

This Scripture contains one of Jesus’ famous “*I am*” sayings. You’ve heard them before: “*I am the light of the world...I am the way, the truth and the life...I am the resurrection and the life.*” **But when Jesus says “*I am the vine and you are the branches...*” he is using one of his many teaching illustrations from agriculture, which you also hear me say every time we celebrate the Lord’s Supper together.**

That’s great for a country boy like me, but it may not be as helpful if you’re a city dweller. In one of his classic parables Jesus talks about a sower going out to sow, and about various qualities of soil. He speaks about weeds growing among the wheat. He says the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. He talks about a tiny mustard seed growing into a tree. Jesus compares himself to a seed that must “die” and be planted in the ground before it can be fruitful. He tells a parable about mischievous tenant farmers who rent an orchard, but refuse to give their landlord his due. Jesus has another parable about a gardener digging around a fig tree and adding fertilizer, in an attempt to save it. He talks about a landowner who hires laborers to pick grapes throughout the day. The gospels show Jesus’ understanding and appreciation for people who work the soil and grow things. He understood rural life and felt a real connection to the soil.

The vine and the branches teaching of Jesus is a summary of much of his teaching, a kind of bottom line instruction, if you like. As I read it, I hear Jesus say that our very spiritual genes are spliced into God through Christ. We cannot be part of the family if we give up our birthright. But when we remain connected to the source of our existence, the Ribonucleic Acid of his Spirit ensures that life flows through our mortal veins. And when it does, whatever our lives are about will bear the fruit of his grace and love.

1. Have you ever struggled in your walk with the Lord and found yourself asking, “How can my faith work better in my life?” There is no passage in the Bible that has a better answer to that question than Jesus’ words in John 15. Most Christians struggle with the question of how their faith is working or not working in their life at one time or another—some to the point of giving up. Most churches are good at talking about what we *should* do as Christians but talk very little about *how* to do it. That leaves many Christian people struggling throughout the week sincerely trying to “live the Christian life” but feeling like a failure. You might look around at the people of this church and think they seem so pious and holy sitting there in their favorite seats on Sunday morning. It may seem that other Christians are cut out for Christianity but you’re not. The truth is that understanding what Jesus is saying here is a key to living as a disciple of Jesus.

In verse 16 Jesus talks about his will for our lives. John 15:16 says, “*You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last.*” God designed each and every one of us to be fruitful, so I’m going to give you some “how to be fruitful” ideas at the end of the sermon.

2. What kind of fruit is God looking for in your life? He is looking for the fruit of the Spirit—*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control* (Galatians 5:22f.). He is looking for the life of Jesus to be expressed through you and me—his character, his works, his will, so that other lives are impacted by his love flowing through us.

3. My first reaction to that is a bit of panic. The works of Jesus, his character, his love flowing through me transforming people's lives, sounds like a lot to ask. I'm not sure I can live up to that. Have you ever felt a little overwhelmed when you realized God's call on your life and his purpose for you? Can any of us individually do the works of Christ, be his representative on earth, love others the way he loves them, or demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit? In my own strength it is an absolute impossibility.

4. But here is the good news. We don't have to do all that. What we have to do is to allow Jesus to do it *through* us, which is a very different matter. In fact, a whole lot of frustration can come into our lives if we don't understand that distinction.

5. Paul draws this distinction in Galatians 5 when he contrasts the works of the flesh to the fruit of the Spirit. Normally we would expect him to contrast bad works and good works. The works of the flesh are bad works. They are things we produce out of our sinful flesh that are contrary to the will of God. But the good that is produced in our lives is not called "works" by Paul in that passage but rather "fruit." Fruit is something that naturally happens when God's life is producing faithfulness in our lives. We don't have to *make* it happen. All we have to do is *let* it happen.

6. Think about the job of a branch. All it does is become an extension of the vine. In North America we call the vine a "trunk," a tree trunk. Branches are branches everywhere you go. A branch doesn't have to produce life. It just receives life from the vine. It doesn't have to decide what kind of fruit to produce. As the life of the vine flows through it, it just naturally produces the fruit consistent with what the vine is. The *life* is in the vine. The vine does it all. The vine extends its roots into the soil and draws the minerals and nutrients and moisture. The vine sends the sap to the branches so that fruit can bud forth.

Bottom line is this: It's impossible for a branch to function as a vine. The branch does not have life in itself. It is totally dependent on the vine for its life and productivity. **The great mistake we make is to try to be the vine when we are meant to be a branch. Life is very frustrating for a branch that tries to be a vine.**

OK. Here's the "how to be fruitful" that I promised earlier...

I want to share with you a "checklist" of ways that you can bear fruit in your lives right now. Try to check at least one of these ways to bear fruit off your list in the coming week. That is my challenge to each of you: Do at least one of these things! There are of course millions of ways to bear fruit—fruit that will last—but at least these suggestions will provide raw material for you to work with. Here are some possibilities for your list:

- Read the Bible to a blind person or a small child.
- Let a nursing home resident dictate a letter you write to one of his or her friends or relatives.
- Bake cookies and take them to a new resident on your street and invite him or her to worship with you next Sunday.
- Offer your friendship to a lonely person.
- Take two or three teenagers out to lunch. Listen to their concerns.

- Take on a task to improve the environment for everyone.
- Forgive someone who has hurt you.
- Compose a poem or a song to praise God's name.
- Paint a room in an elderly person's home.
- Make some homemade soup and share it with someone from whom you expect nothing in return.
- Clean out the refrigerators in the church kitchen (smart of me?).
- Enroll yourself for music lessons so that you can use the new skill to the praise and glory of God.
- Write a letter to the newspaper editor to lift up some issue that would be of concern to Christians everywhere.
- Offer yourself as a free babysitter to help a busy parent.

Years ago, one of my church members gave me a plaque for my desk that read: **“What we are is God's gift to us; what we become is our gift to God.”** The point is this: God plants and brings the growth in this time and place; it's not for us to take God's blessings for granted or to lavish them on ourselves, but to use them faithfully to the glory of God's name. Remember, God is the one who plants. Children living in Jesus' day could've told you that. They could also tell you that, just as God plants, God prunes, and pruning is necessary for the health and vitality of the plant.

A couple weeks ago I started trimming trees and shrubs around our house. You could never tell, but you should see the mountain of branches that has piled up.. If you never trim them, shoots drain the tree or shrub of its vitality and ability to grow. Left to their own devices, plants and trees grow randomly and in every direction.

Children will do that too. So, it's up to someone to prune them from time to time. Parenting is about helping children focus their attention and channel their energy in a meaningful and healthy direction. It's hard work and it's not always pleasant. I clearly remember the times that I failed to do the hard work. But I know now that grandparenting is far more fun.

God has promised to be with us, and to provide everything we need for a full and abundant life. That's his promise. In return God asks that we abide in him, that we live and work together in the unity of the Spirit.

This is my point: From time to time we're tempted to break free of the Vine and go do our own thing. When we do, we don't get much accomplished. That's because we can only accomplish what's best and live faithfully as disciples of Jesus Christ when we work together in accordance with God's will. There is strength in our connection to the Vine and in our relationship to other branches on the tree—the community of faith right here at Ken Mawr.

What is a disciple? That is the question I have raised this morning. A disciple is a branch connected to the Vine (Jesus our Lord)—a branch that bears fruit—fruit that will last. That's not my definition, my friends, it's Jesus' definition, and it's ever so simple. It's impossible to misunderstand.

Nevertheless, may God forgive us the mistake of trying to be the *Vine*, when Jesus has called us to be the *branches*. Amen.