

## “The Vine... a life connected”

- John 15:1-17

“Slow Suicide”

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**John 15:1-17** *"I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. 2 "Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. 3 "You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. 4 "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. 5 "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. 6 "If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned. 7 "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. 8 "By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples. 9 "As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love. 10 "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. 11 "These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full. 12 "This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. 13 "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends. 14 "You are My friends if you do whatever I command you. 15 "No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you. 16 "You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you. 17 "These things I command you, that you love one another.*



In our modern culture we have the legend of the “silver bullet.” The idea behind this legend is that metaphorically speaking a “silver bullet” is something that acts as a magical weapon, especially one that instantly solves a long-standing problem. I would like to suggest to you that if there is such a thing as a “silver bullet” when it comes to the issue of our walk as Christians, then John chapter 15 is it!

This passage before us is one of the most profound, most important and most beautiful chapters in all of scripture. In it lies eminently critical principles to our faith...ones that literally establish crucial doctrines on which we base our faith and our walk as Christians, as well as our eternal status. To fail to understand this chapter is to leave a gap in our theology that is sure to be ultimately fatal. This passage can be as welcome as the sunrise after a long stormy night, or one of the most damning and harsh passages in all of scripture if you are running from God’s call to discipleship.

Our time line brings us at this point into the last days of Jesus’ earthly ministry. It was the ninth round and ‘gloves were off.’ It was time for the boys to grow up, to face the music, and step up to the plate. Some of us are forever in class, and never on the field. There is certainly a period of maturing and growth for all of us. But just as sure, there comes a time when school is over and it’s time to ‘graduate.’ Do you know where you are on that journey?

Firstly, we need to understand that Jesus wasn’t speaking herein to the masses...to the street so to speak. Jesus was *specifically* speaking to His apostles, and *broadly* speaking only to those that are truly disciples/followers of Christ, or at least to those who think they are. This isn’t a prescription or a “recipe” for salvation, but rather the manifest, the *evidence* of the authentic Christian life. This passage encompasses the very personal purpose of our salvation on a practical basis. In other words, this is what is supposed to be happening inside of us *because we are reborn*.

Firstly, we must acknowledge just what is the “fruit” of the transformed life. It is, although no doubt not an exhaustive list, found in Galatians 5:22-23... “**love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, self-control.**” And please note, it is the “fruit” of the Spirit, *singular*. We therefore are prohibited from selecting strengths from the list, while taking a pass on the others. No life, *void of re-birth and the indwelling Holy Spirit*, will produce these elements in any quantity, quality, or consistency. Ironically, many of us church-going folks today are apparently unconcerned that this “fruit” is wholly or at least significantly absent from our lives, despite the clear fact that their absence in any quality and quantity is a clear verdict against us as to whether or not we are truly born again. This is the evidence of the Holy Spirit dwelling in us, for this is His attributes and manifest.

Truth be told, we often avoid, *at any cost*, this personal ‘fruit-inspection’ in our lives. We are quick to excuse ourselves or forgive the fact that we look and act nothing like our Lord and Savior, even though we call ourselves Christians. Only the spiritually bold will to step back and look at their lives honestly and ask, “What am I producing?” Is it the fruit of a transformed life? Or are we rather producing the fruit of a worldly life? Bitterness, isolation, selfishness, deceit, corruption, anger, gossip, strife. The Bible speaks of all these things as “fruits of the flesh.”

When we see these things, few of us have the integrity and the boldness to step back and question our own standing in Christ. It is simply just too much to fathom, to entertain the notion that we might not truly be born again...especially if we have participated for a significant time in church and religion. After all, there may be a lot of religious motion going on, Christian words and religious activity, and maybe such has gone on for a very long time, maybe even years. Today it seems that this is Satan’s greatest weapon against the church and the individuals in it: *to lull us into a state of satisfied apathy. To convince us that religious action is synonymous with spiritual health.*

In the book of Exodus we read about the “fruit” of Pharaoh’s life. The likes of bitterness, jealousy, selfishness, deceit, corruption, anger, and strife. And we read of how God patiently waited for him to repent. Again and again God gave opportunity and grace, and again and again Pharaoh hardened his heart. Sadly, we read such stories and fail to grasp the personal application to our own lives! They remain to us as mere “fairy tales” or metaphors. Or worse, we are blind in our pride and believe ourselves to be producing such when all those around us fail to see it. Do we actually think that the ‘bar’ was held higher for Pharaoh than it is for each of us? That God held *him* accountable but won’t hold *us* accountable?

