

John 15:1-11

I Am the True Vine

This first paragraph in John 15 reads like observing a work of art, where every phrase conveys a certain form, a vivid color, a particular use of space. The more you concentrate on a piece of art, the more you notice the details and how the pieces fit together. Maybe you even grow in your appreciation for what the artist has produced. With more attention, the work becomes clearer—and more meaningful.¹

That kind of depth has been true as we've reflected on each of the seven "I Am" statements over the last few weeks. Each has revealed another aspect of the beauty and glory of Christ. He is not only God in the flesh, but He is God in the flesh—our Redeemer.² He is the bread of life to those who are spiritually hungry. He is the light of life to those walking in the darkness of sin and misery. He is the door of the fold for wandering and endangered sheep. He is the good shepherd to sheep needing care and compassion. He is the resurrection and the life to those dead in sin. He is the way to true life for all who are searching for God. He is the remedy to humanity's deepest problems. In John 15, once again, Scripture is illuminating more of this splendor of our Savior. While the light shines brighter on Him, at the same time, we see ourselves more clearly, too.

This portion of John's gospel is sometimes called the Farewell Discourse,³ just before Jesus is arrested and executed. And though John writes to persuade readers to believe in Christ,⁴ this discourse sounds like He is instructing those who already in some measure do believe. That tension is evident in today's text, also. It's a tension we continue to hold: we believe, but we must keep believing. The branches are in the vine, but the branches must *abide* in the vine.⁵

The disciples are approaching a difficult season. They will soon be absent their teacher, betrayed by a friend, and held in contempt by the world. And yet, none of that is so severe as to sever the real relationship that exists between Christ and His disciples—a relationship rooted in the unbreakable bond between God the Father and God the Son.⁶ Just as the divine relation is indestructible, so the union between Christ and His disciples is indestructible. By this metaphor of the true vine and the branches, our Lord unfolds for us this deep, life-giving, and permanent union between God the Son and those who depend on Him for life.⁷

So linger over this work of art, and what the divine Artist is teaching us.

I. The True Vine Supplies (1a, 5a)

Jesus said, **I am the true vine.** The vine was a common illustration in the ancient world, Israel included. God called the nation a **choice vine**,⁸ a vine **fruitful and full of branches**.⁹ But that one little word **true** suggests an important contrast—that Israel was, in fact, not the genuine vine.

¹ The same could be said regarding architecture, interior design, natural landscapes, musical compositions, novels, and lots of other topics.

² This is the same pattern we saw in Exodus, as God reveals His name, Yahweh, in Exodus 3 and then again in Exodus 6. See Blackburn, *The God Who Makes Himself Known*, 45–46.

³ Or, the Upper Room Discourse.

⁴ John 20:31

⁵ Yet another expression of the indicative/imperative conversation.

⁶ Harris, *Prepositions and Theology*, 135.

⁷ Beale and Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, 492.

⁸ Jeremiah 2:21

⁹ Ezekiel 19:10

A gardener would choose a different plant if he sought merely beauty; or some other tree if he desired a sort of majesty; the vine is planted for fruit. That is the image the vine portrays—bearing fruit. Yet, the one common factor among all the references to Israel as a vine in the OT is that that vine failed to produce good fruit and stood under the judgment of God.¹⁰ The prophets always immediately turn the image of the vine to illustrate the fruitlessness of Israel who turned away from their God.

Christ, on the other hand, is full of fruit. By His life, He bore the fruit of complete obedience to God; He accomplished precisely what the Father sent Him to do. He is the principal keeper of the two greatest commandments. He is the expression of all that godly virtue we call the fruit of the Spirit. Indeed, we could call it the fruit of the Spirit *of Christ*, where the Spirit imparts to believers that which Christ himself embodied.

But that is not all! Not only in life, Christ also bore fruit in His death and resurrection. Forgiveness, redemption, reconciliation, victory over sin, substitutionary atonement, assurance of hope. Indeed, every aspect of salvation that you cherish is the fruit of Christ's work.

