

Main Idea: According to John 15:1-4, the life that pleases God is life in the vine. We learn three things from Jesus about life in the vine.

- I. Life in the vine is a picture.
 - A. It comes from the Old Testament.
 - B. It's fulfilled in Christ.
 - C. Its objective is fruit, that which brings glory to the Father and joy to us.
 - II. Life in the vine involves pruning (1-3).
 - A. Pruning is the responsibility of the Father (1).
 - B. Pruning involves radical surgery (2).
 1. The Father cuts off fruitless branches.
 2. The Father cleanses fruitful branches.
 - C. Pruning requires a relationship with Jesus (3).
 1. It's Jesus' word that makes us clean.
 2. It's Jesus' word that prepares us for fruit-bearing.
 - III. Life in the vine involves purposeful reliance (4).

Think about it: To abide in Christ is to be connected to Christ and purposefully depend on Him for everything. When I am abiding in Christ, I am allowing Him to reproduce His life in and through me.
- Make It Personal: In order to experience life in the vine...
1. Get to know Christ.
 2. Make your relationship with Christ your top priority.
 3. Determine to do what pleases Christ in every situation.

It's my privilege to announce that as we open our Bibles to John 15, we've come to a life-shaping text in God's Word. It's a text I turn to often, for it's a text that shows us in vivid, plain language what it takes to glorify God (verse 8) and experience maximum joy in our lives (verse 11).

Jesus and His disciples had just eaten the Passover Meal, a highly symbolic meal. On the table before them, there had been three significant items, each revealing something special about Jesus: the lamb, the bread, and the fruit of the vine.

The lamb--John the Baptist had announced that Jesus is the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn 1:29). The bread--Christ had already announced, "I am the Bread of Life." (Jn 6:65) And there was the fruit.

Jesus speaks in John 15:1, "I am the true vine." This is Jesus' eighth "*I Am*" claim recorded in John's gospel. Previously, the Lord referred to Himself as *the Bread*, *the Light*, and *the Resurrection*, to name just three images. Now He calls Himself *the Vine*.

Why did He say that? To most of us, a vine isn't very pretty. In fact, they're sort of a nuisance. You have to whack them off the side of the house, and keep them from taking over the sidewalk.

Obviously, that's not the type of vine Jesus had in mind. But what *is* He saying?

Notice *when* Jesus said this. John concludes the previous chapter with these words of Jesus (14:31), "Come now; let us leave." At that point Jesus and the eleven apparently left the upper room, and technically finished the *upper room discourse*.

Although scholars debate this, it seems that while the words of John 13-14 were given in the upper room, the content of chapters 15-17 was given after they left, on their way to the Garden of Gethsemane. They went down the steps, through the winding streets of Jerusalem, out through the gate, down the slope, across the brook Kidron, and up the Mount of Olives. According to 18:1, they don't cross Kidron until after Jesus' prayer in chapter 17.

So possibly, as the group traveled through the darkness, Jesus saw a vineyard, a *grape* vineyard. Vines were plentiful in the agricultural nation of Israel. To develop a vineyard, a person would first clear the rocks out of the field, and use the rocks to build a

***Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

protective wall to keep out thieves. Then he would terrace the ground, and possibly build a watchtower in the middle of the vineyard.

Vineyards took lots of work. The vines needed constant care. Every year, the gardener would have to chop back the excess foliage and stake up the plant to keep the fruit off the ground.

So perhaps Jesus saw such a vine. And then made this announcement, “I am the true vine.” Those words tell us so much about Jesus, who He is and why He came, and about what it takes for us to experience the kind of life God intends for us.

Life in the vine. That’s what God intends. That’s the kind of life that results in the Father’s glory and our joy.

I want you to experience this life. I want to experience it, and more fully. We learn three things from Jesus about life in the vine from His initial words in verses 1-4. First, that it’s a *picture*. Second, that it involves *pruning*—that’s the divine gardener’s responsibility. And third, it involves *purposeful reliance* (abiding)—and that’s our responsibility.