I often see folks who are party to what I call “slow suicide.” It’s been said that most suicides actually die of natural causes: *slowly and in silence*. The Beatles’ sang about it: “*He’s a real nowhere man/Sitting in his nowhere land/Making all his nowhere plans for nobody/Doesn’t have a point of view/Knows not where he’s going to/Isn’t he a bit like you and me.*”

This type of suicide isn’t an issue of some sudden and violent act that ends one’s breath and heart-beat in a fit of despair, but rather a slow “drip, drip, drip” of authentic life ebbing away. Life slipping between the “fingers of time” because of inattentiveness, laziness, boredom, hubris’s, pride, and self-absorption. It comes through blindness to self...unwillingness to look at the “man behind the curtain” and refusal to look at the one in the mirror. What begins as a dalliance...a fling, a quiet ‘vacation’, slowly became prominent and entrenched. What began as an indulgence ultimately became a habit. What was once a controlled luxury became a controlling bondage. Once there, these things became sin, even if not spelled out in the ten commandments or any particular scripture for that matter. Because once it “had us” in its grip, it became an idol and therefore became sin.

These things then become elements...*tools*, of our slow suicide. Our absorption with ourselves, our wants, our comforts, or pleasures become our rope. Our arrogant anti-body life isolation...our separation from others, becomes our poison. Our refusal to hear anything remotely critical from our brothers or sisters becomes our 10<sup>th</sup> floor ledge. Our abuse of food, alcohol, sex, inactivity becomes the “hair dryer in the bathtub.” The lack of priority of spiritual disciplines like prayer, scripture, and service become a bullet to our brains. But whatever the vehicle of our demise, it is ultimately self-inflicted and takes a very long time to kill us. So while we may be walking around today, some of us are very much dead. We just don’t know it because we haven’t hit the floor yet.

How often we can simply refuse to look at what we are producing. We refuse to look at we are connected to, or *not truly* connected to. We fail to be honest with ourselves. And besides, it’s all someone else’s fault anyway right? Only they aren’t the one dying, *you are*.

It is important to remember that when we repeatedly harden our hearts against God, God we finally harden our hearts in confirmation: a relenting to our insistence. When we walk away from the church, from our friends, even from God, and we're angry, bitter, spitting fire against God's people, just like Pharaoh did, the people around us are shocked and don't understand. That's because we don't know about the entrenched marital problems, the repeated porn indulgencies, the pre-marital sex, the abuse of finances, the repeated drug use, or maybe just something as "innocent" and acceptable as idolatry, laziness, gluttony, wrong-priorities and self-preservation, etc., etc. But sadly, we do watch and see the fruit of such...the hardening of their heart until finally God confirmed their state and the Red Sea closed up over them while they ended the movie shaking their fist at God and God's people.

There came a point where Pharaoh **would not** listen to reason anymore, because he **could not** hear or understand such reason anymore. God had hardened Pharaoh's heart because he showed repeatedly that that is what he wanted. Pharaoh was not different or special. But he was to serve as a warning. Not to someone else, but to us! That's why it is really not hard to see who is the next to crash. I need only note the hardening of a person's heart, the refusal to correct that issue or hear others try to warn them.

Often, if you think about it after the fact, you can generally recall that the appearance of such folks had changed. Their demeanor, their interaction with others became strained and surface. They began to isolate themselves. They began to complain and gossip. They spoke a lot about their feelings, made excuses for their behavior, and were becoming increasingly self-absorbed. Scripture increasingly became separate from their world. Aspects of community and unity didn't apply to them anymore. There was selective application. They condemn others on a scriptural technicality, but absolve themselves of flagrant abuses against the church, God, and His grace, and appeal unto a 'higher code' of righteous revenge or a free pass, due to some perceived terrible wrong that had been wrought against them.

Why is it that Jesus asked the rich young ruler to sell everything he had and give it to the poor, but he is not asking you to let go of your material and financial comforts? Why is it that Jesus told the man "...to follow me is to not have a place to lay your head at night," but He is not telling you that? Why do we read about Jesus often being such an offense, but He never is to us? Why does scripture call Him the 'rock of offense,' but we want an easy religion that is nice to everyone? Jesus would spit fire against those who called themselves God's children but were not living such (Mt 23:33 Snakes! Sons of vipers! How will you escape the judgment of hell?), but we want a preacher who is nice, kind, and passive when he sees the same? Someone should have told John the Baptist! Jesus tells us that we must love Him more than husband, wife, even our children, but why doesn't that mean us? Jesus says we must give up everything, pick up the tools of our own death to this world, and follow Him in all things. But we don't. Why is that ok?

This chapter contains the real picture of true Christian living, perhaps with more clarity than any other passage in all the Bible. Jesus will speak of the branches, that's us, and because all are branches, we are all to be literally and constantly "connected to the vine," which is Christ. He speaks of branches that produce and branches that do not.