But that is not all! Christ continues to bear fruit in his intercession. He advocates for His people. He defends us from accusation. He strengthens our prayers. He grants us access to the Father. He ensures our eternal inheritance is safe.¹¹ Neither Israel, nor anyone, can bear that kind of fruit: choice, unblemished, lasting fruit. He is the **true vine**.

In v. 5, Christ extends this idea, for He not only continues to produce fruit at the right hand of God, but He continues to produce fruit on earth. Here's how. **I am the vine, you are the branches.** Here the image takes personal shape. There is a vital connection between a vine and its branches, just as there is a vital connection between Christ and His disciples. The branches must be united to the vine, drawing from the sap that the vine provides. And when that is the case, fruit proceeds.

Remember that experiment you did in elementary school? You mixed food dye with water and put a celery stalk in it. What happened after a few days? The leaves turned the color of the dye. That stalk transported the tinted water from the vase up and out into the leaves. Of course, as adults, this is not quite so profound. And certainly, Jesus makes use of this vine/branches illustration because of its simplicity. The branches live on what the vine supplies. The branches outwardly display the effects of that inner life.

You probably never took this further step in your experiment, but you can hypothesize what would happen. Kids, you could even tell me. Had you torn off one of those celery leaves, and left it on the counter beside the vase, what would happen? Not only would the color begin to change, but the leaf would wither and rot. What grows on the leaves is directly affected by what the stalk feeds it. A leaf without a stalk is dead.

What does it mean that Christ is **the true vine**? It means that if there is any spiritual vitality in you, it is because, and only because, you are connected to the live-giving vine of the Son of God.¹² He supplies the life that produces the fruit that you don't otherwise have and cannot otherwise get.

He is the fulfillment of what Old Testament saints hoped for. Psalm 80:14–15, 17–18 expresses this hope and points to Christ.

¹⁰ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 513.

¹¹ Robinson, *Christ All, and In All*, 162–66.

¹² John made a similar point under the term of adoption in John 1. He gave the right of adoption to those who believe in Christ, not to those born of some earthly descent. *Birth* in Christ is the prerequisite there; *union* with Christ the Vine is prerequisite here in John 15.

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...let your hand be on the man of your right hand, the son of man whom you have made strong for yourself! Then we shall not turn back from you; give us life, and we will call upon your name!

Christ is the True Vine, who supplies life to the branches. Life that leads to fruit, which is precisely what the Father intended. The Father is the second element here.

II. The Vinedresser Tends (1b-3)

Hear Jesus' declaration again, **I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser.** Where has this union come from? The Father. He planted the vine, He tends to the vine, He has a purpose for the vine. What is that purpose? I introduced it earlier, but it is clear at the end of v. 2, **that it may bear more fruit.** Again, in v. 8, **By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit...** Fruit is the purpose of the Father's work.

A scoffing voice might accuse God of tyranny, only in the business of production. But that's not His intent at all. At least not in that tone. Not merely production, but restoration is His goal. He's moving time and history to a conclusive end—an end where everything reflects the nature of the living God. God is changing what is old and natural and corrupt and dying, into what is new and restored and living and glorifying to God, both in the physical creation and in hearts.¹³

From the very beginning, God's design was to spread His influence into the world. Think back to Genesis 1. Light pervaded the darkness. Vegetation bore fruit. Creatures multiplied in the seas. Man was to be fruitful and multiply, to subdue the earth for God. Through man, God would spread His influence into every corner of creation. But man failed, then Israel failed, then God sent His Son. In His Son and through those united to Him, the Father is bearing much fruit.

Look how He does this. V. 2, **Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away.** Because a fruitless branch is not united to the vine in a life-sustaining way. There could be disease or decay, or complete separation, even though the branch is physically near. A **branch in me** can be associated with Christ, can be near Him, without being united to His life. That's the difference between Judas and Peter.¹⁴ On the other hand, **every branch that does bear fruit [the vinedresser] prunes that it may bear more fruit.** He removes the fruitless branches and He cultivates the others to bear more fruit.

Those who know will tell you that, of the fruit-bearing plants, the vine requires the most attention.¹⁵ The vine needs constant care, or it degenerates.¹⁶ Is that not true for Christ's branches also? Sheep need a shepherd and branches need a vinedresser, or they turn wild and useless. This divine Vinedresser is personally engaged to make the most of each branch.

