

# John 15:1-8

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Preacher: Julian Gutierrez

[ 0 : 00 ] Let us just open our Bibles on the book of John one more time, chapter 15. I hope that at this point you recognize that the theme that we are going to discuss is a very well-known passage in the scripture about the allegory that Jesus made to his disciples in relation to the vine and the vine dresser.

But before I begin, let me briefly express to you what a privilege it is for me to stand in front of you in serving this congregation by expositing the word of God.

I must confess to you that not even in my wildest dreams I depicted myself preaching in the very land of such heroes of our faith, like of course John Knox and many others, but the Lord works in mysterious ways and he has been pleased to have me here tonight in spite of many of my deficiencies, as you can see.

And he is a God of abundant grace indeed. I just wondered out of curiosity if there is any providential relation between a Colombian preacher here tonight and the recent announcement of the Roman Catholic Church about the election of the Argentinian bishop, Jorge Mario Bergoglio, now known as the Pope Francis Francesco I.

I don't know. I don't know. I don't know if there is any relation. I cannot see the Pope preaching at Bonacore about apostolic succession and I don't see myself preaching or teaching the cardinals about justification by faith alone, but who knows.

[ 2 : 01 ] My prayer is that God would lead you to ponder on the content of his word rather than to pay excessive attention.

I know that this is going to be difficult for you, but please don't pay too much attention to the form, my heavy accent and perhaps the weird pronunciation of some words, but pay attention to his word in the content of what he tries to communicate to you.

As a way of introduction about this particular petticoat in scripture, let me begin by placing this passage into its context within the Gospel of John.

Chapter 15 is located in a very particular place and I believe that there is a reason for that. This section belongs to what is called the Fatherwell Discourse or the Last Discourse of Jesus and is located, according to some scholars, this Fatherwell Discourse in between the beginning of chapter 14 and the end of chapter 16.

If this is the case, this chapter, chapter 15, is immediately connected with several events that are important if we want to understand the real thrust of this section.

[ 3 : 26 ] For instance, the washing of the feet, Jesus' foretelling of Judah's betrayal, the giving of the new commandment of love, which immediately precedes Peter's denial, that's in chapter 14.

In chapter, I'm sorry, in chapter 13. Then in chapter 14, we have two important events. One is Jesus' exclusivist claim as the only way to the Father.

I am the way. There is no other way. That's the claim. That's very exclusive. And the other event in chapter 14 that is important is the promise of the Holy Spirit.

I need to go so that the paraclete, the spirit, the comforter comes. Then we have this section, the section that we are going to explore, the true mind section.

And after the true mind section, we have after verse 17, because the whole parable goes from chapter 15, verse 1 to 17.

[ 4 : 34 ] We just read the first section, which is verses 1 to 8. But then after verse 17 in the same chapter, and up to chapter 16, verse 15, we find Jesus' words about the hostility of the world, the type of attitude that the world is going to take on fellow believers.

And also we have the witness of the Holy Spirit. Finally, in chapter 16, after verse 16 again, up to the end of the chapter, Jesus talks about his imminent death and his resurrection.

And then his promise that the disciples' sorrow will be transformed in joy. So that's the whole context. Now I hope that you have a rough idea where this section is located into the Gospel of John.

The metaphor of the vine and the branches is the last or the second last of the I am sayings. Remember, if you remember in the Gospel of John, the first verse in this section is, I am the true vine. And this series of I am's are not only unique to this chapter, but if you remember correctly, we have many instances where Jesus depicted himself as using this formula of I am.

[ 6 : 09 ] I am the bread of life. I am the light. I am the door. I am the good shepherd. I am the resurrection and the life. I am the way.

I am the truth and the life. So this is a formula that precedes some important teaching. And this is not the exception in chapter 15.

So let's begin with the exposition of God's Word in verse, in the first verse of this chapter. I am the true vine and my father is the gardener.

It is unknown the precise origin of this image, the image that Jesus is using at this time, which is the vine and vine dresser, the vine dresser in the vineyard.

Some scholars connect the metaphor of the wine of the wine of the Lord's Supper. And accordingly, they tend to construct an Eucharistic interpretation of this parable in chapter 15.

[ 7 : 18 ] However, in my opinion, and also in the opinion of some other well-known scholars, there is a more plausible explanation. And that is that the vineyards were part of the natural landscape of the first century Palestine.

And as such, Jesus simply decided to use that kind of scenery as a way of illustrating his teaching. So perhaps they were...

