

Remain in the Vine

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[0 : 00] Now some of you, if you're utilizing the sermon outline today, let me just let you know that after the sermon outline was printed, I work on the sermon a little bit more and I've slightly restructured it.

So the structure or the outline of the sermon is going to be a little bit different than what is printed here, but the content is all there. You just have to kind of navigate your way around a little bit more than usual.

So apologies for that, but it should still be easy to follow even with the outline. So let's get ready and let's again ask the Lord to speak to us through his word.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we just heard that your words are to remain in us and so that is exactly what we asked for this morning.

We pray that your word will do its work in us so that we might truly be the kind of disciples that you are looking for and that we will find great joy as we do so.

[0 : 57] We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Now, like most of you, I've owned a few mobile phones over the years and after a while they all seem to go the same way.

The battery doesn't last like it used to. The apps start getting slower and slower. The screen gets dimmer and dimmer. And before long, the whole thing just feels worn out, running on empty, unproductive.

And I wonder, as a Christian, have you ever felt like that? Not all at once, but gradually. Your energy fades, your zeal cools, your witness feels dim.

You are still going, but you're just getting by. You feel unproductive, unfruitful. And you just wish you didn't feel that way.

In John 13 to 17, Jesus has been saying his goodbyes to his disciples. He's been telling them that he's going back to the Father.

[2 : 11] And where he goes, they cannot come. At least not for now. So no surprise, they are really shaken. As we've seen over the last few weeks, they pepper Jesus with all sorts of questions.

Where are you going? How can we know the way? Why do you intend to show yourself to us and not to the world? For three years, Jesus has been everything to them.

And now, it feels like everything is going to fall apart. So how surprising it must be when we read the rest of the New Testament.

Because it shows the opposite of what we expect. Instead of falling apart, the disciples go or out. Instead of fading away, they are planting churches.

Instead of burning out, they burn brightly for Jesus. Their lives are fruitful. So the question is, how did that happen?

[3 : 21] How did they go from the brink of collapse to a life of lasting fruit? Especially when Jesus had warned them, as we'll see in chapter 16, that the world will not necessarily welcome them.

Well, that is where John 15 comes in. In today's passage, Jesus prepares his disciples for their future, so that they wouldn't burn out, but bear fruit that lasts.

He declares, I am the true vine. And then he'll call us to remain in him. In fact, if you are looking for the big idea this morning, there it is.

Jesus is the true vine. We are the branches, so remain in him to bear lasting fruit. And that is exciting, isn't it?

Because what Jesus is really showing us today is both what he wants and doesn't want for you. My brothers and sisters, Jesus doesn't want you to live a life where you slowly exhaust yourselves and wear yourselves out.

[4 : 38] He doesn't want you to live a life where everything is drudgery and toil and chore. Know what he wants for you instead is a life where you are fully alive, as you are revitalized in him.

What he wants is for you to keep growing and keep being transformed so that you will fill the world around you with goodness and light and beauty and truth.

In short, he wants you to be fruitful. So let's listen carefully as Jesus teaches us how that might happen. And what I'll do is to work through that big idea I just mentioned.

So firstly, Jesus is the true vine. That is the claim Jesus makes. Verse 1. I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener.

Now, in the Old Testament, the vine often refers to the people of God. Look at Psalm 80 verses 8 to 9, for example. We already read it this morning. You transplanted a vine from Egypt.

[5 : 48] You drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it, and it took root and filled the land. So you can see that Israel is identified as that vine, or sometimes in other places, as God's vineyard.

And now Jesus is saying he is the vine. In other words, he is beginning to redefine what it means to be the people of God.

It's not simply about some sort of ethnic heritage, but about whether you belong to Jesus or not. The New Testament makes this point repeatedly.

For example, in Galatians 3, Paul says that to be a true descendant of Abraham is not about who your dad or your grandpa is.

Rather, it is about whether you have faith in Christ. And that's why in Galatians 6 verse 16, the church is now called the Israel of God.

[6 : 52] Because those who belong to Christ are now the new vineyard, since Jesus is the true vine. And just as an aside, that's why it is important not to uncritically apply Old Testament promises to the modern-day nation-state of Israel.

