

September 18, 2022

“I Am the True Vine”
John 15:1-17

FCF: The mistaken pursuit of change

PROPOSITION: (magnet) Jesus calls us to a fruitful life,
(anchor) a life connected to Him.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

“How can I change?” “How can I live a better life?” Bookstores and podcasts are filled with that theme. But limited in their success. No few of us know this. Most of what we hear is either mechanical, moralistic, or mystical. It’s about better technique, more effort, or a hidden power. There may well be some things we can learn but ultimately these approaches fall short.

The problem is not in the desire for change. The problem is in the paths often taken for change. Jesus speaks to our need and desire that our lives would change. And we see that in our text. Which brings us to the last in our series through the “I am” statements in John’s Gospel.

SCRIPTURE READING: [John 15:1-17](#)**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION****SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

What does it mean to be the king of England? King Charles III is finding out. No longer is he his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales but now his Majesty the King of England. His is now the royal prerogative, acting on the counsel and advice of the prime minister. But it’s not as though Charles is unprepared. His whole life has been a time of preparation. And no few have noted the role his mother, the late Queen Elizabeth played in that. For she knew that her son had to know what it means to be the king. It’s a critical question that needs an accurate answer.

Such questions need such answers. Here’s another. What does it mean to be a Christian? Jesus tells us. It means to come into the Vine. ([READ John 15:1](#)) To understand these “I am” statements, we need to do two things - to read back and broad. To read back is to hear such texts in the Old Testament as Isaiah 5. Israel was a vine, a vine that failed to produce. Jesus is saying He is the true vine, succeeding where they failed. That’s reading back. Reading broad takes us to other places in John’s Gospel. And there are multiple ways Jesus is shown as having life in Himself - the truth of His teaching, the power of His miracles, the depth of His character. But let’s add one more in this installment. Not just reading back and broad but beside. That is, taking into account the context of this agrarian society and how people would have known the need of the vine for a branch to bear fruit. Which brings us to the point. Jesus calls us to a fruitful life, a life connected to Him. Jesus calls us to a fruitful life, a life connected to Him.

What is the significance of that for us? To get at that, we need to consider three things. First, the work of the vinedresser. Second, the life of the vine. And third, the fruit of the branch.

I. THE WORK OF THE VINEDRESSER

First, the work of the vinedresser. What does he have in mind? ([READ John 15:1-3, 6-8](#))

A) To Remove

There are two branches spoken of. The first is cut off, taken away, removed.

1. The image

The image is of a lifeless, worthless branch hanging on the vine. It is dead and diseased, likely compromising the health of the whole, and needs to be removed. That's standard gardening.

2. The meaning

What is the meaning of the image? This is not a reference to a true follower of Jesus who falls away but someone who merely professed faith in Jesus, without any reality to the profession.

B) To Prune

So that one is removed. But there is another, the fruitful branch. And it is pruned.

1. The image

The image is of a branch, bearing as it should. But it will need continual attention so as to grow and mature. Which means pruning, paring, and cutting. Once it's over, it will look like it's been wounded and decimated. But the idea is to help it to draw all the more its life from the vine.

2. The meaning

What is the meaning of the image? This is what the Christian life can look like. Rough handling for the sake of maturity and growth. Sometimes the vinedresser comes towards us with a knife.

The idea being that fruitfulness takes the work of the vinedresser.

Illustration:

C. S. Lewis reflects on this in his book, *Mere Christianity* ([READ](#)):

...we must not be surprised if we're in for a rough time. When a man turns to Christ and seems to be getting on pretty well ... he often feels that it would now be natural if things went fairly smoothly. When troubles [that will] come along—illnesses, money troubles, new kinds of temptations—[you begin to get] disappointed. [Why is this happening now? Didn't I already give myself to God?] Because God is forcing him on, or up, to a higher level...It seems to us all unnecessary: but that is because we have not yet had the slightest notion of the tremendous thing He means to make of us. [...] Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house.

At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on: you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense.

What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of—throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.

Application:

How should we to understand this knife work - the loss of a role, relationship, reputation, a plan, or person? Our assumption is often, "This is proof that I lack God's attention or affection. He's passed me by." Child of God, follower of Jesus, don't you know it's just the opposite? We don't have the full picture. We don't see what the vinedresser does or know His full intent.

Jesus calls us to a fruitful life, a life connected to Him. And this is part of it.

II. THE LIFE OF THE VINE

Second, the life of the vine. How does fruitfulness come? ([READ John 15:4-5, 9-11](#))

A) An Absolute Dependency

An absolute dependency is made clear. And all the more so with two strong statements.

