

Our Vital Vine
John 15:1-17
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"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. ² 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. ³ Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴ Abide in me, and I in you. 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. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷ If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. ⁹ As the Father has loved me, so have I 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 These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

¹² "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³ Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵ No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. ¹⁶ You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. ¹⁷ These things I command you, so that you will love one another. – John 15:1-17, ESV3

Introduction: The 7th & Final "I AM" Saying in John

This morning, we come to the 7th and final "I am" statement of Jesus in John's Gospel:

1. "I am the bread of life" - 6:35, 48
2. "I am the light of the world" – 8:12 & 9:5
3. "I am the gate" – 10:7
4. "I am the good shepherd" – 10:11, 14
5. "I am the resurrection and the life" – 11:25
6. "I am the way, the truth, and the life" – 14:6
7. "I am the true vine" – 15:1, 5

Each of these seven statements reveals something vital about who Jesus is and why we need Him. Through these statements, we have seen:

- Jesus is the true nourishment and sustenance of our souls, giving us life that never ends.
- He is the true illumination, shining truth and righteousness so we never need to walk in darkness.
- He is our access to God and to eternal life.

- He is also our security against the enemy, our safety.
- He is the One who guides, feed and protects us, and He lays down His life for us.
- He alone has the power of eternal life in Himself, and He defeats death forever.
- He is our way to God, the truth from God and the life of God given to us.

And now, He is the vine. This metaphor carries with it the image of a deep, personal, living and life-giving connection between Jesus and His people, as the emphasis here is on abiding in the vine, drawing life from the vine, and bearing fruit through our ongoing, life-giving connection to the vine.

A. The True Vine: Israel -> Christ

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser.”

But why pick the image of a vine? Well, like the other metaphors Jesus chose for His “I AM” statements, this one connects to something very familiar to His audience: Bread, Light, Shepherd, Gate, Way – These are all very common and easily accessible images. So is the vine. Vineyards were fairly common in Jesus’ world, and He used the image of a vineyard at other times in His ministry.

Yet to say “I am the true vine” also carried with it significant meaning drawn from the Scriptures of the Old Testament. One of the common ways God referred to His people was calling them His vine or His vineyard. We read this imagery earlier in Psalm 80, but we also find it in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Hosea. In each of these passages, Israel is the vine and God is the vineyard owner or vinedresser. So, when Jesus says here “I am the true vine,” He is saying “I am the true Israel.”

This is part of a centrally important theme in John’s Gospel: Jesus came to be and to do all that Israel and her leadership had failed to be and to do:

- Israel was to be the light of the world, a light to the Gentiles. Because of their sin of hypocrisy, arrogance and legalistic self-righteousness, their light had become darkness, and so Jesus stepped into the world as the True Light of the world.
- Israel’s leaders were to be faithful shepherds over the flock of God. They had failed, and were feeding themselves on God’s flock instead of feeding God’s flock. So, Jesus came as the Good Shepherd to do for God’s people what their leaders had failed to do.
- Twelve loaves of showbread were in the Temple, representing the twelve tribes of Israel. Ten of those tribes had been lost, and the remaining two were largely unfaithful, stale and rotting. Jesus comes as the Bread of Life.

So, with this final “I am” statement, Jesus is continuing to emphasize this theme. He is the faithful and true Israel, the Anointed One, the Messiah, the prophet, priest and king who does not fail, but who is the fulfillment of the promises and the mission God had given His people. So, He is the True Vine.

B. Abiding in the Vine

“Abide in me, and I in you.”

Jesus is the true vine, and His disciples are the vine-branches. The most important thing for a vine-branch to do is to remain connected to the vine, for all nourishment and life flows to the vine-branch from the vine. And so Jesus says to His disciples throughout this passage: “Abide in Me.”

Abide in me, and I in you. 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. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷ If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

What does it mean to abide in Jesus? How do we abide in Him? Well the word “abide” means to remain, to stay. So, to abide in Jesus means to remain in Him, to stay connected to Him. How do we do that? Jesus highlights three ways in this passage:

1. **The Word:** First of all we are in Jesus and bearing fruit because of the Word He has spoken to us. We might not see this connection clearly because of the shift in our English translation. Look at verses 2-3: “every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.” The word for “prunes” and the word for “clean” are the same word in the Greek. So, the Father “cleans” every branch in Jesus that is bearing fruit. The Father cleans us, but we are already clean. How? Because of the Word Jesus has spoken. This is the same thing Jesus had told His disciples earlier in the evening when He washed their feet, in John 13:10: “The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean, but not every one of you.”

