

John 15:1-8

Limits of the Text

The text is about remaining in the vine and bearing fruit. It begins with the Father, the gardener, and ends with the Father, who is glorified. Verse 9 transitions to remaining in Jesus' love and keeping his commandments.

Translation

1 I am the true vine, and my Father is the **gardener**. 2 He is cutting away **every branch in me that is not producing fruit**, and he is pruning **every one that is producing fruit** so that it might produce more fruit. 3 **You** are already **pruned** by the message that I have spoken to you. 4 Remain in me, and I *will remain* in you. Just as a branch cannot produce fruit by itself if it does not remain in the vine, so you cannot *produce fruit* if you do not remain in me. 5 I am the vine, *and you are* the branches. The one who remains in me as I *remain* in him produces much fruit, because you cannot do anything apart from me. 6 If anyone does not remain in me, he will be like a branch that is thrown away and dried up; they will gather these *branches* together and throw them **into the fire**, and *the branch* will be burned. 7 If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you want, and it will be done for you. 8 My Father is glorified when you produce **much fruit** and prove to be my disciples.¹

Interpretation

1 Ἐγώ εἰμι ἡ ἀμπελος ἡ ἀληθινὴ καὶ ὁ πατήρ μου ὁ γεωργός ἐστίν.

1 I am the true vine, and my Father is the **gardener**.

Many Old Testament writers used the metaphor of Israel as a vine that God planted and took care of. Asaph wrote, "You removed a vine from Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground before it, and it took deep root and filled the land" (Ps 80:8-9).² Isaiah wrote, "My well-beloved had a vineyard on a fertile hill. He dug it all around, removed its stones, and planted it with the choicest vine. And He built a tower in the middle of it and also hewed out a wine vat in it; then He expected it to produce good grapes, but it produced only worthless ones" (Is 5:1-2).³ As Isaiah's

¹ My translation. Bold words are emphatic in the Greek; italicized words are added for clarity.

² Read Ps 80:8-19. All Scripture quotes are from the NASB95 unless stated otherwise.

³ Read Is 5:1-7. See also Je 2:21 and Ho 10:1-2.

text illustrates, God expected Israel to produce good fruit, but often it did not, resulting in God's judgment.⁴

In contrast to Israel, Jesus called himself the true vine. They were unfaithful; he is faithful. They did not produce good fruit; Jesus produces good fruit through his branches (15:2). Israel was a type that pointed to Jesus, the true vine.⁵ "It is he who embodies God's true intentions for Israel; Jesus is the paradigmatic vine, the channel through whom God's blessing flow."⁶

Jesus never works apart from the Father, the gardener who oversees the planting and caring of the vine and branches.

2 πᾶν κλῆμα ἐν ἐμοὶ μὴ φέρων καρπὸν αἶρει αὐτό, καὶ πᾶν τὸ καρπὸν φέρον καθαίρει αὐτὸ ἵνα καρπὸν πλείονα φέρῃ.

2 He is cutting away every branch in me that is not producing fruit, and he is pruning every one that is producing fruit so that it might produce more fruit.

The Father cuts away some branches but prunes others. In this metaphor, being a branch does not equate to salvation, because some branches are cut off, removed, and burned (15:6).⁷ What is a branch? A branch is someone who claims to follow Jesus and be his disciple. As Judas Iscariot demonstrated, not everyone who claims to follow Jesus truly does, and not everyone who claims to be his disciple truly is. Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven *will enter*" (Mt 7:21).

What distinguishes a true disciple from a pretend disciple? The difference is fruit. True disciples produce fruit. "Fruitfulness is an infallible mark of true Christianity."⁸ "In a vineyard, fruitfulness is not simply desirable, it is imperative; that is the whole point of the vineyard."⁹ It is also the entire point of being a disciple. The exact nature of fruit is not defined in this text, but Jesus emphasized that true disciples believe (11:25-26, 14:11), love (13:34, 14:15, 15:12), and obey (14:21, 23; 15:10). They pray, and their prayers are answered (14:13-14). They receive love (14:21, 23), peace (14:27), and joy (15:11). Fruit can also be found in other texts like Ga 5:22-23, Ep 5:9, Php 1:11, and Co 1:10. Broadly speaking, fruit is defined as any action or activity that glorifies God, spreads the message of salvation, increases Christlikeness, or grows faith.

God's role, as the gardener, is twofold. First, he cuts away any dead branches, those who do not produce fruit. Pretenders are not allowed to pretend forever, and the self-

⁴ See also Je 2:21, Ezk 15:1-8, and Ho 10:1.

⁵ Carson, 513. Like manna was a type that pointed to the bread of life (Jn 6:32-35).

⁶ Kostenberger, 448.

⁷ See also Mt 3:10.

⁸ Carson, 515.