It depends how we located the end of chapter 14 when Jesus said simply, Come now, let us live. We don't know exactly if they left the upper room or if they just start walking outside of the upper room and they saw the vineyards.

Well, this is just an anecdotic thing about this, from where this image of the vineyard. One thing that is important to know is that the agricultural images were very common at that time.

And Jesus, of course, used these allegories in order to transmit the teaching that he was...

[ 8 : 35 ] He wanted to communicate. Another feature that is important is that this image of the vine was a very common motif in the Old Testament.

There are many examples in the canonical text supporting this assertion. For instance, the psalm that we just sung, Psalm 80, from verses 9 to 12.

In all these cases, the image of the vine refers to Israel as the object of the vine.

of God's elective purposes. But more importantly, it points to Israel's constant failure to produce the expected fruit.

In every instance that the Old Testament uses the metaphor of the vine or the vineyard in reference to Israel, the nation is set under God's judgment.

[ 9 : 55 ] Every single instance. So, by self-referencing, Jesus self-referencing as the through vine, he is pointing out to his uniqueness in contrast to other vine image in the Old Testament.

Therefore, Jesus' claim as the through vine implies a displacement of Israel as the main object of God's plan of salvation.

In other words, Jesus is saying, I am the through Israel of God. I am the through Israel of God.

And please, do not confuse this with any form of what is called supersessionism or replacement theology. And you will have to indulge me.

I am a theologian, so I need to show you that I am a theologian. No, no, I am kidding. But there is some form of theology that believes that the church has replaced Israel.

[ 11 : 12 ] That's not the case here. And that's not what I am trying to point out. What I am saying is that Jesus supersedes and Jesus displaces Israel because he is the through vine.

The old vine in the Old Testament failed completely all the time. Now Jesus is the new vine, the through vine that will never fail. This is the only instance in this verse, in verse 1, as far as I know, where the I am saying is connected with a mention to the Father.

In the other instances, I am the door, I am the good shepherd. There is no indication that there is another subject. But in this case, the Father is mentioned. Although the Son is the central character in the metaphor of the vine, the Father, as the Father as the gardener, that is, as the one who is in control of the whole process, plays also a crucial role in the metaphor, as we will see in the

following verse.

So let's go to verse 2. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.

It is the Father. The He, in verse 2, is not Jesus. That's the Father. The Father, as vine dresser, He is the one who does the agricultural work in the vine.

[12:53] Therefore, number one, He is the one who cuts off those branches that are unproductive. And number two, He prunes.

The word that is used in Greek literally means cleanse. So the translation in the New International Version, the Bible that we use, renders correctly the word in Greek because within this agricultural image, prunes is completely adequate.

But literally, the word means cleanse. So He cuts off and He cleanses those branches that need the removal of some impurities in order that they are able to produce in abundance.

The first part of this verse introduces some very complicated questions about the status of the branches that are cut off in light.

And this is important, in light, that they are in me. They are in Christ. Many people, this has been really the cause for many debates about the status of those branches.

[14:13] So questions like this, is this a reference to Jews who were part of God's people but now are being rejected? Well, this option, in my opinion, does not fit very well with the meaning of the in me.

For in which sense could a Jew who never put his trust in Christ, never put his trust in Jesus, have ever indwelt in the true vine?

It doesn't make sense. It doesn't make sense how he was, he never put his trust in Christ but now he's separated from the true vine who is Christ.

So it doesn't make, in my opinion, too much sense. But there is a more complicated question that is being asked, especially among evangelicals.

Is this an indication that Christians may lose their salvation? Because if you are in him and then you are being cut off, what exactly does that mean?

[15:14] Well, let me make a brief comment in response to this interpretation. In the first place, we need to be aware that never is safe to answer intricate and complicated doctrinal questions from figures of speech.

I mean, metaphors, similes, allegories, and so on and so forth, they have a purpose in themselves in Scripture as in any other type of literature.

And in Scripture, the purpose is that they convey an illustration of a particular spiritual truth, but not necessarily these figures of speech are used to systematize theological doctrine.

Having said that, this interpretation, the interpretation that this means that a Christian can lose his or her salvation is at odds with the rest of the corpus of Johannine literature, with the rest of what John has written in the Gospel and also in his epistles.

Where clearly, he indicates that a genuine Christian will persevere to the end. So, let me just read just one example out of many, which is in John chapter 6, verses 37 and 39.

