

***Our Bible Journey Begins with John***  
**The Gospel of John Sermon Series**  
Kenwood Baptist Church  
Pastor David Palmer  
September 20, 2020

**TEXT: John 15:1-11**



This morning we continue in our series that we started this fall. It's a series in conversation with *Bible Journey*. *Bible Journey* was developed by my good friend Tim Laniak. It's a massive digital resource to help us engage the text of Scripture. During this time, when we are gathered in person in part and in our homes and in different environments, I want to encourage you right up front to engage in *Bible Journey*. You can use it on your phone, on your tablets, or on your other digital device, as a companion piece to go along with us as we journey. We are beginning our journey in the middle of the Bible, as a place of entry, in the Gospel of John. Like the great epic tales of ancient history, we're starting in the middle with a scene that is central to Jesus. In October we will transition to the beginning of the Bible.

This morning we look closely at Jesus, and we have to ask ourselves, "Who is Jesus?" This question must be answered directly by every human being. Who is Jesus Christ, and why does His life, death and resurrection matter so much for the world and for my life in particular? The question "Who is Jesus?" must be answered by all. This morning, our text in the Gospel of John is guiding us toward a particular conclusion. We have to wait until the end of John's Gospel before he tells us explicitly, but a careful reader and attentive listener will realize the answer that he is guiding us toward in every chapter. His purpose statement becomes very clear in John 20:31, when he says that these things were written, that you might believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the Savior of the world. John's Gospel is designed to change what we think about Jesus. It's designed to lead us to the conclusion that He is, in fact, the promised Savior of the world, who has come into the world. Each of the scenes of this Gospel are designed to lead us to this conclusion. Who is He? Jesus is the Messiah, the Savior of the world. Why does this matter so much? John tells us that it matters so much because, by believing in Jesus, we have

life in His name. This book, this Gospel, this account of Jesus' life is not just to give us information. It's to lead us to a new conviction about the identity of Jesus and that, by believing in Jesus and trusting ourselves to Him, we have eternal life in His name. Sometimes I think it's such a staggering privilege for me or anyone, who gets to stand up and open the Word of God. We're talking about nothing less than eternal life. Eternal life is at stake.

Last Sunday we looked at the signs that Jesus did. John presented Jesus' public ministry through activity. Sometimes you can know who someone is just by watching what they do. It's like when you call someone, and he picks up the phone, but the audio isn't working, and you just watch him. Sometimes you get those occasional calls where you get an accidental FaceTime, and you're just welcomed in to a video stream of someone's life. You can't hear what's going on, but you can see what's going on, and you get an idea of where they are and who they are. The signs of Jesus' ministry are public actions full of significance. We looked at those last week.

This week we look together at the statements. We look at these seven statements that Jesus makes in the Gospel of John. These statements are built around the expression *"I AM."* The first comes in John 6:35, where Jesus says:

*"I am the bread of life."*

In John 8:12, Jesus says:

*"I am the light of the world."*

In John 10:7, Jesus says:

*"I am the door of the sheep."*

Later, in John 10:11, He says:

*"I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep."*

In John 11:25, Jesus says:

*"I am the resurrection and the life."*

In John 14:6, He tells the disciples:

*"I am the way, the truth, and the life."*

In John 15:1, Jesus says:

*"I am the true vine."*

These seven statements, these seven *"I AM"* declarations, are not predications of Jesus' personality. They are, in fact, open declarations of Jesus' divinity. These statements are embedded within Jesus' symbolic actions, the episodes of John's Gospel. There's a fantastic

chart in *Bible Journey* on the structure of John that helps us to see that these declarations of who Jesus is fit within His public miracles or signs. This little phrase, “I AM,” is filled with meaning. “I AM,” or “Ego eimai” in Greek, is a phrase that is used earlier in the Bible. In Exodus 3:13, Moses said to the Lord:

*"If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is His name?' what shall I say to them?"*

We know the God of the Bible as “God,” and in Exodus 3, the Lord reveals His personal name to Moses at the burning bush. God answers Moses in Exodus 3:13, saying:

*"I am who I am .... Say this to the people of Israel: I am has sent me to you."*

“I AM.” The God of the Bible is; He is eternal. He has no beginning, no end. That means there is never a moment in your life, and there is never a moment in human history, that God is not. He is, and He will be with us.

