

I AM the True Vine

John 15:1-16

The Gospel of John Sermon Series- Part II

Kenwood Baptist Church

Pastor David Palmer

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TEXT: John 15:1-16

This morning we come to the end of our series on the Gospel of John. In Part I we journeyed through the Gospel itself as John guided us in each and every passage that we might believe in



Jesus for conversion, a new life in Him. This morning we are finishing Part II on the seventh breathtaking I AM statements of Jesus in the Gospel of John. Each one of these statements is a revelation of Jesus' divinity, His union with the Father as unique and beloved Son. Jesus looms large before us again this Sunday as the one voice that we must hear. Jesus says that He is the True Vine, and our subject today from the Word of God is this sustained image. Jesus says: "I am

the Vine." You and I are likened to the fruitful branches vitally connected to Christ. We're called to stay with Jesus, remain in Him, and stick close to Him for our lives to cohere, to make sense. We're also warned very clearly by Christ that if we lose this connection, this life-giving connection to Christ, then we will wither and eventually perish. Jesus towers before us this morning as Son of God, the life-giving, all-sustaining One in whom alone we truly live. We want to follow this passage as it unfolds in this image of the vine and the branches and leads to the conclusion of where life is to be found in Christ alone.

The passage begins with Jesus' statement in John 15:1:

"I am the true vine, and My Father is the gardener."

The image of a vineyard describing God's covenant relationship with His people occurs in many places in Scripture: in Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Hosea, and Isaiah 5. In Isaiah 5:1, the Lord likens His people to a vineyard:

"Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning His vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with

choice vines; He built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; and He looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes."

He is the planter, or the one in charge of them. In John 15, in the NIV translation, Jesus says: "My Father is the gardener." The Greek text says: "My Father is the *georgos* or *George*, the second most popular name in Greek, and it means *farmer*. Yannis or John is the most common. In this passage, Jesus likens the Father to *George*, but it is *George the gardener* in Greek, not the proper name. Jesus says that He is the one in charge of you and of me. Other translations render this differently. The King James says: "The Father is the husbandman." A husbandman can be that person in charge of animals or agriculture. The New American Standard says: "The gardener or vine dresser." The Latin says: "*Agricola*." He is the one in charge.

The Father looms inside this image as the One in charge of you and of me. He bears responsibility for our growth and development, and we see Him at work immediately in John 15:2:

"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."

God the Father comes with two activities. He surveys and examines these vines, and He notices that there are certain branches upon whom there is no visible fruit at all, and these branches are cut off, discarded. It is a sobering image. That vital connection with the vine has been lost, and the branches bear no fruit. There are other branches, though, which do bear fruit. They are showing some manifestation of growth and life and vitality, and yet the Father comes with pruning shears. The pruning image is the Father coming with those pruning shears and trimming off the growth so that the growth is directed according to the pattern and purpose, not of the branch, but of the gardener. There are times in life when we need to be pruned; we need to be cut back so that we can grow in the way that God designs.

I remember living in our first home. There was a very sad rose outside of our house, and I figured, as a newly married husband, living in our first home, that the plants outside the house were under God's domain, that they would be cared for by God. They were in His sphere. We had one very, very sad rose bush that had only one large shoot coming off of it. It was imbalanced and had a set of blooms on this one branch. One of the men in our church at that time came up to me and said, "David, you know, you should water that." I thought, "Water that? It's outside, God waters those." Then he said, "You know, you should prune that." I thought, "Prune that? That's the only branch with blooms on it. Why would I cut off the one sign of life?" I didn't know what to do. I didn't even have pruning shears. So he came and trimmed the rose down. I thought he had killed it, but he brought it down to scale so the growth was directed in the right way. That plant gathered itself and proliferated blooms. When

God comes to you with His pruning shears, it's a fearful moment. Pruning does hurt, but those of us who have walked with Christ for many years can testify that there are times when Jesus causes us to diminish; when Jesus cuts us back; when Jesus seems to reduce our influence; and when He prepares us for more fruit bearing. Have you experienced that as a follower of Jesus? Some of us will experience that pruning for the first time, and will fear it, and yet in God's great purpose He has a fruitful image that He intends for us.

Now we can see that the goal of pruning is bearing much fruit. Jesus says in John 15:3:

"You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you."

The word that He uses here is the very same word for pruning. Following Jesus involves at times a cutting back, a directing of growth, the conservation of resources. Jesus then summons us in John 15:4 with a great imperative and a promise:

"Remain in Me, and I will remain in you. . . "

Jesus continues in John 15:4:

". . .No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in Me."

