

“I Am the True Vine”

Jn. 15:1-8

--CEFC 12/13/20;

One of my greatest fears is that I will have lived a wasted life.

I fear that at the end of the day, when all is said and done,

I may look back at my life and wonder what it was good for?

What did it accomplish?

What significance did it have?

I fear that I may be unproductive and ineffective,

that my life will have been lived in vain.

Have you ever had that feeling, that fear?

I confess I seem to get it most when I venture into Washington

and get around people who seem to be in positions of power and influence.

It makes me feel very small and insignificant in comparison.

Or maybe when I go to pastors conferences

and see all the great work others are doing—

you know, the megachurches, the booming ministries.

I ask myself, What have I done?

How will I be able I justify my existence?

What can I point to as the fruit of my labors?

It is a valid concern,

for when I turn to the pages of Scripture

I find that the Lord God is concerned with the productivity, too.

He is concerned with the fruit produced by his people.

In Isaiah 5 the Lord depicts Israel as his vineyard

which he planted and prepared,

and then he looked for them to produce a crop of good grapes--

but because they only produced rotten fruit,

Israel was ripe for judgment.

She was unproductive, unfruitful.

And wasn't this the message of John the Baptist

when he told the Pharisees and Sadducees who came to him--

"You brood of vipers! ... Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. ...

The axe is already at the root of the trees,

and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down

and thrown into the fire." (Mt. 3:7-10)

And again, in Jesus' parable of the landowner who planted a vineyard

and then rented it out to tenants

who then refused to give the owner its fruit.

Doesn't Jesus expound the point by saying to the Jewish leaders,

"Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God

will be taken away from you

and given to a people who will produce its fruit." (Mt. 21:43).

Make no mistake about it--

the Lord our God is concerned with productivity--

he desires that his people live fruitful lives.

Jesus once cursed a fruitless fig tree and caused it to wither

as a graphic illustration of his disdain for barren religiosity.

This is a serious matter.

And so Jesus says in our passage this morning--

John 15:1--"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."

And in v. 8--"This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit,

showing yourselves to be my disciples."

A concern for productivity, for fruitfulness,

ought to characterize every Christian,

for a true disciple, Jesus says, will live a fruitful life.

Let's explore this theme as we dig into this passage.

John chap. 14 ends with Jesus and the disciples

leaving the upper room after the Passover meal,

and on their way to the garden of Gethsemane

perhaps they passed by the temple with a great golden vine

decorating its gate;
or perhaps they went through an actual vineyard
on the upward climb on the Mount of Olives.

But whatever the immediate occasion for these words,
their primary background was the Old Testament.

The prophets often spoke of the nation of Israel as God's vine,
his vineyard carefully planted and prepared by him
to bring forth fruit.

By Jesus' day, the vine had become Israel's national symbol,
much like the Irish shamrock,
the Canadian Maple leaf,
or the American eagle.

Israel was God's vine.

But it is interesting that in almost every case
in which the vine is used of Israel in the Old Testament,
it is associated, not just with God's loving care of Israel as the gardener,
but more importantly, with Israel's moral and spiritual decay
as an unfruitful vine.

I mentioned Isaiah 5, but there's also Psalm 80 and Jeremiah 2--

Jer. 2:21--"I had planted you like a choice vine of sound and reliable stock.

How then did you turn against me into a corrupt, wild vine?"

God's vine, Israel, had no fruit.

But notice in our passage,

in another of his "I Am" statements in John's Gospel,

Jesus says “I am the true vine.”—

That is, Jesus is saying “I am what Israel was called to be.

Unlike Israel in the past,

I have received the love of my Father,

and I have brought forth the fruit he desires.

I am the true vine.”

And you, he says to his disciples,

you are like branches attached to that vine.

As you are joined to me by faith,

by the work of the Holy Spirit in you,

you are joined to me in an intimate relationship,

and you share in my life.

Through me, you become a part of a new community of God’s people—

you become a part of that true vine

that the Lord has always wanted his people to be.

This is what it means to be a Christian—

all that we are comes to us in virtue of our union with Christ.

Our **righteousness** before God comes only in our union with Christ,

our **status as God’s children** comes only in our union with Christ,

our **membership in the people of God** comes only in our union with Christ.

Our power to live a new kind of life—

a life that bears fruit and so pleases God

it all comes only in our union with Christ.

“I am the vine, you are the branches.

Remain in me” Jesus says. /

I don't know anything about growing grapes myself.

I am not a viticulturist.

I confess I couldn't tell the difference between a merlot and a pinot noir.

All I know is that I like to eat the green ones without the seeds.

But we can see here that Jesus uses several simple facts of viticulture
to draw out this metaphor for the benefit of his disciples.

•First, in v. 2 he gives a word of warning:

Branches of the vine that do not bear fruit are cut off.

