

The Life: I Am the Vine

Those of you who moved into your first new home—you know the feeling. Really exciting. This is my home now.

And then you quickly go: wait, so this is MY home now. So when something breaks, there's no landlord to call, you are the one responsible for fixing it.

So I remember not long after we moved into our home, and I'm learning the ropes of trying to fix things, and BEFORE I had a list of trusted friends to call when stuff breaks...one day, our garbage disposal stopped working.

You turn it on, and there's just nothing happening at all. And I hit some buttons on there and stuck my hand down in there to see if something was stuck, and once I realized I couldn't do anything to fix it, I thought there was only one thing to do, which is to call a plumber to come over to take a look. So sure enough, the plumber arrives, he comes inside the house, opens the cabinets under the sink...and plugs it in. It had somehow gotten unplugged. Who knew that disposals had plugs?? That was the new thing that I learned that day, that's for sure.

I can only imagine he left muttering something about how stupid people are, but how grateful he is for stupid people like me because they keep him in business.

In order for something to work, it has to be plugged in. It needs power. Jesus gets at something along those lines today, which we will be unpacking as we go.

We're continuing our series today on The Life, which is a reference to a major theme in this passage, namely that Jesus comes to provide an abundant life, a full life, and that he Himself is the fuel for that life. Today's passage gets at this idea and really digs into what is at the heart of this abundant life we're looking for.

Jesus is known for speaking in parables and in this one, it's more of a metaphor than a parable. And there are three components to the metaphor. He says that he, Jesus, is the vine. His Father is the gardener, and we are the branches. The OT actually uses vine imagery pretty regularly but often it's Israel that's the vine and their failure to be faithful is what's picked up on. We have here the contrast then with Jesus who is the perfect vine, the one who will never fail.

And he says in verse 1 that just like a good gardener does, the Father cuts off branches that bear no fruit. AND he prunes fruitful branches so they'll be more fruitful. Then he says that we are to remain in him, as he remains in us. In verse 5 he reiterates this- "I am the vine," he says, and you—we—are the branches.

Like a branch that stays connected to the vine bears fruit—literally produces grapes, so we will bear fruit when we remain connected to Jesus.

In contrast, when we do not stay connected to the vine, we wither and the gardener gathers us up to be burned.

But if we remain in the vine, in Jesus, and his words remain in us, we can ask for what we need from God and it will be done for us.

Verse 8, he wants us to bear fruit, which is the sign that we're his disciples.

Verse 9—Jesus tells us to remain in the love that he has for us. Then he says that when we keep his commands, we remain in that love, which mirrors the way that Jesus' obedience is how he can remain in his Father's love.

And then he says that he's told us these things so that his joy might be in us, and that it might be complete.

I want to take a quick look at the word that gets used here over and over, that's translated "remain" in this translation, and then I've got a handful of observations and implications from the text.

This word "remain" is the Greek word *meno* which is translated in various ways: remain or you might be familiar with a version that says abide. The word is used 118 times in the NT and about a third of those, 40 occurrences, are found in the book of John. And 10 of those 40 are between verses 4 and 10 alone.

The word is sometimes used to just talk about staying with someone. When Jesus tells Zacchaeus he's going to his house for tea, he says I must *meno* with you. I need to remain with you. Which is what Eugene Peterson picks up on when his translation says: "Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you."

The heartbeat of this passage is that life with Jesus is found when we remain, when we abide, when we are connected to our Savior Jesus. And when we do, we will bear fruit, we will find what we need in prayer and we will show the world that we're God's disciples.

But the non-negotiable is that we must remain.

So what does he mean by this? And how are we supposed to live that out? I've got 5 observations from the text.

1. Jesus isn't just interested in a decision from us—he wants a lifestyle of connection to Him.

Perhaps you grew up in a tradition like many Christians where the only thing you really heard about over and over was that you needed to make a decision for Him. And if you were a young person, you probably made a decision for Christ every summer at camp, on every retreat, and so on because 1) you wanted to make sure it would stick and 2) because when the acoustic guitar hits, something happens. Now let me be clear, making a decision to follow Jesus is essential. It's an important first step. As is following in obedience in baptism. But it's a first step, on the path towards a lifetime of abiding in Christ.

We should celebrate people as they make steps and then we have to get along to encouraging people to what a life of abiding in Christ looks like.

Because if someone plugs into Christ, but then they lose that connection, Jesus says that the branches that don't bear fruit aren't good for anything.

So this lifestyle of connection to Christ is everything. Decisions are an important first step. Abiding in Christ over a lifetime is essential.

2. A life of fruitful abiding involves being pruned. (v 2)

Verse 2 says this:

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.

I don't hear a lot of sermons on the joys of pruning. But Jesus says—the ones that bear fruit—ostensibly us—God prunes us. He comes along and trims out the parts that need trimming.

The book of Hebrews chapter 12 echoes this idea. A father disciplines the one he loves. And then goes on to say “no discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace.”

