

The True Vine

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[0 : 0 0] Let's turn to our sermon text. So today, our series in the Gospel of John takes us to John chapter 15, verses 1 through 11. So let me invite you to turn there with me, and as you turn there, let me pray as we come to God's Word together.

Father, we ask that you would pour out your Spirit among us to help us to understand this Word that your Spirit has inspired, and to help us to understand and to know Christ more, because we know that as we see him in all of his glory, we are transformed into his likeness from glory to glory. Lord, clothe us with your beauty as we behold you in your Word, we pray. In Christ's name, amen. So let me read John chapter 15, verses 1 through 11 for us.

Jesus says to his disciples, I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. 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. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. 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. I am the vine, and 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.

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. 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. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you.

Abide in my love. 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. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. So in 1989, Stephen Covey published a book called *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. In this book, Covey seeks to lay down what he calls the universal and timeless principles for how a person can live a productive and effective life.

[2 : 1 5] And since 1989, this book has gone on to sell something like 25 million copies. That's one of the best-selling books on productivity and personal management and self-help ever written.

Now clearly, if it has sold that many copies, this book speaks to a need that many, many people feel. Right? And since then, hundreds of books have been written and seminars taught and TED Talks given about how we can be more productive and more effective, not just at work or in time management, but in life. You see, deep down as humans, we don't just want to exist. We don't just want to float along.

We want to be fruitful. We want to be and do something that lasts, that's meaningful. And this desire goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden. You see, when God created humanity, God made us with a purpose to steward creation, to work and keep the garden, to see the glory of God extend to the ends of the earth as we, his image bearers, use the gifts he's given us to bring flourishing to the world he has made. But of course, the human story took a tragic turn, didn't it? Rather than using our gifts to cultivate creation for the glory of God, we chose to become our own gods and use our gifts to advance our own kingdoms rather than God's kingdom. And the result of the fall has been alienation and disintegration and death ever since. So we as humans are a bit of a walking contradiction, aren't we? On the one hand, we want to use our gifts and our powers to do something that lasts, to flourish and to bear fruit, and that's good. But on the other hand, we're too often motivated to be fruitful by a desire to exalt ourselves rather than the God who made us. Too often we're motivated by a desire to make a name for ourselves, like the builders of the Tower of Babel. Do you remember of that story? Only to see it all kind of end in confusion. Now the passage before us, John 15, 1 through 11, is all about bearing fruit. As disciples of Jesus, we want to be productive and effective for God and his kingdom. In fact, this whole section of John's gospel, what we call

Jesus's farewell discourse, is about Jesus preparing his disciples not just for his departure, but for their upcoming mission when he returns to the Father. And how will the disciples, how will the church go forth and bear fruit that lasts? Now being fruitful here is sort of an all-encompassing thing, bearing fruit. In the New Testament, we see that bearing fruit can refer to a number of things. Bearing fruit can refer to becoming Christ-like in character. Remember Galatians 5, where Paul talks about the fruit of the Spirit. Bearing fruit can also mean doing good works, loving our neighbors as ourselves. Remember Colossians 1, 10, where Paul talks about bearing fruit in every good work. And of course, it can also mean winning others to Christ. It can refer to evangelism and discipleship. A little earlier in Colossians 1, Paul says, in the whole world, the gospel is bearing fruit and increasing as it does among you since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God and truth. So bearing fruit means helping others come to faith in Christ. So you see, bearing fruit kind of describes the totality of our life as followers of Jesus, becoming like him in character, doing good works, sharing the gospel, winning others to faith. But how do we do that? We want to be fruit-bearing Christians, but what's the key for doing so? Because we don't want to go build another tower of Babel that just ends in confusion and alienation. We want to bear fruit that lasts. So what's the key?

[6 : 12] Well, here's the big idea of our passage. In order to bear fruit as disciples, we must abide in Christ. Abiding in Christ is the necessary, non-negotiable, irreplaceable thing if we're going to bear fruit.

You can go to a seminar, you can attend a class, you can read a book, you can listen to a lecture, you can double your effort, double your zeal, double your time, double your activity, you can strategize, plan, and prepare, you can research, and rehearse, and review, and all those things might be right and good, but they will amount to nothing if we aren't abiding in Christ.

Verse 5 says it all. Jesus says, I'm 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. So if you want to bear fruit, you must abide in Christ. And our passage answers two questions about this idea of abiding in Christ.

First, our passage answers the question of why. Why must we abide in Christ in order to bear fruit? And then it answers how. How do we abide in Christ so that we bear much fruit? So let's look first at why, and then we'll look at how. So first, why? Why must we abide in Christ in order to bear fruit?