Good responsible interpretation means we must filter those promises through Jesus first, and see how he fulfills it. For did you notice Jesus doesn't just say he is the vine, but the true vine?

Now, why does he say that? The reason is because he now embodies what God originally meant Israel to be. You see, in the Old Testament, Israel was meant to be a vine that would bear good fruit.

They were meant to fill the whole earth with the fruit of obedience and justice and righteousness. They were meant to fill the earth with the fruit of whole nations being warned over to the Lord to worship him.

But that's not how it turned out. In Isaiah 5, we discover Israel instead bore the bad fruit of injustice and violence.

[8 : 19] And that's why in Jeremiah 2 verse 21, God caused them a degenerate and wild vine. So Israel failed completely.

They were not God's true vine. But everything Israel was meant and failed to be, Jesus now is.

The way through whom God's goodness will be showcased to the world? That's him. The servant who would be a light to the nations? That's him. So if we are asking, how can we bear fruit?

Jesus says, you don't start with yourself. You start with me. Because the key to fruitfulness, then and now, is to be connected to the true vine who alone bears good fruit.

Our Lord Jesus Christ. And that's why you might have noticed Jesus doesn't just stop at saying, I am the vine. Notice in verse 5, what else he says.

[9 : 30] I am the vine. You are the branches. Now here, the Bible is teaching us an incredibly crucial truth about our relationship with him.

You see, sometimes we can reduce our relationship with Jesus to purely transactional terms, can't we? It comes across in some of the illustrations we use.

So, sometimes we might describe it this way. We say, imagine that you have been pulled over for speeding and you are now fined 10,000 ringgit and there's no way you can pay it.

But suddenly, someone comes up, takes out a lot of purple colored ringgit and says, this is for him. And the police stamp your speeding ticket with paid and hands it back to you.

And then we say, this is what Jesus has done for us. And you know what? That illustration is wonderfully true.

[10 : 35] I'm sure I've said something along those lines myself. It captures something real and important about what Jesus has done for us. He has paid the debt we cannot pay.

But, here's the thing. On its own, that illustration can give us the impression that our relationship with Jesus is just transactional.

Like, he steps in, pays the price, and then steps back out again. You walk out one door, he walks out the other.

But the Bible says, actually, our relationship with God is far, far richer than that. It's not just that your record is wiped clean.

It is that you are also brought into living union with him. And the Bible uses a variety of images to try to capture that, including the one Jesus now uses.

[11 : 40] In John 15, Jesus says our relationship with him is like that of branches to a vine. And what is that relationship like?

Let me try to illustrate. During the COVID lockdown months, just to try to get some fresh air, I would sometimes bring my young kids down to the Society for the Death compound next door.

At that time, there was a giant tree near the gate. And just to entertain ourselves, we would collect the fallen twigs and branches and play with them. And here's the thing.

Those branches, without exception, were a dull brown, withered looking, and easily snapped. for they had no connection with its life-giving source.

But of course, when I looked up at that tree, the attached branches told a completely different story. Now, those branches, they were full of leaves and even fruit.

[12 : 49] And that is the picture Jesus is trying to paint of our relationship with Christ. When we trust Christ, the Bible says we are not just near Christ, but in Christ.

We are joined to him. We are grafted into the vine. There is no distance between us and Christ. Instead, the vine pours out all of its life into the branches.

Sometimes, we can think of Jesus as being up there watching over us, can't we? While we are down here trying to live for him.

But Jesus says that is not quite the right picture. We are closer than that. Indeed, to picture this same reality, the Bible will sometimes use another image, the covenant of marriage.

For whenever you marry someone, it is two becoming one. Their property becomes yours. your property becomes theirs.

[14 : 08] That's why in the wedding vows, we have that line. All that I have, I give to you. And of course, that is incredibly generous of Jesus because all that we give him is simply our sin.

And yet, he takes that and in return, he gives us his perfect righteousness. righteousness. And that is the same picture Jesus is getting at with the vine and the branches.

You haven't just been forgiven, you have become one with your Lord. And so, his life becomes your life and his fruitfulness becomes yours.

