

The Vine (2)

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[0 : 00] 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. Of all the doctrines of the Christian faith, union with Christ is one of the most precious, but one of the least understood.

The Apostle Paul talks of our union with Christ in terms of being in Christ. Jesus himself talks about our union with him in terms of us abiding in him and we abiding, us abiding in him and we abiding in him. His being the vine, we being the branches. As many of you will know, I recently had my DNA tested to find out my ancestral origins. It turns out I'm a mixture of Scottish, Scandinavian and South Italian. Go figure that one. For the Christian, the doctrine of union with Christ locates your spiritual ancestry and your DNA in Jesus Christ.

Listen carefully what I'm saying. On the authority of the word of God, I say to you, we are nothing without Jesus Christ. And we can do nothing without Jesus Christ. And we have nothing without Jesus Christ.

Our union with Christ gives us dignity and status because it defines us. It locates our spiritual origins in Jesus Christ. As Christians, our titles mean nothing. And our wealth means nothing. Our achievements are entirely indifferent. And should they become the object of our pride, a snare to our hearts even. But the more we concentrate on Jesus as our vine, and we as the branches, the more we shall live in the joy and freedom of holy fruitfulness and gospel faithfulness. So let your union with Christ, your abiding in him and his in you, be the source of transforming your gloom into joy and your despair into freedom.

[2 : 47] Let me lower the tone somewhat. Many years from now, as you look back on your life as an old man or old woman, what do you hope you will have achieved in life? Can I humbly suggest that two Fs must dominate all our hopes and all our dreams for all we shall ever achieve? Faithfulness to Christ, fruitfulness for Christ. Faithfulness to Christ and fruitfulness for Christ.

These two words often set in opposition to each other belong together in the world of union with Christ. Without faithfulness to Christ, there's no fruitfulness for Christ.

But faithfulness to Christ will always be expressed in fruitfulness for him. Surely this is our prayer today. Lord, make me faithful to you and fruitful for you.

This is what, in John 15, 5, we learn about Christ being the vine and we being the branches. Our union with him. I am the vine. You are the branches.

Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that shall bear much fruit. For without me, you can do nothing. Well, let me suggest, by way of application of last week's message about Jesus being the vine and we the branches, we focus this week upon our union with him, our intimate connection, our living relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

[4 : 30] And we do it in these two ways. First of all, be faithful to Christ. Be faithful to Christ. Whoever abides in me and I in him.

And secondly, be fruitful for Christ. Be fruitful for Christ. He it is that bears much fruit. Again, I say, the more you concentrate on Jesus as the vine, you as a branch, the more you'll live in the joy and the freedom of holy fruitfulness and gracious faithfulness.

First of all then, be faithful to Christ. Be faithful to Christ. Jesus begins, whoever abides in me and I in him.

Whoever abides in me and I in him. Let me take you back to last week. A number of years ago, my good friend, Phil Stogner over there, invited me to meet one of his friends, David Swain.

And together we visited David's vineyard in South Carolina. It looked nothing like I thought it would. I mean, I had imagined the vines being 20 feet high, as tall as the roof here, full of leaves, inviting bunches of grapes, somewhat something like the Amazon jungle.

[5 : 54] In reality, the ground was dry, the vines were waist high, and the branches were trained in rows, all waist high. And yet, it did look like what I'd imagined in this.

All the branches were attached to the vine. In fact, it seemed to me anyway, that 90% of David Swain's job in life, was to make that connection between the branch and the vine, solid, and unbreakable.

As we stood there in his vineyard that day, David took me back to John 15, and reinforced to me the vital importance of that join, between the vine and the branch.

If the join is weak, then the flow of that life-giving sap will be unable to reach the branch. There'll be no fruit. And David said in his own South Carolinian accent, which I can't repeat.

Phil can, but I can't. He said, it's all in the join, he said. It's all in the join. And from there, he went on to remind me of the importance of abiding in Christ, of we, the branches, being joined by faith to him, the vine, and of how it's only when his life-giving grace is flowing to us, in us, and through us, that we will never produce the fruit of gospel holiness to the glory of his name.

[7 : 29] So for that reason, every single morning, David would, he would walk the rows in his vineyards, and he would check all the joins between the branches and the vine.

