

Remain in Me

John 15:1-17

Key Verse 15:4-5, “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.”

Happy Lord’s Day! My name is Paul Chung and I am married to the most graceful, patient, and beautiful woman in the world, Elisabeth Keller. We have twin boys, Josiah and Noah, who are a bundle of energy and joy. I am a doctor with a primary specialty in pulmonary and critical care and I am currently undergoing subspecialty training in sleep medicine at Northwestern.

Over the last few weeks, we have been examining Jesus’ “I Am...” statements. Let’s review them now: “I am the bread of life; I am the light of the world; I am the gate; I am the good shepherd; I am the resurrection and the life; I am the way, the truth, and the life.” Today, we study the seventh and final “I Am” of our series: “I am the true vine.” A couple months ago, when I was asked to give this message, I was hesitant because I felt unworthy and too busy. But as I prayed about it, Jesus’ words spoke to me, “I am the true vine...Remain in me.” Now I’m not saying that I suddenly became worthy or that my schedule suddenly freed up. Instead, Jesus’ words, “Remain in me”, became a loving invitation to grow in a relationship with him and with you all. So it is by his grace and love that I am here before you all today. As I meditated and struggled with his words, I thought about who Jesus is and then three questions for this message: Why does Jesus tell us to remain in him? How can we remain in Jesus? What are the effects of remaining in Jesus?

Jesus is the True Vine

Let’s read verse 1. “I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener.” What makes this statement unique in this “I am” series is that Jesus emphasizes, “*true* vine”. To understand why Jesus says this, we actually have to look back to the Old Testament where many passages use the vine and vineyard imagery to represent Israel. Isaiah 5:1-2 say, “I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard: My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well. Then he looked for a crop of good grapes but it yielded only bad fruit.” Isaiah later says in verse 7 that this vineyard is Israel and the disciples understood this analogy.

In the Old Testament, God as the gardener, deeply cared for Israel; tending to them, providing for them, setting up everything perfectly for them but Israel could not produce good fruit. They were supposed to be his chosen people who were to bear the fruits of

righteousness and bless all peoples on earth. But they failed over and over again. So it's in light of this Old Testament background that Jesus boldly says, "I am the *true* vine..." God is still the gardener but unlike the original vineyard, Israel, that could not bear fruit, Jesus declares that he is the true life source from which all of God's people can produce fruit.

Therefore, Jesus as the true vine says to us, "Remain in me." Let's read verses 4-5, "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."

Why does Jesus tell us to remain in him?

First, to have a love relationship with him. Second, because only through Jesus we bear fruit.

First, to have a love relationship with Jesus. In other Bible translations, the word abide is used which gives us a sense that we are to reside in or dwell in Jesus. In essence, Jesus is telling us to have a relationship with him but not just a casual relationship. Jesus uses the metaphor of the vine and branches to describe a connection of intimate union. This intimate union is detailed in verses 9 and 11. "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love...I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete." The reason Jesus tells us to remain in him is so that we can enter into the love relationship he has with God the Father. This is so significant that the New King James Version titled this section "Love and Joy Perfected."

The American theologian, Carl F.H. Henry says, love "is not accidental or incidental to God; it is an essential revelation of the divine nature, a fundamental and eternal perfection. His love, like all other divine attributes, reflects the whole of his being in specific actions and relationships." Or more simply, 1 John 4:8 says, "God is love." Imagine, the greatest being in the universe, the one who defines love — who is love — wants to be in a love relationship with you. Jesus is basically telling us, "Remain in me so that you can experience the eternal love that I have with the Father." This leads to a complete joy that becomes deeply rooted in us and is not changed by circumstances or accomplishments.

Second, only in Jesus can we bear fruit. These are pictures from my father-in-law in Germany. As we can see, as long as the branch remains in the vine, it will bear fruit. In contrast, branches that are apart from Jesus can do nothing, are thrown away, withered, and burned. (5-6) Jesus uses this simple metaphor to clearly show us that he is the true life source that produces fruit in us. Let's read verse 5 again. "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.” Fruitfulness does not depend on our own efforts but is a result of remaining in Jesus. On one hand, this keeps us from becoming proud as Romans 11:18 says, “...do not consider yourself to be superior to those other branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you.” On the other hand, we don’t have to kick ourselves thinking that we haven’t produced enough fruit or try to focus on fruit bearing. When we look at verse 5 again, Jesus promises that if we remain in him, we will naturally bear fruit. So the focus should be on remaining in Jesus.

How can we remain in Jesus?

First, obey Jesus’ command and second, make intentional time with Christ.