⁹ Morris, 594.

deceived will not be deceived forever. Second, he prunes the living branches, those that are producing fruit. Sometimes it is difficult, or even impossible, for us to tell which branches are truly bearing fruit and which are not, but God the Father sees the heart and can easily distinguish. There is a play on words in the Greek in this verse. αἴρει means to remove and καθαίρει means to make clean or prune. To bring out the play on words, the verse could be translated, “He is *cutting away* every branch in me that is not producing fruit, and he is *cutting back* every one that is producing fruit...” The action of cutting is similar, but the type of cut is very different.

The purpose of God’s pruning is to maximize fruit-producing efficiency, which he does by removing anything that hinders us from producing fruit. Though this text does not say exactly what God prunes from our lives, the writer of Hebrews spoke of this idea. “Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us” (Hb 12:1). Encumbrances and sin entangle us, preventing us from running. When we do not lay these aside willingly, God disciplines us to provide extra encouragement to remove these problems. “He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness” (Hb 12:10b-11). In salvation terminology, pruning is sanctification, the process of becoming more like Jesus.

3 ἤδη ὑμεῖς καθαροί ἐστε διὰ τὸν λόγον ὃν λελάληκα ὑμῖν·

3 You are already pruned by the message that I have spoken to you.

In this verse, Jesus answered the question: How does one become a fruit-bearing branch that the Father prunes? The answer is to be pruned by Jesus’ message.

The message that Jesus spoke was the entire set of teachings that he gave about himself. He was God in the flesh, doing God’s will in order to save man from their sins. Those who believed in him have eternal life (3:16). In salvation terminology, pruned is justification, the moment where a disciple repents of his sin and trusts Jesus as Savior and Lord. This is what births a new branch and prepares it to begin being fruitful.

The verb in this verse (καθαροί) can mean to be clean or pure, and most English versions translate it as “You are already clean;” however, this verb has the same root as the verb in verse 2 that is translated “is pruning,” so it makes it more sense to translate both verbs with the same force. They could be translated as “he is cleaning” (v2) and “you are clean” (v3), but since the context is a metaphor from gardening, it is better to translate them as “he is pruning” and “you are pruned.” Jesus used this same word in 13:10-11, where he washed Peter’s feet and declared his disciples to be clean, except

Judas. There are thus two different uses for the verb prune. In verse 3, it is the initial preparation of a branch; in verse 2, it is the ongoing cleansing of the branch.

4 μείνατε ἐν ἐμοί, καὶ γὰρ ἐν ὑμῖν. καθὼς τὸ κλῆμα οὐ δύναται καρπὸν φέρειν ἄφ' ἑαυτοῦ ἐὰν μὴ μένη ἐν τῇ ἀμπέλω, οὕτως οὐδὲ ὑμεῖς ἐὰν μὴ ἐν ἐμοὶ μένητε.

4 *Remain in me, and I will remain in you. Just as a branch cannot produce fruit by itself if it does not remain in the vine, so you cannot produce fruit if you do not remain in me.*

The main idea of this verse is not difficult. When a branch remains attached to a vine, it will produce physical fruit. When a disciple remains attached to Jesus, he will produce spiritual fruit. To become a branch, one must be pruned by Jesus' message (v3); to be a fruitful branch, one must remain in Jesus. Remain (μείνατε) is an imperative, and it means to continue in a state of inward, close, constant, personal communication. It almost has the sense of two becoming one, much like a marriage (Ge 2:24; Mt 19:5-6). Jesus commanded his disciples to be in union with him, and in return he promised to be in union with them, and the result is fruit.

God used this language of remaining in the Old Testament; the transcendent God was imminent among his people. In the language of the Mosaic covenant, God declared his desire to dwell among his people when he said, "Moreover, I will make My dwelling among you, and My soul will not reject you. I will also walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people" (Le 26:11-12). In the language of the new covenant, God again declared his desire to dwell among his people: "I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will place them and multiply them, and will set My sanctuary in their midst forever. My dwelling place also will be with them; and I will be their God, and they will be My people" (Ezk 37:26-27). Jesus fulfills this covenant promise.

The Father and the Son mutually demonstrate the idea of remaining. "Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on My own initiative, but the Father abiding in Me does His works. Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me; otherwise believe because of the works themselves" (Jn 14:10-11).

The first sentence is somewhat difficult to translate, because there is no verb in the second clause. The text literally reads, "Remain in me, and I in you," so the second verb is implied. There are at least four possible ways to read this text:

1. Two imperatives: You must remain in me, and I must remain in you. Jesus commanded the disciples to remain in him while obligating himself to remain in them.

2. One imperative: You must remain in me, and see that I remain in you. Jesus commanded the disciples to remain in him by which they will also ensure that he remains in them.
3. A promise: Remain in me, and I will remain in you. Jesus commanded the disciples to remain in him and in return promised to remain in them.
4. A pattern: Remain in me, as I remain in you. Jesus commanded the disciples to remain in him the same way that he has remained in them.

