

Jesus, the True Vine

Our New Testament Scripture reading is from John 15:1-11, where Jesus says, “I am the true vine.” In the viticulture of first century Palestine, the imagery of a vineyard was omnipresent. Grapevines were embossed on coins, and the grates of some of the gates to the temple were fashioned after grapevines. Possibly, as Jesus spoke to his disciples on their way out of the Upper Room, they passed a vineyard. Perhaps there was a fire burning that was fueled by dead branches from the vineyard. I’ll read:

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. ²He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. ³You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. ⁵I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. ⁹As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

How I long to understand and to experience what Jesus is saying to me about remaining/abiding in him in such a way that my life will be fruitful and productive for him! As your pastor I also yearn to see your life and our life together as Jesus’ body bear fruit and be productive for his glory.

The 80th Psalm, after speaking of God’s judgment on the unfruitful vine, Israel, prophesies about the “son of man” that God has raised up for himself, who’ll bring restoration and salvation to Israel (Psalm 80:17-19). Even as Israel was a miserable failure as God’s vine, Jesus is the True Vine who will do what Israel failed to do. He’ll perfectly obey the Father and will fulfill the mission given him. And, his life will bring forth much fruit to the glory of the Father. The key to our being productive is to abide in Jesus, the True Vine.

Just as God chose Israel to be his vineyard (Psalm 80:8), so has he chosen and called his people to be a part of his new vineyard, that is, to be part of Christ Jesus, the True Vine.

By grace through faith in Jesus we have been cleansed by the word (3). Because we received grace to believe in Jesus as Savior and have repented of sin, the living word, Jesus, has washed us in his blood and made us alive in him. Our sins are forgiven and we have eternal life in Jesus. We're connected to him in a life-changing relationship. This relationship is one of an organic, living union with Christ. It's not a mechanical matter of an institutional ritual of "jumping through the hoops" of joining a church and doing religious routines that never affect the heart.

Some modern translations of our scripture text use the verb "remain" in place of "abide." But to me abide connotes a close connection, and commitment to stay within a relationship. Some couples simply remain married, even when they no longer love and respect each other. They're going to remain together legally until the kids go off to college, or whatever. But to abide is to share a mutual relationship of dependence and commitment. An abiding relationship is a productive one. Some people decide to remain nominal Christians with occasional church attendance, but it's another thing to abide in Christ, with a life-changing relationship.

Jesus refers to dead branches that never bear any fruit. No doubt an immediate example was Judas Iscariot. He had a superficial identity with Jesus and the other disciples, yet he didn't connect and didn't remain (much less abide), and thus never produced the fruit of righteousness. Jesus speaks of branches dying because they didn't abide in the vine. True, saving grace reveals itself in the believer's perseverance. Those God grafts into his vine will bear the fruit of perseverance.

God has done his part to graft us into Christ, the True Vine. Now we have the responsibility of abiding in him. This speaks of our total dependence on him: "No branch can bear fruit by itself." No branch can even *live* by itself. We depend on God's grace to save us and keep us. We depend on God for life and eternal life. The Christian life is one of dependency, which is not a popular word in our culture of pride and independence. But as believers in and followers of Jesus, we depend on him for life now and a hope for the life to come.

We abide in Christ through faithful praying and prayerful living. Jesus refers to the effective prayers of an abiding life (7). We don't bring him our selfish wish lists, but we come before him to ask what he wants for us. The True Vine's design for our lives also includes the fruit of a godly, holy life. This is the *sine qua non* of the Christian life, that the Holy Spirit produces character that shows we belong to Jesus, that we are new creations (2 Corinthians 5:17). Jesus says "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” (verse 2). A good vine gardener knows that pruning is best for his crop. And his interest is in the harvest.

The Father is the gardener who continues to prune our lives. One pastor (Kent Hughes) speaks about the “when syndrome,” which is our false assumption that some day “when we have grown to maturity in Christ” life will get easier for us. Not true. In my life, the pruning has seemed more severe in my old age. The Gardener never stops pruning us, and pruning usually is uncomfortable, but the heavenly Father’s discipline is a sign of his love (Hebrews 12:11). We don’t like it, but the Gardener wields his pruning knife. God, the Gardener, is at work to make us like his Son, and he is pruning away every thought, habit, attitude, relationship or possession that keeps us from becoming more like Jesus.

Ridgecrest is a Baptist assembly grounds in the mountains of Western North Carolina, a place very familiar to me. A group of Ridgecrest conferees visited a gift shop in the nearby Town of Black Mountain, watching with amazement a wood carver as he completed work on a beautiful carving of a hound dog. One of the curious tourists asked the woodcarver, “How can you carve from just a block of wood such a beautiful and detailed likeness of a hound dog?” “That’s easy, replied the mountain woodcarver, “I just cut away everything that don’t look like a hound dog.” The divine Gardener just cuts away from our lives and character everything that doesn’t look like Jesus.

