

# The True Vine



## Purpose

To show that true life is life in Christ and that such life bears fruit worthy of him

The Scripture for this lesson is John 15:1-17. John 15:1-17

## Listen

1 I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. 2 He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. 3 You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. 4 Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. 5 I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. 6 Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. 7 If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8 My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. 9 As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. 10 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. 11 I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

12 This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. 13 No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. 14 You are my friends if you do what I command you. 15 I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. 16 You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. 17 I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

**Key Verse: I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15:5)**

## Look

Where do you live?

No; do not answer that question with a street address, a city, a state, or even a nation. That may be where the house you occupy is located, but where do you live? No; do not respond with the address or location of your workplace, either. You may spend more time there than anywhere else, but that is still a geographical place. What I am looking for is where you live.

Were you about to say that you live with your immediate family or among a close circle of friends? If so, that is getting closer. There is definitely more to living than where we spend our time or the place we sleep at night. Living involves fellowship, relationships, community. Relatively few people live alone; even fewer people choose to live alone. God created us human beings to be in relationships with others and to live in community. The loneliness that pervades a person's life when a loved one is taken by death is painful testimony to the need we have to live with and among other people. Some have said that we cannot be Christian alone; perhaps we could expand that to say that we cannot be human alone, either.

But is our life with other people all there is? Do we not live in a community that transcends our human community? Do we not live in a relationship that is far greater than our human relationships?

## Live

The disciples were gathered together with Jesus. They were celebrating the Passover as the laws of Torah prescribed. Jesus demonstrated sacrificial love by washing the feet of each of them. He predicted that he soon would be betrayed, and he identified the betrayer. Despite Peter's protests, Jesus told Peter that he would deny Jesus, even though he, Peter, had vowed to lay down his life for the Master. Jesus offered the disciples words of comfort, assuring them repeatedly that he and the Father were one. And, just before his words in our Bible Lesson, Jesus promised the disciples the coming of the Holy Spirit, the Advocate. The disciples would not be left orphaned or comfortless, Jesus vowed; for he was coming to them. Read John 14:15-31 as a prelude to studying today's Bible Lesson.

### Vineyard Talk

Jesus began this discussion with the disciples with another dramatic "I am" statement. These statements asserted who Jesus was, and they did so in vivid figures of speech. In almost all of his "I am" statements, Jesus likened himself to something common, something everyday, yet something that was absolutely essential for life. For example, he likened himself to light, to water, to bread. Now in our Bible Lesson he says, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower" (John 15:1).

We can only wonder if the thoughts of the disciples raced back to their knowledge of the prophecy of Isaiah. Did the disciples recall what has often been called

“The Song of the Vineyard” (Isaiah 5:1-7)? In that song the people are likened to God’s vineyard. Like a vineyard, they are loved, tended, and nurtured by God. God had every reason to expect to harvest fruits of justice and righteousness from these vines, from God’s people. Instead, the vines yielded wild grapes, fruits of apostasy, idolatry, dishonesty, and sinfulness.

Jesus declared that he was the true vine. He was the vine that yielded the fruits that the vine grower, God, sought. Because he was the beloved Son, Jesus was able to do what sinful humanity could not do; that is, produce the perfect fruits of justice and righteousness desired by God the Father. It was Jesus’ ability to be all that God intended that revealed him to be the true vine. Consequently, these words were an affirmation of all that Jesus was and did.

Grapevines were extremely important in Bible times. Grapes were a common table food as well as the source of the wine that was a staple of people’s diets in the ancient Near East. In a land in which fresh water was scarce and in which much of the water was tainted, wine from vineyards was of utmost importance. While Jesus could have referred to himself as the wine itself and thus have followed an earlier precedent (as in the bread), he referred to himself as the source of the wine: the vine that bears the branches that bear the grapes from which the wine is made. Thus, just as John 1:1-3a asserts that all things were made through the Son, so now the Son affirmed that he was the source, the starting point, the beginning.

Lest anyone misunderstand the figure of speech Jesus used here, he expanded it by directly identifying details in the metaphor. “My Father [God] is the vinegrower” (John 15:1). No mistake or lack of comprehension was possible here; Jesus was making his allusion crystal clear. His metaphors were obvious, but still he explained them. He claimed that he, Jesus, was the vine and that God the Father was the vine grower.

Jesus described what the Father does in the vineyard. First, the vine grower removes the lifeless branches from the vine. Because they produce no fruit, these branches are dispensable and so are discarded. Those who fail to bear fruit are considered of no value and are burned as rubbish.

Next, the vine grower carefully tends the branches of the vine that are bearing good fruit. The vine grower prunes these branches. Here “pruning” does not mean removing or cutting away. It means plucking off diseased or insect-eaten leaves and twigs lest they sap strength from the vine. It means “cleaning up” the branches, straightening tangles among the branches, removing those that are broken, and performing the many other chores necessary to enable the vine to bear an abundant crop.

