

## **The Vine and the Branches**

John 15:5-8

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In the first church where I served as pastor, there was a grape vine in the back yard. Each spring two men from the church would arrive to clip and shear the branches. They had come to prune the grape vine so that it would produce a bountiful harvest of grapes. There was only one problem. What do you do with a grape vine loaded down with huge bunches of grapes in the fall? There were simply more grapes than Sherry and I could consume or even give away. Our neighbor down the road came up with a marvelous idea. She said, "You pick the grapes and provide the sugar, and I'll squeeze those grapes and turn them into grape juice. We'll divide the proceeds fifty-fifty and put them in plastic containers that can be frozen. Instead of Welch's grape juice, we had our own brand of grape juice to enjoy for ourselves and others.

In the days of Jesus they didn't make grape juice, but they did make wine. All over the hillsides of the Middle East there were vineyards. Grapes were an important part of the local economy for two reasons. First, wine was the beverage of choice. In fact, it was for the most part the only beverage of choice. The wide variety of drinks in our grocery stores were simply not available. Wine was served at almost every meal. Second, it was safer than water. The alcohol content took care of any of those little creatures that can make us really sick when contaminated water is consumed. Therefore, when Jesus spoke about grapes and grapevines, everyone knew what He was talking about. This morning let's take a look at what He had to say and see if what He said might apply to our lives today.

The passage of Scripture which was read this morning is a part of a larger portion of Scripture in the Gospel of John, verses one through seventeen in chapter fifteen. The overall theme in these verses is abiding in Christ so that His commandments can be lived out in our lives as well as experiencing His loving presence each day. We would do well to read this entire passage of Scripture over and over again on a regular basis. It would make our lives as Christians a much more rewarding experience. For today, however, let's focus our attention on verses five through eight. Within these verses Jesus is painting a word picture. He compares Himself to the vine which emerges out of the ground carrying all of the nutrients that are needed for life. The branches are His followers, the ones who receive the nourishment which He provides. Keeping this word picture clearly in mind, what is it portraying, what is it saying to us as God's people in the twenty-first century? There are three things that are immediately apparent.

First, because we are the branches of the vine, we have a special purpose. We have the same purpose that every branch on every grape vine has. Our purpose is to be fruitful, to produce grapes. In verse eight, Jesus said, "This is my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be My disciples." I'm sure that the Lord is pleased when the branches of His grape vine are green and healthy, when Christians are growing and maturing in their faith relationship with Him. But you know what really makes Him happy is when those branches begin to produce fruit, when they achieve the purpose for which they were created. Years ago a widow living in a depressed part of town came to faith in Christ. She told her pastor, "Now that I'm a Christian, perhaps I need to move to a better part of town." Her pastor replied, "Is there a streetlight on the block where you live? The widow indicated there was. The pastor continued, "What if it were removed? Wouldn't everyone be living in darkness on that street when nighttime comes?" The widow realized what the pastor was saying and took it to heart. Several months later she spoke to the pastor after the service and pointing to a lady standing beside her said, "Now there are two streetlights in our neighborhood."

Second, because we are the branches of the vine, we have a special position, a special place in which to reside. We are attached to the vine. Jesus put it this way, "If a person remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). In order to be alive, in order to even have the hope of bearing any fruit, a branch must be firmly attached to the vine which supplies everything that is needed for life and productivity. Years ago when I was a child my friends and I would construct little make believe houses. We would cut down branches from trees in the woods and stick them in the ground to build the leafy rooms of our houses. Guess what happened? In a couple of days all of those leaves had shriveled. Our pretty little houses didn't look so pretty any more. The same is true with regards to our relationship with Christ. When we purposely separate ourselves from Christ, we lose our vitality and attractiveness. We wither and die spiritually and become like dead limbs which are thrown away.

Third, because we are the branches of the vine, we have been given a special promise. Jesus said, "If you remain in me and My words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you" (John 15:7). That's a pretty bold promise. It's also one which can be easily misunderstood. I am reminded of this story that I heard years ago. A somewhat indulgent father said to his son, "I would like to give you a special gift upon your graduation from college. You can have either a new sports car or a new motorboat." The son thought for a moment and responded half-jokingly but also somewhat seriously, "How about a ferry boat loaded with lots of sports cars." Being attached to the vine of Jesus' sustenance and care is not receiving a credit card with no spending limits. Because we are a branch, we receive graciously and freely what the vine desires and knows is best for us. We do not have free access to anything we wish, especially those things

which might prove to be detrimental or even harmful to us and others. There are limitations, namely the will of God, what He desires and knows is best for us. The writer of 1 John 5:14-15, the same author who wrote the Gospel of John, boldly declared, "This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of Him." Asking, therefore, is not always receiving until we have the assurance that our requests correspond with what the Lord desires.

Jesus had to wrestle with that very issue in the Garden of Gethsemane. He knew what He was facing and it was not pleasant. So He spoke to His heavenly Father asking, "If it is possible, let this cup pass from me." He didn't want to die on a cross, the most humiliating and painful form of execution that has ever been devised. But He knew that claiming God's promises is bigger than simply getting what we want. It's claiming what God desires to bestow upon us, even when the consequences do not look all that promising from our point of view. That's why Jesus concluded His prayer with "nevertheless, not my will but thine be done." He chose to embrace a promise that was bigger and much better than merely life here on earth. He chose to accept a promise that would forever change the course of human history and one which would elevate Him to a place of prominence far beyond what would otherwise have been possible. Speaking of Christ in his letter to the Philippians, Paul described this elevated position of glory and majesty by stating, "Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:9-11).

The same is true for us. Being attached to Jesus, like branches on a vine, enables us to achieve a special purpose, being fruitful, enables us to be attached in a special position, the Lord Jesus Christ, and best of all enables us to await a special promise, an eternal existence with our heavenly Father, forever and ever.