We need to be pruned, to be refined, and if we will allow it, God will prune us. Sometimes that pruning happens in the form of different forms of loss in our lives—whether that's a death or an illness or a disappointment we didn't see coming-- something that takes the rug out from under us. God doesn't bring difficult times to punish us but most of us here can think of a time when hardship shook us, and we came out the other side more made in the image of Christ, and more fruitful.

I'm reminded of one of my favorite quotes from a book by Anne Lamott who is quoting another author who says this:

When you ask God into your life, you think he's going to come in, take a look around, and see that you just need a new floor or better furniture and that everything needs just a little cleaning-and so you go along for the first six months thinking how nice life is now that God is there. Then you look out the window one day and see that there's a wrecking ball outside. It turns out that God actually thinks your whole foundation is shot and you're going to have to start over from scratch.

Sometimes that's what pruning feels like. Something happens that feels foundation shaking, but at the end of it, you realize that God was in it and you're more fruitful that you would have been otherwise.

There's an AW Tozer quote that summarizes this well. I remember reading this and then thinking: did I read that correctly? He says this:

“It is doubtful whether God can bless a man greatly until he has hurt him deeply.”

God prunes us, he at times hurts us because he knows there are things holding us back, things that we need taken away from us, so that we can be fruitful.

Which brings me to my next point which is...

3. The overflow of a life of abiding with God will bear fruit.

Verse 8 says this:

This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

I don't know about you but I want to give God glory. I want to do the thing that the Bible says will add to his glory! Jesus says that the thing that does that is it's to bear fruit, which shows that we're his disciples.

This is how this goes. We abide with Jesus. We remain with him, and we're going to talk in a minute what that looks like.

But we abide with Jesus, then out of that intimacy with Christ, we bear fruit, and part of that fruit is in showing to the watching world that we're his disciples.

So this abiding with Christ isn't just about us, it's about how we impact the world, how we live out our witness.

We are known by our love, by our connectedness to Christ.

So we've seen that Jesus wants more than a decision, he wants us to abide. 2. There's pruning involved 3. God wants us to be fruitful and...

4. Abiding with Christ involves making space to be with Him.

I am going to talk in a minute about different ways we can abide in Christ, what that looks like, but I will say that no matter what you do, abiding in Christ starts with space. It starts with...being...quiet...with even...allowing yourself...to be bored...a little so that you can be aware of God's work in you.

I read an interview with a pretty well-known movie screenwriter and director, who had written a movie about a pastor so they were asking him about his church experience, and he said this:

See, I go to church. And you don't walk out of church because you're bored. You go to church to be bored. I go to church to be bored. You set aside an hour, an hour and fifteen minutes out of Sunday morning, just to sit there, collect your thoughts, listen to the music, maybe listen to the sermon, maybe not... and it organizes the week.

Now—we're not going to interview this guy for an ad for Christ Church—come to be bored! Come to listen to the sermon, maybe not!

It sounds like he's kind of using church to get his week organized.

But I like what he's getting at. His point is, I think: I don't come to church to be entertained. I come to be still, to be quiet. And it's very hard to find quiet in our world right now.

I'm sure every generation says this about themselves, but perhaps there's no greater time in human history where there are more ways for us to be distracted. For us to have so many different things pulling us away from the stillness and quiet that's needed to remain in Christ.

And so many of us are in a hurry. There's a famous story that actually ended up being the genesis for 2 different books, but the story goes that John Ortberg, a pastor, called up his mentor, Dallas Willard. Ortberg was working at a big church, there was always something that needed to be done, and he had found that his spiritual life was lacking, so he went to basically the Yoda of spiritual formation to ask him what he should do. Here's how Ortberg puts it.

What did I need to do, I asked him, to be spiritually healthy?

Long pause.

"You must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life," he said at last.

Another long pause.

"Okay, I've written that one down," I told him, a little impatiently. "That's a good one. Now what else is there?" I had many things to do, and this was a long-distance call (back when that was a thing), so I was anxious to cram as many units of spiritual wisdom into the least amount of time possible.

Another long pause.

"There is nothing else," he said. "You must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life." I've concluded that my life and the well-being of the people I serve depends on following his prescription, for hurry is the great enemy of spiritual life in our day. Hurry destroys souls.

Ortberg wrote his book *Soul Keeping* about that, and then John Mark Comer came along and wrote *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry* also about that.

God doesn't force his way into our lives. He waits until he is invited in. And when we are in a hurry, God's voice is often drowned out.

Each summer, I do a media fast with my summer interns. These are college students, usually 19, and for 1 full week, we all agree not to consume any media, including music. I've been doing this for 20 years now, and the interns 20 years ago, the media back then was TV, magazines and newspapers, and music. And even that felt hard.

Now...we're talking no podcasts, no Instagram or Snapchat or TikTok, and no music. Even in the car.

