

There are some things that when we receive them, we treasure them forever, but we hate that we have to receive them. We hope that we never have to give them, but we would never want to miss out on the opportunity to do so. We do everything we can to avoid the moment they must be exchanged, but when that time comes, we make it last as long as possible.

What I am talking about is parting words. Saying goodbye to someone you love is never easy, and we try to avoid it. However, we do not want to part ways without saying goodbye, and those last words are often gifts we treasure deeply within our hearts.

Think of a grown child now leaving home. It is their last meal together as a family who lives under one roof. It is a husband and wife in their last night together before one of them is deployed for many long months. It is best friends out for a night on the town one last time before one of them leaves for a new job in another part of the country.

One of the common messages communicated during these intimate times is one of loyalty. Parents saying, "Son, remember where you came from." "Sweetheart, remember everything we taught you." One friend telling another, "Don't you forget about me." With a tear in her eye, the wife tells her husband, "Remember to call. You better Skype me every night just like we talked about."

But we live in shallow times where loyalty quickly seeps away. We part ways too easily. We burn our bridges, and say good bye without a tear in our eye. People think only of themselves, without realizing how their lives are connected to those around them. It is a problem that rears its ugly head in almost every part of our society. Employers are not loyal to their employees. Employees are not loyal to their companies. Parents are not loyal to their children. Children not being loyal to their parents. Husbands and wives not being loyal to each other. Friends are not loyal to their friends.

However, in our passage this morning we see a setting where the loyalty runs deep and rich. We have here a friend sharing his parting words to those closest to him, and in those words we see true loyalty.

"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. ⁶ If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷ If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.

This is the final “I am” statement in John. The scene is the last supper. This is the last meal Jesus will share with his disciples, and what we read here is part of the dinner conversation. In John’s gospel, the Last Supper begins all the way back in chapter 13 and goes all the way to chapter 17. However, in the midst of this farewell speech, Jesus verbally paints this beautiful picture of their relationship.

Upon first reading, this passage seems out of place, as if it doesn't belong here. Jesus talks about several important topics before he paints this word-picture of the vine and the branches. He talks about the world, love, obedience, the Holy Spirit and the Word. As soon as he’s done talking about the vine and the branches, he goes right back to talking about those other things. This just sort of seems squeezed in the middle.

But then we remember that Jesus not only teaches truth, He loves to illustrate it in pictures. In his parables, he paints scenes familiar to his audience to illustrate the truth of his teaching. But this is not a parable for it is not a story. Rather, it’s an extended metaphor, and allegory Jesus uses to paint a picture of the truths he’s been talking about. Jesus did something similar in some of his other “I am” statements, “I am the Bread of life,” or “I am the good shepherd.” Word pictures of divine truth.

When Jesus says, “I am the vine,” he again is using a picture familiar to the people. First of all, the grapevine is a part of their religious heritage. It was a picture used repeatedly in the O.T. In the O.T. Israel was God's vine. Isaiah 5 says, “The vineyard of the Lord is the house of Israel.” Ezekiel, David, Hosea, Joel, Zechariah, and Malachi all liken Israel to a vine. But in almost all of these passages Israel is a wild vine that produces unsavory, bitter fruit. Jesus here says he is the “true vine”. He is the true vine that produces good fruit.

Secondly, the vine was a part of Israel’s geography. Grapes were a cash crop, and vineyards were commonplace in the landscape. Naturally, grapevines became a common cultural symbol. A large golden grapevine adorned the front of the temple. It was the honor of any citizen who had enough wealth to provide the gold to add another bunch of grapes or even a single grape to the temple vine. The grapevine even became a national symbol. In the only period of independence that Israel had enjoyed the last several hundred years, the image of the grapevine was stamped into their coins.

Finally, the vine was a part of this last meal they were sharing. Remember, it is the last supper, and Jesus has already shared the bread and the cup with his disciples. The image of the “fruit of the vine” was still freshly impressed in their mind

Jesus did not just say, “I am the vine.”, but he also says, “You are the branches.” This is the only “I am” statement that also contains a “you are.” You see who we are is based on who he is. We have our identity because of who Jesus is. Because he is we are. I want you to understand that. One of the

reasons we are doing this series of Jesus' I am statements is that you need to be thoroughly grounded in who Jesus is, and by knowing who he is, you will know who you are.

Jesus is asking for our loyalty. His loyalty to us is never in question. He is the true vine. He is our source, our strength our supply. He has demonstrated his loyalty time and time again. He is about to demonstrate it ultimately on the cross. The question is, "Will the disciples remain loyal?" Already at this supper, Judas has betrayed Jesus. Tellingly, when Jesus prophesied that one of them would betray him, the others, were eager to ask Jesus, "Surely, not I." "It's not me...is it? Jesus has just warned Peter that he would deny him. The seed of disloyalty is sown deeply in the human heart.