I’ve often been encouraged by good friends who’ve prayed with me during difficult times in recent years, and two of these men made the same statement, unbeknownst to the other: “Lord, I thank you for Roger’s troubles.” I said to both after their prayers, “That’s easy for *you* to say!” Actually, I agreed with them. I knew they were thinking about the Scripture that says, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you will be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (James 1:2-4, NIV).

What an amazing truth, that everything the Gardener allows to come our way, he does for our good. And, he always watches over us to see if there’s any unproductive, unhealthy growth he needs to cut away. Is there anything that keeps us from loving Jesus and becoming more like him? Even our sense of ease and complacency he may cut away.

O, for grace to enable you and me to say to the Gardener, “You know what I don’t. Your perspective is best. “You’re perfect in wisdom, power and love. I’ll not run from your pruning knife if it will make me more fruitful.” We need grace to keep our eyes on the love, wisdom and power of the heavenly Gardener, who has a perfect design for us, for our eternal good and his glory.

The True Vine says as we remain in his love through a prayerful, obedient walk, we'll be blessed with godliness. We cannot always see the fruit of our lives. In fact, the best people will probably be the least aware of the fruit of their godly character since one aspect of the fruit is humility (1 Peter 5:5). Evidently the rogue who wrote the book *Humility and How I Achieved It* missed the whole point, and misunderstood the whole concept of humility! As we learn to submit to the heavenly Father's pruning, and even welcome the pruning knife, he grows us in the fruit of maturity in being like Jesus (James 1:2).

His desire also is to bless us with assurance. Jesus says that "This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, *showing yourselves* (italics mine) to be my disciples" (verse 8). Our assurance that we are God's children is not based on a baptismal certificate or our church membership. It's not even based on a decision we made. Our assurance, according to John's first letter, is based on faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God and Savior and on the change in our lives that makes us godly and makes us love our brother. And our assurance comes with an awareness of the indwelling Holy Spirit (1 John 3:24). To abide in Christ is to be *at home* with him and to allow him to be at home with us is a deep, personal relationship. Assurance of salvation isn't dependent on emotion, but rather on God's promises and faithfulness expressed in his trustworthy word (2 Timothy 1:12).

Jesus speaks of our relationship with him as one of mutual friendship, and what a gracious gift this is! You know how comfortable you are with a friend. You can freely enter his or her house and pick up where you left off, and you never have to worry about being rejected or condemned for what you say. You can share intimate secrets and receive complete understanding. Even when separated by miles, you stay in touch and let one another know what you're doing (verse 15). Even if you're alone, you're never totally lonely because you have such a friend. And our best Friend, Jesus, never leaves us alone.

Again, although we are saved by grace, we will be judged by our works. Jesus says in Matthew 7:15-20, we will be judged by our fruit, which is the identifying mark of the believer. It is possible for a child of God to wander and become unfruitful and barren, according to 1 Corinthians 3:10-15. Such a Christian will be saved "as one escaping through the fire." His/her works will be lost, as will much of the eternal reward that God can give in heaven. But a Christian who has departed, though not bereft of salvation, is nonetheless without assurance of salvation. The only way to "make your calling and election sure," Peter says is to abound in the virtues that make us effective and productive (2 Peter 1:5-11).

The true vine desires to bless us with joy. Jesus speaks of the need to remain in closest fellowship with his love that we might know his joy (verse 11). There can be joy in Jesus even during those difficult times when he's pruning us.

Someone said when the pruning knife is *in* us the Gardener is closest *to* us. Let us never doubt his love for his children. And in his presence there's fullness of joy (Psalm 16:11). Joy is so much more than happiness, which depends on felicitous, fortuitous circumstances. Joy is a sense of well being that gives us "gusto," even when we are in seasons of difficulty and pain.

Yet beyond all the above, the True Vine desires to be glorified through us. "My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples," says Jesus (verse 8). God's overarching purpose in all his creation and works of redemption is to glorify himself. He's created all things to reflect his character of holiness and love, and has created us and saved us to be his worshipers (John 4:23).

You and I can "do church" without dependence on Jesus, but we can't do kingdom living and work unless we are abiding in the True Vine. I can do pastoral busy work without abiding in Jesus. But I can't preach with anointing, serve with love, and lead to honor Jesus without abiding in the true vine.

I desire my life and our church to be fruitful to the glory of God. But the True Vine, Jesus, desires this more than you or I do. He wants to bless us for his glory. He's able and willing to make us more fruitful than we've ever been. He wants to make a godly, holy people who are seriously following him as Lord. He wants to make us fruitful also in good works, in giving, and in prayerful praise and worship.

Jesus is the True Vine. Let's abide in him, for his glory.