

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. 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. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

"I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

DEADWOOD OR FRUITFUL BRANCH—WHICH ARE YOU?

My friends in Christ, I am no gardener but even I can tell that this branch does not come from a grapevine, which is really the kind of vine Jesus was talking about with his disciples, but since I don't have any grapevines—dead or alive—at my house, bear with me for the sake of the illustration!

This branch is obviously dead and was removed from a tree some time ago. We could sit here and watch this branch, which is no longer connected to the living tree, for rest of our hour together and I guarantee you that no buds or leaves or fruit would appear on it. We could leave it up here for a month and look at it every Sunday as we come in and we'd find no change. We could let it remain for a full year to maybe catch it's blossoming and fruit-bearing season, but we all know there won't be any leaves or fruit.

This seems so simple to understand. Every one of us, young or old, child or adult, knows this. Even the comparison Jesus makes—that he is the true vine and we are the branches—seems pretty simple for us to understand. But we need to talk about it today because we can lose all sense when it comes to ourselves or even when dealing with someone we love. And we don't want to forget some blessings that come from sticking with our Savior.

Jesus was talking to his disciples as they were reclining at the Passover table in the Upper Room, shortly before his arrest, trials and death. Judas had already left the room to make arrangements to betray his Lord. As Jesus speaks to the eleven, it is direct. It is personal. It forces each of them to think about themselves and their relationship with Jesus and how that would be going forward. At one point he even says, **"If you..."** What they chose to do from this time on would have eternal life implications. The same is true for you and me. On the basis of Jesus' words, you'll be able to answer the question of whether you are DEADWOOD OR A FRUITFUL BRANCH as you hear both the warning and encouragement of Jesus.

The picture is simple. Jesus says, **"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener.** God the Father is the one who cares for vine, which is the source of life for the branches. Jesus is that life-giving vine—the true vine, the real vine, the actual vine, the genuine vine. There is only one that matters; one that gives life. In spiritual matters, when it comes to God and godly living and eternal life after earthly death, there is only one true vine and that is Jesus.

The work of the Gardener is to cut off branches that are not fruitful and to care for the fruitful branches. It's interesting that the word which shows up as "prune" in our Bibles really means to cleanse, to make clean. In the context of a gardener and a vine, it would mean to prune. Pruning the branches is important because it helps them to be even healthier and more fruitful. And it's here that Jesus begins to explain that his followers are the branches which are connected to him, the vine: **You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.**

Those disciples were already clean, pruned branches connected to Jesus, the vine. They were clean because of Jesus' words to them, he says. They had listened to him teach that forgiveness came through faith in him, that eternal life was only through trusting in him. They believed those words and it made them clean. Can you appreciate how comforting it must have been for them to hear that from Jesus?! **"You are already clean."** That was good news for them! He was saying that they were connected to him and that God had worked on them to make them clean. They were in good shape before God the Father! They trusted what Jesus had told them and they were clean in God's eyes! This was actually the second time he said this to them that evening. What a blessing it is to know that when we are connected to Jesus and listen to his words of truth and believe them, we are clean before God!

But you also heard him say, **"Remain in me."** What's the implication? That it's possible *not* to remain in him. It could happen that a person connected to the Savior could become disconnected. It's a bit of a warning and a lot of encouragement. You heard his explanation of how it works as he used that easy-to-understand picture: **No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.** You are like a good, healthy, fruit-bearing branch if you are connected to Jesus, the vine. Branches can't bear fruit if they are not connected to the vine and in the same way, you can't bear fruit unless you're connected to Jesus.

As branches connected to Jesus, we don't bear grapes like those shown on the front of the worship folder. But we do bear fruits of faith—meaning that there are things in our lives that give evidence that we are connected to Jesus, just like the grapes show that the branch they are on is connected to the vine.

We might think of things like our offerings that we give to God—they show that there is love for God in our hearts because God tells us to give back to him joyfully and generously and in proportion to what he's given to us. Or the things we say and the words we avoid using—that can show a love for God because God tells us to tell others about Jesus and to control our tongues. Or our willingness to serve with our gifts, like singing or playing an instrument or hospitality or ushering or caring for the needs of others or prayer—all things which God says can be done to give him glory and help others. The list of things that show Christian faith is long and often in the Bible God compares them to fruit on a vine or a tree. They show that we have a healthy and productive faith. We'll hear as Jesus continues that God EXPECTS to see these in a

person's life and, in fact, fruits or the lack of them in a person's life reveal whether they are DEADWOOD or A FRUITFUL BRANCH.

