

I AM THE VINE

JOHN 15:1-10

Rev. Matthew Williams

Friends, I am excited to be with you in this digital (paper) format today. I pray that things have been well with your soul. Today, friends, we will be continuing our Lenten Sermon Series: I Am.... This series is designed to help us to learn more about our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Throughout this series, we have examined several “I Am” statements from the Gospel of John.

We have discussed how Jesus is the Bread of Life, and how that means Jesus provides sustenance for our souls. We no longer need spiritual “junk food” because Jesus fills us and we never hunger again. We also discussed how Jesus is the Gate and the Good Shepherd. Jesus is our passageway to God and God’s kingdom. Through Jesus, we are reconnected with God; furthermore, once we are part of this great family of God, Jesus leads us and guides us in this life. We were reminded that a shepherd calls out, and the sheep follow the sound of the shepherd’s voice. If we are the spiritual sheep, then we need to be listening to where Jesus is calling us to go. Last week, we discussed how Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. We learned that the way and truth describe how Jesus was unified with God. We are to strive to have this type of unified spirit with God in our lives and having this gives us access to eternal life.

Today, I wish to discuss another I am statement: I am the Vine. Vines were a significant symbol in Jesus’ time. Any Jewish person who would have heard Jesus speaking about him being the true vine would have immediately thought about what that classic symbol meant: Israel. Before we dive too deeply into what Jesus being the vine means, I want to examine this classic symbol a little more closely. Let’s first jump back to Psalm 80 verses 8-11. They read as follows:

Psalm 80:8–11 (NLT) — 8 You brought us from Egypt like a grapevine; you drove away the pagan nations and transplanted us into your land. 9 You cleared the ground for us, and we took root and filled the land. 10 Our shade covered the mountains; our branches covered the mighty cedars. 11 We spread our branches west to the Mediterranean Sea; our shoots spread east to the Euphrates River.

First, we do know that Israel is the vine being depicted in this scripture. We must ask ourselves, what kind of picture is being depicted here at first? We see Israel becoming a prosperous nation. It is growing and spreading its influence throughout the land that God had provided for them. This image is one of growth. However, the scripture continues:

Psalm 80:12–16 (NLT) — **12** *But now, why have you broken down our walls so that all who pass by may steal our fruit? 13 The wild boar from the forest devours it, and the wild animals feed on it. 14 Come back, we beg you, O God of Heaven’s Armies. Look down from heaven and see our plight. Take care of this grapevine 15 that you yourself have planted, this son you have raised for yourself. 16 For we are chopped up and burned by our enemies. May they perish at the sight of your frown.*

The imagery of the psalm changes drastically in these five verses. The vine that was once growing and prosperous is now in a state of degeneration. Interestingly, in all of the Old Testament references to a vine symbolizing Israel, they almost always depict Israel in a state of decline.ⁱ If we think about what we may know about the history of Israel, however, it is not surprising why this would be the case. We see time and time again that the Hebrew people have abandoned God. The first verses of this psalm indicated a time when Israel was close to God, but the latter half shows how they have fallen away.

Let’s transition over to the New Testament. We are catching up starting in the first verse of chapter 15. This is where Jesus says, “I am the true grapevine, and my Father is the Gardener.”ⁱⁱ We see here a restructuring of this ancient symbol. The vine is no longer Israel but Jesus! Additionally, we see that the being responsible for keeping the vine and its branches healthy and alive is God. As we dig deeper into the following verses, we see that the imagery around this vine is not of decline, rather growth. This, of course, keeping in mind that Jesus just recently told his Disciples that he was soon to die, would have been a very hope-filled metaphor.

One of the other significant things about this passage is the word “remain.” It appears in these ten verses ten times! Because of that repetition, we should pay careful attention to what that word means. When we look back to the original manuscripts, the Greek word *menō* is what we find, and this word means a “profound, intimate, and enduring relationship.”ⁱⁱⁱ So, when Jesus says “remain in me” he is saying that we need to have a deep relationship with him.

With this, let's try to get a better understanding of what this scripture means for us. The scripture reminds us that we are the branches of the vine and that God does the pruning and upkeep of those branches so that they will be fruitful. In other words, we are to be connected to Christ, and when we are connected to Christ, God will work in us to help us to express God's love into the world. The key to this is that we must decide to attach to Christ.

We must develop that deep, intimate, and enduring relationship with Jesus. God gives us the amazing gift of grace, and it is our choice of what to do with it. As we have learned throughout this sermon series, it is wise to accept that gift and grow in it. As we grow in it, we will, over time, begin to see Fruit of the Spirit being expressed in our lives. As I was reading a commentary on these verses, William Barclay reminded me that when a grapevine is first planted, it takes time for the fruit to grow. In fact, a vine will be cared for in such a way that it will not bear fruit for the first three years of its life.^{iv} If you are new to faith, you might be wondering, where is the fruit I am to bear? The chances are that God is still preparing you to bear this fruit. Conversely, if you have been a person of faith for a long time and you are not bearing fruit, you should examine your relationship with Christ. Likely, to truly remain in Christ, there needs to be some work done on your part to deepen your relationship with Jesus.

There is one other passage that I feel needs further exploration as well. Let's examine verse 7.

***John 15:7 (NLT)** — 7 But if you remain in me and my words remain in you, you may ask for anything you want, and it will be granted!*

This is one of those dangerous verses of scripture, and the passage we read last week contained a similar verse as well. Often, these verses are used to justify a heretical belief known as "the prosperity gospel." You know the, "if you believe in Jesus and send me some amount of money, God will give you anything you ask for because you have been faithful" kind of preaching. I will say it outright: **DON'T BUY INTO THIS WAY OF THINKING**. That is not what Jesus means when he says, "ask for anything you want, and it will be granted."

When we read that verse in context with everything else, that word, “remain,” pops out at us again. If you have ever been in a serious relationship, you will probably have a better sense of what this means. When you are in a relationship with somebody, your goals and desires should begin to change because you want to be closer to that other person. For example, maybe you didn’t typically enjoy going to the theater to watch a play, but your significant other does. Likely, you might find yourself going to buy tickets for a show just to show your significant other how much you care for them and want to be with them.

I know there are other examples that you can probably think of for yourself, but I hope you get the point. When Jesus says we must “*menō*” or “remain” with him, that means our desires are going to change too. As we deepen our relationship with Jesus, we will naturally want to do the things that Jesus wants for us. We will want to serve others. We will want to express kindness. We will not have such strong selfish desires. When we remain in Christ, our lives indeed change. Therefore, when we ask something of Jesus when we remain in him, he will grant it because our desires should be intertwined with his. If you ask for something that does not align with Christ’s desires, I am sure that those prayers will likely be answered with a “no.”

So, friends, let’s recap what we’ve learned. Jesus claiming to be “the vine” would have been in contrast to the ancient symbolism of Israel being the vine. Jesus as the vine, however, was an image of growth and fruitfulness while the vine of Israel was one that was withering and being destroyed. Jesus reminds us that we are his branches. We reach out into the world and make a difference in his name; however, we will only bear fruit when we remain in a deep, intimate, and enduring relationship with Jesus. During this season of Lent and uncertainty, friends, I encourage you to remain in Jesus Christ. Amen.

ⁱ Study Notes on John 15:1 from *New Living Translation Study Bible* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc), 1803.

ⁱⁱ John 15:1, NLT

ⁱⁱⁱ Study Note entitled “Remaining in Christ” from *New Living Translation Study Bible* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc), 1803.

^{iv} “The Vine and the Branches.” *The Gospel of John: Chapters 8-21*, by William Barclay, Westminster Press, 1975, pp. 172–176.