[16:48] John chapter 6. All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me, I will never drive away.

For I have come down from heaven not to do my will, but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day.

For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.

So, what we have here in conclusion of this very brief discussion about the interpretation of this passage, especially the first section, is that this verse does not support that a true believer can lose his or her salvation.

But on the other hand, it is equally problematic to assume that since the verb to cut off can also be translated as to lift off, some people argue that the Apostle John meant that this is a temporal separation and only for the purpose of correction and then eventual restoration.

[18:22] So, you just, you are cut off for a while and then for the purpose of restoration and then you are coming and you are being connected again to the true vine.

I don't think that that's a proper interpretation of this verse. Why? Let me just give you two points here. In the first place, I think that this is contrary to the agricultural practices where dead branches are simply removed.

And second, this interpretation does not allow the further explanation of the unfruitful branches that is given in verse 6. So, we will see this later. In conclusion, we may say that the thrust of the teaching of this verse, in this verse, I'm sorry, is that unproductive branches are dead branches.

If they were alive, they would have been pruned, not cut off. And here comes a warning to all of us, as I think it came a warning to the disciples.

Do not deceive yourself. There is not such thing as fruitless Christian. To claim that we are Christians without showing any evidence whatsoever of a spiritual fruit in our life is to question Jesus Christ as the true vine from which eternal life flows.

[19:52] I remember my professor of theology back when I was doing my master's in Taupo, in California. And our professor of systematic theology, he just asked to the whole class this question.

Do you know any Christian, anyone who claims to be a Christian, with no evidence of fruit whatsoever?

and he, everyone started looking, I mean, where is the trick in the question and then, because he's a really, really, really sharp theologian, but then he, it was a kind of a rhetorical question and he answered the question.

And he said, if you do know someone who claimed to be a Christian without any fruit in his life or in her life, he's not a Christian. She's not a Christian. And I think he's right.

I think that's what Jesus is telling us in this section. There is no such thing as Christian without evidence of redemption in his life, in her life.

[21:01] And I think that that's a warning that it is appropriate for all of us all the time. True Christians will always produce fruit, otherwise they're not Christians.

the second part of this verse, every branch that does bear fruit, the father, he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful, indicates the removal of those elements that prevent the living branches from bearing all the fruit that they should produce.

So, it's like I am removing weight in order for me to run faster. and that makes sense. And this is the father's incessant process of cleaning ourselves by the continual bestowing of his grace.

That's what the father does all the time. Grace in sanctification, well, grace that begins in our salvation, and then grace in justification, grace in sanctification, and later on, this grace will end in our final glorification.

But this is grace. Everything is about grace. Verse 3, you are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.

[22:26] At this point, Jesus turns directly to his disciples and says to them that the cause of their cleanness is on account of the words that were spoken to them.

His words, his teaching, is the cause, at least that's what he's indicating here, is the cause of the cleanness, the state of purity that the disciples endured at that time.

The causative emphasis is in the purifying power of the word of God that comes from Christ. But yet, this is not an action of cleaning that takes place apart from what the father does.

Remember, in verse 2, we just read in verse 2 that he is the one who prunes. So, are we talking about two kind of cleanings? One that the father performs and another one that the son performs? I don't think so. That's not, that's not how the Trinity works. The Trinity is not the three amigos that get together to save the universe. This is, those who have had the opportunity to listen to my lectures on the Trinity know that I am kind of anxious to depict the doctrine of the Trinity in such a way that it doesn't allow to confusion.

[24:00] And this is a point where I want to emphasize this is not the action of the father apart from the son. This is the action of the triune God emphasizing in one person of the Trinity.

In this case, it's the son. But we also read in verse 2 that the father is the one who prunes.

Therefore, we need to understand this verse that we just read as the father acting in the redemptive and sanctifying mission of the son as the eternal logos.

So the father working through the son in the same act of cleaning. The father is the one who prunes and the son is the one who began this process of cleaning by his teaching, by communicating his word, which is basically what we do every Sunday by preaching the word of God.

However, this verse cannot be understood as if Jesus were telling the disciples or us for that matter that they have already reached a level of spiritual perfection.

I don't think that this is sustainable if you believe that, well, there are some theological trends that they argue that it is possible for a Christian to reach perfection.

[ 25 : 37 ] Well, that's not the congregation for me because I will be expelled probably the next day. But I don't think that this particular verse is teaching that we are in a state of perfection.

