

I AM the True Vine

MEG JENISTA

Over the past couple of months, we have been on a journey through the “I am” statements, and *journey* is exactly the right word, for many of these metaphors have us traveling with Jesus, the good shepherd, the way, the light; but today, in the last of Jesus’ “I am” statements, we are ready to put down roots with Jesus who says, “I am the vine.”

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

MEG JENISTA

And I am Meg Jenista.

DAVE BAST

And I really liked your intro, there, Meg, because these seven “I am” sayings as they are found in the Gospel of John, all of the first ones are about a journey – about moving with Jesus – about living off Jesus – about His sustaining power and presence in our lives; but now we come to the last of them in John Chapter 15: I am the vine, in whom you must abide if you are going to bear fruit.

MEG JENISTA

¹I am the true vine and My Father is the gardener. ²He 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. ³You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴Remain 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. ⁵I 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. ⁶If 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. ⁷If you remain in Me and My words remain in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you. ⁸This is to My Father’s glory that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be My disciples.

DAVE BAST

Can I say something? Can I make a confession? I have not always been drawn to this passage. It sort of makes me feel guilty. It is a little bit unsettling; maybe even disturbing. It is not one of those really comforting things to me. It so happens earlier this spring my wife and I took a drive up north, as we say here in Michigan, and it is a fruit belt along the shores of Lake Michigan – beautiful country – lots of orchards, lots of vineyards – and we saw the pruning going on and the results of the pruning. It is kind of a violent image that Jesus uses. You know, you are hacking off branches of trees and you are taking these great big shears to the vines in the vineyards – painful; and then this fruit-bearing stuff. I always feel guilty because I figure I do not bear fruit.

MEG JENISTA

I do not think you are...

DAVE BAST

Am I wrong here?

MEG JENISTA

Well, I don't know about that, but I know you are not alone. I think that many people come to this text of scripture and see those images of being cast off and burned and pruned and having to bear fruit, and they take that on as though this is a commandment to do more and to be better and to be good; otherwise you might get thrown away and burned in a fire. I think that is a fairly common approach to this text of scripture.

DAVE BAST

Well, and the whole question of what it means to bear fruit. I know you, like me, grew up in church and Sunday school and all the rest, and will there be any stars in your crown? I always wondered, I didn't think so because I could not think of anybody that I had convinced to be a Christian; you know, so bearing fruit is making converts. It is kind of a common idea.

MEG JENISTA

Right. Well, I have a slightly different take on this scripture passage, and for me I find it profoundly challenging and comforting because the first time I really encountered it was while I was doing an internship in the national parks, where there was not much opportunity to be busy in the sort of urban busyness that I was used to; and I was frustrated because I could not do what I was used to doing, and my mentor, my ministry mentor said to me: Meg, you have to learn the difference between being productive and being fruitful. And I think for many Christians, our Christian life and our Christian discipleship looks more like productivity – about trying to get everything done and be good enough.

DAVE BAST

As if Jesus says: What have you done for Me lately?

MEG JENISTA

Right; and the impulse of this text is actually the exact opposite; and that is what I find to be the comfort in this text.

DAVE BAST

Well, the other thing is, I think as I too sort of grew in my knowledge and understanding of the Christian faith, being fruitful runs all through the Old Testament and the New Testament, but it does not have so much to do with are we able to win people or convince people. It has much more to do with what grows in our character – what grows in our lives. In the Old Testament, Israel was compared to a vine – a vineyard where God looked for holiness, righteousness, justice. In the New Testament, Paul talks about the fruit of the Spirit: Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. That is what Jesus is really getting at here, I think.

MEG JENISTA

I agree; I agree that fruitfulness is more about character and life and what is being developed in us as opposed to necessarily the busyness or the work of our hands. It is a matter of getting the order straight. Do we start with what we do in order to grow close to God, or are we sort of sucked into relationship with God and then we draw the nutrients out of that relationship in order to bear fruit?

DAVE BAST

Yes, what is really at the root of our lives? A lot of people come to the Bible, including a lot of Christians, looking for a rulebook: Come on; make it black and white. Tell me what I have to do.

