

## I AM the True Vine

5/7 I AM Series

John 15:1-8

03 21 2010 Sam Jones Memorial UMC

### Introduction

A story is told about an **Iowa farmer** who had a bad experience with the church. He turned his back on organized religion and became an embittered atheist. In fact, he was so hateful that his entire family disowned him.

The man was a successful farmer who owned 2,000 acres of prime farmland. When he finally died, his estranged family gathered for the reading of his last will and testament. They were shocked to discover that the man had left his farm to . . . Satan! His will read in part:

*Since none of my neighbors would speak to me, and since none of my relatives would have anything to do with me, and since the church is just filled with a bunch of hypocritical liars, I've decided to leave my estate to Satan. I want to leave him everything I've got since I figure I'm going to spend eternity with him anyway. And good riddance!*

Needless to say, the will caused quite a stir in the community. The family attempted to overturn it in court. After two weeks of review, the judge upheld the will and gave this opinion:

*I've decided that the only way to leave this farm to Satan is to abandon it. I order that the entire farm be **neglected** from this day forward. The fields are not to be worked. You are to allow the buildings to rot and fall down. The soil is to be permitted to grow up in weeds or to erode and wash away. For the only way I know to let Satan have this property is to do nothing with it—forevermore.*

### I. Simple Neglect

I strive to be honest in sermons, so I should disclose that a Baptist minister told me this story. You KNOW how preachers are—I have no clue if the story is factual. However, I CAN tell you that it illustrates an important, spiritual truth.

If you want your spiritual health to wither and die, you do not have to become bitter, angry, abusive, lustful, vengeful, hateful, or unforgiving. You don't have to become an agnostic or atheist; and you don't have to leave your farm to Satan. If you want to lose your Christian faith, then all you have to do is **NEGLECT IT**.

In his autobiography, Rocket Boys, Homer Hickam, Jr. described growing up in a West Virginia, coal mine town. He recounted a conversation he had with his father who was the supervisor of the mine.

“What's the hardest thing you ever learned, Dad?” I asked abruptly.

He leaned on the rail of the stoop. “**Entropy**,” he said finally.

I didn't understand the word, and he knew it. "Entropy is the tendency of everything to move toward confusion and disorder as time passes," he explained. "It's the First Law of Thermodynamics."

I must have looked blank. "No matter how perfect the thing," he continued patiently, "the moment it's created, it begins to be destroyed."

"Why was that so hard to learn?"

He smiled. "Because even though I know it to be true, I don't want it to be true. I *hate* that is true. I just can't imagine what God was thinking." (p. 135)

You don't have to be a physicist to understand the concept of entropy at work in the practice of neglect. Try these simple experiments. Neglect your housework or homework for a week. Don't pay bills for a month. Ignore your yard for a season. Be inattentive to diet or exercise for a year.

The entropy of simple neglect constantly threatens to erode our spiritual health. The danger is subtle and insidious, however, because you don't have to DO anything—the very danger rests in doing NOTHING.

People do not wake up one morning and decide to quit believing in God. Folk don't consciously decide at breakfast, "I'm going to start backsliding in my faith." Most people do not make a conscious effort to quit attending church. They just "get out of the habit." They INTEND to do it, but we are familiar with the adage, "*The road to hell is paved with good intentions.*"

The principle of entropy teaches us that **simple neglect** will allow your life to go to hell.

## II. Abide in Me

In today's Scripture lesson, Jesus prescribed the antidote to simple neglect. In John 15:4, Christ said: "**Remain** in me, and I will remain in you." (NIV) *The Living Bible* paraphrases this verse as "**Live** in me, and I will live in you." Other translations read, "**Abide** in me, and I will abide in you." (RSV, KJV)

We are to remain, live, and abide in Christ. The focus is upon constancy and continuity. If you have lived in Cartersville a long time, then you have abided in this community. If you have worked at one place for decades, you have abided in that job. If you have celebrated your silver wedding anniversary, then you abide in that relationship.

In my mid-twenties, I made my first night **SCUBA** dive off the coast of West Palm Beach, Florida. I was sixty feet underwater in the open ocean. The water was pitch-black dark with only a flashlight for illumination. I kept hearing the theme music to *Jaws* in my mind. Before we descended down the anchor line, the dive instructor told me to stay close beside him. Needless advice! I was stuck to him like wet paint on a freshly brushed board. I ABIDED in his presence.

Abiding in Christ describes a healthy, ongoing relationship with God. We are to remain in the Lord's presence and live in his love. In turn, Jesus promises that his Spirit will live in us. Like a fish in water and water in a fish, we abide in Christ and Christ abides in us.

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Jesus illustrated this point with an **agricultural analogy**. He said, *“I am the vine, you are the branches.”* The vine draws nutrients from the ground and carries the sap to the branch. The branch ABIDES in the vine. Cut the branch away from the vine, and it withers and dies. Only when the branch stays in vital relationship with vine can it live.

Abiding in Christ means a constant, continual relationship. Spiritual health is similar to physical health. You cannot exercise for one hour a week or eat one healthy meal a month and expect to be in good health. It requires a daily discipline of acquired **habits of holiness** to keep the soul healthy.

John Wesley referred to these disciplines as “**means of grace**.” They are spiritual exercises that God has given us to help us grow and mature in faith. Wesley divided the “means of grace” into two categories: works of piety and works of mercy.