First, obey Jesus’ command. Verse 10 says, “If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love.” What is that command? Verses 12-13 say, “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” And again in verse 17, “This is my command: Love each other.”

In our Western culture that emphasizes independence and the pursuit of self-identity, it’s easy to discuss our personal relationship with God but obeying his command to love others is another story. I have heard many people say, “I love Jesus and that’s all I need.” But when you examine Jesus’ life, his love was not for only one person; it was poured out for all people. So we must obey Jesus’ command in order to come to the full realization of our Christian lives. Otherwise, can we truly say that we have Jesus’ love? 1 John 3:18 encourages us, “Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.”

What does this look like? In the early 4th century, plague hit the city of Caesarea, a large Roman city that had already been hit hard by famine and war. While many people were fleeing to the countryside for safety, Eusebius, an early historian of the church, describes Christians who decided to stay behind: “All day long some of them [the Christians] tended to the dying and to their burial, countless numbers with no one to care for them. Others gathered together from all parts of the city a multitude of those withered from famine and distributed bread to them all.”

These Christians obeyed Jesus’ command to love others at a time when people were only focused on themselves and their own safety. Their act of love and compassion was so influential that their “deeds were on everyone’s lips, and [everyone] glorified the God of the Christians.” This is love in action and it glorifies God.

At the same time, we cannot do this according to our own will power, at least not indefinitely. In fact, a few decades later, Julian the Apostate, the last pagan Roman emperor, tried to bring about a pagan revival by telling the pagan priests to imitate the love of these early Christians. But his movement failed because they were unable to sustain the kind of self-sacrificial love and compassion that Eusebius observed in Caesarea. Likewise, to obey Jesus' command to love each other can only be sustained in him which brings me to the second point: make intentional time with Christ.

On a typical weekday, college students spend 4.0 hours in "leisure and sports". So if you are in college, make it a habit now to spend time with Christ; if you are not in college, it's not too late but you should make it a habit now. Without the life power of Jesus the true vine, we eventually wither as relying on our own strength, will power, emotions, and intelligence is not sustainable and can become exhausting.

How do we do this practically? Through prayer life and Bible meditation. Verses 7-8 say, "If you remain in me and *my words* remain in you, *ask* whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples."

Jesus says, "ask" or in other words, "pray". This may seem like prayer is a time where you bring your list of needs or wants to Jesus. But in this passage, asking is conditional; we must remain in Jesus and his words remain in us. This transforms our lives such that prayer becomes a walk with the Holy Spirit. It is not focused on what we receive but on glorifying God.

Jesus says, "...my words..." God's Word is the truth that shapes and guides our lives. Sometimes, even in our prayer lives, we can get lost in our own thoughts and opinions. So we need the Bible, God's Words, to guide us according to the truth. Meditating on the Bible by yourself or with others such as a Bible teacher will root you in the gospel truth of Christ. In this way, prayer life and Bible meditation are complementary and both necessary to remain in Jesus and moreover, we receive the blessing of answered prayers.

Admittedly, my prayer life was weak and I mainly prayed when I needed something. Moreover, as a husband, father of twin boys, and a doctor, I felt like I had no time. I'm sure most of us feel the same way. Since I live by a daily planner, over the last couple of years, I began to intentionally put on my schedule "Reconnect with Jesus" and I found ways to be with him including taking prayer walks during lunch, waking up 15-30 min earlier to pray, stopping everything 15 min before bedtime to pray, and praying on the bus or praying out loud as I drove in my car. The actual amount of time and what we do is not so important but if you don't make time for someone, it's really hard to build a relationship. As I spent more time with Jesus, my prayers turned from mainly petitions to include

adoration and thanksgiving. He didn't make me more efficient or help me get more stuff done. Instead, my whole day felt like a walk with the Holy Spirit as he gave me wisdom, patience, and compassion to love others.

What are the benefits of remaining in Jesus?

First, we are pruned, second, we bear fruit that lasts, third, we become Jesus' friends.

First, we are pruned. Verse 2 says, "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." Pruning can be painful and it may seem unfair that God not only cuts off branches that do not bear fruit but he also prunes or cleanses those that do bear fruit. But this signifies that our Christian lives are not complete on this earth; we are on a journey of sanctification. Pruning removes sin and also removes unnecessary things from our lives. Even things that appear to be producing a lot of fruit sometimes need to be pruned so that we will be even more fruitful. In some ways, it may seem like we are losing our identity or losing the best parts of us. But in truth, God cleanses us continually so that we can become our true selves.

