

Who is Jesus?

Messages from the Gospel of John

Message 11

The Vine
John 15:1-8

The Vine and Its Branches

We had a grand time at Thanksgiving this year. Ruth's parents and brothers joined us, along with a few other strays. Her brother Peter is a professor at Duke University, but this year he is working in the White House. His family was invited to participate in commuting the sentence of a criminal on death row. Pretty impressive, isn't it? His little boy, P.J., was especially thrilled to be part of the pardoning of the White House turkey. It was a memorable occasion, and you can see the video if you are interested. But after the ceremony, P.J. and the rest of the Feaver family went home. Although President Bush was glad to have them present for the turkey-pardoning, the Feavers do not live in the White House. Their relationship with President Bush is friendly, but not at all intimate. How different it is for the president's daughters! They are employed elsewhere, but they can roam the White House anytime they wish. Jenna and Barbara Bush do not need an invitation, because the White House is where their parents live. It is their home because of their relationship with the president.

Of all the things Jesus could call Himself, I think the vine is one of the strangest. Later we will look at the unique feature of this image, but the Jesus' obvious intent is to illustrate the intimacy of our relationship with Him. This is a marvelous thing. We certainly do not deserve an intimate relationship with Jesus. In our native state we hated God and tried to avoid Him at all costs. Whenever God got into our business, we opposed Him with all our energy. Everyone comes into this world with an intractable commitment to living for himself, and the thought that God has a legitimate claim on us because He created us is repulsive to natural man. We were such fools! What an idiotic idea that we could avoid God who made everything. What silliness to oppose Him who has all power. God declared that we deserved to die for our rebellion, and surely that would have been our fate had not God Himself intervened. The heart of the Christmas message is that God left the pleasure of heaven and came to this miserable earth for us. Jesus endured the pains and discomforts of life in a poor village to save us from our sin. He spent three homeless years preaching the message of salvation so that we might have a heavenly home. And finally, He offered to die for us so that we would be set free from the guilt and power of sin.

Have you forgotten the marvel of your salvation? Can you remember what it was like to be enslaved to sin? If not, can you look around and see the wreck sin makes of other people's lives? Are you grateful that you have been rescued from the destructiveness of sin now and the fires of hell in eternity? This salvation that Jesus secured for us is so stupendous, we ought to be in a constant state of wonder that Jesus loved us this much. Doesn't it make you want to sing for joy, and pray in gratitude for this great gift?

If all Jesus did for us was rescue us from sin and prepare a place in heaven for us, that would have been wonderful beyond words. But Jesus did not stop there. Jesus has made us His friends. Later in John 15 Jesus says, "No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you." (John 15:15) And the intimacy of this friendship is illustrated by the vine and branches.

Have you ever rescued someone? Have you helped someone who was in deep trouble? Mark is helping students in one of the Allentown public schools. Some of these kids come from rough backgrounds – broken families, drug abuse, a life of violence. Mark is doing as much as he can to help these kids, but at

the end of the day, he comes home. Mark leaves them behind in Allentown and returns to his own house and friends. Some of us are going to Belize over spring break to help the children in a school there. These children are very poor. They do not have the opportunities we have here. Most of them will remain poor all their lives. I am sure the Belize team will pour out their time and energy for those children for that week – but then they will board an airplane and fly back to the U.S. and return to Lehigh. But what if the Belize team brought the whole school back with them? What if they did more than provide temporary assistance? What if they decided to become real, permanent, lifelong friends of those kids? What if they brought them back to live with us here?

That is what Jesus did. Life was infinitely pleasant for God. The Father, the Son, and the Spirit had all they needed. They enjoyed each other's company in perfect fellowship. But out of love for us, God decided to make us His friends. God opened His heart, His home, His whole life and brought us in – we who had formerly hated Him and rebelled against Him!

When Jesus said, "I am the vine, you are the branches," He was expressing a relationship as close as you can get. A branch is tightly connected to the vine. It is not close to the vine, it does not visit the vine, it is not resting next to the vine – the branch is fastened into the vine. This is a permanent connection. The branch is not attached in the morning, or on even days, or in the summer – it lives there forever. So Jesus says we abide in Him. This word "abide" or "remain" means a never-ending dwelling. The Feavers visited the White House once. Dick Cheney might visit sever times a week. Condi Rice might spend the whole day there, but none of them abide in the White House. Only the Bush family abides there. It is *their* house (for now), and they will abide there until the next election. When Jesus makes you His friend, it is a permanent relationship. It is like becoming part of Him. You cannot separate Jesus' friends from Him anymore than you can separate a branch from the vine. If you try, it is no longer a branch, it become a piece of firewood.

