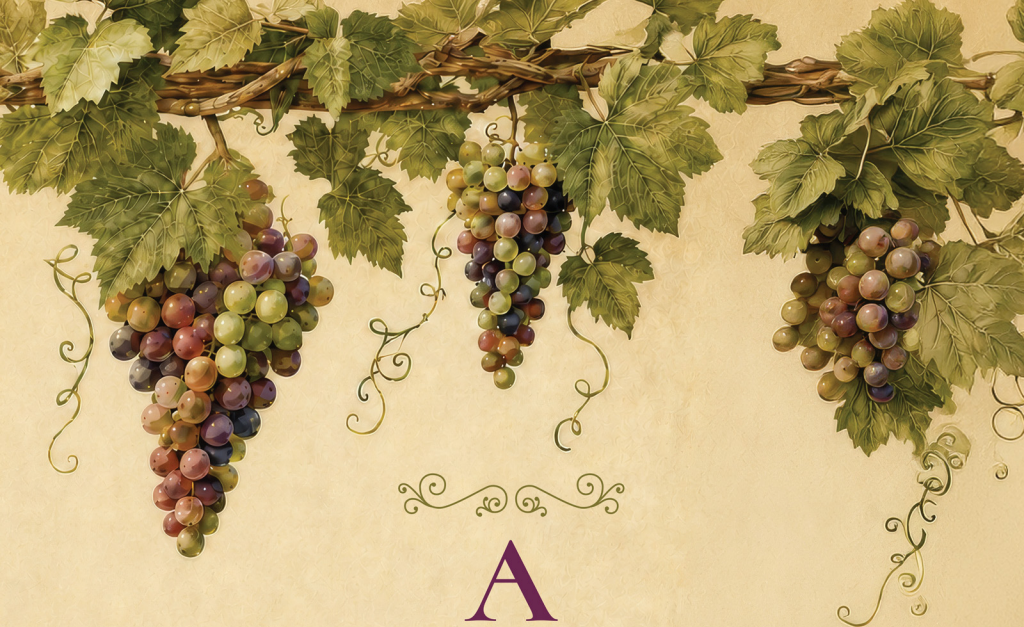




A SUMMER UNDER THE VINE

Discovering the Fruit the Spirit Grows

*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness,
faithfulness, gentleness, self-control*

Michael Kulwiec



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CHAPTER ONE / THE ABIDING

You Will Have Grapes in Three Years



For five Sundays that summer, the small church we attend did something a little unusual. We held our Sunday gatherings outside, in our backyard, under a grapevine. A real one, running along cables from the roofline to a pergola across the patio, a living canopy over our heads.

The setting was magical. An old fountain chuckled. The butterflies sipped from the milkweed. The birds whisked through the air, not much concerned with the people who'd decided to join them in their world. If I hadn't been there myself, I'm not sure I'd believe a little oasis like that existed in our neighborhood.

We gathered around a wooden table on benches and scattered chairs. Above us, dozens of bunches of grapes hung in clusters of jewels.

I remember thinking, of all the places to talk about fruit, we couldn't have picked a better one.

There's a promise in the Old Testament, from the prophet Zechariah, where God describes the life He intends for His people.

¹⁰ In that day each of you will invite your neighbor to sit under your vine and fig tree, declares the Lord Almighty.

Zechariah 3:10 (NIV)

In ancient Israel a vine was not just decoration. It stood for home, stability, provision, blessing. To sit under your own vine and fig tree meant you had a place, you had enough, and you were not living in fear. The picture was never really about grapes or figs. It was about shalom, the wholeness of life God gives when His people are safe, rooted, fruitful, and unafraid.

That is what we were after those five Sundays that summer, gathering under the grapevine to study the fruit of the Spirit, one at a time: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

Not so God could make us nicer people. So He could make us more like Jesus.

The vine over our heads echoed that ancient picture of shalom. But Jesus had taken the image even deeper. He did not simply call us to sit beneath a vine, but to abide in one.

⁴Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. ⁵I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

John 15:4-5

We can't do it on our own. That was the point.

