

OPENING PRAYER

God of mercy and God of joy, we praise You for Your faithfulness and Your love. We pray that You would open our eyes to the marvellous evidence of Your presence among us. Open too our ears to the one who calls us by name and seeks to lead us in the path of righteousness. O Lord link us together in a true and abiding fellowship of sharing and caring and of prayer and of devotion. Work Your will within us and through us that we may bring glory and praise and honour to that name which is above every name, both in this hour and in all the hours to come. We ask it through Christ Jesus, our brother and our Lord. Amen

Scripture - John 15:1-17

The Vine and the Branches

15 “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ² He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes^[a] so that it will be even more fruitful. ³ You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴ Remain 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.

⁵ “I 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. ⁶ If 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. ⁷ If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. ⁹ “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. ¹⁰ If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love. ¹¹ I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. ¹² My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. ¹³ Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command. ¹⁵ I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. ¹⁶ You did not choose me, but I chose you

and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. ¹⁷ This is my command: Love each other.

WE ARE THE BRANCHES

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to You, O Lord who is our rock and our Redeemer.

AMEN

About a 35-minute drive SW of London is a tourist attraction that was once a royal palace. It's called Hampton Court. It was built over 500 years ago and was a favourite residence of Henry VIII. A couple hundred years later, during George III's reign, someone planted the shoot of a grapevine outside the palace. And that vine has grown and grown for the past 250 years. It's been pampered and pruned for so long that the stem is now about 13 feet in diameter and some of its branches are over 120 feet long. Despite its age, the vine still produces 600 to 900 lbs. of grapes per year. Some say it's the oldest living grapevine in the world.

If you noticed, I said "SOME SAY" that it's the oldest grapevine in existence, but that's not true. There is a vine that's older than that. The oldest vine is Jesus Jesus said, *"I am the true vine."* (John 15:1) and *"I am the vine; you are the branches."* John 15:5

Throughout the Bible, God referred to His people as being His vineyard. Isaiah 5:7 says *"The vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are the garden of his delight..."* and in Isaiah 27:2-3 God declared *"Sing about a fruitful vineyard: I, the LORD, watch over it; I water it continually. I guard it day and night so that no-one may harm it."*

When Jesus wanted to tell us about the fact that salvation is not based on works, He told a parable that started this way *"the kingdom of heaven (the church) is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard."* Matthew 20:1

Those who belong to Jesus are the vineyard. We're the BRANCHES and Jesus is the VINE.

One commentator I read once, noted that the Jews of Jesus day were looking for the Messiah. And one of the terms used of Him was that He'd be THE VINE.

(John Gill) So, Jesus used imagery people would understand. When He declared

He was the vine, He was saying He was the Messiah and that those who belonged to Him were the branches.

That brings us to our story today. ***John 15:5 “I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”***

Now, that’s an odd statement. What do you mean “I can’t do anything apart from Jesus?” Of course, I can do all kinds of things apart from Jesus. Well, yes, kind of. 1 Corinthians 15:58 says it a little differently ***Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.”***

Notice: your labour in the Lord is not in vain. It’s not that you can’t do stuff. It’s not that you can’t labour. It’s just that without Jesus IT’S ALL IN VAIN.

It’s kind of like the parable Jesus told about the two men who built houses. One man built his house on the rock. Matthew 7:25 tells us ***“The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock.”***

The man who built that house on the ROCK did NOT build in vain.

But then, there was a 2nd man – the man who built his house on the SAND. ***“The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.” Matthew 7:27***

The man who built on the sand, built in vain.

And Jesus said: “everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand.”

What the foolish man built was in vain because without Jesus you can’t do anything that will last. Folks in this world often put high priorities on things they think are important. They’d like to marry the girl or boy of their dreams; they’d like to be important or powerful; they’d like to be rich; they’d like to be seen as “good people” who do “good things.” And they want to live a long fruitful life.

