

The True Vine

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Here we have an extended parable, which is meant to teach *several* truths. To live a truly human life *fruitfulness is indispensable, abiding in Christ essential, and joy inevitable.*

Fruitfulness is Indispensable

In his opening lines, Jesus gets the characters on stage. *I* am the true vine. My *father* is the vinedresser or gardener. And speaking to his disciples, verse 5, *you* are the branches. Now, it's important to know that hearing Jesus say, "I am the true vine" would have been both familiar and disorienting for the disciples. *Familiar* because the vine was a national symbol for Israel. When Israel was poised to enter the Promised Land, Hebrew spies brought back massive clusters of grapes. Later, the prophets tell of a day when every man would "sit under his own vine and fig tree." The vine was a symbol of joyful prosperity and peace. And *God calls Israel his "choice vine," placing it among the nations to bear fruit and bless the world.* Which this brings us to the *disorienting* part. How could Jesus claim to be the vine if Israel is the vine? The *true* vine? It's audacious move coopting a national symbol. Like our president claiming to be the stars and stripes. What does Jesus mean? He 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** (15:2). He describes the *responsibility* the branches. To bear fruit. What fruit? Verse 10: "**if you keep my commands you will abide in my love.**" So the branches are expected to bear the fruit of obedience to Jesus' teachings (Isa 5:7). If they don't, they are taken away. If they do, they are *pruned* so they'll bear more fruit. Now we're used to hearing this kind of talk from corporate America—produce or you're out of here. And if you do produce, we want you to produce more. But Jesus? It makes me wonder, if we're willing to live by this mantra in our jobs, why not with Jesus? What's wrong with expecting fruitfulness? Does Jesus "pay less?" No, he paid with his life. Are Jesus' demands less important? No, his commands cover every aspect of life, not just our jobs. So why do we shrink back from his demand? *Perhaps it's the result of our historical moment, a Protestant hangover.* 500 years ago the Reformers took a stand against the Catholic Church to insist on the gospel—that we are saved by grace through faith, not by works—something City Life holds dear. But since then, Protestants have developed an allergy to good works. Just the mention of them makes us suspicious. We call out the legalism dogs. We've become so fascinated with justification that we tend to neglect sanctification. But Jesus insists on fruit: "**You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit...**" (15:16). *Or perhaps the reason for our allergic reaction is that we don't grasp what it means to be a branch.* A branch exists to bear fruit. To depend on the vine, but we don't like dependence in this country we love independence. Do you know what Trump's inauguration ball dance song was? I did it my way. In him, we see a reflection of us all, stubbornly resisting dependence on others. But a branch is dependent by its very nature. You exist to bear fruitful obedience to Jesus. It is our *raison d'etre*: "**By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.**" Now the Protestant Reformation had a good concern, that we not mistake our good works as the basis of justification. Sharing this concern, Jesus says: "**Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you** (15:3). What word? He's referring to something he said in the Upper Room where, during his last supper, Jesus washed his disciples' feet. Jesus says, **if I do not wash you you have no share with me** and after washing them says, **you are clean**"

(13:4). What's he saying? Jesus looks ahead to his work on the cross that will wash away sins and says, You're clean. So to summarize, **fruitfulness doesn't make you clean, but cleanliness makes you fruitful**. When when you realize you've been cleansed before a holy God, rescued from death by his Son, by no doing of your own, you're compelled to live for him. In *Return of the King*, Pippin meets the Father of Boromir. Boromir is the warrior who gave his life to rescue Pippin from death. So seized by gratitude, Pippin kneels down and swears fealty to Boromir's father, the Lord of Gondor: "to speak and to be silent, to do and to let be, to come and to go, in need or plenty, in peace or war, in living or dying, from this hour henceforth, until my lord release me, or death take me, or the world end." A picture of what it means to be a branch, to be so taken with Christ and what he gave up, that we pledge our lives to the Father's service. Fruitfulness is indispensable to being a branch. But bearing fruit can be hard. Jesus says, the Father prunes those who do bear fruit so that we will bear more fruit (2). When a bush or vine is pruned, the gardener cuts back the growth that gets tangled and obscures the vine from the light. If you don't do this, then the vine will become knotty and produce second-rate grapes. So for the vine to be its true self, to flourish, it has to be pruned. And so it is with us. We are not nice smooth branches, without wild shoots, bumps or deformities. We are a mangled mess that the Father is trimming back to reveal true beauty, to show our clean selves. Now when we experience pruning, all we tend to see are the shears, the pain and discomfort, but God sees something greater. And he insists that he cut away our tangled mess to reveal more of Christ. If we don't bear fruit, *we are taken away*. If we do, we'll bear even more. Fruitfulness is indispensable.

