

I am the True Vine

Portraits of Jesus

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We are continuing our studies in John's Gospel and we're going to read now from John 15. John 15, reading verses 1 to 11. Let us hear God's word.

1 "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. 3 Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. 4 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. 6 If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. 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. 9 As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. 10 If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. 11 These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

Amen. May God bless to us the reading from his own word.

We reach this evening the two thirds mark in our series of messages from John's Gospel. We had planned to give 24 sermons from this Gospel, this evening is message number 16. John 15:1, "I am the true vine." I am the true vine. This is the seventh and the last of the great "I am" sayings of Jesus from this fourth Gospel and it has suffered in the last 150 years or so by being taken out of its context in the Gospel and most of the preaching in the last couple of generations on this passage has been applied immediately to the personal relationship between the Savior and the individual believer. Your relationship

with Christ and mine. A mystical, devotional, abiding in Christ. How can you and I do this more?

Now, this is a vital part of this chapter but it is not all the chapter by any means, and if we limit it in this way by taking it out of its context, we lose much of this magnificent claim of our Lord. The preceding phrase at the end of chapter 14, verse 31, is this, "Rise, let us go from here." And the scholars argue about whether Jesus and the disciples left the upper room at the end of chapter 14 and started making their way through Jerusalem towards the garden, and chapters 15 and 16 then would have been uttered as the disciples and Jesus walked through the narrow streets of Jerusalem. Others say that the fact that Jesus said, "Rise, let us go from here," doesn't mean that they went that moment exactly, and that these chapters were still in the upper room; just like ministers who say finally but then finally seems to be an awfully long time in coming. But I don't think we can solve the question. I don't think there's enough material to enable us to decide whether these words are spoken still in the upper room or as they walked through Jerusalem. It doesn't much matter but it's this phrase, "Rise, let us go from here," for that's actually a military phrase. It was used in Greek by generals who were speaking to their troops before going to battle. It means something like, "Let us go to meet the advancing enemy."

So by any standards, this is not an invitation to settle down and care for our souls and nurture our souls in quietness. It is a stirring call to battle and I think we have to interpret John 15 in the place where God the Holy Spirit put it in the Scriptures for Jesus is speaking to worried, desperately anxious men. They are frightened. They are downhearted. Their Master is leaving them. He says in chapter 14:1, "Let not your hearts be troubled," and the implication is that their hearts were troubled. He said in verse 18 of that chapter, "I will not leave you as orphans." This shows what they were worrying about. Verse 27, "Peace I leave with you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid." Or again in chapter 16, verse 1, "I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away." That was a danger. Verse 6, "because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart." So here are grieving, sorrowful men. Again, verse 22, "you have sorrow now." So that's the context. Here are these sorrowful, apprehensive, anxious men. "What are we going to do? What's going to happen to us? Our Lord is going away. He's going to leave us. We're going to be stranded." And it's in that context that he gives this teaching, and a great part of the teaching is to reassure the disciples and to reassure us for we face pressures too.

So I want to think about these words this evening, "I am the true vine," as ways in which Jesus reassures his disciples and to look at four ways in which he reassures us. First of all, there is reassurance about persecution from the world. About persecution from the world. That was partly why these men are so terrified. Did they know yet that their Lord was going to the cross? Well, they should have had a good idea. He told them in Matthew 17:22, "The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him." That was some months earlier. He told them three times actually, that he was going to be killed.

And worst than that in their eyes, it was clear that he and they were being rejected by the religious leaders of their own people, their own leaders. Matthew 16:21, "Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes." The whole fabric of the Jewish establishment had turned against Jesus. The Sadducees, the Pharisees, the scribes, the temple, the synagogues, the teachers, they had turned against him. They were looking at him with unbelief, with mockery, with murderous hatred, and the disciples must have been wondering, "Is that hatred going to be directed against us too?" How vulnerable they were. How lonely they felt. They were in a position where they were saying, as it were, "Everybody believes we are wrong. Everybody thinks we are wrong."

And Jesus says, "I am the true vine." Israel was a land of vineyards. The vine was their national symbol. It was their shamrock, perhaps I should say it was their Red Hand of Ulster or it was their Stars & Stripes. On the coins printed during the Maccabean revolt, they printed a vine on the coin, and 30 years after this, 35 years after this when they revolt against Rome, they will again produce coins with a vine printed on it. So the vine was Israel. There was a huge golden vine on the gate of the holy place in the temple. It is even possible that they were standing near it as Jesus spoke. So this was their national symbol. This is who they were. And the Old Testament has many references to the land of Israel as the vine, the nation of Israel as the vine. We sang Psalm 80:8, "You brought a vine out of Egypt." Who did God bring out of Egypt? The people of Israel, the children of Israel. They were the vine. Isaiah 5:7, "the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel."