The Greek translators of the Bible that worked 250 years before Jesus’ public ministry translated the Bible from Hebrew into Greek, and when they translated Exodus 3, they translated “I AM” as “Ego eimai,” the God who is, “I AM.” When Jesus says, “Therefore, I AM,” the people who hear Him pick up stones. They pick up stones because Jesus is invoking, not just a statement of His personality, but an open declaration of His divinity. He is invoking the divine name of God and using it with reference to Himself. That means when we come to Jesus, we come to the eternal Son of God. “I AM,” Jesus says. “I am the bread of life.” “I am the light of the world.” “I am the gate.” “I am the Good Shepherd.” “I am the resurrection and the life.” “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” The seventh statement we want to look at more closely this morning: “I am the true vine.” Jesus’ “I am” statements reveal to us His divine identity, and they also reveal a transformed identity for all of those who believe in Him. Just as John said would happen, if you believe that Jesus is the Messiah, then you will have life in His name. Do you need more life this morning? Jesus Christ offers that. He offers that through faith in Him, and He offers that through a promise to dwell with us and to invite us to dwell with Him. These declarations of who Jesus is also change us, as we are invited to live in proximity with Him, in unity with Him.

Let’s look at this seventh “I AM” statement in more detail. Jesus says, “I am the true vine.” The ESV’s rendering of that reads: “My Father is the vine dresser.” The Greek text says simply, “My Father is the farmer.” He is the *georgos*. Just as a little bit of insider information: *Georgos* or George is a very common name in Greece, because Greece traditionally has a lot of farmers. If you’re ever really in a jam in Greece, and you don’t know what to do, just go out into a large public space and yell out, “Georgos,” and someone will come running to you, because there are plenty of Georges around in Greece. They are always willing to help. Use the vocative “Georgo,”

and someone will come and help.

In John 15:1, Jesus says:

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

He is the gardener, He is the farmer. He is the vine dresser. Notice the activity of the Father. In John 15:2, the Father is pruning; He is cutting. Jesus says:

*"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 every branch is cut. Every single one of us faces the pruning shears, or the cutting shears of the Father in this image. All of us need to be cut. The difference is that some of us are



cut off, and some of us are cut back. The Father comes as the master gardener with the pruning shears, and the branches that are not bearing any fruit are cut off. The branches that do bear fruit are cut back.

I've talked with my friend Tim Laniak at length about growing vines. He is so into Scripture that one of the things he did was build a large trellis in his backyard. He planted a series of vines in order to get to know this biblical image. Vines grow dramatically each year. They have the capability of shooting out tendrils each season that sometimes are ten or twelve feet long. You can think for a moment, "Why, I'm just so skilled – look at my vines." The vine tendrils shoot out, but a master gardener recognizes that 90% of the growth has to be cut back. If it's not cut back, then the vines will just produce a shade plant. The tendrils will shoot out and have leaves, and they will be just a large green umbrella. But most people grow vines not for the shade, but for the fruit. The master gardener cuts off 90% of the growth, back to about three inches from the vine, in order that fruit might emerge. The Father comes with pruning shears and cuts, either cuts off or cuts back. This cutting at first glance seems terrifying to us. I know it does to me, and yet the end is a good one. This pruning happens by the Father's design. Then in John 15:3, Jesus tells us:

