



THE SECRET OF REMAINING

SERIES: THAT YOU MAY BELIEVE

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John 15:1-11

33rd Message

Gary Vanderet

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I like to keep things unified, simple, and integrated. Much of Christian truth comes to us in bits and pieces, however, so I am continually looking for ways to package truth in a form that is unified and stated clearly and simply. In today's text from the gospel of John, our Lord has done that already.

We are working our way through the Upper Room Discourse, Jesus' last hours with his disciples. He is leaving, and they are staying. He is departing out of this world, and he is leaving them in this world. His purpose in this discourse is to instruct them on how to function in this world apart from his visible presence.

In John 15, the chapter to which we now come, our Lord clearly and simply states everything we need to know about the Christian life. From God's perspective, the Christian life consists of relationships. It is people that matter to God, not things. Here our Lord tells us how to function in the three primary relationships of life. Firstly, we have a relationship to God through his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. The key word here is *abide* (it appears 10 times in these 11 verses). Secondly, we have relationships to the church, to other believers. The key word is *love* (it appears four times in six verses). And thirdly, we have relationship to the world, to non-believers. The key word here is *hate* (it appears eight times in our text). That is what we can expect in receive in the world to which we witness.

Jesus opens his teaching using a metaphor. He and his disciples left the upper room (4:31) and made their way through the streets of Jerusalem, through the Kidron Valley, and up the western slope of the Mount of Olives. As they passed among the grape vines in the vineyards of the sunny western slopes of the Mount, this metaphor of the vine and the vinedresser suggested itself to our Lord and he uses it to teach the disciples about their relationship to him.

Jesus begins:

"I am the true vine, [literally, "I myself; I and I alone"] and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every {branch} that bears fruit, He prunes it, that it may bear more fruit. You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you.

We first need to identify the elements in the metaphor, because we cannot understand the illustration until we learn how Jesus is using the various aspects of the illustrations.

Our Lord says that he is the true vine in contrast to a false or spurious one. In this word picture he is contrasting himself with Israel. Throughout the Old Testament, Israel is

depicted as a vine that was planted by God in a place where it could produce fruit for him. This metaphor is used in many places — in Hosea 10, Psalm 80, and Isaiah 5, for instance. But when God went looking for fruit from the vine he had planted, instead of finding luscious grapes he found dried-up, sour grapes. Now, says Jesus, in contrast to Israel, he and he alone is the true vine, planted to bear fruit for God.

The Father is the vinedresser. He owns the vineyard and cares for it. The apostles, and consequently, any believers who would come to faith in Christ later (including us), are the branches.

The fruit is the fruit of Christian character (Isaiah 5). When our Lord went looking for fruit in Israel, what was he looking for? Isaiah says it was righteousness, but instead he found violence and crime. Paul says in Galatians 5 that the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, self-control — Christian character, in other words.

In the metaphor, Jesus distinguishes between the activity of the vinedresser and that of the branches. According to verse 2, the activity of the vinedresser is two-fold. First, "Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; . . ." And second, "every {branch} that bears fruit, He prunes it, that it may bear more fruit." Some Christians take this first activity to mean that they can lose their salvation. Others take this as a reference to a general purging away of dead branches in precisely the same sense that branches are said to be cast forth and burned (verse 6). But I don't think that Jesus has either of these things in mind here.

The primary meaning of the word translated "take away" is, "to lift something off the ground; to lift up or pick up." This is the same word which John used in chapter 5 in the story of the woman caught in adultery. When the Jewish leaders wanted to stone her, they "picked up," they "lifted up" stones from the ground to do so. In ancient times the vinedresser lifted up his vines from the ground, bound them into bundles and tied them on a trellis or pole to support them. Unlike pumpkins or squash that develop while lying on the ground, vines have to hang free. A branch lying on the ground was unproductive, so the vinedresser would lift it up and place it where sunlight and air could get to it, and thus make it more fruitful.

Do you see what our Lord is saying? This is quite the opposite of what we normally think about this passage. "Every branch in me that does not bear fruit . . ." He cuts it off? No! He lifts it up. He encourages it, drawing it closer to himself. If we are floundering in our Christian walk, he wants to help us, to lift us up and get us back in the sunlight of his love so that we can begin growing again. This is

the redemptive attitude of the vinedresser. When he walks through the vineyard and sees us struggling, he does not trample us under his feet and cut us off the vine. No. That is not his heart. He does everything he can to ensure that we bear fruit.

The second thing he does is "prune." This word really means "to cleanse." It is the same root as the word in verse 3 where Jesus says, "you are already clean." In those days they didn't have insecticides and pesticides to keep away insects so they used soap and water to wash off every leaf the insects and pests, whatever it was that was retarding the vine and keeping it from being fruitful. Jesus says in verse 3 that it is his words that "clean" us. That is what the Word of God does for us: it cleans us. It gets rid of the pests that keep us from growing.

One of the pests in my life is that I am an over-controller. I was reading Luke 14, the story that Jesus told about a banquet and certain men who entered the room and kept moving toward the best seats. I never thought I did that. But the Lord used an incident to show me I did. At our elders' meeting on Thursday, I was quiet for most of the meeting, but after awhile I became restless with and discontent with the direction and speed of things, and I said something and hurt my brother in the process. Through his Word, the Lord said to me, "That is just like moving up to the best seats in a banquet." That is what the Word of God was designed to do — wash us and cleanse us.