And it's really funny to hear the response. My favorite from this past summer was one student who half-jokingly said: it's just so awkward to be in my car without music.

Awkward...to be alone in the quiet! But I understand it. We don't have occasion to be quiet very often. There's always something to listen to, watch, fill the quiet. When I get in my car, in many cases, I reach for the radio. When I go for a run, I queue up a podcast. Natural, normal, and there's nothing wrong with that. But from time to time, if we want to remain in Christ, we should think about adding some quiet to our routines.

I heard a guy named Andy Crouch talk this week about the danger of not having a regular pattern of work and rest. He said work and rest, which is how God designed us, can become toil and leisure instead.

God designed us to work and then to rest, to work and to rest.

But if we don't have good boundaries and don't work out of our desire to use the gifts God gave us to bring Him glory and to bring others pleasure, we work too much or (I would argue) *if we get disconnected from the Vine*, from an ongoing connection to our Maker...work can become toil, and then our rest instead becomes leisure.

Meaning: I just need to escape, I need to binge a show. Or we turn to other unhealthy patterns.

Nothing wrong with escape from time to time but if it's the only pattern—if your work is only toil, no sense of purpose in it, then our rest can quickly become leisure.

We need to have healthy patterns of work, and then our rest can be fruitful too.

My final point today is this.

5. How you abide with Christ is up to you.

Abiding in God, remaining in him, looks very different to all kinds of people. This is what spiritual formation, spiritual disciplines is all about. There is no one way for you to remain with God.

And it looks different depending on what stage of life you're in too.

My life changed forever when I was in college and I said: I want to spend time in prayer with God every day. I've never been the same since.

But the danger in finding ways to abide with Christ is that it can easily become about a box we have to check than about the point of it: being with God.

Those of you of a certain age probably grew up with this guilt of feeling like you need to have your Quiet Time every day.

This is of course a very good thing. Starting each day with prayer and Bible reading is very important. But we all go through seasons where this is fruitful and through seasons where it gets stale.

My advice for you would be to stop thinking about it is the thing you have to do: but switch up the routine if you need to.

Think about it more as inviting God into something that you love doing.

Find a new reading plan. Listen to the Bible if you've never done that.

Try a new translation.

Try a different place in your house.

Try reading your Bible at night instead of in the morning.

Try going for a walk when you pray.

Try adding a devotional book to your routine.

If you have a hard time doing it consistently every day, find a longer period of time once a week where you can really be still.

FISHING

A quick aside about Bible reading. There are times when it feels incredibly fruitful and meaningful, and times when it doesn't feel so fruitful. And I think part of the key is that a lifetime of Bible reading is going to look different the 20th time you've read a passage than the first time. There will always be things you discover, but the first couple times you read a passage, there's so much discovery and that same kind of discovery isn't there. That's ok. I like to think about reading the Bible as more like going fishing than eating a meal.

Eating a meal is almost always a good experience. You're hungry, you eat a meal, you feel great. Reading the Bible isn't like that.

It's more like going fishing. When you go fishing, for those that love fishing, whether you catch a bunch of fish isn't the point. For people that love fishing, there's joy in the whole process—going out, being on the water, being with friends (I don't like fishing, so I can't

relate to this) and some days you catch a ton of fish and those days are AMAZING. But even on the days you don't catch anything, there's still joy in going out.

Similarly, when you read the Bible on a regular basis, there's value in coming under the authority of the Scriptures, of submitting yourself to it and to God, and sitting with the word of God in a non-hurried way. Whether you come away with a big catch or not.

And along with that, we have to make sure that we don't look at finding way so to abide with Christ isn't a chore. The biggest way to kill your abiding time with God is to have it feel like it's something you have to do.

And the Bible app most of us use has a streaks thing, which...I get it, if a streak motivates you to keep reading the Bible, good, but you know who had streaks? The Pharisees had mad streaks, and Jesus called them hypocrites and snakes.

Ultimately, it's about the state of your heart. Getting your heart in line with God.

Jesus wants you to be connected to him...so that you can be fruitful! I don't know about you but that's what I want for my life. I want my life to make an impact, I want the things that I care about to be the things that God cares about. And my heart needs to be in the right place for that to happen.

Your heart needs to be in the right place.

CONCLUSION

The point of Jesus' message in John 15 and the point of this sermon is not to add guilt to your life.

Being a Christian is not supposed to be a have-to. It's supposed to be a get-to.

Your Savior wants you to be connected to him.

He has a life of fullness available to you.

For some of you, your relationship with God has become a transaction. And you wonder why it's not working. Jesus would say to you what he said to the church in Ephesus in the book of Revelation:

Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first.

It's about love. It has always been about love, and it always will be about love. God wants your heart, he wants you to be full, to be plugged in.

And he's kind of like the plumber who comes into your home and kindly, gently reminds you—you have to plug it in. I'm not even gonna charge you for that.

Plug yourself in to your king, to your Savior, to your God who loves you more than you could ever know.