

# I am the Vine You are the Branches

## John 15:1-17

Today is the start of a Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. There is a 20 min 'phone in' for prayer and devotion every day this week starting at **8.30am on Monday 18<sup>th</sup> – 25<sup>th</sup> Jan.** Details of how to phone in and listen are at the bottom of this message.

### Let us Pray.

**God of peace, you have shown us that Your will for the world is that all people should live in justice and peace. You have given us a vision of hope where all humanity lives in that wholeness of life for which we have been created. We pray for your world, torn apart by conflict and fear: nations divided one from another by suspicion, aggression, and greed, nations divided within themselves by injustice, oppression, and powerlessness. We pray especially for:**

**You have called Your Church to be a sign of hope in a world without hope, a healing community in a broken world, a people of peace in a world at war with itself. Forgive our failures of the past and create in us a vision of unity and hope, of love and sharing, that we might indeed be a light for the nations, through Jesus Christ our peace. Amen.**

Most people are familiar with Jesus' teaching that He is the way, the truth and the life. Not 'A' way among many, but 'The' way. Here Jesus is talking about the kind of life transformation that happens when we have the Holy Spirit dwelling in us, abiding with us and us with Him.

So, Jesus and his disciples have finished dinner and he has been talking with them. Immediately prior to this passage, Jesus says, "Come, let us leave". They leave, cutting across the city going east. They pass through the interior Valley Gate and Huldah Gate, before exiting through the main wall at the Golden Gate. With the temple rising over the walls of Jerusalem directly behind them, they made their way northeast, stopping shy of the Mount of Olives as they arrived at the Garden of Gethsemane. Along the way, they come across a grape arbour and Jesus, being Jesus, uses the opportunity to teach.

It is good to remember that grapes were quite common as a crop as this area of the Mediterranean, as it was very agricultural. It has been said by some commentators, 'All through the ancient world, the grape vine was a common literary symbol. Almost all the ancient Mediterranean cultures frequently used vine imagery in their literature'. But to the modern ear it might sound a bit odd, leaving us with some questions:

Why is Jesus taking about grapes? What is this about cutting off branches? What is the pruning all about? So, let us read **John 15:1-17** and find out.

So, what is this fruit that He is talking about? What does it mean to bear fruit?

Look at verses 10-13, 'If you obey my commands'. Here, bearing fruit is about obeying Jesus commandments, particularly the commandment to love one another. So, it is about action — the positive action of loving one another. What about the rest of the New Testament? In Galatians 5:22, Paul contrasts the fruit of the Spirit, against the acts of the sinful nature. Most of these fruits speak for themselves — they are feelings and states of being that have outward results. Fruits are also actions — **Titus 3:14**, Our people must learn to devote themselves to doing what is good, in order to provide for urgent needs and not live unproductive lives.

**Ephesians 2:10**, 'For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God has prepared in advance for us to do'.

Fruit is right orientation of the heart and right action; these are all positive commandments. They are all, 'Yes, do this! Christ calls us not to focus on a life of **NO**, but to a life of **YES** of fruit bearing. Behind every "**thou shalt not**", is an implied "thou shalt", to which we are called to aspire. You shall not kill because you shall honour the image of God in your fellow humans. You shall not commit adultery because you shall, through the quality of your marriage, give the world a picture of God's love for his people. You shall not covet because you shall recognise all the blessings, He is already given you. By obeying God's commandments, particularly the commandment of love, you bear fruit, and you experience great joy.

So, why cut off branches? Jesus says, "**I am the vine**" — these words parallel with "**I am the way, the truth and the life.**" Jesus is the vine. He is the only way we tap the soil of God for nutrients. Apart from Jesus, we do nothing of lasting significance, verse 2 — "He cuts off every branch that bears no fruit".

Bible teacher Bruce Wilkinson, you may recall his little book, **The Prayer of Jabez**, selling 8 million copies. Well, he followed up that book with another called **The Secrets of the Vine**, which explores in detail this very passage. In explaining this passage, Wilkinson first shows that the Greek word used here for "cut off", can also be translated as "lift up." This horticultural term is important, as Wilkinson then tells of a conversation he had with an acquaintance who owned a vineyard in northern California.