I. Life in the vine is a picture.

What kind of picture?

A. It comes from the Old Testament. What did this image of the vine mean to Jesus and His disciples? We have to go to the Old Testament to answer that question. In fact, we must first raise another question. In the Old Testament, who did the vine represent? Let’s look at a couple of passages.

Psalms 80:8-9 “You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. ⁹You cleared the ground for it, and it took root and filled the land.”

Who is the vine here? It was Israel. God brought the vine Israel out of Egypt and planted it in the Promised Land. What happened to the vine, Israel? Years later the Lord wrote a song about His vine, and gave it to the prophet Isaiah.

Isaiah 5:1-7 “I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard: My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. ²He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well. Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit. ³“Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. ⁴What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it? When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad? ⁵Now I will tell you what I am going to do to my vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it will be destroyed; I will break down its wall, and it will be trampled. ⁶I will make it a wasteland, neither pruned nor cultivated, and briars and thorns will grow there. I will command the clouds not to rain on it.”

So let me ask you, “What does a gardener expect out of his vine?” A bunch of beautiful branches? No, not this kind of vine. He wants *fruit*.

And that’s what the Lord expected out of Israel. Fruit. What kind of fruit?

The very next verse in Isaiah 5 tells us: “The vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are the garden of his delight. And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress (7).”

So God designed His people to exhibit the fruit of justice and righteousness personally and corporately. He wanted the world to see His nation, His *vine*, and know the truth about Him. But His people failed. For 14 centuries, they failed. Israel was a disappointing vine, a degenerate vine.

Then along came Jesus. And what did He say? “I am the *true* vine.” *True*, in contrast with the disappointing, degenerate vine. *I’ve come to do what God intended Israel to do*, says Jesus.

Don't miss this, dear friends. Life in the vine, first, is a picture that comes from the Old Testament. But as with all Old Testament pictures...

B. It's fulfilled in Christ. Jesus fulfilled what God intended for Israel. Israel failed. He did not. Israel took God's good law and violated it, again and again. But not only did Jesus obey God's law, by exhibiting perfect justice and righteousness, He *fulfilled* it.

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them (Matt 5:17)."

You say, "Why does that matter?"

Here's why. Listen to Jesus again, "For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt 5:20)."

If you're banking on your law-keeping efforts to take you to heaven, you're in for a rude awakening. "But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment," says Jesus (in Matthew 5:22). And He also says, "Anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart (Matt 5:28)." And, "Do not swear at all (Matt 5:34)." And if those don't convict you, try this one. "Be perfect," says Jesus, "as your heavenly Father is perfect (Matt 5:48)."

I was angry this week. I struggled with lust this week. I used God's name in vain and empty ways this week. Which means I violated God's law this week. Which means that though I might have done some good things in *your* eyes this week, or in *my* eyes, in God's eyes I'm a divine law-breaker. Which means I desperately need someone to save me.

And, praise God for His grace, I hear Him speaking this morning, "I am the true vine." Christ came to do for Israel, and for me, and for you, what we have all failed to do. He not only kept the Law, but He fulfilled it for the benefit of all who would confess their guilt and put their total trust in Him.

You see, what Jesus is saying here struck a sensitive note for Jews. He is saying to them, "If you think that because you are an Israelite, you are a branch in God's vine, you're wrong. It's not your Jewish blood that connects you to God's vine. It's not your righteous deeds. It's a relationship with Me. I am the *true* vine."

By the way, it's not church membership that makes you one of God's people, either. Nor a baptismal certificate. Nor a prayer card you signed. Nor the good life others say you've lived. Your only hope, and it is a certain hope, is to be connected to the true vine.

Yet there's something else about this picture that I want us to see at the outset. First, it comes from the Old Testament. Second, it's fulfilled in Christ. Here's the third...