Notice the first harvest of fruit that the True Vine grows in the branches. V. 3, **Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.** V. 3 reminds us of Jesus' words to Peter when He washed his feet. "You don't need a bath, you're already clean. You just need to have your feet washed."¹⁷ Pruning is simply maintaining and perfecting that clean position. To be united to the vine this way implies a readiness to produce fruit. God has grafted the branches into the Vine

¹³ See Revelation 21 for these categories.

¹⁴ Beale and Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, 492.

¹⁵ Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 2:994 referencing Virgil's *Georgics*.

¹⁶ Orr, *ISBE*, 4:1050.

¹⁷ John 13:10. "Clean" is the same word and conveys the same meaning both there and here in 15:3.

prepared to produce fruit. They have been completely removed from another dead plant and transplanted into the living Vine.

Keep in mind, Jesus isn't rebuking unproductive disciples here. He's not threatening the wrath of the Vinedresser, though that is a reality for all who are separated from Christ. He's encouraging those who will soon face tumultuous times, times that might seem like God has cut them off. But that's not how the Vinedresser attends to the branches united to His Vine. He doesn't cut off branches with little fruit, he prunes them. Trials are the Vinedresser's pruning for the sake of more fruit.

Expectations go unmet. Trials hurt. Loss is deep and far-reaching. But that's not how "the cookie crumbles," or "the hand you've been dealt," reasons to grit your teeth, or "just the way it is." And those are not the hacks of an angry landscaper. They're strategic shears from the Vinedresser's knife. Yes, it's honed sharp, but He cuts to direct life-giving sap to other buds so they'll grow stronger, and bear more fruit for His glory.

Pruning exposes an internal struggle. Sin and Satan would have us bundled up with fear and doubt and despair. "What will happen? How will someone respond? What am I going to do?" But the Vinedresser prunes, and life keeps flowing. Maybe the answer to all those questions actually is "I have no idea. I don't know how things will turn out." But the branches are sustained by the Vine, not by themselves. The Vinedresser cuts so that what remains surges with more of that sustaining life. So that what remains is more dependent on that life from the Vine.

It takes great focus, but in those seasons you might ask, "where is the Father redirecting me? How can I turn this disappointment to greater dependence on Christ?" That's what the Vinedresser intends. And that's the nature of abiding in the vine, which is the next element in this work of art.

III. The Branches Abide (3-7)

Having already been grafted into the vine, the branches now need to remain there. **As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me.**

It's not a vine, but a few weeks ago, we brought in a potted plant that should not have experienced the freezing temperatures. Apparently, our rescue was too late. Over the last two weeks, every morning as I read my Bible, I have lifted my eyes to this vivid illustration of what I've been chewing on in John 15. When the branches are disconnected from the source of life, the branches die. Nowhere is the absence of life more clear than on the branches. In my case, a few leaves wilted, then turned brown, then all of them did, then they turned black, then dried up and are now falling off. At this point, the branches themselves have softened and begun to bend over like the life has literally been drained out of them. It's actually quite sad! But I have left that plant at the end of the room because I appreciate the intense illustration.

Because the reality is just as intense. **Apart from me, you can do nothing.** Literally, its "apart from me, you are not able to do nothing." That's bad English grammar, but in Greek it emphasizes the point. Apart from Christ, we cannot even do nothing.¹⁸ Apart from Christ, **he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.** That's the same kind of judgment language the prophets used to speak of unfruitful Israel. No fruit means little more than fuel for the fire—no matter how close to Jesus one seems to be. Without his life flowing into and through and out of you, what purpose are you accomplishing now? What hope do you have in the future? Some of you may have little more than an outward

¹⁸ It would be convenient to say that apart from Christ, we can only do evil, only produce worthless fruit. That is not John's or Jesus's point, though. V. 5 is emphasizing the lack of ability, not ability set on evil.

appearance of connection to Christ. Near His people, near His worship, but there is no inner dependence on His life, no sustained experience of trusting Him, drawing from His way of life, depending on His very life for yours. Looking like a branch, and even being gathered among other branches, is not the same as being filled with the life of the vine.

