

## John 15:1-8

<sup>1</sup>“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. <sup>2</sup>Every branch in me that does not bear fruit, he is going to cut off. And he prunes every branch that does bear fruit, so that it will bear more fruit.

<sup>3</sup>“You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup>Remain in me, and I am going to remain in you. A branch cannot bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Likewise, you cannot bear fruit unless you remain in me.

<sup>5</sup>“I am the Vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in me and I in him is the one who bears much fruit, because without me you can do nothing. <sup>6</sup>If anyone does not remain in me, he is thrown away like a branch and withers. Such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. <sup>7</sup>If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup>My Father is glorified by this: that you continue to bear much fruit and prove to be my disciples.”

## Stay Connected to Jesus

### I.

It was a Thursday. The first full moon of spring. A man and his companions left the room where they had eaten a festival meal and walked toward their next destination. As was his custom, he taught his companions as they walked along.

The group had just celebrated the Passover. Some disturbing things had taken place at that meal—one of their number had left the banquet facility abruptly and in haste, with little explanation of what was really going on. Some wonderful things had happened at the meal, too. An ages-old festival celebration had taken on new meaning as their leader had changed their understanding of a very significant part of the meal, and had instituted a new Supper for them to continue for millennia to come.

That’s right. It was Maundy Thursday evening. Judas had rushed out of the hall to satisfy his greed by arranging the betrayal of his Master. As for that Master, Jesus had changed the understanding of what was taking place in the ritual celebration of the Passover, showing that it all pointed ahead to him and to what he would do for all people. With the third cup in the Passover meal, Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper.

You can’t help noticing vineyards that dot the countryside when you are in wine country. Spring is a busy time in the vineyard. Perhaps most of the technical work was already done, and branches and canes detached from the vines lay in heaps, ready to be disposed of.

Most of the disciples were fishermen, not vintners. Still, those from an agrarian society would have been exposed to all kinds of agricultural professions. They had probably seen vintners work their way down a row of vines with surgical precision.

What can *we* do today to understand the process? Go to YouTube, of course. Here is a picture of a grape vine *before* pruning. Here is that same vine *after* pruning has been done. It’s fascinating to watch how much is taken off. To the uninitiated, it seems extreme, but extensive pruning is necessary for the vine to be truly productive for the following year. Of course, in today’s commercial vineyards a tractor and mechanical pruning equipment are used to do the bulk of the work, but sooner or later someone has to come and clean up the last bits by hand.

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener” (John 15:1, EHV). The stage is set for Jesus’ illustration.

### II.

“Every branch in me that does not bear fruit, he is going to cut off. And he prunes every branch that does bear fruit, so that it will bear more fruit (John 15:2, EHV).

The entire point of Jesus’ illustration is revealed. Stay connected. Stay connected to Jesus.

There are two kinds of branches Jesus refers to in his illustration. The first kind does not bear fruit at all. “Every branch in me that does not bear fruit, he is going to cut off” (John 15:2, EHV). Leaves and shade and beauty are not the purpose of a branch. A fruitless branch might have *all* of these things, yet it still does not fulfill the purpose of the branch.

One of the Twelve close disciples outwardly appeared to be joined to Christ, but his heart had lost faith and love. Judas had long before begun to use his affiliation with Jesus for nothing but his own personal gain. Since he was the treasurer of the little group, he used his position to dip into funds for his own personal use. He ridiculed expenditures of funds for things like expensive jars of perfume that were used to anoint Jesus’ head because he would have liked to get his own dirty hands on that money. Now was leveraging every bit of the appearance of a healthy connection to his Master to seek additional wealth for himself by betraying Jesus. What connection he had to Jesus was like a sucker on a plant—while he was filled with leaves and beauty and shade, he merely stole resources from the vine for his own purposes, not to bear good fruit.

“If anyone does not remain in me, he is thrown away like a branch and withers. Such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned” (John 15:6, EHV).

There are those who no longer believe in Jesus. Often they betray their own spiritual condition by no longer using the opportunity to use the gospel in Word and Sacrament. They reveal their true nature as they no longer enjoy the spiritual fellowship of the true disciples of their Lord Jesus.

