

## **The Ditch of Passivity**

### **John 15:1-11**

We just made it through another Wisconsin winter and snowy driving conditions. I've been driving on snowy roads for about 30 years now and over that time I have found that what I think are the worst driving conditions are those days when you've had a fresh, heavy, wet snow and the roads have a couple inches of slush on them. Usually there are tracks that you can drive in, but sometimes when you meet up with oncoming traffic you have to swerve out of the tracks and into the slush and I don't know what it is, but it's easy to lose control and get sucked toward the ditch.

The same thing can happen when it comes to living the Christian life in our world today. We live in a country that has a lot of Christian history and tradition and even though there are wonderful benefits to that, it can also be like slush on a roadway pulling you toward the ditch. And one of the ditches it can pull you into is the ditch of passivity. It's easy to become content with identifying as a Christian and following Christian traditions while living a very passive Christian life. No depth, no growth, no transformation, no fruit – just a set of beliefs and traditions.

In Evangelicalism we also have the strong tradition of preaching that we are saved by grace through faith and not by works so we emphasize the need for people to believe in Jesus for salvation, which is great, but for some people, that's as far as it goes. They distort the gospel and use grace to justify passivity. Like slush on a roadway, people can get sucked into the ditch and many are just coasting along in passivity thinking everything is ok.

Our passage for today is going to completely contradict that mentality and it might be a little difficult for some of us to digest, depending on where we've been coming from, but I hope it will help us grow in our understanding and be somewhat of a wakeup call – that's what it's been for me – especially if you've been cruising along in the ditch of passivity.

We are in John 15 and Jesus is in the Upper Room with his disciples. A lot has happened in the preceding chapters – there's been an argument between the disciples, a foot-washing by Jesus, the announcement of a betrayer, the

announcement that all the disciples would fall away that evening, and the troubling news that Jesus would be leaving them. In chapter 14 he comforted them by telling them where he was going and that he would come back for them and in the meantime would send a Helper to teach them and remind them of everything he had taught them.

Now as we get into chapters 15-16 we'll see an extended time of teaching with his disciples. It is uncertain exactly where this took place because at the end of chapter 14 he told them, "Rise, let us go from here." It doesn't say that they left or went to a different place, so maybe they were still in the Upper Room but maybe they went somewhere else before making their way to the Garden of Gethsemane. I don't think it really matters. But what does matter is what he teaches them.

Jesus began by using an allegory of a grapevine and branches. So maybe they were walking and passed by a grapevine or something. He used a grapevine to teach them what I think is one of the most critical and foundational truths you will ever hear about how you should live the Christian life. In other words, this is so important, that if you can only remember one thing about what God wants for you as a Christian, this is it. Do whatever you've got to do in the next 20 minutes to pay attention and understand what Jesus is saying to his disciples because he would say exactly the same thing to us today.

I'm going to read the whole passage so you can see the whole allegory, and then I'm going to explain a few things to try to answer some questions that will probably arise.

Read John 15:1-11.

*"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. <sup>2</sup> Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. <sup>3</sup> Already you are clean [or pruned] because of the word that I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup> Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and*

*burned. <sup>7</sup> If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup> By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. <sup>9</sup> As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.*

So there's a vine, and that's Jesus, and the idea is that as the vine, he is the only true source of fruit-bearing life and nourishment for the branches. There's also a vinedresser, and that's God the Father. He tends the vine, taking off fruitless branches and pruning the fruitful ones so that his vine grows and produces bountiful fruit.

And of course there are branches, and that's the people who were associated with Jesus in some way. At that time it included the 11 disciples in the room, it also included Judas who had left. It included other disciples who traveled with Jesus, and it included the crowd of worshippers that showed up on Palm Sunday to welcome him into Jerusalem because they were big fans of him at that time. Everyone who associated with Jesus was a branch.

In our day it includes everyone who identifies as a Christian, whoever they might be: Liberals, Conservatives, Catholics, Lutherans, Evangelicals. People who go to church, people who watch church online, people who get baptized and confirmed, people who ask Jesus into their hearts, pastors, missionaries, you and me. Everyone who associates with Jesus, thinking of themselves as Christians, are the branches. This is not a teaching about Christians and non-Christians. This is a teaching about those who identify as "Christians." They are the branches. You and I are the branches.

But notice that among the branches, there are two kinds. Everyone who identifies as a Christian is one of two kinds of branches. The first kind does not bear any fruit. These branches are associated with the vine, but they don't bear any fruit because they're not abiding in the vine. They're not actually connected to the vine in a life-giving way. There is no sap flowing into them. No life. And therefore no fruit. And Jesus says that with that kind of branch,

the vinedresser comes and takes it away. It is thrown away and withers and those branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

There were a lot of people who followed Jesus and looked favorably on him for a time because of who they thought he was and what they thought he was going to do, but as time went on, it became apparent that there was no spiritual life in them. They weren't connected and they eventually turned away. Judas is the prime example, and there were many more in the crowds that followed Jesus.

