

# Abide and Abound

by Mark Jarvinen

## The Vine and the Branches

**15** *“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup> 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.*

*<sup>5</sup> “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. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup> This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. (John 15:1-8 – NIV)*

In today’s Gospel Lesson, we take a look at the last of seven “I am” passages in the **Gospel of John**. Throughout John’s Gospel, using figurative language, Jesus speaks of Himself by means of various images and metaphors:

**“I am the bread of life”** – 6:35

**“I am the light of the world”** – 8:12 & 9:5

**“I am the gate for the sheep”** – 10:7, 9

**“I am the good shepherd”** – 10:11, 14

**“I am the resurrection and the life”** – 11:25

**“I am the way and the truth and the life”** – 14:6

and finally in today’s text, **“I am the true vine”** – 15:1, 5

Today’s text is part of Jesus’ **Farewell Discourse** that extends from **John 13 – 17**, a portion of Scripture, which **John R. W. Stott** calls the **“holy of holies in the Bible.”** In these chapters, beginning with the Last Supper and the foot-washing of the disciples, and

culminating with His High-priestly prayer, Jesus prepares His disciples for His impending departure from this world by way of the cross.

**John 14** ends with the words, “**Come now; let us leave.**” It appears that Jesus and the disciples then left the Upper Room where they had been gathered to celebrate the Passover meal. They likely made their way around the walls of Jerusalem, through the Kidron Valley, and up to the Garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives – the place where Jesus prayed and later was betrayed by Judas and arrested by the Jews. It was the Passover season, which meant a full moon. It is likely that on their moonlight journey to the Garden of Gethsemane, they passed through vineyards that dotted the Judean landscape. One can imagine Jesus, ever the teacher, pointing to a vine, or cradling a cluster of grapes in His hands, using even this opportunity to teach His disciples something more about living in this world as His disciples without the benefit of His physical presence.

### **JESUS IS THE TRUE VINE.**

Jesus said, “**I am the true vine**” (v. 1). Notice He could have simply said, “I am the vine.” But no, He called Himself the “**true**” vine. The **vine** was the well known **symbol** for the nation of **Israel**, just as the **eagle** is the **symbol** of **America**, the **lion** for **England**, and the **rising sun** for **Japan**. In fact a great golden vine served as the **national emblem**, featured prominently on the entrance to the holy place of the temple. The rationale for the vine emblem came right out of **OT** scripture. For example, **Psalm 80:8** says, “**You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it.**” Similarly, **Hosea 10:1** says, “**Israel was a spreading**

vine; he brought forth fruit for himself.” And Isaiah 5:7 says, “The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the house of Israel.” By calling himself the “**true vine**,” Jesus was not saying that the nation of Israel was a “**false vine**.” What Jesus means is that He is the true vine of which the nation of Israel was only a **symbol** or a **picture**. Where the nation of Israel had failed to be the source of spiritual life and blessing for the nations, because of their rebellion against God and hardness of heart, Jesus would not fail. Listen to God speaking through the prophet’s lament in **Isaiah 5:4** –

**“What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it? When I looked for good grapes, why did it only yield bad?”**

Whereas, the nation of Israel had yielded only “**sour grapes**,” Jesus, the true vine, would yield good fruit. He would be the source of spiritual blessing for the nations that God had originally intended.

### **JESUS’ FOLLOWERS ARE THE BRANCHES.**

Thus, with Jesus as the “**true vine**,” it only follows that His followers would be “**the branches**.” In v. 5 Jesus says, “**I am the vine; you are the branches**.” If Jesus had been a modern man, perhaps He would have used electricity as His metaphor – “**I am the generator; you are the appliances**.” But of course, in his agricultural society, He used an agricultural illustration to speak of the believer’s dependence on and unity with the Lord.

