

The True Vine (Part 1) – John 15:1
Rob Willey, Coram Deo Bible Church

John 15:1.

Intro

Every now and then somebody makes a statement in the course of life – a short, pithy statement; a loaded statement – that conveys a world of information and meaning.

Like when President Reagan said, “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!” Summarizing the western world’s long desire to see Soviet communism eliminated and the Cold War ended. In one statement.

Or how about, “Give me liberty, or give me death!” Patrick Henry. Summarizing the heart of Revolutionary patriots.

And “That’s one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.” (Neil Armstrong) “Remember the Alamo!” (Texan battle cry.) “Et tu, Brute?” (Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*) “Here I stand; I can do no other.” (Martin Luther)

Short, powerful statements that summarize and convey a world of meaning. And recall in our minds a bunch of history. Even emotion.

And John 15:1 is another. Spoken by Jesus. The master of such statements. “*I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser.*” (ESV) You may not realize it now, but that’s one of the most loaded statements in all the Bible.

It not only recalls the history of God’s work of redemption, but conveys the goal and finality of it in Jesus. All because of the metaphor of a vine in a vineyard. A metaphor used throughout the Bible.

So we’re going to follow it, starting in the Old Testament and ending in the New, and I’m going to ask you to turn to a number of passages to see it for yourself. Connecting the dots and discovering the meaning of these amazing words right here in John 15. “*I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser.*” (1)

But before we do, I want to call attention to the fact that . . .

John 15:1 is the seventh and last of the great “I Am” statements

Just like you see on the bookmark you received. Statements like:

“*I am the bread of life.*” (John 6:35, 48)

“*I am the light of the world.*” (John 8:12; 9:5)

“*I am the door.*” (John 10:7, 9)

“*I am the good shepherd.*” (John 10:11, 14)

“*I am the resurrection and the life.*” (John 11:25)

“*I am the way, the truth, and the life.*” (John 14:6)

And “*I am the true vine.*” (John 15:1)

Short, powerful statements that convey a world of meaning.

And the last, just like all the rest, is a statement.

• **It’s a statement of fact**

The very thing we saw back in chapter 6. When we looked at the *first* “I am” statement.

“*I am the true vine*” is a statement of fact, in that Jesus is the ongoing source of our life and sustenance. A source to which we should always be connected.

Think grapes (**grapevine**); especially grapes on a *vine*. It’s another object lesson to say that just like a grape gets its nourishment and sustenance from the *vine*, so we get our nourishment and sustenance from *Jesus*. Everything we need for life and godliness. Everything we need for assurance and fullness.

So “*I am the true vine*” is a statement of fact. Jesus is the source of all we need.

Second . . .

• **It’s a claim of divinity**

Again, just like all the other “I am” statements. Because he was using the very words that God the Father used 1500 years earlier.

When Moses asked him who he should say sent him, God said, “*Say this to the people of Israel: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’ ‘I AM.’*” As in the “ever-existent and self-sufficient one.” The divine one.

So when Jesus used the same verbiage, saying, “*I am the true vine,*” it too is a claim of divinity.

Third . . .

• **It’s a declaration of availability**

I am. As in, “I’m right here. Present and available.” Like a medical emergency where somebody says, “Is there a doctor in the house?” And the person next to you says, “I am.”

It’s not just a statement of fact, it’s a declaration of availability. In this case, the availability of Jesus as our source of life and sustenance.

Three aspects of *all* the great “I am” statements.

But there’s one more that’s unique to this one.

• **It’s an indicator of fulfillment**

When you look at all seven of the great “I am” statements, there’s something rare with this one. Shared with only one other statement. Do you see it?

It’s the adjective. “*I am the true vine,*” he said. Similar to, “*I am the good shepherd.*” They’re the only two statements with a qualifier.

And this one, with the word *true*, indicates there’s something more here. Like he’s clarifying something that’s been spoken of before. He’s the *true* vine as opposed to false vines. And the *ultimate* vine instead of lesser ones. There’s something more.

In fact, given the biblical record, the word *true*, when combined with *vine*, indicates a fulfillment. Because more than just an object lesson, “*vine*” is a loaded metaphor in the Bible for God’s kingdom. Which makes Jesus’ statement an indicator of fulfillment. He’s the *true* vine. The *true* fulfillment of God’s work.

To see it, we need to go way back. So turn with me to Exodus 15, and let's see if we can't connect the dots. Exodus 15:17

Let's start with a definition:

Vines and vineyards are metaphors for the people and place of God's kingdom

His kingdom, as in the people and place of his planting. Like the plantings of vines in vineyards. It's a word picture in the Bible that would have been very familiar to people of old, because wine was their go-to drink.

And sometimes the metaphors of vines and vineyards and plantings are used interchangeably, while other times they're used separately. It just depends on the context.

Sometimes they denote the *place* of God's people, sometimes the people themselves, sometimes God's *kingdom* (his rule and reign), and sometimes all the above. They're all-encompassing metaphors.

It starts in Exodus 15:17, where . . .

Moses alludes to them to make a promise (Exodus 15:17)

He *alludes* to vines and vineyards. Not explicitly, but implicitly.

After the Israelites had passed through the Red Sea on their way to the Promised Land, Moses said this to God – *You will bring them in* [your people; you will bring them into the Promised Land] *and plant them on your own mountain* [your own place; your own kingdom], *the place, O LORD, which you have made for your abode* [your presence], *the sanctuary, O Lord, which your hands have established.*

On the heels of a major deliverance, Moses reiterated the promise God first made to Abraham 700 years earlier. In **Genesis 17:8** – *I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.* 2100BC.

And 700 years later, Moses *reiterated* that promise in Exodus 15 with the word *plant*. Saying that God would *plant* them in the land.

Plus, he *added* a promise. That the land would include a *mountain*; an exalted place from which to rule and reign. That's what mountains represented in the Ancient Near East. Kingdoms.

In this case, a kingdom in which God himself would dwell. A kingdom and sanctuary established by his *own* hands, Moses said. (Exodus 15:17) A vineyard, in which he was the vinedresser. Hello.

Now, if that seems like a bit of a stretch, wait for it. It gets clearer. Because 700 years after Moses, after he *alluded* to the metaphors of vines and vineyards, Isaiah used them explicitly.

In fact . . .

Isaiah used them to withdraw the promise (Isaiah 5:1-7)

Turn with me to Isaiah 5:1-7.

Isaiah 5 is one of those passages in the Bible that can certainly stand alone, but its greatest impact is felt when you connect it to the other vineyard passages.

[1] Let me sing for my beloved [Isaiah says; referring to God] *my love song concerning his vineyard*; *My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill* [mountain]. *[2] He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it* [Exodus 15] *with choice vines*; *he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes* [sour grapes; distasteful and useless grapes].

[3] And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah [God is speaking], *judge between me and my vineyard* [the place of my people and kingdom]. *[4] What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?* In other words, there's no excuse. God did everything they needed.

[5] And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. [Devoured and trampled.] *[6] I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and briars and thorns shall grow up; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.* Game over. No more provision and no more protection.

[7a] For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel [the kingdom of Israel; that's the idea of a house in that day; the place and presence of a king's rule and reign; in this case, God's rule and reign over the nation and land of Israel at that time; the vineyard is the kingdom], *and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting* [the vines; the vineyard is the place and the people are the vines]; *and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, an outcry!* An outcry from those who suffered from such unrighteousness.

The bottom line is this: Isaiah used the metaphors of vines and vineyards and plantings, to withdraw God's promise of a kingdom. At least at that point.

And what you need to know is that it happened. He made this prophecy . . .

• **Right before the Assyrian Dispersion in 722BC**

The Assyrian Dispersion was overthrow of northern Israel when God *fulfilled* this prophecy. Using the powerful Assyrians to swoop in, conquer them, and carry them off. Disperse them. Just like God said in Isaiah 5.

And you don't need to know a lot about grapes, vines, and vineyards to feel the severity of it. Or the shock of being unprotected. It would be like opening the doors of your store in the middle of a riot and letting your customers bear the brunt. Or opening the windows of your home during a hurricane and putting your *family* at risk. It's unthinkable.

Especially when it's completely contrary to your expectations and experience. Like *the men of Judah*, v3. The *vines* in the vineyard.

For 700 years they had been living the dream. Planted and flourishing in the land. On the mountain God had promised. Going all the way back to Exodus 15. And Genesis 17 before that.

