

John 15:1-8 I am the vine

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We come to the last of the I am sayings of Jesus.
There's one we missed when Luke and Jane visited.
We'll come back to that after Easter.
But this is the last in John's gospel.
"I am the vine."

It's an image that ought to resonate on the Mornington Peninsula.
We have plenty of acres devoted to growing grapes around here.
But what does Jesus mean when he says he is the vine?

He begins, 15:1 "I am the true vine,
and my Father is the gardener."

Hold on a second.

There must be another vine somewhere else.

If Jesus is the true vine,
there must be a pretend vine or a fake vine out there somewhere.
And we won't know what it means for Jesus to be the true vine
until we know what he is contrasting himself with.

Well it turns out that the contrast is not so much with a fake vine
as with a failed vine.

Jesus is the true vine in the sense
that he gets done a job that the original vine had failed miserably at.
He is the true vine in the sense that he is a successful vine
in contrast to an earlier vine that is a failed vine.

What's the difference between a successful vine and a failed vine?

Well it's all about bearing fruit.

Successful vines bear fruit and failed vines don't bear fruit.

Just ask at any winery,

it's not a trade secret.

So who is the failed vine?

Well listen to Psalm 80:7-19

- ⁷ Restore us, God Almighty;
make your face shine on us,
that we may be saved.
- ⁸ You transplanted a vine from Egypt;
you drove out the nations and planted it.
- ⁹ You cleared the ground for it,
and it took root and filled the land.
- ¹⁰ The mountains were covered with its shade,
the mighty cedars with its branches.
- ¹¹ Its branches reached as far as the Sea,
its shoots as far as the River.
- ¹² Why have you broken down its walls
so that all who pass by pick its grapes?
- ¹³ Boars from the forest ravage it,
and insects from the fields feed on it.
- ¹⁴ Return to us, God Almighty!
Look down from heaven and see!
Watch over this vine,
- ¹⁵ the root your right hand has planted,
the son you have raised up for yourself.
- ¹⁶ Your vine is cut down, it is burned with fire;
at your rebuke your people perish.
- ¹⁷ Let your hand rest on the man at your right hand,
the son of man you have raised up for yourself.
- ¹⁸ Then we will not turn away from you;
revive us, and we will call on your name.
- ¹⁹ Restore us, Lord God Almighty;
make your face shine on us,
that we may be saved.

Who is the failed vine?

You transplanted a vine from Egypt;

you drove out the nations and planted it.

Well that's talking about how God brought his people out of Egypt.

He took them into the promised land

and drove out the nations who had lived there.
 So the vine is the nation of Israel.
 And in the Psalm is it a failed vine.
 It's a failed vine because the nations have conquered it in battle.
 And as we read the Old Testament,
 we realise that the reason that Israel was conquered by the nations
 was because she was unfaithful to her God.

Jesus on the other hand is the true vine.
 Israel was God's unfaithful people.
 Jesus is God's faithful person.
 He is the nation of Israel.
 And where the nation was unfaithful,
 Jesus is faithful.
 In terms of the vine image,
 the nation of Israel failed to bear fruit.
 But Jesus the true vine does bear fruit.

But here's the surprise.
 15:5 "I am the vine and you are the branches."
 Jesus is addressing his followers
 and he's telling us that the bearing of fruit is going to be done by us.
 The vine in the OT had failed in its job of bearing fruit.
 Various branches had been cut off because they didn't bear fruit.
 But Jesus expects that Christians will bear fruit.
 The surprise is not that Jesus is the true vine,
 that Jesus is true Israel,
 the true people of God.
 The surprise is that the vine plus the branches is Jesus plus us,
 and together we are God's chosen people.
 If that's not surprising to you at some level,
 then you need to have a quick look in the mirror.

OK so we've worked out what Jesus means
 when he says that he is the vine.

