

We need to do a self-checkup of our spiritual health. Are you distant these days from God? Can you hardly remember the last time your life was fruitful?

Do you feel far from joy and peace, victory and blessing? Do you hope that no one gets too close and asks you personal questions? Does your Bible feel as heavy as lead when you pick it up? Do my challenges for you to jump in to serve and speak up for Christ push you away? Do you wonder if you'll get any reward in Heaven. In fact, do you just hope that you will ever get there? Has the zeal you once knew dried up, and become a far off memory?

If these or a myriad of other telltale signs of spiritual listlessness and barrenness have cast their shadows across your path, then Christ's invitation to His spiritual gardening clinic is for you. Come to the vineyard and learn. Listen to Jesus as He introduces us to God's vineyard.

Get a spiritual checkup

Jesus is talking about grapes. Nothing was clearer in first century Judea than vineyards to these men. They often lived, walked, slept, and ate in the very shadow of the vine. The seasons of each Israelite's life were marked by the heavy clusters of fall grapes, the joys of harvest, the winter pruning of the vines, the first buds of spring, the vigorous growth of summer, and the joys of fall's harvest again!

Jesus sums up everything about His relationship to us in John 15. All we need He has supplied (that is a summary of His teaching from John 1-14). Now in John 15 He describes the delivery system. A promise is only as good as the delivery system.

### **How Does God Make Us Fruitful?**

Open with me to Christ's explanation of what He wants this morning from each of us who know Him. That explanation is in John 15.1-8. As we turn there let me remind you that Jesus chose a very special image to help us grasp what He was ordering. Like a catalog with pictures, He paints a picture for us so we would be clear on what He desires from us.

You can live next to Hoover Dam but not have water or power if there are no lines to transport them to you. Jesus explains our lifelong relationship with Him in these precious words of John 15.5 and every word is packed with powerful truth.

v. 5 "I AM the Vine Jesus who is the eternal unchanging God of the universe opens His arms to us opening an intimate and personal relationship directly with us. He who abides in Me, and I in Him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing."

v. 5 "I AM the Vine Jesus gives the seventh and final declaration of His divine relationship to us. In God's Word a seven part truth is a completed set. Jesus says that I AM all you need, needed, and will ever need. And in John 15 He explains how to get and keep everything He has promised us. He who abides in Me, and I in Him,

bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.”

- He started in John 6.35 revealing Himself by saying: “**I AM the Bread**” we need to never perish, then in John 8.12 by declaring: “**I AM the Light**” we need to live.
- In John 10 He opens to us the truth that He is related to us in two more ways: “**I AM the Door**” we need to enter God’s presence; as well as “**I AM the Good Shepherd**” we need who loves, leads, and gives Himself to care for us.
- At the grave of His friend Lazarus in John 11.25-27 Jesus tells us that “**I AM the Resurrection Life**” all that we need to live here and there in serenity and security. As the hymn writers say: “no guilt in life, no fear in death Jesus has set my destiny”!
- In the upper room Jesus comforts His troubled disciples in John 14.6 with the three-fold cord that can’t be broken as He promises “**I AM the Way, the Truth, and the Life**”. The way for today, the truth for tomorrow, and the life for evermore.

v. 5 “**I AM the Vine** and you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in Him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.”

When Jesus speaks to His disciples in John 15, He was emphasizing *the familiar to portray the eternal*. The **vine** was part and parcel of Jewish imagery, and the very symbol of Israel. The vine was grown all over Palestine, as it still is. It is a plant needing a great deal of attention if the best fruit is to be gotten from it. It is grown commonly on terraces. The ground has to be perfectly clean. It is sometimes trained on trellises; it is sometimes allowed to creep over the ground upheld by low-forked sticks; it sometimes even grows round the doors of the cottages; but wherever it grows careful preparation of the soil is essential. It grows luxuriantly and drastic pruning is necessary. So luxuriant is it that the slips are set in the ground at least twelve feet apart, for it will creep over the ground at great speed.

**JESUS USES A UNIVERSAL IMAGE:** There was no one living in Israel in the time of Christ’s ministry that had not seen a vine and its branches, except maybe the blind who had escaped the healing touch of Jesus. So when he set out to explain the relationship that He desired from those who were His own children, He used the vivid image of the vine and branches.

