

JESUS, THE TRUE VINE

John 15:1-17

Key Verse: 15:5

“I am the 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.”

Chapter 14 ended with Jesus’ words, “Come now, let us leave.” Apparently, Jesus and his disciples left the upper room for Gethsemane. On the way, Jesus discourses about the true vine, the gardener, and the branches. Some scholars believe Jesus was inspired by a fruitful vineyard. Some believe he saw a golden vine on the bronze arches of the temple gate. In any case, Jesus teaches us about the relationships between the Father and Jesus, and between Jesus and his disciples. Jesus teaches his disciples the nature of their relationship with him and how to maintain it. We need this teaching today. In his book, “Emerging Hope,” Jimmy Long tells how he innocently asked a young lady whether she was going home for Christmas. She burst into tears. It was because she didn’t know where her home was. When she was ten years old her parents divorced and remarried other people. Ten years later each divorced again and remarried again. She was so confused that she had no concept of home. In a social milieu marked by broken relationships, many have despaired. But Jesus solves our relationship problem. Jesus teaches how to have a right relationship with God and with one another. It is not easy. In fact Jesus’ teaching will challenge us. Yet his truth gives us a solution that is real and lasting. May Jesus speak to us today.

First, Jesus is the true vine (1-4).

Look at verse 1. “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener.” Jesus compares himself to a vine. This would have been a familiar metaphor to the disciples, for vineyards were common in the region. Jesus calls himself the “true” vine. This distinguishes Jesus as unique and genuine. It differentiates Jesus from the nation Israel, which the Old Testament often calls a vine. Isaiah 5:7 says, “The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are the garden of his delight. And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.” God planted Israel in the promised land like a vine in good soil (Ps 80:8). He wanted to see the fruit of righteousness and justice through their holy lives. This would glorify God, illuminating the world with his presence. However, Israel fell into idol worship. Then they became unjust and oppressive, both in domestic policy and international relations. They failed to be a good vine that could bless the world. Many have expected America to reveal the living God to the world in our time. However, moral corruption at home and the spread of violence abroad have dampened this expectation.

Isaiah was sorry that his nation did not live up to God’s purpose. But he had God’s vision through the Messiah. In chapter 11, he foresaw that a shoot would spring up from the stump of Jesse. This shoot is Jesus Christ. He would be full of the Holy Spirit. He would bring about true justice and righteousness on the earth. He would restore spiritual order and true peace. Then the earth would be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the seas (Isa 11:9). When Jesus calls himself the “true vine” he means that he came to fulfill God’s will and purpose, which Israel failed to do. He also indicates that from his time on the flow of God’s history would be diverted to the Christian church.

Jesus did what the nation Israel could not do. Jesus opened the way for mankind to have a relationship with God which is genuine and eternal. Romans 8:3-4 says, “For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.” By faith in Jesus we can have the forgiveness of sins; we are imputed the righteousness of God; we can live in God’s presence by the grace and power of the Holy Spirit. Through Jesus the life of God flows in us like nourishing sap. Jesus restores our life relationship with God. Only Jesus does this. Jesus is the true vine.

In verse 1, Jesus refers to the Father as the gardener. In fact, the Father is the Owner and Sovereign Ruler of the vineyard who tends it for his own purpose. He makes the environment and cares for the vine so that it can bear fruit. Look at verse 2. “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.” The gardener cuts off branches that do not bear fruit. These branches drew nutrition from the vine without yielding anything in return. The wise gardener cuts them off so that the vine’s

nutrition may be directed to the fruit-bearing branches. In this way Jesus explains how God deals with parasites in the body of Christ. God cuts them off. This does not necessarily mean that church leaders cast them out. Jesus loved Judas Iscariot to the end. But the Father, by his own sovereign hand, cuts them off. In one way or another, they disappear from God's work. This is a sobering truth.

The gardener prunes the fruitful branches. Pruning is cutting away healthy stems and shoots which detract from fruit production. Many tomato farmers prune small stems that produce small tomatoes in order to redirect nutrients into large branches that produce large tomatoes. Here we must realize that fruitful servants of God need pruning. It is the removal of things that are not necessarily bad, but which detract from bearing the fruit God desires. Pruning is painful. Spiritual growth requires painful discipline (Heb 12:11). To really receive this pruning, we must recognize God's absolute sovereignty in our lives and ministries.

Look at verse 3. "You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you." In this verse, the word "clean" comes from the same Greek word translated "prune" in verse 2. Thus, the pruning of people means the pruning of hearts by the word of God. The word of God is sharp and effective (Heb 4:12). For example, Father Abraham was called by God to be a blessing to all people on earth. But during one thirteen year period, Abraham lived as an ordinary man, doting over Ishmael, his son by a maidservant. Then God appeared to him and said, "No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations" (Gen 17:5). The word of God pruned Abraham's heart, cutting away his petty desire for a family-centered life and making him a father of many nations. Later Abraham sent Ishmael away to please God, and at the bidding of Sarah. Then his home became a haven of rest which God blessed. By his word, Jesus had cleansed his disciples from selfishness (6:5), fatalism (9:3), fear of death (11:14,15) and many other things. Sometimes they felt Jesus was rebuking them too much. Yet in this way Jesus planted the word of God in their hearts that cleansed them and made them holy servants of God. Now Jesus pronounces them "clean" by the word he had spoken to them.

We can be clean and have a life-relationship with Jesus when we have one word of God in our hearts. Augustine was an intellectual hedonist. His directionless and immoral lifestyle broke his mother Monica's heart and she cried out for him daily in prayer, for years. Then he heard Romans 13:13,14: "Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature." Augustine was cleansed and became a great shepherd and scholar. 1 Peter 1:23 says, "For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God." Whoever accepts the word of God can have new life in Jesus. This is just the beginning. We must learn to grow and bear fruit.

