

**Sermon preached by Pastor Robert Barnett at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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JESUS: THE TRUE VINE

John 15:1-17

“I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener . . . I am the vine, you are the branches.” These are among the last words Jesus would speak to His disciples on the night before He was crucified. He said them right after the Last Supper and only hours before He would go to the Cross. In some ways, they are difficult words . . . and it was a tough and difficult night.

Three times before the sun would rise, Peter would lie about his relationship with Jesus. Judas went off to betray His Lord for a few lousy pieces of silver. And the other disciples were frightened and confused. After Jesus was arrested and brought to trial, every one of them would scatter, nowhere to be found.

Now, these were twelve men who had hung around Jesus for three years. They enjoyed His company, they watched His miracles, and they listened to His teaching. They had been with Jesus on the hills of Galilee and in the streets of Jerusalem. They were the inner circle of His friends. They were His followers.

But on this night, perhaps the most important night in their lives, they held back and distanced themselves from Jesus. They were afraid, far from the joy and peace, victory and blessing of being close to the Lord. They were a long way from their call to be fruitful and productive disciples of Jesus.

Can you relate to them? Do you feel that your life bears the marks of a follower of Jesus Christ? This morning are you passionate about living for Jesus and telling others about Him? Or is your spiritual life a little dry? Do you hope that no one gets too close because, deep down, you feel distant from God?

Well, friends, if spiritual barrenness has cast its shadow across your path – like the disciples that evening and many of us here this morning – you are not alone. These words of Jesus were written for you.

I AM SAYINGS

We know this passage as one of the “I Am” sayings in the Gospel of John. Seven times Jesus spoke these words, using an expression that would mean something special to His Jewish listeners.

“I am the Bread of Life; he who comes to me will never go hungry” (6:35).

“I am the Light of the World; whoever follows me will never walk in darkness” (8:12).

“I am the Gate; whoever enters through me will be saved” (10:9).

“I am the Good Shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (10:11).

“I am the Resurrection and the Life; he who believes in me will never die” (11:25).

“I am the Way and the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me”(14:6).

And finally here in John 15: “I am the Vine [the True Vine]; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing” (15:5).

In each of these sayings, Jesus makes the extraordinary claim that He is God. He recalls a biblical phrase that His listeners would understand. In Exodus 3, the Lord told Moses to go to Egypt and demand, in the name of God, that Pharaoh free Israel after 400 years of slavery. It was a remarkable event – God appeared in a burning bush and Moses asked for the name of who was sending him. God replied that His name was “I AM who I AM,” the Hebrew word Yahweh or Jehovah, translated in English with the all-capitalized “LORD.”

It is the name the Old Testament uses to speak about God in His covenant relationship with the people He has saved. When Jesus said “I AM” in these seven sayings, He was claiming to be the God of Israel, the Savior of the world.

As the True Vine, Jesus claimed to be the only true source of life. Without Him, we perish. But with Him, we will bear much fruit.

IMAGE OF A VINEYARD

When Christ called Himself the True Vine, He used an image that would be very familiar to the disciples. Nothing was more obvious to 1st-century Jews than a vineyard. They lived, walked, slept and ate in the very shadow of the vine. The Israelite calendar was governed by growing season: In the winter was pruning of the vines; spring welcomed the first buds which were followed by vigorous growth of vines in summer; heavy clusters of grapes came in fall harvest.

For that reason the vineyard became a preeminent symbol of God’s care for His people. Frequently, Israel is described as a choice vine, brought out of Egypt to serve the Lord. And God is the wise gardener diligently caring for His vineyard, preparing the ground, planting the grapevines, and expecting good fruit from their lives.

Interestingly, the image of the vine in the Old Testament often makes mention of Israel’s waywardness, of her failure to be fruitful. The good vine planted by God was to bear the fruit of an obedient life, but it produced only sour grapes. The gardener’s disappointment is clear. Jeremiah wrote: “I had planted you like a choice vine of sound and reliable stock. How then did you turn against into a corrupt, wild vine?” (Jer. 2:21).