For all that we might in Scotland resonate with the imagery of sheep and shepherds, David's deepest spiritual emotions were stirred by the image of Jesus as the vine and we as the branches. So for that reason, David would wake up every morning. I hope he's listening to this on Zoom or YouTube or something, Phil. You must tell him that we're speaking about him. For that reason, David Swain, this very wealthy South Carolinian vinedresser, would get up way before the sun every single morning, and he'd walk to the highest point of his vineyard, and he would spend an hour in devoted prayer, because he knew that his union with Christ, his join with the branch, his join with the vine, and therefore the faithfulness and fruitfulness of his Christian life was entirely dependent upon these precious times where he spent with the Lord, deepening the join, strengthening the connection, abiding in him.

And he said to me, Colin, he said, it's all in the join, he said. It's all in the join. The fruitfulness of the branch consists in the strength of the join, he said.

And he was saying in his own words what Jesus said here in John 15, whoever abides in me, and I in him. To put it another way, whoever is joined to me, and I to him.

[9 : 16] Now then, our immediate interest must be to ask the question, how may I abide in Christ? How may I, like David Swain, deepen my join with him, so that his life-giving grace flows to us, in us, and through us, and we begin to produce fruit to his glory?

Now the study of abiding in Christ takes far more than 10 minutes on a Sunday morning. In many ways, it's a life study, growing and deepening the longer we are united to Christ by faith.

And yet, can I suggest briefly that the following three features are utterly crucial? First of all, abiding in Christ is to be the culture of your heart.

Then it's to be the force of your dependence. Then it's to be the determination of your lifetime. It's to be, first of all, the culture of your heart.

Culture of your heart. What is of first importance to David Swain? Isn't that his vineyard looks like the Amazon jungle, but whether it produces grapes?

[10 : 28] The join between the vine and the branches might look strong, but it's whether under the bark, the sap is flowing, and the join is firm, that counts.

Ultimately, the only branches that will abide in the vine are those whose inner structure, whose internal connectivity, is strongly connected to the stem.

And in the same way, when it comes to your union with Christ, our abiding in him, our join with him, what's of first importance is the culture of our hearts. It's not what can be seen on the outside, which is of primary importance.

It is what cannot be seen. It is the inner structure of your join with Jesus, the internal connectivity to him, or to put it yet another way, our personal relationship with him.

So again, I say when it comes to our union with Christ, our abiding in him, what is of first importance is the culture of our hearts. In this, we're a million miles away from the lifestyle of the religious hypocrite, where everything's a mask, and everything's a false face.

[11 : 54] The hypocrite's religion consists only in that which can be seen by others, not in the culture of the heart. There is no real union with Christ at all.

There is no inner join. There is no personal relationship of the heart. And so with just these few words, whoever abides in me and I in him, Jesus is staring each one of us in the face.

And he's challenging us, saying, what is the culture of your heart? Just think of that. The eyes of the risen Lord Jesus staring right into your soul this morning.

What you are on the outside might impress others, but it does not impress him. It is who you are on the inside.

It is who you are in connection to him when nobody else is looking, when it's just you and him. Who you are in the secret places of solitude when left all by yourself, your external appearances matter, not a whit, and all you have is you and Jesus.

[13 : 08] What you are then is who you are in Jesus' sight. Your abiding in Christ consists, first of all then, in the culture of your heart, the real you in relationship with the real Christ.

Second, abiding in Christ depends upon the force of dependence, the force of dependence. Now, it's true that any image Jesus uses in the Bible can be pushed way too far.

I think the shepherd imagery can be pushed way too far in this extent. Surely the emphasis of this image consists in the strength of the join, the union between the branch and the vine.

It is only in and through that connection the vine will ever bear fruit. And it is this way because the life of the branch consists in dependence upon the vine.

If the connection between the branch and the vine breaks and is weakened, the life-giving sap of the vine is no longer able to flow into the branch. The branch can no longer bear fruit and it soon withers and dies.

[14 : 22] And so the life and fruitfulness of the branch consists in this, the forcefulness of its dependence upon the vine. And that is why for us as Christian believers, fostering and growing in our dependence upon the grace of Jesus Christ in the gospel is of first importance.

No dependence, no fruit. No dependence, no life. Dependence upon Christ is what we call faith. And so the life of the Christian depends and consists in this, fostering and growing in our faith in Jesus Christ. Christ. Inasmuch as we depend upon him, his grace shall flow in us, to us, and through us.

