

Jesus First: The Seven I AM Statements of Christ
I AM: Jesus, the True Vine
John 15:1-17

Introduction

Over the past seven weeks we have been going deep into seven different instances in which Jesus referred to himself as “I AM,” a name that represents absolute being and present tense reality.¹ As a new pastor, why would I start here first? Because we are a church at the crossroads of our past story and future potential, and in this critical moment we desperately need to look not to a new pastor first, but to Jesus first—him as our Bread, our Light, our Door, our Shepherd, our Resurrection, our Way, our Truth, our Life, and our Vine. We’ve been reminded to lift him up as our true and only lead pastor, and just as he promised that when he is lifted up he will draw all people to himself (John 12:32), he has drawn us to him. So, this past week I asked for some of you to share stories of how you have been drawn to Jesus during this sermon series so that we could share them and celebrate together. Here are a few of your responses:

- (Bread of Life) “During the part about the disciples knowing Jesus, it made Jesus more real to me. The thought of looking into his eyes made me want to see his face.”
- (Bread of Life) “Thanks for talking about how we are like the crowd. Most preachers don't show us where we fit in the story and it feels far away from today.”
- (Light of the World) “If anyone heard that and didn't get it, they need to get on their knees and pray.”
- (Light of the World) “Thank you Jesus for being the Light who exposes my sin, the Light who shows me the Father, and the Light who transforms me in my sin and darkness into His light here on earth!”
- (Light of the World) “When I hear the word of God preached it is like a fire in my heart and I just want to stand up—but I don't because no one else will be standing up.”
- (Good Shepherd) “I'm prone to try and rule my own life and make ministry happen on my terms, so I welcomed the reminder to entrust the mission to the Good Shepherd and entrust myself to His mission. What an encouraging and freeing truth that is!”

¹ Warren Wiersbe, *Jesus in the Present Tense: The I AM Statements of Christ*, 20

- (Resurrection and the Life) "I was greatly encouraged at the reminder that Jesus is doing something - revealing His glory- in our seeming contradictions. He doesn't leave us where we are but wants to move us closer to Him, even if that requires death. Its truly comforting and humbling to meditate on the truth that He loves us enough to require death for our greater good!"

Thanks be to God for how he has spoken to us during this sermon series!

Today, we arrive at the seventh and final I AM statement of Jesus: I AM the true vine. It's fitting to conclude with this image as we say farewell to this sermon series because Jesus spoke it to his disciples as part of his farewell to them, just hours before he would be arrested and killed. And last words are important, right? Whether for good or evil, the last words of someone we love echoes in our hearts for the rest of our lives. Of all the famous last words ever spoken in the history of the world, Jesus' words here are the most important, the most meaningful, and the most empowering that could echo in your heart.

Now let's call it like it is. As Christians we are actively dedicating our lives to Jesus, someone we have never met face to face, someone who walked the earth a long time ago but isn't here anymore. Yes, his Spirit lives in us, but he is not Jesus in the flesh. As we look at this passage together we're going to consider what it means to remain in a relationship with Jesus, even though he isn't physically here, and then what kind of fruit that grows out a relationship with Jesus.

If you are able, please stand with me to honor the reading of God's word. Today's passage is John 15:1-17. Hear the word of the Lord:

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. 2 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. 3 Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. 4 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. 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. 6 If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. 7 If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8 By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. 9 As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. 10 If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. 11 These things I have spoken to you, that my joy

may be in you, and that your joy may be full. 12 "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. 13 Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. 14 You are my friends if you do what I command you. 15 No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. 16 You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. 17 These things I command you, so that you will love one another. John 10:11-30

May the Word preached here today echo among the nations. You may be seated.

Exposition

As we have found to be the case with other ways that Jesus described himself, the image of a vine takes us back to many references in the Old Testament. There, God often referred to his chosen people, the people of Israel, as a vine, a vine that God himself planted—like a vinedresser, or in other words, a farmer.² And God expected that vine, his people, the ones who represented him to everyone else on earth, to produce good fruit. Now, we're not talking about the big, fat, juicy grapes kind of fruit, but the fruit of loving God and loving others. But did they produce good fruit? God's words of old tell us the answer:

*Do you get it? The vineyard of God-of-the-Angel-Armies
is the country of Israel.
All the men and women of Judah
are the garden he was so proud of.
He looked for a crop of justice
and saw them murdering each other.
He looked for a harvest of righteousness
and heard only the moans of victims. Isaiah 5:7 (The Message)*

Were they loving God? No way! Even after all he had done to rescue them from foreign powers, they were running back to foreign powers for protection. Were they loving one another? Once again, not even close! Even though he had given them peace and unity as a people, they had divided themselves into two big gangs who fought against each other. They were a rotten people sprouting rotten, maggot-filled fruit. This is why it's hard to get into the Old Testament. You'll never hear anyone say, "Dude, you need to

² D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 514

come my church—we're working our way through the Minor Prophets." It's depressing. It's page after page of a failed people. But it's the majority of our Bible. It's the history of our world. And yet it points to the hope of which we arrive at today.