Almost everyone wants to bear good fruit that’s going to last. And, there’s nothing wrong with any of those priorities. It’s just that without Jesus, it’s all in vain. It’s not going to last!!!

That’s what Jesus meant when He said: ***“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal.” Matthew 6:19***

Without Jesus, we can’t live a fruitful life. It’s all going to disappear!!!!

But why is this all about Jesus? Why can't I have a fruitful life without Him? Well, it's all summed up at the communion table. At the Last Supper, ***Jesus “took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father’s kingdom.’” Matthew 26:27-29***

Jesus died on the cross to pay the price for our sins. He shed His blood to cover our guilt and shame. And the juice, this fruit of the vine, represents that blood. The point is this: without His fruit, without His blood being shed for us, we don't have eternal life. And, if we don't have eternal life, when we die everything we've ever done dies with us! We will have literally lived a fruit-less life.

But in order to have a fruitful life Jesus says I must bear fruit that will last. What kind of fruit does Jesus have in mind? Jesus said: ***“By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. 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.” John 15:8-10***

Then Jesus said “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ***Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.” John 15:12-13***

Some time back, someone did a survey and found that 40% of people said they believed in love at first sight. What they were saying was, they believed love was an emotion. But the kind of Love Jesus speaks of goes way beyond emotion. His kind of love is an action! He talks about laying down our lives for each other.

Thomas Kempis read several Scriptures like this and he put it this way ***“Whoever loves much, does much.”***

Now, we are in quarantine. We're locked down and have to do this “social distancing” thing. In that kind of setting, what could we possibly do to show love to each other? Well, do you have a phone? Call someone! Do you have paper and stamps? Write someone! Turn off the TV and the computer long enough to communicate. Call people outside of the church and pray for them. Show Christ's love by doing something!

Some time back a few preachers were concerned that this “shut-down” would make it so people would drift away from God. I don't accept that! I don't believe that for a moment. I believe that there are church goers who were never attached to Jesus who might stop coming. But the branches, the people who cling to Jesus for

their hope and their salvation, those folks will not only come back to the building when this is all done when they can't get to the building, these folks will show their love for Jesus by worshipping at home, like you're doing right now by watching this sermon. And they'll follow Jesus' command to love others by calling others; asking how those others are doing; praying for them over the phone; and, if there's a financial need they can meet, they'll meet it. They are the branches and because they are real branches, they will do what has to be done because they're attached to Jesus. They will do what branches do. They bear fruit!

So, that is what fruitfulness looks like.

But, how can Jesus make it so that my life will be fruitful? What can He add to my life that will make difference in how I live my life?

Well, the first that He does is, He prunes us. Jesus said, ***“Every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.” John 15:2***

One expert noted that vines will produce branches called “Sucker shoots.” These shoots never bear fruit, they just suck away nutrients. All they produce are leaves. And so, the gardener cuts them off because they are unproductive and they rob the vine of its life-giving source.

And not only do gardeners prune those sucker shoots, but they also cut away any dead wood because the dead wood can harbour insects and disease and can cause the vine to rot.

In addition, they prune the live wood, the good stuff, in order to prevent the lifeblood of the vine going into the wood instead of into fruit. In the early spring, the vineyards look like a collection of barren, bleeding stumps; but in the fall they're filled with grapes because they've been pruned.

In times of crisis, like the present quarantine, God does a lot that pruning. How we respond to those crises determines how “attached” we are to Jesus.

Too many churchgoers are satisfied with being “just happy.” That phrase describes people who are content with the status quo. They're not really attached to Jesus. They're not really DOERS, they're just PEW SITTERS. They just sit in the pews and expect to be coddled and fed. They're content to be happy. And those are usually the first folks pruned from the vine during a crisis. They don't want to produce any fruit and so Jesus just lops them off.

