“REMAIN IN ME”

John 15:1–17

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 these upper room dialogues Jesus makes the last two of his seven “I am” statements in John’s Gospel: “I am the way” and “I am the true vine.” But the vine allegory he develops much more fully. Jesus gives his disciples this allegory to help them understand how they can continue having a relationship with him after he’s gone, and what the results of this relationship will be.

This allegory of a vine is repeated in both the Old and New Testaments (Isa5; Jer2:21; Eze15:2–6; Hos10:1; Mt21:33; Ro12:17–24). Israel was the vine God planted. The vine basically represented God’s plan to save the world. But Israel didn’t produce the fruit God wanted, so God was ready to start over. Jesus says in verse 1, “I am the true vine.” Jesus came to fulfill the hope of God’s redemptive history in the world. Through his death and resurrection he opened the way for us, no matter who we are, to be truly reconnected with God (Eph2:5).

Look at verses 1,2. The basics here are that God is the Gardener, Jesus is the true Vine, and we are the branches (5a). In verses 1–17 Jesus flushes out all the meanings of this allegory. But in verses 1 and 2 he starts out by emphasizing what the Father does. God is the gardener. God planted the vine. God still tends it today. God connects branches to the vine. And God checks on how those branches are doing.

What does this tell us about God? Basically, God is keeping it real. God is looking for fruit. Branches that have no fruit he cuts off. Branches that do bear fruit he prunes, so that they will be even more fruitful. It’s not people but God who’s holding us accountable. All throughout this allegory Jesus repeats the words “bear fruit” or “bear much fruit” (2,4,5,8,16). God wants his vine to produce the most fruit possible, and he’s diligently working to make that happen.

If this is true, what’s the fruit God is looking for? Farmers look for fruit so that they can make a good income. But God isn’t seeking lots of money, the best ROI, or the biggest bottom line. God is looking for the fruit of a godly character: justice and righteousness (Isa5:7). He’s also looking for the fruit of good influence, of leading others to him. What’s the point of being in Christ but having no fruit to show for it? Fruitless branches are described as dead and deserving to be cut off, thrown into the fire and burned (6). But fruitful branches bring glory to God (8). We need to seriously accept that God wants us to be fruitful.

But how? How can we be a fruitful branch? The first clue is in verses 2,3. Pruning can cause a branch to go deeper into the vine. This is why God prunes or cleans us. Jesus says this represents being cleaned by the word of God. God’s word is like a pruning tool that cuts off things in our lives that produce no good spiritual fruit. Pruning can seem painful and even sad. Wouldn’t it be nice if we could just grow naturally? But pruning is necessary for producing good fruit. Likewise, if we’re going to have a fruitful relationship with Jesus, we need pruning by the word of God. We need God’s word to challenge us and show us the things in our lives that are a drain on our relationship with Jesus. If we don’t submit to pruning, we won’t be as fruitful as God wants.

The next teaching about beinf a fruitful branch is in verse 4. Read verse 4. The word “remain” is repeated four times in just this one verse. Jesus says here that he remains in us, but we also need to remain in him. What does that mean? First of all, it means to live with the deep awareness that I am a branch. But what does *that* mean? Basically it means to realize how much I need Jesus. To remain in Jesus means to keep on realizing how much I need him. A branch can’t bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. We’d all like to be self-sufficient. But if we’re going to bear the fruit God wants, we need to stay connected to Jesus and be dependent on Jesus as our lifeline. It’s humbling but very necessary.

Then what does it mean to stay connected to him? It means to be close to Jesus and rely on him every day. How do we do that? It starts with spending quality time with him. We call it daily devotions, or daily bread. We quiet ourselves to feed on his word, to reflect on it and ask his help to live by it. Spending quality time with Jesus is a very personal thing we do to remain in him.

We also can be close to Jesus as we get committed to a community of believers. This is actually what church really is—not a building, but a community of believers. As we join in our meetings together, praying, worshiping, and listening to his word, God’s Spirit dwells in our midst, and Jesus promises to be there with us (Mt18:20). To be close to Jesus, we need not only personal devotions but also commitment to a community of people who believe in him.

There’s another way we can “remain in” Jesus. Jesus taught us in 6:56, “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them.” It means to keep on accepting that Jesus gave his body and shed his blood for my sins. We always need what Jesus did for us on the cross. It’s how God’s grace stays alive in our souls. We call it “coming to the cross” each day, letting his light shine on us, asking his forgiveness, and putting our trust in his shed blood (1Jn1:7–9). Even if we do many other things, if we ignore what Jesus did for us on the cross, we can’t remain in him or be close to him.