The vinedresser is at work to clean and remove everything that is detrimental to a fruitful harvest. He not only cleans the leaves, he prunes the branches back each year in order to cleanse them. Vines grow what are called "sucker" shoots where the branch meets the stem. If these shoots are allowed to grow, they dissipate the life of the vine, producing a lot of leaves but not much fruit.

Christians grow sucker shoots as well. When we come to Christ, we are a mixture of faith and flesh. We have some confidence in the Lord, but we also have a great deal of confidence in ourselves. This is why God often puts us in circumstances that drive us to the end of ourselves. We have no strength, no ability to cope. That is when we can turn to him and discover his resources. God wants us to learn to trust him, to depend on him completely. Growth is not the goal; fruitfulness is. Every living organism has to be cut back in order to be fruitful.

Sometimes it seems we have to be cut back to almost nothing. And it isn't only the dead and ugly branches that have to go (we're glad to be rid of those), but the living and vital ones sometimes are put to death so that a better and more bountiful thing can grow. It is true both in horticulture and the Christian life that the more severe the pruning, the greater the fragrance and beauty that will later be released. Our Father often cuts deeper than we would have chosen.

Eustace Scrubb, a character in C. S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*, is a boy who thinks only of himself. In *The Voyage of the Dawntrader*, he finds himself in a dragon's cave. Suddenly, he discovers that he has turned into a dragon. Naturally, he attempts to take off his dragon skin, but he can't remove it by himself. Finally, the lion, the Christ figure, comes to him, and as Eustace relates it:

Then the lion said - but I don't know if it spoke - "you will have to let me undress you." I was afraid of his claws, I can tell you, but I was pretty nearly desperate now. So I just lay flat down on my back to let him do it.

The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I've ever felt. The only thing that made me able to bear it was just the pleasure of feeling the stuff peel off.

Most of us here this morning have felt the pain of that pruning knife. We have felt it through rejection, criticism, losing out, through others getting their way, through endless waiting. We need to remember that though the pruning may be painful, it will never harm us. The pruning knife is guided by a pair of good hands. He is cutting only the extraneous growth. Take comfort from the knife, and trust the hands that hold it. Someone has said that God wants to squeeze us like grapes in order to make sweet wine. The pressures and pain we experience are the fingers of God working to effect that purpose.

These then are the responsibilities of the vinedresser. He lifts us up and encourages us, and he cleanses and prunes us. That is his part.

Our part follows, in verses 4-5:

"Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, so neither {can} you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing.

The believer is responsible to do one thing and one thing only, and that is, abide in Christ and draw upon him and no other, recognizing that he is the only source of true life. Remember that Jesus had just told the disciples that he would send a helper, the Holy Spirit. That helper would live in them and he would be nothing more or less than the Lord Jesus himself. He would grant to them his life and character.

Supposing you had a vine and one day you noticed that the branches were in great distress; they were contorted and making strange noises. You asked the vine what was the matter and, if vines could comprehend and speak, it would groan, "I am trying to produce grapes." You would explain to it that it had missed the point. That is not how grapes are produced, you would point out. All the branch had to do was remain in the vine, and draw upon the life of the vine, and the grapes would come naturally. That is what our Lord is telling his disciples: The fruit was the product of the life that was already within them.

You don't have to strive and strain to be godlike. You don't have to clench your fists, set your jaw and determine that you are going to be more patient; that you are going to stop talking so much; that you are never going to get angry again; that you are never going to have lustful thoughts anymore; that you are never going to put yourself in the center of things anymore. Try as you might, you will keep failing, over and over again. That is not what God wants us to do. He wants us to take an area of weakness and expose it to him and say to him, "Lord, change me. I am an over-

controller. This pervades every relationship I have — with my wife, my children, everyone around me. Please change me.” Then we must keep trusting him, relying upon him. There will be failures along the way, but that is all right. We are forgiven. Just get up, dust yourself off, and keep asking the Lord to change you. Little by little he will do that. Most change, I think, is seen in retrospect. When we look back over the years we realize that there has been some progress.

Certain disciplines, of course, will help us to abide. We must read our Bibles and stay close to his words. We must pray, and stay in contact with other believers. These are all very important to encourage faith. But it is not these things that make us grow. If we open our Bible without the conscious expectation that it is going to tell us something about God, we will read in vain. If we pray for 15 minutes each day to keep our membership dues up to date, as it were, it’s a valueless experience. But if we pray because we are responding to the call of one who loves us, sharing with him out of the honesty of our hearts, it is a marvelous experience. Those elements are what will help us abide. They are means to an end, not an end in themselves. And as we abide, we begin to grow.

If we don’t abide, if we don’t grow and show evidence of change in our lives, this may indicate that we are not a part of the vine. That is why Jesus goes on:

“If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch, and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned.

