

## The Vine and the Branches

In John 15 we have the seventh 'I Am' saying: "**I am the True Vine.**" I don't know how much vines interest you, but in Jewish history the grape vine has massive significance. The vine was symbolic of the nation of Israel. They had coins minted in Jerusalem during this period had a vine symbol. **And in this time, if you went to the gates of the temple there was a great golden vine. It was over 70 cubits high (that's 32 metres high!). The Jewish historian Josephus said this vine was made of solid gold. And the grape clusters were the size of a full grown man!**

In the Old Testament the vine was the ultimate symbol of Israel. It comes up many times. Most famously in Psalms 80 and Isaiah 5. In these passages we're told the LORD himself planted the vine. He chose Israel and created the nation. He took care of them like a vinedresser, and watched for them to bear fruit. Fruit bearing was symbolic of Israel's mission; the people were meant to bear fruit among the nations. They were meant to be different; to be a light to the nations. To bring salvation to the ends of the earth. God elected them to bless the nations by revealing his glory. But Israel was a bad vine. They didn't bear fruit. They became like all the other nations. They committed all sorts of injustices.

But in contrast to the vine that destroyed itself by disobedience, Jesus is the True Vine. When Jesus says, "**I am the True Vine,**" He is saying he's the fulfillment of this symbol. He is the True Israel; the obedient Son. He is the fruit bearing vine, and through him all the nations of the earth will be blessed.

In John 13-17, Jesus is preparing his disciples for when he goes away. He's told them he will die, rise again, and go to be with his Father in heaven. How are they going to carry out the mission when Jesus isn't around? How will they bear fruit and be effective in the world? That's what Jesus dealing with here. And it's relevant for us as followers of Jesus too. What is your purpose on earth? What is God's purpose for your life and the life of this church? Jesus tells us: ***To bring forth fruit and bring God glory.*** That's our mission.

And in John 15 fruit bearing all comes down to our relationship with Jesus. What is the nature of this relationship? In two words: union and communion. Let's look at this passage under those two headings.

### 1. Union with Christ

Check out verse 1, "**I am the vine you are the branches.**" Although Jesus is going away, his followers will be joined to him like a branch to a vine. They're gonna be united to him. How? Jesus has just promised them the Holy Spirit (John 14:16; 26). The Spirit of Jesus unites us to Jesus. Our Lord Jesus is the fruit bearing vine. Branches get their life from the vine don't they? So the Christian gets their life from Christ. And like the life giving sap fills the branch.... His life giving Spirit fills every believer.

This is great news! Are you worried about bearing fruit? Maybe you're not seeing much change or growth in your Christian life? Our first instinct is usually, "I got to do something about this!" And put together a list of dos and don'ts. Little rituals to perform every morning. More disciplines.

But what Jesus says here cuts against our self-sufficiency: without me you can do nothing. In our culture the more independent you are the more fruitful (or successful you are). But not so for the Christian. When it comes to bearing fruit, we can't lift a little finger on our own! Christianity is Christ alone. **We become Christians by faith in Jesus, we stay Christians by faith in Jesus, and we grow and bear fruit as Christians by faith in Jesus.** Imagine being carried across the **Niagara Falls** by a skilled tightrope walker, and halfway across you have a choice: You can let him carry you the rest of the way, or you can tell him you'll walk by your own steam. That would be death wish wouldn't it! You can't live as a Christian without Christ: **"Without me you can do nothing"** Fruit bearing is the work of God the Son indwelling us by his Holy Spirit.

And notice, God the Father is at work too isn't He? The Father is the Vine dresser. And check out verse 2, **"Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes."** God the Son is the Vine, God the Father is the Gardener. Notice there are some branches that don't bear fruit, and that's not good. No fruit means no root doesn't it. What sort of fruit are we talking about? The fruits of the Spirit. Some are mentioned in our passage, Love, joy, peace. The Character of Christ in us.

No fruit means no root. So this is a warning. Jesus is calling us to examine our lives. Am I growing more like Jesus? Am I showing some resemblance? Or even, am I desiring to become more like Jesus?

There are some branches that have an artificial attachment to Christ. Maybe that's you? Maybe you're attached to the church, but are you attached to Christ? Maybe you've been baptised even? Maybe you have had the outward symbol, but do you have the inward reality? Have you been united to him by faith? The million dollar question is not, 'Am I a good church goer?' But am I in union with the Lord Jesus? If not, repent of your independence and become fully *Christ* dependent.

If you are in Christ, then praise God. But be prepared to be pruned. Notice, **the Father prunes every branch that does bear fruit in order that it might bear more fruit.** That's surprising isn't it. You'd expect the branches going well to be left alone. But the Heavenly Gardener knows how to make His branches even more fruitful. **And so here we learn that being fruitful is painful.** Being trimmed back hurts. But that's how our Father changes us. Sometimes pruning comes because of sin. But here we learn that when we are living the way God wants, we get pruned. The most fruitful Christians are usually those who have experienced a painful life aren't they. The more we grow to be like Christ, the more we get pruned. We have to remember this. We have to expect it. **For the moment all pruning seems painful - not pleasant. But later it brings the peaceful fruits of righteousness.**

There's a scene in C.S Lewis' *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* that really captures this. Eustace Scrubb is a character you just want to punch in the face, until one day he's transformed by Aslan - the lion. Eustace finds a dragon's lair and is very greedy for the treasure. He puts on a gold bracelet and falls asleep. And when he wakes up, he's turned into a dragon. Lewis writes, **"Sleeping on a dragon's hoard with greedy, dragonish thoughts in his heart, he had become a dragon himself."** Eustace soon realises what's happened and feels lonely and desperately wants to change. That night Aslan comes to Eustace. Eustace thought he just needed help getting the gold bracelet off.