So, talk about vines and grapes would have been obvious to the disciples. Israel had been an unproductive vineyard, unfaithful to her covenant with the Lord.

But Jesus is the True Vine. He's not "true" simply as the opposite of false. But more than that, He is "true" because He is perfect, complete, and enduring. He, and He alone is completely true. Only Jesus can give life to new covenant people to bear fruit for God's glory. He is the true Israel, the true source, He is the way, truth, and life.

Only as you and I are attached to the true vine, will His life flow through us . . . and produce in us His fruit. Without His life, we are cut off and we will perish. Jesus said "I am the vine, you are the branches, apart from me you can do nothing."

So what is this fruitful life that Jesus wants for His disciples? What does He want for you and me? He says in verse 5 that if we remain in Him, we will bear much fruit. Proof of being Christ's disciple means fruit bearing . . . that is, having evidence in our lives that we belong to Him and that we obey His commands.

In another place, the apostle Paul wrote of fruit bearing, Christ's own character, living within us: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control – those are qualities he called the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23. The fruit of the Spirit is a new way of living, a different way of being and acting. It is a change that affects us at the very core of our lives . . . because it is the work of the Cross in our hearts, a work that transforms the way we think and the way we choose to obey God's Word.

It is a quality of living that is available to any child of God, regardless of his circumstances. Jesus offered fruitfulness to the disciples on that tough and difficult night . . . and He offers it to us today. But it is a life that you and I cannot produce on our own.

At this point, I want to make something very clear. It is vital for our understanding of this saying. Jesus' words are to believers, those who are in Christ. The passage is not about keeping or losing your salvation. If you are in Christ, if you depend on Jesus alone for your salvation, your eternal destiny is secure. You cannot lose eternal life.

The descriptions of cutting away, pruning, and burning of unfruitful branches, refer to our efforts to live out our faith disconnected from the vine. Works that will be burned as wood, hay, and stubble. Works that no matter how well intentioned, are not produced by Christ. The passage is about our dependence on Him to produce the fruit of the Spirit in us. He is the True Vine, the great I AM, and apart from Him we can do nothing!

REMAIN IN HIM

Although we are totally dependent on Him to make us fruitful, we are not totally passive. Look at verse 4 again. Jesus says, "Remain in me, and I will remain in you." That implies some sort of response. We are to abide in Him, to sojourn with Him, to continue to be present with Him.

In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson translates this as “Live in me. Make your home in me, just as I do in you.” I like the way Ray Stedman explains it:

“When our Lord says, ‘Abide in me’ He is talking about the will, about the choices, the decisions we make. We must decide to do things which expose ourselves to Him and keep ourselves in contact with Him.”

So, what choices do we make that enable us to remain? What decisions do we make to abide in Christ, to stay connected to the vine? Let me suggest three ways.

First, we must continue in the joyful and passionate recognition of His perfect sacrifice. Verse 13 tells us, “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.” Here Jesus points us to the Cross. He tells us that He poured out His life for us. He suffered the righteous wrath of God for us and took our place under God’s judgment for us. Romans 8 teaches that we were once God’s enemies, powerless sinners, hardly friends of God. But we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, and He now calls us His friends!

We can never overemphasize the place of the Cross. Believing in Jesus’ death is not merely the entry point to the Christian life – it is the essence of discipleship. Fruitfulness comes from living the Cross-centered life, living under grace – knowing that our identity as Christians means that even while we were yet sinners, He called us into new life through the death and resurrection of His Son.

Friends, never let the Cross become old news to you! The gospel underwrites everything there is in the Christian life and you and I should preach it to ourselves every day.

As we have said, in John 15 Jesus is talking intimately with His disciples. He is not speaking to Pharisees or to the multitude like He did with other “I AM” sayings. Here, He speaks to those who already have a relationship with Him, people who have believed on Him and committed themselves to Him as Savior and Lord.

