

“I AM THE TRUE VINE”: HOW TO LIVE A FRUITFUL LIFE

There's an old Jewish story where God compares his people to a plant.

We all study in places with a national flower. England has its rose, Scotland its thistle and Wales its daffodil. But God compared the Jewish nation to a *vine*.

It was a careful choice. Some plants are appreciated for their beauty, others for what can be made out of their wood. Vines find their value in their fruitfulness. Sweet, juicy grapes are evidence of a gardener's care, and also bring life and goodness to all who feed on them.

The Jewish nation were specially chosen to be fruitful for God in his world, like a kind of vine. They were to be full of the fruit of kindness, justice and gentleness, like him. They were to be truth-tellers, embodying God's character and pointing the surrounding nations to the promised King to come.

By the days of Jesus, this vine-imagery tasted bittersweet. On the one hand, the nation appreciated how special their task was. On the other hand, they were aware of their *constant failure* to live out their special calling.

The prophet Isaiah poetically describes how God had carefully arranged everything so that his people might live fruitfully:

My loved one had a vineyard
on a fertile hillside.
He dug it up and cleared it of stones
and planted it with the choicest vines.
He built a watchtower in it
and cut out a winepress as well.

But here's what God repeatedly found:

He looked for a crop of good grapes,
but it yielded only bad fruit.

So, imagine being amongst Jesus' disciples as he makes his latest claim:

I am the true vine.

It's like Jesus is saying: I'm the most properly Scottish thistle ever. Everyone else may have failed. Not me. I am the true vine.

Jesus is claiming that he is the real Israelite – the only one who truly reflects God – and that his life has the fruit to prove it. He doesn't need to be dug up, fertilised or replanted. He bears fruit wherever you look.

Even today many who aren't Jesus' followers admit that there's an undeniable beauty—a rich *fruitfulness*—to his life. He lived justly, loved extravagantly and spoke truthfully.

Having watched him for three years, Jesus' friend Peter could say of him:

He committed no sin,
and no deceit was found in his mouth

Can you imagine someone saying that about you?

No, each of us is much more like Israel than we are like Jesus. If God were to come to us looking for good grapes, we could offer only bad fruit. Our speech, our relationships and our attitudes continually fall short. We leave words unsaid. We fail to take the opportunity to be generous or stand up for the needy.

According to Jesus, God will indeed look for fruit in our lives. Yet without him, each of us is:

like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up,
thrown into the fire and burned.

In the original context, Jesus' disciples couldn't have heard these words as anything other than a damning verdict on God's people.

The same solemn verdict will be spoken over our fruitless lives too.

Yet, according to Jesus, fruitlessness needn't be final. Jesus invites his disciples – and each of us – to grow, flourish, and be fruitful.

How?

Through being *connected* to him.

Left by ourselves, we're unable to bring the good fruit we owe to God. Yet, like branches joined to a healthy tree, when we're joined to Jesus, *his fruit becomes evident in us too*.

Listen to Jesus' words:

If you remain in me and I in you, *you will bear much fruit*, apart from me you can do nothing.

Fruitfulness is possible when two things happen. First we must connect with Jesus, then we must remain in him.

We connect with Jesus as we admit our need for him.

We say: even if I try my hardest, Jesus, I can't make my life fruitful! Your fruitful life shows even my best efforts to be lacking. I need *you*.

So, can I be joined to you? Will you make me fruitful?

Jesus' answer is: yes.

Moments later, Jesus will explain that he will lay down his very life for his friends. Such is his love for us, Jesus was willing to face rejection so that we might be welcomed as his friends, and to be made fruitful. His fruitful life in exchange for our fruitless ones.

All we need is to take Jesus at his word. That word joins us to Jesus, purifies us and prunes us. Even a totally dead branch can be brought to life and be made fruitful.

And if we're initially made fruitful through depending upon Jesus and his word, then we become more fruitful today as we *remain* in that state of dependence.

Remaining in Jesus means depending on him as much as when we first trusted him. So, as Jesus continues to speak his life-changing words, we allow ourselves to savour them, depend on them, obey them. And, slowly but surely, they transform us.

Indeed, says Jesus, knowing him gives us a new ability to obey God's commands. Once we may have seen God's commands as repressive; now we know the one who speaks them – and how much he loves us.

Apple trees produce apples. Pear trees produce pears. Jesus is producing a people who display his likeness in his world.

It's not quick. A branch grafted into a tree may take seasons to become fruitful. Yet the process starts—slowly, invisibly, sometimes painfully—whenever a connection is made.

God remains committed to having a fruitful, joyfully obedient people. He tasks us to live and speak so that others will tangibly experience him – tasting, touching, seeing and hearing of his goodness.

It's a big calling, but here's the promise: connected to Jesus, *we will be fruitful*.

You may not feel like a rose, or a thistle or a daffodil. But, joined to Jesus, you can be connected to the true vine – and bear fruit that will last.