But how that grapevine in our backyard came to be was unexpected and improbable. Like so much in our lives. So it seems only right to start with how it got there.

Eleven years earlier, my brother-in-law Paul had an idea for our backyard. He delivered it like a professor teaching his favorite subject. We should grow a grapevine. He knew everything about grapes, down to the ancient land where they originated. Which variety produced which wine. What climate and soil they thrived in. His knowledge was encyclopedic.

He knew the exact variety that would thrive in our backyard. He tracked down a wholesaler in the back country outside San Diego and talked the man into selling him precisely what he wanted.

The day arrived that he and his family showed up with his prize. Two small one-gallon pots, each with a 12-inch-long stick poking out from the center. No leaves. No buds. Just two sticks. They were the Charlie Brown Christmas trees of grapes.

He explained, punching his pinched fingers like a conductor cueing the cymbals, that this was Roger's Red, a natural cross between a wild California grape and a European wine variety once used to deepen the color of red wine.

Pam and I exchanged a glance. How are these two twigs going to cover our pergola, let alone produce fruit? I had killed hardier plants than these with an errant sneeze. These didn't stand a chance.

"Where do you want me to plant them?" Paul asked.

Pam pointed to a spot behind the pergola. To this day I don't know if she was giving them their best shot at success, or trying to make sure we wouldn't have to look at them once they died.

As he dug the holes, knowing Pam loved a garden with color in it, he told her the leaves would turn a bright crimson red come fall.

She smiled.

I thought, What leaves.

Then, as if he'd heard me thinking it, Paul said, "You will have grapes in three years."

Not likely. But then I considered who was telling me this. Paul knew grapes. He knew vines. He knew what fruit they could produce, long before there was anything to see that would convince the rest of us.

He was right. Three years in, the first bunches showed up, about a dozen, but grapes all the same. Every year after that, there were more. This year, eleven years after those two sticks went into the ground, we sat down to learn under a whole leafy roof of them, heavy with fruit.

There is another Paul, and another green thumb. My brother-in-law Paul could look at a twelve-inch stick and see grapes. The apostle Paul could look at people and see the character of Jesus waiting to grow. One knew vines. The other knew the Spirit. Both knew that fruit takes time, and that it never comes apart from the vine.

¹⁶ But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷ For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. ¹⁹ Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality,

impurity, sensuality, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, ²¹ envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. ²² **But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,** ²³ **gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.** ²⁴ And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

²⁵ If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit.

Galatians 5:16-25

That is not the tone of a man writing to strangers. Paul had planted these churches himself, on his first missionary journey, in a Roman province called Galatia, in what's now central Turkey. It was a crossroads, where Greek thought, Roman law, and Celtic tribal roots mixed into the region's religion, its politics, and its daily life.

These were people he knew. He describes them elsewhere as having welcomed him like an angel of God (Galatians 4:14, NIV). There was real affection there, real relationship, the kind that makes what happens next sting.

Because after Paul moved on, other teachers came in behind him with a different message. Faith in Christ, they said, was a good start, but it wasn't enough by itself. You needed circumcision too. You needed to keep the law. You needed to add your own effort and your own religious performance to what Christ had already done, or you weren't fully right with God.

When word reached Paul, he wrote the most urgent letter of his life. No pleasantries. No thanksgiving, which is how he opens nearly everything else he ever wrote. Instead, alarm.

⁶I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—

Galatians 1:6

That's not the opening of a calm theological treatise. That's a pastor who is scared for people he loves.

Here's why it still matters for us.

The Galatian error never really went away. We still try to earn our way into right standing with God. It feels like simple common sense: surely our okayness depends on our performance, on being good enough, doing enough, getting it right.

These days we don't dress it up in circumcision and food laws anymore. We dress it up in disciplines and habits and quiet times and church attendance and a private moral scorecard we're always checking, usually without admitting we're keeping one.

But the root underneath it is the same one it's always been. We trust our own effort more than we trust the Spirit.

