

JESUS IS THE VINE; WE ARE THE BRANCHES

John 15:1-10

Key Verse: 15:5

“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.”

In John 14, Jesus gave us a glorious promise of the kingdom of God. He said, “In my Father’s house are many rooms. I am going there to prepare a place for you.” In Chapter 15, Jesus teaches us how we can bear fruit in life, as we make our pilgrim’s journey toward heaven. He says we have a vine and branch relationship with him. May God help us to know what it means Jesus is the vine and we are the branches!

I. “I AM THE TRUE VINE” (1-3)

Look at verse 1. *“I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener.”* This verse teaches us what kind of relationship we have with Jesus, and what kind of life God wants us to live. In the Old Testament, Israel is often compared to God’s vineyard. For example, Isaiah chapter 5 begins with “the Song of the Vineyard.” The prophet describes how God planted for his people a vineyard on a fertile hillside. He even built a watchtower and cut out a winepress. Then he expected his people to work hard to produce good fruit. To his disappointment, however, they bore bad fruit. God asked them, “Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it? When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad?” (Isa 5:3-4)

So, what does Jesus mean when he says, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener”? Jesus describes the relationship between God the Creator and us, his beloved creation. God created us to be fruitful. Genesis 1:27-28 says: *So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; ...”* God is the source and owner of our lives. The gift of life was given to us so that we may bear fruit to glorify God. We have a fruit-bearing relationship with God.

Many people ignore this relationship. They want to enjoy sinful pleasures of this world, ignoring God. They act and speak as if their life would be fine without God. However, we humans cannot have true life apart from God. A branch separated from the root is dead. It may look okay for a while. But it has no life in it. It’s like cut flowers in a vase. They may look good, but they are dead. They are cut off from the source of life. Jesus says that we need to have a relationship with him to have a life that bears fruit. When we have a personal relationship with God, we can also have a beautiful relationship with others.

We live in a society where the broken relationship problem is serious. Marriages have become much less than life-long commitments. More and more young people live together without marriage commitment. They want an easy way out when things get

tough. Many families are broken and children suffer silently. But this is only a symptom of the more fundamental problem, that is, a broken relationship with God. The most devastating effect of sin is a broken relationship with God. The first thing Adam and Eve did after sinning was to hide from God in fear. Sin separates us from God. The only cure for this problem is Jesus. The Son of God came to heal our broken relationship by giving his life on the cross to take away the sin of the world. When Jesus said, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener," he is reminding us that he came all the way to this world to heal our broken relationship with God. He came to restore our fruit-bearing relationship with God.

Look at verse 2a. *"He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit,..."* God is the gardener. As a gardener takes care of his vineyard, so God takes care of the world. We should know that God is very concerned about our fruitfulness. He is not indifferent toward our spiritual conditions. Because he cares about us, he does two things for us to help us to be fruitful. First, he cuts off every branch that bears no fruit. What does this mean? The branch in Jesus that bears no fruit represents those people who seem to follow Jesus but with no real commitment. They follow their own desires. Judas Iscariot was one. He followed Jesus but his heart was on something else--money. Such people cannot bear spiritual fruit. Worse yet, they have bad influence on others. A bad branch is not only worthless but it can infect the rest of the tree. St. Paul says that God gives such people over to their sinful desires (Ro 1:24,26). God judges such people. Verse 6 says, *"If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned."*

Second, God trims clean the good branches. Look at verse 2 again. *"He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he trims clean so that it will be even more fruitful."* Why do good branches need trimming? We are God's children by the grace of God, but it does not mean we are blameless before God. We are forgiven sinners; we still have many sinful desires in us. God disciplines us to trim clean some areas in our life that make us unfruitful. For young people today, their attention is divided among many things, including Facebook, smartphone, video games, boyfriends and girlfriends, parties, and so on, in addition to school and work. If they allow their hearts to be preoccupied with all these things, they cannot develop a deep personal relationship with God and they cannot bear good fruit. This is true for all of us, not just students. On a given day, our hearts are divided into many things of this world. Let's think about how many of these things hinder our fruit bearing in God. Let's come to God in repentance so that we may spend more time with Jesus.

To prune a fruit tree, gardeners use tools such as shears, snips and saws. What kind of tools does God use to trim clean us? He sometimes allows us to go through trials in life such as sickness and financial difficulties. Many cancer survivors say that their perspective in life is changed because of their ordeal. They no longer spend every hour thinking about how to make more money or how to climb higher on the career ladder. Many of them turn to God more earnestly. Some people lose their lucrative jobs and then they begin to think about life more seriously.

Another tool God uses to trim us clean is through his word of truth. Jesus says in verse 3. *“You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.”* God’s word has the power to make us clean. When we accept Jesus’ word into our hearts and repent our sins, we can become fruitful. The word of God has the power to change a person. So let us not neglect the study of the word of God. Let us not study the word of God casually or superficially. Let us study the word of God wholeheartedly, knowing that it can change us from within to make us fruitful.

A man named Levi was so selfish that he became a tax collector, taking money from his own people to support the evil empire that occupied their country. He sold his own conscience to make money. He thought he would be happy with the money, living in a mansion. But he was not happy. His life did not bear good fruit. His life was miserable. He was lonely. One day, Jesus came to him and said, “Follow me.” Levi had been following his desires for money. Now Jesus was inviting him to follow the Messiah instead. Levi did not calculate this time. He was happy to hear the voice of Jesus. He accepted the words of Christ and followed him. His life was turned around 180 degrees. Through Jesus, this selfish man was changed to become St. Matthew who recorded the beautiful Sermon on the Mount. His heart was deeply moved when he heard Jesus saying, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:3).