Verses 1 through 6 kind of provide an answer to that question that's twofold. Jesus is basically going to tell us, you have to abide in me because of who I am, and because of who the Father is. Because of who Jesus is, and because of who the Father is. That's why we have to abide in Christ.

[7 : 51] So let's look at first, we have to abide in Christ in order to bear fruit because of who Jesus is. And Jesus says, because he's the true vine. That's how the passage begins, right? Jesus says, I am the true vine. Now this is the last of the famous I am statements in the Gospel of John. And like all the previous I am statements, this one is a rich and powerful metaphor. Jesus is the true vine.

In a vineyard, think about it, where do the grapes come from? Well, they grow off the branches. And what are the branches connected to? Well, they're connected to the central vine, right? It's the vine that carries life and energy and vitality that flows through the branches and so produces the fruit.

Now John has already told us as much about Jesus in his prologue. Do you remember in John 1-4, John says about Jesus, in him was life? Life is in Jesus. Jesus Christ, who was one with God from the beginning, the one through whom all things were made, he is life. He is the true vine.

And just look at the records we have of Jesus' earthly ministry and you see this must be true. His words were words of authority and life-giving truth. His character was full of love and courage. His deeds were like none who had come before or after him. The blind were given sight, the lame were made to walk, the sick were made whole, the lepers were cleansed, the dead even were raised back to life. The power of life flowed through Jesus just like life-giving sap and energy flows through a vine, bringing fruit and life in its wake. We have to abide in Jesus to bear fruit because Jesus is the true vine.

[9 : 35] He's life itself. We were joking this week as a staff that wouldn't it be a great sort of visual illustration if I walked down to this little flower thing and just cut it off? And I'd say, see what happens when you're not connected? You die. Do you want to be like that?

I figured I wouldn't go that way, but then I just did. So now it's in your mind. So it's done. Jesus is the vine. He's true life. We have to stay connected to him to bear fruit.

But you know, this I am statement, this I am statement's more than just a metaphor. You know, these I am statements that Jesus makes in John's gospel, they're all rich actually, not just in metaphorical power, but they're rich with Old Testament overtones.

There's a biblical, redemptive, historical reality that Jesus is talking about here. You see, in the Old Testament, the metaphor of a vine was used again and again to refer to what?

To refer to God's people, to refer to Israel. God called Abraham and formed the people of Israel so that they, like a vine, might be planted in the midst of fallen creation and bear fruits amidst the ashes of Babel.

[10:47] That in the fallout of human confusion, Israel might be the place where God's fruit started to flourish again. Israel was meant to be a fruitful vine, glorifying God, a kingdom of priests, a holy nation, declaring God's life and light to the nations.

They were meant to be the vine where fruit finally grew again. But what's interesting is that in places like Isaiah 5 or Jeremiah 2 or Ezekiel 15 or Hosea 10, when the prophets speak of Israel as the Lord's vine, it's not their success that we hear about, but their failure.

That Israel, like the rest of us in humanity, we can't bear the fruit that we were meant to create. That Israel, too, must be rescued.

And in Psalm 80 that Eli read for us earlier, Jerusalem, much like the Tower of Babel, ends in ruin and confusion. The people are judged and sent away into exile, and Jerusalem lies in ashes.

And yes, God would eventually end the exile, and God would eventually rebuild Jerusalem, but still the people were waiting. When would God make us fruitful? When would we become the vine he intended us to be?

[12:10] And into this Old Testament hope, Jesus says to his disciples, I'm the true vine. The hopes of Israel, the mission of Israel, the people of Israel, all find their fulfillment.

In me, Jesus says, I'm the true vine. And if you want to bear fruit, if you want to overcome the fall, if you want to do something that lasts, if you want to escape the pride and the folly of Babel, then you must be united to me.

There's no other way. The mission of God to redeem the nations and heal creation, the mission that God launched through Israel, is now fulfilled in Jesus, the true Israel.

So if we want to be God's people, if we want to be fruit-bearing people, we need to be Jesus' people, united to him, abiding in him. So why must we abide in Christ in order to bear fruit?

On the one hand, because of who Jesus is. He's the true vine. There's no other. But on the other hand, because of who the Father is. Verses 1 and 2, Jesus continues.

[13:19] He says, I'm the true vine. My Father is the vine dresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit, he takes away. Every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes that it may bear more fruit.

The Father, Jesus says, is the vine dresser. He's the gardener. He's the farmer. He's the vine grower. The vineyard belongs to him. And just like a vine grower is jealous for the success of his vines to see them flourish, so the Father is jealous for the glory of his Son, whom he loves.