MEG JENISTA

Right; and the interesting thing about this text is if you are looking for the imperative – if you are looking for the rule – the “thou shalt” in this text, there is really only one commandment for the rest of us who are

listeners, and the commandment is: Remain in Me.

DAVE BAST

Yes; abide in Me, in the old versions, yes.

MEG JENISTA

Abide in Me.

DAVE BAST

So it is not a whole list – a laundry list of do’s and don’ts. Jesus says, in effect: The one thing you have to do if you are one of My disciples – if you belong to Me – the only thing you really need to focus on is remaining. I like that. That is not off-putting to me. That is appealing to me.

MEG JENISTA

But it is also confusing. How do we remain in Christ? And I think we need to take time in the next section to talk about that.

DAVE BAST

Good point.

Segment 2

MEG JENISTA

Welcome back. You are listening to Groundwork. I am Meg Jenista.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and Meg, you read that wonderful section at the beginning of John 15, where Jesus says, “I am the vine, you are the branches. You need to abide in Me.” – that is the one commandment that He gives – “and then you will bear fruit;” and it is part of the farewell or Upper Room discourse in John. We saw last week another “I am” saying from Chapter 14 – part of that same session – where Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth and the life,” and it is sort of His last instructions, His last words to His disciples. It is the last night of His life on earth.

MEG JENISTA

And in both cases what is at the heart of the message is: Stick close to Me.

DAVE BAST

Right.

MEG JENISTA

And this is going to be hard; it is especially going to be hard for the disciples in the next couple of days as Jesus goes to trial and crucifixion and death; but the message is: Stick close to Me. You have to remain in Me.

DAVE BAST

Yes; this is a very Jesus-centric part of the Bible, isn’t it? That is probably not even a word, but it is all about Him, and about their relationship to Him, which is going to undergo a savage blow, really, with the crucifixion; but the resurrection is going to open all kinds of new possibilities, and it is really the role of the Spirit comes in here, too; so without going all theological, we could say that it is the Spirit who is Jesus’ presence in us, and the way we remain and abide in Him. I think we want to kind of dig into that a little bit more. But to me, it is also interesting that this saying about the vine and the branches is almost a parable.

MEG JENISTA

I think so. At the very least, it certainly hearkens back to Old Testament imagery. I think especially of Psalm 80 and bringing a vine out of Egypt in order to plant it in the Promised Land, and then when it plants in the Promised Land and it takes root there, it is going to take over the whole land; but it also talks about how that vine is going to be cut down and burned with fire, and that it equates that vine with the Son of Man in Psalm 80; and it ends:

¹⁹Restore us, Lord God almighty; make Your face shine on us that we may be saved.

DAVE BAST

Yes; so in the Old Testament, the vine is really the people of God – it is Israel, and it is not just for Israel, but there is that beautiful image in Psalm 80, that it is going to spread out into the neighboring countries.

MEG JENISTA

It is going to break down the walls and overflow into the neighboring countries.

DAVE BAST

Not to conquer them, but to absorb them – to include them...

MEG JENISTA

Right.

DAVE BAST

Because the Old Testament, like the New, has this consistent vision that God cares about all people – He cares about all languages, races, tribes, and so on; and Israel is sort of a means to an end, not an end in itself, to bring the blessing; but in Isaiah 5, there is another reference to the vine, and in that context God is looking for fruit, which is very interesting when we compare it to John 15. The fruit that He is looking for is righteousness, justice, holiness as a people in a society. So it is all through the Old Testament, and then there are New Testament connections as well.

MEG JENISTA

Right. As we move forward into the New Testament, the connection that I most quickly make is with Jesus, who says, "I am the vine," and then later in Colossians Chapter 3, as Paul is talking about our relationship to Christ he says: Your life is now hidden with Christ in God. The reformer, John Calvin, talked about the idea of union with Christ – that we gain our strength by being united with Christ – our life is hidden with Christ. We are hunkered down, we are kept safe in Christ; and then Christ nourishes our life and brings fruit.

DAVE BAST

Well, and Paul's shorthand expression for being a Christian is to be in Christ; so there is *in Christ* and there is outside of Christ, and that makes all the difference in the world – in the universe – in eternity; but here and now, too, for the source and nature of our lives.