**JESUS USES A HISTORICAL IMAGE:** After the Old Testament era the identification continued, in fact the vine is the national symbol for Israel on the coins of the Maccabean Period (167-63 BC). By the time of Christ’s ministry, the Temple of Herod had made the vine and branches to be the glory of the area in front of the Holy Place. Herod’s Golden Vine was the spot where the Jews could bring golden clusters of grapes to hang as an offering to the glory of the God of Israel – and many did. Many wealthy people brought a new bunch of grapes and the less wealthy would bring a new grape to hang on to that vine. So to all in Israel, as John records these words of Jesus, the vine and branches were the very symbol of Israel. But Jesus changes the symbolism and declares in v. 1 that He is the *true* vine. The point of that word *alethinós*, true, real, genuine, is this.

**JESUS USES A BIBLICAL IMAGE:** Often in the Old Testament, Israel is pictured as the vine or the vineyard of God. “The vineyard of the Lord is the house of Israel” ([Isaiah 5:1–7](#)). “Yet I planted you a choice vine” is

the message from God through Jeremiah to Israel ([Jeremiah 2:21](#)). Ezekiel writes in chapter 15.1-11 and 19.10 that Israel is as a vine in God's sight. Hosea writes "Israel is a luxuriant vine" ([Hosea 10:1](#)). Psalm 80.8 records that "Thou didst bring a vine out of Egypt". Thus in the Old Testament the vine had actually become the symbol of the nation of Israel.

**JESUS USES A NEGATIVE IMAGE:** The vine is never used in the Old Testament for Israel in a positive way. It always spoke of *degeneration*. The point of Isaiah's picture is that the vineyard had gone wild. Jeremiah laments that his nation has turned into "degenerate and become a wild vine" (Jeremiah 2.21) Jesus was warning any who heard Him that just being associated with God's people did not save. They were degenerate and wild. The only hope was by a living connection to Him! We need to be connected to Christ, living in Him or we have no hope. It is not human descent but Divine rebirth that saves. Nothing external can give endless life, only connection to God Himself through Jesus.

**JESUS USES A VIVID IMAGE:** Vines grew everywhere in Israel as they do today. And everyone who grew grape vines knew the close attention they need to bear good fruit. Each year 90% of all growth from the previous year must be cut away. Pruning was required, and the soil constantly prepared. The vines have to be held away from the ground by trellises or sticks. After three years of maturing, the new plant is pruned back twice each year as it bears two kinds of branches, ***ones that have fruit and ones that don't***. Any branch that does not bear fruit is drastically pruned back, so none of the plant's strength is misused for mere foliage and not grapes. An unpruned vine never produces the good fruit it is capable of producing, and this Jesus knew very well.

**JESUS USES A SOBERING IMAGE:** The wood of the grape vine has the distinct characteristic that it is good for nothing. It is too soft for any purpose. At certain times of the year, it was laid down by the law that the people must bring offerings of wood to the Temple for the altar fires. But the wood of the grape vine was excluded. Wood pruned out of a vineyard was only useful for a bonfire. This completes the picture Jesus draws.

- One of the sobering principles of the New Testament is that *uselessness invites disaster*. The fruitless branch is on the way to destruction.
- A second truth: *contact is the key to all of our spiritual life*. Jesus lived connected to God. The secret of the life of Jesus was his contact with God; again and again he withdrew into a solitary place to meet Him. We must keep contact with Jesus. Connection takes planning. We must take deliberate steps to stay connected.
- A final truth: *any amount is sufficient*. "To take but one example—to pray in the morning, if it be for only a few moments, is to have an antiseptic for the whole day; for we cannot come out of the presence of Christ to touch the evil things. For some few of us, abiding in Christ will be a mystical experience which is beyond words to express. For most of us, it will mean a constant contact with him. It will mean arranging life, arranging prayer, and

arranging silence in such a way that there is never a day when we give ourselves a chance to forget him". Don't wait for a better time – seek Him now. Don't put off for later and miss the blessing of this moment you can have with Him.

v. 5b "I AM the Vine and you are the branches. He abides in Me, and I in Him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing." When Jesus stopped to describe our daily relationship to Him in John 15, it was of utmost importance. The timing is unbelievable, just hours before the darkest night on earth. The cross and the grave were looming whoyet Jesus joyously looked ahead for the joy of being united with His disciples and us! Think about something – when Jesus sums up the Christian life it is with this picture. We are a branch and everything in our life is connected to HIM! All we are and all we will ever be flows through Jesus. That is an awesome thought.

