

# Sustainability – The Vine and the Branches

John 15:1-8 on March 27, 2022

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*Please read John 15:1-8 before going further in this transcript.*

Today we're wrapping up a 3-week sermon series called "Unchanging." But as much as this is indeed the end of our 3-week series, in another sense, it's also the beginning of a new 4-week series from the Gospel of John. So, we're going to look at four of Jesus' "I Am" statements. Today we'll be in John 15 where Jesus said, "I am the True Vine. Then, Pastor Eric will be preaching on the Gospel of John for the following 3 Sundays. He'll preach from John 6 where Jesus said, "I am the Bread of Life." Then John 10 where Jesus said, "I am the Good Shepherd." And then, on Easter morning, from John 11 where Jesus said, "I am the Resurrection and the Life!"<sup>1</sup> So be encouraged, our church is headed into a wonderful season of becoming more fully devoted followers of Jesus together!

In John 14:31, Jesus tells His disciples, "...Come now; let us leave." Jesus had just finished eating the Last Supper with His disciples in the Upper Room, so this is Thursday of Passion Week. And now verse 31 is letting us know that they're headed over to the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus will eventually be arrested and then taken to His crucifixion.<sup>2</sup> Along the way, as He often did, Jesus uses this opportunity to teach His disciples.<sup>3</sup> It's not explicit in the text, but it certainly seems plausible that Jesus begins teaching about the vine and the branches, because they are passing by someone's garden. In John 15:1-2 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." And so we have a simple, yet profound object lesson here:

Vine = Jesus

Gardener = the Heavenly Father (*aka the vinedresser*)

Branches = people (*which is further clarified in verse 5*)

Fruit = godly character and Christian living (This is spelled out more clearly in the rest of the New Testament. Things like loving one another, evangelism, etc.).<sup>4 5 6</sup> (This is spelled out more clearly in the rest of the

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<sup>1</sup> See the helpful chart by Mark Strauss "Seven 'I am' Statements of John's Gospel" on p. 1786 of *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> See John 18:1.

<sup>3</sup> Consider Deuteronomy 6:6-7.

<sup>4</sup> "The 'fruit' borne by Jesus' followers is an all-encompassing reference to the manifold evidences of growth and its results in the lives of believers; this would seem to include love, Christian character, and outreach [i.e. evangelism]." Andreas J. Kostenberger, *John*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2004, p. 454.

<sup>5</sup> "The branch's purpose is to bear much fruit (v. 5), but the next verses show that this fruit is the consequence of prayer in Jesus' name, and is to the Father's glory (vv. 7, 8, 16). This suggests that the 'fruit' in the vine imagery represents everything that is the product of effective prayer in Jesus' name, including obedience to Jesus' commands (v. 10), experience of Jesus' joy (v. 11—as earlier his peace, 14:27), love for one another (v. 12), and witness to the world (vv. 16, 27). This fruit is nothing less than the outcome of persevering dependence on the vine, driven by faith,

New Testament.) When John 15 refers to Jesus as the vine, it's referring to Him as the trunk of the tree, the source of all of the nourishment for the branches. In other words, the branches are completely dependent on the vine to sustain them, to provide the vital nourishment that they need.

I picture Jesus pointing to Himself as He leans over someone's garden wall, and touches the trunk of a massive grape vine.<sup>7</sup> ("I'm the vine.") He then points to a gardener, down the way a bit, who is clipping off the dead and useless branches. ("That's the Heavenly Father.") Jesus may have even picked up a branch that had been recently cut off, demonstrating the evidence that it lacked any fruit on the end of it. He may have then reached out and touched a branch that was hanging over the garden wall, loaded down with heavy fruit, to drive home his ultimate point: branches that remain connected to the vine, bear much fruit, which brings glory to the gardener. (It makes the gardener SO happy when He sees His vineyard flourishing!) This vine metaphor gives us a vivid word picture for spiritual fruitfulness as well as for dependence on our union with Christ.<sup>8</sup>