C. Its objective is fruit, that which brings glory to the Father and joy to us.

Friends, let me say it again. What God wants from His vine isn't foliage, but fruit. He mentions *fruit* throughout this teaching session. In verse 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**." In verse 4, "No branch can bear **fruit** by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear **fruit** unless you remain in me." And in verse 5, "he will bear much **fruit**."

This is what the Father desires, and this is why Jesus came, to live a fruitful life Himself, and to reproduce His fruit in those connected to Him.

But what is fruit? We'll talk about this in greater detail as we walk through the text, but let's go to the end of it now and see at the outset two key elements of fruit. Notice verse 8, "This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit. What is fruit? Fruit is that which brings glory to God the Father. Glory, honor, weight, attention to the Father. That's what the true vine came to produce, and that's what He intends to reproduce through His branches.

Now notice a second element in verse 11, “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.” Joy. *My* joy in you, says Jesus. And *your* joy made complete. This too is the outcome of fruit. Glory to the Father, maximum joy to the person connected to Christ.

So this is what life in the vine is all about. This is what God is after. It’s why He sent His Son into the world, who kept the law, then died a law-breaker’s death in the place of His people, and then conquered death. He’s after the fullest display of His glory and the fullest experience of our joy.

By the way, is that what you’re after as you live your life? When you go to school, or to the ball-field, or work? What I want to see flow from my life is that which brings God the most glory, for that will bring me the most joy.

You say, “That’s what I want! What does it take?” Jesus is about to tell us. That kind of life in the vine, that *fruitfulness*, requires two fundamental responsibilities, the first is God’s, the second is ours.

II. Life in the vine involves pruning (1-3).

I learned a lot about pruning when I was in high school. I worked for my uncle who had a wholesale nursery. There were hundreds of trees and shrubs in the thirty acre field. I learned that maturity isn’t an automatic for plants. The growth process takes sunshine, water, good soil, the right temperature. And something else...

Pruning. I remember how cruel it seemed at first. My uncle handed me the knife, and showed me the trees--the maples, the oaks, the mountain ash, the crimson king. He told me it was my job to prune them. That meant I had to cut away the sucker growth from around the trunk, for those shoots would sap the nourishment needed for the tree to be healthy and strong. I learned three important lessons about pruning from that experience:

One, pruning is the responsibility of the gardener.

Two, pruning involves radical surgery.

Three, the goal of pruning is fruitfulness.

Two thousand years ago, the Lord talked about the same three lessons. He taught His followers that there are three things involved in spiritual pruning.

A. Pruning is the responsibility of the Father (1). Verse 1, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener.” Who is the gardener? The Father is. He is the *vinedresser* (“husbandman” in the KJV). It’s a general agricultural term which refers to one who tills the soil—a “farmer.” It’s the person who is responsible for the growth of the plants. Vines require care. And Jesus says that His Father provides that care.

So pruning, then, is the responsibility of our Heavenly Father. He prunes the branches. He’s actively involved in the lives of those who profess faith in His Son. Why? Because it is His vine, and what happens in it is all about His glory.

But how does He do it? What’s involved in our Father’s pruning process?

B. Pruning involves radical surgery (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.”

I read that an Israeli vinedresser prunes his vine every year, and he does it in two ways. First, he cuts away dead wood that can breed disease and insects. And second, he cuts away living growth that is undesirable--excess branches, and even whole bunches of grapes at times.

Why such drastic action? He’s after maximum productivity.

There’s no getting around it. Cutting and clipping and removing are drastic and decisive actions performed by the gardener.

“This pruning process,” explains Warren Wiersbe, “is the most important part of the whole enterprise, and the people who do it must be carefully trained or they can destroy an entire crop. Some vineyards invest two or three years in training the 'pruners' so they know where to cut, how much to cut, and even what angle to cut.”¹

You'll notice that Jesus specifies two types of radical surgery in verse 2. First of all He says...