This is why Jesus calls for their loyalty. This is why he calls for our loyalty. This is the whole purpose of the vine and the branches...to encourage them and to encourage you and me to remain loyal. You see a real branch has no choice but to remain loyal. It can't disconnect itself from the vine and go somewhere else, but you and I do have that choice.

As our vine that is our source, our strength, and our supply, Jesus calls us as branches to do three things:

I. The Branches Must Remain in the Vine.

First of all branches must remain in the vine. By itself, a branch is useless, good for nothing. This is especially true of branches from a grapevine. They are a very weak wood, so that nothing could be made with them, and they are not suitable to burn for heating or cooking because they produce lots of smoke. Now they're perfect for those of you with smokers. But for how they did things in the 1st Century they were good for nothing except to be destroyed in a bonfire.

The grapes grow on the branches, but the branches are dependent on the vine for the life giving sap that makes bearing fruit possible. If the branch is removed from the vine, it can get no sap, and the grapes will die just as the leaves of a tree will die if the limb is removed from the trunk.

In the same way we must remain in Christ. We are dependent on him to live and be fruitful. Here is where we begin to see the connection between this passage and what Jesus says both before and after. What is the life-giving sap that we get from Jesus? The answer comes from what Jesus says before and after.

- John 14:16-17a – *“And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever— the Spirit of truth.”*
- John 16:13 – *“But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come.”*

When you become a Christian and your life is connected to Jesus you receive the Holy Spirit. He is the life-giving supply we receive from the vine. The Holy Spirit comes from Christ bringing his life to us. Ephesians 1:13 says, "In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit."

But how do we remain in Christ? Again I think the themes that run throughout the whole last supper scene make this clear.

- John 15:7 – Jesus talks about, *"If you remain in me and my words remain in you."*
- John 15:10– *"If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love."*

Several times, including twice in our text this morning, Jesus refers to his teaching, his commands, or his word. God's word is essential to our Christian life. We can't remain in him without it. 2 Timothy 3:16, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness." Hebrews 4:12, "For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." (Read II Tim. 3:16 & Heb. 4:12). We need to take more seriously the necessity of studying our Bibles. It is essential to our remaining in Christ. Even when we are busy we don't fail to eat, breathe, or sleep. Well, studying the Word is just as essential to our spiritual lives. That's how we remain connected to the vine.

II. The Branches Must Bear Fruit.

Secondly, the branches must bear fruit. Christ does not give us life for no reason. The Holy Spirit brings the life of Christ into our lives for a very specific– to bear fruit. What use is a branch that is connected to the vine and receiving its life-giving sap, but does nothing with it?

Christ talked often about being fruitful. Jesus says in Matthew 7:17-19, *"Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."*

In the parable of the soils Jesus explains, *"But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown."*

It was important to Christ that we bear fruit. All the disciples knew that in a vineyard all branches that did not bear fruit were cut off from the vine and burned. This is a very sharp image of Hell. And notice in this passage that it is not just bad fruit that causes you to be put into the fire, but the failure to produce good fruit. Many who profess to follow Jesus are fairly successful in not producing

bad fruit. They're not bad people. They're not out there doing all kinds of bad things, but are they producing good fruit? Are they producing the fruit that Jesus has called them to bear?

How do we produce this good fruit? Sometimes the Bible uses the bearing fruit imagery or the idea of a harvest to picture evangelism. In that sense bearing fruit is spreading the good news of Jesus to others. But Jesus is talking about a different kind of fruit here. Again we go back to the themes that Jesus has been teaching throughout the last supper. We have already talked about the importance of the Holy Spirit and the Word, but there is something else that is almost always mentioned in connection with them, and that is obedience.

- John 14:15– “If you love me, keep my commands.”
- John 14:21– “Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me.”
- John 14:23– “Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching.”
- John 15:10– “If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love.”
- John 15:14– “You are my friends, if you do what I command.”

Are you noticing a pattern here? Jesus is talking about the fruit of obedience– the harvest of a Christian life. The word tells us what we ought to do, The Holy Spirit gives us the strength to do it, but it is still our response to obey. If you remain in Jesus and you are connected to him and you are receiving the life of the Holy Spirit he supplies to you then its going to show in the growth of a Christ-like character. Gal. 5:22-25 tells us what this fruit is.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. 24 Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. 25 Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.

You know you are connected to Jesus when you start looking, acting, and sounding more like Jesus. But when the fruit of your life looks like anything but Jesus, that shows that you're connected to something other than Jesus.