It is usually in February or March that the grape vines of the Middle East
are cut back severely.

All the dead wood is removed from the vine,
for dead wood only harbors insects and promotes disease
and may cause the vine to rot--
so the dead branches are cut off and burned in the fire.

So Jesus says,

God my Father the vinedresser, the gardener,
“cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit.”

Notice, that Jesus says “every branch in me”—

referring no doubt to those who were outwardly
joined to him in some way.

Perhaps Jesus even had Judas in mind here--one of the Twelve.

Just some outward association with Jesus is not enough--

“He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit.”

Certainly, there is a warning here for “nominal Christians”--

Christians in name only--

those for whom Christianity is “at best a hobby and at worst a [mere] habit”¹

In the absence of fruit--

in the absence of the evidence of spiritual life,

without some spiritual productivity,

we dare not think of ourselves as safe and secure.

Didn't Jesus say in Matt. 7--

“No everyone who says to me of that day, “Lord, Lord”

will enter the kingdom of heaven,

but he who does the will of my Father.”

“You shall know them by their fruit,” Jesus said.

So first, Jesus uses this vine metaphor to give a warning—

Dead branches, branches without fruit,

are cut off and thrown into the fire.

Examine your own life to see if this is a warning you need to heed.

Jesus uses a second viticultural fact here

¹Cf. Clements

to give a word of encouragement.

•Branches that do bear fruit are pruned

so that they may bear more fruit.

Around August, after the vine has begin to grow leaves,

the gardener pinches off the little shoots

so that the main fruit-bearing branches

can get all the nourishment.

He does this so that all the energy from the vine is not wasted

on producing little branches that don't produce fruit.

How much energy, nourishment, do we waste

in pursuits that are ultimately unfruitful?

Our Father the gardener's desire is that we lay aside every encumbrance

and the sin that so easily entangles us,

patiently enduring his pruning discipline in our lives,

which, as Hebrews 12 tells us,

is painful for the moment,

but for those who have been trained by it,

it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

The Lord disciplines those he loves,

he prunes those he wants to see produce more fruit.

I remember visiting the gardens at Dumbarton Oaks in Georgetown—

that is a beautiful place!

But I was amazed at the rose garden in the spring--

all you could see were a few bare stalks sticking out of the ground.

They had been pruned back almost to nothing--

but that was done so that all the energy of the new spring growth

would go toward producing beautiful flowers

and not in just supporting a large bush.

The gardener doesn't want a rose bush,

he wants roses!

So it is with the Lord in our lives.

He wants to see fruit—

not just lots of leaves.

Is the Lord at work pruning your life?--

cutting you back, breaking you,

stripping away unnecessary baggage in your life

that prevents you from bearing the fruit he desires?

I suspect the Lord is doing some pruning in our lives during these Covid days—

as the routines of our lives have been so rudely interrupted,

and things we have depended on in the past have been cut back.

He is working to refine us and to refashion us

so that we may be more fruitful.

The Christian can't avoid the pain of the Lord's pruning shears.

Some difficulties are to be an expected and even necessary part

of the Christian life.

It's universal--"every branch," Jesus says.

**"Every branch that does bear fruit he prunes
so that it will be even more fruitful."**

Don't be discouraged when those trials come--
it just shows that there is something in you
worth nurturing and preserving.

A loving gardener is at work in your life,
and he is seeking an abundant harvest of much fruit.

• **Jesus uses a third fact of viticulture here to present a simple but sobering reality--
A branch cannot bear fruit by itself.**

Look at vv. 4,5--

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.

"I am the vine; you are the branches.

If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit;

apart from me you can do nothing. "

I've been told that the cuttings from a grape vine

can continue to live on their own for a while.

They can even produce leaves,

but they will never bear fruit.

They must remain in the vine--

it is the vine that gives life;

it is the vine that is the source of the fruit.

“apart from me you can do nothing,” Jesus says.

You may put forth a lot of shiny leaves--

You may appear to be quite busy and successful;

you may seem to accomplish a great deal;

you may rise to the top of your profession

and be the envy of your peers.

you may even be very active in the life of the church—a pastor even,

but in Jesus’ mind, you will produce no fruit without him.

Unless you remain in him,

you will bring forth nothing of any lasting value.

On your own you are powerless to please God. /

The conclusion is clear--

We must remain in Christ if we are to bear fruit.

This central idea takes two forms in this passage--

• First, remaining in Christ comes as a **command to obey**--

v.4--“Remain in me, as I remain in you.

No branch can bear fruit by itself;

it must remain in the vine.”

To remain in Christ is something we **must do**.

What does it mean to “**remain**” in Christ?

Sometimes that word is translated “abide” or even “rest” in Christ--

but the idea seems more active here.

It means to maintain an unbroken contact with Christ,

to constantly draw upon his power.

Had Jesus been speaking in our day,

he might have used the image of a power line instead of a vine.