1. *The Father cuts off fruitless branches.* In the first part of verse 2, Jesus talks about a branch that bears no fruit. He doesn't say that the Father “fixes” that branch, but rather “cuts off” that branch. “Takes away,” says the NASB and ESV (“taketh away” in the AV). In verse 6 the Lord tells what happens to these cut off branches. They are “picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.”

Who is Jesus talking about? Who does the "cut off branch" represent? You say, “Well, Jesus said, 'Every branch IN ME,' so these branches are Christians, right, Christians who lost their salvation.”

No, not true Christians. A true Christians cannot lose what Jesus says repeatedly is eternal. “I give them eternal life and they will never perish,” said Jesus back in John 10:28.

So how can a person *in Me* be cut off? For starters, “in me” in John 15 is not the same as Paul's “in Christ.” When a person is saved, he is placed *in Christ*.

That's not Jesus' point here. He's using a metaphor, but you can't push a metaphor too far or it falls apart.

Who are these people that are *in Me* that the Father cuts off? One of them just the room. His name is Judas. He was connected to Christ for three years, in the John 15 sense of the word, but he was never *in Christ*, in the 2 Corinthians 5:17 sense of the word (“If any man is *in Christ*, he is a new creation”).

Jesus is simply saying, in essence, “Every person who professes to be my follower is not necessarily a true disciple. A branch that bears no fruit is obviously dead. And like Judas, in time he will be shown for what he truly is, and *cut off by My Father.*”²

So this fruitless branch image, then, seems to refer to a person who, like Judas, professes to be a Jesus-follower, and from outward appearances seems to be in the vine, but who in reality has never truly been connected to Christ through saving faith. In time it becomes apparent that they've never truly been connected to Christ because they never produce the fruit that Christ always produces in the life of someone connected to Him. So consequently, in time, the Father takes His knife in hand and removes them.

Then, says Jesus, there's a second type of radical surgery that the Father performs.

2. *The Father cleanses fruitful branches.* Notice the second half of verse 2, “While every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.” Notice what the Father does with fruitful branches. He “prunes” them (“purgeth” is the word in the KJV). The Greek verb is *kathairei*, which means “to cleanse,” here meaning “to cleanse by pruning.” The Father prunes fruit-bearing branches.

Why? Jesus says it's so the branch will become even *more fruitful*. Don't miss the progression here: fruit (2a), more fruit (2b), much fruit (5). Again, the goal of the gardener isn't foliage, or even fruit, but maximum fruit.

¹ Warren Wiersbe, p. 356.

² Some translate the Greek verb *airo* as “take or lift up” rather than “cut off/remove” as I have done (i.e. Bruce Wilkinson, *Secrets of the Vine*, p. 33). While this interpretation is possible, I'm not convinced it does justice to the lexical data of *airo*, especially as used in John's gospel. John 11:39, 41 “Take away the stone.” John 17:15 “I pray not that you *take them out* of the world.” John 19:15 (at the crucifixion) “Away with Him!” The normal use of the term refers to *removal*, not lifting.

What's that mean for us who know Christ? It means our Father isn't living in the past, nor should we be. "Well, I used to serve the Lord by..." Or, "I once..."

Suppose an apple tree could talk. And it said to the gardener, "I gave you 20 bushels of apples five years ago. Remember how happy you were? I think that's enough. I don't want to produce any more. I just want to take it easy and let my branches grow. Okay?"

What would the gardener do? He'd wack off some branches!

And so does our Father. He prunes us. Why? So we'll be even more fruitful, for His glory and our maximum joy.

Friends, the worst thing God could do for a believer would be to let him alone, and let him have his own way.³ It's because He loves us that He prunes us.

Sometimes He cuts away dead wood from our lives. Sometimes He lops off living growth, that is, He takes away good things so we'll experience what's far better.

There's no question. This pruning is radical action, and can be painful at times. But it's always our maximum joy He's after, and the fullest display of His glory.