Jesus wisely says we must live in Christ; stay close to Him; abide with Him; make our dwelling place in Him. Some of us are tempted to make Jesus just a part of our lives, and that will not do.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer gave a set of sermons as a young man. He was just 22 years old when he gave this set of messages. One of the messages begins in this way as Bonhoeffer says provocatively:

"Christ has been exiled from the lives of many Christians, We say, 'Of course, we build Him a temple,' but we live in our own homes. Religion has been exiled to Sunday morning alone, to a place into which one withdraws gladly for a couple of hours only to get back to one's place of work afterwards. We cannot give Christ only one compartment of our spiritual life. We must give Him everything, or nothing at all."

You have to live in Christ, I mean really live in Jesus, in His presence, walking with Him step-by-step. This is the call, and this call comes with the promise of life. This is where life is really to be found. Woe to us if we seek life in other places. We will not find it there, but slowly diminish. If you're like me, the question that comes to mind is: "How do I do this?" This is really high-stakes. We have to remain in Christ. How do we remain in Him? How do we live with Him and stay close to Him?

Jesus continues the imagery and says in John 15:5:

"I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in Me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from Me you can do nothing."

He knows us very well and so reminds us that without Him, apart from Him, we can do nothing. It's not that we can do a little bit, or maybe a C-. He says, "You can't do a thing without Me." Do you believe that we can really do nothing if we are severed from Christ? Jesus says: "Without Me you can do nothing." Just like the parables of last summer, this image has this binary separation: it's either/or.

In John 15:6, Jesus says:

"If anyone does not remain in Me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned."

It's a sobering image of judgment. If you lose the vital life-giving connection to Jesus Christ, you will die, and it's worse than just dying. It's not just that your life becomes empty and meaningless, but you shrivel, wither, and die. Then Jesus says you are gathered up and burned. It's a terrifying image, and all of us should say, "I want nothing to do with that. Keep me far from that and let me come over to the side were Jesus says, 'If you remain in Me and abide in Me, you are fruitful.'" Jesus promises the very life of Jesus Christ Himself will begin to course through your life, and you will really live in Him.

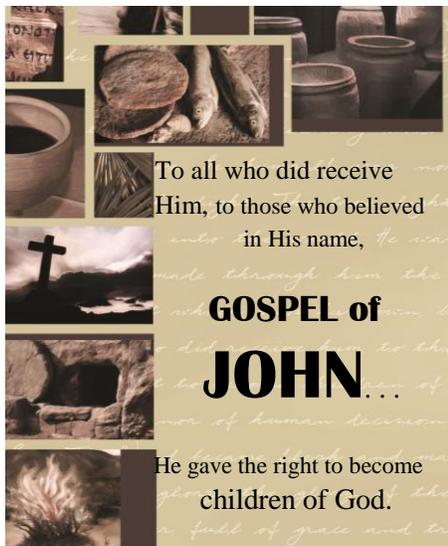
Jesus tells us more in John 15:7-8 about what it means and how we remain in Him. Jesus says first of all, that the words of Jesus must remain, must dwell, in us:

"If you remain in Me and My words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to My Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be My disciples."

We must be in a covenant relationship with Him, in a relationship of prayer. Jesus says: "You may ask anything of Me in this vital, life-giving relationship." Jesus also says: "My Word must remain in you. You must remain in fellowship with other believers." The disciples of Jesus are a recognizable entity in this passage, and they remain in Him with a mission to the world. Jesus says that the Father's glory will be evident in our life together; we will be a fruit-bearing people producing fruit for the blessing of the lives around us. The Word of Christ must dwell in us. To remain in Jesus means that He will come with those pruning shears. Some of us need His pruning precisely at this point. If you took an inventory of the past week and you considered all of the words that you read this last week, how many of those words would be the words of Christ? For many of us, we feel a tremendous urgency to stay current. Our morning begins with the reading of the newspaper, although it is getting thinner and thinner. Others read it electronically, and we feel this is information we must have. I must know what has gone on in

the world in the past 12 hours, forgetting that that same paper will be irrelevant within 12 hours. People will wrap raw fish in it and sell it. People with new litters of puppies will use it, and it will not endure. But the Word of Jesus Christ, the Word of the living God, will stay with you, and you will be relevant not just for conversation around the coffee table at work, but you will be relevant for eternity. You will take a step forward and say, "Jesus I'm tracking with You, and I can recognize how You are thinking and acting in the world because Your words are in me." That's what you must have in the morning more than anything else. So there is a pruning that needs to happen. Prune away anything that doesn't matter so that you can abide with Him who does matter. Forever the Word of Christ must dwell in us.