It's impossible to be certain, but I believe the third choice is the most likely because of the context. It fits the context of promise, as Jesus had already promised, "If you love me, then my Father will love you, then I will love you, and then I will make myself known to you (14:21). It fits the context of abiding, as Jesus had already said, "If you love me and keep my word, then I and the Father will abide with you" (14:23). It also fits what is known about God from the Old Testament. The prophet Azariah said to King Asa, "Listen to me, Asa, and all Judah and Benjamin: the Lord is with you when you are with Him. And if you seek Him, He will let you find Him; but if you forsake Him, He will forsake you" (2 Ch 15:2). God promises to be with those who seek him and remain with him.

The first half of the verse is then understood like this: Choose to be in a union with me. If you do, I promise that you will find me to already be in that union with you. The result is that we will dwell together and be one. How does a disciple choose to be in a union with and dependent upon Jesus? It's much like a husband choosing to love his wife. As a husband must constantly decide that he loves her, so a disciple must constantly decide to be in a union with Jesus. The verb is an imperative; it's a choice, a decision.

What is the significance of remaining in Jesus? It is required for fruit bearing. "Fruit bearing for the disciple is totally dependent on a direct connection to Jesus."¹⁰ Disciples must remain consistently, completely dependent upon Jesus. When they do not remain, they cannot produce anything of lasting, spiritual value. They can certainly work hard and do many things in their own intellect and ingenuity, but it is only wood, hay, and straw that will not last (1 Co 3:12).

Some commentaries say that branches do not produce fruit, the vine does; the branch just has to remain. While this sounds very spiritual, it's not what the text says. It says, "A branch cannot produce fruit by itself." To state that positively, "A branch that remains produces much fruit." Verse 2 says, "Every pruned branch produces much fruit." There is no sense of quietism, of "let go and let God," in this verse. Jesus enables fruit bearing while still requiring his disciples to produce fruit. This is exactly the

¹⁰ Borchert, 142.

message of Paul in Php 2:12-13, where he told his readers to work out their salvation while God was working in them.

How does Jesus enable fruit bearing? Jesus enables fruit bearing through the power of the Holy Spirit, God's agent in every interaction with his children.

5 ἐγὼ εἰμι ἡ ἄμπελος, ὑμεῖς τὰ κλήματα. ὁ μένων ἐν ἐμοὶ καὶ ἐν αὐτῷ οὗτος φέρει καρπὸν πολύν, ὅτι χωρὶς ἐμοῦ οὐ δύνασθε ποιεῖν οὐδέν.

5 I am the vine, and you are the branches. The one who remains in me as I remain in him produces much fruit, because you cannot do anything apart from me.

Jesus again stated that he is the vine (see 15:1), but here he explicitly stated the role of his disciples to be branches.¹¹ They are not the givers of spiritual life (the vine), but the receivers of spiritual life and the producers of fruit. Since the Garden mankind has been tempted to be like God (Ge 3:5), so Jesus clarified any possible confusion of their respective identities.¹²

In this sentence, Jesus repeats what he has already said, emphasizing the main points of the passage. His disciples are required to remain in him. If they do, they will produce spiritual fruit; if they do not, they will produce nothing of spiritual value. "In isolation from him no spiritual achievement is possible;"¹³ however, all things are possible through Jesus who gives strength (Php 4:13).

6 ἐὰν μὴ τις μένη ἐν ἐμοί, ἐβλήθη ἔξω ὡς τὸ κλῆμα καὶ ἐξηράνθη καὶ συνάγουσιν αὐτὰ καὶ εἰς τὸ πῦρ βάλλουσιν καὶ καίεται.

6 If anyone does not remain in me, he will be like a branch that is thrown away and dried up; they will gather these branches together and throw them into the fire, and the branch will be burned.

Those who do not remain do not produce fruit, and those who do not produce fruit are cut away by the gardener, the Father. What happens to those branches? The gardener throws them into the fire, which is a symbol for judgment. In Ezekiel, God said that unfruitful branches are thrown into the fire, thus he would judge Jerusalem (Ezk 15:1-8). In a similar manner, Jesus warned his listeners that all who do not bear fruit will be judged.

This verse is not about true disciples of Jesus who have been genuinely justified (pruned, 15:3); suggesting that they can lose their salvation would contradict Jesus' clear teaching elsewhere in John's letter (6:37, 10:27-30). This verse is about

¹¹ And he did so emphatically, as the pronouns are emphatic.

¹² Borchert, 143.