But he needed something much deeper. Something much more painful. Aslan needed to peel his dragon skin off. Eustace found that no matter how many layers of dragon skin came off there was still more dragon. Lewis writes, *"Then the lion said - but I don't know if it spoke - 'you will have to let me undress you.' I was afraid of his claws, I can tell you, but I was pretty nearly desperate now. So I just lay flat down on my back and let him do it. The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone straight into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I've ever felt."* But eventually Eustace was filled with joy when he realised he'd become a boy again.

Our Father trims us down until there's not much of self left but Christ. These painful experiences that we would have avoided, make us fruitful. As David said in Psalm 119: **"Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep your word."**

And James 1:1-2, **"Dear brothers, Is your life full of difficulties and temptations? Then be happy, for when the way is rough, your patience has a chance to grow. So let it grow."** Pruning is always good for us.

One preacher put it: **"The hand is never closer than when the pruning takes place."** Let's remember that. When we are in union with Christ, Father, Son and Spirit are at work: To bring forth fruit and bring God glory.

And you and I are called to work out what God is working in. We have our part to play. The vine and the branches metaphor show us our union with Christ. And out of this union comes our communion; our ongoing relationship with Jesus. Jesus sums up our work in one word: **Remain.**

## **2. Communion with Christ**

Check out verse 4: **"Remain in Me,"** Jesus says, **"as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless you remain in me, neither can you."** That word 'Remain' comes up eight times in our passage. Just as many times as 'bearing fruit' comes up. The remaining and the fruit bearing go together. The one who remains in Jesus bears fruit. The one who doesn't gets cut off.

So what does it mean to remain? The word 'remain' means to stay doesn't it. The one who remains doesn't leave but sticks around. But what does it mean to stick with Jesus? In short it means **to have a close and living relationship with Jesus.** Union leads to communion. We've been grafted into Christ by grace. The cross has made it possible. He was cut off so that you and I could be grafted in. And now he calls his followers to remain. Or abide. Stick close. Cling to him. Live out your union with Christ, by communion with Christ. Communion is our part in the relationship.

By saying 'Remain in me' Jesus is saying He's not interested in a nominal Christianity. He's not interested in dead orthodoxy. He wants a warm and intimate relationship with you. In the Christian life one of the dangers is our love growing cold. And the good news getting old. We've heard it all. Said it all. Sung it all.

That's why we need the Psalms. Psalm 80: **Give us life and we will call upon your name. Restore us O Lord God almighty. Let your face shine on us and we will be saved.**

Jesus isn't interested in a cold and distant relationship. Jesus want a close, warm, intimate relationship with you.

How do we do that? Here are two ways you and I can remain in Christ.

### **1. Word and Prayer (verse 7)**

The first way to remain is through word and prayer. Notice in verse 7, Jesus says “If you remain in me, and my words remain in you, as whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” You might think that’s it’s only boring preachers who say “Read your Bible and say your prayers.” But here the great Teacher sees this as the key to communion. Take in the word. And lift up your prayers. Some people say most sermons finish with read the Bible and say your prayers. It’s may sound boring but it’s big. It’s crucial isn’t it. Every meaningful relationship requires communication doesn’t it. Sharing on both sides. And it’s the same with Jesus - he talks to us through his Word - we respond in prayer.

If Bible reading and prayer sound boring, ***you could pray to God to save you from boring Bible reading.*** And pray to God to save you from boring prayer. Say, “I’m going to read the Bible, please help me. I’m going to pray - please help me to pray.” We aren’t dead wood. Dead wood is no good. A Christian is a living branch. In a living relationship with Jesus. And the bread and butter of our relationship is word and prayer.

## **2. Love One Other (vv. 12-17)**

And next to remain in Jesus means to love one another. Check out verse 9: “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Remain in my love.” How? v. 10: “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love...” ....What commandments? Down to verse 12, “This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you.”

The fruit of the Spirit is ....Love. Love first and foremost. Love one another. This also might sound boring. You might get sick of hearing it. But we should never underestimate the power of Christian love. Give me a wave if you were helped into the kingdom by other believers? God is at work through His people. Jesus says keep loving one another.

Our little local church is a powerful testimony to the love of Christ. “Love one another as I have loved you, Jesus says.” There’s no greater love. The world says, “You lay down your life for me.” Jesus says, “I’ve laid down my life for you. Now you do the same for one another.” And this isn’t going to be difficult. ***Some of God’s people aren’t as sweet as me.*** But we’re to love as he’s loved us and laid down his life for us. Jesus laid down his life for us. Jesus was trampled on so that people like you and I could be lifted up and saved. On the cross he was cut off so that you and I could be grafted into Him.

And now, our Lord Jesus has handpicked you and I to continue His mission in the world: to bring forth fruit and bring God glory. How do we do that? Union with Christ: He is the vine we are the branches. Without me you can do nothing.

And communion with Christ: remain in him. Take in His word, lift up your prayers. And love one another like Christ loved us and gave himself for us.

### **Prayer**

Restore us, O Lord God Almighty

Let your face shine upon us and we shall be saved.

In the name of Jesus we pray - Amen.

**Swansea - Abide with me — CT - Cling to Christ**