The images on our church bulletin cover for the Gospel of John series have been designed to form the shape of a cross. Two of these pictures were advanced pictures. There were the easy



to recognize the pictures: John the Baptist, the turning of the water into wine, and the feeding of the 5000. But there were two advanced pictures, and several of you asked me about the one at the bottom: "Pastor David, what in the world does a burning bush have to do with the Gospel of John?" My response was: "Wait and see in the second part of the series." Now it should be abundantly clear that the I AM revelations of Jesus flow from the revelation of God's name.

The other challenging image in this collage was the very small one at the top. It was a picture of a very important small piece of

papyrus, ancient writing material. This is a picture of it in a glass case at the library of John Rylands in Manchester, England. As we look at the close-up, we see a small fragment of the papyrus. It is only 3.5" x 2.5", and yet this is the earliest piece that we have of the New Testament. This piece of papyrus, written on both sides, part of the book of the Gospel of John, was found in Egypt and dates from just a few years after John's Gospel was written. This small section quotes John 18 and contains lines that speak of the Word of Christ having to be fulfilled. It speaks of the manner of His death on the cross for our salvation. This is one of those pieces of paper that really matters. We sometimes write things on pieces of paper about that same size, things like passwords or PINs, or other things that seem important, and yet, this matters. The



Word of Jesus Christ must dwell within you and me if we are to abide in Him.

Jesus then tells us an additional way to remain in Him and abide in Him. Beginning in John 11:9, Jesus gives us a series of ways that we are called to imitate Him, to follow Him, to act in the way that He acts. It's a sacred invitation where Jesus says: "I want you to live, think, and feel as I do." Let's look at this together. In John 11:9, Jesus says:

"As the Father has loved Me, so have I loved you. Now remain in My love."

Jesus is inviting us inside to share the love that the Father has given to Him. Oh, what love that God the Father has for His beloved Son! It's an eternal, unbreakable love, and Jesus says: "The same way that the Father has loved Me, I am loving you." He invites us as our soul's center of gravity to remain inside the love of God in Christ, first and foremost to receive the love of God. Can you be the same, can you be unmoved by receiving the very love of God? It will change you forever, and Jesus says: "Stay inside of it." In John 15:10, Jesus says:

"If you obey My commands, you will remain in My love, just as I have obeyed My Father's commands and remain in His love."

Jesus invites us into a sacred imitation of His joy in bringing the Father pleasure through His obedience to the Father. Obedience is a word that is an acquired taste. Dog lovers who take their pets to obedience school speak of the experience very positively; parents speak of obedience as a great aspiration of their early years of parenting, but this word means more and more to me. It is life-giving to obey Jesus. When Jesus says, "Would you do this?" and you say yes, it's life-giving. When Jesus says, "Don't do that," it's Jesus saving you from death, loss of joy, fleeting pleasure. Jesus invites us into His own obedience. Next, Jesus invites us into His own joy in John 15:11:

"I have told you this so that My joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete."

Can you imagine the joy of Jesus Christ? Consider the joy of Jesus. Jesus says in Luke 15 that there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than 99 who need not repent. Every day, 174,000 turn to Christ for salvation. What kind of joy does Jesus Christ abide in? This is not the joy of new clothes, a new friendship, but this is joy, joy that is irrepressible, and Jesus invites us inside of it to share His joy.

Jesus invites us next to imitate His sacrificial love for His friends. Jesus says: "This is My command, to love each other as I have loved you." How does Jesus want us to love each other? We love with that self-sacrificial, 'dying-to-self' love, preferring-the-other-above-ourselves kind of love that is life-giving and transformative around us. Jesus says: "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life." Where are you practicing self-denial? Where are you feeling the pruning of your own desires so that you might burst forth with fruit in

another area to the sole satisfaction of the people around you? I want to be pruned like that, and I want you to be pruned like that. I really do, even though I know that you will look at me and your eyes will get big when God comes up to you and says, "Here I come. The pruning shears are in My hand. I'm going to separate you from this relationship, this appetite, this desire." You will panic. I will take joy in praying for you and say, "Get ready brother, sister, for your soul is getting ready to grow in a directed way, and there will be blooms that burst forth into new life. The growth will not be haphazard, but you will fall under that benevolent wise care of the master Gardener who is caring for your soul and knows what branches need to be loped off. When you take Jesus at His word, He will prove Himself true in your life.

Next, Jesus says imitate Me in making new friends by revealing the will of the Father. It is a tremendous blessing for us to be called the friends of Jesus Christ, but to be a friend of Christ happens in this way, as He tells us in John 15:15:

"I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you."

Friendships that are built on Jesus Christ last. Friends that are built on shared musical preferences, favorite fast food drive-through orders, or any other criteria, don't really flourish long term. Lasting, enduring friendships in this life are friendships that share Jesus Christ, and Jesus says, "You are My friends because I have revealed the Father's will to you." We share that, and that creates a bond between us that is eternal.

