

## **I Am The True Vine (John 15:1-6)**

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**Main Idea:** Jesus' desire for you is that you would produce spiritual fruit, but you can only do so through abiding in Him.

### **Introduction**

Friday marked the 3<sup>rd</sup> week of spring and if you're a gardener, it means the temps are moving further and further away from freezing and gardening season will be in full swing. If you garden, you are part of the 55% of American households who garden. My wife likes to garden, and we've added a second raised bed to our garden. Even with our two beds, our garden is nowhere near the size of the average American garden...that number is 600 square feet. That's a lot to maintain but those who garden obviously don't mind because they'll spend about 5 hours of their week devoted to the activity.<sup>1</sup>

If you've ever planted a garden, have you ever asked yourself why? Why do we garden? Why do we dig, build raised beds, buy seeds, and fertilize soil? Why, in a world obsessed with automation and ease do we participate in an endeavor that is very hands-on, arduous (any number of things fight against you) and tedious (the work can be long and slow)? We voluntarily do this work mostly as a hobby not because our livelihoods truly depend on it.

Why do we garden? I think part of the answer is that we garden for the beauty, the yield, the produce, the fruit that gardening produces. If your garden yielded neither beauty nor food, you'd probably find a more fulfilling hobby.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.rubyhome.com/blog/gardening-stats/>

A gardener is very interested in what their garden produces. Similarly, Christ is very interested in what your life produces. He's not just interested, He's invested. Open your Bible to John 15. Here's what we're going to see: Jesus's desire for you is that you would produce spiritual fruit, but you can only do so through abiding in Him. Let's look at John 15:1-11,

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup> By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. <sup>9</sup> As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.”

Let's pray and then we'll jump in.

### **Brief Background**

As we dive into this first section of John 15, I need us to take a couple of steps back for some additional context. The setting for John 15 actually begins two chapters back in John 13 in what's often called “The Farewell Discourse.” In the timeline of Jesus's life, these chapters take place the day before His death. Here at John 15, the Passover meal they gathered for is over, they've left the upper room, and it is now deep into the night.

#### **I. Jesus is the Only True Vine (v. 1)**

Along this journey, Jesus gives the disciples a metaphor using images they'd be very familiar with. In America today, the most common jobs are home health and personal care aides, retail sales, and fast-food workers.<sup>2</sup> In Jesus's day, the everyday jobs were in agriculture--

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/area\\_emp\\_chart/area\\_emp\\_chart.htm](https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/area_emp_chart/area_emp_chart.htm)

herding, shepherding, and farming.<sup>3</sup> As a result, when Jesus started talking about viticulture—the cultivation and harvesting of grapes—the disciples would have been very familiar with the subject.

Let's see how He used this topic in verse 1. Jesus said, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser."

It's important that we understand Jesus's opening statement was very offensive to the religious establishment of the day. While they aren't there to hear Him say it, it's still an offensive statement. Here's what He says, "I am the true vine..."

In the Old Testament, the vine was a common symbol for Israel. Here's the thing: In the Old Testament, when Israel is mentioned as a vine, it's never in a flattering or complimentary sense. Rather, what's highlighted is the nation's failure to produce good fruit followed by the threat of God's judgment. Jesus comes along and essentially says, "Remember how Israel was supposed to be the vine—they were supposed to be the channel through which God's covenant blessings came to the rest of the world? Well, I am the true vine. I am the one that if you were rightly relating to God, you would be pointing the world and rightly relating to me." Jesus was the true vine in the sense of being genuine as compared with Israel which had not acted in harmony with its calling.<sup>4</sup> One pastor described it this way, "Theologically, John's point is that Jesus displaces Israel as the focus of God's plan of salvation, which then means that faith in Jesus becomes the lone and deciding factor for membership among God's people."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.americanbible.org/engage/bible-resources/articles/how-people-made-a-living-in-the-time-of-jesus/>

<sup>4</sup> Donald Guthrie, "John," in *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, ed. D. A. Carson et al., 4th ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 1056.

<sup>5</sup> John F. MacArthur Jr., *John 12–21*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2008), 144 as told in Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004], 448.

Now, if His “true vine” statement wasn’t offensive enough, Jesus goes onto say, “my Father...” No religious leader of the day uttered a phrase like that. That’s a death sentence. When Jesus says, “My Father,” He is not saying, “I am a descendant of the Father.” Rather, He is saying, “I am an equal of His. When I speak, I say what He would say. He agrees with me and I with Him.” Friends, if that’s not a true statement, Jesus is committing blasphemy and the penalty for that crime back then was death by stoning.

