

Text: John 15:1-10 / Title: I Am the True Vine / translated by Yaeun Han

1. I am the true vine

Commentators understand this statement, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser," as words spoken by Jesus the day before His crucifixion. He was crucified on the Friday of Passion Week, so it is thought that He likely said this to His disciples on Thursday while passing by a vineyard. Now, Jesus had to be crucified the next day. It is said that He spoke these words to steady the hearts of His disciples, who were about to fall apart and were showing signs of division. Jesus was now about to face a situation where He would carry the cross and lose everything. For the disciples who had followed Jesus, the wandering prophet from Galilee, for three years, what did it mean for their master to die on a cross? It would mean that they too would face the same fate as Jesus. We know well that even the disciple who said he alone would not abandon the Lord would betray and leave Him. To these weak disciples who were bound to fall apart, Jesus spoke these words, explaining how precious a life attached to Him is. The message, "Though I must bear the cross, walk this path with me. Do not leave me," is hidden in today's scripture, the parable of the vine.

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser." In the original Greek Bible, this sentence begins with *Ego eimi*. I have mentioned several times that in Greek grammar, it is not necessary to use a personal pronoun. Even without the personal pronoun *Ego*, meaning "I," using *eimi* alone means "I am." When *Ego* is intentionally used, it is for emphasis. The addition of *Ego* makes it an emphatic statement: "It is I, and no one else, who is ~." In the Gospel of John, phrases beginning with *Ego eimi* are used a total of seven times. Jesus used this expression when He said He was the bread of life, the light of the world, the gate for the sheep, the good shepherd, the resurrection and the life, and the way, the truth, and the life. For the seventh and final time in John's Gospel, Jesus emphasizes, "It is I, and no one else, who is the true vine." I have told you that when He speaks this way, the Old Testament is

always the background. The sentence "I am the vine" is also a statement based on the Old Testament. Psalm 80, verse 8 says: "You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it." It says a vine was brought out of Egypt and planted; what do you think the vine symbolizes? It symbolizes Israel. In Jeremiah 2:21, the vine also symbolizes Israel. "I had planted you as a choice vine of sound and reliable stock. How then did you turn against me into a corrupt, wild vine?" The prophet is saying that Israel was a choice vine, but it turned into a wild vine, failing to meet God's expectations. Another passage is found in Isaiah 5:1-7. Isaiah also compares Israel to a vine to pinpoint and accuse them of their sins. Isaiah specifically uses wordplay in this passage. In verse 7: "The vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the nation of Israel, and the people of Judah are the vines he delighted in. And he looked for justice (*mishpat*), but saw bloodshed (*mishpach*); for righteousness (*tsedakah*), but heard cries of distress (*tseaqah*)." Justice is *Mishpat* in Hebrew, and righteousness is *Tsedakah*. The Hebrew word for bloodshed is '*Mishpach*,' and the word for cries of distress is '*Tseaqah*.' Isaiah is using wordplay, saying God looked for *mishpat* but found *mishpach*, and looked for *tsedakah* but found *tseaqah*.

2. The Fruit of the Vine, *Mishpat* and *Tsedakah*

From these three Old Testament passages, we can see a common theme: God considered the people of Israel to be a vine. Through the words of Isaiah in particular, He clearly stated what fruit should be borne on that vine. The fruit that should be borne on the vine called Israel is *mishpat* and *tsedakah*. These are Hebrew words translated into our language as fairness and justice, or righteousness and equity. I have mentioned before that *mishpat* means fairness as judicial justice, and *tsedakah* means mercy as distributive justice. So, throughout the entire history of the Old Testament, what did God expect of Israel? He expected an impartial community, but instead, a fracture occurred where the strong oppressed the weak, and the powerful suppressed and dehumanized those who had fallen behind in the competition. This is brutality. To expect *tsedakah* meant to expect divine kindness. Divine kindness means more than what morality requires. In the old days, people

