

This morning, let's continue exploring how each of us would respond to Jesus' question found in Matthew 16:15: "Who do you say that I am?" I think that I can safely say that this is probably one of the most, if not the most important question that you and I will ever answer in our life – who is Jesus Christ to me? Our reply will have a direct impact on our personal relationship with the Lord and eventually our place in eternity. To help us come up with the best possible answer, during Lent we have been studying the seven "I Am" sayings of Jesus as recorded in the Gospel of John. As we discuss these sayings, we are not only asking ourselves who is Jesus, but also what does He mean to us; what has He done for us; what does He want us to do for Him; and what is our relationship with Him? So far, we have discussed Jesus identifying Himself as the Light of the World, the Bread of Life, the Gate and the Good Shepherd.

Let continue our study this morning in the fifteenth chapter of John. But before we read this text, let me give you some background about this particular passage. Jesus and His disciples have just finished celebrating the Passover meal at which Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper. During the meal, Jesus told His disciples that one of them would betray Him and that He would be leaving them soon and returning to His Father.

Following the meal, eleven dejected men (minus Judas who had already gone off to betray Jesus) followed Jesus down the stairs of the Upper Room and out into the cool of the night, headed for the Garden of Gethsemane. Some of the disciples carried lamps or burning torches to light the way. They followed Jesus down the hill, through the winding streets of Jerusalem, and out of the city into the valley. Along the way, they passed through the ancient vineyards.

Here Jesus stopped, took some grapes in His hands, and began discussing the branches and grapes, and how the owner of the vineyard cared for his prized possession. Jesus loved to convey the deepest truths of life with simple, down-to-earth illustrations. Here Jesus uses the vineyard to help us understand our role in God's kingdom, a role of bearing fruit for the Lord. With this background, let's now see what Jesus has to say in the fifteenth chapter of John, the first eight verses.

Read John 15:1-8

Jesus says: "I am the vine, and my Father is the gardener. Every branch in me that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. I am the vine; you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, bears much fruit. By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit."

In this passage, God is the gardener. The primary goal of the gardener is to coax his plants to produce the best and largest number of grapes. A healthy and properly maintained vineyard means a higher yield.

If you haven't figured it out by now, you and I are the branches. So far during Lent, we have been called to be lights for Jesus in this dark world and the sheep of His pasture; now today we are called to be branches that bear fruit. In the vineyard, the branches get the gardener's full attention because they are the ones that produce the fruit. Branches are tied to a trellis or propped up with sticks to let the air circulate, to provide the maximum amount of sunshine, and to allow full access for proper care. The gardener carefully cultivates each branch so that it will bear as much fruit as possible. Now I don't know if you have ever thought of it this way, but we are fruit trees. We are placed here on earth to make a difference, to bear as much fruit as possible for the Master; not to see who is the most popular; who has the most toys, biggest house or fanciest car, but to build God's kingdom.

In this passage, you can almost see Jesus in the vineyard leaning forward in the light of the burning torches and pointing to the massive trunk of the vine from which the branches flow in all directions, and saying: "Abide in me, and I in you." Then He directs the disciples' attention down the branch trimmed and tied to the trellis and already swelling with the promise of the harvest to come and states: "As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me." As the disciples gaze at the trunk, Jesus adds: "I am the vine, you are the branches, he who abides in me and I in him bears much fruit, for without me you can do nothing."

The key words in this morning's text are found in the fourth verse: "Abide in me or remain in me." Another translation of the Bible says: "Be joined with me." To me it means "to be connected or linked to."

A newspaper reporter went to interview a successful small business owner. "How did you do it?" the reporter asked. "How did you make all this money?" "I'm glad you asked," the businessman said. "It's a great story. When my wife and I married, we started with just a roof over our heads, some food in the pantry, and five cents between us. I took that nickel, went down to the grocery store, bought an apple, shined it up, and sold it for ten cents."

"What did you do then" the reporter asked. "Well," he replied, "I bought two more apples, shined them up, and sold them for twenty cents." The reporter thought this would make a great human-interest story, so he asked excitedly: "Then what?" The businessman replied: "Then my father-in-law died and left us \$20 million."

The businessman prospered not because of his own ingenuity, but because he was connected. Are you connected? Now this question has different meanings depending on the context in which it is asked. For example, to say that you are politically connected may mean that you belong to the political party currently in power or that you are good friends with a powerful politician. Or it could be knowing the right person. You may also be socially connected if you

run in the right social circle and rub elbows with the in-crowd. But what I'm talking about here is being really connected to the one and only Jesus Christ! The imagery of the vine and the branches is one of connection, portraying a life rooted in Jesus Christ.

Only by abiding can we enjoy a rewarding friendship with Jesus Christ and live life as it was intended from the beginning. To abide means to remain, to stay closely connected, to settle in for the long run, and to take up permanent residence and make our home with Jesus. One does not abide in a hotel room or a guest room. These are places of brief visits, more like a parking space. Home is where we abide and where Jesus dwells in our hearts.

Within these few verses in the fifteenth chapter of John, Jesus used the term "abide" or "remain" ten times. Jesus knows that His destiny with the cross is near and that He is about to leave His disciples, yet He is saying to them "We must be together; we must be connected." He realizes that in the coming weeks, months, and years, these downcast, frightened men now standing with Him in the vineyard that night will be called on to produce an unheard-of amount of fruit – enough fruit to turn the whole world upside down. And Jesus knows that they can't begin to achieve that kind of impact without being connected to Him.