But Jesus isn’t committing blasphemy, He is telling His disciples (and us) the truth. Jesus did not say, “I am like a vine.” He is not comparing Himself to a vine. He did not say, “I am a vine,” as though He is one of many to choose from. He says, “I am the One and the Only vine. I am the true vine. Where the people of Israel failed to produce the fruit that God was looking for, I will succeed. Where the people of Israel fell short of God’s righteous requirements, I will succeed. Here’s His point: Though Israel bungled its mission to be a blessing to all the nations of the earth, He will get the job done and therefore He can say, “I am the true vine.”<sup>6</sup>

## **II. We are the Branches (v. 2)**

Well, if it’s true that Jesus is the true vine then we need to ask, “What does the Father do with the branches that are connected to the vine?” I’m not an expert gardener, but I’ve heard that if a rose bush is left to itself, it will grow in on itself. It will become tangled and even block the light it needs to grow. As a result, a rose bush needs help if it’s going to flourish. Sometimes the very thing that makes a plant look full is also holding it back and keeping it from bearing additional fruit. In verse 2, Jesus states, “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.”

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/preaching/sermons/truevine/>

Of all fruit plants, the vine requires the most attention. That attention often begins with tying the vines to their supports (sometimes trees, but usually wooden posts).<sup>7</sup> If a vine is not kept under control, well, it's a vine, which means it will grow wherever it wants. That's not good for the vine or for the farmer. Certainly not in all circumstances, but often, gardeners belonged to the poorest class, such as those who might lease rather than own a vineyard.<sup>8</sup> If a gardener did not keep their vines under control, they could grow and interfere with other crops.

Pruning at the right time was essential. Pruned too soon and you could get chutes with no fruit. If a vine was pruned later—assuming it wasn't too cold—the fruit was actually better. In my minimal amount of time learning about grapes and pruning, here's what I've learned: pruning takes place both for the current harvest and for next season's harvest. Pruning ensures that the fruit is of good quality, otherwise during the following season there would be too many clusters of fruit to be nourished by the roots, resulting in only poor grapes.<sup>9</sup>

### III. Pruning the Fruit Bearing Branch (v. 2 cont.)

Well, let's bring all this together. In verse 1, Jesus describes the Father as the vinedresser and verse 2 tells us the vinedresser has two responsibilities. First, he prunes or trims every branch that does bear fruit. No fruit-bearing branch is immune. There is no doubt the Father's purpose in pruning is loving—His goal is more fruit—but the procedure may be painful.<sup>10</sup> The health of the vine is directly proportionate to its pruning. A grapevine will never produce anywhere near its potential without being pruned!<sup>11</sup>

Pastor and author Kent Hughes says, of pruning,

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<sup>7</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary & 2*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 994.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 993.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 995.

<sup>10</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 514.

<sup>11</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *John: That You May Believe*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1999), 354.

Pruning always hurts! David said in Psalm 119:67, “Before I was afflicted I went astray.” Psalm 119:71 says, “It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.” Sometimes the pain of pruning comes because of our sins. Other times it is simply because we are bearing abundant fruit and God wants us to bear more. Whatever the reason for pruning, our natural desire is to try and escape it. No one naturally wants affliction. So allow me to afflict us with a difficult truth: Afflictions would only stop if they were useless, and that is why they never stop. Without pruning, a vineyard would never be in full bloom.<sup>12</sup>

But rest assured of this during a difficult pruning: When is the hand closes to the vine? When it’s being pruned. Friend, God’s hand is never closer than when He prunes the vine. During those times of severest cutting when, to us, He may seem to have departed, He is the closest. His pruning may pain us, but it will never harm us. When the gardener does his pruning well, he leaves little more than the vine. Similarly, the more we are pruned, the more of Christ there is in our lives!<sup>13</sup>

I have never walked through a vineyard in the winter, but I did read an article recently where the workers counted how many cuts they made cutting and pruning and the number blew me away—100,000,000 cuts. Each and every cut has the same purpose: more fruit.

