

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
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John Crosby
Jesus in His Own Words: I AM the Vine
John 15**

Hey, let's be like the second graders. They are excited to have received their Bibles. Pull out the Bibles in the pews in front of you and turn to John, chapter 15. It's toward the end, page 1,606. We are spending seven weeks talking about the "I am...." statements. What's God like? Jesus says, "I am...." Today we are at the second to the last one.

Do you ever start something and not finish it? Do you ever start something and sort of lose steam and end up not doing it? I'm seeing a lot of wives saying yes, not about themselves. The reason I know about that is because I started piano lessons and never finished them. I think all of you are glad for that, but it was something that I started and didn't finish. It was no big deal. I wasn't excited about piano. I was excited about being a doctor. I wanted very much to be a doctor. Doctors were my heroes. I had the little third grade chemistry set. I read all the books about biology and the great doctors who were medical pioneers. Then I got to college and was in pre-med and took organic chemistry. And then I was no longer a medical student. Organic chemistry just put the end to a promising medical career because you have to know something about the human body. It was something that was begun but not finished.

We laugh at that but there are other times when starting something and not finishing brings pain. Think of a relationship between children and their parents, between folks who are trying to get to know one another and love one another, between 40 percent of all of the marriages in our country. Things begun and not finished. One of the most striking things, frankly, in the sight of the second graders is that we do a pretty good job in the Christian church of showing our kids who Jesus is, how to follow Him, and they get excited. There are over 125 eighth graders away on a retreat, coming to believe that Jesus is real and that they can follow Him.

They peak in their devotion to Jesus somewhere around age 18. They go to college and then after college, they get their first job and find someone they love. All of a sudden in the blink of an eye, they are 30, and 48 percent of them are no longer anywhere near a church. They have started something, but they haven't finished. Looking back, many of them say, "Yeah, I went through a religious phase." I bet a lot of you have heard that. "Yeah, I used to believe like you do, but that was a religious phase for me." I guess what I want to ask you is, "How do we convince them to make it more than a phase?" As I said about the Bibles, they are not listening but they are watching. They are watching you. If you finish as faithful, fruitful, not just go-to-church people, then it is more likely that they will believe that the God that you talk about is real.

So, John 15. Jesus is right at the end of His race, and He is not stopping. He wants to stop. He can already see that it is going to get very ugly. He is going to suffer and die. All of His beloved followers are going to run away like rats off a sinking ship. It's already started, but He is determined to keep going to the end. John 15 comes right after the Last Supper. They are

leaving Jerusalem. They are going back to the Mount of Olives where Jesus will pray and then be arrested. As they go back to the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, they will walk right by the temple. It used to be Solomon's temple, the big temple, but now it is twice as big. It is King Herod's temple. On the outside walls of the temple are these huge carvings, beautiful artwork of all different scenes from their Old Testament heroes. About every 150 feet is a huge cluster of grapes on the vine, more than a person high, because for the Israelites, the idea that they were God's vine was central to who they were. They were the fruit and God was the vine.

Remember the story in Genesis about Joseph interpreting the first dream? The first dream is the wine bearer's with the image of the grapes. Jeremiah says, "God is going to strip every last fruit off the vine." Ezekiel and Joel say, "God is going to chop all the branches off the vine and cut it to the ground, but he is not going to destroy the roots. Someday the vine is going to grow back up, faithful." Hosea says, "God told me I will be your vine, and your fruit will come from me." God says, "I am the vine." Jesus walks by the temple with His merry men, or not so merry men that night, and they believe that God is the vine and Israel is the fruit. Jesus turns to them and says something a little different. He says, "I am the vine. I am the true vine, my Father, the gardener."

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. 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. ⁸ This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. ⁹ "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. ¹⁰ If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. ¹¹ I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. ¹² My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.

I think the guts of this passage--it's all important and we could do weeks on it--are verses 4 through 9. Let me give you a Bible study tool that is very easy: *if it is repeated, it's to be heeded*. Okay? So let's look in this passage and ask, what is repeated? There is one word that is repeated eight different times. I am not going to give you a clue. Don't look on the screens. What is that word? *Remain!* This is about *remaining*, or as other translations would say, *abiding*. I think *abiding* is a better word. We will get to that later. So if you don't mind, if you've got that Bible still open, circle *remain* all eight times. Can you do that? Circle it so that the next person who reads this passage will say, "Well, there must be something about that word." But it is not just about remaining. It is also about what happens when you remain, and Jesus repeats that word four times. If you remain, what happens? You will have fruit. Four times. Do you see it up on the screen, those four instances? Just underline *fruit*. There is a connection between remaining on the vine and producing fruit.