Let this sink in. God is committed to doing exactly what it takes so your life will be fruitful. He is working in your life right now. He is pruning you.⁴

He's intent on taking things away because He wants to give us something far better. So snips away things, things like sin, for sure, but also worldly distractions that would hinder our fruit-bearing, or even good things at times.

One of our Father's favorite pruning tools is the knife of suffering. Have you noticed how in times of suffering God opens your eyes to things that are distracting you from what really matters in life? Oh, how our Heavenly Gardener loves us!

John MacArthur is right, "Don't think God is up in heaven snapping a big whip and saying, 'Bear fruit, or I'll get you!' He is carefully helping us to bear fruit."⁵

Do you look at your trials that way? The next time you face a trial, instead of complaining, or lapsing into fear or self-pity, recognize what your Father is doing, and thank Him for it. See His hand in the suffering.

Charles Spurgeon did, and it gave him great hope.

"If you drink of the river of affliction near its outfall," he preached in 1868, "it is brackish and offensive to the taste, but if you will trace it to its source, where it rises at the foot of the throne of God, you will find its waters to be sweet and health-giving." He explained in 1873: "As long as I trace my pain to accident, my bereavement to mistake, my loss to another's wrong, my discomfort to an enemy, and so on, I am of the earth, earthy, and shall break my teeth with gravel stones; but when I rise to my God and see his hand at work, I grow calm, I have not a word of repining."⁶

I've appreciated something else Spurgeon said. It's usually right after the seasons of greatest suffering that we experience the seasons of greatest fruitfulness.

So are you experiencing the pruning hand of God right now? Are you cooperating with the Gardener or resisting Him? Are you trying to cling to the things He is seeking to remove from your life—maybe a bitter spirit, or a dangerous relationship, or maybe even

³ As Wiersbe observes.

⁴ The Greek word *kathairo* appears only one other time in the New Testament, but it's also found in extrabiblical Greek literature. There it refers to cleansing grain, the act of separating grain from waste material, and also of cleansing soil of weeds before planting a crop. The first century Jewish philosopher Philo said that unnecessary shoots that grow on plants are a hindrance to the good shoots which the gardener cleanses (*kathairo*) by pruning.

⁵ John MacArthur, *Abiding in Christ*, p. 16.

⁶ <http://www.ctlibrary.com/ch/1991/issue29/2922.html>

something good that's becoming an idol in your heart? Let's surrender and say, "Have Thine own way."

We learn something else about pruning in John 15. First, pruning is the responsibility of the Father. Second, pruning involves radical surgery. Third...

C. Pruning requires a relationship with Jesus (3). Here's what Jesus told His disciples in verse 3, "You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you."

You—Jesus is talking to the twelve minus Judas, the apostles, men He has chosen. These are men who know Him, who believe in Him, who have a relationship with Him.

You are already *clean*. The word 'clean' here and the verb 'prunes' in verse 2 are closely related in the Greek. Perhaps Jesus didn't want His followers to be fearful of the Father's pruning work, so He tells them, "What the Father does with the branches is what I've already been doing with you."

You are already pruned and clean. And what made them clean? Jesus says it was "the word which I have spoken to you."

Men, after three years with Me, you're clean because My word has pruned you and made you clean. My word has admonished you when needed. My word has cut out the undesirable traits in your lives. Now I'm leaving, but you are ready to produce fruit. Because of the ministry of My word. Friends...

1. *It's Jesus' word that makes us clean.*

2. *It's Jesus' word that prepares us for fruit-bearing.*

No wonder Jesus told these men, "Go and make disciples, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." Beloved, His Word is the key to everything.

So let me ask you a fundamental question, "What place does the Word of Christ have in your life?" Do you read it daily, and place yourself under it weekly? And when you do read and hear it, what do you do when you run across some instruction from your Savior that confronts something in your heart or life?

"Well, I know I should do that but..." Or, "I know I shouldn't do that, but..."

