

John 15:1–16 — I Am the True Vine

The Fruitless Nation, the True Vine, Profession and Reality, Abiding, and the Word That Cleanses

Scripture Reading: John 15:1–16

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman. Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit.

Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me.

I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.

If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned.

Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain.”

Why the True Vine? The Failure of the Old Vine

The Lord says, “I am the true vine.” Why the true? Because there was a vine before, and it failed. Isaiah 5 gives the account: the Lord planted a vineyard with the choicest vine, fenced it, gathered out the stones, built a tower, made a winepress. He looked for grapes. What he found was wild grapes. “For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel.” Nothing more could have been done for that vine; everything was there for the best. And the result was nothing of value to God.

That story speaks also to the individual. God has given up on the flesh. Some think it is still under trial — it is not. At the cross it was judged as irredeemably unfruitful. All that the first man could produce in his best circumstances were wild grapes — sour, untasteful to God. Isaiah 64:6: all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags. The flesh cannot please God; the mind in the flesh is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can it be. So a new source of life is needed. Hence: I am the true vine. In him there is no failure, no wild grapes. In him fruit, more fruit, much fruit, and abiding fruit — those four expressions run through the chapter.

Profession and Reality: The Crucial Distinction in Verses 2 and 6

This chapter is not about the organic union of the body of Christ, nor is it the same as chapter 12 where the life of the risen stalk flows into the grains of wheat. It has to do with profession — with true and false discipleship. The vine is a figure of profession of relationship to Christ. There are fruitless branches in the vine, and that is possible only in the sphere of profession, not in the sphere of vital union.

The distinction between verses 2 and 6 is critical. In verse 2: “Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away.” It does not say he burns it. The Father as husbandman may take away — in governmental judgment — a branch that bears no fruit. This answers to 1 Corinthians 11:30–32, where because of unfruitfulness and sin, many among the Corinthians were weak and sickly and many had fallen asleep. This was not eternal perdition — the text says explicitly they were chastened so as not to be condemned with the world. It is governmental judgment, not eternal loss.

Verse 6 is different: “If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned.” Here the subject changes from “ye” — disciples — to “a man.” The Spirit marks

the difference. This is absolute profession without reality. There is no abiding at all. He is cast forth, withered, gathered, burned. This is not governmental discipline of a true believer; it is the end of an empty profession. So verse 2 deals with fruitless true believers under governmental dealings; verse 6 deals with those whose entire profession is hollow. The difference in outcome — taking away versus burning — answers to the difference in the person.

The Vine Is for Fruit: Ezekiel 15 and the Christian's Purpose

Ezekiel 15 asks what the vine tree is good for compared to any tree in the forest. Can you make a pin of it to hang a vessel on? No. Can you do any work with it? No — not even when it was whole, and much less after the fire has touched it. The only thing the vine is good for is its fruit. That is all. If it produces no fruit, it is fit only for burning.

This is what the Christian is for. Not to be an impressive piece of timber, a great cedar or a lasting oak. Not to do some other kind of work. The vine is for fruit, and nothing else. In itself the vine is not beautiful — narrow, twisted, tangled. But what fruitfulness comes from it. And the Lord Jesus as the true vine, in whom there was no beauty that men should desire him, brought forth fruit to the Father's glory in the most adverse circumstances: a root out of dry ground, rejected and despised. He is the true vine, and because we are in him, we can bear fruit too.

Ye Are Clean Through the Word

Verse 3 brings a wonderful word in the midst of all this solemn teaching: "Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you." Judas was not present when these words were spoken — he had gone out. Those who remained were the eleven, and the Lord says of them: you are already clean. Not cleaner than yesterday, not in process of becoming clean — already clean.

The world through which the disciples walk is moral filth. Yet the Lord addresses them with the word clean upon his lips. He who was the spotless, sinless one, who could not sin, says to those who had been born into evil and had their own old nature: clean. That is the character of what God has done for his people through Christ.

The cleansing agent named here is the word: “through the word which I have spoken unto you.” Not the blood — though Hebrews 10:22 shows both agents at work: the blood cleansing the conscience from evil and the water of the word cleansing the body (the ways of life). Here it is the word that has done it, the whole logos that the Lord had communicated to them. Not some part of it — all of it. This is why the word of God must be tenaciously held and revered in its entirety. It is through the whole word that we are clean. Those who chisel it away — who reduce the Gospels to a percentage of what might be original — are dismantling the very instrument through which souls are made clean.

Abiding: Conscious Residence in the Source of Fruitfulness

Verse 4: “Abide in me, and I in you.” To abide in him is not simply a positional statement — we are in him positionally. The injunction is about conscious realization of being in him. It is conscious residence in the source of fruitfulness. Without that consciousness, without that practical awareness of one’s union with him, there will be no fruit — only the effort of self-produced activity, which is not what the vine does. The branch is fruitful because it is in the vine; it does not produce fruit by its own volition separate from the vine. So the believer who abides in Christ consciously, dwelling in him as the source of all fruitfulness, will bring forth fruit.

The “I in you” of verse 4 is the consequence: abide in me and I in you. It is not unconditional. It describes what follows from genuine abiding. And from verse 9 onward the condition of abiding is connected with keeping his commandments

and continuing in his love, just as he kept the Father's commandments and abode in his love. True discipleship and fruitful abiding are one thing.

Fruit, More Fruit, Much Fruit, and Abiding Fruit

The progression through the chapter is deliberate. Fruit in verse 2; more fruit as the Father purges the fruitful branch; much fruit in verses 5 and 8 as the Father is glorified; and then in verse 16, abiding fruit — fruit that remains. The Father is glorified in much fruit; the Lord's design is that the fruit should remain. All that is wood, hay, and stubble will be burned; what is of the Spirit will abide the fire, like gold, silver, and precious stones. The fruit of the Spirit endures for all eternity, to the glory of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

What is it that flows from the vine into the branches to produce this fruit? The chapter from verse 9 onward suggests it clearly: divine love. As the Father has loved the Son, so the Son loves the branches. Continue in his love. The love flows through the vine into the branches, and the result is fruit that reflects the character of that love — “greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.” The true vine laid down his life. And from that love, the branches are to love one another. That is the fruit.

I am the vine, ye are the branches. Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit.