

The Seven I AM Statements of Christ

I AM the True Vine (John 15:1-11)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on November 24, 2024

Introduction

- ❖ This morning we're finishing off our series on The Seven I AM Statements of Christ. The seventh and final recorded statement in John's Gospel is where Jesus says to his disciples, "*I AM the true vine.*" According to the context, Jesus had just celebrated the Passover (and the Last Supper) with his disciples in an upper room in Jerusalem. All that takes place in John 13-14. And at the end of John 14, in v31, he says, "*Rise, let us go from here.*" And the next geographic location given is in chapter 18 where they arrive at the Garden of Gethsemane.
 - So, in all likelihood, Jesus and his disciples had walked past one of the many vineyards outside the gates of Jerusalem. Which prompted Jesus to teach using a metaphor drawn from the vineyard. **This lesson was aimed at clarifying his identity and mission as the Great I AM, as the God of the OT come in the flesh.** And it also clarifies *our* identity and mission as his followers, as disciples of Christ.

- ❖ **And for his original audience, the vineyard metaphor is so fitting and relevant for theirs was an agrarian society.** Vinedressing was a common occupation. Everyone would've been familiar with the hard work of tending to vines, cutting off and pruning branches. Talk to them about spiritual growth and – because of the world they live in – they would instinctively picture a vine or some other plant. **They would instinctively think of spiritual growth in terms of vegetative growth, organic growth.**
 - But, for most of us, that's not where our minds go. **Since we live in a modern, high-tech environment, we're more familiar with machines than with plants.** Which results in an overly mechanized view of spiritual growth. In the world we live in, we just press a button, pull a lever, and out comes the result. Well, if your dominant metaphor is mechanical, then everything is predictable. Everything is formulaic.

- ❖ **So it's no surprise that many of us take a mechanized approach to spiritual growth.** We assume that if we do the right things and avoid the wrong ones, then we should expect certain results. **If I'm consistent in going to church and reading my Bible, then that ought to result in clear, discernible spiritual growth and progress.**
 - But then when the growth is *not* automatic. When the change is slow to come and sometimes imperceptible. When you still struggle with the same temptations. When you still deal with the same problems and weaknesses. That's when you start to doubt and wonder. Maybe it's pointless. Maybe things will never change. Maybe we're fooling ourselves. Maybe none of this is real.

- ❖ **Or maybe the problem is that we've adopted an overly mechanized view of spiritual growth.** And maybe the needed corrective is a vine metaphor, set in a distinctly organic environment. Especially in the way it depicts how spiritual growth actually occurs. It can teach us to be patient and to remain hopeful. **Growth might not be automatic or predictable. But you can be sure that true branches of a true vine will eventually bear fruit.** That's what you'd expect when dealing with an organism instead of a machine.

- ❖ **So as we dive into this morning's passage, let's keep in mind that it's about spiritual growth but just cast in the language of fruitfulness.** So to be fruitful – to bear fruit – is another way of saying to grow spiritually.
 - Now according to our text, there are two actions that God takes that are aimed at growing his church spiritually, and there's one thing we're commanded to do. (1) God cuts off fruitless branches from the True Vine to expose their true nature. (2) God prunes fruitful branches on the True Vine to make them more fruitful. (3) The branches abide in the True Vine trusting that growth will come.