Before we move on from those words, I want to be sure to point out the comforting promise of Jesus there: **Remain in me, and I will remain in you.** Jesus isn't going anywhere. Like those disciples, Christians today don't have to fear that Jesus is going to leave them. The only question is whether *they* will remain. That is what Jesus is encouraging—remain in him. And then he repeats and summarizes what he had been saying and gives us the basic truth of this whole sermonette of his: **“I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.**

You heard him say **“If.”** We know that a person on their own can never decide to believe in Jesus—because of our totally corrupt sinful natures that hate God. But once the Holy Spirit gives us faith to believe, we do choose to continue listening to Jesus or not. If we don't continue listening to Jesus—and that means following what he says, not just knowing what he says—then we come apart from him and we cannot bear fruit that is pleasing to God. Jesus' words cause us to pause to consider where we are in our faith. It's good to think about whether we're going through the motions or if we are listening and living in a way that shows that we're connected to the Vine. Are we DEADWOOD OR A FRUITFUL BRANCH?

I'm not trying to make anyone doubt their faith or their salvation, but Jesus says **“IF”** a person remains. And next he says **“IF anyone does not remain...”** It can happen that a Christian falls away. One of the 12 disciples already had—Judas had just left that room to go betray Jesus. If your connection to Jesus has been coming loose, he's both warning and encouraging you here to not come apart from him. The tragic end for the person who allows that to happen, he describes next: **If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.**

Again, it's not hard to understand what Jesus is saying because the picture of a person not trusting in Jesus going to the fires of hell after death is a picture that is common in the Bible. Anyone who is tempted to think that any religion is okay or that simply being a spiritual person is enough, ought to pay close attention to Jesus' words here. Without a close connection to Christ and a life that bears fruit as evidence to God, there is only death in the eternal fire of hell. This warning is for us and maybe for us to share with someone in our lives who needs to hear it.

But just look at the blessings we receive as we trust in Jesus and continue to hear his words! He remains in us. His words remain in our hearts and minds. AND we have the privilege of prayer, of asking God anything, knowing that our prayers are answered. A Christian always prays like Jesus prayed—according to God's will. When that is the case, we always receive what we ask for—either the thing we are praying for OR if not, then God's will is done—which is also what we asked for. You can see that Jesus is saying

that only Christians have this privilege and the assurance of God hearing us and answering us.

And in all this, again Jesus says we will bear much fruit—not just a little evidence that we are Christians, not just sometimes showing that we are connected to Jesus—**MUCH fruit**. Our lives will really look like we are listening to Jesus' words and taking them to heart because that's what we're doing! As we live like this, God will receive glory! He will be happy to see us living as his children. Other people will see that our life is different than people who don't trust in Jesus. He says that if we are connected to him, we will show ourselves to be his disciples.

We are so blessed to have many opportunities to listen to Jesus' words and remain joined to him. Our children have the opportunity to hear about their Savior every day at Redeemer Lutheran School and at Arizona Lutheran Academy, our Lutheran High School. It takes quite a commitment from parents and our church and members of our congregation who support with tax credits and encouragement and prayers, but that we have these Christian schools available to our families is a wonderful blessing.

And here, other gifted members will help keep our young branches connected to Jesus, the true vine, in Sunday School and Confirmation class and youth Bible Study. God doesn't stop giving us all chances to know our Savior better—a campus ministry Bible study every week is the heart of our college work. Adult Bible Classes on Sunday and other days during the week help strengthen the rest of us. Bibles and devotional materials are abundantly available through our church and in lots of other ways. The sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper connect us to Jesus.

If our connection to Jesus is looser than it ought to be or if you are actually in danger of becoming deadwood, it is because you're simply not putting the same importance on our relationship with our Savior as he does. You're not making use of what he has made available to you. If your life is not bearing abundant fruit—lots of evidence of faith in your life—then you're falling short of God's will and not bringing him the glory he deserves and desires.

I think we all—kids and adults alike—have to admit we've sinned and not done exactly what Jesus wants for us. Young people haven't always appreciated Christian teachers who share Jesus with them. Adults get busy or make excuses not to strengthen their connection to their Savior. None of our lives are perfectly overflowing with the good fruit God wants.

So it's important for all of us to remember that Jesus was talking about all this the night before he gave his life on the cross to pay for these very sins of ours. You and I can be certain that because of his death and his resurrection on Easter, we are forgiven for those sins. In love and thanks to our Savior and with hearts that want that same close relationship he wants, we'll leave today thinking about what we will do to remain in him and what kind of fruit we will show in our lives. And we'll use the gift of prayer God has given and ask him to bless us and make us the fruitful branches that show that they remain connected to the true vine, Jesus our Savior. Amen.