

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ² He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. ³ You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴ Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

⁵ “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. ⁷ If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. (John 15:1-8 NIV2011

Check Your Vine Connection

There’s a tree in my backyard that, quite frankly, I don’t know how it is still alive. It’s a sad tree. Last summer, during one of those crazy wind storms, the trunk split. Push on it and you can see one part pull away from the other. After this winter I thought this tree had no hope. Images of a chopped down tree and nice apple-wood for smoking meats filled my brain. It should be dead. Now that spring is here, look into my backyard and that little apple tree by my garage has flowers blossoming and leaves growing. I’m sure as summer turns into fall there will be little apples on that tree once again. Why? The branches are still connected to the trunk. It’s not rocket science. Little children understand it. We gather together the branches that fall off, they dry up and wither on the burn pile as they wait for the next bon-fire. But as long as that tree trunk is alive, branches connected to that tree will continue to grow and produce.

No wonder Jesus uses this picture in John 15. It’s clear. It’s to the point. He needs it to be because when he speaks these words it’s Thursday night a few hours before Judas will betray him, guards will arrest him, and tomorrow he will die on the cross. Jesus knows this. So, he wants to make things clear for his followers. **“I am the vine; you are the branches...No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.”** He’s not talking about an apple tree but a vine. All the same, we know this. You see this outside in nature. Branches produce fruit as long as they remain on the vine. Of course, Jesus isn’t giving you gardening tips. Jesus explains: he is the vine. The source and strength to produce comes from him. We are the branches. Remain in him as he has no plans of letting go of you.

So, how is your vine connection? How is your connection with Jesus? Well, you are here; therefore, you are being connected to the vine again. Jesus is feeding you with His Word. He gives you the nutrients you need to continue to grow in this dead world filled with the decay and pollution of sin.

But what about all those other hours of the week? What about when you are not able to be here connected to the vine in His Word in the church service? Unlike branches in nature, we humans have a terrible power: we can disconnect ourselves from the vine. Someone doesn't roll out of bed one morning and decide, "Today I'm no longer going to be a Christian." No, it starts small. It might be a life event that shakes everything up. It can be as simple as "getting out of the habit." The need to remain in other things slowly takes the place of remaining in Jesus. The personal devotional time with Jesus is swallowed up with all the other responsibilities you have in life. You're busy! Things need your attention now! Our minds remain on the to-do list of today and a thousand other distracting thoughts. You're tired. Everything else you are trying to maintain and remain in has eaten up your energy so that remaining in Jesus is pushed off for tomorrow. I feel it too.

It can seem like such a great task that you need to do to be with Jesus, to study his Word, remain with him. Where do you even begin? Will you know you are studying the right thing? You know it's important. But as important as remaining in work? Remaining in that relationship? Remaining in the comfortable lifestyle choice? Remain in that sin? You know that Jesus loves you. So what will another service at church do? What will a Bible study do? That's for the "better" Christians, right? What will a daily devotion do? You know Jesus. You know what he has done. You agree it's important, maybe you used to do be better and you want to do better. But...and that's all it takes to stop. Because whatever comes after that three-letter word you feel is a good and valid reason. Take that away and check: how's your connection to the vine?

Did you notice the third party involved in Jesus' picture? It's the gardener, God the Father. Did you notice what he's doing? He keeps a close eye on the vine. He's looking for the dead branches that aren't bearing fruit ready to chop them off. What about the other branches that bear fruit? He's pruning them. He's cutting off the unnecessary twigs and things that are taking away from fruit production. When someone prunes a plant, it shocks it. It hurts. But it allows the plant more bountiful growth. Again, we aren't here to discuss best gardening tips. Nevertheless, this is what our heavenly Father who knows what is best does for you and me. He allows struggles to come into your life. The sickness doesn't go away as quickly as we think it should. The pain is still very real and present making regular daily life miserable. The financial problems don't just disappear. The Father doesn't take away all of the frustrations. The answers aren't right there like we want. The struggles in your relationship rarely are fixed over-night. The results and consequences of your sinful actions you still have to live with for a time. In a worldly way of speaking, life doesn't always get better or more comfortable. You may still feel stuck.

