

John 15:1–9

A Ministry in the Word

Scripture Reading

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. As the Father hath loved me, so have I loved you: continue ye in my love.

John's Gospel — A Section About Love

John's Gospel has a character profoundly different from that of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Those three are often read together; John stands apart. It sets forth the things of the Lord Jesus Christ with a view to displaying His deity. And to take up what is written with a view to something infinite — in all our finitude — is a challenge, though a greatly blessed one. We take a little portion as the small child who went to the ocean with a cup, filled it, and said, I have the ocean here. Better to go away knowing we have held a little of something infinite than to imagine we have exhausted it.

There is a section of John's Gospel that is devoted, from beginning to end, to the subject of divine love. It begins with chapter 13:1 — *having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end* — and extends at least to the close of chapter 17: *that the love wherewith thou hast loved me may be in them, and I*

in them. Between those two verses lie five chapters. Chapter 15 verse 9 puts it in plain words in the middle: *as the Father hath loved me, so have I loved you: continue ye in my love.* The whole section is about divine love. And the vine and the branches are one of its expressions.

I Am the True Vine — Isaiah 5 and the Contrast

The word true calls for reflection. If there is a true vine, there must be one that is not true. Isaiah 5 supplies it. There, Jehovah describes His planting of Israel — a vineyard perfectly prepared: fenced, cleared of stones, a choice vine set in it, a winepress built. Perfect cultivation. And the result was wild grapes. Not fruit — wild grapes.

The stock was bad. The cultivation was perfect; the nature was wrong. In John 15:1 the two halves of the verse answer to the two questions that Isaiah 5 raised. *I am the true vine* — the stock is good. *My Father is the husbandman* — the cultivation is perfect. Both are right this time. Nature and nurture both meet their standard. And this is not the old Judaism refurbished, nor a new Judaism. It is something entirely new — a new stock, the root of which is the Lord Himself.

I Am — The Deity Behind the Vine

In the very first words of verse 1 there is a depth that cannot be exhausted: *I am.* Through John's Gospel the Lord uses these words of Himself in a way that no merely human teacher could. When John the Baptist was asked who he was, he confessed without hesitation: *I am not the Christ. I am not.* There is something fitting about placing that alongside the Lord's words. John the Baptist said I am not; the Lord says I am. He is the one who exists — the self-existent one, the God of the burning bush. The vine and all that flows from it draws its meaning from that foundation.

I Am the True Vine — Which Is to Say, I Love You

This is a section of John's Gospel about love. How does the Lord say, I love you, to His disciples? He says it here, in this image. The vine is the source of everything the branches have — all the sap, all the goodness, all the strength, all the resources for producing fruit flow from the vine to the branches. Without the vine, a branch is a withered stick, good for nothing. To say *I am the true vine* is to say, I am the source of your life, and all that you have comes from Me. That is love. And *my Father is the husbandman* adds: and He loves you too. Twice in one verse, without using the word once.

Fruit, Not Works — Galatians 5 and Ezekiel 15

The branches of a vine are not suitable for making anything. Ezekiel 15 presses this: *shall wood be taken thereof to do any work?* — no. *Will men take a pin of it to hang any vessel thereon?* — no. Vine branches are not good for work. They are good for one thing only: bearing fruit. And that is precisely what the Lord asks of His branches here.

The distinction between fruit and works is clearly drawn in Galatians 5. The works of the flesh are listed in verses 19-21 — and everything on that list is temporal and transient. The fruit of the Spirit is listed in verses 22-23 — love, joy, peace, longsuffering, and the rest. Not one entry appears in both lists. The works come from the flesh and belong to the flesh. The fruit comes from the Spirit — with a capital S — and has about it the character of eternity: love that lasts forever, joy that lasts forever, peace that lasts forever. That enduring quality is built into what the vine produces through the branches. The fruit is not our doing; it is the doing of the vine through us.

The Husbandman's Hand Is Very Close

When the husbandman prunes — his hand comes very close to the branch. The pruning may be felt as a sense of loss, even as something painful. But the hand of the Father, who is the perfect husbandman, is very close in that moment. And the motivation behind the pruning is love — more fruit, better fruit, fruit that abides. It is another way of saying what Hebrews says: *whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth*. A God who prunes is a God who is close, and a God who cares deeply about what the branch is producing. There is great comfort for the soul in knowing that the hand that prunes is the Father's hand.

— *Study ends* —