



June 9, 2013  
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## *Cram Session: Jesus' Parting Words – Abide!*

John 15:1-17

We are sitting in on the cram session with Jesus in the upper room the night before he was crucified. As a teacher, Jesus was well known for his short stories taken from everyday life. These were called parables: The Good Samaritan, The Prodigal Son. There are about 50 parables in the New Testament. Now, how many parables do we find in John's gospel? Zero! Not one. So this morning's text is about as close to a parable as you will find in John's gospel. Take a look at the screen for the translation we are using this morning. And I want you to watch for the word, "Abide." Every time we come to that word, say it with me, ok?

<sup>1</sup>"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup>**Abide** in me, and I will abide in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must **abide** in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you **abide** in me. "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever **abides** in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing." <sup>6</sup>If anyone does not **abide** in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. <sup>7</sup>If you **abide** in me and my words **abide** in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. <sup>8</sup>This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. ...<sup>16</sup>You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last.

Let's start here. Did you notice anything familiar about the first two words in our text? "I Am!" Remember? "I Am" was God's holy, unpronounceable name, Yahweh. So every time Jesus said, "I Am... I Am the Bread of Life, I Am the Good Shepherd, I Am the Light of the World" and so on, he was making claiming to be God. Audacious! This one is the final "I Am" statement and I wonder if John doesn't save it for last because it is such a powerful image of our ongoing relationship with Jesus on earth. 5: "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing."

For the first time, Jesus includes us in one of his "I Am" statements. He is the vine and we are the branches! And what is our job as branches attached to the Vine?

To bear fruit! Eleven times in the text Jesus repeats himself, culminating in this powerful summary in verse 16 about what he expects from his disciples: <sup>16</sup>You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last.

Notice Jesus doesn't say, "I chose you and appointed you to go to heaven when you die." That is true, and it is a wonderful thing, but it's not what Jesus says. "I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last." And Jesus doesn't tell us what that fruit is. He leaves it open. Maybe it means sharing your faith with others who end up following him. Maybe it is living your life as a faithful husband or a godly mother or a loving grandparent or Christ-like friend; or being the best student you can be, or volunteering with kids, or going on a mission trip, or serving in your vocation with integrity that brings honor to Christ in the workplace. This week at Darren Fouquette's memorial service, we listened as his boss spoke of how Darren's Christ-like integrity touched every one of their 2300 employees.

We don't know exactly what Jesus meant by "fruit", but he meant something! He is clear: he chose us and appointed us to be fruit-bearing branches attached to him. So if you do an honest self-assessment and can't point to anything that you would describe as fruit born for the sake of Jesus, then this passage ought to scare the bejeebers out of you! Because this is one of those places where Jesus sounds like a hellfire preacher!

There are two parts to this fruit-producing relationship. God's part and our part. How does Jesus describe God the Father in this "parable?" He is the gardener. And what does a gardener do? This. He prunes.



I don't remember seeing a grapevine as a kid. I grew up in Yakima way before it was a wine hotspot. I don't know anything about pruning a grape vine, but I know a little about pruning apple trees. Would you like a few pointers? The first pruning begins right after a tree is planted as a new "whip." It is the most important pruning job because it establishes what is called the "Central Leader." That is the straight stalk in the center of the tree from which other branches grow out. Any other branches that try to take the center place in the tree are known as "Competing Leaders" and they are ruthlessly pruned out. Only one branch can be the "Central Leader."

There are other branches that are pruned, too. Downward facing branches are lopped off, because unless the branches are turned upward, they will not be able to bear the weight of their fruit. Broken or damaged branches are pruned so that they can be replaced by healthy ones. And all criss-crossing branches are lopped off, too. The ongoing friction damages both branches and the fruit. All of this pruning is done in the winter when the trees are dormant.

But there is another kind of branch that is pruned. And this is the most ruthless pruning of all. What do you call these? Suckers! (Every time I hear that word, I can't help but think of my daughter Rachel offering up one of her favorite one-word phrases: "Suckahhhh!") Suckers grow out of the roots and out of the tree trunk; they are absolutely worthless. All they do is suck out nourishment. They will never bear fruit. So, if you find a sucker, you chop it off immediately. Winter or summer, it doesn't matter. These worthless branches are lopped off right away. "See ya, Suckahhhh!"