¹³ Morris, 596.

anyone who does not remain, including pretend disciples who are only hanging around (e.g., Judas Iscariot). “Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness’” (Mt 7:22-23). Pretend disciples have not been justified, thus they do not have eternal life, thus they will be judged. The application still applies to the church today. “Some who appear to be members in good standing in the Christian community may eventually turn out never truly to have been part of it in the first place.”¹⁴

Does this verse refer to present-life judgment or eternal judgment? It doesn’t state clearly, but from other passages both can be in mind. There is judgment for those who live in sin now, and of course there is a future judgment as well.

7 ἂν μείνητε ἐν ἐμοὶ καὶ τὰ ῥήματά μου ἐν ὑμῖν μείνη, ὃ ἂν θέλητε αἰτήσασθε, καὶ γενήσεται ὑμῖν.

[7 If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you want, and it will be done for you.](#)

Remaining in Jesus is not only required for fruitfulness, it is also required for answered prayer.

Jesus had previously taught about other requirements for answered prayer. He said, “I assure you: The one who believes in Me will also do the works that I do. And he will do even greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. Whatever you ask in My name, I will do it so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it” (Jn 14:12-14, HCSB). Answered prayer requires believing, obedience, and asking in Jesus’ name. “In Jesus’ name” does not mean finishing a prayer with those words; it means to pray in accordance with all that Jesus stands for.¹⁵

In 15:7, Jesus added two more requirements. A disciple must remain in Jesus (15:4), and Jesus’ words must remain in him. The words and teachings of Jesus must be one with the disciple. He must know his words, read his words, study his words, and memorize his words; he must be saturated with God’s Word. The words of Jesus “must so lodge in the disciple’s mind and heart that conformity to Christ, obedience to Christ, is the most natural...thing in the world.”¹⁶

Why is it that being saturated with God’s Word leads to answered prayer? First, it changes what we pray. “The ‘petitions of the true disciples are echoes (so to speak) of

¹⁴ Kostenberger, 455.

¹⁵ Morris, 596.

¹⁶ Carson, 517.

the words of Jesus because his teaching is 'transformed into a supplication, and so it will be necessarily heard.' There is a direct connection between how one prays and the primary commitments of one's life."¹⁷ In other words, we begin to pray Jesus' words back to him as applied to our life.

Second, it changes why we pray. In Ro 12:1-2, Paul urged the Romans to be transformed (changed into the likeness of Jesus) by the renewing of their mind (by being saturated with God's Word), so that they could discern God's will. When our mind is soaked in God's Word, we begin to perceive what God desires, and we begin to desire what God desires. When we reach that point, then we will begin to pray accordingly, and that's when Jesus answers his prayers. "A truly obedient believer proves effective in prayer, since all he or she asks for conforms to the will of God."¹⁸ John would later write, "This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him" (1 Jn 5:14-15). This verse rejects the name-it-and-claim-it gospel that says a person can ask for anything he wants to satisfy his own selfish desires. "The model of Jesus in life and word must permeate the life and words of the disciple. When this happens, praying ceases to be selfish asking and becomes aligned with the will and purposes of God in Christ."¹⁹

The verb "ask" is an imperative. Jesus commanded his disciples to pray in accordance with his will, which is effectively also a command to abide and to be saturated in his words. Praying according to God's will is not optional for the follower of Jesus. It also brings God glory (14:13).

8 ἐν τούτῳ ἔδοξάσθη ὁ πατήρ μου, ἵνα καρπὸν πολὺν φέρετε καὶ γένησθε ἐμοὶ μαθηταί.

8 My Father is glorified when you produce much fruit and prove to be my disciples.

In this verse, being a disciple and bearing fruit are again linked (15:2), but they result in something specific: God's glory. The Father's objective is always to bring glory to himself. He is glorified in the work of the Son (13:31-32); he is also glorified when disciples produce much fruit and prove to be Jesus' disciples. "The fruitfulness of believers is part and parcel of the way the Son glorifies his Father...Fruitlessness not only threatens fire (v. 6), but robs God of the glory rightly his."²⁰

¹⁷ Borchert, 145.

¹⁸ Carson, 518.

¹⁹ Borchert, 145.

²⁰ Carson, 518.

Textual Outline

1. God cuts and prunes branches (15:1-3).
2. Jesus enables branches to produce fruit (15:4-7).
3. God is glorified when branches produce fruit (15:8).

Central Truth of the Text

John wrote John 15:1-8 to warn his readers that true disciples must remain in Jesus.

Teaching Outline

As disciples of Jesus, we must remain in Jesus. Today I want you to understand what it means to remain in Jesus and then encourage you to do just that. From our text in John 15, we are going to see five reasons why we must in Jesus.

1. Remain in Jesus so that you can be pruned (15:1-3).
2. Remain in Jesus so that you can produce fruit (15:4-5).
3. Remain in Jesus so that you are not thrown into the fire (15:6).
4. Remain in Jesus so that you our prayers are answered (15:7).
5. Remain in Jesus so that you glorify God (15:8).

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