But again, Jesus' point is to bolster His disciples. **Whoever abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit.** Fruitful branches are clearly part of the vine that the Vinedresser planted and tends. **If you abide in me, and my words abide in you ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.** Those who *abide* are safe in Christ. So well-received, **ask whatever you wish and it will be done.** Complete freedom and complete openness before God. Nothing rejected.

But Jesus did use a command up in verse 4. **Abide in me.** Remember, the branches are only a metaphor; they can't physically exert any effort to remain in the vine. So here is where the metaphor begins to break down. But what does the Lord mean to **abide**? Your version may say *remain*. That's a helpful synonym. Abide, remain, dwell, stay close in this union. But think less of external nearness, which is true of branches; they must remain *physically* connected to the vine. Think more of spiritual nearness; disciples must remain *spiritually* connected to Christ. They are ever dependent and ever looking to Him. They know they are lost without Him, dead without Him, without long-term life or effect. So they persevere with Him.¹⁹

Abiding sometimes looks like we are pruning ourselves.²⁰ The Father is the Vinedresser, and we mimic His work upon our own lives. We remind ourselves where our life is found, what life truly is. That life is knowing the only true God and Jesus Christ whom He sent.²¹ We rehearse to ourselves the finished work of Christ. When even life feels like death, we remember that His death has provided eternal life. We recall that He glorified the Father on earth and accomplished the work He was sent to do;²² that He speaks what the Father taught Him and with the Father's authority.²³ His word is trustworthy and true. We hold His Word dear. We soak in the Word of Christ so that it drips out of us, in contemplation, in conversation, in correction. Where the Word encourages, rest; where it rebukes, repent; where it commands, obey. It is the Vine pulsing His life through you.

Abiding in the vine means that, at times, we're pruning ourselves according to the Word. That's not skirting around the work of the Vinedresser, that IS the work of the Vinedresser tending His branches. He is bearing much fruit *through* His Son, *in* you.

IV. The Fruit Abounds (8)

Step back and see all the parts together: the Son is the perfect expression of the life of God, He shares that life with His disciples, the life He shares causes them to live like Him, all according to the Father's design. We treasure that life and give every effort to grow in our understanding of our union and fellowship with Him.²⁴ **By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.** Life isn't all that the Son shares with His disciples. In fact, this whole reality is motivated by what he says in v. 9. The last portion I want you to see is the depth of the supply He shares.

¹⁹ Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 2:1000.

²⁰ Ferguson, *Maturity*, 38.

²¹ John 17:3

²² John 17:4

²³ John 7:17; 8:28

²⁴ Ferguson, *Maturity*, 38.

V. The Supply He Shares (9-11)

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. On the brink of their separation and uncertainty, Jesus wants His disciples not only to understand, but also to dwell on, the fact that they have been brought into a fellowship of divine love. The kind of care and tenderness and attention that the Father showed His own Son, the Son gives to His followers. What a reassuring thought in the midst of a “Farewell Discourse.”

This is the nature of our Lord. He shares everything with His people.²⁵ You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for our sake He became poor, so that we, through his poverty, might become rich.²⁶ He shares every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.²⁷ And He shares every spiritual strength in the earthly places.

These things I have spoken to you that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. All this is for spiritual fortitude. The same joy that empowered Christ to endure the cross²⁸ He gives to us. Joy that looks at the big picture; joy that casts all it cares on the Lord, knowing He cares for you; joy that rests in union with Christ through every harsh moment; joy that takes a deep breath and says, “This is for spiritual fruit and the glory of God.”

Conclusion

God supplies all we need for life and godliness through the Vine of His Son. Abide in Him.

The best kind of art draws your attention, not to the medium, but to its subject. To unfold the reality that the art portrays and lead you to wonder. And do we not wonder when we gaze upon Christ? Seven times John has shown us these majestic truths about the identity of Jesus. Again and again, we’ve seen Him as more than just a person who was born in a manger. He is the living link to God. He is God in the flesh, come for us. That our joy might be full.

²⁵ Spurgeon, *Morning and Evening*, May 14.

²⁶ 2 Corinthians 8:9

²⁷ Ephesians 1:3

²⁸ Hebrews 12:2