That's why David Swain spent the earliest part of the day long before the sun arose deepening the join between him and Jesus in an hour of prayer.

He spent that time fostering his faith. depending upon the grace of Christ. Now we call disciplines like reading the Bible and prayer and the sacraments means of grace because as we seriously engage with them, they become the means by which Christ's grace flows to us, in us, and through us.

[15 : 57] So why do you suppose that for generations Christians have practiced a quiet time? We're by themselves, perhaps, they read the Bible and they pray.

Sure, it's not a matter of duty as much as it's a force of dependence. They know that they will only ever experience genuine spiritual life and fruitfulness in as much as they grow in their faith in Christ. That's the strength of their join. that's one reason why many Christians use daily reading notes or reading planners or daily bread and things like that.

It helps us to maintain that force of dependence upon Jesus. It helps us to abide in him. If at present you're not using one of these daily reading guides or planners, we can easily make them available to you.

I found one of them this morning actually. I've been listening a lot to UCB radio in my car as I travel around and I downloaded the app and actually on the UCB app you have a word for today which is a daily reading.

[17 : 04] Very helpful this morning. You want one of these? Just ask me or one of the elders after the service. It will greatly help you in your spiritual growth and development.

Your join in Jesus. And so our growth as Christians consists in learning to depend more and more upon his grace. And then third, being faithful to Christ consists in the determination of a lifetime. The determination of a lifetime. For many years the definition of a Christian was determined by a one-off decision. You became a Christian when you decided for Christ.

Perhaps you put up your hand at an evangelistic campaign or in the heat of the moment you prayed the sinner's prayer or you came forward to the Lord's table. Now we must not minimize ever the importance of deciding to follow Christ.

That one-off decision to be his disciple and if that is something that you as a person have yet to do then let me say again to you today is the day of salvation.

[18 : 11] Choose this day right now who you will follow as Savior. But of more importance than defining a Christian by a one-off decision is that we define a Christian by the determination of a lifetime.

The branch which is joined only very briefly to the vine will never experience the fruit-giving life-giving fruit-bearing properties of the sap. And the form of the verb Jesus uses here is whoever is abiding in me.

It's that abiding that present which transforms the relationship we have with Jesus from the decision of a moment to the determination of a lifetime.

Don't rest on past glories. Don't rely on future plans. It's who you are now in dependence upon the grace of Christ that is important. Speaking here to younger people among us of which I was once one I'm delighted that many of you have decided to follow Jesus.

make it the determination of a lifetime. I speak here to older people among us of whom perhaps even generously I'm one of the younger.

[19 : 31] Are you abiding in Christ now as much as you were when you were younger? Many of the kings of Judah fell in their later years because rather than depend upon the grace of God they became proud in their own achievements.

I've heard of a hundred year old man who loved Christ and that's amazing. Maintain the determination of a hundred years to keep growing in the grace and the knowledge of your Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Be faithful to Christ. Foster a culture of the heart which is holy and lifelong dependent upon Him.

Abide in Him. Remain in Him.

Never lose that vital connection with Him through faith. Never stop experiencing for yourself His grace to you in you and through you. When the great vine dresser of the church walks the rows of His church let Him find you firmly joined to the vine for only in so doing will you bear much fruit to His glory.

only then shall your DNA be truly found in Jesus. Be faithful to Christ. And then secondly and more briefly be fruitful for Christ.

[20 : 54] Be fruitful for Christ. Whoever abides in me and I in Him he it is that bears much fruit. fruit. I wasn't in South Carolina at the right time to see the bunches of grapes hanging from David Swain's vines.

I could picture it though. Bunches bunches of grapes. Much fruit. Jesus noticed the words He's not interested just in our mere production of fruit for Him.

but in the production of much fruit. In the parable of the seed and the sower the seed falls in good ground and produces a harvest a hundred times what was sown.

In the same way the branch which is firmly joined to the vine produces not just a little or some but much fruit.

what is that fruit? Well I guess we could automatically jump to the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians love, joy, peace, patience kindness, goodness faithfulness gentleness and self-control I guess we could do that nothing wrong with that because in the context of Paul's writing these are the fruit of the Spirit who is Jesus' life giving sap at work in us.

