

1 John 15:1-17 I am the True Vine

This is the 7th of the 'I AM' sayings of Jesus; bread/light of the world/ gate/good shepherd/resurrection & life/ way, truth and life and now 'The True Vine'.

Set the scene – Jesus is meeting with his disciples for a fellowship meal, the yearly Passover celebration, which will also be his farewell meal before he faces death. He shares a meal with them, shares in fellowship with them, but also shares instructions for living for them. Jesus often uses very ordinary language with these 'I AM' sayings and illustrations; he talked in parables and allegories. Here, the last 'I am' The vine – my father is the gardener.'

But we can draw out more e.g. Maple Leaf = Canada; shamrock = Ireland; Thistle = Scotland; Japan? = Cherry blossom or chrysanthemum. The Vine is the symbol of Israel in OT. Around the Temple was a frieze, also on their coins, showing vines, vine leaves, bunch of grapes. Logo of Israel Tourist Board two men carrying a huge bunch of grapes on a pole on their shoulders

e.g. Psalm 80:8 You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it, and it took root and filled the land.

But this vine had gone rotten – it was fruitless. **Is. 5:1-2**

I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard: my loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well. Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit.

Is 5 Verse 7: The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the nation of Israel, and the people of Judah are the vines he delighted in. And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.

There are FOUR aspects of Jesus' teaching 1) *Relationship* between the vine and the branches; 2) the *Residence*, the way the vine and the branches depend on one another; 3) the *Renewal* that is promised; 4) the *Results*, the fruit that is produced.

Relationship. The vine is unlike most other trees - each branch is in intimate relationship with trunk. This was the relationship that God wanted with his people Israel – but this relationship had gone rotten. Jesus says 'I am the true vine, the real vine, the new vine, the new Israel.' Our relationship with Jesus is to be intimate and personal – if you like, as Christian fellowships we are to be like bunches of grapes. Some bible illustrations:

In Ephesians – we are the body, Christ the head

In 1 Corinthians – we are the building, Christ the foundation

In Revelation – we are the bride, Christ is the bridegroom

In John 15 – we are the branches, Christ is the vine

Relationships are important to life, and our relationship with Jesus is important. Relationships should develop and deepen with age, but for Israel their relationship with God had gone cold; it had become formal and based on religious practices, their first love had been forgotten. Jesus offers a new possibility of intimate relationship.

Residence. This relationship isn't to be fleeting or temporary, it's to be permanent. Ten times in the passage Jesus uses the word 'remain'. This has the meaning of setting up a home, a dwelling-place, something established and above all permanent. A permanent home instead of a nomadic wandering in a tent. Eph. 3:17 talks about Christ 'making his home in our hearts.' When Jesus calls Zaccheus down from his tree and says 'I will be coming to your house' the word doesn't mean a quick visit for a cup of tea – it actually means coming to stay, to dwell, to reside, to remain. A relationship with Jesus - not a one-off event at conversion. It's the difference between a fleeting teenage love-affair and a life-long marriage that lasts until death. And a loving relationship is vital – it's more important than income, a house, or possessions.

A good relationship will mean a partnership through bad times as well as good. Christ wants to be at home with us - if we feel he is far away, guess who has moved!

Renewal. There's a bit of a difficult bit here – branches that are fruitless are cut off and burned; wood from a vine has really very little use, only good for feeding a fire. Branches that do bear fruit are pruned so that they are even more fruitful. What are the unfruitful branches?

1) Israel? Yes, the vine had gone rotten. I could choose a number of OT quotes here – e.g. Jer 2:21 *'I had planted you like a choice vine of sound and reliable stock. How then did you turn against me into a corrupt, wild vine?'* So Jesus might well have Israel in mind here.

2) Apostates – those who have turned away from the faith? Those who had previously been fruitful but have lost faith. Conceivable – Jesus says that there will be many who call him 'Lord, Lord' – but he will say 'Get away from me, I never knew you.' Matt. 7:21

3) Could it mean Judas, the disciple who was to betray him? Possible – the other disciples will be pruned to bear more fruit, but Judas could be the one to be cut off and burned.

4) Perhaps non-Christians? Those who have heard the message but rejected it? Maybe.

5) Or could it be fruitless Christians? I don't think that's possible. All Christians will bear fruit – maybe small, but they will be fruitful. No Christian, no fellowship would be too small or weak to be cut off and burned.

We need to recognise the difference between cutting off to prune or cutting off to burn. The difference is a question of millimetres, and depends on the skill of the gardener. The word 'pruning' and 'cleaning' is the same in the Greek. Pruning does not seem logical from the vine's limited point of view, it's painful, but is essential if the plant is to remain fruitful, because it encourages new growth on the stem of the vine. Purpose of pruning is not to destroy, but to build up.

I said that all Christians will bear some fruit, but all Christians need pruning, sometimes when they are actually quite strong – and this is sometimes very difficult to recognise.

I am no gardener, but we have a climbing rose which we inherited when we moved house six years ago. It looks many years old, produces lots of leaves and spindly twigs but not many flowers. It needs to be hacked right back to the ground. I just need the courage. I look forward to some lovely blossoms later. Ask me next year!

Result. Verse 8, ‘This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear *much* fruit.’ That’s the first result, the *quantity* – ‘MUCH fruit’, but it is also good *quality* verse 16, ‘I appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will LAST.’ Fruit might be new disciples, more people won for Christ, you might not think of yourself as a great evangelist, converting people to the faith, but if we read Galatians 5:22 we find the *fruit of the Spirit* - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Fruit, has one sole reason for its existence - at its centre has a pip, a seed, for new plants, and that’s true of the fruit of the Spirit. Love – there is no love like Christian love, and Jesus says ‘By this shall all people know that you are my disciples, by the love you show one another.’ Joy – our worship, our Christian life is to be joyful, not miserable. Peace – we are to live in love and peace with ALL. So it goes on.

So I’d encourage you to look back – at the fruit that you have produced. Answered prayer; love; joy; peace. Fruits you can see – and some that you cannot, the seeds that have grown out of your sight, maybe far away. Seeds that may have been planted in a child, that are quietly growing, as yet unseen. Look back, draw strength from what God has done and will yet do through you.

And look forward – especially when times are a bit hard going and you wonder if it’s all worth while, because you don’t seem to see much fruit being borne. Can it be that the master gardener is pruning? Cutting back the old, tired growth and making room for the fresh. It’s not always pleasant, but pruning is essential for new, healthy growth.

“If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.”