That is what this passage is about. That is what I've taught and that is what I prepared. Then I read it again on Thursday and realized that those two words are not the most common words. The most common word is repeated in one form or another 12 different times: the words *I* or *Me* or *My*. I was reminded that this story is not about the *teaching* of Jesus. This story is about Jesus Himself. Jesus is saying, "I am the vine. I am God come to Israel." If you don't get anything else out of this, remember Jesus is the vine.

Jesus' teachings do not change the world. Don't read the Bible, expecting that. You learn the teachings of Jesus, that God will be with you, but Jesus' teachings did not change the world. *Jesus* changed the world. People who follow Jesus don't follow the teachings of Jesus so much as they have come to believe that Jesus rose from the dead. That is why Christianity went crazy, not because He was a good teacher but because a group of them came to believe that this man who walked among them died and rose from the dead. It is the resurrection of Jesus that validates His teaching and makes us say that He is the vine. "Abide, remain in Me."

Okay, now I would like you to do two things at one time. I think you can do that. Leave the Bibles open, okay, but let's take it to the next level. At the end of each of the pews, there is a basket and in the basket, there are sticky notes and pens. We are going to apply this to our lives. Sticky notes and pens. End of each pew. Everybody gets a sticky note. Every couple or every family can get a pen, but there is probably a pen for everybody. Pass the basket all the way down. The ushers will make sure that everybody has a sticky note and a pen to write with. Now just take the sticky note and put it on your bulletin or on the pew in front of you. You won't need it for a while.

It's one thing to read it or to circle it or to understand it. It is something else to put it into practice. Jesus says, "I am the vine. Remain in Me. Abide with Me." Remain means staying in the same place. Abide means stay with Me. You abide with a person. You develop a relationship. "Abide with Me." Live in me. Be here for me.

We are a here-today, gone-tomorrow kind of world. We don't remain at a lot of things. Jesus said, "If you remain in Me, abide with me, things will be different." I didn't understand that until I got married because the difference between dating and marriage is almost indescribable. The difference between living together and being married is almost indescribable. I learned more about my wife in the first year of marriage than I would have learned in 50 years of living together because we now had a commitment that we would abide. We would remain. We would get to know one another to the end of the road.

That is what Jesus is saying. Stay with me to the end of the road. Remember, He said something like that to all the crowds, the crowds that gathered, the 5,000. Jesus says, "Pick up your cross. Follow Me." They said, "Thanks, I think we have a dental appointment," and they all left. He turns around, and there are only about a dozen people left, and He says, "Are you going to leave, too? Are you going to Abide with Me? Remain in Me?" And Peter says, "Where else could we go? You are the only one we've seen who has life, the words of life." You cannot be a fruit-filled Christian (remember, "Remain in Me; bear fruit."), you cannot be a fruit-filled Christian if you don't remain. A lot of people go through a religious phase because they stop abiding or they turn abiding into another list of things to learn, words to underline in the Bible, another list of things to do, a bunch of times to come to church. That is not, I think, abiding. That is not remaining in Christ. So many Christians never experience fruit because they come and go. They get all pumped up but then they go away.

For some crazy reason, I bought my wife some flowers this week. The shock value was worth it right there. They are beautiful, and they were expensive. I left the receipt on the table. They are lovely, and she will keep them far longer than she should because it was such an unusual gesture. But in three weeks, these beautiful flowers will not look fresh because they are cut flowers. They may look good for a short while, you may look good, but if you are not connected,

you are a cut flower. Jesus is saying, “Stay with me to the end of the road.” The fruit that Jesus talks about is the fruit of the Spirit that grows in us slowly over time, peace, patience, gentleness, kindness, love. Not something you get out of a cut flower. It may look like it for a minute, but then it goes away. Jesus is saying, “I am the vine. You are the branches.” It is a metaphor. We love this as adults because we love metaphors. They bring pictures to our minds, but they are very difficult to explain to children in the children’s sermon. “I am in the Bread of Life.” Don’t eat me. “I am the Good Shepherd.” What is that about? Here, “I am the vine.” What does that metaphor mean? Sometimes it is easier to show than it is to explain.