So the vine is the people of God and yet as we look at the Old Testament references, they often speak of the fruitlessness and the failure of the vine, for this vine was a great disappointment to God. In Jeremiah 2:21 God says, "I planted you a choice vine. How then have you turned degenerate and become a wild vine?" So it's a spoiled vine, it's a disappointing vine, it's a fruitless vine. Again and again and again they disobeyed. They turned from the Lord and here in Jerusalem you have godless, cruel leaders, and a shallow, unbelieving people. This is God's vine so at this point the Lord Jesus says, "I am the true vine." This is a very shocking, radical, loaded, political, religious statement and, yes, it's wonderful. Jesus is saying, "I am the fulfillment of all the prophecies. I am the true land where God dwells. God's place is not fields and rivers and mountains. I am God's land, I am God's grace. I am the true Israel. I am God's people. I am the source of blessing and joy to the world." What national Israel failed to do, he has come to do. All the promises and the blessings of the covenant are embodied in him and the disciples are sitting, you see, thinking to themselves, "Israel has cast us out. Israel is against us." And Jesus is saying, "No. No. God has cast Israel out and I am Israel, I am the true vine." Let the disciples be assured it doesn't matter if the religious leaders are against them, the religious leaders are false, they are apostate. It doesn't matter if the people are unbelieving. It is in Jesus that there is the truth and the blessing of God.

So here is reassurance, "The world may persecute you, the scribes and the Pharisees may persecute you, but that's because they are not the true vine. I'm the true vine." And my friends, it is important for us to hold to this. The world is against us, mocking and hostile.

Much of the professing church has no time for evangelicals and sometimes it seems as if we are a tiny minority opposed by huge forces. We must never be intimidated. Here is the truth: Jesus is the true vine. He is the leader of a new humanity, God's own people. Jesus is the source of all the joy and all the blessing that will ever come to this world. It is to be found nowhere else. In him is everything good and everything holy. In him is indescribable joy and life everlasting. So he's saying to his disciples, "All these men are against you. All these great teachers, these clever rabbis, these high ecclesiastical officials are against you. It doesn't matter. I'm the true vine. I'm the true vine."

Then, secondly, there is reassurance here about partnership with Christ. About partnership with Christ. Verse 5, "I am the vine; you are the branches." What a wonderful statement because they are all thinking, "He is going away. He's going away. We're going to lose him. We're going to be separated from him. We're going to be cut off." He's going off into heaven and they are full of fears and a sense of bereavement and loss and Jesus says, "There is not going to be a loss. There is not going to be a loss. You're not going to be separated from me. There is not going to be a distance. I am the vine and you are the branches. You are part of the vine. You are part of me. We can't be separated. We're joined in the closest possible way."

That's the force of this verb "abide" or "remain," some of you may have. Abide, it's used 10 times in verses 4 to 10. Over and over, "Abide in me. Abide in me." And it is a command. It is something we have to do and that means stressed. I would actually need another complete message to stress the command to abide in Christ. But what I want you to think about is this: as well as it is a command, it is a huge reassurance in the context. It's a huge reassurance. It's the best news they've heard for a long time because that's what they want to do. That's what they are frightened that it won't go on. They are terrified that he is going away and now he says, "Abide in me." And if you can imagine, their faces clearing up and they're saying, "Lord, this is great news! Can we abide in you? Is that possible? Are we still going to be joined?" "Yes," he says, "we are still going to be joined. You are not going to be separated from me. There is going to be no distance between yourselves and your beloved Master. Abide in me. Stay loyal. Stay committed." It's the very thing they most wanted to do.

It's a huge challenge but it's also a wonderful blessing. This is, I'm sure, not a very appropriate illustration but I remember years ago several small boys as they were then in this congregation at one of our parties, were presented with an enormous challenge. Some of you will remember it. They were each presented with section of drainpipe filled with ice cream and the challenge was to eat the whole drainpipe full of ice cream. An enormous challenge, but looking at their faces, they weren't downhearted, they weren't daunted, they were up for it. It was what they wanted to do above all.

And often we think of the "abide in me," this is what we've got to do, we've got to abide in Christ. But the other side of it is, what a wonderful opportunity and promise that we can abide in Christ; that that's what he wants us to do; that's what we're meant to do. We can't see Jesus and we are living among people to whom the Lord Jesus is utterly unreal, and we know he's there, but would you not agree with me that many times we don't really

have a sense of his close immediate presence? One man once prayed, "Lord Jesus, make thyself to me a living right reality." And often we have to acknowledge that when we believe in him, we know he's with us, we know he's there, we couldn't honestly say that at this moment he's a living right reality, and that is here what we are called to.

