

# THE VINE

## SERIES: I AM: GETTING TO KNOW JESUS



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John 15:1-5

Final Message

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Paul Krugman, a professor at Princeton University, writes,

*“Productivity isn’t everything, but, in the long run, it is almost everything. A country’s ability to improve its standard of living over time depends almost entirely on its ability to raise its output per worker.”<sup>1</sup>*

“Productivity isn’t everything, but in the long run, it is almost everything.”<sup>2</sup>

Based on that, we should all try to be more productive. And if you want to do that, there are a lot of resources out there. Lifehack offers 13 practical ways to be more productive.<sup>3</sup> Oprah has 15 simple ways to be more productive.<sup>4</sup> ActiveCampaign offers 18 habits of highly productive people.<sup>5</sup>

If you want productivity methods, there are many from which to choose. You could try the Pomodoro Technique, Getting Things Done, Personal Kanbans, The SMART goals method, The Eisenhower Matrix, or many more.

Are you tired yet?

We live in a world of results, efficiency, and output. Many of our workplaces are laser-focused on improving KPIs (Key Performance Indicators), OKRs (Objectives and Key Results), or KRAs (Key Result Areas). We get rewarded by improving our metrics. To succeed in this culture, you have to learn to live this way. We are trained in this through our education, professional development, and corporate cultures. Our goal is to be as productive as possible.

But if you live this way at work, that mentality bleeds over into the rest of our lives. Eventually, it affects the way we live out our faith. Following Jesus becomes focused on what more I can do, how I can change the world, and squeezing a little more ministry out of my tired soul.

A Christianity Today article from April this year talked about how hard the past few years have been on pastors in America. They observed, “Perhaps our greatest concern shouldn’t be empty pulpits, but rather empty pastors standing in them.”<sup>6</sup>

Maybe there is a better way to live out our faith than focusing on productivity. Maybe there’s even a better way to live our professional lives than being ruled by the efficiency expected of us.

This morning will conclude our series in the book of John, looking at the “I Am” statements of Jesus. These are seven sayings that each illuminate one aspect of who Jesus is. We’ve been using them as a guide to get to know Jesus better. Today we’ll hear Jesus say, I Am The Vine.

In these words, Jesus will offer us a different perspective on the goal of life. What are we actually here for? How do we accomplish that?

The final “I Am” statement from Jesus is not found in the context of a story. It is in the middle of a long passage of discourse from Jesus.

**John 15: 1-5:**

**“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. 2 Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. 3 Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. 4 Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. 5 I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”**

We are going to focus on **John 15:5:**

**“I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is**

**that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”**

For the last six weeks, as we’ve looked at the statements from Jesus, we have learned a lot about who Jesus is. The same will be true this morning. But the image Jesus uses in John 15 isn’t just about him. It is a complex image that involves his followers as well. When Jesus says he is the vine, he also says that his followers are branches. So we will not just learn something about Jesus—we’ll also learn something about ourselves.

We will look at this verse in three parts. First, we will consider the metaphor. Then the command that Jesus gives his followers. Finally, we will see the result of obedience to that command. The metaphor, the command, and the result. As we sit in this for a while, we’re going to see that maybe productivity isn’t almost everything after all.

## **I am the vine**

Jesus repeats his “I Am” statement twice in this passage. He starts with these words:

**John 15:1:**

**“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser.”**

I want you to notice a very important word. Jesus doesn’t just say he is the vine. He says that he is the “true vine.”

The metaphor of the vine here has at least two layers. One is a historical layer. The other is a more basic layer. We have seen this before. When Jesus said he was the bread of life, he was pointing back to the story of God providing manna in the desert. He was connecting with Jewish history. But he was also talking about the most common food that every Jew ate every day. Bread was a basic everyday item.

The same is true with the image of the vineyard. Throughout the Old Testament, Israel is referred to as a vineyard. One of the most famous references is from Isaiah 5:1-2:

Let me sing for my beloved  
my love song concerning his vineyard:  
My beloved had a vineyard  
on a very fertile hill.