II. “REMAIN IN ME” (4-10)

Look at verse 4. *Remain in me, and I will 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.* In verses 4-10, the word “remain” is repeated 11 times. What does it mean and how can we remain in Jesus? Jesus gives us a clue in verse 7: *“If you remain in me and my words remain in you,...”* We can remain in Jesus when his words remain in us. Several other Bible verses can help us to understand the meaning of this word. Psalm 1:2-3 says, *“But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.”* A secret to remain in Jesus is to meditate on his word day and night. If we want to bear good fruit, we must meditate on the word of God every day so that the word of God may remain in us.

If we want to remain in Jesus, we must store the word of God in our hearts. We should not read the Bible the way we read fashion magazines or newspapers. We must read and study the Bible until our hearts are filled with longing to know God and follow his ways (Ps 119:20). Colossians 3:16 says, *“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.”* Paul says, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you.” Let me ask you a question. What dwells in your heart? What is on your mind right now? There are many good things to think about, but above all, the word of our Lord Jesus Christ must dwell in our hearts. This is what it means to remain in Jesus. The best way to have a personal relationship with Jesus is to hear his voice personally by meditating on his word everyday.

Let us read verse 5. *“I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”* When the word of Christ dwells in us, Jesus is in us and helps us to bear much fruit. Apart from Jesus, we can do nothing. Some people try very hard to bear fruit on their own, apart from Jesus. They work hard to make money and to advance their career, spending no time to be with Jesus. They are too busy to find time to study the word of God. They may become successful this way. But no accomplishment in this world will matter in the end, if they still remain in sin and death. Apart from Jesus, we cannot bear good fruit.

In this passage, the word “fruit” is repeated many times. Why is fruit bearing so important? By bearing fruit in Jesus, we can glorify God. Jesus says in verse 8, *“This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.”* We are like fruit trees. God created in his own image and blessed us, saying, “Be fruitful and increase in number.” Our greatness is measured not by our human achievements or material possessions but by our spiritual fruit. Consider the life of John the Baptist. Humanly speaking, he lived a short and tragic life. His severed head was served on a platter at a birthday party. His disciples had to bury his headless body. But Jesus said that no one was greater than John on earth (Lk 7:28). John’s life bore much fruit.

What kind of fruit does God want us to bear? This chapter mentions spiritual fruit such as prayer (7), obedience (10), love (11), and joy (12). In Galatians 5, Paul lists 9 kinds of spiritual fruit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal 5:22-23). Look at verse 9: *“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love.”* One fruit that Jesus wants us to bear is the fruit of love. Love is one of the main themes of John’s gospel and we have many opportunities to talk about it as we study the book. Today, let me talk about just one aspect of it, that is, to love is to give. God loves us. What did he do because he loved us? God so loved the world that he gave us his one and only Son Jesus to be our Savior. Jesus loves us. What did Jesus do because of his love for us? Jesus didn’t just say, “I love you guys so much.” He gave his life on the cross to save us from our sin and death. This takes us to a point that St. John makes in his letter of 1 John. He says: “Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth” (1Jn 3:18). Love is spiritual fruit we can bear in Christ. It is more than vague, warm, fuzzy feeling. To love is to give--to sacrifice ourselves for God and for others. Love is an action. Helping young people to come to God through Bible studies and prayers is certainly one way to bear the fruit of love. This is the fruit that will last (16).

What is the bad fruit that God does not want us to bear? St. Paul says that a sinful person bears bad fruit such as sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. Paul warns us that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God (Gal 5:19-21).

We can learn a lesson about fruit-bearing from Abraham and Lot in Genesis. The two men embarked on a journey of faith at the same time. Abraham believed in God’s promise, “You will be a blessing,” and strived to keep his faith in God through many ups and downs. Because of his faith, Abraham became a source of blessing for all of us. His

nephew Lot, however, believed in God in his own way. He seemed to believe in God, but he didn't listen to God's word. Instead, he followed his own desires. His compromising life bore tragic fruit. His wife and daughters did not take God's words seriously. They produced bad fruit. Some people may say, "I live my own life. Don't bother me; and I won't bother you." But we don't live alone in an island. We are the branches of a vine. One person's life can have an influence on others, especially on his or her children.

Look at verse 7. *"If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you."* Jesus teaches us that prayer is another way to remain in him. There are many ambitious people who want to do great work of God. They often come up with new programs and implement different strategies, in an attempt to make their ministries successful. But in the end, God's work doesn't grow through some clever programs. We cannot do God's work with our own strength. We must learn to pray, knowing that we are weak but God is strong. No matter what we do, the word of God and prayer must be at the center of our ministry.

In verse 10, Jesus says we can remain in his love by obeying his commands. *"If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love."* We learn that love and obedience are closely related. We can remain in his love by obeying his words. The problem is that it is not easy to obey the word of God, especially when we don't like what he says. To obey means we deny our own ideas and learn to listen to the word of God. Obedience does not come naturally. We must learn to obey. Even Jesus learned to obey God (Heb 5:8-9). He didn't want to be crucified half naked before his mother at the age of 33. But he denied his own desire and obeyed the will of God through his prayer struggle in Gethsemane. Jesus set a good example for us to remain in his love by obeying God's words.

In conclusion, we have a vine and branch relationship with Jesus. God wants us to bear good fruit. We can bear much fruit by remaining in Jesus through our sincere Bible study, earnest prayer, and wholehearted obedience. Apart from him we can do nothing. May God help us to remain in his love by obeying his commands!