Abiding is Essential

How do we endure the pruning and bear the fruit? Jesus says, "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 (15:5). He is the vine and we are the branches. Not, we are the vine, and he is the branch. To bear fruit, we have to get the order right. We abide in him. We cannot abide in ourselves. We have to be connected to, dependent on, another source to flourish. Apart from Christ we can do nothing. When I weed eat our backyard, I take an inordinately long, orange extension cord, plug it into the wall, then into the weed eater. Then, I walk around the side of the house and start whacking. But inevitably, the cord pops out and power ceases. I can't clear the yard of a single weed. I can do *nothing*. And when this happens repeatedly, sometimes I want to take the weed whacker and start whacking on my own. Which gets frustrating. When we try to do life, to obey his commands disconnected from Jesus it will be frustrating, impossible. So how do we abide? Jesus shows us several ways, First, we abide in him by his words abiding in us: "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you" (15:7). Jesus words are God's words. God's words are collected in one place, the Bible. It's the one book written by God. It contains the most valuable words of any book in the world. And yet, most of you read the news more than you read the Bible. You value words on Facebook more than the words in God's book. So how do we abide in Christ? By allowing his words to abide in us. You've got to read them, but it takes more than reading. They have to read you. They have to *get into* us. The word abide means to dwell. When we purchased a home the contract called it a dwelling. Do you know the difference between dwelling and renting? Dwelling has permanence. If you're renting you don't do a lot to fix up the place. But if you dwell there, you settle in, paint the walls, hang stuff, build a deck. When we allow God's

word to dwell in us, we invite it to settle in, change things, maybe knock out a wall, to fix up the place. To abide in Christ is to have Jesus words live in us. I think of the young college student who, when she took Christ at his word for the first time, felt like she'd swallowed a flashlight, *known and loved all at once*. Or the guy who struggled to sing aloud at church, until he took Isaiah 12 to heart, and opened his mouth to sing, as tears came streaming down his face. Or the person who felt alone, exposed, misunderstood and turned to Psalm 3 to discover "the Lord is a shield about her, her glory and the lifter of her head." *Has God's Word gotten into you? Is it changing you from the inside out? We abide in him by his word abiding in us. A second way to abide in Christ is to abide by his commands: "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love..." (15:10).* If you obey Jesus, you will enjoy Jesus. But obedience isn't all fireworks. Keeping his commands doesn't equal feeling his love. Feelings are fallen, unreliable compasses that do not always point to true north. Inevitably, the forest will get thick and the sky grow dark, but if you stick to true North, it will always lead you home. In fact, habits of obedience nourish love for Christ. Jamie Smith tells the story of his wife trying to get him to "eat healthy and eat justly," to eat happy cows and pigs, but it wasn't until he read Michael Pollan and Wendell Berry that he was converted to a whole new diet. He recounts marking up pages of a Wendell Berry essay, writing Amen in the margins, only to lift his head and realize he was sitting in a Costco food court eating a not-so-happy hot dog. The point? We can't just *think* our way into new loves. Reading isn't enough. We have to obey it. While he believed Wendell Berry, he *wanted* Ronald McDonald. So he committed himself to an accountable community (WW), started exercising, and changed his whole diet. After a run or a healthy meal, his wife would ask, "Did you enjoy that?" He would say "Not for a second." But, then, after some time he found himself drawn Greek yogurt and actually wanting to run. His habits changed his hungers. His obedience formed his desires. Obedience to Christ nourishes love for Christ. We abide in Christ by abiding by his commands. Have you committed yourself to an accountable community (CG/FC)? Do you ask one another the deep questions? To form habits around Jesus—Sunday worship, communion, solitude, service, prayer, mission? Apart from vital union with Christ, we wither up. But when we're connected to Christ, life flows from the vine, power runs through the cord, and we become fruitful! Abiding is essential.

Joy is Inevitable

Fruitfulness is indispensable, abiding is essential and finally, joy inevitable: "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full" (11). The whole reason for his sometimes difficult teaching is *joy*. His joy in us. Our joy full, to the max. How? Let's return to the disorienting image of Jesus being the Vine when Israel was God's chosen vine. If you continue reading the prophets, you'll discover God's choice vine bears wild, second-rate grapes. It becomes a mangled mess, entangled with itself and the idols of other nations, instead of bearing fruit *for* the nations. Then along comes Jesus, claiming to be the true vine. In him, the whole of Israel is narrowed down to one, faithful Jew, who inherits the selfishness and failure of a whole nation, of the whole world. And dead set on our joy, he endures the cross before him, despises its shame, and sits down at the right hand of his Father to open a way for humanity to be reattached to God, for branches to filled with life, for Christ-shaped fruit to emerge. *In us, Jesus bears choice grapes to nourish the world! The vine bears fruit through the branch. So seek your joy to the max by abiding in Christ, allowing his Word to abide in you, and abiding by his commands.*