John 15:2 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." If there's no fruit on the branch, then the gardener cuts it off. After all, bearing fruit is kind of the point, this is why the gardener planted the vineyard in the first place. If we consider this verse in its immediate context, it's likely referring to people like Judas. Who in fact, had his true identity revealed by Jesus earlier that same evening. Jesus predicted his betrayal back in John 13:21-27, "21 ...Jesus was troubled in spirit and testified, "Very truly I tell you, one of you is going to betray me... 26 ..."It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish." Then, dipping the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. 27 As soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him...." In other words, this reference to the gardener cutting off every branch that doesn't bear fruit, is likely an immediate reference to Judas. But it's also likely a broader reference to anyone who doesn't show signs of spiritual fruit. You see, just like Judas, lots of people hang around Jesus, and hang around followers of Jesus, but that doesn't necessarily mean that

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embracing all of the believer's life and the product of his witness." Carson, D. A. (1991). *The Gospel according to John* (p. 517). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.

<sup>6</sup> John 15 doesn't articulate exactly what the fruit is, but other places in the New Testament make it clear. (See *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1797 footnote on John 15:2.) So for example, the fruit of the Spirit comes to mind from Galatians 5:22-23, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control...."

<sup>7</sup> Now, I'll have to admit that this vine imagery always throws me off a bit. This is, at least in part, because I read FAR too many Tarzan books in my early teens. When I try to picture a vine, the first image that flashes through my mind is Tarzan swinging from tree to tree, complete with his Tarzan yell: "Ah Ah Ah!" Listen here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eL4piuUn5nc> However, this is not AT ALL what John 15 is referring to!

<sup>8</sup> Not to mention the importance of proper care and pruning as well as "...the Old Testament associations that present Jesus as a replacement for (or, better, the fulfillment of) Israel." Carson, D. A. (1991). *The Gospel according to John* (p. 511). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.

they themselves have made a genuine commitment to follow Him. The gardener cannot be fooled; and God will not be mocked. He will judge justly, and He will judge accurately every time. So those who may SEEM to be connected to Jesus, or who may even PROFESS to be connected to Jesus, will have their true identity revealed, when the gardener fails to find spiritual fruit in their lives.<sup>9 10 11</sup>

John 15:2 also talks about the branches that DO bear fruit, "...while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful." So our Heavenly Father either cuts off the branch or He prunes it, but none of the branches are left alone. Pruning is God's UNchanging plan for our maturity. So, even though we are already producing fruit, we get pruned so that we'll produce even more. One author says it this way: "No fruit-bearing branch is exempt. Doubtless the Father's purpose is loving—it is so that each branch will be even more fruitful—but the procedure may be painful."<sup>12</sup>

Now, I'm no tree expert, but each year I do my best to prune our apple trees. I do this by cutting away the smaller, less productive offshoots, particularly the ones that are growing downward or inward, rather than upward and outward. My goal is to ensure that more of the nourishment will go to the branches that are actually producing apples. Most of us are familiar with how branches are pruned, but how are believers pruned? Well, pruning comes in lots of different ways. It can come through persecution (which was coming), it can come through the storms of this life (Jesus had told them "in this world you will have trouble"), it can come from God's discipline (Hebrews 12 says that God disciplines those He loves), it can also sometimes come through times of suffering or sickness or any number of other struggles that we face. Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 1:8-9 come to mind, "...We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead." The fact is, much of the rapid CHANGE and upheaval in our world is being used by God for His pruning purposes. Covid-19 and all the rest of it have created a sort of stress test on our

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<sup>9</sup> Consider Matthew 3:8 and Acts 26:20.

<sup>10</sup> "In the case of Jesus' followers, 'in me' (15:2) would include Judas. In the church age, the designation may extend to nominal (but not true) believers." See Andreas J. Kostenberger, *John*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2004, p. 452. See also footnote #18 on the bottom of page.