Does this describe you? If so, you are one of His branches. You can go on to what Jesus is talking about. If not, you must first stop and come to Him. Say to Him,

Lord Jesus, I admit that my life is not fruitful and that I can never make it fruitful by myself. I need you. Take me now, not on the basis of my own goodness (for I can never measure up to the holiness you require), but on the basis of your death on the Cross for me. Accept me as one of your followers.

If you can pray that prayer and mean it, you can be sure that Jesus has already joined you to Himself. You can remain in Him because He will remain in you.

Second, we are to continue in response to His love through a posture of obedience. In verse 10, Jesus said, “If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in His love.” This is the pattern for us – the pattern of Jesus’ obedient relationship with His Father. It is a lifestyle of loving, obeying, and remaining. John

14:23 says, “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.”

I am talking about an attitude of submission to God and His Word . . . not following a bunch of rules and regulations. It is a lifestyle, one in which we are constantly being changed by God’s grace, being transformed by Christ, so that the fruit of the Spirit is produced in us.

Ray Stedman writes again,

“We have been placed into Christ by the Holy Spirit. Now we must choose to maintain that relationship by the decisions we make – decisions to expose ourselves to His word in order to learn about Him, and to relate to Him in prayer. Decisions to relate to other believers in body life experiences; that is, bearing one another’s burdens and confessing our faults and sharing in fellowship with one another. All of this is designed to relate to Him – Jesus says, “Abide in me.” If we do that, we are fulfilling this active, necessary decision of the will, to obey His Word, to do what He says, and to stay in touch with Him.”

Foremost in Christ’s mind was the command to love one another. Verse 12 says, “My command is this: Love each other as I loved you.” His direction was much like the command in John 13:34-35: “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” If we know this love of Christ, if the Holy Spirit has poured out His love in our hearts, we ought to obey Him by loving one another. That is the proof of our remaining in Him. Our love for one another will be how all those people who live in the neighborhoods surrounding this building know we belong to Jesus.

Finally, we are to continue in or remain in Christ through an attitude of entire dependency on Him. It is the consciousness that sin still indwells us, that we are still helpless. It is the realization that “apart from His Spirit working in us, we cannot live the Christian life, we can do nothing.” It is not enough that we recognize our own inabilities. We must turn to Christ with delight. We must seek His presence and be occupied with His excellence.

We do this as we seek Him in His Word and in prayer. Do you go to the Bible regularly? Do you pray to Him often? You will never develop an attitude of dependence on Him until you draw near to Him often.

Remaining in Christ means I no longer rely on my sufficiency, my strength, or my anything. It is solely a matter of His sufficiency. He is the vine and we are the branches. The branch is simply a conduit, through which flows the fruit-producing juices that the vine provides, which result in the lovely clusters of grapes. You and I cannot produce the fruit of the Spirit in our lives. That is the work of Christ in us. He is the vine, you and I, as branches, are simply grape holders. Even if it is hard to understand, the simple message of John 15 is that we are totally dependent on Christ. Spiritual vitality does not come from us. It comes from Christ. “No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.”

C.S. Lewis illustrated what this means:

“A car is made to run on petrol, and it would not run properly on anything else. Now God designed the human machine to run on Himself. He is the fuel our spirits were designed to burn, the food our spirits were designed to feed on. There is no other. God cannot give us a happiness and peace apart from himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing.”

CONCLUSION

In John 15, Jesus calls us to examine ourselves. Are we rejoicing in what He has done for us on the Cross? Does faithful obedience mark our lives? Is our life in Christ merely external or is there a true dependence on Him?

In our union with Jesus through faith by the power of the Holy Spirit, the life of Jesus flows in us. We have the promise of fruitfulness – abundant Christian living – if we remain in Him. Just as sap flows from the vine to the branches to produce fruit, the power of God is available to us to produce Christ’s own character within us.

The Christian life is not about how well we do, how much we know. It is about Jesus, the true vine, the true source of life.

You and I will have fruitful and productive lives only as we remain in Him. We will be fruitful only when we are connected to Jesus like branches are to the vine.