We can see the same thing in our world today – people who initially get excited about Jesus for some reason but as time goes on they drift away because there's no spiritual life in them. They might make a profession of faith, and show interest for a while, but that's as far as it goes. There's just no life because they're not actually connected to the Vine.

And then, with our Christian history and traditions, we also see people who are associated with Jesus – maybe even a lifelong association – they identify as a Christian and Christianity is their religion, but when it comes to Jesus, their lives are characterized by passivity. Whatever denomination they're from, they think they're a Christian, but it's only a label. They aren't plugged in to the Vine. They're not pursuing Jesus or seeking to grow spiritually. They have a Christian identity and a few Christian traditions and they're content with that. There isn't any hunger or love for God, no regular prayer or Bible study or spiritual growth. Life is about everything else and Jesus has very little influence.

So that kind of passivity is another indicator of a fruitless branch. I'm not talking about having a few days where you feel disconnected from Christ or even having a season where you feel spiritually dry and you're struggling to connect. I'm talking about a lifestyle of passivity where it's evident you don't really care about growing closer to Jesus or growing in your faith. It's a life marked by spiritual apathy and the pursuit of other things, but not Christ.

If you are cruising along in that ditch and thinking that everything's ok, don't be deceived, this passage should put big warning signs with flashers and sirens right in front of you, and warn you to get out of the ditch because

there's a cliff ahead and you're headed right for it. That's not the kind of branch you want to be. Confess your empty religion to God and cry out to him for mercy. Repent from that kind of life and become a true follower of Jesus. There are only two kinds of branches – there isn't an in-between. You're either disconnected and dying or you're connected and growing.

And that's the other kind of branch in Jesus' teaching – the branch that does bear fruit. It's not only associated with the vine, but also abiding and bearing fruit. According to Strong's Lexicon, "abide" means: *"to remain or stay in a given place, state, or relation. It conveys a sense of persistence and continuity, often implying a steadfastness or enduring presence. In the New Testament, it is frequently used to describe the believer's relationship with Christ, emphasizing a continual, abiding connection."*

So an abiding branch is connected to the vine in a life-giving way and there's sap flowing into it, and it's bearing fruit. With that kind of branch, the vinedresser comes and prunes so there will be even more fruit.

That kind of branch represents people who not only identify as Christians but are pursuing Jesus and growing their relationship with him. They spend time regularly seeking him in prayer, Bible study and worship. They know his teachings and seek to walk in obedience to his commands. They are being pruned by the Father, which means they are being sanctified, where in cooperation with the Holy Spirit, they are putting off sinful behaviors and becoming more like Christ. Those who are abiding in Christ experience the abiding presence of Christ in them and are being transformed by the word of God. Jesus says when they pray, they receive what they ask for because they pray according to God's will. They glorify God and prove themselves to be Christ's disciples, and they experience fullness of joy.

That's not to say they never struggle or get distracted or are always on fire for God. The 11 disciples in the Upper Room had times of struggle and failure. But they kept coming back to the Vine. They were drawn to Christ by the Spirit of God living in them. And so, they produced fruit. And so will you, if you abide in the Vine. The command here isn't "Be fruitful." It's "Abide in me." And the promise is that if you abide in Christ, you will be fruitful. Christ will produce fruit in you and through you.

Two very different kinds of branches. The disciples in the Upper Room were those that bore fruit and Jesus was calling them to keep abiding in him and he commands the same thing of us today: “Abide in me. Keep abiding in me. I am the true vine. You aren’t going to find life in anything else. You have to abide in me, and keep abiding in me. You cannot bear fruit without me. Abide in me. Your prayers will be answered if you abide in me. You will glorify God if you abide in me. You will prove to be my disciples if you abide in me. My joy will be in you and your joy will be full, if you abide in me.”

Now, lest anyone jump out of the ditch of passivity and into the ditch of legalism, which is on the other side of the road, remember that the gospel does not teach that it is your abiding that saves you or keeps you saved. It is Christ who saves you through what he accomplished in his life, death, and resurrection. This is received by grace through faith as a gift from God. And those who are being saved are also given a new heart and a new spirit, by which we commune with God and receive the life-giving sap from the Vine.

So it is Christ who saves you, but we are active participants of his salvation in our lives – not passive. And that’s what this allegory of the vine and branches is all about. We must abide and we will abide if we have been born again. We live in cooperation with the work that the Spirit of God is doing inside us and so prove to be Christ’s disciples. Philippians 2:12-13 says: “*Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, <sup>13</sup> for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*” This is just another way of saying “Abide in me, and I in you.”

Peter says the same thing in a longer passage, but I want to read it to you so you can hear the importance of this teaching. 2 Peter 3:3-11: “*His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, <sup>4</sup> by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. <sup>5</sup> For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, <sup>6</sup> and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with*

*steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness,<sup>7</sup> and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love.<sup>8</sup> For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>9</sup> For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall.<sup>11</sup> For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”*

*“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.”*