

“I Am the Vine” | John 15:1-12

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(Discussion questions on page 6)

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I have had the unusual blessing of being mentored by a father and son—both ministers, both great men.

I met the son first, nearing the end of college. He was a new associate pastor at my home church outside of Philadelphia. I was newly following Jesus and sensing a call to pastoral ministry. He was only 8 or 9 years my senior and fresh into ministry after many years of preparation. But here is the thing: he was so wise. He just understood how life worked, how churches functioned, what was most important for preparing for ministry. Even once in seminary, surrounded by seasoned leaders, his advice always seemed wise beyond his years.

Then I went to work for his father—a man with decades of experience and well-known as a Christian leader. As I got to know the dad, I then understood where all the son’s wisdom came from. The son was simply bearing the fruit of a life steeped in the wisdom of the father.

There is a truism here: *our lives reflect, in character and deed, the people we are most deeply united to*. Whether a parent, mentor, friend, spouse, the people we entrust our hearts and minds to and pay closest attention to shape the character and deeds of our lives. And for better or for worse.

Jesus uses the image of a branch and vine to make the point in our passage today from John 15: *the branch bears fruit in accordance with the vine*. And Jesus wants us to bear good fruit—the fruit of his personality and his power, tasted through our own lives. Here is how Jesus puts it:

I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit (Jn 15:5).

This is another of Jesus’ “I Am” statements in John. And this is the most intimate. When Jesus says, “I am the bread,” he speaks of feeding us; when he says, “I am the Light,” he speaks enlightening us; when he says, “I am the door,” he speaks of being access for us; when he says I am the Good Shepherd” he speaks of caring for and guiding us.

But none of those images implies quite the depth of intimacy that the image of the Vine and branch does. The branch doesn’t merely drink from the vine or remain alongside the vine—it *abides in the vine*. Meaning, this passage is about the individual *living inside the heart of Jesus*. As the vine, Jesus is to be our closest union, the person and power most shaping the character and deeds of our lives.

And if we consider the context where Jesus uses the image, we also see that it is incredibly provocative.

One of Israel’s national symbols was the vine. That’s how they were referred to often in Scripture:

You brought a **vine** out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it (Ps 80:8); “In days to come Jacob shall take root, Israel shall blossom and put forth shoots and fill the whole world with **fruit**. (Isa 27:6).

The image was there for everyone to see as they entered the Temple doors in Jerusalem. As the historian Joseph’s recorded,

above the doors [of the Temple], and over the great gate, spread out a golden vine, with its branches hanging down from a great height, the largess and fine workmanship of which was a surprising sight to the spectator. Some of the clusters of grapes were as tall as a man.¹

The story of the vine and fruitfulness goes all the way back to creation, in fact, and runs like this:

God did not design the world or people to be stagnant, but to bear fruit. “Be fruitful and multiply,” he said to Adam and Eve (Gen 1:28). “In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed,” he said to Abraham (Gen 12:1-3). So too was the mission of the nation of Israel: “Israel shall blossom and put forth shoots and fill the whole world with **fruit**. (Isa 27:6).

But the mission was failing. Neither Adam and Eve’s family, nor Israel after them, produced the fruit of righteousness and justice God intended for his world, as he laments in Isaiah 5:

What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? ... 7 For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting; and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, an outcry! (Isa 5:4, 7).

It is this context of the failing vine that we hear Jesus’ bold words in John 15:

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. ² Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. (Jn 15:1-2).

By saying, “I am the *true* vine,” Jesus implies that God’s work of producing fruit in the world now happens through connection to him. He is the True Vine.

How does the image of our lives as fruit-bearing-branches shape our self-understanding? And as a branch, what does it mean to abide in Jesus as the vine? And what do we make of this image of the Father as vinedresser, cutting away dead branches and pruning the others. We’ll consider these by way of a few observations about life as a branch: **(1) The Branch and Its Fruit; (2) The Branch and Its Vine; (3) The Branch and Its Vinedresser.**

I. A Branch and Its Fruit

Six times between verses 1-8 we read of “bearing fruit” or “bearing much fruit.” So the first thing to get clear about from this image of the vine and branches is this: Jesus wants us to understand our lives as branches meant to produce fruit.

¹ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* (Book 15.11.3, §394–395). Perhaps Jesus and his disciples have walked past the Temple on their way out to Gethsemane (“Rise, let us go from here,” Jn 14:31).

We already saw how hardwired this call is, going back to creation and the mission of Israel. But Jesus continues to emphasize the importance of living *productive, fruit-bearing lives* in his ministry, whether in the parable about the talents (Matt 25:14-30), or parables like the one of the manager who says to his stewards, “Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required” (Luke 12:48).