2 He dug it and cleared it of stones,  
and planted it with choice vines;  
he built a watchtower in the midst of it,  
and hewed out a wine vat in it;  
and he looked for it to yield grapes,  
but it yielded wild grapes.

Israel is the vineyard that God has built. He has tenderly created it and cared for it. In this passage, despite all the tender care God has lavished upon his vineyard, it did not yield healthy fruit.

In fact, almost all of the Old Testament references to Israel as a vineyard occur in the context of judgment. Whenever the people of God are described as a vineyard, the point of that comparison is that Israel failed. They were supposed to bear fruit, but they didn’t.

Israel was a rebellious vineyard.

In contrast to that, Jesus is the “true vine.” He is the one who will actually bear fruit for the Father. That is the historical context that Jesus draws upon. But there is also the more basic everyday power of this image.

When you think about fruit, what kind of fruit first comes to mind?

If I asked the average first-century Jew what came to mind at the word fruit, they would undoubtedly say either fig or grape. In fact, those are the only two specific fruits mentioned in the New Testament.

Israel is full of vineyards. The land enjoys a dry and arid Mediterranean climate with rolling hills—very similar to our own wine country in the North Bay.

Every single Jew that heard Jesus say “I am the vine” would have grown up seeing vineyards their whole lives. They would have seen the lush vines heavy with grapes during harvest season. They would have seen them bare in the winter. And they would have seen them cut back by the vinedressers every season when pruning happened. Jesus isn’t just speaking words. He is bringing back vivid memories for the people he was addressing.

So what does it mean? What was Jesus trying to communicate by saying that he is the vine?

Jesus is the source of life. Think about all the other images he has used to describe himself. He is the bread of life—he sustains life. He is the light—he makes life possible. He is the resurrection—he overcomes death.

Everything Jesus has said is about how to live—how to really, truly, and fully live.

By saying that he is the vine, Jesus claims that connection to him is the only way to experience life. Staying close to Jesus is the only path toward a full and rich life.

This should lead us to ask ourselves: are we connected to Jesus? Are you connected to Jesus?

Remember that Jesus used this vine metaphor partly because it was so familiar to the people in his day. We could imagine a lot of metaphors that might resonate in our culture which communicate a similar idea.

- Jesus is the AC Adapter. You are the laptop, and he connects you to the source of power.
- Jesus is the transmission in your car. The engine provides the power, but the transmission connects the power to the road.
- Jesus is the social worker, and you are the recipient of benefits. The government has all sorts of programs to help you, but it's the social worker that explains and offers them so you can take advantage of them.
- Jesus is the aqueduct that brings water down from the Sierra Nevada Mountains. We need that water to keep living, but we have no access to it apart from the channel that carries it to us.

Do you get the picture?

Nothing happens that should happen without a connection to Jesus. So if that is true, how do we stay connected to Jesus? That is where his command comes into play.

## Abide in me

We have looked at what Jesus says about himself. He is the vine. But there are two other characters in this image: the Father and the disciples. As we step back and look at the full scene, we notice that the Father does something and the disciples do something.

In the second verse, Jesus says that the Father does two things.

## John 15:2:

**“Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.”**

Notice that there are two situations and two actions. Branches either bear fruit, or they don't. The ones that do not, the Father “takes away,” and the ones that do, the Father “prunes.” This verse has a wordplay in Greek. The word for “take away” is *airo*, and the word for “prune” is *kathairo*. They are both related to the word for cleanse. One commentator tries to make that association clear by translating the verse this way: “Every branch in me that yields no fruit he cuts off, but every one that yields fruit he cuts clean in order that it may yield more fruit.”<sup>7</sup>

This verse is the source of theological controversy. It raises a lot of questions that I don't think Jesus was trying to address when he said this. It is not the main point of what he is communicating, so we don't need to dwell on it. But it is worth at least saying this: not everyone is connected to Jesus.

It is possible to be disconnected from Jesus entirely. In fact, that is true for a lot of the world. So as we think about what it means for us to be connected to Jesus, we should also think about how to help others become connected to Jesus in the first place. If Jesus really is the source of life, then all who do not know Jesus do not know true life. That should motivate us in a powerful way.