Our duty is to see that we maintain an unbroken electrical connection

to the power station generating the current.

Or perhaps instead of a power line,

he might have used the image of a wireless wifi connection.

for abiding in Christ can be wireless—

it can take place anywhere and any time.

Just so long as we remain in range of the broadcast signal—

we need to maintain a strong four-bar connection.

We must choose to expose ourselves to him,

we must be tuned in to him,

if we receive what he has to give us.

Are you doing that?

Steve Tiilikianen told me about an app for my phone—called a Wifi Analyzer--

Wherever I am, it can measure the strength of my wifi connection.

Wouldn't it be nice to have a little "Abiding in Christ" meter

to tell us how we are connecting to Christ?

Maybe that Christ connection analyzer

could be displayed in the way we relate to other people—

To what degree are we displaying compassion, kindness, humility,

gentleness, and patience? /

So how do we remain in Christ?

What are we to do?

For one thing, we must go to him in **prayer--**

recognizing your dependence on him.

And then we can remain in him by **listening to his word--**

v.7--"**If you remain in me and my words remain in you**" he says,

"ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you."

Are you reading his word?

Are you taking advantage of opportunities to study it?

are you treasuring his word in your hearts?

Are you allowing his desires to become your desires?

And remaining in him means not just hearing what he says

but also doing what he says--

v.10--"**If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love.**"

or in 1 John 3:24--"**Those who obey his commands remain in him,**

and he in them."

Remaining in Christ is something we must choose to do--

we must want to do it and then bend our wills to his will so that it will happen.

Remaining in Christ is a command to be obeyed.

But there's another side to this--

Jesus tells us that, though remaining in Christ is a command to be obeyed,

bearing fruit also comes as a promise to be trusted--

v.5--"If you remain in me and I in you,

you will bear much fruit."

If you ever wonder how in the world your life can be fruitful?

Here is the answer--remain in Christ.

It is a promise--

if we remain in Christ, we will bear much fruit.

It's a spiritual law--

When we are organically connected to the source of life,

that life will flow out through us in one way or another.

This is the essence of the Christian life--

the transforming power of Christ at work within us.

As Jesus said, you can't take a rotten apple tree

and expect it to produce good apples.

First you have to change the tree--

and if you do change the tree, then it will produce good fruit.

This is what separates Christianity from any kind of self-help program.

It is more than a set of principles that you simply put into practice.

Or a list of laws that you have to obey.

Christianity is a shared life--

the Christian must be joined to Jesus Christ,

remaining, abiding, in him.

It's an organic process by which he actually changes our hearts--

and it is this internal power which separates true growth from false.

For there is such a thing as false Christian growth--

an imitation spirituality in a Christian.

That false growth can be illustrated in the growth of a crystal.

Do you remember your high school chemistry class?

If you dangle a string in a concentrated solution of sugar.

you will see growth as the crystals suddenly form on the string.

But it's inorganic growth--growth without life.

And when you remove the string from that sugar solution

and put it into water,

the crystals disappear.

They dissolve back into the water.

So you can put some people in a concentrated Christian environment,

and they may appear to grow--

as they begin to assume the characteristics

of the Christians around them.

But once you take them out of that environment
all the Christian trappings of their life quickly dissolve away.²

Theirs was not organic growth--
the life of Christ flowing through their lives--
because that kind of life, that kind of growth remains--
it's irreversible--
oak trees don't get smaller once they've grown!

This is the true fruit--
v.16--the fruit that will last.

It's a promise--
if we remain in him, we will bear much fruit.

That's encouraging in those moments when you wonder
whether you're really accomplishing anything,
asking yourself if your life will count for much--
and fear that it will be unproductive and unfruitful.

Here is the promise of Jesus--
"If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit;"

But you may be asking yourself,

² Ibid.

what exactly is this fruit he's talking about?

There are a number of things it could be--

“**Fruit**” is sometimes used as a metaphor for **evangelistic success**.

Fruit comes in reaching other people for Christ.

Others say, no, this must refer to **the fruit of the Spirit**--

the fruit that flows out of our character.

That fruit is listed in Galatians 5 as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness,
goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control.

This is what Jesus is talking about.

Still others say, no, bearing fruit means **impacting the world**—

bringing good into the lives of others,
changing things for the better.

And I have to say, they're all right.

The fruit that Jesus is talking about

is everything that flows out of our lives

that reflects the life of Christ.

Fruit in our lives is found as we reflect the same obedience

that Jesus had toward his Father--

and the same love

that Jesus shared with his Father--

v. 10--"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."

Fruit is found in our lives as we reflect the same joy

that Jesus had in doing the will of his Father--

v.11--"I have told you this so that my joy may be in you

and that your joy may be complete."

And it is this fruit that will draw others to Christ,

as they see his life in us.

