

I Am - Jesus in his own words

2. The True Vine

September 23-24, 2017

Many years ago when the internet was young, I created my first computer password. It was John15. I used it all the time -- for all kinds of purposes. Of course, that's too weak a password to use today, but back then it worked fine. I chose "John15" because I wanted to be reminded of John 15:5 as often as possible. That's because if there was one verse that summed up the key to a life without regrets and to a life that makes a difference, it's that verse.

If you have your Bible or a Bible app online, please turn to John 15. In the book of John, Jesus made 7 different statements to describe him. They all begin with the words "I am..." Today we look at John 15, in which Jesus says, "I am the true vine." Let's stand and read these five verses aloud together:

John 15:1-5 I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ² He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. ³ You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴ Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. ⁵ "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

All of Jesus' "I am" statements used common images that meant something to his listeners. This one is, "I am the true vine." Grapevines were a common sight to the disciples. First of all, the disciples likely had grapevines growing near their houses. Most people had their own vines and knew about how to take care of them. Also, every time the disciples walked into the temple in Jerusalem, they saw a grapevine. That's because there was a gigantic grapevine carved out of gold above the large door that led to the inner sanctuary.

[http://www.ritmeyer.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Temple-Avi-Yona_blog1.jpg]

The grapevine represented God's people Israel. The Old Testament says God planted Israel so they would bear fruit. But every time Israel is called "the vine" in OT, it is always a negative reference. It always says Israel was a vine planted by God, but that they didn't bear fruit like God expected. They were a vine without fruit. They didn't show justice, they didn't love mercy, they didn't stay faithful to God... they worshipped idols instead. So when the disciples heard a reference to "grapevine," they would have thought about the people of Israel.

But now in John 15, Jesus says, "I am the true vine..." So, Israel isn't really the vine, *Jesus* is the true vine. By saying this, **Jesus is revealing God's grace**. Here's why: Jesus is saying that he is doing what the Jews couldn't! The

Jews couldn't stay faithful to God, but Jesus did. And when people are connected to him, God views them as faithful too. The Jews couldn't display God's character to the world, but Jesus did. And when people connect to Jesus, God views them as faithful too. The Jews couldn't produce fruit, but Jesus was fruitful!

By saying, "I am the true vine," Jesus is saying "I know you couldn't live up to God's standards, but don't worry, I'll do it for you. I got this." What a powerful statement of the Good News - we can't be good enough to meet God's perfect standard, but Jesus did it for us. He is our righteousness. In John 15:5, Jesus said: *I am the vine; you are the branches.* The people are not the vine anymore, Jesus is the true vine. The people are the branches which connect to the vine.

The vine is the source of life for the branches. The role of the branches is to stay connected to the vine and receive life from it. Verse 15 continues: *If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.* To "remain" is to stay connected -- to live in union with Jesus. This verse tells us two things happen when we stay connected to Jesus:

When we stay connected to Jesus...

1. ...we will change.

Our lives become different. We don't stay the same. Branches on a vine change as long as they are alive. They change according to the season. Some grow, some fall off. The leaves come and go. And there is no such thing as a person who is connected to Jesus who doesn't change.

One of the ways God changes us is that he "prunes" us. *John 15:1-2 I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ² He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.* To an untrained eye, pruning can seem cruel, but it actually helps the vine to produce more fruit.

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Each year, vine keepers prune the vines. They clip away a lot of branches and leaves. Sometimes they cut off as much as 90% of the previous year's growth. It's not that the branches are dead or diseased. There is nothing really wrong with them. Pruning simply channels the energy and life of the vine into new growth and lets the vine re-invent itself each year. It is important that the pruning be done at the right time in the growth cycle. And a weak vine will be pruned differently than a healthy vine. No one size fits all. The result is that there is more and bigger fruit.¹

God will prune our lives by leading us away from certain things so that he can lead us toward others. I'm not talking about getting rid of sin - though God

¹ Kendall Jackson website; <http://www.kj.com/blog/vineyard-why-we-prune-vines>

will prune that away from us too. I'm talking about things which are not bad. For example, about 10 years ago I quit playing golf.

Now, there is nothing wrong with golf. Plenty of highly spiritual people I know play golf a lot. I may play golf again. But about 10 years ago it became obvious to me that I needed to stop. It happened one day when I was out with two guys from our church, and I was not doing well. It was just one of those days. Balls were spraying all over the course, and I was frustrated. I wasn't having a good time. When I went home, I realized that if I was going to enjoy golf I needed to start practicing and probably take lessons in order to improve. Playing a round already took a fair amount of time and money, and I didn't believe God wanted me to invest more into getting better. So I put the clubs away, and haven't played since. I was pruned and refocused.

Honestly, pruning doesn't usually feel good. Sometimes our lives are pruned and we have no say in it at all. A relationship we value ends. Pruned. We didn't ask for it. We didn't want it. But it happened. And God wants to use it to help us change. Maybe we lose a job and a chapter in our life ends. It might be God pruning us for greater impact. Pruning is all for the purpose of growing us. Sometimes it feels like growth is way too slow. Most vine growers don't see their first bottles of wine until 7-8 years after they have planted their vines. That takes patience! It takes patience, but change will happen!

When we stay connected to Jesus...

2. We will bear fruit.

John 15:2 He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. When the pruning is done, the energy of the vine flows into the branches and they produce even more fruit. When you are connected to Jesus, his life will flow through you and you will "bear fruit." It is inevitable. In verse 5 Jesus says, *If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit.* It is also inevitable that if we don't stay connected, we won't.