C.S. Lewis saw this same tendency with his usual precision. We tend to think, he wrote in *Mere Christianity*, that God simply wants obedience to a set of rules, when what He actually wants is "people of a particular sort." A single brave act doesn't make someone courageous any more than one good move makes a chess player great. It's the whole pattern, sustained over time, that becomes a person's actual character. God isn't collecting isolated right actions off a checklist. He's forming something

durable, spreading what Lewis called a “good infection,” until, as Lewis put it, every Christian becomes “a little Christ.”

The Galatians believed that righteousness could be secured through rule-keeping. Paul, and Lewis centuries later, were both pointing toward something rules alone can never produce: a transformed heart and a Spirit-shaped life.

Have you ever noticed the quiet arithmetic running underneath a good day with God, the sense that you’re doing well because you’ve been doing the things? The Galatians received the gospel with real joy and then drifted, slowly, back toward that same math. Most of us have, even if we’d never say so out loud in a room full of church people.

Right in the middle of all this, Paul hands us both the solution and the reason it’s so hard. Verse 16 is the solution. Verse 17 is the struggle.

¹⁶ But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷ For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.

Galatians 5:16-17

The solution is almost too simple to trust. Walk by the Spirit. Not grit your teeth. Not try harder. Not follow a set of religious acts. Walk by the Spirit, and the desires of the flesh lose their grip.

But then Paul, in the very next breath, tells us why the struggle is real. The flesh and the Spirit want opposite things. They are set against each other, pulling us in two directions at once, which is why doing the good we intend so often feels like walking uphill.

When Paul says flesh, he doesn't mean the body. He means something closer to the whole orientation of a life turned in on itself, living for itself, and answering only to itself, a life operating as though God isn't in the room. Theologians have a Latin phrase for this, *incurvatus in se*, curved in on oneself. The picture goes back to Augustine, and Luther gave it its sharpest form in his *Lectures on Romans*. We were made to open outward, toward God and toward other people, the way a hand opens. Ever since the fall, sin has folded that hand inward, the way a fist closes around something it's decided to protect.

This isn't only a description of bad people doing bad things. It's a description of the human condition itself, the whole person misdirected, not just the behavior.

Paul knew this from the inside.

¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.

Romans 7:19 (NIV)

He isn't describing someone outside the faith. He's describing himself. Knowing the right thing and doing the right thing, he discovered, are two entirely different problems. Willpower wasn't enough. Information wasn't enough. The curve inward runs too deep for discipline alone to straighten out.

But there is good news right behind it.

¹ There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ² For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.

Romans 8:1-2

What the law couldn't do, and what sheer effort couldn't do either, the Spirit does. He reorients the whole person back outward, toward God and toward others. He uncurves what sin curved inward.

Paul names the works of the flesh directly, and says plainly they're evident and obvious.

¹⁹ Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, ²¹ envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Galatians 5:19-21

We know what works of the flesh look like. And when Paul warns that those who do such things won't inherit the kingdom of God, he isn't talking about the person who stumbles and repents. He's talking about a life given over, a whole direction, a person whose settled orientation is the flesh. That kind of life bears this kind of fruit because it was never really on the vine at all.

But here's what's easy to miss when you're sitting as comfortably as most of us were that morning. The flesh doesn't only show up in the loud sins. It shows up in pride. In needing to be right. In using religion itself as a way to prove your worth to God, and to whoever else is watching. Paul isn't writing to people who'd drifted into open sin. He's writing to people so eager to secure their standing with God that they'd adopted circumcision and food laws to do it. That's not a careless congregation.

That's a devout one. And Paul was more alarmed by them than he might have been by open sinners, because religious flesh is so much harder to diagnose in the mirror, and harder still to surrender. The curve inward doesn't always look sinful. Sometimes it looks like me, a very committed teacher, sitting under a vine on a Sunday morning, sure I had this figured out.

Paul sets all of that, the works of the flesh, against something completely different: the fruit of the Spirit.

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

Galatians 5:22-23

Did you catch an important little detail? He doesn't write fruits. He writes fruit, singular. The Greek word is *karpos* (pronounced kar-pos) and here it functions as a collective singular. Not nine fruits to pick from like produce at a farmers' market. Not nine separate character traits to work on one at a time, checking off kindness this month and self-control the next.