Now the next step is to work out why he said it.
 What the main reason that Jesus wanted to tell us that he is the vine?
 What's the main point of the image?
 Well here's where this 'I am' saying is different to all the others.
 In the other six,
 the main point is about Jesus.
 Here the main point is actually about us.
 Jesus is the vine, we are the branches.
 And the main point is:
 We need to stay connected to Jesus.
 Remain in me.
 That must be the main point of this picture
 because Jesus says it so many times in this passage.
 15:4 "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."
 15:5-7 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."
 When you read it with emphasis,
 it becomes quite apparent
 just how much Jesus is emphasising remaining in him.
 And it fits the metaphor, doesn't it?
 When you prune a vine,
 branches that get cut off
 are dead as a door nail within a few weeks of being cut off.

So what does it mean to remain in Jesus?
Well the bottom line is, it means stay a Christian.
To remain in Jesus is to continue being one of his followers.
Of course that brings up the question
of whether it's possible for a true Christian to fall away.
Jesus says things in chapter 10
that many would interpret as saying
that it's not possible for a true believer to fall away.
10:28 "I give them eternal life,
they shall never perish;
no one will snatch them out of my hand."
Other people would say,
"Ah Jesus says no one will snatch them out of my hand,
but that doesn't mean they can't jump."
Well I think we need to have some sort of an understanding
that makes sense both of the very strong assurances
that Scripture gives.
"Whoever believes in me shall not perish but have eternal life."
And makes sense of the very strong warnings that Scripture gives.
"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."
That's a very strong warning.
I find it hard to read a warning like that
and not think that Jesus is warning people against going to hell.
What else could getting picked up,
thrown into the fire and burned refer to?
So how do we hold the assurances and the warnings together?
Well that's a question
that much smarter people than me have written whole books on.
I won't resolve it to the satisfaction of everyone in a short sermon.
But here's the broad outline of how I resolve it in my head.
The assurances that Scripture gives us are real.
No Christian person needs to worry

about whether they are good enough to make it into heaven.
The teaching some branches of the church
that we need to do various things:
whether that's confessing your sins,
or taking communion,
or attending church,
or reading your Bible,
or whatever,
in order to be saved,
these are wrong.
If your faith is genuinely in Jesus you will be saved.
If he is your Lord,
he will not let you down.

But in order to take the warnings seriously,
then I have to conclude
that not everything that looks like faith in Jesus is genuine.
Some people talk about putting their trust in Jesus.
But it's just talk.
They might look and sound very much like other Christians.
But deep down their faith is not real.
How can you tell these fake Christians?
They don't remain in the vine.
They don't continue with their faith in Jesus.

I'm old enough now to have seen many supposed Christians
give up their faith.
I conclude that they were not genuine Christians in the first place.
That's the way
that I can hold the assurances of Scripture as very real promises
and the warnings of Scripture as very real warnings.

Now of course there's a pastoral question here.
How can I know that I am one of the genuine ones?
If the fake Christians look and sound like genuine ones.

And the only way to tell if they are fake
is they don't remain in the vine.
Then how can I know that I am genuine
until I get to the end of my life
and I'm still proclaiming that I love the Lord Jesus?
How can I know that I am the real deal now?

Well that's a good question.
Personally,
I can't imagine ever getting to the point of deciding not to follow Jesus.
It seems inconceivable to me.
And so I conclude that I am the real deal as a believer.
Which is only by the grace of God, not through my own goodness.

But there might be others of you
who know that you do change your mind on stuff quite often,
when your emotions knock you round,
sometimes you will go in directions you wish later you hadn't.
And it might be a real concern for you.
What if something bad happens to me,
and I spit the dummy and stop following Jesus?

Well don't do it.
It's the worst possible decision you could ever make.
It has eternal consequences.
And remember the things the Bible tells you to do
are not just because God likes making rules.
When Hebrews tells us not to give up meeting together,
that's not because God is like an Anglican minister
who gets his validation in life
by counting how many people came to church on Sunday.
It's because when the inevitable bad things in life do happen to you,
you will be better equipped to deal with it,
if you have a strong Christian community surrounding you.
And when the inevitable bad things in life happen to other people,

they will less likely to give up on Jesus
if you are there to encourage them.

When the Bible tells you that if you are going to marry,
you should only marry another believer,
it's not because God gets some thrill
out of reducing the pool of eligible spouses.