I love this idea from the image of the vine and the branches of grafting, and again, that is a reference from later in the New Testament about how we as gentiles have been grafted in.

I remember going... When my kids were small, we took a trip out East, and we visited Monticello...

MEG JENISTA

Oh, sure.

DAVE BAST

Which was Jefferson's home; and they showed us the vineyards that he had planted, and he could not grow very good grapes for whatever reason, but it turns out that the root that he used later saved all the grapes in Europe, because there was this tremendous disease that attacked them, and they discovered that they could be successful if they took the New World root of the vine and grafted in these European branches; and that is

kind of what Jesus is saying here: You need to be grafted into Me like a branch into the root, and then you will be fruitful.

MEG JENISTA

Which changes the paradigm significantly for those of us who come to the text initially a bit overwhelmed or frightened by the language of “pruning” and being cut off. It reminds us of the impulse of the text, which is fundamentally that we are in Christ, and that we gain all of our strength from our union with Christ; and then, it is not that we are completely inactive, but I think as Christians we are often surprised by the fruit that God is bearing in us and through us while we have been focused on something else altogether; and all of a sudden, God is doing this other thing in us while we have been being very busy and important.

DAVE BAST

We can think of it collectively and say: All right. It talks about unfruitful branches being cut off and burned in the fire; that is kind of scary – that sounds like judgment – that sounds like maybe collectively some people who thought they were in are going to find themselves that they were never in Christ; but better maybe to think of it and apply it to our own lives individually. Pruning is something that happens to us. It is not what we do...

MEG JENISTA

Right.

DAVE BAST

And it may be painful – it may be suffering. God is the gardener. There is actually a reference to a third character here, isn't there? There is the vine, there are the branches or the root – Jesus in us, but there is a gardener who comes and does these things to us, but His purpose is not to hurt; His purpose is to help us bear fruit almost in spite of ourselves, maybe.

MEG JENISTA

The image that comes to me... I grew up in the Philippines, and the image that comes to me is during Holy Week in the Philippines. Because of the strong Roman Catholic influence there, they will often do passion parades, and the devout will actually tie themselves, or in some cases use nails, to put themselves on the cross beams of a cross in order to walk in the feet of Jesus; and I think of all of the ways that we do that to ourselves. We attempt to cut and prune and shape ourselves, and how that misses the point that God is the gardener. There is a God of the universe and it is not me; and so, far better for me to remain in Christ and allow God to do what God does in and through me.

DAVE BAST

Well, I really like that idea that there is only one command in this whole passage, and it is to remain – to abide; but how do you do that?

MEG JENISTA

It is a tricky business.

DAVE BAST

That may be the next question, and we want to look at that in just a bit.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

Hi again. This is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

MEG JENISTA

And I am Meg Jenista. Today we have been discussing Jesus' "I am" statement: I am the true vine. And His commandment within that "I am" statement is that we remain as branches – we remain connected to the vine; and yet, "remain in Me" sometimes does not seem like enough. It seems like we should be doing more. What does it mean to remain in God, to abide?

DAVE BAST

Well, maybe I can start with a quote from a doughty old sort of puritan – latter-day puritan. He was a 19th Century Anglican priest and bishop named J. C. Ryle, and he has a couple of classic books still in print, I think. One of them is called *Holiness*; and Ryle says this. I think this is actually from his commentary on the Gospel of John. This is what it means. He uses the older phrase: Abide in Me. "Abide in Me. Cling to Me. Stick fast to Me. Live the life of close and intimate communion with Me. Get nearer and nearer to Me. Roll every burden on Me. Cast your whole weight on Me. Never let go of your hold on Me for a moment." I kind of like that. You know, it is not rocket science. It is stay close to Jesus and live your life intentionally toward Him – into Him.

MEG JENISTA

It is not rocket science, but it is incredibly countercultural for those of us in North America. Think about the way that we compliment each other in passing: Oh, you must be really busy. Oh, I don't want to take too much of your time; you are such a busy person. As though busyness and being frenzied and having lots of activity somehow elevates our status; when in fact, Jesus seems to be saying the opposite.