Second, remain in Jesus and bear much fruit (5-8).

Look at verse 5. "I am the 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." When a branch remains in the vine, it will bear much fruit. The branch does not have to try to produce fruit. The branch only has to remain in the vine and it will produce fruit. In this way Jesus taught his disciples how to bear much fruit. It is to remain in Jesus. What did it mean to them to remain in Jesus? They were facing a tough time. The heartbreak of betrayal, denial, and Jesus' violent death were imminent. They could think that they had lost everything. They could fall into despair, abandoning their mission. To remain in Jesus meant they must not run away from hardship. Instead, they had to be faithful to Jesus. They were willing to be faithful. Peter said he would lay down his life for Jesus (13:37). But their willingness was not enough. They could not remain in Jesus by their own effort. So Jesus taught them how they could remain in him.

In the first place, they had to recognize the absolute necessity of remaining in Jesus. Look at verse 6. "If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned." Some people think that they can abandon Jesus and enjoy a carefree worldly life. This is a deception. We can see this in the people of Israel. When they received God's divine training in the desert, they sometimes thought their former life was an easygoing paradise in which they sat around pots of meat (Ex 16:3). In fact, they had been miserable slaves who were abused constantly. Those who do not remain in Jesus will not experience paradise; they will find utter misery. They are thrown away like garbage and wither, like the old woman in "Great Expectations." What is worse, they finally experience eternal condemnation in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. We must know that abandoning Jesus is the greatest mistake a person can make.

In the second place, they had to let Jesus' words remain in them. Look at verse 7a. "If you remain in me and my words remain in you..." Jesus' words are spiritual words of life (6:63). In fact, Jesus' words are the very presence of Jesus in us. Jesus promised in verse 4, "Remain in me, and I will remain in you." Though the disciples would lose human Jesus, they could let Jesus' words remain in them. Then they would gain Christ in their souls. They would have inner peace, overflowing love, and unending happiness. This glorious inner life can be ours when we let Jesus' words remain in us. To do this, we must spend quiet time in Bible study with sustained concentration until the word of Jesus speaks to us personally. This is why we eat Daily Bread and write Bible testimonies regularly. It is not easy. We live in the "information age." According to a recent study, people who use cell phones and the internet frequently can become more scatterbrained than alcoholics. It is imperative for Jesus' disciples to give first priority to the study of Jesus' words. Then his words speak to us, as a real person does, and we can hear his voice.

Amy Carmichael heard the word of Jesus saying, "Go ye...", on January 13, 1892. It was quite unexpected. She had decided to stay in Scotland for several years and care for an old friend. But after hearing the words of Jesus, "Go ye...", she could not forget them. As she struggled over what to do, her dear old friend and her mother both encouraged her to obey Jesus. Thus, she began a mission journey that eventually took her to Dohnavur in India for fruitful ministry. Her missionary life was hard. Many times she was discouraged. Then she quietly listened to the word of Jesus. In this way, she remained in Jesus, and in India, for 56 years without furlough, and bore much fruit.

In the third place, they must use their privilege of prayer. Look at verse 7. "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you." When we abide in Jesus' word we have the privilege of asking whatever we wish in prayer. And Jesus promises that it will be given to us. When the early Christians faced persecution, they prayed: "Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness" (Ac 4:29). God listened to their prayer and shook the place where they were meeting. Then he gave them the power of the Holy Spirit and they spoke the word of God boldly and the gospel spread rapidly. There is a saying that the best defense is a good offense. Those who pray not only remain in Jesus, but advance the kingdom of God boldly.

The goal of remaining in Jesus is stated in verse 8. Jesus says, "This is to my Father's glory that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples." When we bear much fruit, we can glorify God; we can reveal God to the world. We can show people around us that God is real, God is living, and God is good. Jesus wants us to show that we are his disciples through a sanctified inner life which expresses Jesus' words and actions. This is the fruit of the Holy Spirit in one's life. Galatians 5:22-23 says, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." There is a young lady who is bearing the fruit of love. Before knowing Jesus, she always sought the love and attention of others, including many worldly friends. She was a sponge for human love. But after meeting Jesus, she tasted the love of Jesus. Her soul was satisfied and she began to produce the fruit of love. Now, she loves others with the love of God. She loves her mother with the love of God instead of expecting to be loved by her mother. This is the work of God. Jesus wants all of us to glorify God by bearing the fruit of the Spirit in our inner person.

Third, remain in Jesus' love (9-17).

Look at verse 9. "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love." The Father loved Jesus by placing everything in his hands (3:35). The Father trusted Jesus to carry out his world salvation plan. Likewise, Jesus loved his disciples by calling them from meaningless lives to bear God's mission. Therefore, to remain in Jesus' love was to remain in God's great purpose for world salvation.

To remain in Jesus' love we must love one another. Verses 12-13 say: "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." Jesus would lay down his life for us through his death on the cross. Jesus wants his disciples to accept his love and friendship and practice the same toward each other. To remain in Jesus' love, we must love our family members, coworkers and friends with the same life-giving spirit.

Though Jesus taught his disciples how to remain in him, he knew that ultimately they could not do this by their own strength. But Jesus believed they would remain in him to the end. It was because he chose them. Look at verse 16. "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. Then the Father

will give you whatever you ask in my name.” Jesus chose each of us to be his disciples. Therefore, he will carry us through to the end.

Today we learned that Jesus is the true vine. When we accept one word of Jesus we can have true life in our souls. Then we must remain in Jesus and bear much fruit. To remain in Jesus, we must overcome Satan’s deceptions, hold on to Jesus’ word, engage in prayer, and love one another with a life-giving spirit. Let’s remain in Jesus, the true vine.