And that brings a warning and a promise. The warning is that if we say we are Christians, but bear no fruit, Jesus says, our judgment will be the same as those who reject Christ altogether.

Every branch in me that does not bear fruit, the Father takes away. And then he says again in verse 6, if anyone does not abide in me, he's thrown away like a branch and withers. The branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

So the warning is this to us. If we merely profess to be believers, that is, if we take the name of Christ to ourselves, but our lives show no fruit of a real relationship with Christ, if they show no fruit of real union with him, no real change, no real vital union, then eventually, we will be removed altogether from the presence of God like branches bundled for the fire.

[14:54] So we must not merely profess Christ with our lips. We must embrace him and surrender to him with our whole hearts. We must abide in him.

That's the warning. But there's also a promise. Every branch that does bear fruit, Jesus says, the Father prunes, that it may bear more fruit.

For those who abide in Christ, the Father will use every circumstance of our lives, not just the good circumstances, but also and especially the trials and the hardships and the challenges and the losses to prune us that we might bear even more fruit.

Like a master gardener, he will cut away what is lifeless, what is distracting, what is sinful, so that the life of Christ might flow for us, flow through us even more richly that we might bear even more fruit.

So brothers and sisters, if you are in a season of trial or pain right now, do not despair. The life of the true vine is still flowing through you.

[16:02] And your heavenly Father is pruning you, shaping you, so that you might bear even more fruit. You know, what you think might be your greatest loss or your greatest liability for the kingdom, your greatest setback in your Father's hands becomes the work of a loving gardener who has a vision to see you flourish in beauty and praise.

That's the promise. So in order to bear fruit, we must abide in Jesus. Why? Because of who Jesus is and because of who the Father is. Jesus is the true vine and the Father is the vine dresser. And now listen to what Jesus says in verse 3. If you have it open, look there. Already, Jesus says, you are clean because of the word that I've spoken to you. Now there's a bit of a play on words here.

In Greek, the same root underneath the word prune in verse 2 is also underneath the word clean in verse 3. In other words, Jesus is saying, the Father cleans up those who are already clean.

And how are they clean? Because of the word that Jesus has spoken to us. Friends, hear this loud and clear. How do we get connected to Jesus, the true vine?

[17:18] Do we earn our way into proving that we can sort of bear a lot of fruit? Is there sort of some kind of like vineyard tryout? Where the Father sort of lines us all up and says, okay, make some fruit on your own in order to win a spot on the vine.

No! That's the whole point of the metaphor. The whole point of this metaphor is that you can't produce fruit on your own. You can't perform your way into a saving relationship with God in Christ. Apart from Christ, we're dead wood. So how do you get connected in the first place? Jesus says, because of the word I've spoken to you. The word of Jesus comes to us, outside of us, as a word of grace.

The word of Jesus that says, come to me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I'll give you rest. The word of Jesus that says, I've not come to be served, but to serve, and to give my life as a ransom for many, for you.

The word of Jesus that says, whoever believes in me will have eternal life, and you will dwell in me, and I will come and dwell in you. We're united to the vine when we hear the words of Christ and respond with believing trust in him.

[18:33] And we don't place our trust in a sort of set of doctrines, although biblical doctrines are beautiful, and we don't put our trust in a system of ethics, although biblical ethics are so life-giving.

No, we place our trust in a person, in the crucified, risen, and ascended Lord Jesus who says, I'm the vine. Believe in me. And through believing in his word, Jesus says, you're clean.

You're mine. And now, I want you to abide in me so that my life can flow through you more and more and so that you can go and bear much fruit.

So that brings us to the next natural question. We've seen why we must abide in Christ in order to bear fruit. Now we need to ask how. Right? How do we do that? How do we abide in Christ in order to bear fruit?

Well, in verses 7 through 11, Jesus tells us how. He doesn't leave us guessing. He gives us very practical means, actually, for abiding in him. First, he says, if you want to abide in me, then abide in my words.

[19:37] Look again at verses 7 and 8. If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish and it'll be done for you. By this, my Father is glorified that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.

So, abiding in Christ means first and foremost, abiding in his words. So, what does that mean?

Well, think about the word abide itself.

How might we define that word abide? I've been sort of using it a lot this morning, but what does it mean? Some translations say remain, some say live, some say stay. One translation even put it, make your home in.

And I sort of liked that last one. To abide in Christ is to sort of make our home in Christ. That he's the place where we stay. He's the place where we rest. He's the place where we dine and celebrate.