God Cuts Off Fruitless Branches From the True Vine

- ❖ Let's consider the first action God takes to spiritually grow his church. **He cuts off fruitless branches from the True Vine.** Now, at first glance, it's hard to see how that leads to spiritual growth. **How will a decrease in branches result in an increase of fruit?** It seems counterintuitive to me. But that's why I'm not a gardener. I had to read up on vinedressing.
 - And I learned that a vinedresser will usually do two things to maximize the fruitfulness of his vineyard. In the winter time, **he'll cut off dry, withered branches** from the vines and take them away. And then, in spring time, when the vines have sprouted new branches, **he'll prune back some of them.**
 - And both actions – though different in target – are the same in intent. It's about maximizing the fruitfulness of the vineyard by ensuring that all the fruit-bearing branches are receiving adequate nourishment from their vine.
- ❖ If you miss this point, then certain actions attributed to God the Father – as the Vinedresser – could be possibly misinterpreted. **Cutting off fruitless branches and throwing them into the fire seems cruel – until you see the bigger picture and how it serves the bigger purpose of growing a fruitful vineyard.**
 - Let's start in v1. Jesus calls himself the True Vine and his Father the Vinedresser. Then, in v5, he says we are the branches. *“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. ²Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away (remove or cut off), and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.”*
- ❖ Now to understand this metaphor, you've got to read it in proper context. I don't just mean its historic cultural context – in an ancient agrarian society – I mean its biblical context. When his disciples heard this metaphor, they would've heard familiar OT language and imagery.
 - **Did you notice how Jesus calls himself the True Vine?** Not just the vine but the *true* vine. **Which begs the question – true compared to what else?** There's obviously a comparison being made. And that's where the OT background is so helpful.
- ❖ **In the OT, a vine was commonly used to symbolize Israel, the OT people of God.** Take Isaiah 5 as an example. Israel is described as a vineyard, and God is the vinedresser who diligently tends to its vines. But when it was time to yield grapes, he looks and discovers that it yielded only wild grapes. So what will the LORD do? How will he respond?

- ❖ Listen to Isaiah 5:5, “*And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down.*” Then in v7, Isaiah explains, “*For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel.*”
 - **According to the metaphor, the LORD God planted Israel as a chosen vine and called her to bear fruit that blesses the nations.** A mission and mandate originally given to their forefather Abraham (Gen 12:2-3). They were to spiritually grow in love and righteousness, to develop a deep devotion to God and a compassionate mercy to others, so they can serve as a beacon of blessing to all the nations that surround them.
 - But over time and after many chances, Israel continued to produce bad fruit and was eventually cut down. Which is how the vine metaphor always concludes. **Every time, the focus is on the vine’s failure (on Israel’s failure) to produce good fruit, which is accompanied by a corresponding warning of judgment to come** (cf. Ps 80:8-16; Jer 2:21; Ezk 15:1-8).

- ❖ Which is what makes John 15 so fascinating. **Because, for the first time in Scripture, the vine metaphor is applied in a positive light.** While Israel, as a vine, failed to produce fruit – while they were *not* true to their mission to bless the nations – there arose another vine, the True Vine, who did bear fruit and blessed many.
 - **In saying, “*I AM the True Vine,*” Jesus is claiming to be the True Israel who’s capable of doing what ethnic Israel failed to do.** He took on and fulfilled the mission to be fruitful and bless the nations. He did it by taking up his cross; by dying for sinners; by taking away the sin of the world (Jn 1:29). By forming a new covenant community comprised of all nations – called the Church.

- ❖ **So in this sense, the cutting off of branches is a metaphor for the cutting off of Israel as a nation.** Their mission and mandate has been handed over to Jesus. Which means if you want to be blessed by God to be a blessing to others, you can’t just rely on tracing your ancestry back to Abraham. **You have to share in the faith of Abraham – you have to trust in Christ – otherwise you have no abiding connection to the True Vine.** That’s the point. And I’m arguing that that’s how this metaphor would’ve been heard by his disciples familiar with OT imagery and its overall narrative.

- ❖ My point is this: **If that’s what all this cutting off of fruitless branches is ultimately referring to – to the blessing of God (and the mission of God) shifting from the Israelites as a nation to the True Israel as a person in Christ Jesus** – if we understand that that’s what this is about, then it’ll help us avoid some faulty conclusions. Namely, the common assumption that the cutting off and taking away of branches teaches that true Christians can lose their salvation. No, that’s not the point. That would be pressing the metaphor too far.
 - **The metaphor is simply conveying the consistent biblical teaching that fruitfulness is a mark of true saving faith.** That faith without works is dead. Without works (without fruit) it’s exposed as a dead faith. It was never real. It was never saving in the first place.