There is an implication to consider from this image, and also a question that arises.

The implication is this: to be human is not merely, or mainly, to be a consumer. A branch on a vine is not mainly there to consume resources for itself—to soak up the sun, to enjoy the rain, or to drink in the resource of the vine for its own personal growth. Its purpose is to produce fruit.

This is an important caution for modern people. We tend to organize our lives around consumption. And even when we do focus on productivity, it is often in the name of accomplishing things for ourselves—bearing fruit of accolades or success. We work hard to get better and bigger things and better positions.

A consumer mentality can even creep into our Christian mentality. We can find ourselves mainly praying for things *we desire to consume or have*, rather than praying to be more fruitful for the sake of others. I think Jesus’ words about prayer in verses 7-8 are all about praying to be more fruitful for God:

⁷ If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples (Jn 15:7-8).

And to underscore this point, this passage presents a scenario where as branches, fruitfulness is *expected of us*: “Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away” (15:2). A driving passion of a disciples live, is to bear fruit for God’s kingdom. That is the implication of Jesus saying we are “fruit-bearing-branches.”

And this, then, naturally raises a question:

What is this fruit? What does it consist of? The fruit Jesus has in mind in John 15 seems to be twofold. First, it involves the quality of our lives, our character.² Jesus says in verse 12 that his disciples are to “love one another” (15:12). We might think of Paul’s language in Galatians, when he talks about fruits of the spirit:

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control (Gal 5:22-23).

Jesus does not want our lives to be ugly, but beautiful. Fruit is when our lives give tangible tastes of the personality of Christ.

² The “fruit” was not worldly success but holiness, obedience, and love. Puritans often identified it as: “The fruit here meant is sincere obedience, arising from love, carried on by faith, and directed to the glory of God. Not every show of leaves, or empty profession, but solid holiness of life.

What type of fruit does the character and tone of my life produce? That is an important question to ask. For husbands, parents, leaders—we all should consider whether or not the people in our influence are being fed from the Vine of Christ.

The other type of fruit could be called *kingdom work*, and pertains chiefly to acts we do in the world that bring others closer to Jesus. This is likely what Jesus has in mind when he says in verse 16,

You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide (Jn 15:16).

The language of “going” suggests mission in the world. And later Jesus will pray for those who “will believe in me through their word” (Jn 17:20).

God expects his branches to produce *evangelistic fruit*; that in the course of time, people who are near us taste and see that Jesus is Good, real, and has life for them.

[T] That is the first thing to notice from the passage: We are branches designed to bear fruit—*tangible experiences of the personality and power of Christ, produced through our lives*. Second, let us consider how the branch does this. Here we turn to The Branch and Its Vine.

II. The Branch and Its Vine

While abiding in Christ conjures up images of intimacy, we note that as stated here in verse 4, it is a command:

Abide 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. ⁵ I 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 (15:4-5).

The verb here, translated “abide,” means *remain*, or *stay*. It tells us one of the secrets of fruitfulness—communion with Christ.

Apparently, a branch severed from a vine can still flower and produce leaves for some time—but it will not produce grapes. For that, it must abide in the vine.

In an overarching sense, to abide in Jesus is to be connected to the only source of power that can produce kingdom fruit through you. It is to live in and under his influence—His spirit flows through us, doing things in us and through us that we simply could not.

But we can see in this passage some specifics about how thus union works—what abiding entails for the branch.

Inwardness: To abide means not merely to be around Jesus, but being “in” Jesus (“abide *in* me”). Friends, merely coming to church, or being a Christian family, or having a Bible on your desk, do not equal being *in Jesus*. To be in him is to receive him as Lord, to acknowledge what he has done for you by dying on the cross for your sins, and to invite him to take residence in your life.

Listening: to abide is to listen and speak to Jesus. Jesus says, “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you desire” (15:7). This implies that the one abiding is regularly

hearing Jesus words to them and allowing those words to shape how they think and desire and pray.

Permanence: To abide also means more than a visit; it means to stay—to make Jesus your permanent home. It means Jesus is not a hotel but your house. By hearing his voice in his word, by speaking your request to him in prayer, by worshiping him and resting in him, you are *regularly*, even *constantly* in him. As it is with human relationships, we end up producing fruit in kind with the people who are closets to.

And the point Jesus is making is that without this abiding, a branch can do nothing. Without the life of Christ shaping our character, and working through us, we can accomplish nothing fruitful for God's kingdom.