I would like you to listen for about four minutes to two of my friends. The first person is Charlie. Charlie is a young 20-something. He comes on Sunday nights and he sits right there. Every week he sits right there with six of his other good friends. There are two things that are different about this group of guys. They are leaning forward. They are listening. They are engaged as opposed to *prove it to me*. They hunger. The other thing is that they are all recovering from wrecked lives, drugs or alcohol. They are together in AA, and that is their next meeting of the week. Charlie is on the vine, but he was grafted on about a year ago. He stumbled in here because some friend invited him, and he became grafted on to Jesus this last year. He is still learning. The other person is a Hal. Hal is about 180 years old and a good friend. He started following Jesus even before Charlie was born. He has toured the end. He is in the gun lap, and what he is talking about is: Charlie, way to start; here is how you finish. Listen to their stories.

Hal: Well, when I was in high school out in Wyoming, I met a girl. I went out with her, and she led me to Christ. She said, “What do you think about Jesus?” I said, “He is the greatest teacher who ever lived.” She said, “That’s not good enough.”

Charlie: I was raised in a more or less faithless home. I’ve been coming to CPC for almost a year now. The idea of the vine on the branch was not something that I was familiar with but once I became familiar with it—actually, to be perfectly honest, I read it I think for the first time last night lying in bed preparing for this. It seems to be one of the most important tenets of the Christian faith, the idea that like God loved Christ, Christ loves us and we are called to go out and love people in that way.

Hal: I also married the girl who led me to the Lord so I’ve had an ongoing encouragement to stay connected not only to her but to Jesus as the vine. That’s been a 60-year connection.

Charlie: In the analogy of the vine, it feels like I am born from that vine. I have grown from that vine. There comes a point in my life where I have to realize where I’ve come from.

Hal: In an ongoing day-to-day life, these things of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, and all those things come not from any strength of my own because there isn’t any power there to do these things, but it’s through Christ and through His Holy Spirit that they happen.

Charlie: I can sit on my stem for so long and not realize what I’m attached to but coming to faith has taught me that I was born this way. I was born attached to Christ, attached to God, and at some point I had to desire to realize that. To abide in Christ I think is really to realize that very point and to try to pursue that love that I spoke of before.

Hal: I spent 30 years at the University of Minnesota, and there were challenges there but on an ongoing basis, my faith sometimes didn't feel accessible in bearing fruit for Christ. For some time I've been studying the life of David and the psalms and I've been writing about that. That has been kind of ongoing for me, growing slowly from the vine out to the branch, the power and the presence of God through Him as the vine and me as the branch. That encourages me. It's not by any movement or any efforts I make to reshape the branch. It's abiding with Christ in His power. He is doing those things for us.

Charlie: If it wasn't for redemption, if it wasn't for the ability to forgive, the ability to be open and honest and willing to just try new things and be vulnerable with people, I wouldn't have anything. I can't attribute that to anything else but the grace of God.

That's what I'm talking about. I've seen that video five times, and I get choked up every time. The kid doesn't even know the right words. Thank God! He has started that journey on the vine and, frankly, that's important for you to know because he and hundreds of others like him are sitting among you. There is no one branch on the vine. The vine is stuck together. We are in this together. We can either be religious people or we can be connected to the grace that changes our lives. What's going to help Charlie not go through a religious phase but end up like Hal, not perfect but more filled with joy and hope and faith and gentleness and love than he was 30, 40, 50 years ago? It is being connected, abiding, that gives us fruit in our lives. Is there fruit in your life, or are you just sort of sitting on the branch doing your religious thing? You receive love from God and joy and grace and peace enough to share, or are you just underlining things in your Bible? I'm not trying to guilt you. I'm trying to say, I'm in this with you. I'd like to finish by having us figure out one way, there are many, but what is one way we can stay connected to the branch?

How about this? Would you like to have it happen out there? John Ortberg says, "When you go to work, what would it be like to work *abiding* in the vine?" A problem comes up and instead of getting overwhelmed or defensive or panicking, you stop for a minute and you hear in the back of your head, "As the Father loves Me, so I love you. Stay in My love. Be loved." Then you say, "God, I don't know what to do about this, but You'll help me. So give me help, give me strength. Give me guidance. Give me patience." Maybe you're on the phone talking to a customer and you want so much to close the deal and the thought comes to you, not from you, the thought comes to you, "This is My command. Love one another. Love one another as I have loved you." So in that second, trying to close the sale, maybe you pray, "God, this isn't just somebody I'm trying to sell. This is somebody You love. Jesus, bless this person." That would change your day. Or maybe you finally get home, and the kids or your roommate or your spouse are driving you crazy, and this verse comes to you. "If you keep My commands, I will love you." So you say to them, "If you keep my commands"—no. You love them anyway, and you hear the voice say, "I've done this so that My joy might be in you, and your joy might be complete."