DAVE BAST

Well, you know, if we are not busy then we must be lazy; so there is something wrong with us; or maybe we are not important.

MEG JENISTA

How will people know I am important if I don't look busy and frenzied all the time?

DAVE BAST

Oh, I cannot possibly fit you in until two weeks from Thursday because my schedule is so full, yes. I don't think we have anything very new to say about this. I think you remain in Christ by getting up, by praying, by reading the Bible, by gathering with the saints for worship. I had a friend tell me the other day, yeah, they were not so happy about their church and they had stopped going, but he said: It is all right. We watch TV on Sunday morning, and we watch a church service. And I said to him, "You cannot take communion through the TV. You have got to be part of the body." All of those great, old, traditional, spiritual practices and disciplines are the specific ways we abide and remain in Christ.

MEG JENISTA

I don't think we have much new to say about this because I think in this day and age it is strange for us to talk about slowing down and being still and finding solitude and silence with God. I think we have to look to the past – to one hundred years ago to two hundred years ago – because that is when people valued slowing down and being quiet and silence. It is hard to find the value in that in the world around us.

DAVE BAST

It certainly takes more intentionality because we have a lot more gadgets that can steal time from us and make us think that we have actually less of it than we do; but I just think it is not bad to be a little old fashioned. Actually, when I think about abiding in Christ I think the greatest personal example for me, if I can get personal a little bit...

MEG JENISTA

Please.

DAVE BAST

Was my father, who was a busy pastor. He was really a great servant of God, a preacher of the Gospel; but I can remember seeing in his bible little dates. He would read the Bible from cover to cover every year. He would start at Genesis on January 1st and he would end at Revelation, usually far before December 31st. I can still remember seeing him even as an older man kneeling beside his bed at night before he got in bed, saying his prayers, you know, like a little kid. He knew a lot of suffering in his life. His life was not always happy and peaceful, but he was a godly man, and he remained in Christ because of those disciplines that he lived out.

MEG JENISTA

I think there is a growing interest today in the practice of the Sabbath. It used to be such a legalistic thing, and so for a generation it fell out of favor; but I am beginning to hear my contemporaries and my colleagues talking about the value of turning off the technology, of sharing a meal with family and friends, of slowing down enough, and so I am beginning to hear what I hope to be a resurgence in the disciplines that allow us to remain in Christ.

One of my favorite theologians is Henri Nouwen, who was a wonderful writer, pastoral presence, and theologian; and at one point in his life he got himself so busy that he came to a place where he had a breakdown and he had to remove himself from his busy world and rebuild his life; and at that point, as he was staying in a monastery, he asked himself this question: Is there a quiet stream underneath the fluctuating affirmations and rejections of my little world? Is there a still point where my life is anchored, and from which I can reach out with hope and courage and confidence? I find myself asking that question of myself so often.

DAVE BAST

Well, you know, we have been talking about different passages in the Old and New Testaments that share this image of the vine and the branches and being rooted – being planted – and when you read that Nouwen quote – that beautiful quote about the quiet stream, it made me think of Psalm 1:

¹Blessed is the man... ²whose delight is in the Law of the Lord; and on His Law he meditates... (that means the Bible). ³He shall be like a tree planted beside the streams of the water that brings forth fruit in due season. It is seasonal. God will do this; He will work in our lives; He will prune us, He will shape us. We remain in Him; we stay centered in Christ; we stay absorbed in His word, and the fruit will come. It may take a while. It may not be twelve months a year; you know, there is a time for being fallow and there is a time for being fruitful, but it will happen.

MEG JENISTA

And all the while we are held and we are anchored in our savior and our God, and empowered by the Spirit, and that is the best possible place to be.

DAVE BAST

He is the great I Am, and that reminds me of another “I am” saying, maybe for a future program. So, thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation; and don’t forget, it is listeners like you participating that will keep our topics relevant for your life. Let us know what you think about what you have been hearing, and maybe you can share some ideas for future Groundwork programs. Just visit us online at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

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Printed on January 21, 2025