For when you are in the vine and are united to Christ, you receive what some theologians call a double grace. You receive first, his righteousness credited to you, but you also receive second, his transforming power at work in you.

You are receiving the power to be changed gradually into someone who actually lives differently. And here is the key.

[15 : 30] Both gifts come from the same source. You can't separate them any more than you can have sunlight without warmth.

They come from the same sun. The great reformer, John Calvin, puts it this way, to try to take forgiveness from Christ without transformation is, in his words, to tear Christ into pieces.

You either get all of him or none of him. Both gifts flow from being connected to him. And because that is your reality, the implications are profound.

First off, here is the glorious paradox. if Jesus has joined his life to yours, that means you are even closer to him than the disciples were on that night in the upper room, even though they were physically present with him.

That is the privilege we have this side of the cross. And second off, if Jesus has joined his life to yours, then you have been given everything you need for life and godliness.

[16 : 59] But what we need to do now is to live out of that union with Christ. Which brings me now to the second part of our big idea today, remain in the vine.

Remain in the vine. Did you notice that is the key word for today? By my count, it appears ten times in this passage.

So for instance, verse four, remain in me as I also remain in you. And it is there again in verses five, six, seven, nine, and ten.

So Jesus is not calling us to believe when it suits us. He's not saying stick with Jesus until you get bored of him. No, he's saying hold fast to Jesus, hang on to him, return to him in everything. Now, let us be clear. Jesus is not saying go and find Jesus, grab hold of him, make sure to earn his love. That is not the logic.

[18:12] Rather, the logic is you have been found by Jesus. He has joined himself to you, so stay there. Remain there.

Or in the language of verse four, no branch can bear fruit by itself. It must remain in the vine. Because you can't bear fruit unless you remain in Jesus.

But what does it look like? To remain. I think Jesus chooses that word deliberately. Because you see, to remain is to hold together dependence and effort.

Here, I think it's worth quoting at length the writer Rankin Wilborn, who captures this dynamic really well. He says, it should appear on the screen, on the one hand, the word suggests resting and staying like a child leaning into his mother's embrace.

It is a posture of reliance for care and even survival, like branches depend on a vine, which is exactly the context in which Jesus uses the word.

[19:27] This is a relationship of utter dependency. As Jesus says, apart from me, you can do nothing. On the other hand, abiding or remaining is an action.

Here is something you must choose to do. Jesus commands us, abide in me. He commands us to rest in him. Like a dog commanded to stay, we must exert ourselves not to become distracted or move away from our master.

So, remaining is neither passive drifting, no frantic striving. It is the posture of a branch that stays where it is, open to receive what only the vine can give.

So, remain in Jesus in this manner. And why should you remain in Jesus? Well, you can see the purpose of remaining all over the passage as well, can't you?

take verse 8 for instance. This is to my Father's glory that you bear much fruit. You see, the purpose of a Christian is not to get safe, keep living the same way as you did before, then die and get transported to heaven.

[20:57] No, that's not why we exist. no, our purpose as a Christian is to bear fruit, to glorify God.

That's how verse 8 again, we show we are really his disciples. And did you notice in verse 2 just how thoroughly committed God is to seeing this in us?

He says, every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. In other words, the Father is acting exactly like how Jesus describes him in verse 1, like a gardener.

As John Calvin puts it, he is constantly clipping and trimming because our hearts naturally grow all sorts of things that don't belong there.

You see, even branches that are truly in the vine can keep reaching out towards other sources for life. So think of an ordinary week.

[22:10] What do you think makes it significant? Maybe it's how your career is going, the sense that you matter because of what you achieve. Maybe it's how your relationships are going, you feel okay about yourself and people affirm you.

Maybe it's comfort or status or even your own spiritual performance. These shoots feel like part of us. But the tragedy is if we try to draw our significance, our very life from these sources rather than the vine, we will find ourselves drained and our fruitfulness declining.

Because they always demand more than they give. One more achievement, one more word of praise, one more comfort.

But they never ultimately say, like Jesus does, rest, I am satisfied in you. You are accepted. Rest now, you don't have to prove yourself.