Sure, there had been some ups and downs, but they were there. Planted and established. Until Isaiah showed up and God said “enough.” No more provision, no more protection, no more vineyard, no more nothing.

[5b] I will remove its hedge [v5], and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. [6] I will make it a waste. And he did it. Using the Assyrians.

• **Because God was sick of their sin**

Israel didn't *obey* him, they didn't *follow* him, and they didn't take *care* of the vineyard; by preserving the *holiness* of his kingdom; and the *righteousness* of his sanctuary. They flat-out ignored God and rebelled.

So he punished them. Withdrawing the promise, removing their protection, and withholding his blessing. He destroyed their vine and laid waste to the vineyard. *His* vine and *his* vineyard. Because he was sick of their sin.

God's patience and God's mercy won't last forever. It has an end.

And as sobering as that is, and was, that's not it. Neither for the punishment *nor* the metaphors.

Because 125 years later . . .

Ezekiel used them to condemn the people (Ezekiel 15:1-8)

Ezekiel used the metaphors of vines and vineyards to outright *condemn* God's people.

Turn with me to Ezekiel 15.

Despite the fact that Isaiah's prophecy had been fulfilled in the north, the southern tribes, centered in Jerusalem, were following in their footsteps. Forsaking God and living in sin of their own.

[1] *And the word of the LORD came to me [v1]: [2] “Son of man, how does the wood of the vine surpass any wood, the vine branch that is among the trees of the forest? [3] Is wood taken from it to make anything?* [The implied answer is no. It's useless.] *Do people take a peg from it to hang any vessel on it? Even the lowliest of uses? No.*

Which must have been terrifying to them. To all of a sudden be considered useless, when all along they were God's prized planting.

[4] *Behold* [still speaking of the useless vine], *it is given to the fire for fuel* [that's all vines were good for if they didn't produce]. *When the fire has consumed both ends of it, and the middle of it is charred, is it useful for anything?* [In other words, when it's *destroyed* is it any good?] [5] *Behold, when it was whole, it was used for nothing. How much less, when the fire has consumed it and it is charred, can it ever be used for anything!*

[6] *Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: Like the wood of the vine among the trees of the forest, which I have given to the fire for fuel, so have I given up the inhabitants of Jerusalem.* [His people.]

[7] *And I will set my face against them. Though they escape from the fire* [the fire of earth], *the fire shall yet consume them* [the fire of hell], *and you will know that I am the LORD, when I set my face against them.* [8] *And I will make the land desolate* [the vineyard itself], *because they have acted faithlessly, declares the Lord GOD.”*

Isaiah prophesied right before the Assyrian Dispersion in 722BC, and this was . . .

• **Right before the Babylonian Exile in 586BC**

Right before Jerusalem was completely destroyed by the armies of Nebuchadnezzar. Including the temple; God's sanctuary. And God's people at the time were carried off into captivity.

They were deep in sin, false worship, rebellion, and unbelief. Sound familiar? Despite the fact that God had *persistently* sent prophets and leaders to warn them. **2 Chronicles 36:16** – *But they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the LORD rose against his people, until there was no remedy.*

So he gave them up, v6b – *I have given up the inhabitants of Jerusalem*. And he set his *face against them*, v7. And made the land *desolate*, v8. And consumed them (7); destroyed them.

It's the same fate that awaits *anybody* who rejects God. *Anybody* who acts faithlessly. *Anybody* who despises his words. *Anybody* who produces wild grapes.

You know what that is? Condemnation. And God used the metaphors of vines and vineyards to foretell and declare it. Metaphors for the people and place of God's kingdom. Alluded to by Moses, used by Isaiah, and applied by Ezekiel.

Summary

It's not the full story, but enough to see some parallels with our own lives and our own time, and hopefully spur us on to live right. To be a *pleasant* planting in God's sight. *To live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age*, Titus 2 (12). Continually drawing nourishment and sustenance from *the true vine*.

The metaphor fits, and it's loaded.

Prayer – Father, forgive us of our sin. Forgive us of our rebellion; our complacency; our excuses. Assuming that just because our lives have been good, just because you've shown us mercy, you always will. Oh God, wake us up from our slumber. Wake us up to your holiness. And your promises. And your offer of a Vine that never stops giving. Never stops sustaining. Never stops providing. The Vine in whom we pray.

You Are Loved