So, Jesus told them they were already clean, and now He tells them they are already clean because of the Word He had spoken to them. But hadn’t Jesus spoken the Word to Judas, too? And Judas wasn’t clean. That’s because Jesus had merely spoken the word to Judas’ ears and it had not penetrated his heart. Having the words of Jesus vibrate your eardrums and stimulate your brain waves is not what Jesus means here. He means hearing the word in such a way that it penetrates the heart.

We see this imagery in verse 7: “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you . . .” We are made clean by the word of Jesus penetrating our hearts, and we abide in Jesus as His word continues to abide in us. Later, in John 17, Jesus will pray for His disciples and ask the Father: “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.”

We cannot abide in Jesus without abiding in His word and having His words abide in us. We hear the voice of Jesus in His word, and as we receive and believe His word, we are abiding in Him, continuing to receive and believe in Him. We do this especially when we hear the preaching of the Word, but beyond Sunday morning, we do this when we spend time in His word, meditating, memorizing, praying and seeking to understand, believe and live His word in our lives.

2. **Prayer:** The second thing Jesus emphasizes in abiding in Him is prayer. In fact, in verse 7, He makes an explicit connection between the Word and prayer: “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” And then He tells us the result of our abiding in Him in the word and in prayer: “By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.”

Notice the connection: It is the word first and then prayer. We are made clean, made holy, connected to Jesus, through His word spoken to our hearts. We then abide in Him and His words abide in us, and then we ask. Our asking is prompted and shaped by the Word. He speaks first and we listen, and then we speak back to Him in response to what He has spoken to us.

The heart of every relationship is communication. People who love each other and want to stay connected to each other make it a priority to talk to each other. And they listen to each other well. Listening is the most important part of communicating – right, men? And we need to make sure we are listening to Jesus in loving faith and then speaking back to Him in prayer out of the Word abiding in us.

3. Obedience: The third thing Jesus highlights is obedience:

“As the Father has loved me, so have I 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 These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

¹² “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³ Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵ No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.”

Can we say Jesus' word abides in us if we're not striving to do what He commands us to do?

Interestingly, Jesus uses close relationship words when He talks about obedience. We do not obey Him as servants, for we are not mere servants. Rather, He has drawn us into His confidence and has revealed His Father's will and plan to us. We obey not as slaves hoping to earn the favor of the Master, but as friends who wish to abide in Jesus' love.

To strengthen the emphasis on relationship, the commandment Jesus highlights for us to obey is the command to love one another. Once again, He gives us the highest possible standard for love, His own love for us. Jesus has loved us in the highest, deepest, most self-sacrificing, and most beneficial way possible. He calls us to do the same for each other.

We should not read His words *“You are my friends if you do what I command you”* as if obedience to Christ would earn us His friendship, but rather we should see obedience to Christ as the true and necessary fruit of being His friend. If His word dwells in us, and we abide in Him, and we have heard Him tell us His and His Father's will and plans, then we will necessarily obey Him – not perfectly, of course, as we remain sinful and unreliable. Still, our obedience will be sincere, heart-felt, loving and not mercenary, not self-seeking.

If we were to try to obey Jesus in order to earn His friendship, this would not be the kind of obedience and love He seeks from us, for it would be self-serving and calculating: How much do I need to obey

Jesus to get Him to stop being angry with me and be my friend instead? If that's the kind of question we're asking, then the answer is going to be full and perfect obedience, for the Lord can accept nothing less as the standard for our acceptance before Him.

But if we have heard the words of Jesus in our hearts, and if we are His friends, we know His perfect obedience is the basis for our acceptance. We will know that our obedience cannot earn us His friendship but flows from the love He has poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. We will see our obedience not as an act of merit-building but as an act of thanksgiving.

C. Astounding Promises

As we abide in Christ through the word, prayer and obedience, He gives us astounding promises to encourage and bless us:

1. **You are already clean:** First of all, He tells us that if we're abiding in Him, we're already clean. Sometimes we may not feel particularly clean. We may feel weak, guilty, inadequate. Our obedience is so incomplete. Our sin is so real and present in our lives. Yet Jesus says we are already clean. He tells this to His disciples twice on this last night, on the very night when they will flee from Him and on the very night when Peter will deny Him three times – "You are already clean."

Sometimes we confuse the progress we are making in obedience and discipleship with the position we have before God as those who belong to Christ. We are growing and struggling. Sometimes God the Father will need to prune us. Jesus says, "Every branch that does bear fruit he prunes." That's a painful and necessary process, because we still have stuff in our lives keeping us from bearing fruit. We still have sin and worldliness, anxiety and distraction, and God is committed to cutting those things out of our lives, bit-by-bit, so we can be even more fruitful.