Apple trees, not grapevines... Washington, not Israel... but do you find any parallels here? Jesus says, "I am the vine." or "I am the Central Leader." I am the source of your life. I am the one that rises above all the others and out of which all of you grow! And my Father will lop off every competitor that tries to steal the place of centrality, lordship and supply that only I can offer. I will always have center place in my Church."



But that's just the beginning. Jesus goes on: "Any branch that does not produce fruit (What are those called? Suckahhhs!)—that exists only for its own pleasure and purpose, that draws life from me with no hope or intention of producing new fruit—will be chopped off and thrown into the fire." Wow! What does Jesus mean by these frightening images? Is he talking about us losing our salvation? I thought we didn't believe that possible. Is this punishment on earth, or is he talking about hell?

We need to be careful not to get more specific in our interpretation than Jesus does in his teaching. He does not define "fruit." He does not identify the fruitless branches or what the fire means. He simply says this: "If you claim to belong to me but aren't producing fruit that proves you do... you don't. And my Father will chop you off and make room for the person who wants to be my fruit-bearing disciple."

Harsh? Yes. Scary? Yes. But that's what Jesus says. If it makes you mad, talk to him. And if it makes you mad, there might be a reason you find yourself offended. If there is nothing about your life to which you can point that might be described as Christian "fruit"—if neither your marriage nor your parenting nor friendships nor your reputation at work nor your witness nor your habits nor your checkbook register reflect anything of your supposed relationship with Jesus—then I can see why this teaching would make you nervous. Maybe you hear Rachel's voice in your head! "Suckahhh!"

Pruning doesn't sound pleasant, does it? It even looks painful; like something to avoid. Bad news: it's not just suckers that get chopped. Who else? The fruitful branches, too! There is no escaping the lopper. If you produce no fruit, you get chopped and burned. If you do produce fruit, you still get pruned to produce more fruit!



Those whose heads and hearts and hands are turned downwards in grief or shame or weariness—who cannot bear the weight of the fruit God wants to produce in you—Jesus lovingly prunes you so that they will be turned back upward! Those of you who are broken and wounded, Jesus lovingly prunes so that you can heal and be fruitful again. Those of you who are rubbing up against each other—who are living in conflict—Jesus lovingly prunes you, too, so that we can learn to live and bear fruit together. How many here this morning are going through a season of pruning?

Here's the good news... The harvest is comin'! God is going to produce some great fruit in you!

So far this parable is about what God does. Jesus is the vine. He is the source of life that produces the fruit. And the Father is the gardener with the pruning shears—lopping off dead branches and lovingly pruning others. But what is our job? If we are supposed to produce fruit, how do we do it? By telling ourselves, "I am going to produce fruit!" like the little engine that could? "I think I can, I think I can, I think I can produce fruit!" Is it by straining and trying real hard to be fruity? You know, I walked through a lot of apple orchards in my day and I don't recall hearing a single tree grunting... kind of like an apple maternity ward. What is the only thing an apple branch needs to do in order to produce fruit? Stay attached to the tree!

That's our job. To stay attached to Jesus. Jesus uses the same verb eleven times to reinforce this! Did you see it in our reading "Abide in me. I will abide in you. Abide in the vine. Abide in my word. Abide in my love."

Abide is a weird word. What does it mean to abide in Jesus? The most common understanding is to "live with, to make our home with." We "abide" in our homes. Having a home of our own is a wonderful thing, isn't it? And you only realize how wonderful when you don't have one. Is there anyone here this morning who has ever been homeless for some reason—had no place you could call home, where you felt safe and secure... no place where you can "abide"? Most of us can only imagine how awful that would be. Jesus says, "Abide with me. Live with me. Make your home with me!"

That's a wonderful and encouraging image, but it doesn't really help us understand how we bear fruit, does it? This same word can also be translated, "Remain" or "Stay attached to" or even better for us, "Plug yourself into." There was no electricity in Jesus' day, but isn't that the sense of what he is saying here? "Stay attached to me! Stay plugged into my power... my life source. If you do, you will bear much fruit."