In *The Screwtape Letters* by CS Lewis, Uncle Screwtape, a senior demon, writes to his demon nephew, Wormwood that the goal of Satan and demons is to tempt us so that they can eventually devour us. On the other hand, he says of God: "When [God] talks of their losing their selves, He only means abandoning the clamour of self-will; once they have done that, He really gives them back all their personality, and boasts (I am afraid, sincerely) that when they are wholly His they will be more themselves than ever."

How does God prune us? Let's read verse 3. "You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you." The Greek word for "clean" is the same as "prune". Thus God uses his word to prune us. Hebrews 4:12 says, "For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." This again emphasizes the importance of Bible meditation.

Second, we bear fruit that lasts (2, 5, 8, 16). What are these fruits? They are visible but difficult to measure. Galatians 5:22-23a provides a good description, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." When we look closely at these fruits, we see that they are relational. They attest to Jesus' words "remain in me" and his command to love each other. Moreover, they are fruits that will last (16). There is an old hymn which says, "Happiness happens but joy abides." Through Jesus, these fruits are produced even in the most difficult situations and even among our enemies.

Third, we become Jesus' friends. Verses 14-16 say, "You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit — fruit that will last — and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you." This is not the health and wealth gospel but a life of discipleship. We gain purpose in our lives and we become so attuned to Christ, we can ask for anything that glorifies God and shows ourselves to be Jesus' disciples.

A couple weeks ago, my wife watched a movie about Sabina Wurmbrand. She was born a Jew in Romania but together with her husband became Christians just before World War II. They suffered immeasurable hardships as Sabina's parents, two sisters, and brother were killed in Nazi concentration camps. Later, during the Communist occupation, they were both imprisoned, leaving their young son to fend for himself on the streets. But in the midst of all these sufferings, they remained firmly rooted in Christ and through Jesus, bore the fruits of the Spirit, showing love to Nazi soldiers and even sharing the gospel of Christ to Communist troops. They lived this life of Jesus' love and together, God gave them a purpose to help the persecuted church of the world as they co-founded the international organization, The Voice of the Martyrs.

I grew up in the church but did not really know Jesus. I grew up thinking that life was about enjoyment and about finding my own identity. But as I did this apart from God, I became consumed with sin, especially lust, sexual immorality, and alcoholism. I tried to save myself by relying on complex repentance rituals which made me feel okay for a time but sin and guilt always remained. Moreover, all they did was change my dominant idol so that I later became a workaholic, idolizing my career, recognition and productivity. I was blind to the fact that all of my relationships, especially with my wife and children, were deteriorating as I grew in selfishness, self-righteousness, and rage. Then in May 2020, during the COVID pandemic, I became sick while taking care of COVID patients in the intensive care unit (ICU). For 10 days, I had fever and chills with uncontrollable shaking, and I thought I was going to die. Satan came to me every single day to accuse me of my sins. He reminded me in horrific detail all the sins I had committed and many times, I hoped that COVID would overwhelm my body and kill me.

All this time, my wife had been praying for me and along with Dr. Augustine Suh, they prayerfully encouraged me to bring my sins to Jesus. At first, it was extremely painful and shameful but I held onto Isaiah 53:5, "But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed." After spending many days with Jesus, through repentance and

forgiveness of sins, I was healed and for several days, had a glimpse of heaven. It's so hard to describe but it felt like time had stopped and there was a glow to everything. I didn't see the golden streets or magnificent buildings but rather, I gained the complete satisfaction of being with my Lord and Savior. At this point, I want to say that I became the most perfect Christian but in truth, this was only the beginning and God pruned me, a lot and is still pruning me. As I remained in Jesus, though, God first blessed our family to be healed of my selfishness and my wife became my best friend. Instead of "managing" our kids, Elisabeth and I began to pray and encourage each other to feed Josiah and Noah with the love of Christ. Slowly, our family was transformed so that instead of living in our own bubble, we could overcome our fears and shyness to share the love of Christ to our friends and even strangers.

Whenever I think of Jesus, I am always reminded of his great love for us. Jesus was not some aloof being who watched us from afar. He came down from heaven and tabernacled with us, to be with us and as we heard in the last few weeks, he revealed to us who he is. Through his life, he brought healing and restoration. And in the greatest act of love, he laid down his life for us so that through his death and resurrection, he could give us hope of eternal union with him, an eternal love relationship full of everlasting joy.

Let's read verse 5. "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." Through this passage, we learned that Jesus calls us to remain in him so that we can have the love relationship that he has with the Father. Through this intimate union, Jesus empowers us to bear fruit to love each other. May God richly bless you to remain in Jesus.