It was the 17<sup>th</sup> century author, **John Donne**, who penned the famous words, “**No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; ....**” Applying this concept to the metaphor of our text, we might say “**Every one of us**

**was made to be a branch.”** In other words, every one of us is dependent for our life from a source outside of ourselves. We cannot generate by ourselves what we need for the fullness of life. In fact, an unknown author once wisely wrote: **“Man, despite his artistic pretensions, his sophistication, and many accomplishments, owes the fact of his existence to a six-inch layer of topsoil and the fact that it rains.”** Although we humans like to flatter ourselves with the notion that we are rugged individualists, self-sufficient, and fully capable; we almost subconsciously tend to attach ourselves to something else as our source of life. Some choose **politics** or **government**, giving themselves wholly to political change as their source of meaning and fulfillment. Others attach themselves to **technology** for the same reasons. **Fame, money, pleasure,** or some **alternative religious form** provide other options. **Yet, Jesus offers Himself, the true vine, as our source of life.** Those who become His branches, connected to Him by faith, experience His life and blessing flowing into them.

### **THE FATHER IS THE GARDENER.**

In **v. 1**, Jesus identifies the gardener as the Father. As the gardener, our Heavenly Father is interested in the fruitfulness of the branches. According to **v. 2**, He accomplishes this in two ways. First, **“He cuts off every branch in the vine that bears no fruit.”** Vines, like any plant, grow **“sucker shoots”** on their surface. These shoots, although they will produce leaves in abundance, will never grow fruit. In fact, if allowed to remain, these shoots will actually sap the life of the vine and greatly reduce the quantity of fruit it will bear. The first job of the gardener is cut off the sucker shoots from the vine.

In terms of the analogy of our text, these **“sucker shoots”** are the **hypocrites in the church** – the tares, in Jesus’ parable of the “Wheat and the Tares.” Tares are those who masquerade as Christians, but who are in actuality, **unbelievers**. Bible teacher, **Dr. John MacArthur**, contrasts **the eleven disciples**, who were with Jesus at the time of this teaching; with **Judas**, who had already left to betray Jesus. Judas took care of the money for the band of Christ’s followers. He was with the eleven as the Last Supper began. But his connection with Jesus was only superficial. It was not based on true faith. Such a contrast is still applicable in the church today. Although there are those who appear to be **“in the vine”** based on appearances, they’ll never bear fruit, because they have not come to a true and living faith in Jesus Christ. These are the **Judas branches**, which, according to the metaphor of our text, must be cut off, after which, according to **v. 6**, they will wither, be gathered up, and thrown into the fire to be burned. This is a picture of the judgment that is sure to come to all unbelievers.

The **second way** in which the Father, the Gardener, brings forth fruitfulness from the branches, is through **pruning**, which in the Greek actually means **“cleansing.”** The second part of **v. 2** says, **“... while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes to that it will be even more fruitful.”** Whereas sucker shoots are **“cut off,”** and thrown away, the living branches are **“cut back,”** and cleansed from the dirt, cobwebs, dried leaves, and fungus, that tend to accumulate, in order that they might bear even more fruit.

Even though as Christians we are children of God, we are still sinful. Therefore, the Father prunes away the deadness in us, cuts away the deeds of the flesh, and cleanses our hearts so that we’ll

continue to grow. **How does the Father prune our lives?** Most often He uses the **Word of God** in conjunction with the trials and adversities of life as His method of exposing our self-centeredness and pride, so that through confession and repentance we can turn from our sin and be forgiven. **Charles Spurgeon**, the great 19<sup>th</sup> century preacher from London, has this to say concerning the pruning process in the lives of Christians:

*"It is the Word that prunes the Christian, it is the truth that purges him, the Scripture made living and powerful by the Holy Spirit--effectually cleanses the Christian. Affliction is the handle of the knife --but the true blade is the Word, in the hand of the Great Vinedresser."* - **Spurgeon**

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF ABIDING IN THE VINE.**

Jesus' continues His exhortation to His disciples, saying that fruitfulness will only result from "**abiding in the vine.**" The word in the Greek is meno, which also means "**to remain.**" Thus, v. 5 reads, "***If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit.***"