<sup>11</sup> John 8:31 says, "To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you HOLD to my teaching, you are really my disciples." The word translated "hold" in verse 31 is the same Greek word for "remain" in John 15. So enduring belief in the teachings of Christ is what separates devoted followers from fickle followers See *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2170 footnote on John 8:31.

<sup>12</sup> He goes on to say, "The thought is not unlike Hebrews 12:4–11, cast in terms of another model: the Lord disciplines his own the way a father disciplines his children. All this is 'for our good, that we may share in his holiness' (Heb. 12:10)." Carson, D. A. (1991). *The Gospel according to John* (p. 514). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.

Christian faith. Much of this change in our world has been used by God, to prune His fruitful branches so that they'll produce even more fruit.

John 15:3-4 goes on, "You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. 4 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." "You are already clean" is a way of saying "you are already saved." So, Judas wasn't clean because he hadn't believed Jesus.<sup>13</sup> However, the other 11 were clean because they had believed the word that Jesus had spoken to them.<sup>14</sup> In other words, this pruning wasn't for their salvation, it was for the further sanctification and maturing. Now, some Bibles translate the phrase "remain in me" as "abide in me." Even though these may sound like two different things, they're actually driving at the very same idea. "Abide in me" is about continuing to exist or live somewhere, to remain. "Remain in me" is about staying in the place where you live, to abide. In other words, they are coming at the same idea from different directions, so they can be used interchangeably.<sup>15</sup> Regardless of your preferred translation, the point of verse 4 is the same. Fully devoted followers of Jesus need to REMAIN in Him; we need to ABIDE in Him. We can't bear fruit by ourselves. We cannot live the Christian life or develop godly character apart from Christ. We cannot love God and love people apart from the sustaining nourishment of Christ. We cannot effectively reach our lost neighbors without help from Christ.

John 15:5 states it directly, "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." And yet, how often do we try to bear spiritual fruit on our own? To drum up spiritual character or spiritual behavior by trying REALLY hard? When what we need to do, is embrace complete dependence on Jesus. Not only does trying on our own not work, but it also causes us to aim really low. Do you know what I mean? If we're going to try to be godly based on our own efforts, intrinsically most of us know that we're going to fail. In other words, since we lack confidence in our own ability to be godly, we aim low. And here's the thing, eventually we aim so low that we're not even in the ballpark. Eventually our definition of godly character and Christian living gets so watered down, that it's not even recognizable as anything all

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<sup>13</sup> Again this points us back to Judas in John 13. When Jesus was washing the disciples' feet, He said this in John 13:10-11, "Jesus answered, "Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you." 11 For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean."

<sup>14</sup> See Carson, D. A. (1991). *The Gospel according to John* (pp. 515–516). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.

<sup>15</sup> In other words, the English language does not have an exact word for word equivalent for the Greek. Thus, "μένω" = means "① remain, stay as a person or thing remains where he, she, or it is. α. of a location stay, often in the special sense live, dwell, lodge... [and also] ② to continue to exist, remain, last, persist, continue to live [abide]." (Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed., pp. 630-631). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.)

that special or unique. However, when we learn to truly abide in Christ, to depend on our union with him, then we can aim high. We can set our sites on the target that God intends for us, rather than some puny, unimpressive, human accomplishment. Then we can accomplish things for God that can only be explained by the work of God.<sup>16</sup> For example, in Matthew 5:43-48 Jesus gives this instruction to His followers, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ 44 But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 that you may be children of your Father in heaven.... 46 If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? [i.e. anyone can do that.] 47 And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? [i.e. anyone can do this.] 48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” You can’t aim much higher than perfect. And you can’t achieve that kind of fruit just by being like other people. We need to abide in Christ if we want to bear this kind of fruit. In other words, the Christian life is a supernatural life that can only be lived out by abiding in Jesus.