The Spirit isn't building nine separate traits. He's growing one kind of life, and that life looks like Jesus. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Not a menu. A portrait.

These nine are all connected. Tug on one and you will find the others attached.

Try to have peace without gentleness, and you usually end up with something else. A person who's gone numb, or who keeps the peace by never saying the true thing. And joy without love underneath it doesn't last. It's fine until the day turns hard.

That morning under the vine, I asked everyone to try something quietly, on their own. I'll ask you to do the same. Put your name in front of the list. Michael is loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle, and self-controlled. Notice where you flinched. I flinch too, every time.

For the rest of this book, we'll keep circling back to a few of the same things with each fruit we'll look at:

What it actually is, in the Spirit's terms rather than the world's.

What it looks like when God Himself is the one showing it to us.

What its absence looks like.

And what the world offers instead, close enough to the real thing to fool us.

I won't keep naming this framework as we go. Once is enough. You'll start to recognize the rhythm.

Before we can talk seriously about walking by the Spirit, we need to know who we're actually walking with.

The Holy Spirit is not a feeling, a mood, or the atmosphere of a worship service. He is not a force, an energy, or a vague spiritual presence. He is a person, the third person of the Trinity, fully God, coequal with the Father and the Son. So when Paul tells us to walk by the Spirit, he isn't telling us to follow a mood or chase a feeling or tap into some force. He is inviting us to walk with God himself.

Scripture introduces the Holy Spirit early, in Genesis, hovering over the waters before creation begins (Genesis 1:2).

The Hebrew word used in the Old Testament is *ruach*, pronounced roo-akh, and the Greek word used in the New Testament is *pneuma*, pronounced nyoo-mah. Both carry the

same range of meaning: spirit, breath, wind. Unseen but real, life-giving.

God breathes into the dust and Adam becomes a living being (Genesis 2:7).

Ezekiel watches dry bones come alive when breath enters them (Ezekiel 37:1-14).

Jesus tells Nicodemus that the one born of the Spirit is like the wind, impossible to control, but visible in what it does (John 3:8).

Billy Graham put it plainly, “I’ve never seen the wind. I see the effects of the wind, but I’ve never seen the wind. There’s a mystery to it.” That’s the Spirit. You know Him by what He does.

We know the Spirit is a person and not simply a power because Scripture describes Him the way you’d describe a person, not a force. He speaks (Acts 8:29). He teaches (John 14:26). He guides (John 16:13). He intercedes (Romans 8:26). He can be grieved (Ephesians 4:30). He says, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul” (Acts 13:2). Ananias lies to Him, and Peter tells him he has lied not to man, but to God himself (Acts 5:3-4). You don’t lie to a force. You don’t grieve an atmosphere. You don’t have fellowship with an energy. These are things that only belong to a relationship between persons.

In the Old Testament His presence was real but often selective, resting on judges and kings and craftsmen for particular tasks and then, at times, lifting again (1 Samuel 16:14).

But the prophets kept pointing toward something fuller still to come (Joel 2:28-29). Jesus had promised the same thing Himself, in person, right before He ascended (Acts 1:4-5, 8).

Not just judges. Not just kings. Not just craftsmen. Something bigger was promised, and it broke open at Pentecost. The festival fell fifty days after Passover, a Jewish harvest

celebration that packed Jerusalem with pilgrims from all over the known world. That's the day the Spirit came like wind and fire on the gathered believers (Acts 2:1-4), and Peter stood up in front of a confused crowd and told them, in effect, this is what Joel was talking about all along (Acts 2:16-17).

And here is the staggering part, the reality of life on this side of Pentecost. Every believer belongs to Christ by the Spirit. Paul puts it bluntly. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to Christ (Romans 8:9). When we believed, he says, we were marked with the promised Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:13). In one Spirit we were all baptized into one body (1 Corinthians 12:13).

The same Spirit who hovered over creation, who empowered the prophets, who descended on Jesus at His baptism (Matthew 3:16), and who raised Jesus from the dead (Romans 8:11) now dwells in the people of God. He does not merely visit us. He lives in us.