#### **IV. Cutting Away the Non-Fruit Bearing Branch (v. 2 Cont.)**

Well, what about the branches that don’t have any fruit? Jesus says the second responsibility of the vinedresser is to cut off every branch that bears no fruit.<sup>14</sup> Friends, feel the weight of this verse. Jesus is speaking about salvation, and He’s saying you and I can know with absolute certainty if we are in right standing with God. The individual who is right with God bears fruit. Now, this is important because Jesus indicates here that there are people who attach themselves to the vine—in other words, they say they are Christian...they identify themselves as Christians—and Jesus says they’re not in right standing with God. They claim to be Christian, but they have no fruit...they’re dead. They’re not going to be pruned; they’re going to be cut off. And then what? Look at verse 6, “If anyone does not abide in me, he is thrown away like a

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 354.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 355–356.

<sup>14</sup> Carson, 514–515.

branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.” This is a statement about eternal judgment. It is impossible to be a Christian and not bear fruit. Jesus is clear. Any individual who claims to be a follower of Christ but does not bear fruit is not really a Christian. That person doesn’t one day get pruned by God, they get completely cutoff from Him. One pastor summarized it this way, “Although they imagine that they are on their way to heaven, they are actually on the broad path leading to hell (Matt. 7:13–14).”<sup>15</sup>

#### **V. The Fruit of a Fruit Bearing Branch**

Well, how do I know if I’m right with God? How do I know if I’m a Christian? We can actually answer that with another question, “In your life, is there any evidence of fruit?” A true branch, a true Christian, cannot fail to produce fruit.

What kind of fruit are we talking about? How does the Bible define fruit? Let me offer some examples of biblical fruit. The first is from Galatians 5:22-23. The Christ-follower lives a life marked by the fruit of the spirit which includes love, joy, peace patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

A second example includes praise offered to God. Hebrews 13:15 says, “Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge His name.” (Heb. 13:15; cf. Isa. 57:19; Hos. 14:2).

A third example includes sacrificial love in meeting the needs of others. Paul references this in Romans 15:28 when he refers to the monetary gift he was collecting for the needy believers at Jerusalem. He also acknowledged Philippians’ financial support of his ministry in Philippians 4:17.

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<sup>15</sup> MacArthur Jr., 152.

A fourth example includes holy, righteous, God-honoring behavior. Paul prayed in Colossians 1:10 that the Colossians would be continually “bearing fruit in every good work.” Additionally, in Ephesians 2:10, he writes Christians were “created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.”

Finally, the Bible defines fruit as people who come to faith in Christ—not the artificial fruit of superficial “believers,” but genuine disciples who abide in the true vine. Referring to the Samaritans who were coming out to Him from the village of Sychar, many of whom would believe savingly in Him (John 4:39, 41), Jesus said, “Already he who reaps is receiving wages and is gathering fruit for life eternal; so that he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together” (v. 36). In Colossians 1:6, Paul rejoiced that “in all the world also it [the gospel; v. 5] is constantly bearing fruit and increasing.”

But let’s also make sure we know what this fruit is not. It’s not outward success. It is not fruit to be externally religious, superficially righteous, leading a large church, leading a popular ministry, or leading a successful program. The Bible nowhere equates fruit with superficial, external behavior or results. Those are things deceivers, hypocrites, non-Christian cults, and religions can all duplicate. The Bible defines fruit in terms of spiritual qualities.<sup>16</sup>

Let me add one more point about fruit. The idea that each of these fruits will be perfectly exemplified in your life at all times since the moment of your salvation is a lofty expectation. Lofty is an understatement. It’s an impossible expectation. That’s why you need Christ. He meets that expectation. You will have moments where you do not exemplify the fruit Christ produces in believers. Remember, the goal of a good harvest is maturity, not perfection. So, the question is not, “Do I exemplify love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 149–150.

gentleness, and self-control perfectly?” You might still struggle with impatience but compared to last year you’re gentler. Maybe, anxiety is a very real issue for you but you’re trusting God more now than you have at any other time in your life. Or what about how you respond to your own sin? Maybe in the past, it was someone else’s fault but today you own when you sin and are quick to humbly confess it to God and to those you’ve sinned against and then repent. Friends, that’s fruit that is maturing and mature fruit, not perfection, is the goal of the harvest.

## **VI. Obtaining the Fruit – Abiding in Me**

Well, how do we get this fruit? Where does it come from? Look at verses 4 and 5, “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. <sup>5</sup> 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.”

The key to seeing spiritual fruit produced in your life is to abide in Christ. That word, “abide,” by my own quick count, looks like it appears 10 times between verse 4 and 11. One principle of Bible study is when a word is repeated over and over, the author is trying to draw our attention to it. In John 15, John is trying to draw our attention to that word, “abide.”