John MacArthur says: *Now the question that comes up here is this. The branches that bear fruit are obviously Christians. The branches that do not bear fruit become then the problem branches, who are they? Are the branches who do not bear fruit Christians or are they non-Christians? The problem then becomes the branches that do not bear fruit are thrown into the fire and burned. If they're Christians then what does that mean? That Christians can actually perish? Or does it mean that Christians are punished and chastised for a lack of fruit bearing? Does it mean you can lose your salvation if you don't bear fruit? Or does it mean God will punish you if you don't bear fruit? If the 'non-fruit bearing branches' are the unsaved and are burned because they didn't produce fruit, then aren't we then preaching a 'works' oriented salvation? ...A true believer cannot lose his salvation and be condemned to hell.*

Once again, who are the players in this story? Looking at the context of this passage, who Jesus was talking to, where He was, what was happening, it appears that we can only see the participants in one light. The vine is Jesus, the 'husbandman' is God the Father, the 'fruit producing branches' are the faithful disciples. The problem lies in just who are the branches that produce no fruit, the ones that are cut down and burned because of their lack of fruit. They appear to be, despite all outward appearances, those that never truly belonged to God.

In John 13:10, Jesus sheds some light on the understanding of this issue: "Jesus said to him, 'He who is bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean...'" In other words, once we have been saved, once we have been cleaned, we just need regular foot washing. For our feet naturally get dirty from walking through this world. Once we have been reborn, we don't have

to get saved all over again when we stumble in sin. We don't need another bath, we just need some cleaning detail. That's the continuing grace and forgiveness of God. Jesus says in verse ten at the very end of this discourse, "...and you are clean." But when He says "you," He's referring to His disciples. Then He qualifies it by saying, "...not all of you... For He knew who would betray Him" speaking of Judas.

Yet Judas was there with the 'real' apostles for the whole trip. He looked the same, he talked the same, he appeared to be one of the gang. **But He wasn't.** The fruit of his life eventually told the story. Eventually his reality became known to all those around him. Even to those he called brothers, whom he now would 'throw under the bus.' I would imagine that the experience was very painful for the apostles to endure.

This idea of Judas' involvement in the context of the teaching before us seems obvious. There was probably only a few minutes between where we are in the text and the physical departure of Judas, who was, no doubt at that very moment, literally out betraying Jesus. It is interesting that Jesus didn't try to talk Judas out of what he was going to do. In fact, He said, "*Whatever you are going to do, do it quickly.*" Why wouldn't he have tried to talk him out of it? Because Judas had hardened his heart, and Jesus simply confirmed it.

Both "groups of branches" had been with Jesus. The producers and the non-producers. Judas had even been so trusted that he was given the position of club treasurer. He was not a rookie, nor a newbie. He was a player. He rolled with the best. But when the harvest time came, Judas had no fruit, and was cut off the vine, with a clear picture of permanence.

Again, we can debate whether Judas lost his salvation, or never had it. We can argue whether the unproductive branches were tossed into hell for eternity, or whether some other metaphor was being used. But the language is graphic, and the picture stark and painful. Why would we debate whether we can get away with the lack of good fruit production without major fallout? We must see that such a performance makes Jesus very unhappy and displeased, to say the least, and the end for that individual was terrible.

Certainly the man who hid his talent and produced nothing in Matthew chapter 25 was called a "wicked and lazy servant." The instruction was given to "*throw the useless servant into outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*" But again, unless we believe the scripture really means what it says, that Jesus really meant what He said, then all of this is merely an idealistic analogy for men to aspire to, not a fact of the character and nature of the one we call "Lord." If you believe the former, how can you be sure that salvation and eternal life is therefore not just a spiritual analogy and not a fact?

Well, did Judas lose his salvation because he didn't produce good fruit? To believe such would negate John 10:28 which says, "*And I give unto them eternal life and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of My hand.*" The Word of God is absolutely clear about the area of security. In John 6:6 Jesus said, "*All that the Father gives to Me shall come to Me.*" He said, "*I have lost none of them.*" And so He cannot be talking about a true believer who stops bearing fruit and loses his salvation and is condemned to hell. Rather He is talking about a Judas branch who apparently is in the vine, but his position was never real, and because it wasn't, nothing was ever produced from his life. He never was truly a part of the vine of Christ.

Some folks grow very uncomfortable with talk like this. They will even condemn such discussion as judgmental, negative, and mean. Yet if one was so inclined to do a study themselves, they would find the book of John full of examples where Jesus contrasts the true and false disciple. Thus, such condemnation does not fall on me today, but upon Jesus Christ our Redeemer and Savior. Rejection of these words is not a rejection of me as a pastor, nor of us as a church. The rejection is of Jesus and His written Word.

What was Judas' end? How did the final chapter go down? Acts 1:15-20 *During this time, on a day when about 120 believers were present, Peter stood up and addressed them as follows: "Brothers, it was necessary for the Scriptures to be fulfilled concerning Judas, who guided the Temple police to arrest Jesus. This was predicted long ago by the Holy Spirit, speaking through King David. Judas was one of us, chosen to share in the ministry with us." (Judas bought a field with the money he received for his treachery, and falling there, he burst open, spilling out his intestines. The news of his death spread rapidly among all the people of Jerusalem, and they gave the place the Aramaic name Akeldama, which means "Field of Blood.") Peter continued, "This was predicted in the book of Psalms, where it says, 'Let his home become desolate, with no one living in it.' And again, 'Let his position be given to someone else.' "So now we must choose another man to take Judas's place.*

The picture is clear...