made fire to cook their meals. Let's say you don't see smoke coming from your neighbor's chimney for three days. Seeing no smoke for three days and simply passing by is not a major moral flaw. However, *tsedakah*, divine mercy, means knocking on the door of the house with no smoke for three days, asking if anything is wrong, and actively helping. *Tsedakah* is the act of kindness and love shown proactively and assertively—knocking on the door, asking why there is no smoke, showing love responsibly—in order to maintain the solidarity of the covenant community. But *tseaqah* is the outcry of people who cannot bear to live. *Tseaqah* is crying out loud when your neighbor makes your life unbearable. Israel, where fairness has collapsed and justice has crumbled, is no longer a covenant community. The prophets call a community that has lost its function and collapsed a "wild vine." When Jesus says, "I am the true vine," He is emphasizing that He is the true vine that stands in opposition to the wild vine. Anyone who understood the words of Isaiah and Jeremiah would have immediately been able to understand what kind of world Jesus dreamed of achieving through the cross He was about to bear. Unlike Israel, which was a wild vine, the kingdom Jesus dreams of is a kingdom of shalom, built on the pillars of fairness and justice. In the Kingdom of God, there is no massive, oppressive bureaucracy. It is a kingdom of peace where the strong and the weak are not divided, where the powerful and the powerless coexist instead of competing. In the Kingdom of God, there is no need for a king, a standing army, or a large bureaucracy. There are only the awakened, autonomous citizens of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is a nation that runs on fairness and justice, where people voluntarily serve one another. We must understand that within this sentence lies the message that although Israel failed, Jesus wanted to start anew the vision of the Kingdom of God with His disciples.

3. My Father is the Vinedresser.

Jesus is the true vine, and He says His Father is the vinedresser. I receive great comfort when I read this line. My father was also a farmer. God, the Father of Jesus, is introduced as a farmer. In Greek, the word for farmer is *Georgos*. *Geo* or *Gea* is a word that means earth or land. A person who cares for and cultivates the land is a

Georgos. The English name George means farmer. What a farmer looks most forward to is a harvest. The purpose of a farmer's life is to gather much fruit. The times my farming parents were disappointed were when the harvest of grains, fruits, or vegetables decreased due to pests or natural disasters. A farmer strives to gather a large harvest by any means necessary. All the acts of plowing the land, weeding, and cutting branches are ultimately for the purpose of gathering much fruit. In verse 2, the expression "he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful" appears. The word for 'prunes' in verse 2 and 'clean' in verse 3 is the same word. It is the word *Kathairo*, which means clean, clear, or pure. To make them bear more fruit, God prunes the branches with pruning shears in His hand. This is because if the branches grow aimlessly, the nutrients cannot be concentrated in the fruit. A grapevine is a vine plant, so its tendrils spread out in all directions beyond imagination. If you don't prune the branches and tidy up the vines, you will ruin the crop. This must mean that God sometimes trims unnecessary branches to maintain the purity of the community. The same applies to us as individuals. Sometimes God cuts away the unnecessary things within us that prevent us from bearing fruit. It is painful, bothersome, and unpleasant for us when a part of us is cut off, but God sometimes brings the pruning shears to us to make us clean and whole. The losses and trials we experience may be God's pruning to remove what is unnecessary for us.

4. The Holy Winery

Why does God want to harvest grapes? What is the purpose of a grape's existence? The prophet Isaiah also made a prophecy concerning this. Isaiah 25, verse 6 says: "On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines." Through these words, Isaiah proclaims the vision of God saving all the nations of the world through Israel. The vision of the Kingdom of God, inviting all the peoples of the world, is described as a feast prepared with well-aged wine. They say a feast in Jeolla Province is not complete without fermented skate, and a feast in Gyeongsang Province is not complete without octopus. For a feast in Israel, wine was indispensable. Perhaps for that reason, Israel is compared to long-aged wine. The

reason Israel was transplanted from Egypt as a vine is revealed here. The wine of joy that invites all peoples to a joyful feast, making them drunk on aged wine so that their hostility toward one another disappears and brotherly love grows—that is the very purpose for which God made the people of Israel into wine. When you are drunk on wine, the national identities that separated you and me all disappear, and we share the love of brothers and sisters. A festive community where internecine strife and oppression of others disappear is created through wine.

