

## **I AM...the True Vine (John 15:1)**

**Readings:** Psalm 80; John 15:1-17

We are in a sermon series in the lead up to Easter on the “I AM” sayings of Jesus.

The “I AM” sayings of Jesus are seven statements that are found in the book of John in which Jesus says “I am ....*something*.”

We have already talked about Jesus being the Light, the Gate, the Bread of Life, and the Good Shepherd.

Each of these sayings reveals some aspect of who Jesus is.

Today Jesus takes us to a vineyard when he says, *I am the true vine*.

Throughout the Old Testament, vineyard language is used to portray Israel.

Vineyard language is used by Isaiah, by Jeremiah, by Ezekiel.

And it is used in Psalm 80.

Israel is the vine God lovingly takes out of Egypt.

Israel is the vine he tenderly plants in the Promised Land.

Israel is the vine that grows lush and large

spreading west to the Mediterranean and east to the Euphrates river.

But Israel is also the vine that grows wild.

In time, it is the vine that is plundered and ravaged.

The vineyard song of Psalm 80 is a sad song.

It is a song that laments the sorry state of the vineyard.

It is a song that longs for the vineyard to be restored to its former fruitfulness.

In John 15 Jesus picks up this old vineyard song.

Jesus says that **he** is the answer to those ancient prayers.

He is the true vine.

He is the true Israel.

He is the true Messiah.

Only **in** him can true life and true fruitfulness be found.

This is an amazingly Christo-centric chapter.

Jesus uses the pronouns I, me or my...71 different times in this chapter.

He uses those pronouns 35 times alone in these verses we read.

So Jesus takes this OT imagery and applies it to himself...

But we also need to think about the setting of when Jesus said this.

The last verse in Ch 14 tells us that Jesus and the Disciples are about to leave the upper room. They are headed to the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus will later be arrested by the mob led by Judas.

It seems Jesus speaks the words which make up chapters 15 and 16 on the way to the garden.

I can imagine Jesus and these men going through the darkened streets of the city and then passing beyond the walls into the surrounding countryside.

During this time of year, mid April, the grape vines would be beginning to blossom with the promise of a fresh harvest.

As Jesus walked, maybe He reached out and took a vine in His hands and used it to teach an object lesson to His men.

His aim is to teach them about the most vital relationship they have in their lives,  
the one that is with Jesus and His Father.

You might ask, "Why did Jesus give them this teaching now?"

The answer is simple: They needed it!

These men have just been informed that Jesus is going away,  
but that His work is going to continue,  
and that it is to continue through them and their lives.

If they were to carry on the work of the Lord,  
then they needed to know how to produce that kind of fruit in their lives.

Today, we are 2,000 years removed from that night, but the work of the Lord still goes on. God is still working through the followers of Jesus Christ to accomplish His work and will in the world today.

You might sit here and wonder how you are supposed to do the work of the Lord  
and how you can produce that kind of fruit in our own lives.

Well, the answer is found in these verses.

Jesus was telling His followers that there were three things that the vine illustration tells them about being a disciple of His.

The three points are these:

- (1) the branches must remain in the vine,
- (2) branches that remain in the vine will bear fruit, and

(3) the gardener prunes so that the branches produce more fruit.

Let's look at each one of these ideas.

***First, the branch must remain in the vine.***

Your belly button is a constant reminder of the vital connection you once had with your mother.

In the womb we were all connected to our mothers by the umbilical cord.

The umbilical cord carried out two life-saving jobs.

First, it brought necessary food and oxygen so that we could grow and live.

Second, it carried away all of the waste so that we wouldn't suffocate in filth.

Without this connection to mum, none of us could have lived.

Just as the umbilical cord provided a vital connection to mum,  
so also we all need a vital connection to Jesus.

The illustration Jesus uses is obvious...

if a branch is not connected to the vine, it will quickly wither and die.

Without a connection to the true vine, Jesus, not a single one of us will live spiritually or eternally.

That truth is drawn out in the verb that is repeated some 11 times in these verses...

It is the Greek verb *Meno* – each time translated in our NIV as **remain**,

*Remain* in me as I *remain* in you;

A branch cannot bear fruit unless it *remains* in the vine.

We cannot bear fruit unless we *remain* in Jesus.

Those who *remain* in Jesus bear much fruit.

We *remain* in Jesus by having his words *remain* in us.

We *remain* in his love by obeying his commands.

*Remain .... remain .... remain.*

So the key way by which we are to remain in Christ is by having Christ and especially Christ's *words and commands* remain in us.

**The second thing we see in this illustration is that if a branch remains in the vine, it will bear fruit.**

Again, if the branch symbolizes a disciple and the vine is Jesus, what did Jesus mean by bearing fruit?

In this passage we see a couple clues.

Jesus said the fruit would bring glory to the Father and that it would last.

The fruit was to be good and would have eternal impact.

It is in this context that Jesus, somewhat surprisingly, begins in verse 9 to speak of a command: that we love one another.

Jesus has not totally left the image of the vine behind yet,  
but that is precisely why the language of command is so striking.

Ordinarily you would not imagine a vine *ordering* a branch to produce grapes. The branches will either bear grapes or they will bear nothing due to sickness or disease or something.

So why does Jesus have to order even his healthy branches to produce that primary fruit of love?  
How can love be both a fruit which grows naturally *and* also something we have to pursue as a task?

Unlike real vine branches which have no choice but to receive the sap flowing from the larger vine, when it comes to disciples, it is possible to in some way be in Christ and yet be unproductive.

It's not inevitable that we receive the full nutrients Jesus has to offer. Some branches produce only meager amounts of fruit or maybe even sour grapes...  
fruit that just didn't get enough sugar into them (or in this case love).