*"Already you are clean because of the Word that I have spoken to you."*

I had a moment of exegetical euphoria this week at this verse. I never understood this verse until this week. What does clean have to do with what we're talking about? I think it's because I had read this passage in English for years. Jesus says that the Father is coming and He takes away and prunes, and then Jesus says that you are already clean. And I thought, "Is this clean? We've been working in the garden. What's going on?" Jesus says, "You are already clean." In the original text, the word is the same, exactly the same as in verse two, where Jesus says that

the Father prunes. The Greek term for “prune” or “to cut back” is the same word that's used here. Jesus says, in effect, that you are already pruned, you are already cut back, because of the Word that I've spoken to you. Jesus' Word “to follow Me” means that we are trimmed and cut back when we hear His Word. The Word of Jesus, when you embrace it, cuts off some of the wild growth. Do you know that? Have you experienced that? If you haven't, are you willing to experience that? Are you willing to have the Son of God say to you, “Take up your cross and follow Me”? Are you willing to have the Son of God say to you, “If anyone wants to follow Me, let him deny himself,” as the first word. That's a cutting off kind of word, isn't it?

The authoritative Son of God in the Sermon on the Mount teaches us to cut off some of our desires that run wild. We looked at the Sermon on the Mount this spring, and that sermon has lots of pruning words to it – pruning words like “restraining your anger,” pruning words like “don't look at a woman lustfully that God hasn't given to you,” pruning words like “when you pray, don't make a big show of it.” Those pruning words that Jesus gives to the disciples are designed to restrain the wild growth in us and cause us to abide in the vine in Him. In John 15:4, Jesus says:

*“Abide in Me, and I in you.”*

That's the best part. The best part is that you lop off those wild shoots, and you end up pulling into the vine where the life is. Jesus says, “I will abide in you,” and then He continues in John 15:4:

*“As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me.”*



When we are pruned off, it's a spectacular result. When a vine is first pruned, it looks a little pathetic. All the branches are cut back to within three inches of the vine, and it looks like this is turning out terribly, but then as you watch, all that life that's in the vine starts to come out. It starts to come out of the vine where the life is and the life flows, and Jesus says in John 15:5:

*“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.”*

Do you know this? Jesus says, “Apart from Me you can do nothing.” Have you tried to muster up the strength to change your family dynamics? Have you tried to muster up the strength to live without fear in 2020? Jesus says, “Apart from Me you can do nothing.” Have you tried to muster up the strength to create a plan for your life? Jesus says, “Apart from Me you can do nothing.” When we abide in Him, when we allow the Father's master pruning shears to come and trim us back, so that we pull into Christ, and His life flows through us, then we all of a

sudden become this fruitful vine. It's spectacular. When you see a vine that's been properly



cared for and pruned, and all of a sudden it bursts forth into life-giving delicious fruit, it's the life of Christ flowing through us. It's the fruit of the Holy Spirit, producing nourishing, sweet-tasting crops that can feed those around us and fill our hearts with joy. That's what we're called to. That's what Jesus invites us to. It's a positive image, isn't it? Abiding in Christ and bearing much fruit is so worth the pruning.

Jesus then gives the negative counterpoint to this. We may resist the Father and say, "I'm not interested in pruning. I don't want to be cut back in any way. I just want to be who I am and just let my interests, my passions grow where they will." You know where that ends up in Scripture. It ends up with dead branches. It ends up not producing fruit. It ends up where the center of our life is lived out of ourselves and not out of Christ. It means that we wither. If you try to love your spouse with the love that you have, you will run out. If you try to parent your children with the wisdom that you have, your wisdom well will run dry. But if you live and love out of the love that flows from Jesus Christ, you will bear much fruit. Jesus says in John 15:6:

*"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."*

It's an arresting image, isn't it? It's a high-stakes image. Abide in Christ and bear much fruit for the sake of those around you, or live for self, avoid the Father's pruning, and end up on the brush pile. Let us be a fruitful vine bearing much fruit. When we look in the text closely, there is so much for us about who Jesus is and who we are in Him.