He's the place where we can weep and find comfort. Christ is our home and we abide in him. And to make ourselves at home in Christ is to make ourselves at home in his words.

[20 : 40] The things that he's said and the things that he continues to say. Now, where do we find those words? Well, we find them in the Gospels, of course. And so, we must read and ruminare and meditate on the Gospel records of Jesus.

But you know, in the Gospels, Jesus also teaches that the Old Testament was really all about him as well. Jesus says, the Old Testament was my word too. So, then, we read and we ruminare and we meditate on the Old Testament, on the Pentateuch and the history books and the wisdom literature and the prophets because that too is the word of Jesus.

But we also see that Jesus himself commissioned the New Testament apostles, gave them the Holy Spirit that they might go and teach and instruct and pass on all that he taught them in his name.

So, that means not just the Gospels and not just the Old Testament but the rest of the New Testament as well is also the Jesus-authorized word of Christ. So, you see, the whole Bible, it's not just merely a collection of 66 books written by various authors over the course of 100 years.

Yes, it is that. But through the work of the Spirit of Christ in and through those authors, the whole Bible is the very word of Jesus to us, his church.

[21 : 54] So, if we are to abide in Christ, we must make ourselves at home in the words of Christ. Christ. And look at what a treasure he has given us.

All the pages of Scripture are there so that we might commune with him and commune with him as intimately and personally as a branch is vitally connected and organically knit together to the vine.

Now, how do we know? How do we know we're abiding in Jesus' words? And how do we know we're sort of abiding in his words and his words are abiding in us and we're not just sort of reading them, right? After all, plenty of folks can read the Bible and not abide in Christ.

Well, look at what Jesus says here. If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you. In other words, prayer is the sign that our reading of the Bible has become a real abiding in Christ.

So, I think that causes us to ask ourselves a good question. When you and I read Scripture, do our minds, do our hearts move to prayer?

[23 : 10] Do you start talking to God, asking God for the things that you see him showing you in his word? Now, don't be immediately discouraged if you think, well, that's not really true of me.

if your reading doesn't often turn into praying, then just take the simple advice of many, many saints down through the ages. Slow down.

Read less so that you might pray more. You know, rather than reading three or four chapters of a gospel, try reading three or four verses slowly and then reread them.

Reread them as if Jesus intended these words to be handed down to you so that you might commune with them and hear his voice because that's exactly why Jesus inspired the Scriptures. Ask, what's the point of the passage?

Is there anything that jumps out at you? Where is the Spirit drawing you in, challenging you, comforting you? Slow down and then pray. And when we start praying in line with the word in this way, Jesus makes the incredible promise that God will answer those prayers.

[24 : 26] So abiding in Christ, how do we do it? First, abide in his word. Let his words abide in you. Abiding in Christ means second, abiding in his love.

Look again at verses 9 and 10. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. 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.

Now, how might we abide in the love of Christ? How do we make ourselves at home in the love of Christ? And isn't this great? Jesus is saying, look, it's not just about hearing my words and kind of getting them into your head and your heart, but you also need to abide in my love.

What does that mean? Well, first, I think abiding in the love of Christ means returning again and again to the fact that the love of Christ for us is the thing that is most true and most real about us.

To make yourself at home in the love of Christ means to remind yourself again and again that is what is most real about me. Too quickly, we are tempted to leave the love of Christ and set up shop in our accomplishments or our successes, but then, as we all know, that means we've also set up shop in our shortcomings and in our failures.

[25 : 45] But Jesus says, remain in my love. Let my love be the vital energy that flows through you like sap flowing from a vine to its branches. And abiding in the love of Christ also means that we will be constantly returning to the cross of Christ.

For at the cross, the love of Christ is seen in its fullness. You know, the first time I went to a vineyard, I was really surprised actually, because I was expecting when I went to this vineyard to see like rows and rows of big, bushy, thick vines, strong and sturdy, ready to like give life to the branches and the grapes.

Of course, if any of you have ever been to a vineyard, you know that's not what I saw, right? The first time I visited a vineyard, what I found out was that the vines that produce the most desirable grapes aren't strong and aren't huge and aren't massive.

They're these gnarled, twisted, ugly things coming out of the dirt, like three or four feet high, looking very weak. fruit. But from those twisted and naked vines in time come the most beautiful fruit.

Isaiah 53 2 says, For he grew up before him like a young plant and like a root out of dry ground. He had no former majesty that we should look at him and no beauty that we should desire him.

[27 : 18] Friends, Jesus is a true vine, the only truly fruitful one. But look at where his love would take him. Look at where his love for us would lead him.

