whom to follow,

whom to trust, and what to flee (7:15-20). The fruit test is for recognition, not condemnation: it does not presume to read hearts or pronounce final sentence, which belongs to God alone. Judgment that enjoys itself has changed teams; discernment that refuses to look is not humility but negligence.

Live Discovery

Now send the group to Psalm 1, which they read in Session 2, with one question: what does the blessed man's tree have that the chaff does not? Rootedness by the water. Then say: one chapter has been saved for tonight so it could have a full night of its own. Open John 15 and read verses 1-11 aloud, slowly.

3. Count the occurrences of "abide" in John 15:1-11. What is the branch's entire job description, and what does Jesus say the branch can do apart from the vine?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

The word appears roughly ten times in eleven verses, depending on translation. The branch's job is one word: remain, and Jesus glosses remaining himself: "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love" (15:10). Stay attached, obediently and actively; the sap does what only sap can do. And apart from the vine: "nothing" (15:5). Not less, not little, nothing. This is why seven weeks of fruit could not be manufactured: fruit is what sap does, and the Spirit, the Catechism says, is like the sap of the Father's vine (CCC 1108). Abiding is concrete: his word abiding in us (15:7), prayer, the sacraments, above all the Eucharist, where the fruit of the vine is his blood.

4. John 15:2: every branch that does bear fruit the Father prunes, that it may bear more. Who gets pruned, and what does that mean for the seasons when a faithful life is being cut back?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

The fruitful branch gets pruned. In this image, pruning is not punishment but the vinedresser's investment in a branch he intends to load with fruit; the image does not explain every suffering, and Scripture knows other kinds of trial. This reframes seasons of loss for the abiding Christian: not evidence of abandonment but of attention. Say it carefully: it dignifies suffering without explaining any particular suffering, and it is never a diagnosis to hand someone else in their grief.

5. Read Isaiah 5:1-4. God planted a vineyard, did everything for it, and looked for grapes; it yielded wild grapes. When Jesus says "I am the true vine," what is he claiming against that background?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Israel was the Lord's vine that failed to yield; the prophets sang its grief. Jesus claims to be the vine that finally answers the Father's care: everything Israel was planted to be. And the astonishing move is the grafting: we are made branches in him, so that our fruitfulness is no longer our project

but participation in his. The Father is glorified, Jesus says, by our bearing much fruit (15:8): the whole study in one verse.

Dig Deeper · Revisiting the guesses one last time

Before Send, return to the whiteboard. Ask what changed in their understanding, and which passages did the changing; let participants explain their answers. Then offer one pastoral observation: fruit is usually slow, and counterfeits tend to be fast and impressive. It is an observation, not a rule; Christ's criterion remains the fruit itself.

Send · Closing Questions

1. Where are you relying only on yourself? How could prayer and the sacraments support the effort that situation requires?
2. What is the difference between evaluating someone's actions and assuming you know that person's heart? Give an example without naming anyone.

Live It This Week

- Choose one concrete abiding practice, daily Scripture, a weekly Holy Hour, or more frequent Communion, and start it this week, small and sustainable.
- Reread John 15:1-11 every day this week; let "abide" set the day's tone.
- Write yourself a new answer to the Session 1 question and keep it in your Bible at Matthew 7:20.

Closing Prayer

Father, vinedresser of the true vine, we asked in our own words how your Spirit is known, and your Son answered: by fruit, from abiding. Keep us on the vine through every pruning, and be glorified in our bearing much fruit. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Scripture Memory Verse

Matthew 7:20

Thus you will know them by their fruits.

Leader Reference Card

Every passage read or discussed in this session, in order of appearance, with key leader background.

- Matthew 7:15-20 (with 7:1-5, 21-23 context)
- John 15:1-11
- Psalm 1
- Isaiah 5:1-7
- Galatians 5:22-23 (context)
- Leader background: Jeremiah 17:7-8; Romans 11:17-24; Psalm 80:8-16