Let's go behind the text a little bit together. We looked briefly behind the text at the "I am" statements and where they come from with the divine name. Let's look behind the text a little more closely with the image of fruitfulness. This goes back to the beginning of Scripture, doesn't it? God's first statement to humanity made in His image is to be fruitful. We are made to be fruitful, to put on display the character of God in our lives. When we look at the narration of humanity's creation in Genesis 2 more closely, in Genesis 2:8, we find the first image of God as the gardener. The Lord God planted a garden in Eden in the east, and there he put the man whom He had formed. God begins Scripture with creating the world and then draws our attention to this beautiful, fruitful, abundant garden. It's a garden that God plants, and He makes trees spring up, trees that are pleasant to the sight and good for food. There is an abundance in Eden. The tree of life is there. Humanity eats from the tree of life and sustains

their eternal life with God.

God warns them not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which is warning us at the very beginning of the Bible against separating ourselves from God. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil is a temptation from the enemy to assert our independence. This is so dangerous for us. It's particularly dangerous for Americans because independence is a very high cultural value. We celebrate the Declaration of Independence. We mark this in the summer. I remember one time traveling with a group of people in Europe. We were in Europe on a mission trip, and it just happened to be the Fourth of July. One of the members of our team pulled me aside and said, "How do they celebrate the Fourth of July here? I pulled him aside gently, and I said, "The Fourth of July isn't really a big deal here." He said, "Oh, yeah." He had thought of the day of independence as if it were a global holiday. I thank God for our country, and we need to be in prayer for our country these next weeks. But independence is not a biblical virtue on its own, and it can mislead us.

Sometimes I hear this from parents. I ask, "What is your goal for your child?" They say, "Well, my goal for my child is to grow up and be independent," and I think that's a terrible goal. The opposite of that is not: "I want to raise a child, whom I send to the best schools, and I pay for college, and then he just comes back home and lives with me forever." That's not what I mean. But let's be clear about what we want. I want to raise children who grow up and know that they are under loving parental authority, and they grow up to make wise decisions, and then they feel the yoke of a kingdom on their shoulders. I want us to grow up to be a people who never cease being dependent on the Lord, responsive to Him. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil is an invitation to assert your independence and say, "I will decide what's right and wrong." When we decide what's right and wrong, we end up as a dead branch. But if we abide in Christ, and His Word abides in us, then the Father prunes us, and we bear much fruit. We partake of the tree of life. We are made and called to be fruit-bearing.

This image of the vine is used not only as part of the garden, but it's also used in Scripture as an image of God's people. In Psalm 80:8, we read:

*"You brought a vine out of Egypt; You drove out the nations and planted it."*

Psalm 80 describes God's saving action in the Exodus as God's transplanting a vine from Egypt into a good and fruitful land. In Isaiah 5:1, the prophet sings a song:

*"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."*

The vine was unfruitful. In Isaiah 5, as in Psalm 80, God's people are likened to a vine that is to bear much fruit. In Isaiah 5, this vineyard is planted by the Lord, and He comes to the vineyard looking for fruit and finds none. The vineyard is torn down. Later, in Isaiah 27, God uses this image of a vineyard and expresses the hope that God's people would be restored to fruitfulness. In Isaiah 27:6, we read:

*“In days to come Jacob shall take root, Israel shall blossom and put forth shoots and fill the whole world with fruit.”*

Did you remember that fruit-bearing is a way to remember the whole plot line of the Bible? In the beginning, to bear much fruit, God rescues the vine out of Egypt and plants it in the land. He looks for fruit and finds none. There is judgment and exile and then hope of restoration. In Psalm 80:14, we read:

*“Turn again, O God of hosts! Look down from heaven, and see; have regard for this vine, the stock that Your right hand planted, and for the Son whom you made strong for Yourself .... But let Your hand be on the Man of Your right hand, the Son of Man whom You have made strong for Yourself!*

At the end of Psalm 80 is a prayer that God would send the Son of Man to replant the vine, and it would be fruitful.