You become what you are connected to. We see a perfect illustration of this online. A few years ago an angry dad walked into a Target store outside Minneapolis clutching coupons in his hand. He demanded to talk to the manager, “My daughter got this in the mail! She’s still in high school, and you’re sending her coupons for baby clothes and cribs. Are you trying to encourage her to get pregnant?”

The manager had no idea what the man was talking about, but sure enough, a mailer filled with ads for maternity clothing, nursery furniture and smiling babies was addressed to this teenage girl. The manager called a few days later to apologize. On the phone, a somewhat embarrassed father said, “I had a talk with my daughter. It turns out there’s been some activities in my house I haven’t been

completely aware of. She's due in August. I owe you an apology." The company used datamining from this girl's phone and computer to know she was pregnant. They can know this with great accuracy just from what kind of skin creams, supplements and personal hygiene items you buy.

When my bicycle broke down and I was researching how to fix it, I started seeing bicycle ads everywhere. I go to the doctor for something and while I'm at the doctor's office I search for something on my phone, by the time I get back to the office my computer is already bombarding me with links to articles about this medicine and that supplement. It's kind of spooky how much Amazon, Google, and Facebook know about me and my life. I half expect to find Jeff Bezos and Mark Zuckerberg hiding under my bed taking notes, so they know what's going on my life. I know when one of the girls has been using my computer, because I start getting all these links to cosmetics and fashion magazines.

My computer shows me what I've been connecting to online. It knows what I've been shopping for, what I've been reading, and sometimes it even knows my most personal and private stuff.

It works the same way with what you are connected to in life. Who and what you connect to affects what you see in your life. What kind of fruit are you bearing? Maybe that tells you something about what you are connected to.

III. The Branches Must Be Pruned.

The third thing Jesus says is that the branches must be pruned. It is this process of pruning that shows us just how much time and effort go into making a fruitful branch. The pruning of branches was common and drastic. There are four stages to the pruning process. 1.) The tips are pinched to prevent them from growing too fast. 2.) There is topping where an entire foot or two of top growth will be removed to prevent the loss of an entire shoot. 3.) There is the thinning of grape clusters. This enables the rest of the fruit to be the best it can be. You don't want a whole of bunch of clusters of wimpy, bitter grapes. Instead you want several clusters of large, juicy, sweet grapes. 4.) Finally, there is the cutting away of suckers to prevent the loss of valuable nourishment to the whole vine.

What is this pruning process for look like our lives? It is discipline. Although fruitless branches are thrown into the fire, those that remain in the vine still must be pruned to bear good fruit. Without pruning, a good branch can quickly and easily become a fruitless branch. In the same way, without loving discipline, a good Christian can quickly wither and become fruitless in their life.

God's discipline is an essential part of your life with Christ. Like the discipline we received growing up, it isn't always pleasant, but it is necessary. Hebrews 12:7-11 says,

Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? 8 If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all. 9 Moreover, we have all had

human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live! 10 They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. 11 No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

To the branches that don't remain in the vine, God acts as a judge. To the others, he acts as a father. How does God discipline us? He corrects us in love. He may let us go through trials to test us and hardships in life that strengthen us. He may let us suffer the consequences of our own sin that lead to repentance. He may let Satan attack us so that we turn back to him. These things all help us grow and produce fruit.

Many Christians mistakenly see Jesus as a genie in a bottle that will help them avoid hardships, that if they are experiencing suffering something is wrong. I have heard many believers share testimonies about how God helped them avoid trouble in their life. And it's true that God is the giver of every good and perfect gift. He blesses us in many ways, and guides us around many dangers. But that is only a part of the picture.

Listen to James 1:2-4 *"Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."*

Let me say something that might be hard to hear, but we need to hear it. God is good because he also lets us suffer. This may sound strange, but it is true. It helps us be fruitful. The holiest and most spiritual Christians won't tell you about all the hardships God helped them avoid. They will tell you about all the hardships that God brought them through.

If you are going through a trial in your life, it may not be God's will that you be delivered right now. It may be necessary for your Christian life to go through it, to grow from it, to experience the divine pruning process.

To be sure, the pruning process is not easy. It can even be painful, but oh, is it ever profitable. We must remember that God's hand is never closer to us than when he is pruning. He is working directly in our lives. We may feel alone, but we need to remember that though pruning may pain us, it will never harm us. When a gardener prunes he lives little more than the vine. This produces the most fruit, the best fruit. When God prunes he leaves little more than the vine, too. He cuts away everything that is not Jesus, leaving us as fruitful as possible.

We can see the loyalty of Christ in all that he does for us. He gives us his life, he gives us his word, he gives us his Holy Spirit, and he prunes our lives. But are we loyal to him? Are we as branches

remaining in Christ by studying and meditating upon his word as we should? Are we bearing the fruit of obedience in our lives, the obedience of the heart? And finally, Are we humbly accepting the pruning God wants to do in our lives?