Why? Why does God do this? He's pruning us. And if you are not connected to the vine, remaining in Jesus, we cannot make sense of it. Instead, it feels like God has left you. We may begin to wonder, "Does God really love me?" We can start doubting God's goodwill because this feels really unfair! We start playing this game in our heads that you've been a pretty good person who has tried their best, you did the right things, so why is he doing this to me? Is he punishing me for something I've done in the past? We start listening to the idea that we just need to try harder, do better, pull ourselves out, then we can get through this. But, how is your vine connection? You may fall into the one side wondering how much you need God and then cut yourself off that way. Or, it's the other side of despair that there's no hope. And you cut yourself off listening to your own doubts and lies of Satan. So how is your vine connection?

How much clearer can Jesus get? "**Apart from me, you can do nothing,**" Jesus says. Apart from him, we cannot make sense of it. We are lost trying to get out of it. The failed good intentions, the continued frustrations, the trying to keep-up with everything in life is meaningless—one moment here, the next gone. Even your best days are noticed by few, remembered by fewer, and will be forgotten with time. Nothing can fill that gaping hole looking for meaning and purpose in this life. On our own we are dead branches who can do nothing.

"I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me, as I remain in you, you will bear much fruit." Now we can make sense of all that suffering and struggling. It's hard. No one likes it. The pruning shocks us. No one looks forward to it. In fact, we try to avoid it. At the same time the Father does it so that you might bear much fruit. He's cutting away those thoughts of self-dependence and independence. He's forcing you to see your strength isn't coming from you. He's cutting off those things that distract eating up your energy and time. He's refocusing you onto the one thing that gives us the ability to do anything pleasing in his sight: the vine, Jesus.

But how can you be sure? "**You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you,**" Jesus says. You are a baptized child of God. The Word spoken with the water at your baptism has washed you clean. The blood of Jesus pours off that cross and washes your sins away. The blood of Jesus, the Father's Son, has purified you of all unrighteousness. When we have been unfaithful, he remains faithful (2 Timothy 2:13). Your scarlet red sins have been made white as wool. Your sins and their guilt have been removed and the Father remembers them no more. This means the Father is not punishing you; he's already punished Jesus so that you have peace with your Father in Heaven. The Father isn't making you suffer before you can be forgiven; Jesus already endured hell itself for you. You don't need to try and make up for something you've done. "It is finished," Jesus said. The Father cut down the vine Jesus; he dies! But Jesus doesn't stay dead. The tomb is empty. Jesus lives! Because the vine, Jesus, is alive, we

know that we too are alive in him. By the working of the Spirit he has grafted you into the vine and Jesus will not let you go. As Jesus will explain later in this chapter, it's not that you have accepted or chosen Jesus, but Jesus, the vine, has chosen you to be his own that you might bear much fruit.

Worldly speaking at times it may not look very extravagant or special. Sometimes you might sit there and think, "I'm not like so-and-so who can do all those things. I wish I could this or that with those gifts." Sometimes it doesn't feel like you affect all that much in life. After all, what can you do that is so fruitful as a shut-in or in the late years of your life as you are depending more on others? What can you do as a child still in school? What can you do while you are busy working all the time, at home busy raising the children?

Produce fruit. Remember, not all fruit on a tree is always the most beautiful either. But it's still fruit. Because you are connected to the vine Jesus, because you are already clean, because the vine is already working through you even the seemingly insignificant things are beautiful fruit. This fruit is patiently caring for the stubborn child. It's putting your spouse before yourself and what you want to do. It's listening to the same story a thousand times because they need to talk to someone. It's turning away from sin and resisting temptation. It's the dollar put into the offering plate. It's how you speak with and about your co-workers. It's there in the classroom with your classmate. It's the big things, the little things, it's serving on this or that committee. It's taking prayers to God's throne with the assurance that whatever we ask in Jesus' name that God's will be done, it will be done. All that we do according to God's will is good fruit. Do it not for yourself trying to prove something. It's for the benefit of your neighbor, your friend, your spouse and child, the random stranger so they might know God. It's done to the glory of God. It's beautiful fruit and pleasing not because of the action that is done but because of what Jesus has made you.

I am the vine, Jesus says. You are the branches. Remain in me as I remain in you and you will bear much fruit. Share Jesus' love in your life, not just in words but in action. Remain in Jesus coming to God's house to be fed with Word and Sacrament. It's the food you need to produce good fruit. Taste and see the Lord is good. Remain in him with your personal study at home and your bible study at church with God's people. Check your connection to the vine with the assurance that Jesus will not let you go. Amen.