This is what we find in John 15. The next one to announce the arrival of the vine being replanted and restored is the Lord Jesus Christ. He invites us this morning to remain in Him, connected to Him. Let His Word remain in you. Then He invites us to ask whatever we would wish, and it would be done. He invites us to prayer, heartfelt prayer, for His will to be done. With this invitation to ask whatever we wish, we have to be careful not to hear this as though it is a wish from Aladdin. This isn't three wishes: Rub the passage and we have a new car and full scholarships for our children. This is not God in a box or a bottle. This is Jesus Christ, the real vine, asking us to ask Him to work powerfully according to His will. This is Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray in the Sermon on the Mount for the kingdom to come, for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. That means we pray over the next six weeks in a serious way for God's will to be done in our country. That means that we pray in a serious way for His kingdom to be realized in and through our church, in and through our families, in and through our lives. It means that we pray and ask in a serious way for God to meet our daily needs, to forgive us our sins, our debts, as we forgive those who have sinned against us. It means we pray hard, in a serious way, to not be led into the power of temptation, but to be rescued from it. This is to ask the One who really has authority and power.

When we ask, according to His will, that also includes the prayer to ask from this text, “Father, prune me where I need to be pruned.” This is kind of risky, isn't it? I've had to pray this all week

before you, so it's been a little riskier for me. For some of those tendrils that are growing, I think, "Boy, I really like that one; I'm interested in that. But, Father, prune me according to Your will. Cut back anything in my life that is not bearing fruit." Isn't it wonderful that, as branches, we don't have to make the self-assessment? Branches have no ability to jump outside of the branch, look at themselves, and evaluate. They just say, "Father, You determine if fruit is coming from this path or not. Sometimes, this is a relationship. Sometimes, we are in a relationship that we like or that brings us comfort, or we think it might turn out well. Yet the Father comes with pruning shears and says, "This is not My will for you; I'm going to cut this off." Do you trust Him? Do you trust Him to prune, so that fruit comes? That's what we really want – a fruitful life. "By this, My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit," Jesus says. So He invites us to abide in His love. This is one of the most intimate pictures that Jesus gives us of life with Him. Jesus says in John 15:9:

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

In John 15:10, He continues:

*"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."*

Jesus offers us a fruitful life, the experience of His love, and in the end He offers us the experience of His joy. In John 15:11, He says:

*"These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full."*

The pruning comes for fruitfulness, for the experience of Christ's love, and for a fullness of joy.

What does this passage mean for us this morning? It means several things. When we hear and apply this text well this morning, we hear Jesus' identity. The signs of last week are confirmed in the open statements this week of who He is: the bread of life; light of the world; resurrection and new life; way, truth and life; the gate of the sheep; the door; the Good Shepherd; the true vine. When we hear His Word this morning, these statements cause us to believe in Him, to trust in Him, and to trust that, by believing in Him, we will experience life in His name. That's what we really want, isn't it? We really want the life that comes to us in Jesus Christ, and there's no other place to get it.

That means for us:

Number one: ***We welcome pruning.*** Can we do that? Can we see the pruning shears coming and say, "Praise the Lord, here I am"? Now this requires a little bit of practice, and you might want to say this a few times in advance. Maybe just look at the mirror in the morning and say,

“Lord, wherever You're bringing the pruning shears to me today, I'm ready. Lop off whatever is not fruit-bearing. Lop it off, Lord, so that I can abide in the vine and then come back out and bear much fruit.” Let His Word come to you, and let it trim your desires. Let it cut things off that really won't be life-giving. Trim the wild tendril that will provide only shade and die at the end of the season. Let it cut you off, so that you go back into the vine and gather strength and are renewed. The places where you have shot out on your own or gotten ahead of the Lord, just let Him trim that back. I've learned from *Bible Journey*, listening to Tim Laniak and in talking with him, vines are constantly pruned. There is winter pruning; there is spring pruning; and there is fall pruning; so really there is never a time, out of the Father's love for us, that He won't be trimming. It should be a regular part of discipleship, when you look at the lopped tendril on the ground of your life, to say, “Praise the Lord. I was wasting my energy there.” He will do this for us. Isn't it a joyful thing that He doesn't ask you to self-prune? Just let Him do it. Let Him prune.