In the sixth verse, Jesus says: "If anyone does not abide in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire, and burned." Here you might think that Jesus is threatening those who do not bear fruit with being doomed eternally to hell. But a more logical interpretation is that if we are not connected to Jesus, we wither and dry up and become of no spiritual use. When we are **not** connected to our spiritual source and strength, we dry up and die like a limb that is cut off from the tree; in other words, we become spiritual deadwood.

For example, when I was serving in Grants, one year we had an especially abundant crop of apples. The apples were big and juicy; it was one of the best crops in memory. While picking apples one day for our community pantry, I noticed a limb that had fallen from the tree. Its fruit was rotten and shriveled. Because the limb was detached from the tree, it was no longer producing the good fruit that it was created for. The same is true of the Christian that ceases to remain connected to Jesus – they cease to produce good fruit.

We should also remember that the roots of the vine gather water and nutrients from the earth and that these flow through the vine and give life to the branches. If our life is not rooted in Jesus Christ, we are cut off from the real reason that we were created, to be in fellowship with the Lord; thus, our lives are meaningless. But if we stay connected to the Lord, then we are able to draw spiritual strength from Him. And how do we stay connected? We do this through our daily quiet time of prayer and Bible reading and regular attendance in worship. With the

power that flows from Jesus flowing to us, then nothing will hold us back from achieving the abundant life that Jesus promises us in the tenth chapter of John.

Jesus said: "I am the Vine." He didn't say that He was one of the vines; He is the Only True Vine. Unfortunately, some Christians try to be connected to other sources of strength and knowledge. They want to try to hold on to Jesus with one hand while grabbing hold of the world and its so-called values with the other hand. They want to attach their branch to money, power, drugs, and other addictions, and use Jesus only as their last lifeline if something goes wrong as it definitely will. Jesus understood this desire when He said in Matthew 6:24: "No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to one and despise the other."

When Lawrence of Arabia was in Paris during World War I with some of his Arab friends, he showed them the sights of the city: the Louvre, Napoleon's tomb, the Eiffel Tower and other tourist sights, but none of these things impressed them. The thing that really fascinated them was the water faucet in the bathtub of the hotel room. They spent a lot of time turning it on and off. They were amazed that you could turn a handle and get all the water that you wanted.

Later, when they were ready to leave Paris and return to home, Lawrence found them in the bathroom with wrenches trying to disconnect the faucets. "You see," they replied, "it is very dry in Arabia. What we need are faucets. If we have them, we will have all the water we need." Lawrence had to explain to his friends that the effectiveness of the faucets did not lie in themselves but in the large reservoirs of water to which they were connected.

What a tremendous application to the Christian life. Like the faucet by itself, we as Christians are useless unless we are connected to Jesus Christ; as Jesus said in the fifth verse: "Apart from me you can do nothing." Unfortunately, the lives of many Christians are as dry as the Arabian Desert. They have their faucets, but there is no connection to the living water provided by Jesus Christ, and thus, their lives are dry and unfruitful.

Now I don't think I could make a living growing grapes or even owning an orchard. You see I just don't like pruning. I understand the principle that you must cut back in order to get a greater yield of the fruit, and I will saw off the dead limbs, but I have a hard time cutting off good live branches. In our text for this morning, Jesus is talking about both types of pruning: cutting off the dead branches that are no longer bearing any fruit and throwing them into the fire, and cutting back on the good branches to let more sunlight and moisture in.

Since we are the branches that Jesus is talking about here, pruning also applies to our lives. If we are to bear fruit for the Master, then we must cut off those dead branches – those bad habits that drain our energy, sap our strength, separate us from God, and hold us back from truly living the life that God intended for us to have. We all have them: what I call dead weight

that is holding us back, such as bad habits, addictions, obsessions, hurts, regrets, grudges, egos, pride, jealousy – the list could go on and on. The point is that if we are to truly live the Christian life and abide in Jesus, we need to cut off these dead branches so that the good life can receive more nourishment. What dead branches do you need to trim during this time of Lent?

In the second verse, Jesus says that “every branch that bears fruit He prunes to make it bear more fruit.” Every one of us is doing something good for the Lord, but sometimes these branches need pruning also. There are times when we take on too much and get over-extended and need to cut back and focus on that at which we are really good and for which God has gifted us to do. Then there are the times when the fruit that we are producing is more about us than God, and it starts to spoil and affect the ministries that we are working in. Also, there are the times that we are in the wrong orchard; we are an apple tree among the peach trees; in other words, we are involved in a ministry that does not suit our spiritual gifts. Each of us has been called by God to use the spiritual gifts that He has given us to produce fruit. I hope and pray that each of you has found or will find where God wants you to serve.

In closing, Jesus has extended an invitation to each of us. We have been invited to be connected to Him, to invite Him into our hearts and life. He promises us happiness and an abundant life if we will only accept His invitation to remain connected to Him. How will you respond? Will you let it pass by and be satisfied with just producing so-so fruit and living life only to a fraction of its potential? Or will you accept Jesus’ invitation and live life to the fullest in a personal relationship with Him, bearing much fruit for Him? Jesus calls us to abide in Him. Are you connected? May each one of us answer His call and be connected to the true source of life – our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ – the True Vine. Amen