**I AM the Vine**

October 4, 2015

John 15:1-12

Key Verse 15:5 “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.”

A gardener works very hard to grow big juicy delicious grapes. New branches have a natural tendency to trail down and grow along the ground. But they don’t bear fruit down there. When branches grow along the ground, the leaves get coated in dirt. When it rains, they get muddy and get mildew. The branch becomes sick and useless. So a gardener goes through the vineyard with a bucket of water looking for those branches. He lifts them up and washes them off. Pretty soon they are thriving. The vine’s ability to produce growth increases each year, but without intensive pruning, the plant weakens and its crop diminishes. Mature branches must be pruned hard to achieve maximum yields. The gardener prunes the vine drastically and mercilessly so that the small twig branches may not drain away the strength of the vine. You can have lots of leaves or lots of grapes. It depends on pruning. Likewise God prunes our lives in such a way that it causes us pain, and our wounds are fresh and oozing. But it is so necessary for us to know that much of the time, God is working a great work in our lives, even if we do not understand what is happening at the moment. In this passage Jesus declares, “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.” Perhaps some of you are thinking, “What a nonsense! I can do many things by myself.” That may be true. But in the matter of eternal consequences, you can do nothing without Jesus. We need to remain in Jesus. It is Jesus’ great desire that we bear much fruit. Let’s think about what it means to remain in Jesus and how we can bear much fruit.

Look at verse 1. “I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener.” Why does Jesus speak of himself as the “true” vine? His disciples would easily understand what he meant. The image of the vine was a vivid one for them, since the land of Israel was covered with vineyards. It even was used in the Old Testament as a symbol for Israel’s relationship with God. Isaiah spoke of the house of Israel as the vineyard of the Lord (5:7). Isaiah’s prophecy spoke of Israel as a vineyard that produced only wild grapes. At one point in their history, the symbol of the vine was even on their coins. So as Jesus and the disciples were making their way out of the city of Jerusalem and into the Garden of Gethsemane, imagine them passing through a vineyard. When Jesus says, “I am the true vine,” he meant something like this: “You know that the vine is symbolic of Israel that is supposed to produce delicious grapes. The nation has failed to do so. I, on the other hand, am the authentic Vine. I am the fulfillment of everything suggested by the symbol.” If this had taken place here in Canada, Jesus would have used a maple tree as an example. The point is that God maintains and cares for his people.

Look at verse 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 gardener goes through his vineyard with his pruning knife, he has a definite purpose. He does not randomly cut and slice without regard. He has a purpose, and that purpose is to produce the best fruit possible from his vineyard. A vine does not have beautiful flowers. It has no wood to use. The only use is to bear delicious grapes. The vine cannot produce grapes without the drastic pruning.

God had expected Israel to bear delicious, tasty grapes, but the only grapes he got from them were sour, rotten, stinking, tasteless. When God looks at your life and mine, he has certain expectations. The Bible teaches that God expects to see love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, longsuffering – the fruit of the Spirit. When our Heavenly Gardener picks up his Pruning Knife, he does so with that purpose in view. For instance, if there is something in my life that is preventing me from producing love, he will work in me until I have fulfilled that purpose. What in your life is preventing you from producing the fruit of joy, or peace, or kindness? Our Heavenly Father has a purpose when he begins to cut and prune and cleanse. He does not do it randomly, but with a sharp focus. He knows exactly what he is doing, and he always follows a plan. Remember Jeremiah 29:11? It fits in well here: “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

Our Heavenly Father’s pruning knife is sharp. It is the word of God. Hebrews 4:12 says, “For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.” The New Living Translation says, “For the word of God is full of living power. It is sharper than the sharpest knife, cutting deep into our innermost thoughts and desires. It exposes us for what we really are.” His goal is to cut, and cut, and cut, until he sees fruit in us! Left to ourselves, our flesh will always produce rotten fruit. He moves among us with his Pruning Knife to remove those dead things from our hearts, such as bitterness, resentment, selfishness, anger, self-centeredness, arrogance, pride. Verse 3 says, “You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.” Just as a vine must be cleansed from insects, mildew, and fungus, God uses his own word to cleanse our lives and hearts from those things that should not be there, those things that prevent us from our ultimate, intended fruitfulness. This is a reason why it is necessary that we must study the Word of God. We must read it, understand it, practice it, share it.

When the pruning season comes in our lives, we have a natural tendency to moan and complain. We ask “Why is this happening to me?” If we do not deal with that in our hearts, we will become bitter. The single most important thing for us as Christians is to maintain our vital connection to Jesus, the Vine. Jesus said in verse 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.” Here “remain” means “to maintain a union, to maintain an unbroken connection.” We can produce the fruit of the Spirit only as we remain attached to Jesus and draw our life from him. It is especially important when we are under the Pruning Knife of our Heavenly Father.