I think that if we are honest, all of us would say we really do not want to become permanent friends with poor kids, or others different than we – frat guys, or nerds, or jocks – or you fill in the blank. In our better moments we are willing to lend a hand to others who are in trouble, but you would be horrified if they actually moving into your room. Forever! But that is what Jesus has done. He saved us from sin, certain death, and torment in hell. Then just for love, He went further and made us His friends. We live with Him – forever!

Abiding in the Vine

But now we encounter a curiosity. When we look at this passage more closely we see in verse four that Jesus *commands* us to abide in Him. The first word in this verse is an imperative verb. If it is a fact that we abide in Jesus – if He *has* made us His permanent friends – how can He command us to abide in Him? Isn't that pointless? No because although a vine is an excellent image of our relationship with Jesus, we are not in fact branches. We are human beings. A branch is incapable of changing its location, but people *can* choose where to live – and whom to live with. And although Jesus has chosen us for an intimate relationship, we can turn our backs on Him. We can choose to ignore His precious love and lust after other loves and excitements and comforts.

Now Jesus says two very sobering things. First, He says that apart from Him you will be unfruitful. Not more or less unfruitful – absolutely unfruitful. Think about it. How many grapes will you harvest from a branch which has been broken off a grapevine? Ten? Five? One? No! You will harvest exactly zero grapes. And it happens every time! Infallibly! What happens when a branch is removed from a vine? Within hours it withers. All the life drains from it, the leaves dry up, and it soon becomes worthless. Likewise, if you are not connected to Jesus, you also will fail to bear fruit. Jesus is not saying you will bear less fruit –

He is saying you will bear *no* fruit. You may go through the motions of living a Christian life, you may say you believe in Jesus, you may think you are saved – but you will not produce the fruit that all true Christians produce. You will be fruitless.

Now Jesus says a second thing. He says that unfruitful branches will be burned. Of course. You would expect nothing else. Perhaps you helped your father gather up branches from your back yard and cut them into pieces for firewood. They are useless otherwise. In fact they are worse than useless – they are in the way. So likewise with you. If you bear no fruit you are useless, and you will be burned. This is a strong statement, and we need to qualify it with two important points. First, Jesus is not making any statement about the quality of the fruit in this passage. Here He is only interested in the reality of some fruit versus no fruit. Perhaps you are afraid that your service to Jesus is deeply flawed. Perhaps you think you lack the gifts to do great things for God. Perhaps you are hampered by fears and insecurities, or weighed down by pride. All these are serious issues, but God uses imperfect people in His Kingdom. However small or seemingly insignificant your fruit may be, God is pleased with your service. He will say to you, “Well done, my good and faithful servant.” Our second qualifier is that you cannot use your doctrine of eternal salvation to rob this passage of its impact. Jesus means what He says. It does not matter if you have prayed to receive Jesus, or have been baptized, or have spoken in tongues, or have performed great works, or have any other sort of assurance of salvation. In this passage Jesus means to say that if you are not bearing some sort of fruit, however small it may be, you will burn. And if you thought you had assurance of salvation, Jesus intends to dislodge it if you are fruitless.

Maybe you do not like what I am saying – but these are the words of Jesus. Do not argue with me. Read this passage again for yourself and see if Jesus really said that the unfruitful branches will be burned. But this passage need not be frightening – for the solution to unfruitfulness is simple and obvious. It is to abide in Jesus. Be like the branch that you think you are. If you really are a branch, your place is in Jesus. So stay there. Do not go wandering elsewhere. And if you stay with Jesus, you have nothing to fear. Jesus says in verse five that “He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit...” This is a promise – a wonderful promise. This applies to all of you. You may be talented or not, but Jesus promises you that you will bear fruit. You see, a branch does not have the resources within itself to bear fruit. The branch receives its nutrients from the vine. As long as the vine delivers food and water to the branch, it will bear fruit. The resources for fruit-bearing are in the vine, and the branch receives those without hindrance as long as it is attached to the vine. So we bear fruit as long as we are attached to Jesus. Your own estimate of your ability is irrelevant. You may be a pretty branch, or a long one – you may be fat or skinny, or rough or smooth – but all this has nothing to do with fruitfulness. All that matters is the strength of your attachment to Jesus. Abide in the vine. Cling tenaciously to Jesus, and you will bear much fruit.