Apply: And consider how this might work. Fruitfulness in the kingdom is the vital power in our words and deeds to change hearts. And nothing gives vitality like the presence of the presence of the living God. Closeness to Christ gives an unusual potency and power to whatever other gifts it touches—it hallows our other gifts and makes them more effective, and therefore more fruitful.

Robert Murray M'Cheyen, a Scottish minister, once wrote, "A heated iron, though blunt, will pierce its way even where a much sharper instrument, if it be cold, cannot penetrate."³

If we are filled with the presence of God, who is like a consuming fire, our words and deeds can pierce into the hardest of hearts—even where the sharpest of wits and best of arguments cannot find their way.

Fruitfulness in the kingdom is the vital power in our words and deeds to change hearts. This comes only by abiding in Christ, so that His life lives through us.

III. The Branch and Its Vinedresser

Jesus says, "I am the vine, and my father is the vinedresser" (Jn 15:1). The vinedresser's work is twofold: *cutting off* and *cutting clean*:

Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit (15:2).

With this part of the image Jesus is preparing us for two things: for fake Christians, disciples who seem to be in him, but in the end are not. People like Judas. These are not *true disciples*, but people who for whatever reason followed Jesus for a while, but like the crowds in John 6, turned away when his teaching became offensive.

The point: God the Father will remove dead branches from his son, from the church. Christians, do not always be caught off guard when you see this happening.

The second, and main thing Jesus means by this, is to prepare us for pruning. And to help us know that while pruning is painful, it is purposeful, and always in the hands of God our Father.

³ Cited in Thomas Murphy, *Pastoral, Theology*, 50.

Images of pruning from places in the world that know about vine-dressing tell us that branches often need to be cut down almost to the stem. This is to ensure good growth. We also know that all growth is not good growth.

I want to close by noting some things about the vinedresser's work.

First, let us be clear that God is an expert gardener! He is at work all around us. His pruning may take the form of afflictions, trials, or convictions of the Holy Spirit on our conscience. God uses these things to go to work on diseases, overgrowth, or needed areas of maturing—all with perfect precision and skill; he is never wasteful.

Second, pruning is painful. It hurts to be cut. Do not be shocked when following Jesus involves tremendous, agonizing seasons of being pruned. But there is intentionality when God disciplines, prunes, his children: "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. (Heb 12:11).

Third, and finally, recognize the connection between the outward pruning of the Father, and the inward closeness to Jesus. It is often overlooked in this passage, but there is a relationship between God's pruning and the branches abiding: the pruning is to make the branch abide more deeply in the vine; the pruning is designed to allow the branch to draw more sap from the vine. So too with the Father's outward work: your health diagnoses, your social circumstances, your family problems, may all be used by the vinedresser to force you—the branch—into deeper, and deeper drinking from the Vine. Christ will suddenly be your only place to go, your only source of hope, your only friend. And then, as the months and years go by, you will see the sweetest of fruit hanging from your life, and find dear people being fed, as by the riches of fare, from what God has done through you.

Close: One of the first ministers in the American colonies was Cotton Matther. He was consumed with living a fruitful life and wore a signet ring with a fruit-bearing tree and the words of Psalm 1:3 about a tree planted by streams of water, always bearing it fruit in season. As he lay dying, his son and successor asked him for a word to remember him by. Matther feebly whispered one word, "fruitful."

May this be true of our lives, and of our church.

Let's pray.

Small Group Questions for John 15:1-12

1. Do you think of your life as something that produces fruit? If so, what would be some examples of fruit?
2. Read John 15:1-5. What type of fruit do you think Jesus has in mind that branches are to produce? Read Galatians 5:22-23. Which fruit of the Spirit do you most long for the Holy Spirit to grow in you this season?

3. What stands out to you about this “I Am” statement, “I am the True Vine” (Jn 15:1, 5), as compared to the other statements, such as “I am the bread of life,” or “I am the light of the world,” or “I am the good shepherd”? What is unique about this image?
4. This passage emphasizes that God designed us not to be merely consumers, but producers of fruit. In what ways can we drift toward a consumer mindset, even in our spiritual lives?
5. Jesus commands, “Abide in me.” What helps you *abide* — to stay close and connected to Christ? What makes it hard to abide consistently? The sermon described abiding as involving *inwardness*, *listening*, and *permanence*. Which of these do you find easiest? Which is hardest?
6. The Father, the Vinedresser, “prunes” fruitful branches so they will bear more fruit (15:1-2). Can you think of a time when God pruned you — removed something, changed your direction, or used hardship — to make you more fruitful? How might you encourage someone else who may be in a painful season of pruning.