Wilkinson says, "**As we sat across the restaurant from each other, my acquaintance began to talk about the life of a grower, the long hours spent walking the vineyards, tending the grapes, watching the fruit develop, waiting for the perfect day to begin harvest. 'New branches have a natural tendency to trail down, and grow along the ground,' he explained. 'But they don't bear fruit down there. When branches grow along the ground, the leaves get coated in dust. When it rains, they get muddy and mildewed, the branch becomes sick and useless.'**

'What do you do?' Wilkinson asked; 'Cut it off and throw it away? 'Oh, no!' he exclaimed, 'The branch is much too valuable for that. We go through the vineyard with a bucket of water looking for those branches, we lift them up and wash them off.' He demonstrated for me with dark, callused hands. 'Then we wrap them around the trellis or tie them up. Pretty soon they're thriving.'

There maybe some of you who may feel like your life has not been bearing fruit, you do not feel that joy or peace. You do not live a life of self-control. You have not been living a life of love. You know that Jesus wants these things in your life, but they are just not there yet. Hear this — Jesus is not coming after you with the shears and the weed basket. He is coming with a bucket of water. He will clean that mud and mildew off you — those attitudes and assumptions that hold you back from fruitful living. He'll cleanse you and purify you.

Realise however that it takes years for a vine to become strong enough to bear fruit, it will also take some time to bear spiritual fruit. Do not give up, hold on to **Philippians 1:6, "He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."** No matter where you are in your spiritual life, Jesus **IS NOT** done with you yet. So, what is this about pruning branches that bear fruit? Those of you who are gardeners understand this, think about your lawn. What is the natural tendency of grass — to grow up high. However, if you allow it to grow tall, it will start to thin out, only the tallest blades will survive; therefore we cut grass.

When we regularly cut our grass, it allows for new growth to spring up for a thicker healthier grass. Interestingly, those who use the old-fashioned rotary blade mowers rather than petrol powered mowers, have an additional benefit. The petrol mowers break the blades of the grass apparently, making a traumatic wound that takes longer for the grass to heal. Meanwhile, the rotary blade mowers slice the grass like scissors, leaving a thin wound that heals quickly, and thus allowing more energy to be put into root development.

The same is true in our spiritual lives. As we grow, we will discover that there are some things in our lives, even good things, which must go to make room for deeper spiritual growth. Has there been something in your life that has always worked for you, but it seems to be offering diminishing results lately? Perhaps it is time to prune that from your life so you can focus your energies on more profitable exercises.

For instance, a friend of mine has a practice to read 2 books every Christmas period, **The Screwtape Letters and The Great Divorce by C. S. Lewis**. He says these books display insight into human nature and, in the past, helped to focus him for a new year. But this year he said, he did not feel the same, he did not have the flashes of insight that he expected. There was not as much joy in the experience that he had before. He thinks that God might be prompting him to lay down this practice to focus on some other things. Picking a new book to read is the simplest things to do, but sometimes pruning is quite painful.

God may be calling us to let go of something quite dear, but not helpful, to our spiritual lives. God may even allow us to suffer for a time in order to get to a new level of fruit bearing. Look at **Hebrews 12:7-11, 'Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us, and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.**

It is hard to surrender to God's stroke, but there are times when it must be done. If we could just let go of that intellectual pride, or that old grudge, or new grudge come to that, needs to be put right. Everything we do, the worship, the witness, the Bible study, the sharing, the serving, as much as we have been able to do in this last year, is designed to help us bear more fruit than we are currently bearing. Some people are so beat up by life that they are not bearing any fruit at all. Jesus washes them and ties them up and lets them heal in his grace. If this is you, then long for and expect Jesus' soul therapy. Some people are bearing some fruit, but could be bearing so much more, Jesus identifies those areas of their lives that are sapping your growth and sets about the process of removing them.

If this is you, then look for those places in your life that seem to be holding you back and work with Jesus in getting rid of them. Do that, and you and those who love you will enjoy abundant fruit like you have never imagined. Just take a moment to think about what you will have in the way of joy, in that harvest. Amen.

Let Us Pray

**Lord God, we thank you for calling us into the company of those who trust in Christ and seek to obey His will. May your Spirit guide and strengthen us in mission and service to your world; for we are strangers no longer but pilgrims together on the way to Your kingdom. Amen.**

Please stay safe, and may our Lord bless you this coming week.

Blessings

Mike

Details for 'Phone in'. Free Conference is a telephone conferencing service (which saves us having to get our webcam faces on early in the morning!) For most telephone call-packages the dial-up number is included in your package!

**Just dial 03330 110616** Then you will be asked to put in the **access code 152 8718** followed by the **pound or hash # key**. If you arrive first, you will hear some tinny hold music, but once more than one person is in the conference is 'live'. During the call you can mute or unmute using **\*6**