What does it mean to "bear fruit?" In the OT, God said Israel was not bearing fruit because they did not live in a way that reflected God's character to the world; they were supposed to do justice, love mercy, and worship only God. But they didn't. For us, "fruit" is showing the character of Jesus to the world. *Galatians 5:22-23* describes this character, and it called the fruit of the Spirit.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,²³ gentleness and self-control. When we stay connected to Jesus, these traits will show up in our lives! And bearing fruit also means our lives will have impact here on earth. We will make an impact. The disciples certainly did. When we share our faith we are bearing fruit. When we bless others we are bearing fruit.

We are fruitful only when we stay connected to Jesus.

⁵ I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. You can do nothing unless you “remain” - stay connected.

My wife likes to plant a garden each year, and this year she planted green beans near our porch swing. She decided to let the vines grow up the chain of the swing. So now we now have green beans growing from our swing! I brought a branch up here. What could we do to make this branch bear beans? Give it pep talks? Lecture it on why it should produce beans and how important it is we have some to eat? What if we all think positive thoughts toward this branch? Or maybe we should try to tape some beans on to it?

That’s ridiculous. Since this branch is not connected to the vine, there is no way it is going to produce any beans. And yet, it is so easy to fall into thinking we’re going to accomplish something without staying connected to Jesus. I know because I’ve done it. I have started my week with a calendar filled with activities and obligations. I have started days with a to-do list and plowed into it, checking items off as I go. There are things that need to get done! People are waiting for things from me! I might think I’m accomplishing a lot. But Jesus says that if I am not connected to him, nothing of lasting impact will get done. Jesus is saying that if we are not connected to him, there is nothing we can do that will bear fruit that matters.

So how do we stay connected to Jesus? I used to think that this verse was saying that if I didn’t have a regular devotional time with God that I wouldn’t accomplish anything. I’ve also considered right doctrine a key to staying connected to Christ, as well as living in a morally healthy way. But just a few verses later, Jesus tells us that to remain in him; stay connected to him. *Verse 9-10 “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. ¹⁰ If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love.* So there it is, keep Jesus’ commands and we’ll stay connected to him.

What are Jesus commands? He tells us: *¹² My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.* To stay connected to Jesus, keep his commands, and his command is to love others. It’s not about getting out our list of do’s and don’ts of laws to obey. It’s about focusing on one thing: loving others.

To stay connected, ask for power to love others.

Love is what matters most. *1 Corinthians 13:1-3* says without love, nothing we do matters. *If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. ² If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.*

Studying the Bible is really important, but if it doesn't lead to love, it's worth nothing. Right doctrine is good, but if it doesn't lead to love then it doesn't matter. But when we make loving others the target, that aligns everything else. We will study the Bible to stay in tune with God in order to have the power to love. We will pray in order to hear how to love better. We will understand doctrine so we can love really well.

Jesus is not telling us to work really hard to be good; or to struggle to love like we should. He is saying "remain in him"... not to struggle really hard to get to him. He is saying to lean into him, not to work to show ourselves worthy. He's got this! Remember, love is part of the fruit of the Holy Spirit. And Jesus tells us we will bear fruit.

I have had the chance to walk by vineyards where grapes are growing. Maybe you have, too. Let me tell you --- they are quiet! I didn't hear the grapevines grunting and straining to bear grapes. There was no groaning or struggle. The grapes just showed up on the branches because they were connected to the vine! The Holy Spirit will empower us to love others, if we rely on him to do it.

What does that love look like? Jesus tells us in verse 13: *Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.* Jesus willingly died for his friends-- and in verse 14 he calls us his friends too! So does that mean that to love others we have to die? No, not physically. (usually) But to love does mean dying to ourselves. It means dying to our preferences so we can serve someone else. One of the times Linda and I were the closest was after my heart surgery. I couldn't do much of anything for a little while, and Linda cared for me in amazing ways. She totally disrupted her routine. She went WAY out of her way to help me dress, get to a chair, you name it. That was love.

How might you take steps into loving others? Perhaps you could join with others to meet a need. Right now there are teams organizing to go to Houston to help hurricane victims recover. Those of you who are going down there as volunteers are showing amazing love. I have seen lots of amazing acts of love done by Crossroaders. You have fed the hungry and helped fatherless kids.

Another option: we have been teaching about "BLESS" in recent months. That is an acronym that describes a way of showing love to the people you live, work and play with. Pray for those you love, Listen to those you love, Eat with those you love, Serve and Share your story with those you love. And one of the reasons we urge you to get in to a small group is so you can love others who are in that group. Small group is a great way to get to know some other believers: we can't love if we don't know them. What would it be like if those in your small groups loved and cared for each other like family? What if you could risk telling

the real truth about what's going on in your life? What if we could use our gifts and minister to each other?

We thrive when we stay connected to Jesus by loving one another. In verse 8 Jesus says: *This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.* Could we love each other so authentically, so differently, that people would say, "They must belong to Jesus." Could we, by the power of the Holy Spirit, love the people in our area so selflessly that it blows people's minds - so that they know the only explanation is that God is at work in us? That would be to the Father's glory.

Yes we can! We are created to do that! Jesus said, ¹⁶ *You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you.* ¹⁷ *This is my command: Love each other.*