

I Am the True Vine

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[0 : 0 0] I once heard someone say that the Bible should be understood not as humankind's book about God, but as God's book about humankind. I don't know about you, but I find that really compelling.

One of the things that draws me into Christian faith is the way its claims resonate so engagingly with human experience. I find that the more deeply we probe into the Bible as a whole and the teaching of Jesus in particular, the more we discover about the reality of what it is to be human.

C.S. Lewis famously wrote, I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.

Over these last few weeks, we've been looking at the seven I am sayings of Jesus. And in this last one, Jesus says, I am the vine. It's the only one in which he not only tells us something important about who he is, but he then goes on to spell out what we are. He says, I am the vine and you are the branches. Interestingly, when we look at the other six I am sayings of Jesus in John's gospel, in each case, we can see how in saying something about himself, Jesus also exposes something important about us as human beings. Except in all of those other sayings, he always leaves it for us to work out what that is. So for example, when he says, I am the bread of life, he's pointing us to the reality of our spiritual hunger. It's in our human nature to spend our whole lives craving satisfaction. Most of the time we may not even recognize it, but often that craving is expressed through things like the quest for material possessions, financial security, or trying to find fulfillment through human religious activity. But Jesus says we can only find what we really need in relationship with him. When Jesus says, I am the light of the world, he reminds us that we can spend our lives stumbling around in the darkness with no sense whatsoever of where we're going. We're in the dark and we need relationship with him to throw light into our lives. And when Jesus says, I am the gate, he highlights our deep longing to be able to access a sense of lasting security.

When Jesus says, I am the good shepherd, we're challenged to ask ourselves just who do we look to for leadership? Who do we follow? And who do we entrust ourselves to? Because whether we're aware of it or not, we do all have that mysterious tendency to be led by someone or something. If that's not God, it will be someone or something else. When Jesus says, I am the resurrection and the life, he puts his finger on what is arguably the greatest and deepest reality that lurks beneath all our human angst and fear. I'm talking about death and dying. We can live our lives trying to avoid or deny that reality or by employing some kind of coping strategy, but nothing will actually make it go away.

[3 : 5 3] And Jesus highlights that very same sense of longing for assurance and peace and direction that lies deep within our souls when he says, I am the way and the truth and the life. So we can see a pattern.

We can see that each and every time Jesus says, I am, he then points to something about what we are too. But when he says, I am the vine, it's the only occasion on which he actually spells that out explicitly what it means for us. He says, I am the vine and you are the branches.

It reminds us that first and last in Christ, God tells us that faith is all about relationship with him. Whenever God in Christ says, I am, it puts the question back to us. And you are.

I'm reminded of the story in Mark chapter eight, when Jesus is talking with his disciples at Caesarea Philippi, as various rumours and theories about his identity are bubbling to the surface.

He makes it personal and he puts it to his disciples. But what about you? Who do you say I am? You see, faith comes down to how we respond to that question. When we make a statement about who we believe Jesus is, then we make a statement about ourselves, about who we trust and about what we're choosing to live for. Think about that. Now, let's just take a few moments to ponder specifically on the imagery that Jesus presents us with when he says, I am the vine and you are the branches.

[5 : 46] I just happen to have here a branch. It's not from a vine. I don't have in a vineyard in the back garden of our mans, but that's OK. The imagery still works. Think for a moment, what would happen to this if I just held it like this for a few months or weeks or days or even just a few hours?

Now, don't worry, I'm not actually going to do that. It would make for spectacularly long and not very interesting video. But what would happen if, having been separated from the plant of which this was a part, this branch was just held in the air? Would it bear any fruit? No, of course it wouldn't. I could try sellotaping some apples or bananas on or something, but it wouldn't take very long for it to wilt and then wither and then eventually slowly but completely decompose.

That wouldn't happen straight away. For a while, if you were to just look at the leaves close up, it might not be that obvious that this branch had been cut off.

It's still got its colour and signs of life in it. And our lives can be like that. During our relatively short time in this world, we all exist, however we stand in relation to God.

And it's quite possible for us to go through our lifetime paying no attention whatsoever to the God who has given us life. During that time, we gradually wilt and wither away. But Jesus says this doesn't have to be all there is to it. We can choose to be reunited, reconnected, rerouted back into the one who is the source of that life. We can abide in him. We can remain in him. We can live and grow in him. Living is about dying. That's inevitable. We're mortal beings.

[7 : 59] But if we abide in Christ, dying can be living. That's his promise. Not just for this life, but forever.