

The Mission of the Branch

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Last summer was known in our yard as the summer of desolation. I took to pruning with such vigor that I could have been called an arbor-cidal maniac. At the time, though, I had no choice. Our home was under siege. I dutifully tugged, pulled and clipped, not meeting any real surprises or resistance until I approached what appeared to be a small fruit tree and saw a budding bunch of grapes! A grape tree? Whoever heard of a grape tree? No, I decided there must be another explanation, and when I followed the branch further, I found it was connected to a hardy, black-brown vine sunk deep into the soil. I asked my neighbors about the vine, but none of them had ever heard of a grape vine on our property. It seemed to have set its roots in secret. But it was there, flourishing, and even overtaking the trees around it, and when the fruit ripened about two months later, my family harvested and enjoyed bowls full of grapes. How could that have happened—unattended for years, surrounded by competitors, and yet still bearing fruit? The answer is simple: Every branch that remains in the vine bears fruit.

The church's mission is rooted in this same truth. All we hope for and all we could ever want will be found for us in Christ, the Vine. Every holy desire we have for genuine spirituality, for powerful witness, for true community, for living worship, for foreign missions and for covenant children must be rooted in the great promise of these words: 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. John 15:5

The branch which aspires to be fruitful must remain in the Vine. If we rest in the Vine, the sufficiency of Christ, the power of Christ and the sweetness of Christ will all be ours.

THE GLORY OF ABIDING

Going Where We Cannot

The first glory of the vine is that it goes where the branches cannot, but must. When our Lord professes to be the True Vine, He declares that in Him we will have access to all we need. The vine draws what the branches need but cannot reach. The vine drinks what the branches must have in their stems but can only feel on their leaves.

Listen to the Scriptures speak of this great access and divine supply of God's goodness for us in Colossians 2:9-10, "For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority."

By virtue of His nature and by the authority of His office as our Mediator, Christ is divinely suited to draw what we need but what we could never draw near to on our own. He is our Vine, our Root, our Life. And in Him we have access to every spiritual blessing in heaven.

Christ goes where the branch cannot go. That is the first glory of the vine. The second is like it.

Supplying What We Must Have

Like the vine itself, Christ not only goes where the branches cannot, but He brings to the branches what they have not. Every bit of life and living, every ring of growth, every drop of sap comes to us without interruption and in abundant measure through Him. By virtue of the great mystery of our union with Him and His indwelling Holy Spirit we are given uninterrupted and incorruptible life. By the nature of His office Christ delights to freely give His people all that they need. He does not begrudge our petitions any more than the vine is angered by the branch which draws its life. By the Vine we drink up God's grace. Through the Vine we know God's light and truth. From the Vine we receive divine power and love. This is not ours, but Christ's glory. It is the glory of the True Vine to bring fruit to the branches.

THE MISSION OF ABIDING

If we are serious in our hope to bear fruit, we will make it our mission to abide in the Vine. Everything we need for life and godliness will be found in Him. There is nowhere else to go, nor any need to go anywhere else. No matter the strategy, no matter the giftedness of the congregation, no matter the zeal or the hours of tireless labor, there will be no love, no joy, no peace, no power to overcome evil apart from the Vine. There will be no real movement of God's Spirit until we learn to abide in Christ.

It is apparent that the Church has seldom been confident in this assurance of power. Perhaps our error is we have made it our mission to bear fruit, when we should have made it our mission to abide in the Vine.

This important distinction has been lost to the Church at a high price. We made it our mission to recapture our nation's heritage or to win our cities, or to build great churches and then we dutifully busied ourselves about bearing those fruits. But it was then that the Church opened the door to a form of godliness without its power.

If we misunderstand the basic truth that our mission is to remain in the Vine, we will make it our mission to change the city and, in effect, do no more than any decent public agency could do. We will make it our mission to build relevant ministries and we will end up with no more than a community center that opens and closes with prayer. We will make it our mission to strengthen families, only to accomplish what a well-trained therapist could have done.

The chief end and mission of the Church is not to change the world; it is to abide in Christ. Everything else will follow this. Until we learn that without the Vine we can do absolutely nothing, we will remain as we are.

THE POWER OF ABIDING

But there is more than warning in these words. There is a great encouragement. If we would look faithfully at Christ's words, we would see the simple and absolute guarantee of all of our hopes as a community of faith in an age of darkness. Christ's words are boldly absolute. Those who abide will bear fruit!

I know that we value this resting in Christ. It is actually exalted each Sunday morning as an important duty.

But as our mission? It seems so un-warriorlike in an age of war. It seems so elementary. We must realize that abiding in Christ is not preparation for the real labor. Remaining in Christ is not a prelude to power. Remaining in Christ is the power.

We may exercise our gifts easily enough. We can labor in the fields; we can run evangelistic campaigns; we can teach studies, organize ministries, and hire pastors. We stand ready to employ the gifts of the Spirit, but this verse does not speak of gifts. We have more gifts and resources in this part of the Church than have been known in virtually any other age in history. Are we any more fruitful for them?

I am thankful for the gifts of the Spirit, but so much of our great work is not real spiritual fruit because it is not borne on the stems of branches living in Christ. We can certainly bring forth leaves on our own or even sprout blossoms, but the fruit of Christ is more than these. We are called to bear the exquisitely delightful and eminently powerful virtues of the Spirit of God Himself: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness and the like.

When Christ says, "I am the Vine," He is saying, "From me is the fruit of all godliness." So if you would love your fellow man, then abide in Him who says, "I am the Vine of love." Would you have peace that can lead you to quiet waters? Jesus says, "I am the Vine of peace." Must you grow in patience? He assures you, "I am the Vine of patience." Would you grow in godly virtues? Then listen in faith to Christ say, "I am the Vine of kindness and gentleness and goodness and self-control." Would you be like Christ? Then abide in Christ.

If we long for a full and abundant Christian life or a strong and vibrant Church or an impact on the culture around us, then let us make it our mission to abide in Christ. There are no dreams too great for this bounty. If we long for a great movement of God's Spirit that will bear the fruit of righteousness all across the Church and this land, then we have a clear and singular mission: Abide in Christ and there will be a truly great harvest.

As a pastor, I have had to learn this lesson over and over again. It is not my work for Christ, but my remaining in Christ that bears real fruit. God is gracious to confirm that in my ministry year after year. This year He even confirmed it in my yard.

After I found that grapevine in my yard, I was concerned about caring for it in a manner to allow it to continue to bear fruit. So I asked an elder in my church, who had spent three harvest seasons in Jordan, how I could save all the branches of the vine which were tangled in the trees. That elder just looked at it for a bit and then made a suggestion, "Wait until the fruit is ripe on the branches and harvest the grapes. Then cut 'em all way back close to the vine itself." "What?" I cried out, "Prune all those branches? It will kill the plant!" "No," the vinedresser replied, "only the vine is necessary." It is true. Only the Vine is necessary.

Abide in Him.

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