John 15:6 goes on, “If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.” Last week we talked about the importance of fixing our eyes on Jesus, so that we will not grow weary. In verse 6, “wither” may actually be quite similar to weary, although it certainly sounds like it could be more serious. This could be a reference to judgment on those who are not truly saved. But it could also simply be part of Jesus’ ongoing metaphor. The point being that branches that don’t stay connected to the vine aren’t good for much of anything, except one-time kindling wood. In other words, this may very well be Jesus’ way of reminding His followers to pay attention if their spiritual lives are beginning to wither. We need to pay attention to how connected we are to Jesus. And if that connection is wilting, then we need to do something about it. Otherwise, we will become useless to the Kingdom efforts here on earth. If we’re truly a fully devoted follower of Jesus, then we’ll want nothing to do with living a spiritually fruitless life. It will be appalling to us, if our lives look anything like, a withering branch that bears no fruit.

So brother or sister in Christ, how is your connection with Jesus today? How is your personal intimacy with Christ? If your faith feels like it’s withering, it’s likely a sign that you’ve been neglecting it. Yes, all of the CHANGE and chaos in our world lately has been brutal, but that’s just all the more motivation to deepen our intimacy with Jesus. Close connection

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<sup>16</sup> Philippians 4:13 says, “I can do all this through Him who gives me strength.”

with Jesus is the only way that we can sustain a healthy, fruitful faith in an ever-changing world.

This spiritual withering in verse 6 is contrasted with spiritual flourishing in verse 7. John 15:7 goes on, “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” Knowing Christ and having His words remain in us, enables us to pray the things that He wants us to pray.<sup>17</sup> In other words, His words become our words, and we pray in accordance with His will. We wish for the same things that He wishes for. To put it another way, our prayers will become “Scripturally informed requests that God will answer.”<sup>18</sup>

John 15:8 wraps up today’s passage, “This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.” Now remember, verse 1 told us that the Father is the gardener. So the purpose of the branches is to bear fruit for the gardener.<sup>19</sup> This fruit shows that our faith is genuine, that we are indeed disciples of Jesus. One author says it this way: “Genuine salvation is evidenced by a life of fruitfulness.”<sup>20</sup> So the purpose of the branches is to bear fruit, and that fruit shows that we are Jesus’ disciples. But there is an even greater purpose for the fruit: to bring God glory!<sup>21</sup> The main point of verse 8 is that “Jesus glorifies his Father through fruitful believers.”<sup>22 23 24</sup> Jesus, along with His fully devoted followers, make up God’s fruitful vineyard.<sup>25</sup> This is God’s UNchanging design for humanity: that our lives bring God glory. This motivates us to live for Him, to make sure that we remain in the vine, that we abide in Christ, so that we can live out fruitful Christian lives that bring God great glory!

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<sup>17</sup> Consider 1 John 5:14.

<sup>18</sup> *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2185 footnote on John 15:7.

<sup>19</sup> See Andreas J. Kostenberger, *John*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2004, pp. 449-450.

<sup>20</sup> See *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1797 footnote on John 15:6.

<sup>21</sup> This is nothing less than the chief end of humankind. I’m borrowing a point from the Westminster Confession of Faith: “[Humankind’s] chief end is to glorify God, and enjoy Him forever.” <http://thewestminsterstandards.com/q1-what-is-the-chief-end-of-man/>

<sup>22</sup> *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2185 footnote on John 15:8.

<sup>23</sup> Or to put it adversely, “Fruitlessness...robs God of the glory [that is] rightly his.” Carson, D. A. (1991). *The Gospel according to John* (p. 518). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.

<sup>24</sup> “the bearing of fruit is God’s primary creative (Genesis 1:11-12, 22, 28) and redemptive purpose (cross reference John 15:8, 16).” Andreas J. Kostenberger, *John*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2004, p. 452.

<sup>25</sup> Verse 11 later goes on to reveal that this is for our mutual joy, that Jesus’ joy may be in us, and that our joy may be complete. Those who know Jesus well, have come to understand that “Obeying Jesus is not drudgery,” but rather true joy. *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2185 footnote on John 15:11.