Jesus says that what happens to a branch that isn’t united to the vine is that it is broken off and it falls to the ground. It withers up, and has no life. If you know someone who claims to be a Christian but over a long period of time this person bears no fruit — if he or she is not any more loving, but is withering away — then there is reason to question whether he or she has ever been part of the vine.

I think our Lord has Judas in mind. Though Judas had a kind of external relationship with Jesus — he had some external attachment to the vine — he was never one with Christ. He was never a true part of the apostolic community; he never committed his life to our Lord. Eventually, the fact that our Lord’s life was never in him became evident; he withered up and fell off.

But, on the contrary,

“If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, [that is, you allow the Word to speak to you; you take it to heart, listen to it, believing that the Lord is able to translate truth into character] ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you.

As we saw last week, this is not an unconditional invitation to ask for anything we want. Jesus is talking about asking for fruit, not for selfish requests, but for change in character. If we are abiding in him; if we are counting on him and listening to his words so that we understand his will; if we have a submissive heart to those words; and if we ask him to conform us to that word, we have the promise that he will. It doesn’t always happen in the manner or timetable that we would like, but little by little we are changed. This is the process Paul refers to in 2 Corinthians, where he

says that as we look at the Word we see the face of Jesus and we long to look like him. And as we focus on him we are changed from glory to glory; from one degree of likeness to Christ to the next; from one attribute to the next. He will change us. As we abide in Christ, the result will be fruit.

The result will be that God will be glorified.

“By this is My Father glorified, that you bear much fruit, and {so} prove to be My disciples.

Do you know why that is true? God is glorified in our bearing fruit because people see that we are different than we were a year ago. They cannot attribute that to the fact that we just “got it together.” They can’t attribute it to anything but the fact that God is working in our lives. God gets the glory. He becomes famous as a result of what he is doing in our lives.

God is not so concerned that we attend meetings or that we read the Bible for hours at a time or that we memorize dozens of Scripture verses. Those things are all valuable, but they are only the means to an end, not an end in themselves. They are the means to the end of abiding in Christ, of drawing upon his life inside. There are people who do all of these things and yet they never grow. They are the same bitter, difficult, defensive, arrogant people they have always been. It is because they have not understood that these disciplines are designed to produce dependence on the Lord so that he can do the work in their lives.

In the following verse Jesus explains and unpacks the metaphor he has just told the disciples.

“Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love [Remain in my love, make yourself at home in my love]. If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father’s commandments, and abide in His love. These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and {that} your joy may be made full.

Here we have the answer to the low-grade depression that so often consumes us, that lack of fulfillment and satisfaction we often sense. The only thing that produces security and significance in life is abiding in Christ’s love

The most significant truth Jesus wanted to leave with his disciples was that he loved them.

Do you know that this morning? You don’t see much of our Lord’s love in the world, but you see it in the cross. Maybe no one really cares about you. Maybe your spouse is cold and uncommunicative. That is hard to take. It can shake us right to the core of our being. But I want you to know that Jesus loves you. He cares for you. You are very important to him. He demonstrated that by laying down his life for you. Our most important responsibility is to understand and depend on that love. It is what Paul calls in Ephesians “being rooted and grounded in love,” or, as the New English Bible puts it, “to have deep roots and firm foundations” — like a well-rooted tree or a well-built house. Both are pictures of stability; and the source of the stability is love.

Love is to be the soil in which our lives are rooted, the foundation on which they are built. To be rooted and

grounded in love is to live a life in which all our thoughts and actions spring from an awareness of how much God loves us.

Do you believe that? Do you believe that God is good even though life is tough? Or have you quietly given up the battle and taken over the responsibility for your own well-being? Are you merely giving lip-service to the words of Jesus, refusing to believe that they really apply to you? The problem with most of us is that we have no clear picture of the God we are told to trust. We're inclined to interpret the Word by some indignity we suffered as a child or by the bitter memory of some pastor or priest who "put the fear of God into us." Maybe you think of God, as Herman Melville did, as "all brain, like a watch," with no heart at all. Maybe you think of God in the same way as you think, perhaps, of the father who battered you, shamed you and abandoned you, who never gave you the time of day, a father who flew off the handle at the smallest slight.

Or maybe you are sitting here this morning wondering, "Why would God want me? He knows my sin, my wanderings, my long-standing habits of yielding. I'm not good enough. I'm not sorry enough for my sin. I'm not able to not

sin." You're right! Our waywardness doesn't have to be explained to God. He sees everything about us at a single glance, what is, what could have been, and what would have been apart from our choices. But our sin and incorrigible weaknesses only draw out God's love. It is his nature to love; he can do no other. "God is love" (1 Jn. 4:8).

The truth we should cherish this morning is that God's love creates the only safe ground on which we can give up our search, and surrender to him. He is one, says Pascal, "before whom we can humble ourselves without despair." What is the use of holding out when we've found, or rather have been found, by the very thing, infinite love, that we've been looking for all our lives?

This morning as you awoke, God's eyes swept over you and he called you by name and said to you, "Abide in me." It's a once-for-all thing, an everyday thing.

*Let not conscience make you linger,
Nor of fitness fondly dream,
All the fitness he requireth,
Is to feel your need of Him.*

—Joseph Hart

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