He would be twisted and gnarled on a cross and hang on a rough piece of dead wood and himself would die. Why? Why would the true vine be cut off like that?

God. Because he loves us. Because he wanted to rescue us from the death our sins deserve.

Because he died as a substitute to deliver us from sin and death.

So that we could abide in his love. And so that we might say with the apostle Paul, the life I now live, I live by faith in the son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.

Now how do you know you're abiding in the love of Christ? How do you know you're abiding there?

Well, again, what does Jesus say? If you keep my commandments, you'll abide in my love.

[28 : 24] Just as I have kept my father's commandments and abide in his love. Love and obedience go hand in hand. Jesus the son abides in the love of the father and so keeps the father's commands in the same way we abide in the love of Jesus the son and so we keep the son's commands.

Now let's be honest. The commandments of Jesus are not easy. Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off.

Take up your cross and follow me. Wash one another's feet. Serve one another. Forgive one another. Not just seven times but 77 times. What on earth could lead someone to want to do anything like that?

the love of Christ can. Because all the fear and all the pride and all the anger and all the confusion that we harbor the love of Christ meets us there and heals us and forgives us and comforts us and gives us hope and gives us strength so that we not only want to obey but that we actually can obey his commands.

And when we're abiding in the love of Christ suddenly we can turn to someone who's wronged us and we can forgive them. Because we know that the true vine was twisted and gnarled for us.

[29 : 46] How could we not forgive? How could we not pray for those who persecute us? How could we not want to rid sin from our lives? How could we not want to serve one another and love one another? So abiding in Christ's love leads to obedience just like abiding in Christ's words leads to prayer.

But last we don't just abide in his words or in his love we also abide in his joy. Verse 11 These things I've spoken to you that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full.

When we make our home in the words of Christ and in the love of Christ do you know what follows? We suddenly find ourselves at home in the joy of Christ and we stay there and we remain and we abide.

Even in sorrow even in pain even in loss and brothers and sisters you know as Christians we will face all those things in this life but even there there's a joy that nothing can steal away.

The kind of joy that comes not just from being loved but also from having hope. You know the reason why a vine dresser can look out across a field of old gnarled vines and have a smile on his face is because he knows what's coming.

[31 : 05] In a few short months those vines are going to push out tendrils and those tendrils are going to push out leaves and those leaves and tendrils will grow into branches full of color and full

of life and then there will be a flower and then there will be fruit and then there will be a harvest and then there will be a celebration.

celebration. Perhaps you look out over your life at present and you just see a twisted bunch of sticks. But if only you could see what your father the vine dresser sees.

If only you could see what soon will be reality. The leaf, the flower, the fruit, the harvest and yes soon brothers and sisters the celebration.

celebration. Christ will make all things new and in him you will join the celebration and the fruit that you have born in this life though it was made in the midst of much pruning your fruit will be caught up in the celebration of eternity.

After all why did Jesus do what he do? Did it do what he did? Why was he willing to hang fruitless and alone on a cross? The book of Hebrews says for the joy set before him and you are part of that joy so abide in him.

[32 : 31] And what will be the sign that you're abiding in his joy? If the sign of abiding in his word is prayer and the sign of abiding in his love is obedience what's the sign you're abiding in his joy? Well what does Jesus say?

These things I've spoken to you that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full. Friends the end of joy is well it's joy.

Unstoppable unshakable joy. And that's why God made us in the first place to glorify him and enjoy him forever as the old catechism says.

Joy in Christ is the end. His joy leads to our joy and that's the fruit of it all.

Humanity redeemed from our confusion and death to know eternal joy in God once again. And you know this joy is starting to take root when the old things that used to give you joy don't seem to have the same power anymore.

[33 : 37] When the old lusts and the old addictions and the old needs and the old fears and the old longings when they've just started to lose their taste and now joy in God is what really counts and what really satisfies you.

It will be imperfect and it will be ongoing in this life to be sure but it will be real. And your joy will start to be full. So friends if we want to be fruitful if we want to be productive we must abide in Jesus in his words in his love and his joy.

At the end of the day there aren't seven habits of highly effective people as helpful as that book is there's only one that really counts. I'm the true vine Jesus says abide in me.

Let's pray. Our Father send your spirit that we might abide in you and abide in your son.

And Lord cause us to be a people in this day in our time in our city that bear much fruit for the glory of your good and holy name. Lord help us to slow down that we might abide in you.

[34 : 51] Help us to remember your love and your joy would it flow through us we pray in Christ's name. Amen. Amen.