

# I am the Vine

## John 15:1-8

**Series:** The I Ams of Christmas

**Preaching Date:** January 1, 2012

**Worship:** Abiding (Christmas transition and communion)

**Key Sentence:** If you want to bear the fruit, mind the root!

### **Outline:**

I. The Metaphor: Life flows through the vine

II. The Positive Outcome: Abide and be fruitful

III. The Negative Outcome: Be fruitless and be pruned out.

**John 15:1-8** “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.

<sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>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. <sup>6</sup>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.

<sup>7</sup>If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup>By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.

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## I am the Vine John 15:1-8

Today we reach the last of the seven 'I Am' statements Jesus made in the Gospel of John. For each of these we've done a brief exposition, then a story, set in 1940 in England, that illustrates or applies that 'I Am' statement. Our text today is John 15:1-8. We'll find that Jesus the vine and we are the branches. But we are only fruitful branches if we make our home in the vine.

Verses 1-8 present this teaching in an extended metaphor, further unpacked in verses 9-16. Characteristic of the whole section, indeed of the whole Gospel of John, is that Jesus tends to repeat and modify, repeat and build, repeat and add content. So to understand the teaching we have to pick key words and themes out of several cycles of thought. In this case we're only going to look at two cycles, and we'll see themes of the vine and the branches, fruitful abiding, and the dry withered alternative to fruitful abiding.

John 15:1 *I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>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. <sup>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup>If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup>By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.*

See the thought cycles? Verse 1: 'I am the vine and my father is the vinedresser;' Verse 5: I am the vine and you are the branches. This repeated 'I Am' is the main metaphor of the text: the vine is the source of life to the branches. Therefore if you are rightly connected to the vine you're fruitful, and if you are not fruitful you're not rightly connected to the vine, so you are pruned out, wither and die. Imagine walking through a park. You look a tree and it's green but one branch is hanging down, brown and dry. You immediately assume that branch has been broken off and is no longer connected to the tree. And you're almost certainly right. Though there are some diseases that can cause this, most of the time it's because the branch is no longer receiving the flow of water and nutrition supplied by the trunk.

Notice in the first instance Jesus says ‘I am the true vine.’ This fits with a pattern in John’s Gospel in which Jesus is also the true light and the true bread. In other words there were Old Testament images of light and bread and vine, but Jesus is the real thing. In the case of a vine the image has often been Israel itself: Israel is a vine God planted and cared for, but it was not fruitful. Jesus is the true vine through whom the fruitfulness God intended comes.

In the second cycle the metaphor is superbly simple: I am the vine, you are the branches. The life of the branches comes through the vine. Just as Jesus said he was the bread of life, and he was the way to life, and he was the light of life, so here Jesus reveals himself as the ongoing source of life.

The branch can’t function without the vine: apart from me you can do nothing. Nothing: do you believe that? You must be connected to Jesus or everything you seem to do is really fruitless. Go outside; cut a branch from a tree. Nail it to the wall over your fireplace. Then talk to it: stay green; do good; produce fruit! It’s hopeless: the branch apart from the vine cannot live.

So Jesus is the vine; the source of life. We are the branches, the recipients of that life. This is one of the Bible’s big ideas, that God is God and we are not and therefore we are dependent on him and we are to depend on him. One of the phrases I use often is ‘I can’t do this.’ I’ve said before that this need not be a cry of despair but should be a cry of dependence. Jesus expands that here: not just ‘I can’t do this without you’ but ‘I can’t do anything without you.’

But this core metaphor is teased out in two directions every time the cycle repeats: there is the direction of abiding and being fruitful and there is the direction of not abiding and the consequences of being fruitless. To pursue these directions, we need to unpack two words: fruit and abide.

What is this fruit we are to bear? One of my favorite commentators on John, Bob Deffinbaugh, says: “Some think the “fruit” our Lord refers to is the “fruit of the Spirit.” Others think of the “fruit” as new converts, those who have been saved as a result of our witness. I understand the term a bit more broadly. I believe as we abide in Christ, He abides in us, and when He abides in us, Jesus Christ becomes evident in and through us. The “fruit” then, is being Christ-like . . . He is seen in us as we manifest His character, evident in us as we carry on his work. Being fruitful is manifesting Christ in our lives.”

Don Carson takes it further. “The fruit, we are told, is obedience or new converts, or love or Christians character. These interpretations are reductionistic. The branch's purpose is to bear much fruit, but the next verses show that this fruit is the consequence of prayer in Jesus' name, and is to the Father's glory.”