What does it mean "**to remain**" in the vine in v. 5? At first blush it sounds like fruitfulness is predicated on our ability to "hang on for dear life," to Jesus. However, if there's one thing I've learned in the spiritual life it's this: Anything that depends on my own initiative or strength will fall short. Remaining in Christ is not, first and foremost, predicated on our obedience, or ability to fight temptation, or learning how to pray, those things will come in time as our desires become conformed to his will. But in v. 5b, Jesus says it best, "***apart from me, you can do nothing.***" There is first an important passive side to remaining in Christ. **Verse 3** says, "***You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.***" This is the word of justification - the declaration that we are by faith grafted into the

vine, and therefore one with God. Also, notice v. 5 which says, “**If a man remains in me, (our action); and I in him, (Christ’s prior action); he will bear much fruit.**” We mustn’t forget that **God our Father, through our Lord, Jesus Christ, is more committed to us than we will ever be to Him.** He says to us, “**I’ve chosen you, I love you, I’m committed to you. Let me love you.**” It’s time for us to accept His embrace, stop trying to earn His love or validate ourselves in His presence. We need to accept what is already true, bask in His acceptance, breathe a sigh of relief and simply say in the warmth of His presence, “**Abba Father.**” As we come to understand our new identity in Christ, as children of God, we will desire to develop the disciplines that will keep us close to Jesus and connected to his family – the Church – things like developing our spiritual gifts, learning to spend time with him in Bible Study and prayer, learning to hear God’s voice and making fellowship with other believers a priority in our lives. There needs to be an interdependence - a two way connection – a synching between Christ and us. Christ being everything we need; and us expressing back to Him our love and commitment, our needs and confusions, our fears and our hopes, remembering that apart from Him we can do nothing.

### **FRUITFULNESS IS THE GOAL.**

The words “**fruit**” or “**fruitful**” are mentioned seven times in the eight verses of today’s text. Clearly, the fruitfulness of the branches is the goal of our text. We are to **abide** in Christ in order to **abound** in fruitfulness. **What is the fruit that is to be borne in the life of the Christian?** It seems rather evident that the fruit to which Jesus is

referring is **Christlikeness** --His character produced in us. If we compare Scripture with Scripture, in **Galatians 5:22**, Paul says, ***“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”***

Each of these character traits were manifested in the earthly life of Christ, which the Holy Spirit makes manifest in increasing measure in the life of the Christian. They are **nine qualities gathered as one cluster**, just like the grapes a grapevine would produce. We must keep in mind that this fruitfulness is not instantaneous, but a process. As Paul writes, ***“We are being changed from one degree of glory to another.”*** Nevertheless, it is this kind of fruit that God is looking for in our lives as Christians. As pastor and author, **Ray Stedman**, who was also one of my professors at Fuller Seminary, once said, ***“God is not looking for our happiness, but our wholeness, not our busyness but the beauty of our character, not our sadness but our serenity.”*** This is the fruitfulness of the Christian life.

## **CONCLUSION:**

**Why is our fruitfulness the bottom line?** As v. 8 suggests – ***“This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.”*** When Christians bear the fruit of a Christlike character, God is glorified and others are influenced for Christ. **What higher purpose is there? What greater meaning could life afford?** Abide in Christ, and abound in the fruitfulness of a Christ-like character, so that God may be glorified and others might come to know Christ personally. **A-men.**



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### **1917-1992**

As a young man, Ray worked alongside J. Vernon McGee, a preacher widely known in Evangelical circles for his radio ministry. In the fall of 1950, Ray accepted the call to serve on the staff of Peninsula Bible Fellowship in Palo Alto, CA, where he served for some 40 years, ultimately as Sr. Pastor. He also served Fuller Seminary as an adjunct professor over the years and I sat in his Introduction to Ministry course.