Works of piety include the inward care of our own soul through prayer, Bible study, fasting, and healthy living. He also included the sacraments of baptism and communion along with Christian fellowship.

Works of mercy address outward acts of ministry and mission, including good works, caring for the sick, visiting the imprisoned, and feeding and clothing the poor. In addition, he included words of financial stewardship: make all you can, save all you can, and give all you can.

### III. Bearing Fruit

When we abide in Christ, the Lord abides in us. Like the branches of a grape vine, the natural result is that we bear fruit in our lives. Then Jesus said, *“I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much **fruit**; apart from me you can do nothing.”*

I know many of you are preparing your **gardens** for the spring and summer. However, you don’t need to be a master gardener to understand this simple concept. Suppose you carefully plant health **tomato** plants. Then you fertilize, water, and weed the plants in appropriate amounts. You protect the plants from disease and insects. Do you know what will happen? You’ll get tomatoes! The plants naturally bear the fruit.

In the same way, those who abide in Christ naturally (and supernaturally) **bear the fruit** of Christian living. An ongoing relationship with the Holy Spirit cultivates holiness in our lives. If you live with someone long enough, you begin to take on their mannerisms and habits. Abiding in Christ makes us more Christ-like. It’s critical to understand that Christian discipleship is an ongoing, lifelong process of growth and maturation.

One night a mother put her five year old daughter to bed. After a drink of water and prayers, the mother turned off the light and went down the hall. Minutes later she heard a THUD and then the sound of her daughter crying. The five year old had fallen out of bed. After comforting her daughter, the mother asked what had happened. The child answered, “I guess I fell asleep too close to where I got into bed!”

As Christians, sometimes we fall asleep too close to where we got into bed. We enter into a relationship with God but do not grow spiritually. Discipleship is a lifelong journey of growth.

A father once referred to his child's weekly piano lesson as "that painful time when the music teacher attempts to close the gap between my child and Beethoven!" The Holy Spirit is constantly working in our lives to close the gap between whom we are and who God created us to be.

Philippians 1:11 says that we are to be "*filled with the fruits of righteousness which come through Jesus Christ.*" In Galatians 5:22-23, Paul enumerated some of the aspects of the Christian character: "*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.*"

Those who abide in Christ naturally bear these fruits. And note the order of the process. Abiding in Christ leads to the bearing of fruit. Oftentimes, we take the opposite approach. We decide that we need to be more patient, kind, or forgiving. So we focus our human energy on trying to accomplish this goal. We become like Charlie Brown who instructs his baseball teammates, "If you just grit your teeth hard enough, then you will get a hit." It doesn't work that way!

The fruit of the Spirit is not like a Boy Scout merit badge. We don't become patient by counting to ten. We don't become forgiving by growing forgetful. We don't become humble by ignoring our good works. Instead, we remain in Christ and all these other things naturally become ours as well.

#### **IV. Pruning**

If you're a fruitful branch, then you have got to be feeling pretty good about things just about now. But Jesus said something quite intriguing: "*I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit.*" OK, that part is understandable, but listen to the rest of the verse! "*While every branch that DOES bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.*" Wait a minute—the "reward" for bearing fruit is pruning!

From the outside looking in, **pruning** seems like a strange concept. A gardener cuts back a plant for its own good. Jesus was referring to the **vineyards** in first century Palestine. The grape vines grew quickly and had to be planted twelve feet apart. Left to their own, however, the vines grew with a lot of energy but little direction. Unchecked, this would lead to unproductive growth with little fruit. So the gardener trimmed back the healthy branches so that they would bear more fruit.

<p>Now, a word of warning for any budding botanists in the congregation. You need to know WHAT to prune WHEN. We've got some beautiful gardenias around our home. Two years ago they had so many blooms that the branches bent down to the ground. So I decided to trim them a little. OK, so maybe I pruned them a lot. They ended up looking like a row of Charlie Brown Christmas trees and didn't have any flowers last year. The Master Gardener at my house was less than pleased.</p>
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We are the branches, and God is the pruner. The Lord knows what is best for our lives. From the plant's point of view, pruning is not necessarily a pleasant experience! However, the pruning takes place for the greater good.

Sometimes the Holy Spirit needs to prune diseased and sinful parts of our lives. We will be much better with them gone. But we've grown attached to them! They are a part of us. It might be sin, but it's my sin!

I recall when I had to have a tonsillectomy in my late 20s. I KNEW the tonsils needed to go, but it was a painful procedure to have them removed. I was much healthier afterward, but the process itself was not fun.

Other times pruning might trim back something good in our lives for something better. As saints grow in Christ, the choices change. We may quit having to choose between bad and good. Instead, we choose between good and better—and better and best.

Botanists tell us that pruning stimulates **new growth**. Trimmed shrubs and trees grow at the point of pruning. The same is true in our spiritual lives. Jesus said: *“Every branch that does bear fruit God prunes so that it will be even MORE fruitful.”* The very things that needed to be removed from our lives become the occasion for spiritual growth.

### **Conclusion**

Our children sing the song: *“He is the vine, and we are the branches, his banner over me is love.”* The lyrics point to an important truth. Jesus Christ is the vine, and we are the branches. We draw nurture and sustenance from our Master and bear the fruit of Christian living. At times our lives may require pruning, but this is yet another sign of the gardener's loving care. Abide in Christ, and Christ will abide in you.