But this verse also means that for those who know Jesus, the Father prunes. Branches are cut back. Extra growth is removed. After pruning, a vineyard looks bare and lifeless. But it is only being prepared for new life to come.

In reality, the whole process of growing fruit involves a lot of difficulties put on the vine. The movie *Bottle Shock* tells the story of how Napa Valley became recognized as a world-class wine region in the 1970s. The vintner explains a key principle to his intern: “A comfortable grape, a well-watered, well-fertilized grape grows into a lazy ingredient of a lousy wine.”<sup>8</sup> I love that phrase. Sometimes winemakers say, “stressed vines make good wines.” Being connected to the source of life doesn't mean life is always easy. In fact, it often means that life involves challenges.

That makes Jesus' command so important.

#### **John 15:4:**

**Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me.**

Followers of Jesus are given a very simple command: abide. The word is repeated ten times in the space of seven verses. It is sometimes translated as “remain” or simply “stay”. Later in the passage, the idea of staying is connected with love and obedience to Jesus.

If you want to be productive, there are lots of tips you can follow. You can try a dozen different methodologies to increase your efficiency and improve productivity. But if you want to bear fruit, there is one simple command: stay. All you have to do is stay.

Abiding in Jesus is mostly about not leaving. We might be tempted to read this command and try to figure out how to abide. We need to spend more time with Jesus. We need to get more trained. We need to do this or focus on that. I’m not abiding, so I need to try harder to abide. But that isn’t what the word means. The branches on a grapevine aren’t gritting their teeth to stay connected to the vine. They are simply staying put.

My family and I have been working with our dog on being better trained. One of the exercises we do is to teach him to stay when there are distractions all around him. I thought about bringing him up on the platform to demonstrate, but I was talked out of it. So imagine that my dog is up here.

I tell him to sit, and he sits down to stay. I walk away from him, and he stays. I bang on the wall to create a distraction, and he stays. I throw his favorite toy across the room, and he stays. I take a handful of his food and scatter it across the floor right in front of him, and he stays. I keep doing whatever I can to distract him, and he stays.

It is not complicated to stay. But sometimes it can be very difficult. All sorts of distractions and forces in our life tempt us not to stay. But the instruction is clear. Stay.

We are surrounded by temptations not to stay. Sometimes it is hard to stay because we are in pain. It is hard to stay put when you’re being pruned. We all go through seasons of pain and difficulty. Some of them are devastating. But God uses that pain to make us more fruitful.

Sometimes we are tempted not to stay by something else that looks better. Sometimes it is simply an encouragement to de-prioritize faith until it barely registers in our lives. Still, others directly attack the premise of faith and convince us that believing is stupid or backwards. Let me tell you that amazing things happen when you stay.

Faith isn’t complicated, but it is difficult. Stay is one of the most challenging commands to teach a dog. Remaining in Jesus is one of the most challenging parts of the Christian life. But when you do, something amazing happens. We will look at it next. When we stay, we see fruit.

#### **Bears much fruit**

Here is what Jesus says about fruit in John 15:5:

#### **John 15:5:**

**“Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”**

What happens when we stay? We bear fruit. It is not that complicated. We tend to make it harder than it needs to be.

Fruit-bearing is not a test. It is not a report card for your Christian life. Fruit-bearing is a byproduct of intimacy with Jesus. You don’t try to bear more fruit. You just stay connected.

Our goal is not productivity. Our goal is fruitfulness. When we produce something, whatever we have made immediately begins to degrade. If you start a company, it requires maintenance and support and management to keep going. If you build a building, it requires effort to keep it from breaking apart and eventually falling down. If you manufacture a computer, it immediately begins to degrade and is completely irrelevant after a few years. Everything we produce always degrades over time.