When we lived here, one of my favorite places to work on a sermon was the Moline Public Library. There’s just something about that environment that makes me comfortable doing sermon prep there. Thursday afternoon, I went to the library to wind down my work on this weekend’s message and when I arrived, I pulled out my phone to send a text. The phone said my battery had 31% left. 45-minutes later, I checked my phone again and I was down to 23%. I picked up my things and moved to a spot in the library closer to an outlet but there was one problem and I bet you can guess what it was. When I opened my bag, my charger was nowhere

to be found. I knew right where it was too but in order to get it, I was going to have to leave the motivating environment of the Moline Public Library.

Whether you have the latest, greatest, cell phone or one like mine that is approaching 5-years-old, all of our phones have the same thing in common: if it doesn't get plugged into a power source, the battery will drain and eventually the phone will die. The phone doesn't create power on its own—it has to remain connected. That's what Jesus means when He says, "abide." To abide is "to dwell," or "stay," or "remain" somewhere, and ordinarily implies a continuing relationship, one in which a person is already involved.<sup>17</sup> To abide in Christ then, is to be utterly dependent on Jesus for life and fruitfulness. Discipleship is not just a matter of acknowledging who Jesus is; it is having Jesus spiritually connected to our inner lives.<sup>18</sup>

If abiding is the first step toward fruit production, how do I start? The starting place for abiding is believing God's Word, embracing the message that Jesus is God's righteous Vine, admitting there is no pleasing God apart from Christ. Friend, the starting point is placing your faith in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Have you done that? We can settle that before you head home.

What if I've taken that first step? Where do I go from here? If you have already come to faith in Christ and believe that He is God's provision of life for us, your next step is to seek Jesus as the vine for strength and life and help in the day to day. Self-sufficiency is the enemy of abiding. The Bible is clear—Jesus is clear—you can do nothing apart from Him. Don't forget that. He invites you to drink deeply of Him, to remain firmly fixed on Him. You are invited to strengthen your connection with Him, to call upon Him in greater dependence and humility.

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<sup>17</sup> J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John*, The New International Commentary on the Old and New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 803.

<sup>18</sup> Gary M. Burge, *John*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000), 418.

Additionally, there is the importance of being in God's Word. God's Word makes the branches clean. Look at verse 3, "Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you." Interestingly, the word used for 'clean' is close to the word for pruning. So one of the major ways that we are pruned (or cleaned) is by the word of God. God's Word, applied by God's Spirit, activated by humble faith and dependence, sends the life-giving power of Jesus Christ coursing through us.

### **Conclusion**

So where does this leave us? Jesus made His point unmistakably clear: fruit is the evidence of life, but abiding is the source of fruit. Branches don't strain their way into fruitfulness. A branch doesn't just grit its teeth and through its effort produce grapes. The responsibility of the branch is to remain connected to the vine. That's the invitation Jesus extends to you right now.

Jesus is not asking you to perform for Him. He's not asking you to impress Him. He's certainly not asking you to go and get cleaned up first. No, the instruction from Jesus is, "Abide in Me—remain in me, stay close to me, depend on me." Do you see what He says He will do? He will abide in us. What a promise!

I hope for some this passage brings comfort because now you realize that whatever it is you've been walking through—this painful pruning—may actually be the loving hand of the Father preparing you for more fruit this season and next. The loss, the disappointment, the unanswered questions might be the careful cutting of a purposeful vinedresser whose aim is more fruit, more Christlikeness, more dependence, and more glory to God.

I hope for others of us, this passage is not comforting, it's confronting. Jesus says there are branches that appear attached but bear no fruit. That's not a comforting statement; that's a

warning shot across the bow. You would be wise to heed His warning and address this question: are you truly abiding in Christ or merely associating with Him? It is possible to attend church, speak Christian language, know Christian doctrine, sing the songs, and still not truly belong to the vine. The evidence is fruit. Is Christ changing you? Is His Spirit producing love, joy, peace, holiness, and obedience in your life? Is there increasing dependence on Him? Those connected to the vine produce fruit—maybe not perfect fruit, but real spiritual fruit.

So, the call is simple: If you have never placed your faith in Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, if He's not the Lord of your life, don't wait. Now is the time to come to Him. Be joined to the vine. Be joined to the true vine by faith.

If you know Him, stop trying to live life in your own strength. Abide. Tomorrow morning, abide. On your drive to work, abide. In your parenting, abide. In your suffering, abide. In your temptation, abide. In your uncertainty, abide. Apart from Him, you can do nothing. But connected to Him, the Father delights to make our lives fruitful for His glory.

Let's pray.