For an apple tree doesn't make more apple trees--

first it must bear fruit—it must make apples--

and from those apples the seeds come for new trees.

Fruit--the fruit of Christ-likeness--

the fruit of the Spirit--the fruit of new life in the Kingdom of God--

the fruit of obedience and love and joy—

This fruit is a quality of character,

a way of living,

an attitude to life which honors God.

That's what God has created us to produce.

You can be fruitful in God's sight in whatever situation or circumstances

you find yourself in.

You don't have to be in Christian work to be fruitful.

Any work that is done to the glory of God

can be fruitful before God. //

v.16--"You did not choose me, but I chose you
and appointed you to go and bear fruit--
fruit that will last."

"This is to my Father's glory,
that you bear much fruit,
showing yourselves to be my disciples."

Do you want to live a productive, fruitful life?
Do you want your life to count for something--
to mean something?
That's a big question, isn't it?

In God's eyes there is only one way
that is possible to live that kind of life--
You must remain in the vine, the true vine,
and allow the life of Jesus Christ to flow through you.
All that is done in union with Christ has eternal value in God's sight—
and in the end, nothing that is done apart from him will matter.

You must be joined to the vine, and that's the work of the Spirit—
who baptizes us into union with Christ.

As we put our faith in Christ we are joined to his death,
as we grasp the astonishing reality that he died for us—
that his death is the death we deserve—
the death of all that is sinful in our lives.

And as we put our faith in Christ we are joined to his resurrection—
we are given new life to live in a new way.

This union with Christ in his death and resurrection
is what the ordinance of baptism is meant to display before our eyes.
In baptism a person is washed clean of their sins
in their union with Jesus our Savior,
and their new life in Christ is portrayed in visible form.

But being joined to Christ in baptism does something else—
it is the outward act by which we are joined not only to Christ
but also to the body of Christ, the church.

You cannot abide in Christ,
you cannot remain in him,
if you are not also abiding, remaining in his body—
for it is in the church that you encounter him,
and experience him
and are empowered by him.

In his body, the Spirit is at work through other people
to make Christ present in our lives.

I've never known anyone
to have a vital and fruitful relationship with Jesus
who wasn't also committed to spending time with fellow believers
in the context of the life of the church.

It just doesn't happen.
I remain in Christ, I draw upon his life-giving power,
through my relationships, my relationships of love,
with other Christians.

And just as baptism is the sign of our once-and-for-all union with Christ
so the Lord's Supper—the bread and the cup—
is the sign of our ongoing communion with him—
the physical acts of eating the bread
and drinking from the cup
speak to us of the union we now have with Christ by the Spirit.

It is one of the means given by our Lord to nourish our faith
so that we might remain in him.

And the fact that we do it together speaks of our common life
as the many branches that share in the life of the one true vine.

In a moment, we will witness the baptism of four people
who have come to profess their faith before us.
and to have that faith affirmed by us
and to have that faith confirmed in this visible way by God's himself.

But before I bring them forward, let's pray.

Prayer—

Lord Jesus, we praise you as the true vine—

the embodiment of all that we are to be as the people of God—

fulfilling in yourself the faith, the love, the obedience that ought to be true of us.

Thank you that you invite to share in all that you are—

to be joined to you like branches in a vine—

and in that union, you promise to share your life-giving Spirit

to work within us so that we, too, can bear fruit—

fruit and lasts—fruit that brings glory to you.

May we remain in you as the source of real life

and as the power to yield real fruit.

Now, we pray for this ordinance of baptism—

display it your gospel before our eyes and may we rejoice in it—

Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

The “I am” Statements of Jesus

Dec. 13, 2020

“I Am the True Vine”

Jn. 15:1-17

The prophets often spoke of Israel as fruitless vine, subject to God’s judgment. In our passage this morning, Jesus declares himself to be the true vine who now shares his life with all those joined to him by faith. This horticultural image can help us lead fruitful lives in God’s sight.

I. A Word of Warning:

Branches that do not bear fruit are cut off (v.2).

II. A Word of Encouragement:

Branches that do bear fruit are pruned
so that they may bear more fruit (v. 2).

III. A Sobering Reality:

A branch cannot bear fruit by itself (v. 4,5).

IV. A Command to Obey:

A branch must remain in the vine (v. 4).

V. A Wonderful Promise to Trust:

A branch connected to the vine
will bear fruit (v. 5).

Sermon Discussion:

“I Am the True Vine”

Jn. 15:1-17

- Is this passage more of an encouragement to you or a warning to you? Why?
- What do you think Jesus means when he says, “apart from me you can do nothing”?
- How have you seen the Lord “prune” you so that you can bear more fruit?
- How do you seek to “remain in Christ”?
- What sort of fruit do you see in other Christians? What sort of fruit do you want to see in yourself?
- How can we encourage one another to “remain in the vine”?