- ❖ **So this action of God cutting off fruitless branches from the True Vine is really directed towards those who are very much rooted in a Christian environment but *not* necessarily rooted in Christ.** It appears as if they're attached to the Vine. And that might be assumed because of their consistent church attendance and involvement. **But, over time, they prove to be dead branches by their lack of fruit.** While fruitful branches, on the other hand, prove to be true. Look at v8, *“By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.”* Fruitless branches prove to the contrary.
 - **Now in the immediate context of John's Gospel, Judas is an example of a fruitless branch.** Any outside observer would've assumed he abides in the Vine along with the other disciples. But, over time, he proves to be a dead branch. Never having received life from the Vine. In the end, his true nature is exposed.

- ❖ **Now in our context, in the life of the church today, this concept of cutting off fruitless branches would be most directly expressed in the practice of corrective church discipline.** In accordance with principles taught by Jesus himself in Matthew 18, churches today have the responsibility of acting – in step with the Divine Vinedresser – to cut off from membership those in the church who, over time, demonstrate a consistent fruitlessness. A consistent pattern of unrepentance or spiritual rebellion.
 - If corrective discipline ever reaches that stage where a church is called to remove someone's membership – to treat them as we would a non-believer rather than a Christian – **it's done, on one hand, to expose the unrepentant sinner's true nature as detached from Christ the True Vine.** And, on the other hand, such action is taken to maximize the spiritual fruitfulness of the church as a whole. **Because nothing hampers the spiritual growth of a church – and hinders its gospel witness – like open, unrepentant sin tolerated and ignored among its own members.**

God Prunes Fruitful Branches on the True Vine

- ❖ So cutting off fruitless branches from the True Vine to expose their true nature is one action that the Vinedresser takes. Here's the second: **God prunes fruitful branches on the True Vine to make them more fruitful.** Listen to v2, *“Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.”*
 - As mentioned earlier, the act of pruning still involves cutting. **Cutting off small shoots in order to direct all the life-giving nourishment of the vine to the fruit-bearing branches.** So it's an action related to that first action of cutting off, but, in this case, it's not because the branch failed to deliver. It's because it did!

- ❖ **The vinedresser only prunes the branches that *are* bearing fruit.** Being fruitful doesn't exempt you from pruning. It doesn't exempt you from the knife. It actually justifies the knife. He prunes fruitful branches to make them *more* fruitful.
 - **In the immediate context, Peter is an example of a fruitful branch that needed some pruning.** That needed to go under the knife before he was ready to be of good service in the early church. It was all for the purpose of making him more fruitful.

- ❖ What’s interesting is that the verb for “*takes away*” (or cuts off) and the verb for “*prunes*” both share the same root word. They sound very similar in the Greek – *airoi* (cuts off) and *kathairoi* (prunes). **My point is that sometimes pruning feels like being cut off.** When God prunes you, it tends to hurt. It feels like he’s cutting you off and throwing you away. **But it’s in those moments that you need to trust the goodness of the Vinedresser.** His wisdom and skill. His love for you and desire to make you more fruitful.

- ❖ **I distinctly remember a time in my life when God did some major pruning.** In the early years of marriage, my wife and I started trying for children, assuming it wouldn’t be too hard or take too long. But years went by and nothing. We prayed hard. We kept waiting. And as we waited, we kept serving the Lord. I was going through seminary. Then eventually pastoring in a church. We kept pleading to God. But still nothing. No child. Only disappointment and bitterness.
 - It was particularly difficult when I would receive baby news from family or friends who were *not* following the Lord and were actively trying to *avoid* getting pregnant. **Why would God bless them and not me?** I actually believe in him. I’m the one serving him. Devoting my life to him as a pastor. Why don’t I get a family?

- ❖ And then I remember, one time, reading the **Parable of the Eleventh Hour Workers** (Mt 20:1-16). It’s the story of a landowner who shows his grace and kindness to those who clearly don’t deserve it – to workers who showed up at the last hour and barely put in any work. Which draws the ire and complaint of those who worked so much longer and so much harder. Who put in so much more sweat and tears. Who think they deserve so much more.
 - But the landowner responds by reminding them that he is free to dispense his grace and kindness as he sees fit. And he questions why the grumblers are begrudging his generosity. **And suddenly, the Word cut me to the heart and pointed out the way I was begrudging God’s generosity towards others.** I was begrudging his grace.