And so Jesus gives a way to make sure you are drawing on the nutrients...  
"This is my command: Love each other."  
This is perhaps as clear and easy-to-understand a verse as you will find in the Bible.  
If only it were as easy to do!

You've got to hand it to Jesus: when he issued a command, it was a whopper!  
Actually, Jesus was not real big on giving commands. Jesus was more of a dispenser of beatitudes, of truths couched in parables, and of warm invitations to come unto him for rest and forgiveness.

As a matter of fact, except for a couple of times when Jesus *commanded* an evil spirit to come out of someone, this is the only time in the gospels when Jesus issues any kind of a command.

He generally didn't even use the word!

Even when a lawyer tried to pin Jesus down on what was the greatest of all commandments, Jesus skirted obvious things like the Ten Commandments and reached for love: love for God and love for neighbors.

Of course, if you study the life and words and parables and sermons and actions of Jesus, you will find an eternity's worth of things you should *do*.

But there was precisely just one thing which was so vital that Jesus actually went so far as to phrase it as a command, and that was to love each other.

We are to love one another, cherish one another, even lay down our lives for one another if need be, and it is all an extension of being a branch on Jesus the true vine.

Apparently Jesus knew that if we could do just this one commandment, everything else would follow.

If you bring a child to an ice cream parlor, you won't need to start issuing rules which insist that the child order a cone, eat it, enjoy it, find it delicious, and so just generally have fun!

Once the child gets to the parlor, the rest follows.

So also with love: if we can't do this, nothing else will work, either.

If we can, the rest follows.

But Jesus has to command us to love...

So it does not so naturally flow from being in Christ as we hope.

Apparently we human branches in Christ, unlike real grape vine branches, need to do some self-cultivation through the Holy Spirit.

We need to hone skills like *forgiveness*

without which we sooner or later will find reasons *not* to love most everybody.

We need to nurture *kindness and gentleness*,

without which the hard knocks of life will eventually make us hard-edged and bitter like a sour grape.

We need to grow *compassion* in our hearts

so that we can reach out to those in need even as we see people we don't particularly like in ways that remind us that they, too, are flawed folks like ourselves and that they struggle and hurt the same as do we all.

Above all we need to be *students of God's Word* so that the words of Jesus can remain in us. The words of Jesus must abide in us but that cannot happen if we neither know those words nor practice them often.

**The third thing we see in this illustration is that branches that bear fruit are pruned.**

The Father is described as the gardener, the vine-grower, the vine-dresser.

He is the one with pruning shears in his hand.

He is in the business of **cutting off** any branch that bears no fruit and **pruning** any fruit-bearing branch so that it bears more fruit.

The gardener who prunes his vine works with extreme care.

There is no threat here in the picture of God as the gardener who prunes his vines.

There is no warning of 'produce or else!'

Instead we are assured that God, the gardener, actively tending his vineyard,  
is fully committed to bring us to maximum fruitfulness.

God's pruning work benefits us;

It doesn't threaten us.

The good news is that the more and better fruit you produce in Christ's love,  
the more God will prune your part of the vine so that you can make even *more* fruit.

This is the way that horticulturalists work on grape vines.

I checked a website about pruning last week and discovered that the art of proper pruning is a special skill.

Whenever you leave a vine unpruned, the first year you'll have a massive big crop.

Novice growers can feel delighted with their success and wonder what all the pruning fuss is about.

There's a flipside to this.

The vine will produce more fruit than it knows what to do with.

The vine can't produce enough energy to ripen an unregulated crop, and it'll be poor quality.

The clusters will be straggly, and you won't have much fruit worth using.

Dr Peter May is one of Australia's leading horticulturalists and he has been growing grapes as a hobby for 25 years.

He prunes the vines every year as part of routine management.

"We do it mostly to control the amount of fruit that is set, so it's really about making sure the grapes ripen properly," he said.

"One of the main jobs of pruning is to tell the vine how many bunches of grapes you want it to produce and to ripen in the year," he said.

Something like that happens spiritually, too--the better things go on your particular branch, the better they will get because the Father will tend you even more.

Actually, in verse 2 the Greek word used is *katharei*, from which we get the word "catharsis." It points more to cleansing than pruning...

which is why in verse 3 Jesus tells the disciples they are already "clean".

But what does that mean?

We have all heard someone refer to some tragedy in her life as God's "pruning" of her, as God's way of trimming her back and building character.

But there is no hint in John 15 that hardship and harm and diminishment would necessarily be involved in the cleansing process to which Jesus refers.

If anything the image of being cleansed summons up notions of forgiveness, of grace, of the Spirit's giving us the strength to resist temptation so that we can express the love which is the hallmark Christian fruit.

When a Christian fails to bear fruit, something has gone wrong and it's time for some serious self-examination.

But God does not work in vain.

When he has sent his powerful grace that changes our lives, he will also reap the fruits he himself has caused to grow.

God is pruning out of our lives those things that distract us from him;

So that the fruit we do produce will be the sweet juice of love distilled,  
bringing joy to God and flowing into the lives of others

### **Conclusion**

Today, I need to remain in the vine...so I can produce fruit.

Fruit-bearing which is impossible for those outside of Christ.

### **LATER**

We will be celebrating the Lord's Supper in a few minutes – eating the bread and drinking from the cup.

Last Lord's Supper we talked about eating the bread and thinking about how Jesus body was broken for us so that our sins could be forgiven and we could be made whole.

As we drink of the fruit of the vine we are reminded of the blood of Jesus Christ – that He gave His life so that we might be forgiven. But the grape juice is also a good reminder of our being connected to the vine. And if we are connected to the vine, we will be bearing fruit.