The final way to imitate Christ Jesus is to imitate Christ's mission for the world. Jesus says in John 15:16:

"You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit--fruit that will last."

Branches never have independent meetings in the middle of the vineyard. They never say, "Let's try out that vine. It seems to be growing well." They never roll themselves down the vineyard and say, "Let's try this one next year." Jesus says, "I chose you." Sometimes this language confuses us or frightens us, but it shouldn't. The language of election or choosing is Jesus Christ's looking you in the eye and saying, "Will you come with Me?" It is Jesus Christ's looking at you and saying, "Would you come and take your stand with Me? Would you abide with Me?" The language of choosing always carries with it responsibility of mission and service. Even when God chose Abraham, the first man to be chosen in Scripture, he was chosen to be a blessing to all the earth. You do not understand the language of choosing if it makes you passive or inactive. "Frozen chosen" is an oxymoron. Notice what Christ says about being chosen by Him: "I chose you and I appointed you . . ." My mind is flashing back to playing kickball as a fourth-grader, and lining up at recess. There are two team captains, and there's

always a thrilling moment when the upperclassman looks at you and says, "I want you on my team. You play third base," and you say, "OK, I'll do it." Jesus says, "I chose you and I appointed you. I have a purpose for you, and My purpose is for you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last." Jesus says, "I appointed you to bear fruit, an enduring fruit." Here we imitate Christ in His mission for the world.

Fruit emerges from the branches not for the branches' glory. The branches of the vine do not look at each other. One branch with two generous clusters of grapes hanging down doesn't say



to one with a single cluster, "How is your devotional life?" They don't compare themselves with each other; they simply abide in the vines so that the fruit emerges. What happens to the fruit? The fruit is harvested. Some of the fruit is eaten by the workers as they go through the vineyard. In the Scriptures, some of the fruit remains in the fields so the poor can come through later and harvest it. Other fruit is gathered and transformed into 100 different products: wine, jellies, jams, life-sustaining fruit for the benefit and refreshment of those around us. If you are connected to Jesus Christ, He wants you to bear fruit, not for your own glory, but for His, so that His mission in the world continues and extends. Jesus Christ stands before us this morning, majestic, triumphant, sovereign. He says, "I am the True Vine." That means life is found in Christ, bottom line. It means remaining in Christ is vital, in His word and prayer, in fellowship, service,

submission, and, above all, in deliberate imitation of Jesus.

I want to come back to how Bonhoeffer ended his sermon. I still can't believe, however, that he was only 22 when he preached this, but his sermon ended in this way. He said:

"It's possible to admire Christ, call him a genius, call him a great ethical teacher, even admire his going to death as a hero, sacrificing for his ideas. Only one thing one does not do in any of these scenarios is take Christ seriously. One doesn't bring the center of his or her life into contact with the claim of Christ, to speak the revelation of God, and to be that revelation. One maintains a distance between himself or herself and the word of Christ and allows no serious encounter to take place. I can live with or without Jesus as a religious genius and ethical teacher or as a gentleman, just as I can live without Plato or Kant. However, should there be something in Christ that claims my life entirely with the full seriousness that here God Himself speaks, and if the Word of God once became present only in Christ, then Christ has not only a relative, but an absolute urgent

significance for me today.”

Jesus Christ does have absolute urgent significance for all of you and for me this morning. He is the one Word we must hear.

If any of you are here this morning and you have not trusted in Him, you are not in this Vine, then I offer you Jesus Christ right now, and to hear His Word and build your life on Him forever. You will live, I promise. If you are already in Him, fear not His pruning shears, but let Him cut you back on His design that you might truly live and bear more fruit for His glory. If we do that together, then this church will be a place where the fruit of God ripens on the vine and people and families and nations will be impacted by that fruit, and this fruit will be harvested to a great paean of praise to God. Are you willing with me to abide and remain in Jesus Christ?

Let us pray. Oh Lord, we praise You, We praise You that You are the True Vine, that You are the one Word we must hear. I pray, Father, if there are any present this morning trying, failing, to live apart from You, that You would bless them now. Reveal Yourself right now; walk into their hearts and abide with them. Lord, if there are others here who are growing wildly in all kinds of different directions, would you prune us back? Cut us back, Lord, from things that limit our fruit production for Your glory. Father, we pray that the fruit of Jesus Christ would be manifest in our own lives, in our marriages, in our families, and in Kenwood Baptist Church, that the mission of God in this world would continue this morning, and that You would help us and allow us to be part of it. We give you praise, Lord. We worship You for Your great Name.

Would you stand with me as we sing to Jesus Christ for His great Name. Amen.