That is abiding. Small ways. One-at-a-time ways. How do you do that? Throughout the ages, people have asked, "How do I do that?" They've come up with different names for it but the primary way that people stay connected to the vine is to turn to the vine. It's not rocket science. They turn to the vine. One of the saints, Brother Lawrence, called it practicing the presence of God. He would be washing dishes in the kitchen of the monastery and people would say, "You grin." And they would realize that washing the dishes, he was saying, "Hey, Jesus, how's Your day going?" Abiding.

A sister in Washington, D.C. says, "It's the interior glance, the glance inside, and when I look inside, I see God inside smiling at me saying, 'I love you. Do you know how much I love you? I put you on My screensaver. That's how much I love you.'" The interior glance, being loved by God, allows her to love other people. The Jews knew all about this. They knew that if they could be reminded of God's presence, God's very presence would change the way that they lived. If you see an Orthodox Jew, you will see little pieces of paper hanging off their sleeves. Those are little pieces of the Bible, reminders of the presence of God. And they put a piece of Scripture on the door jams of their houses reminding them God is in the house. They touch it when they leave and they touch it when they come back. The reminder of God's presence changes the way that they act in the world around them.

My wife is teaching me this one. We have a walk-in closet, and the other day I walked in the closet and for some reason turned toward her side. I saw on the wall, "Clothe yourselves with compassion and kindness and gentleness and patience." In parentheses, "John." No, not this John. It is a reminder to her at the beginning of her day of what her real clothing is supposed to be. It is an interior glance. It is practicing the presence. Can we do that together just this week? Try it this week, to abide more intentionally. That is what the sticky notes are for. Everybody pull out the sticky notes. You can write on a hymnal or on the Bibles, but you are just going to need to write one thing. Jesus says that some of the things that happen when you abide will change your life. When you remain. Some of them will apply more to you this week than they will to me, but there are four of them that I see in verses 9, 10, 11, and 12. Here they are:

⁹ "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love.

That means, "Let me love you. Stop still so I can love you." Do you need to hear that? Or,

¹⁰ If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love.

Not obey Me or fry. It is a relationship that is not just about words. It is about doing it. "I obey the Father. You obey Me. We love one another." Do you need to hear that? Or, is it for you, having a bad week, Jesus saying,

¹¹ I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.

"I am going to get killed tomorrow, and I am filled with joy. I've told you this that My joy might be in you, and your joy may be complete." Do you need that? Or are you the fourth person?

¹² My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.

I think if you write all four of those things down, you are making a big mistake. I think you should write down one of them. John 15:10, "Keep My commands." Or John 15:12, "Love one another." Or John 15:9. Whichever one it is that stirs your heart right now, write it down. Take your time. Just write it down. You don't have to show anybody what you're writing. My charge, that is, my exhortation, my encouragement to you, is to take this and stick it on your bulletin and at least get it to the car. I am not setting the bar real high. Get it to the car. I'm saying that deliberately because if you leave it in the car, that is a good thing. If you see it in the car, that may be the best thing. That interior glance. That practicing the presence of God. That connection to the vine

just for a second. Or you take it home and you put it on the refrigerator. That would work for me. I'd see it a lot. Or you put it in the bathroom on the mirror. For the next seven days, let that one word from God work its way inward in your heart.

The most frequent promise in the Bible is "I will be with you" but we don't remember that, do we? We think we are on our own. This week let this interior glance help you practice the presence of God so that you abide in the juice of God's love for you, and your week will be different. By the power of God, I guarantee it. Your week will be different.

Lord Jesus, thank You for this reminder to me. Thank You that You speak to us, each one. You want so much for us to be connected to You and not just go through the motions. I pray that as my sisters and brothers see these little sticky notes, they will be reminders of Your love and Your presence, Your courage and Your hope and Your forgiveness, Your joy and Your patience. And in all those little reminders, we will not only feel connected to Your love, but a little of it will become fruit that we might share with others. Bless us. In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost we ask. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.