- ❖ **I came to the humbling realization that, even as a pastor, I still didn’t understand God’s grace.** That I was still operating out of a very legalistic framework. **It took those painful years of infertility to finally teach me the meaning of grace.** That God doesn’t answer my prayers and give me my heart’s desire just because I followed and served him. Just because I faithfully pressed that button and pulled that lever. No, God is sovereign and dispenses his sovereign grace and generosity as he sees fit, in his way, in his timing.
 - **In the moment, infertility felt like punishment. But now I realize it was pruning.** It was intended to make me more fruitful. To be more fruitful and grace-filled as a husband, and a pastor, and an eventual father. I needed to go through a season of deep pruning before I could be effective and faithful in my respective callings.

- ❖ What about you? **If you’re a true branch, then how has the Lord been pruning you?** Perhaps that hardship you’re dealing with is *not* what you think it is. Perhaps that trial you’re going through *does* have a purpose – a divine purpose of pruning. I know it feels like God has cut you off. That he’s thrown you away. You feel abandoned.

- ❖ But that's only because pruning does require some cutting. So while it might feel the same, the purpose is entirely different. **Pruning is intended for growth.** The Lord wants you to be fruitful. And, more often than not, that'll involve some pruning.
- ❖ Now, as mentioned, pruning could involve the Lord putting you through difficult trials and challenging circumstances. **But there's a more common, more regular, means by which he prunes his branches. It's through his Word.** That's how Jesus pruned his own disciples. Look at vv3, "*Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.*"
 - The Greek word for "*clean*" (*katharoi*) shares the same prefix – and sounds similar to – the word for "*prune*" (*kathairoi*). **The point is that Jesus's Word has cleansing power. Pruning power.** The power to convict you and cleanse you of sinful patterns of thought or behavior. Just like how God used that particular parable to convict and cleanse me of my latent legalism and to teach me the meaning of grace.
- ❖ **So if you're serious about growing spiritually – about bearing spiritual fruit in your life – then get serious about reading and studying Scripture.** Let the Word of God, the Sword of the Spirit, do its pruning work in your heart. Friends, if you don't have a habit of regularly spending devotional time in the scriptures, then make it a personal goal. Or if you've fallen out of the habit, then today is the day to recover that practice. Consider getting a copy of the Christmas devotional we have available in our book stall, and use it as a tool to get you back into the Word during the Advent season starting next Sunday, December 1st.

The Branches Abide in the True Vine

- ❖ So God's first action to spiritually grow his church is to cut off fruitless branches from the True Vine. His second is to prune the fruitful branches on the same Vine. Now the third action belongs to us – to the branches, to believers. **If we want to bear fruit, then we, as the branches, are responsible to abide in the True Vine trusting that growth will come.**
 - Look at vv4-5, "*Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, 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.*"
- ❖ **I think the most important observation is that there's only one command in this passage and it's *not* to bear fruit.** It's to abide. "*Abide in me.*" Stay connected to the Vine. Depend on Jesus. Live in constant reliance upon him. That's where your focus should be.
 - And that's the difference with mere religion. **Mere religion focuses solely on fruit-bearing.** And it's up to you to produce. Mere religion commands you to perform. You to grow. You to bear the fruit. In the end, they say it is up to you.
 - **But gospel faith is focused, first and foremost, on the Vine.** Focus on maintaining an abiding relationship with Christ. And the fruit will eventually come. That's what's unique about the Christian faith. **The gospel says it unquestionably is *not* up to you.** You don't have it in you to bear fruit. Apart from the Vine – apart from Christ – you can do nothing.