I. The Principle of Abiding (What it Means to Abide in Christ)

This hope: Jesus comes along and says, "I AM the *true vine*" (v. 1). All that was intended from God's people, all the fruit of loving God and loving others they were supposed to produce, all the pride and joy of God the Father—Jesus is that vine. So when we look to God and say, "What do you want from me?!" he responds, "Be exactly like my Son." Want to be a fruitful vine, a "planting of the Lord" (Isaiah 63:1)? Want to make God proud and be welcomed home? Be Jesus.

But what's the problem with that? You can't be Jesus. And yet we try! Katie and I were talking recently about how in college we were all crazy about being the generation who would end human trafficking; and that was great...but we couldn't even get to class on time! Many people think Christianity is just about making the world a better place by doing the things that Jesus did. But the essence of Christianity is all about recognizing you are not the vine and being vitally connected to the true vine, Jesus Christ.³ Thus Jesus says this:

Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. John 15:3

This emphasis is on what Jesus has done, not us. In light of the many famous phrases in John 15, this little sentence is easily overlooked, which is really unfortunate because of how much we need its truth. For some of us, we feel the need to clean ourselves up before we dare approach God. For others, even though we know that only God can clean us, we feel like we need to keep ourselves cleaned up to stay in his good graces. Either of these mindsets are like playing Russian roulette with a fully loaded revolver.

But Jesus said to his disciples, "*Already you are clean*". The disciples hadn't received some magical words that cleaned them up—they had received Jesus, "the word made flesh" (John 1:14), and he *himself* was the word that breathed new life into them, much like he did to Adam in the very beginning.⁴ After clarifying who does the cleaning, Jesus continued,

³ Kevin Jamison, "[The Gospel of John: John 15:1-16](#)"

⁴ D.A. Carson, [The Gospel According to John](#), 515-516

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. John 15:4-5

Here, Jesus began to use the word 'abide', which is word we really don't say that much. 'Abide' basically means 'to remain' or 'continue'. I will be using 'abide' and 'remain' and 'continue' interchangeably from here on. When Jesus says "Abide in me, and I in you," it gives a clear sense of deep connection. The clearest way to describe it is in terms of an actual vine. This is a picture of my neighbor's young grapevine he's been cultivating over the past couple of years. In the masterful way that Jesus does, he teaches us using a very simple picture. A vine makes grapes by growing little branches, or shoots. There are no branches that exist on their own—they all grow out of and are completely dependent on the life-giving nutrients of the vine. In using this picture, a couple of things become really clear.

First, Jesus has determined that he will produce his fruit *through you*. In other words, all that he wants to accomplish to reconcile the world to himself and to one another, he is going to accomplish through those who are vitally connected to him. This is not optional, just for pastors and missionaries. If you are in a real relationship with Jesus himself, you cannot keep fruit from growing in your life. You can't explain it! And if fruit isn't growing, then it's a sign you aren't connected to Jesus the vine. And pay attention because Jesus says of you,

If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. John 15:6

A second thing that becomes clear from the picture of the vine and the branches is that the fruit that Jesus wants to produce through you cannot be produced *without him*. He says in verse 5, "Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing."

Nothing?! Really, Jesus—nothing?! As a young man in ministry among other young men and women in ministry, I have found that we can do a *lot* apart from Jesus. One of my most frightening thoughts is how much we are able to accomplish in our own strength, especially as Americans. There have been some churches planted and missionaries sent and books written and poor fed and children raised and checks written in the name of Jesus, and yet done primarily by the sheer determination of "good Christians". But Jesus warns us,

Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.' Matthew 7:21-23

Anything we do that fails to come from a vitally connected relationship with Jesus Christ, even many mighty works done in the name of Jesus, ultimately they count for nothing. There may be applause and admiration from others. It doesn't count. There may be a sense of personal accomplishment and satisfaction and duty fulfilled. It doesn't count. There may even be the ability to lay your head on your pillow at night and trust you've proven you really are a Christian. Still, *it doesn't count!* So the question lingers, "Then what does count?" Paul tells us in Galatians:

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love. Galatians 5:6

The only thing that counts to God is faith—a deep, abiding trust in his Son Jesus, and as you depend on him over and over, day by day, moment by moment, opportunity by opportunity, failure by failure, he produces, in you and through you, love. Love for him and love for others.⁵

Let's make this real life. Kids and youth in the room, you're playing with your brother or sister and you do something to hurt them and you get in trouble. Or adults, you say something hurtful to your spouse or friend and need to resolve it. It's an opportunity for you to love the other person by feeling their pain, recognizing your sin, and genuinely grieving that you did it. But that would mean talking to Jesus and asking him to change your heart, to do what you can't do. But what do we often do instead? We say a quick "I'm sorry" so that we can go back to playing or to get the conflict over with. That might count to your brother or sister, and it might count with your spouse or friend, but it doesn't count to God. He knows your heart.