Number two: Not only do we welcome pruning, but ***we are a people who remain in Christ***, and we abide. The term that's used here several times in our passage is sometimes translated as “remain,” sometimes “dwell,” sometimes “abide.” Those are all legitimate translations of the same term. It's the same word where God describes His own dwelling among us. He will dwell with you and invites you to dwell with Him, with Christ, to abide in Christ. How do we do that in a very real and concrete way? We do this through prayer. How is your prayer life? Do you go to God regularly? Is it your morning and evening offering? “If you abide in Me, My words abide in you,” Jesus says, “ask what you will, and it will be done for you.” We will ask what we will, and we will find, as we abide in Christ, and His Words abide in us, our will will increasingly correspond to the Father's will, and there won't be conflict within us.

One of the interviews in *Bible Journey* was with Pastor Sameh at Kasr El Doubara Church in Cairo. I encourage you to go to *Bible Journey* and meet this man, pastoring one of the largest Christian churches in the Middle East. When you think of Egypt, do you think of the thousands of brothers and sisters in Christ who live there? You should. Do you think of a branch of the church that is centuries old? Do you think of faithful pastors like Pastor Sameh? I was challenged by his reading of this passage. He was the one who pointed out to me how many times Jesus invites us to prayer in this discourse and that it should be the reflex of our hearts. A conversation with the Lord, an intimacy with Him, a communion with the Lord in unity, enables us to experience His love. We are a people who welcome pruning. We are a people who remain in the vine.

Number three: ***We are people who enter into joyful harvest***. If we submit to God's pruning, and we abide in Christ, then we will bear fruit, and that is exciting. It's exciting to see life burst forth. God is so skillful in His gardening that sometimes, when places in our lives have fallen

into neglect and disrepair, and we think that nothing will ever grow there again, the Father comes and prunes it and fertilizes it, and all of a sudden life springs forth. If there's a part of you that has died this year, let the Father come and prune. Pull into Christ, ask Him to renew you, and watch with great joy as the life of Christ starts to flow through you and renews you. This is the promise for us in John 15, that He might be glorified in us, that we would bear much fruit, and prove to be His disciples. The promise and hope of fruitfulness that begins the Bible is then realized in the followers of Jesus. We bear much fruit, and the Father is glorified, as we abide in Christ and God's original plans from Genesis flourish in the world around us. And when that happens, people see that, they are nourished by that fruit, and they glorify the Father. They see Jesus Christ, and that's what we really want. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, Son of God, we magnify You this morning. We give You our lives. We lift up our lives before You, the True Vine. We ask, Lord Jesus, that You would give us the courage to welcome the pruning shears. If there is a part of our life that is not bearing fruit, that You would evaluate that, and we ask You this morning to cut it off. Lord, where life is flowing in and through us and fruit is happening, we ask You, Lord, to cut those branches back wisely. Draw us, Lord Jesus, into You. We thank You, that You promise to come into us. Lord, I lift up those in particular this morning who feel lifeless. Lord, I lift up those this morning who have shot out wild tendrils from self or maybe have been drawn with attachment and interest to something that this world is offering and yet is death-dealing. Lord God, I pray You would cut those tendrils off. Trim, Lord, our lives so that we would abide in Jesus Christ. Come, Lord, and fill us with Your life, Your eternal life. Renew us in prayer; renew us in hope; and bear much fruit, Lord, through us for the sake of others. Be glorified, Lord God, in our lives, and we take Your promise in Your Word that when we abide in You, we will bear much fruit, and we will enter into Your joy. So, Lord, replace our sorrow, our regret, and our sin with Your joy and your life and your love that You have from the Father. Breathe new life into us, we pray.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.