What I believe is that this is a way of reminding the disciples and reminding us that those who have treasure in their hearts Christ's words are the ones who will produce fruit.

I think that's what it is behind this. And also that Jesus he's the agent who by communicating his words he is the one who has begun the process of perfection in our lives.

Verse 4 I divided verse 4 this position of verse 4 and verse 5 by first of all I will concentrate on the first clause the first very phrase in verse 4 the section that reads like this remain in me and I will remain in you.

So let's just talk about this for a moment and then we will discuss the rest of the passage. The imperative mode of the verb the verb is the verb *mainati* in Greek which it conveys an imperative mode it's a command so this mode emphasizes the need to comply to remain in the true vine is not an option for the branch that bears fruit it is not optional for the branches if they want to be alive if they want to be productive to be and to remain in the vine for some reasons that I don't know I don't know the reason but perhaps there are some stylistic or idiomatic reasons for this but the NIV the Bible that we are reading translates the second clause of this first sentence and I will remain in you as future tense but in the original the Greek in the original is in the present tense remain in me and I in you would be a more literal translation and this is important not because

[ 28 : 21 ] I want to let you know that I know the difference between present and future tense in Greek but because if we follow the NIV the sentence that we are reading must be understood as conditional if you do this I will do this so the phrase as a whole might be interpreted as if the cause of our perseverance is our remaining in Jesus however if we follow other translations for example the ESV and many others then the imperative stays which is the important part of the verse remain in me abide in me that's important that doesn't change so the imperative stays but the conditional disappears and becomes a reciprocal formula of mutual indwelling so to remain in Christ necessarily implies that he remains in us so we must remain in him because he actively remains in us nurturing us by his word and spirit and I think that this is more is more it's exegetically possible to have this view and theologically speaking

I think it's much more defensible so let's go into verse 4b and verse 5 no branch can bear fruit by itself it must remain in the vine neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me and then verse 5 I am the vine you are the branches if a man remains in me and I in him he will bear much fruit and then the conclusion apart from me you can do nothing I decided to join the last part of verse 4 and with verse 5 in my exposition since the latter basically expresses positively what the former renders negatively that is that disconnected from this reciprocal indwelling that we just discussed between Jesus and his disciples it would be impossible for the disciples for us to produce any fruit of spiritual worth that is that separated from the through vine the branches certainly and I emphasize this certainly will fall back into total infertility it's not like I'm going to take my chances and I'm going to be away from the through vine and let's see what happens no that's not the case the case is that once we are separated from Christ that's it that's that's the end there is no more hope for us or for anyone in the same way apart from Christ we will not be able to do anything worthy of God's acceptance and on the other hand by remaining in him this is the positive aspect of these two verses by remaining in Christ the believer will be able to produce abundant fruit not only fruit but abundant fruit in light of what the apostle

John writes elsewhere in this chapter the fruit that is being produced as a consequence of the disciples and us abiding in Christ cannot be reduced to simply cannot be reduced simply to obedience to Jesus commandments that's part of it but that's not all of it the fruit that John is talking about must include experiencing Jesus' joy that's on verse 11 the same chapter showing love from one another that's on verse 12 the same chapter and witnessing to the world that's verse 16 of chapter 15 so we have this description and we don't have time to describe from verse 8 and forward but I thought that it would be beneficial to know what kind of fruit are we talking and at this point it's also you cannot help but think about Paul in Galatians chapter 5 verse 22 when he refers to the fruit of the spirit faithfulness, self-control so on and so forth but remember and this is the final the final

clause in this in verse 5 apart from me you can do nothing and at this point allow me to to the interpretation of this passage allow me to introduce some of my own theological conviction for your consideration

I believe that at this point scripture supports this passage to be framed within a Trinitarian conception let me just flesh out my thinking about this I think that this verse can be read like this except from the grace that the Father bestowed to us in Christ through the redemptive work of the spirit we can do absolutely nothing so Father, Son, and Spirit and apart from this Trinitarian indwelling we can do nothing and please remember this nothing does not mean a little something nothing is nothing we can do nothing apart from Christ that's why I'm a little bit anxious when some brothers in the faith or sisters or in congregation pastors they talk about

[ 35 : 09 ] Jesus doing the 99.9% and now you have to come and complete the .1% I don't think that's biblical I don't think that's I think that that robs God's glory is His glory He is the one He is the perfecter of our faith the triune God not the sinner I cannot emphasize this and perhaps this is not the moment but this is something that really really creates some anxiety let's go into verse 6 I will have to rush if anyone does not remain in me he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers such branches are picked up thrown into the fire and burned this verse conveys the idea of divine judgment for those who are cut off from the vine and remember that when I was explaining verse 2 number 2