In the Christian Church we take steps in Church Discipline to warn people we *think* might be on this sort of destructive path. Eventually our warning might be to remove them from membership in the congregation. This is *not* what Jesus is talking about. *God*, in his omniscience, *knows* those who are unbelieving branches. His removal is much more final. Such an unfruitful branch is thrown into the fire and burned.

### III.

It was verse two in which Jesus explained that there are two kinds of branches. The first was a fruitless branch. We have come to the second kind of branch: a *fruitful* branch. “He prunes every branch that does bear fruit, so that it will bear more fruit (John 15:2, EHV).

Before he explains Christian pruning, Jesus wants to make one thing perfectly clear. “You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you” (John 15:3, EHV). We call this cleansing “justification.” Justification means we *are* in the Lord Jesus. Having been grafted into the vine already we have forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. We have this because of the gospel—the Word of life he has spoken to us.

Jesus has done all the work. He is the vine. He doesn’t need to be fertilized. He doesn’t need to be strengthened. He doesn’t need to be cut back. *He* has done everything for our salvation. His death on the cross paid for every sin every human being has committed. The sins of Judas who rejected Jesus were all paid for. The sins of Peter, who in weakness denied Jesus, and the sins of Thomas, who doubted Jesus, have all been paid for. Our sins of weakness and doubt and denial have all been paid for, too. Jesus has purchased and won our salvation—our justification. “You are already clean” because of what he has done for you. “You are already clean” because you have been grafted into the vine.

“Remain in me, and I am going to remain in you. A branch cannot bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Likewise, you cannot bear fruit unless you remain in me” (John 15:4, EHV). To remain in Jesus is to believe in Jesus. What faith is all about is receiving nourishment from the vine, from Jesus. Day by day you grow because of your connection to Jesus in his Word. Week after week you come to worship to hear his Word in a corporate setting, and to receive strength from his Supper. You are fed, and you grow and grow.

#### IV.

By remaining in him, you produce fruit. Jesus says of the gardener: “He prunes every branch that does bear fruit, so that it will bear more fruit (John 15:2, EHV). When pruning a grape vine, eventually only the last two or three buds from last year’s canes are allowed to remain. Those buds will grow and produce this year’s crop. It looks excessive. It looks brutal. But it’s the best thing to do for the vine to bear lots of large, juicy grapes.

I would make a lousy vintner. I would be too timid in my pruning. I would be afraid that I was removing too much, and that there would be no produce at all for this year. There would be fruit, perhaps, but it would be small and lacking flavor.

“I am the Vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in me and I in him is the one who bears much fruit, because without me you can do nothing” (John 15:5, EHV). To give up our relationship to Jesus would be fatal for us. Without him, we can accomplish nothing—we are incapable of bearing fruit. *In* him, we not only bear fruit, but *much* fruit.

What *is* this fruit of which Jesus speaks? Next Saturday the Confirmands will explain that a good work is something which is in accordance with God’s will that a believer does out of love for God and out of thanks for what the Lord Jesus has done for you. The Apostle Paul identifies the fruit in broad terms. He says: “The fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup> gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23, EHV). Elsewhere Paul puts it this way: “The fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness, and truth” (Ephesians 5:9, EHV).

These fruits of the spirit just show themselves in a Christian life. They show that we are living in the joy of forgiveness, life, and salvation that we already have in Christ. Living in Jesus we live according to his will. We want what *he* wants—the extension of the kingdom of God. Because of this he can say: “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you” (John 15:7, EHV). There is no limit for the vine. The only limit is the limit of our faith, which may not ask, even though it has the right to.

“My Father is glorified by this: that you continue to bear much fruit and prove to be my disciples” (John 15:8, EHV). Doing these good works—bearing the fruit of faith—gives glory to God the Father. By *you* living your Christian life, others see vividly the reason for the hope you have. They see that there is something about a Christian that they want to learn more about.

Sometimes people want confessional Lutheran pastors to preach more specifically about sanctification—living the Christian life. Most of this lesson from Jesus is about living the Christian life. You will notice that *he* doesn’t give specifics, either. That’s because the fruit that comes from living in the vine is different for each one of us. Just remain in the vine, gathering your strength for Christian living from God’s Word and the Sacraments, and whatever you do out of love for God is *your* version of the “much fruit” you bear as a branch coming out of the vine. Stay connected to Jesus and you will bear much fruit. Amen.