

Remain in Christ

John 15:1-8 (NIV84)

¹ "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ² 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. ³ You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴ 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. ⁵ "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. ⁶ 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. ⁷ If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. ⁸ This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

How will I make it through this? Regardless of whether you have been a Christian your entire life or it's a new thing for you, we all ask ourselves at some point, "How will I make it through? Will I make it through to the end?"

The setting for our Gospel reading today takes us back to Maundy Thursday evening. Jesus has already made it clear that he is going back to his Father in heaven; he will not be with his disciples much longer on earth. He is going to suffer and die. He's told them that they will be scattered. Jesus has been the disciples' unifying factor for three years. He's been the one that they followed, who held them together, but now he is leaving. They are going to have to continue on without him. While dealing with feelings of grief and shock, they are also asking the question, "How will we make it through?"

As their world is collapsing around them, as they are starting to feel abandoned by Jesus before he has even left them, Jesus starts a word picture for them. "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener... You are the branches." (verses 1 & 5) "[My Father] cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit." (verse 2)

Lord, why are you telling us this? Why are you talking about people getting cut off from you? That's the last thing that these disciples want to hear right now. They want to remain with you, Jesus; they want to say with you. They want to always be connected to the one they called their Messiah, their Savior. Who are these branches that bear no fruit? "Do we, your disciples, bear fruit for you? Do we bear enough fruit for you? Are you saying that you are going to cut off one of us?"

Jesus' statements about this vine and branches and bearing fruit and being cut off immediately leads us to reflect internally. His disciples understand as we do that bearing fruit is a picture of our lives showing that we are Christians. As John the Baptist famously preached, produce fruit in keeping with repentance. Are we bearing fruit? Is God's Word working in my life? Does it cause me to want to obey his commands? Do I have compassion on my fellow human beings? Do I stand up for them, speak well for them? Do I try every day to live the way God wants me to be? Do I reflect Christ's love for me out into this world? Do people know that I am a Christian by what I say and do?

Or am I one of those who bears no fruit? Is my life not good enough for what God expects? I mean, I know that I'm not perfect, but I'm not completely unproductive as a Christian, am I? Would people even know that I am a Christian by how I act and how I talk? Am I bearing fruit?

If I am not bearing fruit, there's a reason for that. Jesus said, "No branch can bear fruit by itself...Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me...Apart from me you can do nothing." (verses 4 & 5) If I am not bearing fruit at all, if I look at my life and there is no evidence that anyone would accuse me of being a Christian based upon how I act and how I talk, then I might very well be cut off by the Father, the gardener.

To be cut off, that's something else. We use that phrase to talk about people being turned down from previously expected support, from money. You are cut off from your source of income. To be cut off by the vine, though, that's being cut off from the very life source. If you cut off a branch from a grapevine, you are expecting that vine to be discarded and never grow back. You can't superglue it back on and hope for it to grow. It's cut off. Because it is cut off, the branch withers and dies.

This is what it's like for those who see no evidence of fruit in their lives. They are wondering, "Will I make it through this? Will I make it to the end in Christ" and every sign points to "no." There's no hope. There's no evidence that I am connected to Jesus. Maybe I'm

cut off from him. And there's only one thing left for the gardener to do with someone who bears no fruit. "Such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned." (verse 6)

It may be an extended metaphor, but we get the picture. If I am not bearing any fruit, if I am in no way showing that I am a Christian, then I will get cut off by the Father. I will be cut off from his love, from his forgiveness. I will be tossed into the fires of hell, caused to burn and suffer for all eternity instead of being connected to the true vine, Jesus, who gives life - life eternal.

We've seen branches cut off and begin withering. We've seen family and friends who once went to church with us, who we raised in the church, and now the good works are shriveling up. Their obedience to God and his Word pretty much gone. Sure, they are still good people whom we love, but we know that they are living life on their terms, not God's. They don't look like a Christian or act like a Christian. God's Word has no place in their lives. They are no longer bearing fruit. They will be tossed into the fires of hell if this continues.

Do I see this in myself? Am I drying up? Does my fruit leave something to be desired? Am I doing enough to avoid being cut off? Will I remain a disciple of Jesus until the end? What do I do to fix this situation, to remain in Jesus?

The solution does not come from what we do, decisions we make. Apart from the vine, apart from Jesus, we can do nothing. (verse 5) Instead, it is up to what Jesus does as the vine and what the Father does as the gardener that causes us to remain in him and bear fruit. As the true vine, Jesus is our life source. There is no life without him – spiritually speaking. He brings us back from spiritual death to spiritual life. He causes me to want to serve him, to bear fruit. He empowers me to do so, just as a vine gives the life source for the branches to bear fruit.

As the gardener, the Father notices the branches that are bearing fruit and helps them do even more. "Every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful." (verse 2) Doing a little bit of research, I found that grapevines are recommended to have 70-90% of their new growth pruned back in order to keep the entire grapevine healthy and growing the way it should. That's almost all the new growth, but not quite. This wouldn't seem to work, cutting off that much growth, but it does. It's the same when God prunes us. We feel cut off, hindered, stunted, but he does it so that we become even more fruitful.

Have you felt a pruning lately? Has God's law cut you down to size, humbled you, exposed you for who you are – a poor, miserable sinner, someone who knows what's right and wrong and yet so often you are doing what you are not supposed to be doing and not doing the things that you are supposed to be doing? Do you look at your life and wonder if anyone would be peg you as a Christian or would no one guess that you belong to Christ or ever notice anything different in how you behave and talk?

God fixes that with his Word. Jesus said, "You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you." (verse 3) God's Word not only shows us our sin, but it also shows us our Savior, a God who grafts us onto the vine, not because we are so good or deserving, but because of his great kindness. By his Word, God connects us to himself, connects us to the source of eternal life, Jesus Christ, the one who lived and died and rose again so that we would live and bear fruit.

Will I make it to the end? Will I remain a follower of Christ? Yes, as you remain in Christ by his Word. Since we have been grafted onto the vine, made a believer by God through his Word, it is that same Word which will cause us to remain in him. This is what is done as you come to church, attend Bible class, read your Bible at home, have family devotions, make use of e-mail devotions and our little booklet called "Meditations." The only way for us to remain in Christ, the true vine – our life source, is to remain in his Word.

As his Word remains in you, you remain connected to him. He nourishes your faith with his Word. He prunes you with it so that you bear fruit, cleanses you with it so that you remain spiritually healthy. He gives us his laws and commands so that we know what kind of fruit God expects, that we have guidance in living for him. Without Jesus the true vine, there will be no fruit produced. With him, you will bear much fruit and show yourself to be his disciple and you will remain until the end.

Will I make it through? Will I remain until the end? By the life source of the true vine, of Jesus, the answer is yes. Pray to remain in him, to remain in his Word and the true vine will grant it. Amen.