When Cooper and I did our college trip to California, we rented a Prius. With gas approaching \$5 a gallon, it seemed like a good idea. We were intrigued to watch

the displays as we drove. The lights represented all the money I was saving when I was in electric mode. But when I “punched it,” the gas engine would kick in and the display would go from green to red. Electric was more economical, but I had my backup plan.

Then the other day I drove someone’s Nissan Leaf... all-electric. There is no backup plan. After 100 miles, if you don’t find a power source to plug into you ain’t going nowhere. As I drove around in that silent car, it was odd trying to imagine what it would be like to own that kind of a car. No gas station on every corner to fill up when I run low. No. I would have to know where the charging stations are located. I would have to plan on staying plugged in every single day, or I will be stuck! I realized that if I had an all-electric car, it would transform the way I think about driving.

I wonder if we really believed what Jesus says about “abiding in him,” if it would transform the way we think about living? Because, honestly I’ll bet a lot of us live “hybrid” Christian lives. We know Jesus, and we know how much he has done for us. We are grateful that our sins are forgiven... really glad we will go to heaven someday. And when we are sick, or in financial trouble, or our marriage is rocky, or our kids are rebelling it’s nice to be able to ask for a little help from him. But most of the time we are driving on gas and we know we can fill up just around the corner. Jesus is a nice feature—a nice option to have—but we pretty much depend upon ourselves to take care of the day to day stuff. We tap into Christ when we need to, but most of the time we are pretty self-sufficient—off on our own, doing our own thing. We know where to find him if we need him, but that’s mostly for emergencies. He’s our backup plan.

And then we return to John 15:5. <sup>5</sup>“I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.” The fact is we aren’t hybrids at all. We are Leafs! We are all-electric cars, and if we don’t abide in Jesus—if we don’t stay attached, stay plugged into him every single day—we can do nothing. Not just really big stuff, not just really important stuff... apart from him, unplugged from him, we can do nothing!

Jesus says, “I am the vine. You are my branches. I am your life source. As long as you abide in me—as long as you stay attached to me—my Father is going to prune away at you and you are going to bear much fruit. But if you pull away, you can do nothing!

I had a shameful father/son moment the other day. I asked Cooper to play golf with me. One of the things I love about golf is that it can be a four hour conversation with people you enjoy. The problem is, I was playing horribly that day. And the worse I played, the more into myself I got. Pretty soon, I was just hitting the ball badly, snatching up my clubs, and stalking off toward my next lousy swing... leaving poor Cooper trailing along behind me. And it wasn’t until the

end of the round that I realized how many times I had done that... left my beloved son in the dust because I was so self-absorbed and focused on something so fleeting and stupid. I felt ashamed. When we got home, I asked his forgiveness and promised I would never treat him like that on the golf course again.

But as I think about it, too often I do the same thing to Jesus. I take a swing at life, and then stalk off leaving him in the dust—so absorbed with my own stuff, whatever it is, that I forget the one thing he has asked me to do... stay close to him. Stay plugged into him; abide in him. And I'm convinced that if we really learn what it means to abide in Jesus—every day, every moment... remaining in him—it would transform our lives. And we would have way more fruit to show for it.

Is anyone here living a hybrid life right now? Tapping into Jesus when you need a little help but otherwise, pretty much running on your own? Let's listen to his very clear words one more time: <sup>5</sup>"I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing."

For Graduates: Graduates, you are about to leave behind most of the things that have grounded you in life. One of the biggest decisions you will have to make is this: "Will I continue to abide in Christ when no one is looking over my shoulder? When no one is waking me up on Sunday mornings?"

## Sermon Questions

- REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER: Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.
- PRAY TOGETHER: Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.
- DIG DEEPER
  1. Pastor Mark suggests this is the closest thing to a parable in John's gospel. Why do you think he says that?
  2. What do you find disturbing about this text? Encouraging? What do you learn about pruning?
  3. What is the part that you are called to play in "fruit bearing?" What does "abide" mean? Would you say that you are "abiding?"