So, the first way that Jesus works on us so that we produce fruit, is by pruning us. He cuts back the dead wood. He makes us re-evaluate our life as Christians. Right now, we can't come gather in the sanctuary, and we can't greet each other and

enjoy the fellowship that we're used to. We have to DO our Christianity. We have to DO our faith. We can't have it done for us. And that, in itself is not a bad thing. It prunes us back to being a doer rather than a pew sitter.

The 2nd way Jesus helps us produce fruit is through His teachings. When Jesus told the parable of the 2 men who built their house on the Rock and the Sand, He described the man who built on the rock this way: ***“everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.” Matthew 7:24***

If we want to have a fruitful life, we need to listen to Jesus, and obey Jesus. Earlier in Jesus' ministry Peter said to Jesus, ***“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” (John 6:68)*** Jesus has the words of eternal life. Not just words about the things we should “do” in our lives, but the words that actually gives us eternal life.

Now, bear in mind, the entire bible holds the words of Jesus. There's not a single word in the Scriptures that Jesus didn't put there. But our question this morning is, “What words did Jesus say while on earth that tell us how we can lay hold of that eternal life?” Well, these are just a few of the verses I found.

In John 6:40 Jesus said, “this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and BELIEVES in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.” We need to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.

In Luke 5:32 Jesus said, “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to REPENTANCE.” In order to “attach ourself to Jesus; and in order to lay hold of His eternal life; we need to repent of our past sins. We have to accept that we've sinned and determine that we don't want to live like that anymore.

Matthew 10:32-33 says “ everyone who ACKNOWLEDGES me before men (in other words, you CONFESS that Jesus now owns you – that you belong to Him), I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.”

Mark 16:16 Jesus said, “Whoever believes and is BAPTIZED will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.” Baptism is the last thing that the sinner does before they are saved. You believe, you repent, you confess Jesus is now your Lord and Master and then you are buried in the waters of baptism to rise up a new creature in Christ.

And lastly, in *Matthew 19:29* Jesus said, “*everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life.*” These are people who, once they have decided to attach themselves to the Vine, they are so committed to Jesus that nothing else matters.

It’s so simple: Believe in Jesus; Repent of your sins; Acknowledge Jesus owns you; Be buried in the waters of baptism; And be more committed to Him more than anything else on earth. We can’t EARN salvation. We can’t do enough good deeds to purchase a place in heaven. But we can receive it by attaching ourself to Jesus and obeying Him in accepting His free gift.

If we want a life that is worth something, we need to build it around Jesus. we need to attach our life to Christ and live a life that means something and will last for eternity.

Let us pray.

Gracious God enable us on this day to put away the things that hurt and accept anew the things that help all people of faith. Be with us in Your love that we may be Your children, at one with all those who hear Your voice and who follow in Your way. Renew

us with life that is full of joy, assured by the presence of a Saviour who knows our lot and cares for us deeply. O God, we pray that we may never forsake the means of grace that You have granted to us. Keep us true to the way of prayer; to the reading of scripture and to the practice of gathering in Your name. Build in us, and in your people everywhere a devotion to the teachings of the Apostles and lead us to live our lives that Your light may shine through us and draw those around us closer to You. Bless this congregation of your people that it may be a blessing in the world around us.

We pray for our world that You have given us and for all those in it. We ask for Your love and care for those who are suffering this day, in body mind or spirit. We pray for all health care workers and first responders. Keep them safe and give them comfort, guidance and strength to carry on their most important job these days during these trying times. We pray for our loved ones, our family members and our friends. We ask that You would keep them safe and protect them from this Covid19 virus. And now we lift us to You those who are on our own hearts and minds.

REQUESTS

We ask all these things and we give you our deepest and most profound thanks through Jesus Christ, our Risen Saviour, who taught us to call upon You as one family saying: *Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.*

BENEDICTION

Go in peace. May all the blessings of God go with you. May the Spirit lead you; the light of the Lord shine on your path, and the abiding love of God dwell within you, both now and forevermore.

Amen