Yet the ongoing process of our pruning does not change or undermine the firm reality of our cleanness in Christ. Our cleanness is Christ doesn't depend on how well we're making progress but on the word He has spoken to us based on the work He has done for us. I love Hebrews 10:14: "*For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.*"

So, be encouraged as you abide in Christ: You are already clean.

2. **You will bear much fruit:** The second promise Jesus gives us is that, as we abide in Him, we will bear much fruit.

"Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing." – v. 5

"If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples." – vv. 7-8

Fruit comes in different forms in the Christian life. Some of it is seen in the changing of our internal character: "*The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness gentleness and*

self-control.” Some of it is seen in the fruitful work we do in God’s kingdom. And some is seen in the lives of others who are reached, blessed and transformed by God working through our words and actions.

As branches abiding in the vine, we can know that our labor in the Lord is not in vain. We can know that the Vine who abides in us is imparting His life to us, and His life is bearing fruit and will bear fruit – much fruit - in us to the glory of God.

So, be encouraged as you abide in Christ: You will bear much fruit.

3. You may ask whatever you wish: Third, Jesus gives us the promise that as we abide in Him and His words abide in us, we can ask whatever we wish, and it will be done for us. Now, if we take this as a blank check to ask God for our “best life now,” we’ve missed the whole point of abiding in Christ. The goal is bearing fruit to the glory of God.

If Christ’s word truly abides in us, it will shape our prayer lives, so we will pray the things Christ has promised in His word. We will pray to be fruitful. We will pray for God to prune the fruit-blocking junk out of us. We will pray for God to be glorified in us and through us. These kinds of prayers the Lord delights to answer.

So, be encouraged as you abide in Christ: You may ask whatever you wish according to the promises of His word, and it will be done for you, in order that you may bear much fruit and so bring glory to God.

4. You will bring glory to God: Finally, Jesus promises us that, as we abide in Him, we will bring much glory to God: *By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.* – v. 8

Glorifying God is the end for which God created the universe and is the purpose for which we were made. So, when God works in our lives to enable us to bring glory to Him, we are fulfilling our purpose and are truly fulfilled.

So, as you abide in Christ, be encouraged: You will bring glory to God.

D. A Sobering Warning

“If anyone does not abide in me” – v. 6

Now, before we close, we must take a close look at the sobering warning Jesus gives us in this passage:

Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away” – V. 2

If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. – V. 6

If we will not abide in Christ, we will not bear fruit, and so we will prove to not be His disciples. In the light of what has just happened on this night, we have a sobering example of this reality: Judas Iscariot.

He was one of the twelve. He heard the words of Jesus. He looked and sounded just like the other followers of Jesus. But while he was among the twelve and he was in Christ externally, he was never in Christ internally. He did not abide in Christ, and Christ's words did not abide in him. He was not connected to the vine vitally, and so he was taken away, thrown away.

Hebrews 6:4-8 expands the sober warning of these verses from Jesus –

For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, ⁵ and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, ⁶ and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt. ⁷ For land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. ⁸ But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned.

People who come to church, call themselves Christians, look like everybody else from the outside, share in the benefits and blessings of life in the church, and yet do not love Jesus in their hearts, are in a very dangerous place. If that is you, you must awake and repent. You must stop faking your Christianity and turn to Jesus for real life. You must be connected to the true Vine, or you will wither away as a useless, fruitless branch destined for the fire.

But be careful: What you should focus on is not the question: “Have I borne enough fruit to show myself to be His disciple?” No, instead, you need to ask, “Am I abiding in Christ?” In other words, Do you love Jesus and are you clinging to Him? You will never bear “enough fruit” to satisfy your guilty conscience and silence the accusations of the enemy of your soul. Cling to Jesus. Abide in Him. If you do, you will bear much fruit, even if you can't see it yourself all the time. Hebrews 6 goes on to say:

⁹ Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation. ¹⁰ For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do. ¹¹ And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end, ¹² so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

God wants you to have the full assurance of hope. So, persevere in faith in Christ Jesus.

Conclusion: Will you abide in the vine?

And that's the question for all of us this morning, as we close: Will you abide in the vine? Will you be imitators of those who have, those who through faith and patience have inherited the promises? Will you seek His will in His word, seek His face in prayer and seek to be obedient in your life?

If this is your heart's desire, know that Jesus will keep you. Remember, it's the vine which gives life to the branches. You will abide in Him if He abides in you.