The True Vine

Earlier I said you cannot use the doctrine of eternal salvation to rob this passage of its impact. Perhaps you were troubled by that. You know John himself quoted Jesus as saying that those who come to Him will remain. Let’s read John 10:27-29.

My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. ²⁸ And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. ²⁹ My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand. (John 10:27-29)

Now let’s not twist this passage into saying something other than it means either. Jesus is very explicit here. His sheep shall never perish. He does not say they seldom perish, or almost not perish. He

simply says they *never* perish. The omnipotent power of almighty God protects Jesus' sheep, and everyone of them receive eternal life. But if this is true, how does it square with Jesus' equally clear and strong warning in John 15? The answer is to be found in asking what distinguishes this vine from other vines. For Jesus said He is the *true* vine.

The key to understanding this passage and to clearing up the problems it introduces is indeed to ask where Jesus got the vine image. And here we will have success if we look a little in the Old Testament. Turn to Psalm 80 and look at the vine described there. Psalm 80 opens saying,

Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, You who lead Joseph like a flock;
You who dwell between the cherubim, shine forth!
Before Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh, Stir up Your strength,
And come and save us! (Psalm 80:1-2)

No doubt this psalm is about Israel. In it God is addressed as the "Shepherd of Israel", and some of the tribes are named: Joseph, Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh. This is a prayer for deliverance for God's people Israel. Moving down to verse eight, the psalmist makes his case for God to act. He cites God's previous care of Israel as a reason why now God ought to get involved and rescue His people. In doing so, he speaks of Israel as a vine.

You have brought a vine out of Egypt;
You have cast out the nations, and planted it.
You prepared room for it, And caused it to take deep root,
And it filled the land.
The hills were covered with its shadow,
And the mighty cedars with its boughs.
She sent out her boughs to the Sea,
And her branches to the River.
Why have You broken down her hedges,
So that all who pass by the way pluck her fruit?
The boar out of the woods uproots it,
And the wild beast of the field devours it.
Return, we beseech You, O God of hosts;
Look down from heaven and see, And visit this vine
And the vineyard which Your right hand has planted,
And the branch that You made strong for Yourself.
(Psalm 80:8-15)

Do you see how this is a perfect recounting of the highlights of Israel's history? God brought Israel out of Egypt and settled her in Canaan after driving out the original inhabitants. Israel spread out and filled the land of Canaan – from the Mediterranean Sea to the Euphrates River. But like a vineyard which has its walls broken down, enemies invaded Israel and plundered her. The psalmist closes these verses by imploring God to "visit this vine, And the vineyard which Your right hand has planted". The vine is a symbol for the nation of Israel.

Isaiah picks up this image in chapter 5 of his book. Turn there for a moment, to the original parable of the vineyard.

Now let me sing to my Well-beloved
A song of my Beloved regarding His vineyard:
My Well-beloved has a vineyard
On a very fruitful hill.
He dug it up and cleared out its stones,
And planted it with the choicest vine.
He built a tower in its midst,
And also made a winepress in it;
So He expected it to bring forth good grapes,
But it brought forth wild grapes.

(Isaiah 5:1-2)

Here Isaiah is using the vine to symbolize Israel in her rebellion against God. God is pictured as the master farmer who planted the best vine in the best soil. But the vine yielded sour grapes – fruit not worth anything. Clearly the farmer will dig out the vine and replace it – just as God will throw Israel out of her land if she continues to bear the fruit of unrighteousness.

So the vine is Israel. But how does that apply to Jesus? Turning back to John’s gospel, Jesus is saying that He is the true Israel. Let’s look first at what He means by saying He is the true, and then at what He means by saying He is Israel.