II. The Product of Abiding (What Comes from Abiding in Christ)

And yet he still laid down his life so that he could call you friend. There is no greater love than that! And that is the love he intends to pour into your heart so that it overflows into your life. Though love is the first and most important fruit that is

⁵ World Harvest Mission, [Sonship Manual: 3rd Edition](#)

produced when you have a deep and abiding relationship with Jesus, it isn't the only fruit. In fact, Jesus told his disciples that

By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. John 15:8

The proof of true disciple isn't just fruit, but "much fruit". And here is where this passage has been used sometimes to place a heavy burden on Christians rather than set them free. If we misunderstand or downplay that only Jesus can produce the fruit he wants in us, then not only do we feel required to make things happen on our own, we carry the weight of trying to make *a lot of things* happen on our own. That's exhausting! And it's especially exhausting when you consider that our particular tribe of Christians define this fruit primarily as evangelism, leading people to Christ; or, on a church-wide scale, the number of baptisms. No wonder we are often guilt-driven tribe, seeing so little "fruit" according to this formula that we wonder if we're even Christians!

Though Jesus' words in John 15 hint at the apostles bearing much fruit in being witnesses, there are other kinds of fruit he is very clear about.⁶ One of them is discipline. Jesus says in verse 2:

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. John 15:2

As my neighbor Dominique has kept his grapevine, I have literally watched him out of my kitchen window everyday, sometime multiple times a day, pruning. Pruning means cutting off older branches so that new branches can grow and bear more fruit. It also means cutting back hundreds of little tendrils that reach out wrap around things. If you don't prune, it's not just that the branches won't produce fruit—they will cut themselves off from the vine and die. It's necessary and painful work, and it's the kind of work God is committed to in your life. Every sleepless night, every body ache, every poopy diaper, every moment of drama at school—for the Christian this isn't just life, it's God's intimate work in your life to prune you, to take away the things you cling to, and to give you the only thing that is necessary for a fruitful life: Jesus himself.

Another kind of fruit is joy. Jesus says in verse 11:

These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. John 15:11

⁶ D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 523

In light of all the pruning that is guaranteed in the Christian's life, it would be easy to walk away from today discouraged. But Jesus tells us that all this will also produce joy—and not just any joy—but the joy of Jesus himself, a supernatural kind of sustaining joy so real that it delighted Jesus to anything God asked him, even dying on the cross.⁷

The final kind of fruit I want to highlight from this passage is prayer. Twice Jesus emphasizes this:

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

This isn't just prayer, but answered prayer. Not like a genie bottle, but more like if you are remaining in a deep relationship with Jesus, your heart will line up more and more with his, and so you'll ask for things that he would want you to ask for. And he will faithfully give us those things, to our amazement and delight.

Conclusion

Church, I want to conclude this message and this sermon series by reminding us of something we talked about in the very beginning. There, I felt compelled to call us to a vision as a church that is reflected in this quote:

A more biblical theme for [church] evaluation than either success or faithfulness is fruitfulness. Tim Keller, Center Church⁸

Not just successful in the eyes of man, and not just faithful to sound doctrine, but totally depend on the Person, Jesus Christ, and seeing him bear fruit in us and through us. If that vision is an arrow, then John 15 is the tip of it. Let's allow it to pierce our hearts and respond to Jesus, saying, "Yes! That's what I want in my life, and in the life of this church."

And this is the invitation. On the night he was betrayed, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it, broke it and gave it to his disciples and said to them, "This is my body, which is broken for you; eat this in remembrance of me." He also took a cup of wine, and after blessing it, gave it to his disciples and said, "This cup is the new covenant

⁷ D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 521

⁸ Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City*, 13

marked by the shedding of my blood. For as often as you eat this bread and drink from this cup, you announce the Lord's death until he returns." **We are announcing that Jesus Christ is the True Vine, and apart from him we can do nothing.** Our tradition here at Antioch is to come forward and break off a piece of bread and dip it in the juice. There will be stations here in the front; gluten-free bread will be available to my left, your right. If you're not a Christian, this sacred symbol is not for you, but rather than taking communion, we encourage you to take Christ. He has made himself available to you this very moment. There will be pastors in the back and people to pray with you on the sides. Let's pray.