And that is why our loving heavenly father, like a careful gardener, steps in and cuts away what would harm us.

[23:37] But did you notice the flip side as well? Look at verses 2 and 6. If you are a dead, unfruitful branch, he throws you away into the fire to be burned.

You see, the branch that is pruned is genuinely in the vine. Sometimes it reaches for rival sources, yes, but its root connection to Christ is real.

But the dead wood is something altogether different. It is the person who was drawing life from a rival vine all along and whose connection to Christ was never real.

That's why there is an absence of fruit. It is the people whom John warns about in 1 John 2 verse 19. They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us.

For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us. But their going showed that none of them belonged to us. And God says, the dead wood must go.

[24 : 55] Now, some of you might hear that and be unsettled. You're quietly wondering, which one am I? Am I truly in the vine, just being pruned through a hard season?

Or am I the dead wood, and I just haven't realized it yet? Good question. So let's observe how Jesus answers that fear, verse 3.

He says, you are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. In other words, your assurance doesn't begin with your fruit, it starts with the word of his gospel.

But if his word has taken hold of you, fruit will follow. So, if you have heard his word and received it, about who he is and what he's done, if you are clinging to him and seeking to follow him, however weakly, Jesus says, you are already clean.

You're not the finished article yet, but you are truly his. And that changes how you see the pruning. Because now when the father cuts, it is not the knife of judgment.

[26 : 24] It is the care of a gardener who already knows this branch belongs to him. So, if today you feel as if things are being stripped back, if life feels like you're being cut down, than being built up, don't assume you are being cast off.

It might be that you are being carefully tended. Because the dead branch doesn't feel the knife as pruning, but the living branch does.

So, if that is where you are, don't be fearful. Simply stay where he tells you to stay, remain in Jesus. And as you remain, notice what kind of fruit that staying will produce, end of verse 16.

Fruit that will last. That's the promise. Now, up to this point, I haven't really defined what that fruit is, have I?

So, let me do that now. In context, firstly, it seems to be the fruit of character, of becoming more like Jesus, someone who is good and faithful and upright, like how Israel, the original vine, was meant to be.

[27 : 52] Then, secondly, it's the fruit of witness, to be so different in word and deed that people around us are drawn towards the Jesus who is producing this in us.

Again, like Israel was meant to be. And thirdly, it is the fruit of love for one another, caring for one another the way Christ cared for us, as Jesus will explicitly mention down in verse 12.

And all that, Jesus says, is the kind of fruit worth bearing, because it is fruit that lasts into eternity. So that brings us to our third and final point, bear fruit that will last. Now, up to this point, you might say, okay, pastor, I get it, we should remain in Jesus because we want to bear fruit, but what exactly does this remaining look like?

I get concrete, please. Fair point? Well, from this passage, I think remaining in Jesus involves two things.

[29 : 05] First of all, it involves remaining in his words. Did you notice that from verse 7? Jesus seems to assume that remaining in him means his words remain in us.

And that makes sense, doesn't it? You see, isn't Jesus' word to us how we became a Christian in the first place? We heard the gospel and that word took root in us.

That's how the relationship began. And what is the word of that gospel? Ultimately, it is a word of love.

Jesus tells us at the beginning of verse 9, it's that as the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. It is the mind-blowing truth that the love the Father has for the Son is the same love Jesus has for the disciples.

Now, let that sink in for a moment. The love that has existed between the Father and the Son from before the foundation of the world, that same love, in its full wake, and warmth, is now directed at you.

[30 : 31] It is that love that drove Jesus to the cross, that ensured that he remained there so that he could pay the price for us. It is the love of verse 13 that he lays down one's life for one's friends.

love. And that is the word of love we need to hear over and over and over again because it is that word that sparks joy in us.

Jesus says just as much in verse 11, I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.

You see, think again of a marriage. How does it thrive? It doesn't actually thrive by simply living in the same house or even sharing the same bed.

It thrives on the words spoken across the dinner table, words of delight, words of commitment, words that say, I'm glad I'm with you.

[31 : 42] And when those kind of words remains in a spouse, they create a deep sense of security and joy. You don't just know you are married, you feel the joy of that union.