Christians have disagreed for centuries about the particulars, about what happens at conversion, about later experiences of the Spirit, about how the gifts of the Spirit function today, and those are honest disagreements among people who genuinely love God. I don't know where everyone sitting at that table that summer landed on all of it, and it didn't need to matter for what we were doing there. But here is ground we can all stand on together, whatever table you grew up at. He is a person. He is God. He is present in every believer. He unites us to Christ, forms us into His likeness, and produces exactly what Paul calls the fruit of the Spirit.

It helps, before we go further, to say something about how this fruit actually grows, because it shapes what we should expect

of ourselves. Tim Keller, teaching on this same passage, pointed out a few things about how the fruit of the Spirit grows, and they've stuck with me. Keller, to my knowledge, never had a vine to point to when he taught it. But I do. That morning I told everyone to look up, and I'll tell you the same, whether you're under a vine of your own or just picturing ours.

The fruit of the Spirit grows gradually. The vine over our heads did not produce a single grape its first summer, or its second. It couldn't have. A vine that young has to spend everything it has building roots and a strong enough wood framework to eventually carry the weight of real fruit. Producing grapes takes a massive amount of energy, more than a young vine can spare. Force it to fruit too early and it will weaken itself, sometimes permanently. There is hidden root work long before there's anything visible above ground, and the Spirit tends to work the same way in us, slowly, hard to measure day to day.

Even once the vine was old enough to bear fruit, I learned to watch for something most people walk right past. Every spring, small, tight clusters show up on the vine, no bigger than a seed, easy to mistake for something already finished. They look like mini grapes. They're not. Watch long enough and you'll see each one bloom, shedding a tiny cap off every flower, until the ground underneath is dusted green, the way a light snow dusts a lawn. Only after all of that does a single grape actually exist. Most of what blooms never makes it to harvest. What survives had to pass through every one of those stages first. There's no shortcut from bud to fruit.

The fruit of the Spirit grows inevitably. Those tiny flowers don't wait on a bee or a breeze to carry anything in from outside. Everything the vine needs to fertilize itself, it already has,

inside the flower itself. If the Spirit truly lives in a person, fruit will come the same way, drawing on what's already been placed there, not all at once, not perfectly, not without struggle along the way. But the Spirit is not passive. He brings life. Slow growth does not mean no growth.

It grows internally before it grows visibly. Long before there's a grape to see, the change has already started inside each fertilized flower, cell by cell, invisible from where I'm standing. This isn't behavior stapled onto an unchanged heart, more religious activity, or learning to act nicer in public. The Spirit changes us from the inside out, forming the desires and loves and motives underneath our actions, long before anyone else, maybe even we ourselves, can see it happening.

That's three things Keller helped me see. Here's a fourth I've watched happen with my own eyes, out under the vine. Those same small green flower clusters I watched all spring eventually turn into deep crimson grapes, impossible to miss from clear across the yard. Fruit grows visibly, first to God, then to ourselves, then to everyone around us, because fruit was never meant to just hang there looking pretty. It was meant to be tasted.

⁸ Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.

Psalm 34:8 (NIV)

This is not a self-improvement program. It is not a list of behaviors to maintain through sheer willpower until you die. It is a life being grown from the inside by a person who lives in you.

C.S. Lewis described this better than almost any writer of his century. In the sixteenth chapter of *The Lion, the Witch*

and the Wardrobe, Aslan has just risen from the dead. He leads the girls into a courtyard filled with the White Witch's victims. These are creatures, fauns and centaurs and dwarves, she turned to stone over years of her reign. All of them are frozen mid-motion. All the right shape. None of the life left in them.

Then Aslan begins to breathe on them. Lewis describes the change starting small, a streak of gold spreading across cold marble until, as he puts it, "the colour seemed to lick all over him as the flame licks all over a bit of paper." The stone folds ripple into living hair. A great red mouth opens and yawns. One by one the statues wake, and the courtyard that had looked like a museum starts sounding like a zoo, full of creatures running and laughing and making noise.