The opposite is true with fruit. Fruit multiplies. Fruit increases. Fruit leads to trees which leads to more fruit which leads to more trees. This description of fruit goes back all the way to the creation story. Listen to the first creation of life in Genesis 1:11:

#### **Genesis 1:11:**

**“And God said, “Let the earth sprout vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit**



**trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind, on the earth.” And it was so.**

Do you see the emphasis on life which recreates life? That is the kind of life that happens when God is involved.

How many of you like seedless watermelons? I have to admit that I’m a big fan. But fruit without seeds is a perversion of God’s creation. Metaphorically speaking, there is no room in the kingdom of God for seedless watermelons. Go ahead and enjoy your seedless watermelon. But just remember that theologically, they are an example of how we have twisted the idea of life. Real life always bears fruit which leads to more life.

This is something we have emphasized at Peninsula Bible Church for a long time. We sometimes refer to it as the New Covenant. But we have always tried to emphasize that the Christian life is not about trying harder and working for God. The Christian life is about staying connected to Jesus and trusting him for the fruit.

The image Jesus uses has three different characters. The father is the vinedresser or, as they’d say in Napa, the viticulturist. Jesus is the vine or the rootstock of the grape plant. The followers of Jesus are the branches from where the grapes will eventually sprout.

In the picture below, you can see the gnarled-looking vine, the thin branches coming off it, and the man with the shears: that’s the Father.



Keep looking, and you’ll realize that there is even more than that. Winemakers use the term *terroir* to talk about the whole system of the vineyard: the soil, the climate, the weather, and the geography. A grape is not grown in isolation; it is part of a whole system.

Fruitfulness in Christ works the same way. You are part of a whole system. Abiding in Christ does not just happen through deep private moments with Jesus. That

is absolutely part of it. But the entire ecosystem of life includes the body of Christ as well. We are all part of it. Staying in Jesus happens in small groups, cooking food for others, serving the unhoused in our community, going on retreats, becoming vulnerable and finding support.

So let me give you the same encouragement, but with a twist. Stay.

Stay after church. Here’s a challenge: sit outside or stand around for 15 minutes after the service. Someone will talk to you. Something will happen. That’s part of the fruit-bearing process.

Stay after your small group. Stay at the same church for a long time. Stay in your friendships. Come early to church and leave late. Hang around. Just stay. Many of us are afraid of that awkward moment: standing on the patio and not knowing who to talk to. Just stand there. Someone will come up to you. And you can’t leave after 30 seconds. Stay. Something good will happen.

It’s not always easy to stay. We are tempted to leave because often staying includes a level of discomfort. But that is part of what it means to be fruitful. Remember that “A comfortable grape....grows into a lazy ingredient of a lousy wine.”<sup>9</sup>: a comfortable grape turns into the lazy ingredient of a lousy wine.

But when you stay in Christ, you turn into “a fruit tree bearing fruit in which is their seed.” Life from life from life.

We are not created to be productive; we are created to bear fruit. When you stay connected to Jesus and the ecosystem of life that he has created, you will bear fruit. That is what he promises.

## Conclusion

Let’s think again about all the productivity tools and efficiency hacks that are out there in our culture. This is the way we are taught to live. And I suggested that it seeps into the rest of our life.

Let’s say we adopt an attitude of fruitfulness in our Christian life—that we learn to stay and trust God for fruit and see him bring new life from our connection with him. How do you think that would affect our attitudes toward our friendships? Our families? Our workplaces?

What if fruitfulness instead of productivity became your default approach to life at work or home? How would that change things? Some of you have seen this kind of transformation happen in your life. Others can't even imagine living like this.

Some of you cannot possibly imagine being fruitful. You have tried to stay in Jesus, but it seems like nothing has come of it. If you feel that way, remember that fruit comes in its season. Fruit doesn't happen all the time. Count this as a promise from Jesus: Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit.

The next time you are tempted to leave, don't. Whether it is distractions, comfort, or doubt, remember the one simple command of the Christian life. Stay.

## Endnotes

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7. George R Beasley-Murray, *John: Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 36 (Revised) [WBC]* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 266.
8. Bottle Shock, directed by Randall Miller (20th Century Studios Home Entertainment, 1995).
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