And that is what Jesus wants for you. He speaks so that his own divine joy can flow into you like sap into a branch.

love. And that's why we remain in Jesus' words. Because as we do so, we are actually remaining in his love.

As verse seven puts it. Sorry, it's verse nine, not verse seven. But that is not the end. For second of all, it involves remaining in obedience to Jesus.

You see, how else does a marriage thrive? It thrives as you listen to the other person, as you learn your heart, and allow that to shape your actions.

[32 : 56] And that is what Jesus is describing here. to have his words remain in us is to let his teaching, his commands, his perspective, his very voice be the loudest one in our heads.

That's why he also says verse ten, if you keep my commands, you will remain in my love. You see, to remain in obedience is not the opposite of love, it is simply the other side of the same coin.

Think of it this way, in a marriage, if I say to my wife, I love you, I delight in you, I want to remain with you, but then I constantly ignore her wishes or live in a way that hurts our union, am I really remaining in her love?

No, I am distancing myself from it. So when we look to keep Jesus' commands, we are simply looking to stay in the sweet spot of the relationship.

We are simply expressing, as verses 14 and 15 puts it, that we consider ourselves friends of Jesus. And that's why we will do verses 12 and 17.

[34 : 17] We will obey his commands, love one another, because that's the way we remain in his love. And what happens as we remain in those words of love and that path of obedience?

The joy deepens and the fruit starts to grow. And brothers and sisters, let me just say it might also be a good time now to ask you to examine yourself if there is an area of disobedience in your life that is actually cutting you off from the joy of Jesus.

You see, ultimately, sin will always make you miserable. So if you know there is something there today that needs to be cut off, confess it, go to Jesus with it, let the Lord prune it off for you.

For did you notice you can always ask God to help you remain in his words, to receive his love and to obey him? Again, that's what verse 7 is all about.

If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you. In other words, if Jesus' words are truly taking root in your life, that means your desires will start to look more and more like his.

[35 : 52] and so you will start asking for what the father already delights to give. And therefore, verse 8, you will bear much fruit.

So keep asking more and more to remain in his words and obey him. And that way, just like the first disciples, you can then go confidently into the world to bear fruit that lasts.

For did you notice in verse 16 how this is fruit you have been appointed to go to bear? In other words, this is the language of commissioning.

For as you go into the world, speak the gospel, love one another, and put on the character of Christ, there will definitely be some who will want what this vine offers.

And if they get to know Jesus, you have just made the biggest, most lasting impact of all. So let me bring us back to where we began.

[37 : 09] You might have walked into church today as someone who is tired, who is running on empty, and simply going through the motions like an almost dead phone. And if that is you, then today Jesus is telling you, you were never meant to run on your own battery.

The branch was never designed to generate life. It was designed to receive it from a vine that never runs dry.

So today the question we need to ask is not so much are you doing enough? It is, are you remaining in Christ?

Are you letting his word dwell in you richly, the word that tells you that the father loves you with the same love he has for his own son? Are you walking in obedience, not as a way to earn his love, but in response to that love?

If you are, you can be confident even if it doesn't always feel that way, you can live a fruitful life.

[38 : 29] my brothers and sisters, Jesus is the true vine, we are the branches, so remain in him to bear lasting fruit.

That is what God's word from John 15 is saying to us today. Let's pray. Amen. Heavenly Father, as we ponder these words, Lord, will you indeed help us to wonder at this marvelous truth that when we trust in you, we are not just brought near to you, we are actually in you, just as the branches are in the vine.

And so Father, would you help us to draw all our life, all our fruitfulness from you as a true vine?

Help us to remain in you, help us not to go to rival vines, go to rival sources for life.

And Father, maybe for some of us, we know that we are going through a season of pruning, and it is a bit painful to have the Lord cut off things that are not good for us, but we kind of want to cling to. But Lord, we pray that we will submit to his pruning, we will allow him to refine us so that we can be even more fruitful. So Lord, help us to remain in your words as well, so that we might obey you, and therefore live for your glory, and show that we are your disciples.

[40 : 12] All this we pray in the name of Christ. Amen.