Lewis knew exactly what he was writing. *Ruach. Pneuma.* Breath. The same breath that hovered over the waters at creation, that filled Adam's lungs, that rushed through a room at Pentecost. Aslan's breath turning stone back into life is the oldest story in Scripture, dressed up in Narnian clothing.

The statues didn't earn their way back to life by trying harder. They weren't slowly improved through a better regimen for stone statues, whatever that would even look like. They received life, by being breathed on, by proximity, by Aslan coming close enough to lean in.

This is what the fruit of the Spirit is. Not stone learning to act like flesh. Flesh actually becoming alive. From the inside. By the breath of God.

This is a good place to stop and ask you plainly: have you become alive by the breath of God? Have you received His Spirit? For many of you, the answer is yes, and if so, there is

nothing better. The Spirit is already in you, and the rest of this book is about letting Him bear His fruit in your life.

But some of you aren't sure. If that's you, the first step isn't trying harder. It's becoming a child of God. And that happens the simplest way there is: by believing that Jesus died on the cross for your sins and rose again, so that you could have life.

⁹ because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.

Romans 10:9-10

You can tell Him so in words as plain as these, not so different from the ones I prayed decades ago:

Lord Jesus, I know that I am a sinner and I need Your forgiveness. I believe that You died on the cross for my sins and rose from the dead. I turn from my sins and invite You into my heart and life. I want to trust You as my Lord and Savior. Thank You for loving me and saving me. In Jesus' name, Amen.

When we receive Christ, we are sealed by His Spirit.

¹³ In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit.

Ephesians 1:13

That word “sealed” wasn’t a churchy word in Paul’s day. It was a word from the marketplace. A merchant sealed a sack of grain to guarantee it belonged to the buyer. A farmer branded his livestock the same way, so no one could question whose animal it was. And a king pressed his own ring into hot wax on a letter or a shipment, a mark that meant two things at once: this belongs to me, and no one has the authority to break this seal but me.

That’s the picture behind what happens when you receive Christ. God presses His own mark onto you, not one you can see, but every bit as real. You belong to Him now. And what belongs to the King, the King keeps.

And in that moment of our salvation, we are joined to the vine. Apart from the vine, our lives can’t produce the fruit of the Spirit at all. Jesus put the same truth plainly at the very start of this book when He said, “apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5).

If you prayed that prayer just now, welcome to the family of God. And if you’ve walked with Him for years, welcome all the same. Neither of us got here by our own effort, and neither of us grows fruit by it. But both of us get to watch our lives fill with fruit.

Now what?

Two words are worth carrying with you through the rest of this book: God-centeredness, and God-likeness.

We pursue God-centeredness, and the Spirit produces God-likeness. We abide in the vine, and the Spirit grows the fruit. It really is that simple to say, even though it takes a whole life to actually live.

God-centeredness means God at the center of our motives, our desires, our worship, our obedience, our daily decisions, the

small unremarkable ones as much as the big ones. Not church attendance alone. Not moral scorekeeping. God Himself, at the center. This is what it means to abide in the vine.

God-likeness means our character increasingly reflects God's own character, most fully as we see it in Jesus. Not niceness. Not self-improvement dressed up in spiritual language. The actual likeness of Christ becoming visible in how we live, in ways we usually notice last, if we notice them in ourselves at all.

God-centeredness is the abiding. God-likeness is the fruit that grows out of it. These two words framed everything that followed under the vine that summer, and they frame everything that follows in this book. Keep them close. You'll want them again before this book is through.

Nobody left that first Sunday with a reading list, or a twelve-step program, or homework to feel guilty about not finishing.

What actually stays with a person after a morning like that first Sunday is usually smaller than everything that got said. One step. Small enough to actually take, honest enough to actually mean. Five minutes of quiet before the day starts. A prayer practice picked back up after years of leaving it alone. Five words said out loud for the first time in a long time, Spirit, I know You're here.

Fruit doesn't grow through dramatic gestures. It grows because a branch stayed attached to a vine, one ordinary day at a time.

Continue the journey

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A Summer Under the Vine

by Michael Kulwicz

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