I said that certain interpretations of verse 2 has to consider the flow of the passage and particularly what John is saying in verse 6 so this is divine judgment I don't see how can we interpret it in a different way there is only one end for the unfruitful branches that is destruction in fire and I think at this point it is hard not to think about Judas Iscariot as the personification of this branch the one who seems to be in the vine but never was in the vine that's the story of Judas the son of perdition and here again the exhortation is not to doubt about God's faithfulness to comply with his promise to preserve to the end preserve us and preserve the disciples to the end those whom he has elected but rather it is an invitation to ponder about our real status in Christ

John Calvin Calvin is a very popular guy in our congregation this morning Jesse quote Calvin and I have also Calvin here because listen to what he says in his commentary according to John he writes quote not that it ever happens that anyone of the elect is dried up but because there are many hypocrites who in outward appearance flourish and green for a time but who afterwards when they ought to yield fruit they I'm sorry they yield fruit they show the very opposite of that which the Lord expects and demands from his people close quote what Calvin is saying is that there is a huge difference between profession of faith and possession of faith you can be a professor of faith profess

Christ and you perhaps you are empty of Christ that's the point that he's making here and I don't want to create anxiety in you I am not saying in this this is not my intention in any shape way or form that the Christian is immune to sin that's not the case what I'm saying is that if you believe that you are Christian in your life there is no fruit of repentance there is no your conscience is not subjected to what God called the hate that we must feel about sin and sinful actions probably there is something wrong in us and that's the point that I'm making verse 7 if you remain in me and my words remain in you ask whatever you wish and it will be given to you what would be the extra benefit of abiding in Christ apart from the obvious life and being productive what about getting from God whatever you ask for that sounds really good but of course all types of banalities according to our own fancies are simply ruled out because the prayers of the believer are always subjected to God's will so if you think that because you are in the through vine or you profess and perhaps it's true that you are in the through vine you can make petitions such as please

God let me drive the coolest car in the market well think twice think twice because I don't think that that brings God's glory and that's not the intention and I don't think that the apostle John was thinking about this particularly why well because prayers are means by which God accomplishes his sanctifying purpose in us and I don't think that driving the coolest and typing on the coolest and that's essential for our sanctification I don't know I don't know you but that's not how I see the aspect of sanctification and finally verse 8 this is to my father's glory that you bear much fruit showing yourself to be my disciples again a more literal translation of this verse would be in this not this is but in this my father is being glorified the verse in the original the verb in the original is passive so in this my father is being glorified meaning that the father receives glory through the son's mission by the fruit revealed in those who remain in him this is fantastic what a magnificent

thing is to be called you and

[ 41 : 36 ] I and the disciples participants in making the glory of the father visible through the fruit coming from the redemptive work of the son in our lives think about this you are bringing God's glory glory to his name by your actions your fruit is a way through the son by which God's name is being glorified that's absolutely incredible it's fantastic in my opinion bearing fruit that glorifies the father is the unquestionable evidence that we are Jesus disciples that we belong to the true vine let us pray father thank you for the word spoken through your eternal son thanks for the gift of salvation and everlasting life in

Christ grant us grace to bring glory to your holy name help us father because we are weak and we fall short of your calling let us make visible to others that we belong to you by showing fruit that goes beyond external activities or moralism and let us never forget that we are what we are that we are in the true vine by grace alone amen let us conclude tonight's service by singing from the traditional section of psalm 111 that's 111 verses 1 and 2 and then we are going to sing verses 7 to 10 so 111 that's the traditional section traditional version and then we will sing verse 1 and 2 and then verse 7 and 10 that's in the tune of

Saint Stephen so please stand for us sing praise praise ye the Lord with my whole heart I will God praise declare The great above all measure,

Sort as they are of every one, That doth therein take pleasure.

His hand he works the truth and right, All his commands are sure, And done in truth and all brightness They are evermore endured.

[ 46 : 11 ] He sent redemption to his foe, His covenant for aid, He did command only his name, And ever and ever and ever away.

Wisdom's beginning is God's fear, Good understanding they have all that is, His covenant for aid, His grace endures for aid.

By the authority that is given to me, By God's word, May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, And the love of God, And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, Be with you all and always.

Amen.