This is our Lord's way of expressing the truth that Paul later put a different way: you are the body of Christ, or you are in Christ, one of Paul's favorite phrases. Jesus says, "I am the vine; you are the branches." We couldn't be closer and this is the reassurance about partnership with Christ. We are challenged to do what we should most want to do. If someone came to you and said, "Think of your very best friend, the person you most enjoy being with in all the world. I want you to spend all next week with them." Would you say, "Oh, that's a pretty daunting task"? No, your first reaction would be one of joy, reassurance.

But we move on. Thirdly, there is reassurance here about productiveness of life. Productiveness of life. These men are facing a huge task. Their Lord is returning to heaven and they are going to have to live in the world Christ-like lives. They are going to have to teach Christ's message to the world. He's not going to be there. They are going to be his witnesses and it's not just going to be in Palestine, it's going to be into Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. How will they cope with this huge task? They are weak men. We read of their failures and their sins in the Gospels. How is this little group of men going to take the message of Christ into the world? How is it possible?

Verse 5, "Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit." There is the reassurance. When God made Adam, he gave him a responsibility, he said, "Be fruitful." Be fruitful and Adam failed and he wasn't fruitful. God said to Old Testament Israel, "Be fruitful," and that nation failed and they weren't fruitful. But here's God's vine, here is the true vine, supremely fruitful, the most fruitful life there has ever been on earth and now the branches will share in the fruitfulness. The life of the Lord Jesus will fill them more and more. They are going to bear the fruit of the Spirit. Their witness will be astonishingly successful. "You will bear much fruit," he says. And then 30 years, there are going to be churches all over the world; in as short a time as that, perhaps hundreds of new churches. We are only told a little bit of the New Testament missionary endeavor. We are only told about two or three of the disciples. We are not told where the others went, what the others did. Huge expansion.

"You will bear much fruit." And we are often discouraged with ourselves, aren't we? There is so much remaining sin in our hearts. There is so little real growth as Christians. Our witness is so ineffective. And we are right to be discouraged with ourselves for as Jesus says, "apart from me you can do nothing." But we aren't apart from him. We are closely joined to him and as we stay close, as we abide, as his words abide in us, we will be productive Christians. We must be productive Christians. We will grow and it will be organic growth.

I give a scientific illustration with fear and trembling. I have no doubt you will tell me if it's wrong. But I'm told for an example of inorganic growth would be an alum crystal, that

if you suspend an alum crystal in a concentrated solution of alum, the crystal will grow and it will continue to grow. If you take it out and suspend it in water, the growth will drop away and the crystal will go back to what it was before because all the growth was external. It was from the outside. It was from the environment. It was from the solution in which the crystal was placed. There are so-called Christians like that. You see it with young people. They are in a Christian environment, they have Christian friends, they look like Christians, they talk like Christians, they even may think they are Christians but it's really because of the environment that they're in. You take them out and you put them in a different environment and then all the so-called growth drops away because it wasn't organic growth. Organic growth comes from within, from the life inside us, and it's inevitable and it is irreversible.

How reassuring that is to each one of us. If you are joined to Christ, you will bear fruit. You will become more loving, more patient, more faithful, more holy. You will live with greater impact for God. You will live a productive, meaningful, worthwhile life, what people around us are looking for and cannot find. But we have to abide.

So there is reassurance about persecution, about partnership and about productiveness and, lastly, there is reassurance here about pain, the pain of pruning. Vines need a good deal of attention, especially twice in the year. In the late autumn, the vinedresser comes and he cuts the plant back severely, indeed almost savagely. And if you are in Israel in winter, the vineyards have just little black ugly looking stumps in the ground. That's all there is. The vinedresser has cut the vine back and burned the branches right down to the very roots. That's the first pruning. Then the second pruning comes in spring when there is growth and he comes along and he nips some of the plants in the bud or he snips off a foot or so of a tendril or he cuts off suckers that are going along the ground, anything that would take away the growth from the plant. And you see those two prunings referred to in verse 2. First the autumn pruning, "Every branch that does not bear fruit he takes away." And then the spring pruning, "every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit." And the process seems cruel, wasteful, but it's vital. If the vine isn't pruned, it won't thrive. There may be masses of foliage but there will be little fruit, and the vinedresser who cares about his vines will prune them.