Think about the job of a branch. All it does is to be an extension of the vine. It doesn’t have to produce life. It just receives life from the vine. It doesn’t have to decide what kind of fruit to produce. As the life of the vine flows through it, it just naturally produces the fruit consistent with what the vine is. The life is in the vine. The vine does it all. The vine extends its roots into the soil and draws the minerals and nutrients and moisture. The vine sends the sap to the branches so that fruit can bud forth. It is impossible for a branch to function as a vine. The branch does not have life in itself. It is totally dependent on the vine for its life and productivity. The great mistake we make is to try to be the vine when all we have to be is a branch. Life is very frustrating for a branch that is trying to be a vine. Here is perhaps the greatest source of discouragement and frustration in Christian’s lives; we want to do the right thing. We want to accomplish great things for God. We want to please God. But we don’t really understand how that gets done. We try to live the Christian life but the problem is that it is us trying to live it rather than Jesus living it through us. We try to live our lives as if we were the vines and Jesus is an attachment to us—a kind of support to help us do what we want to do. We have our goals, our desires, our work, and we attach Jesus to our lives. But Jesus wants us to understand something. He is not an attachment to our lives. We are an attachment to his life. He is not dependent upon us. We are dependent upon him. The relationship between the branch and the vine can be summed up in one word: dependence. I am dependent upon Jesus as the vine to supply his life flow in me so that what is produced is a fruit of his life flow rather than a work of my own efforts.

There are seasons in our lives when the fruit just seems to flow. God is blessing. Things are happening. We feel victorious. People appreciate us. Lives around us are being changed. People are getting saved and we are having a positive impact. And then there are seasons when you feel like a stub. There’s no beautiful green foliage. All that has vanished. There are a lot of frustration with your own failures and shortcomings. People are certainly not impressed with you. You feel like there’s not much left of you. You wonder if you will ever produce anything worthwhile for God. We feel like giving up and running away. In that situation, there is only one thing we are called to do—remain. What does it mean to remain in Jesus? It means simply, “Don’t leave.” We can think of it in three ways.

**First**, remaining in Jesus means to remain in his word. Look at verse 7. “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” 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 whither. Whatever he does prospers.” In these verses, “meditates day and night” has a deep meaning. Consciously and subconsciously human beings meditate on many things. But if we are going to remain in Jesus, we must meditate on even one word of God day and night, understand its deep meaning, and rejoice in it. We must read the Bible until our souls are consumed with longing for the law of God at all times. This is the meaning of remaining in Jesus. 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.” In this verse there is the phrase, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you.” We must examine what is dwelling in our hearts. Is it jobs, children, movies, video games, research papers? In order to remain in Jesus, the word of our Lord Jesus Christ must dwell in our hearts.

**Second**, remaining in Jesus means that we remain in his love. Verse 9 says, “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love.” What does that mean? Does it mean Christ might stop loving me? No, his love for you is everlasting and unconditional. He will never stop loving you. But by our disobedience, we can remove ourselves from his love. The younger son in Luke 15 left his father’s presence. That father never ceased to love his son. But by his own decision, the younger son left the loving atmosphere of home and wandered into a land full of hardship and trouble. Only when he returned to that place did he experience the love of his father. It was there all along but he had removed himself from the father’s love. It is especially important to remain in Jesus’ love when things do not go well. It is easy to doubt his love and complain. The apostle Paul suffered a lot in the course of preaching the gospel. But he remained in Jesus' love in any situation and lived a victorious life. He shouted, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” (Rom 8:35,37). When we remain in Jesus' love, we bear the fruit of love and all hatred and jealousy and anger will disappear from our hearts. We will be filled with the love of God.

**Third**, remaining in Jesus means that we obey his commands. Verse 10 says, “If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love.” He links obedience with love. Here is the key to remaining: it is obeying. Jesus said, “If you obey you will remain...” What happens when I disobey? I remove myself from the flow of God’s Spirit. I grieve the Spirit and therefore deprive myself of life-flow. Remember what Jesus said in John 14:15, “If you love me, you will obey what I command.” Love is irrevocably linked with obedience. If we really love God, we will obey him. The way we remain in him and in his love is to obey his commands.

Look at verses 12. “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.” Here Jesus wants us to love others as he loved us. When we receive love, we have to give it. Otherwise, we become stagnant pond. A stagnant pond may receive water in the form of rainfall, but the water doesn’t leave the pond. There is no movement out of the water. It just stagnates. The water turns green and starts to smell. When we receive the love of God but there is no movement out of the love, the love just stagnates in us. Now, we take that pond, full of murky, green, smelly, still water and cut an opening into it, and allow that still water to flow out of the pond. Then that stagnate pond changes into flowing water. And an amazing thing happens. The water clears up. It loses that smell. It starts to flow down and out and nourish things. Jesus wants us to let the waters of love flow out of our hearts. May the Holy Spirit cut an opening into our hard hearts and let the waters of love flow so that we may love others as Jesus loved us.

Today we learned that Jesus is the vine, we are the branches. We also learned that God wants us to bear much fruit. We can do that only by remaining in Jesus. May God bless you to bear much fruit by remaining in him.