[22 : 24] Patience in the Christian life oh Lord give me patience and give it to me now is fostered and developed primarily through our union with Christ through our personal join with Him it's only as we are joined to Him the Holy Spirit flows in us and produces the fruit of patience the same is true for all the other fruit of the Spirit we shall only produce these fruit to the level where we are joined by faith to Christ and He to us and so ultimately if you want to become a more patient person you want to become a kinder person a more faithful person a more loving person a more joyful person invest first in your relationship with Jesus Christ so that His Spirit has free access to your mind and heart to do His work there.

I don't want to suppose that Jesus didn't have these fruit in mind when He was speaking about bearing fruit for Him in verse 5 there we could also look wider into the passage here in John chapter 15 our fruit for Christ may consist in effective prayer verse 8 obedience to His commands verse 10 joy in Him verse 11 witness for Him verse 16 but I rather think something just far more obvious is in sight here the fruit of the vine is grapes the vine does not produce olives figs or cornflakes it

produces grapes my friend David Swain does not expect a harvest of apples or oranges from his vineyard rather juicy muscadine grapes from which southeastern American wine is made in the same way the fruit of the vine who is Christ is Christ-like character and behavior the fruit of the vine who is Christ is Christ-like character and behavior a branch which is joined to the vine who is Christ a Christian who is abiding in Him produces no fruit which is un-Christ-like deceit and lovelessness are not Christ-like they are not fruit of the vine judgmentalism and pride are not Christ-like fruit rather love and joy peace self-sacrifice compassion and holiness this is the much fruit Christ is calling for and for which we as we're connected to Him through our growing and developing faith inevitably produce let's go back to the image here the only way in which the branches can produce fruit which after all is their primary purpose is in their vital connection to the vine and the only way in which we as Christians are going to produce the fruit of Christ-like character and behavior is in our vital connection to Christ in our relationship to Him what comes first is not the fruitfulness it's the faithfulness but if there is faithfulness to Christ there will inevitably and as a consequence be fruitfulness for Him so the ideas of a faithful but fruitless Christian you can be faithful but not have any fruit it's a contradiction in terms but this brings us on to the last application from this verse namely that what we may talk about at the individual level for the Christian we may also apply at the level of a church or a congregation the idea of a church which is faithful to Christ but not fruitful for Christ is a contradiction in terms the idea of a congregation which is faithful to Christ but bears no fruit for Christ is a contradiction in terms true faithfulness to Christ true connectedness to Jesus will inevitably result in a church's Christ like behavior and character that's why we want to recommend that as a church we foster and grow in our relationship to Jesus through the means of grace that we invest in Sunday worship both AM and PM that we invest in the prayer meeting that we invest in fellowship that we invest in mutual service that we invest in evangelism it is only as we unite together as one people in Christ his life giving spirit will make us fruitful Glasgow City's strapline condensed down into one word is equip we want to equip you to be the best Christians you can be at home in the workplace at school in all your relationships and duties but perhaps in the light of John 15 and it's called to radical faithfulness to Jesus and fruitfulness for Jesus we need to extend that strapline to us all our vision is to equip you for gospel fruitfulness our vision is to equip you for gospel fruitfulness so to engage you with the means of grace so to latch you on to Christ divine that your faithfulness to him inevitably results in your fruitfulness for him and this not merely as individuals but as one church we want to invest as a church in fruitful activities to the glory of Jesus [28 : 37] Christ our savior evangelism service church planting social engagement and so again our vision must be to equip you for gospel fruitfulness if anyone asks you what's the aim and vision of our partnership as Glasgow City and Partick you know an answer for them we're being equipped for gospel fruitfulness do you want to be part of this what the free church are currently calling from head office a healthy gospel church for every community in Scotland that's the free church's new strap line a healthy gospel church for every community in Scotland in vital union with Christ in our personal relationship with Jesus as individual Christians and our corporate relationship with him as one church will do what we can so that 100 years from now our children will thank us that we left them such a rich legacy of grace and zeal for the glory of Christ in Glasgow and beyond but as we finally close I want to take you right back to the beginning to the question I asked many years from now as you look back on your life what do you hope you will have achieved perhaps you have not yet committed your life to the Lord Jesus Christ what do you hope you will have achieved what will your life have made no matter how many days you have been given let me encourage you that if you do not yet have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ by faith in him that right here right now you make that first decision that first decision which will grow into the determination of a lifetime to be his disciple to live independence upon him to be faithful to him your whole life through and thus to be fruitful for him for this fruit the fruit of faith in Christ for us as individuals and as one church this is the only fruit which shall ever last you 2