- ❖ Friends, this is going to be a paradigm shift for some of you. **For some of you, your entire experience of Christianity has been centered on commands, on rules, on dos and don'ts.** And I'm not suggesting that they're not a part of Christianity. Commands have their place, but they're certainly not at the center.
 - **Jesus never tells his disciples to abide in his commandments.** He says to abide in me. Or to abide in my love. Look at vv9-10, *"⁹As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love."*

- ❖ **Notice how abiding in Jesus (or in his love) is *not* the same thing as commandment-keeping.** Look at v10. Commandment-keeping is *not* how we abide in Jesus's love. **Rather, our obedience to his commands is how we *express* an abiding love for the Son.** And we know that's how the two relate because obedience is how the Son expressed abiding love for his Father. *"Just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love."*
 - **In other words, Jesus shows us, through his own example, how an abiding relationship with divine love should be the main focus and everything else flows from that.** Abiding in God will translate into – and continue to motivate – a life of faithful obedience, marked by commandment-keeping and fruit-bearing.

- ❖ So if fruit-bearing and commandment-keeping are *not* how we abide in Jesus – but rather the results of abiding – then that begs the question: **How do we abide in Jesus?** What does that look like? If our focus needs to shift from merely trying to bear fruit and merely trying to keep commands to a focus on abiding in the Vine – then how do we do it?
 - Jesus answered that, in v9, when he elaborated further – telling us to abide in his love. **Abiding in him means abiding in his love, which, in other words, means *trusting in his love*.** Holding onto it. The opposite of abiding in his love is to let go and stop trusting that Jesus loves you. It's when you look at your difficult circumstances and draw the conclusion that he doesn't love you or at least not as much as before.

- ❖ **But abiding in his love means holding on and trusting that Jesus loves you – even if your circumstances shout another message.** This is where v9 is helpful. Trusting in Jesus's love gets easier once you grasp the extent of it. Look at v9, *"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you."* **Jesus loves his followers as much as God the Father loves him.**
 - Apparently, in this world, there's no adequate comparison of Jesus's love for us. You have to look to heaven to find a suitable comparison. **You have to look to the infinite holy love between the Father and the Son to know how much Jesus loves you.**

- ❖ Friends, if you're ever tempted to doubt his love for you – if you find yourself questioning his goodness towards you – I urge you, "Don't let go." **Hold on to Jesus's words. He says he loves you as much as his Father loves him.** So as certain as you are that God the Father will never let go of God the Son, you can be sure that Jesus won't let go of you. **He is holding fast to you. He's abiding in you.** Which is all the more reason to abide in him and to trust in his love for you.

- ❖ **Now in practical terms, what will help you maintain that abiding trust in his love is to make a regular practice of worshiping with other branches on the Vine, every Lord's Day.** Don't be content with just showing up here once or twice a month. There is so much in our flesh that constantly works against an abiding trust in God's love, that we desperately need to regularly sit under the preaching of the Word and the proclamation of the gospel. **And we need to make a practice of preaching the gospel to ourselves.** Reminding ourselves, on a daily basis, of Jesus's great love for us, which he demonstrated on the cross.
 - **And, again, the best way to remind yourself of these gospel truths is to stick in his Word.** To abide in it and to have it abide in you. Look at v7. *"If you abide in me, and my words abide in you."* Apparently, abiding in Jesus and having his words abide in you are related concepts. In other words, the way you can practically abide in him is by – not just reading his Word as a mere exercise – but having it abide in you.

- ❖ **And notice, in v7, one of the fruits that flows out of that kind of abiding – an effective, fruitful prayer life.** *"If you abide in me, and my words abide in you. Ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you."* I know, at first, that sounds a little too good to be true.
 - But in context, it means when Jesus's words so deeply abide in you – lodged in your mind and cherished in your heart – then you end up naturally praying his words and asking for his will to be done. **Effective prayers are the organic result when you abide in Christ and his words abide in you.**

- ❖ And lastly, look at v11, and consider with me one more fruit that Jesus intends to bear forth in his branches. *"These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full."*
 - **Brothers and sisters, spiritual growth is an organic growth.** Which means it takes time. It's not predictable. There will be months of barrenness. And seasons of painful pruning. **But through it all, there can still be joy.** Jesus's own joy. His infinite, holy joy can be *in* you – as you abide *in* him.