1. A strong negative

Note the strong negative. A branch cannot bear fruit by itself. Apart from Jesus, we can do nothing. Not literally nothing at all but nothing of any lasting worth and eternal significance.

2. A strong positive

And then a strong positive. Whoever abides in Jesus will bear fruit. A changed life comes - so deep that it goes to the depth of our desires, changing our prayers, making us pray His desires.

B) The Need for Abiding

That dependency then drives the need for abiding. This is mentioned 10 times in the text.

1. The meaning

What does this mean? Literally, it's to remain, stay, live, dwell. Abiding is a state of reliance - on one place or person as opposed to any other as our source of life. We remain. We dwell.

2. The means

This abiding is the means of fruitfulness. It's how it comes. As with the branch and the vine, so with us and Jesus. We draw upon Him. We hear Him speak to us through His Word and Spirit. We walk with Him and speak to Him in prayer. Not only privately but corporately, together.

Fruitfulness means drawing life from the vine. It's the only way it comes.

Application:

But that's not our default mode. Our default mode is to draw on ourselves. How? Think of how we downplay the difficulty. Or we overplay our ability. Then reality settles in and we get stressed out. Why? Because we've been kidding ourselves. The better way is to face the immensity of the task for what it is. And to embrace the infinitude of resources at our disposal. Facing the immensity and embracing the infinitude. Denying nothing. Depending in everything.

Jesus calls us to a fruitful life, a life connected to Him. That is what it demands.

III. THE FRUIT OF THE BRANCH

Third, the fruit of the branch. What is Jesus after? What kind of fruit is the vinedresser most especially interested in? What does He long to see come forth? (**READ John 15:12-17**)

A) The Place of Obedience

Jesus speaks here of obedience and friendship. How are they related?

1. Not the priority to obedience

The priority is not on obedience. That is not what comes first. Our obedience does not earn, merit, or obligate His friendship. The branch does not bear fruit so then it can be grafted in.

2. But the priority to friendship

The priority is not on obedience but on friendship. That is what comes first. Jesus' friendship with us is what transforms us. His friends become like Him. Time with Jesus has that effect.

B) The Priority of Love

But Jesus also speaks of commands and love. How are they related?

1. According to His pattern

He commands us to love according to His pattern. “As I have loved you, so you are to love one another.” How had He loved them already? Think of the foot washing. But there’s something else. “As I will love you, so you are to love one another.” That’s His laying down His life.

2. The purpose of His choosing

So the priority of love comes out in the pattern. But also in how it is the very purpose of His having chosen and appointed us. (READ John 15:17) We are to bear fruit. What kind of fruit? A life of love for one another. This is a command to followers of Jesus about a love for fellow followers of Jesus that shows itself in how we think of, speak to, and act towards one another.

True fruitfulness is a life of love. That’s what Jesus is looking for even now.

Illustration:

We’ve had a couple of recent birthdays for the little people in our family. Part of that is the gift giving. How do you know what to give? You start not with what you want to give but with what the other wants to receive. It’s about their desires, not ours. What about the fruit we bear for Jesus? Are we yielding what He desires? Or are we fixated only on what we desire?

Application:

We need to press this. Why is there so often such a lack of love among Christians? Why is there so often such a poor demonstration of the power of the gospel for the world? At least two reasons. First, we are not hearing the command. We don’t take it seriously. Worse, we sub it out for something else such as being right, making noise, getting angry. We’re not listening. The second reason is that we don’t believe the promise. We’re not hearing the assurance. But to draw on Him is to find power to love. It’s the only way. And it’s what Jesus is seeking.

Jesus calls us to a fruitful life, a life connected to Him. Which is a life of love.

CONCLUSION:

Let me go back to something from earlier. What does it mean to be a Christian? There is a good deal of confusion on this point. Religious folks think it has to do with appearances and activity, with doing good and spiritual things. Unreligious folks think it has to do with not doing certain things, with not holding certain positions or hanging out with certain people. But neither are right. And both are equally wrong. Both are making it way too hard - thinking you have to get your act together, to clean up your life. But is that how the branch finds life? Looking at it from another perspective, we could also say both are making it way too easy - thinking all Jesus is interested in are these surface matters. But what is the vinedresser after? He is looking for fruit. He wants a healthy vine. He wants us. He wants you. Not just a bit but all of you.

What does it mean to be a Christian? Jesus will not have us settle for these answers that are too hard or too easy. To follow Him is to come into the Vine. It’s to come into the Vine.

Jesus calls us to a fruitful life, a life connected to Him.

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