And Jesus is warning his disciples and us, for we too are his disciples, he is saying, "God isn't going to leave you alone. He's going to prune you." Often that pruning will be through his word. That's a wonderful pruning. That's gentle, it's kind, it's gradual. He says in verse 3, "Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you." And as we read the Bible or hear the Bible preached, we are rebuked, we are corrected, we are guided, we are instructed, and as we put that into practice, we are pruned. But sometimes severer measures are needed and we feel the pain of the pruning knife as the vinedresser comes and he cuts away something, something that is part of us. It's painful to lose. We dread it but the promise here is that it's worthwhile. It hurts to have evil things cut out of your life by the Lord, and not even necessarily evil things but possible hindrances cut out by the Lord.

In the children's novel, "The Voyage of the Dawn Treader," there is a character called Eustace Scrubb, a selfish, immature, horrible boy. And Eustace Scrubb goes into a dragon's cave and he becomes a dragon and he's covered in horrible oily scales and he can't get the scales off. And Aslan, the lion, comes to take off the scales from Eustace Scrubb and here's what the boy says, "I was afraid of his claws but I was pretty nearly desperate so I just lay flat on my back and let him do it. The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right to my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I had ever felt. The only thing that made me able to bear it was the pleasure of feeling the stuff peel off." That's the pain of the pruning, when Christ comes with his knife and he says, "This is going to hurt. This is going to hurt. Something that means a lot to you, something that is precious to you, maybe not bad in itself, it may even be a good thing in itself, but for you, I'm going to take it away. I'm going to take it away. You're going to lose it. You're not going to have it but I want you to know that it so that you will bear more fruit." That's his only reason.

I suppose the question for each of us this evening is: are we ready? Do we want the pruning? The story is told of a lady missionary, a Christian, a marvelous Christian lady. She was elderly. She was giving her testimony to a youth group. It was a marvelous testimony. Prayers answered. People converted. Miracles of every kind that God had worked through this old lady. And at the end one young fellow came up to her and he said, "Boy, I'd give everything to have a testimony like that!" She put her hand on his shoulder and she said, "Young man, everything is what it cost me. Everything is what it cost me."

"Every branch in me," and here's the wonderful thing, "every branch in me that bears fruit he prunes." It's the best branches that get the knife. It's the branches with the greatest potential that get the knife. The knife isn't a sign of condemnation, it's a sign of commendation. It's not a sign of anger, it's a sign of love. Friends, that's reassuring in hard times. Sometimes we wonder what's going wrong in our lives: suffering, loss, loneliness, frustration. Our plans are turned upside down. Our hopes come to nothing. It's immensely discouraging. "Why, Lord? Why are you doing these things? Why are these things happening?" And very often it's the Father pruning us for greater fruitfulness and that is immensely reassuring.

Someone has put it this way in verse and some of you will know this,

"I asked the Lord that I might grow
In faith, and love, and every grace;
Might more of His salvation know,
And seek, more earnestly, His face.

"I hoped that in some favored hour,
At once He'd answer my request;
And by His love's constraining pow'r,
Subdue my sins, and give me rest.

"Instead of this, He made me feel
The hidden evils of my heart;
And let the angry pow'rs of hell
Assault my soul in every part.

"Yea more, with His own hand He seemed
Intent to aggravate my woe;

"Yea more, with His own hand He seemed
Intent to aggravate my woe;
Crossed all the fair designs I schemed,
Blasted my gourds, and laid me low.

"Lord, why is this, I trembling cried,
Wilt thou pursue thy worm to death?
"'Tis in this way, the Lord replied,
I answer prayer for grace and faith.

"These inward trials I employ,
From self, and pride, to set thee free;
And break thy schemes of earthly joy,
That thou may'st find thy all in Me."

So there it is. If you want to be fruitful, think about it, if you want to be fruitful, prepare for the knife. "Every branch in me that bears fruit he prunes it, that it may bring forth more fruit." But remember this: a knife need not be a bad thing. A knife in the hand of a mugger is foul and ugly, the same knife in the hand of a surgeon is kind and loving and a blessing. And our God has a reason for every cut he makes and I think there are tears in his eyes of love and compassion and his hand is very gentle and very careful. Amen.

Let us bow our heads in prayer.

Help us, O Lord, to receive your word into our hearts. Help us to be willing to stand alone if necessary with Christ knowing that he is the true vine. Thank you for the privilege of abiding in him. Help us to avail ourselves of that privilege with joy. Thank you, God, for the promise that his matchless life will flow through us bringing fruit and productivity that could never happen from ourselves alone. And Father, we even dare to thank you for the times of pruning which have been painful, but even in our experience so far, many of us can look back and say, "It has been good for me that I was afflicted." And we pray that you will help us so to long to bear fruit for Christ that whatever it may cost us, we may accept it gladly from your hand. Give us strength for this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.