As your pastor, let me speak frankly, as I borrow an observation from D. A. Carson, "No one is more miserable than the Christian who hedges in obedience. He doesn't love sin enough to enjoy its pleasures, and he doesn't love Christ enough to relish holiness."⁷

The Father wants your fruitfulness. That's why He's pruning you. That's His commitment to you, for your maximum joy and His maximum glory.

That brings us to our responsibility. That's number three: a picture, pruning, and...

III. Life in the vine involves purposeful reliance (4).

Look at verse 4, "Remain [translated "abide" in other translations] in me, and I will 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."

Pruning? That's the Father's responsibility. The disciples? It's not complicated. Just one simple word. *Meno* in the Greek. *Remain* in the NIV. *Abide* in the AV, ESV, and NASB. If you want to experience fruit, you must abide. Why? Because you don't have within yourself what it takes to produce fruit. Only He does. You can't bear fruit unless you abide in Me, says Jesus.

More about abiding in a moment, but first, this question. What is *fruit*? Again, it's not complicated. Fruit is the product of, the reproduction of, that plant. A peach tree produces peaches. A grape vine grapes. An apple tree apples.

⁷ D.A. Carson, *The Farewell Discourse and Final Prayer of Jesus*, p. 100.

What do Christians produce? *I am the vine*. So Christians reproduce Christ. Or I should say, Christ produces Christ in the followers of Christ. This happens in a couple of ways.

The first is *Christlikeness*. Christ reproduces Himself by forming a people that resemble Him. “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, self-control (Gal 5:22-23).”

But it doesn't stop there. Christ doesn't just reproduce Christ *in* His followers, but *through* them. “All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth (Col 1:6).” What kind of fruit is that? Not just Christlikeness, but more Christians. Evangelism.

So what's fruit? Fruit is Christ reproducing Himself in us and through us, to the glory of God the Father.

But fruitfulness does not just happen. The Father's part is the pruning. What's our responsibility? Let me give you two words. *Purposeful reliance*. That's what I think abide means here.⁸

We're going to develop this in greater detail next time, the Lord willing, but for now let me put it this way...

*To abide in Christ is to be connected to Christ and purposefully depend on Him for everything. When I am abiding in Christ, I am allowing Him to reproduce His life in and through me.*⁹

I want to be as practical as I can at this point. I want every one of us to experience life in the vine as Christ presents it here. So let me take that working definition and turn it into three practical steps which are indispensable to abiding.

Make It Personal: In order to experience life in the vine...

1. *Get to know Christ*. Christianity is not just another religion. It's not merely a way of life. It's a relationship between a person and a personal God. So if I am going to see the fruit of Christ in my life, then I must be connected to Christ. Are you?

Jesus Christ came to earth two thousand years ago, in fulfillment of the God's eternal plan to save a people for His glory. He died as a substitute on the Cross. He rose again on the third day and later ascended to His Father's right hand. He sent His Spirit into the world. He is a *real Person*.

Do you know Him? To abide in Him, you must know Him personally.

2. *Make your relationship with Christ your top priority*. What is your greatest ambition in life? To raise a good family? To make money? To have a good time?

Friends, when we're abiding in Christ we're allowing Him to reproduce His life in us and through us. It's His agenda that matters most to us. His will, His honor. It's having people see *Him* in our lives, and come to know Him through our influence.

Is Christ your top priority in life, and if not, what needs to change, starting *today*?

3. *Determine to do what pleases Christ in every situation*. When I abide in Christ, it makes me a better husband and father. When I abide in Christ, it affects my performance on the job and in school. Why? Because I want my life to please Him. I want my life to follow in His steps. And I live it in *purposeful reliance on Him*.

⁸ This is a key word in John's gospel, appearing 11 times in this chapter and 40 times in the entire book. It can be translated “remain, dwell, lodge, stay.” By definition, it has to do with an inward, enduring, personal communion.

⁹ There's a sense in which abiding in Jesus is synonymous with believing in Jesus. John 3:15 says, “...that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”