Jesus told the disciples, and indirectly tells us, that they had already been pruned by the word of God that they had received. That word was the teachings, the actions, and the very presence of Jesus. (The Greek verb that is translated “prunes” in John 15:2b reappears as the noun that is translated “cleansed” in 15:3.) Jesus was affirming that the disciples had already been made whole, enabled to bear much fruit, by the pruning, cleansing actions of God. These divine activities had taken place through both the words spoken by Jesus and the Word that is Jesus the Christ.

If God is the vine grower and Jesus is the vine, then the people to whom Jesus was speaking, including you and me, are the branches that are expected to bear fruit. What is the fruit we are to

bear?

One insightful commentator, Gail R. O'Day, answers this question precisely and succinctly: "To bear fruit is to keep Jesus' commandment to do acts of love."<sup>1</sup>

Again, to bear fruit is to do, not simply to say. It is to act, not simply to affirm. Jesus demonstrated this when he washed the disciples' feet, an act that was still vivid in the disciples' thoughts.

How have you experienced the pruning, cleansing action of God in your life? What is the fruit you have borne as a result of the word of God alive in you?

### **God's Love—Our Spiritual Nourishment**

Jesus pronounced both an invitation and an imperative: "Abide in me as I abide in you" (John 15:4a).

That word abide (Greek: meno) is an important word in the Bible passages we have been studying this quarter from the Gospel of John. It is used forty times in the Gospel and is translated as "continue" (John 8:31), "place" (8:35), "endures" (6:27), "remain" (12:46), "dwells" (14:10), "stayed" (11:6), and "abide" (15:4). The word connotes a kind of permanence or longevity or stability or even commitment that is often missing from our lives today.

In our highly mobile and very transient society, to live or dwell somewhere is often a temporary event at best. We live here or there for a time but just as quickly move on to another location. Today fewer and fewer people can say they live in the same house or even in the same town in which they have "lived all their lives."

To live or dwell somewhere is often a matter of convenience, too. We often choose the location in which we live for its proximity to where we work or because of the school our children will attend. By contrast, "to abide" refers to much more than temporary convenience. It implies putting down deep roots and staying put; it means becoming so attached that separation is well nigh impossible. To abide is to become perpetually attached, inseparably bound, connected for all time.

Notice how Jesus couched the call to abide in him. He told the disciples—and us—to abide in him as he abides in us. We learn how to abide in Jesus by reflecting on how Jesus abides in us. Offering us a lived example of God's steadfast love, Jesus inseparably committed himself to us and put down permanent roots in us and for us. Then he called us to do the same, to bind ourselves to him perpetually, to make our everlasting home in and with him. Through our attachment to Christ, we learn to sing, "We shall not be moved."

To help the disciples understand this concept, Jesus returned to the imagery of the vine and the branches. A single, unconnected branch cannot bear fruit by itself. Indeed, it cannot survive detached from the vine. (Paul, incidentally, will make a similar use of this metaphor in 1 Corinthians 12:12-31.) A branch separated from the trunk or the vine soon becomes lifeless. It dries and withers, as does whatever budding fruit that is on it. It soon is good for nothing but to be burned in the fire (John 15:6).

Only when the branch is totally and permanently attached to the vine can it live and grow and

bear fruit. This is because the only source of nourishment for the branch is in and through the vine. The branch draws everything that is required for its life from the vine and only from the vine. So it was, explained Jesus, with the disciples and him; and so it is with us and Christ. We have no life apart from the Son; for the beloved Son is the source of our spiritual nourishment, the source of life itself. That nourishment, that nurture, that source of life itself, is the Father's love as personified in the Son. Thus, it is only as we disciples love one another as Christ loves us that we learn about the Father's love. In expressing that love through action, we begin to bear the kind of fruit that both God the Father and the beloved Son look for in us.

How do our actions and our lives mirror the fact that we abide in Jesus?

### **The Bond of Friendship**

Jesus concluded his comments about abiding in the vine with an assurance for the disciples that they were no longer his "servants" but had become his "friends" (John 15:15). A servant simply does what she or he is directed to do; the reason or purpose for the act is immaterial. Friends, on the other hand, share in the knowledge, purpose, and direction of an activity. Thus Jesus shared with his disciples all that was soon to take place, as well as its meaning. Notice that Jesus shared with his disciples at his initiative, not theirs (15:16). This fact of sharing, this bond of friendship, carried with it responsibilities on both sides, however. The responsibility placed on the disciples was—to return yet again to the metaphor of the vineyard—to bear fruit. The fruit we disciples are ever called to bear is love, love for one another as Christ loved us and love for the world as Christ loved the world. Such love was—and remains—so deep that Jesus ended up literally giving his life for his friends. To such an act of commitment there is little more we can say but "Thanks be to God!"

***How does your life reflect your friendship with and love for Jesus the true vine?***

***Lord God, we praise you that your beloved Son, Christ Jesus, gave his life for his friends so that they might abide in him. May we as branches be so attached to the vine that all that we say, do, and are bears the fruit of love for you. We pray in the name of Christ Jesus. Amen.***

<sup>1</sup> From "John," by Gail R. O'Day, in *The New Interpreter's Study Bible* (Abingdon Press, 2003); page 1938.