I've lost count of the number of women
who've told me that there aren't enough good men in the church.
The reason is because some people don't remain in the vine
when they marry a non Christian.

And certainly the spiritual damage to their children goes without saying.

So if you are concerned about remaining in the vine,
then act on your concern

by being scrupulous about obeying God's Word.

That is the best way to make sure you remain in the vine.

I'm yet to meet a person who packed in their faith
where there wasn't some glaring disobedience to God in their life
before they packed it in.

OK we've answered two questions.

What does Jesus mean when he says he's the vine?

What does it mean to remain in Jesus?

One more question to go.

What is the fruit that we bear by remaining in the vine?

If there's a second emphasis of this passage after remaining in the vine,
it's bearing fruit.

I'm not going to read it all out again with emphasis.

If I do the same trick too many times you'll get bored.

So I'm just going to tell you.

Jesus mentions bearing fruit six times in eight verses.

Jesus is really interested in us bearing fruit.

15:8 He says, "This is to my Father's glory,
that you bear much fruit,
showing yourselves to be my disciples."

Jesus is all about bringing glory to the Father.
That is the Son's mission in life and in death.
And so if we bear fruit,
that will bring the Father glory,
and Jesus will be fulfilling his mission.

So how can we know what the fruit is?

It would be helpful to know what to strive for
in order to bring the Father glory.

Well there's a big hint in verse 7.

15:7 "If you remain in me and my words remain in you,
ask whatever you wish,
and it will be done for you."

It could be tempting to view this

as a random promise about prayer out of the blue.

But Jesus normally strings his sentences together
so they make sense together.

So I think it's fair to say that the fruit that we bear
will be the result of prayer.

Prayer that springs from Jesus' words remaining in us.

So when you are reflecting on God's Word.

And you start praying about what you are reflecting on,
then God answers your prayer.

That will be fruit.

So it doesn't tell us specifically what the fruit is.

But that's probably a good thing.

Because the fruit could be many things.

It could be God's Word

about always being ready to give a reason for the hope that is in you.

And you reflect on that

and pray for someone who you've been talking with.

And when they respond to God,

that would be fruit.

But it could also be God's Words about character.

You read about the fruit of the Spirit.

Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, and the rest.
You pray that God would grow those fruit in you.
And God answers your prayer.
And you are bearing fruit.
This time fruit helpfully described as the fruit of the Spirit
so you can be doubly sure they are fruit.

Well as I said a moment ago,
Jesus normally strings his sentences together
so they make sense together.
And in that vein,
it's pretty reasonable to view 15:9-17,
the passage immediately after the one we read out,
as fleshing out the metaphor about the vine.
If we do that,
then there are two specific fruit that Jesus is looking for in particular.
15:10 "If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love."
15:12 "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you".

There are lots of fruit that bring the Father glory.
But the fruit of loving one another will be right up there
in Jesus' estimation.
The apostle Peter said,
"Above all love each other deeply,
because love covers over a multitude of sins."
Peter wasn't saying that love buys forgiveness of sins.
Only Jesus death on the cross pays the penalty for sins.
But love is something
that deals with the effects of other sins particularly well.
Suppose someone has a few irritating qualities.
They might be boastful or full of their own opinion.
They might keep interrupting you when you converse.
If you know that they love you,
you will put up with it.
But if they are disinterested in you,

then you will most likely find someone else to talk with.
Love makes things work that would otherwise not work.
It make people able to work together
who would otherwise not be able to work together.

What fruit does Jesus want from us?
Well if his words remain in you,
and you ask for what those words cause you to desire,
then you will bear the fruit he wants you to bear.
And if that's a bit vague for you,
well love is probably top of the list.

Jesus is the vine -
that means he is the true people of God.
And remarkably as the branches of the vine,
we are the true people of God also -
but only because we are connected to him.

Jesus is the vine -
and as the branches we need to remain in the vine.
That means we all need to keep being Christians as long as we live.
The warnings about branches being cut off from the vine
are real warnings.
Make sure you stick with Jesus!

Jesus is the vine -
and that means we will bear fruit.
The fruit will be come from his words remaining in us,
and then our praying that those words would be active in our lives.
The top fruit on Jesus list for us is love.