We live our lives from salvation onward attached to Jesus. Everything we say ***we say with Him***, everything we see ***we see with Him***, everything we do ***we do with Him***. We are like Siamese twins, ***we are connected, attached, linked, and sharing His life.***

Now look further, and what is amazing if you step back and look at John 15.1-8 is that ***no sin is in the picture***. Jesus is describing us as we are, wearing His righteousness, and thus He sees us as without sin. The result is that Jesus is asking the Father to remove anything that hinders His life from being ours. Life is reduced to being either good or good for nothingness.

To be good branches for Jesus we need some constant help. This is the job of the Gardener, and God the Father assumes the role of the Gardener. He is ***always*** at work in our lives trimming, pruning, lifting, and promoting Christ-likeness. The explanation of John 14.21 is seen in John 15.1-7.

Jesus used this vine/branch metaphor for their understanding. But the importance of ***vineyards*** in the ancient world is difficult for modern readers to appreciate. Winemaking dates back to the earliest days of human history. Genesis records Noah as the first vineyard cultivator and winemaker, with unfortunate results ([Gen 9:20](#) ff.). The production and consumption of wine was an economic mainstay for the farmers of Israel in Jesus' day. Many Christians today do not drink wine, and most have little understanding of a working vineyard. Wine comes from the juice of the grapes produced by a grapevine. So what lessons was Jesus offering to His disciples that night and thus to us?

- ***WE, LIKE BRANCHES, ARE UNFOCUSED BY NATURE:*** If left untrimmed, a grapevine will use its available energy to grow long woody branches and extend its territory, while producing a few meager bunches of grapes. Winemakers learned early on that grapevines could be tamed by vigilant pruning of branches so that comparatively few buds would be allowed to grow. ***What are you doing that God the Father is watching for just the right time to trim away from your life? It may be good in the sense of not being sin – but good for nothing in the light of eternity!***

- WE, LIKE BRANCHES, ARE FOCUSED BY THE GARDENER: When the trimming of the gardener is finished, the vine is forced to direct its life-giving sap into the production of grapes rather than territorial expansion. Under good conditions of both sufficient rain and plenty of sunshine, this resulted in heavy grape clusters and abundant grape juice for wine production. ***We go through seasons of being focused, by the Lord, back on why we are here. These seasons usually follow retreats, they follow car accidents, they follow good messages we hear or read, they follow trips to the hospital, they follow times of Bible study and prayer, they follow the loss of a job, or they follow the death of loved ones or the diagnosis of a serious or even terminal illness. Are you focused yet?***
- WE, LIKE BRANCHES, ARE PRUNED FOR FRUITFULNESS: Major pruning was done in midwinter, when the vine would lose the least amount of its precious sap. This process of cleaning/pruning the vineyard left a bare field with small stumps at the beginning of the spring growing season. ***In our lives it is the fall and early winter that often sees the most pruning. These are our later years when we have pain, sickness, limitations, and the most opportunity for growth in godliness. Are you enjoying God the Fathers work on your life?***
- BRANCHES ARE BURNED WHEN THERE IS UNNECESSARY WOOD: Farmers not only snipped off these old branches, but also hauled them away and burned them so the vines could grow unhindered from the mature stump each year. Effective vine dressing required that the farmer continue to prune through the growing season to keep the vine's energy focused on a limited number of grape clusters. Even today the best grapes are produced by developed vines, 12–40 years old, with deep, healthy root systems. ***God has much to burn in our lives. We busy ourselves often with everything but Him! Let your life get lean and focused and fruitful for Him.***

Adaptations and quotations from Barclay, William, Daily Study Bible Series: The Gospel of John - Volume 2 Chapters 8-21 (Revised Edition), ( Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press) 2000, c1975.

Drawn from Bryant, Beauford H.; Krause, Mark S., The College Press NIV Commentary: John, ( Joplin, Missouri: College Press Publishing Company) 1999, c1998