What was the first miracle Jesus performed in the Gospel of John? It was the miracle of turning water into wine. When the wine that enlivened the wedding feast ran out, Jesus performed the miracle of changing water into wine. The vision of the Kingdom of God that Jesus dreams of is connected to the prophecy of Isaiah and manifested in the miracle of wine. Herein lies the expectation Jesus has for the church. The church must be a holy winery. In Acts chapter 2, the result of being filled with the Holy Spirit is described as being similar to the result of being drunk. The phenomenon that appears when one is drunk is said to appear as a result of being filled with the Spirit. The church must be a holy winery that supplies the wine of fairness and justice. People who leave the church should return home enlivened and in good spirits. Those who drink the holy wine become cheerful and happy for no reason. The hostility they held toward others is disarmed, and the tense life they led in pursuit of greed becomes relaxed. This is the reaction that appears in people who have met Jesus. People who have met Jesus realize that their state of being full of selfishness and greed is not normal. Like a drunken person, they become kind, break down all hostility, and embrace an openness that allows them to befriend anyone. This is the joy of attending church. It is coming to church, tasting the holy wine that Jesus gives, and having one's life changed.

5. Abide in Me

Jesus is now about to be crucified. Is it more advantageous to be next to a successful person or a person who is failing? Be around someone successful and you may get a whiff of their good fortune and wealth, right? If your life gets entangled

with someone who is failing, you too could fail. The disciples thought Jesus had failed and fled, thinking they shouldn't get involved. But Jesus says, "Though I must bear the cross, you must abide in me." He says that only those who abide in Him can bear fruit. Everyone, to abide in Jesus who bore the cross means to accept a life of loss for believing in Jesus. The person who does not leave Jesus even after hearing His words about bearing the cross is the branch that has been made clean and can bear much fruit. The power to love Jesus is the power of Christianity. That power of life—following Jesus knowing it would lead to death—was the driving force behind the growth of early Christianity. The history of the church is the history of people who could not possibly abandon Jesus because, although they knew staying attached to Jesus meant death, the fruit was so noble and beautiful. Why is the church still a source of hope, even when it is so heavily criticized by the world? I believe the church is still the hope of the world because of that pure faith—the desire to abide in Jesus without abandoning Him, knowing that believing in Him means suffering loss and bearing the cross together. The church is like a show house for the Kingdom of God. When you come here, you get a flavor of the Kingdom of God. Why does the church resemble the Kingdom of God? The church exists even without a large, oppressive bureaucracy. It is because there are people who have been changed by meeting Jesus. It is because there are pure people with awakened spiritual autonomy, people who abide in Jesus. Even without bureaucratic coercion to clean up the chairs after service, people clean them up on their own. There are no demerits or pressure for not tithing. The church waits until one does it voluntarily. The church is the only institution that has been sustained for 2,000 years through voluntary contributions. No other institution is so voluntary and sacrificial. The reason this organization does not collapse is because it is an organization born from a conviction that comes from deep within. I have experienced the church in China many times. The church in China survived even when Mao Zedong killed 23 million people through the people's communes during the Great Leap Forward. It persevered through the ten years of the Cultural Revolution, which aimed to eradicate the church. A burning sincerity toward God cannot be erased by any violence, torture, or tanks. The church, with the wine of the new covenant

established by the Lord's blood, must be a holy winery. As long as there are people who purely love Jesus, people who will not abandon Him even knowing they will suffer loss for believing, the church will not disappear. Abide in Jesus. Love Jesus. Embrace the vision of the Kingdom of God, of fairness and justice, that Jesus dreams of. I believe that God's love will make you cling even more tightly to Christ. Abide in God's love. Do not give up the life of a disciple following the way of Jesus Christ. Living a life that proclaims the gospel means demonstrating a blessed life through responsible actions. A life that proclaims the gospel is one that demonstrates the state of being drunk on the new wine of the gospel and shows that this is the Christian life. If there is anyone who says, "I don't yet know what it means to live attached to Jesus," then stay close to those who are attached to Jesus. By attending church services, small group meetings, and spiritual fellowship gatherings, you too can become attached to Jesus along with them. I will conclude by summarizing the message of today's scripture from Jesus in one sentence. "If you share deep fellowship and communion with me as I bear the cross, you too will become my disciples who follow me by bearing your own cross."