Remaining in Jesus is more than attending church or taking communion. Read verse 7. Remaining in him means letting his words “remain in” us, and then praying. We stay connected to Jesus the true Vine through his words and through prayer. The more we meditate on his word and pray, the more connected we get. But if we start ignoring his word and forgetting to pray, we grow distant. Even though he’s the true vine, he can’t bring his life into our lives. How do his words “remain in” us? We have to hold onto them. It’s good to memorize his word. It’s also good to write a reflection based on his word, struggling to see how I need to put what Jesus taught into practice in my daily life. The more his words become a part of our lives, the more we remain in him.

He also says in verse 7, “…ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” This means prayer. We can pray if we hold onto his promises. And we can pray for impossible things by faith if we’re close to him. Life is hard, and living in this world can be discouraging. But if we remain in Jesus, we gain the faith to do the things he did and to pray for God to do what seems impossible. Jesus taught us in 14:12–14: “Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father will be glorified in the Son. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.” To remain in Jesus means to really believe and really pray.

There’s one more way to remain in him that Jesus teaches us in these verses. Read verse 9. Remaining in Jesus means remaining in his love. But he especially wants us to think about what kind of love that is. It’s very special. He says, “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you.” What is Jesus saying? He means he experienced the Father’s love and showed that same kind of love for his disciples. How did the Father love the Son? In 3:35 it says, “The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands.” In 5:20 Jesus said, “For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does.” The Father allows the Son to do the things only he himself does, to give life and to judge (5:21,22). Jesus loves his disciples in the same way. He entrusts his work to his disciples. Later in this chapter he says, “…everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you” (15b). It’s a totally transparent, trusting and sharing relationship. To remain in Jesus’ love means to remain in this closest relationship with him, realizing that he wants us to share with us all that he knows and all that he does.

Jesus goes on to explain further how we can remain in his love practically. Read verse 10. To remain in Jesus, to remain in his love, we need to keep his commands. And there’s a specific command he’s especially thinking about. Read verse 12. As we learn to love each other as Jesus loved us, we are keeping his command and remaining in his love. In other words, to remain in his love we need to be practicing his love, showing his love to others. What does it mean to love others the way Jesus loved us? Jesus loved us first, when we didn’t love him. So we have to love others when they don’t love us. We have to take the initiative. We have to be humble. Jesus showed his love for his disciples when he washed their feet. So to love each other means to serve each other, especially to be willing to forgive each other. To love each other means to see each other’s needs and share what we have (1Jn3:16–18). Such love is the key fruit God is looking for in our relationship with Jesus—loving others the way Jesus loved me.

What happens when we remain in Jesus and learn how to love the way he did? Read verse 11. Through this vine and branch relationship with Jesus, we’re full of his love, and full of his joy. This is another fruit God is looking for in us: joy. How can we say we’re connected with Jesus but not be joyful? If we truly *are* connected with Jesus, then it’s guaranteed that we’ll be full of his joy. There’s a struggle involved in remaining in Jesus, but the end results are wonderful: full of love and full of joy. Who doesn’t want *that*?

But there’s more. Read verses 13–15. This is the ultimate fruit of being united with Jesus in a vine and branch relationship with him. We become his friends. It’s mind-blowing. Jesus considers *me* his *friend*? What does it mean? It means first of all to be loved by him. And it means, in response to his love, to do what he commands, to lay down our own lives for each other. A friend of Jesus sacrifices himself or herself completely for fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. And there’s one more thing to being a friend of Jesus. Read verse 15 again. A friend of Jesus “knows his master’s business.” What does it mean? It means to know what he’s really interested in, to know his heart. A friend of Jesus shares the heart of Jesus. It’s also how we get closer to one another, as we all come to share the heart of Jesus. What a beautiful fruit, being a friend of Jesus!

How is it possible? Read verse 16. Here Jesus brings together some important elements of remaining in him. It means remembering his grace that we didn’t choose him; he chose us. It means remembering that he appointed us to go and bear fruit that lasts. Real fruit spoils rather quickly. But fruit that lasts is the fruit of a changed life, and the fruit of bringing other people to him. Jesus repeats the secret of this fruit-bearing life: to ask in his name, to pray in faith.

Read verse 5 again. Thank God for Jesus who is the vine. May God help us practically to remain in him. May he produce in each one of us the fruits of faith, love, joy, and real friendship with him.