“This suggests that the fruit represents everything that is the product of effective prayer in Jesus' name, including obedience to Jesus' commands, experience of Jesus' joy, love for one another, and witness to the world.” This fruit is nothing less than the outcome of persevering dependence on the vine, embracing all of the believer's life and the product of his witness.

Do you get that? The fruit of abiding in Christ is every Godly outcome that you can legitimately pray for: all changed character; all effective service. Every time you display Christ-like character or serve others you are bearing fruit.

But in order to do this Jesus says ‘abide in me,’ ‘remain in me.’ Seven times he uses the word, beginning in verse 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.” What does the Greek word, ‘menw,’ mean? Let me quote and paraphrase Bob Deffinbaugh for a few minutes on this:

“The difficulty with the Greek term is it conveys more than any one English word is able to capture. Out of 120 occurrences in the New Testament, the King James renders menw as “abide” 61 times, “remain” 16 times, “dwell” 15 times, “continue” 11 times, “tarry” 9 times, and “endure” 3 times.

In our text, the idea of “remaining” is clearly present, but the word “remain” somehow fails to convey the full force of the word. But John also uses the term a number of times of “dwelling” in a certain place, staying somewhere as one’s dwelling place. John 1: “They said to him, “Rabbi where are you staying?”<sup>39</sup> Jesus answered, “Come and you will see.” So they came and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him that day.” John 2:12 “After this he went to Capernaum with his mother and brothers and his disciples, and they stayed there a few days.” There are seven or eight instances in John where menw is used of dwelling, residing, even if only for a day or so.

In addition a related word, mone, is used in John 14 of the rooms, the mansions, the dwelling places that await us in heaven. Deffinbaugh says “Because of John’s use of these terms, I suggest we render the term menw “make one’s home.” To “abide” in Christ is to “make our home” in Him, just as He also “makes His abode” in us. In fact it is to make our permanent home in Him.

So Deffinbaugh paints a picture of ‘home.’ It is, ideally the place you want to be, especially during holidays. Home is where you find your strength for life; it is where you eat and sleep and rest. Home is the place of safety and security. Home is where you offer hospitality and provision to your friends. Home is your base of operations; the center of what you do. For all these reasons ‘home’ is, ideally, the place to which you return, over and over.

Isn't this what Jesus should be for us? Shouldn't He be our place of refuge and security, the source of our life and strength? Shouldn't He be the center of our fellowship with others and the place we return after reaching out into the world? Jesus himself is the "abiding place." It is only through making Him our permanent dwelling place that we receive his life and bear his fruit.

The third thread of these cycles focuses on the consequences for a branch that does not make its home in the vine. Jesus uses the image of pruning. Verse 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." Notice that even fruitful branches are pruned, but for greater productivity. This pruning corresponds to the Bible's common teaching that believers will suffer trials and hardships to refine them into Christ-likeness, that is, into greater fruitfulness. James says "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, <sup>3</sup>for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness." At the end of this discourse Jesus says "I have spoken these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."

But there is another kind of pruning that simply removes the branch and allows it to wither in its disconnectedness. Jesus says "my Father is the vinedresser; every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away." He says "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."

But how can a branch be 'in him' and still not be savingly connected to him? In John Jesus himself recognizes a kind of belief in him that does not constitute saving faith. Early in the Gospel John says "Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. <sup>24</sup>But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people <sup>25</sup>and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man." Jesus knows the heart.

And, as Carson says, "there is a persistent strand of New Testament witness that depicts men and women with some degree of connection with Jesus or the church who, by failing to persevere, finally reveal that the transforming life of Christ never pulsed within them. He cites several examples from the parable of the Sower to the hidden reefs and false shepherds of Jude's letter.

Yet this Gospel also strongly affirms, in John 6 and John 10, for example, that those who do have the life of Christ in them cannot ultimately be cut off from that life. So I believe that those who are saved are fully saved forever, and will show at least some evidence of the life of the vine in them.

But those who are not saved may seem to be in the vine for a time, until they dry up and wither away. This means we need to examine ourselves. You know that one of John's key words is believe: if you believe, have faith, trust in Jesus, you are saved. But if we look at our hearts and our lives and see no inward desire for the character of Christ, and no outward Christ-like impulse toward others, we may need to question if we have faith. God alone can know if you are dead or alive in him; no one else can make that judgment, not even you. But if you sense you are dead, you need to take that seriously.

But let's not lose sight of the larger truths that Jesus was trying to communicate. First, that he is the vine - the source of life, the source of strength, the source of growth, the source of fruitfulness. Apart from him we can do nothing. Therefore, second, we are commanded to make our permanent home in him, to abide in him, to live in him, to dwell in him. Because, third, a life not connected to the vine is fruitless. None of the good things God desires for us or for our service, will come about if we are disconnected from the source.