The Greek word here simply means true. But it is not the only Greek word that means true. Αληθής is the word ordinarily used to specify a statement or idea that is not false. The word used here, αληθινός is the same word Jesus used when He said in chapter 6 that He is the true bread. Αληθινός means true in the sense of being real or genuine – not a copy or imitation. We might say that the testimony of the witness was αληθής, but the Vermeer painting is αληθινός. Now Jesus is not saying that Israel was a fraud. He is saying that Israel was a reflection of something bigger, better, more real in a sense. Theologians call Old Testament reflections of New Testament realities “types”. We would say that Israel was a type of Christ. Israel revealed something about God, but in a dim, shadowy way. When Christ came, we saw the real thing in all His glory!

Israel was the people of God in the Old Testament. It was the means of salvation then. Israel was good, a wonderful provision from God. But Israel was never the goal. Israel was the means of salvation for all who would worship God until Christ came, but she was only temporary. Since Christ has come, he gathers all God’s people to Himself. So the New Testament calls the church the New Israel. Whereas before the people of God consisted in those who were part of Israel, now the people of God consist of those who are joined to Christ in His church.

Christ is the true vine, not in that the first vine was false (although Israel often was false in many ways), but in that He is the original, the uncopied, unreflected, permanent home of God’s people. Israel revealed God by being a place where God’s people could live and worship Him in joy and peace. In Israel you could see and feel the wisdom, love, peace, beauty, and power of God. You heard God speak when the scriptures were read. You saw God’s sacrificial love in the sacrifices. You were awed by the sheer splendor of the temple with all its gold, cedar, and precious furnishings. You were comforted by the peace that God brought to your land. Life in Israel was simply wonderful. There was no better place in the ancient world. But it was only a pale image of the real wisdom, love, peace, beauty, and power that is revealed in Christ. The Israelites heard a crashing voice on the mountain and saw the commands written on stone, but Christ came right among the people and spoke in a gentle voice. The Israelites saw a lamb sacrificed to save them,

but we see Jesus dying in the cross for us. The Israelites knew the peace of God when He subdued their enemies, but we know the peace of God in the midst of our enemies. The Israelites saw God crush the nations around them, but Jesus destroyed armies of demons by a simple word. Israel was a beautiful nation, but the church of Jesus Christ is dazzling beyond comparison!

In the Old Covenant to be in the vine meant to be part of Israel. It is evident by a cursory reading of the Old Testament that many who were in Israel were not faithful to God. They were unfruitful branches. They were cut off and burned. But others heard God's word and remained in Him. They were faithful, and so were fruitful. They live still, as witnesses to God's faithfulness. (Hebrews 12:1) Now in the New Covenant to be part of the vine means to be part of the church. The church is the New Israel which Jesus loves. He loves her so much, He died for her, and He identifies with her. The church is the body of Christ in this world. But just as there were unfaithful Israelites under the Old Covenant, so there are unfaithful Christians in the New Covenant. To these people Jesus says, "Abide in me lest you be cut off and burn forever." All the sheep that God calls will come to Jesus, and God will preserve them forever. But the vine, the church, has some branches which are not true sheep. These will be cut off and burned.

Abiding in Christ

So what is one to do? All this about vines and sheep is interesting, but what does one do to abide in Jesus? This is not a secret, and I am sure you know the answer already. But first, if you have never before confessed your sin to God and asked Jesus to save you, that is the first step to getting this intimate relationship with Jesus. Do that now, before you leave this room. Jesus promises that He will receive all who come to Him. For us who have come to Jesus, verse seven points us in the right direction. To abide in Jesus is to let His words abide in you, and to speak to Him in prayer. This scripture is not an ordinary book. It is the word of God. That means that when you read it or hear it, God speaks to you. Maybe you are not consciously aware of it, but it is true nevertheless. Likewise, when you speak to God in the name of Jesus, you open up real communication between you and God. You may feel wonderfully close to Jesus, or you may feel nothing at all – but your feelings have nothing to do with the reality of speaking with God.

Most of us here pray and read our Bibles. For you the question is, do you abide in Jesus? Or do you plug into Him on occasion? Are you a branch that draws its strength from Him? Or are you getting by on your dwindling energy and run to Jesus only when you are desperate? Abiding means all the time – every hour of every day. RUF is here to help you abide in Jesus. These meetings, our Bible studies, Noon Prayer, and other activities can help you stay connected to Jesus – and then you should fill the in-between hours with your own fellowship with God. Jesus has called you to be His friend. What would you rather do than welcome His friendship?

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