

What a joy it is to dig in to the Living Word of God with you ladies this morning.

Today we are going to be back in the gospel of John, and I have the privilege of studying with you the 7th and final I AM statement of Jesus. We've looked at a number of these statements in our times together this year; and today we will be looking at John chapter 15:1-4; I am the true vine. Please open your Bibles with me, and let's pray.

We find ourselves at the end of what is called the Passion Week. Only 5 days ago, Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey amidst likely thousands of Jewish people yelling "Hosanna!"

And during the following days, Jesus spent most of his time in Jerusalem. On Monday clearing the temple of the money changers and returning daily to teach there. But he spent each night in Bethany, at the home of his dear friends Martha, Mary and Lazarus.

It's now Thursday evening. Tomorrow is Friday, the day the Passover lamb will be killed in the courtyard of the temple in Jerusalem. All throughout the Jewish world the Passover supper is being eaten, and Jesus has come into Jerusalem and is celebrating the Passover in the upper room with His disciples.

By putting the 4 different gospel accounts together we know that Jesus and his disciples have just finished eating. Mid-way through the meal Judas left the upper room. As he was the treasurer for the group, the disciples thought he went to do some necessary business. But Jesus knew, and we know, that he went to gather the soldiers and chief priests to come and arrest Jesus soon, in the garden of Gethsemane.

After Judas left, Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper and began a rich farewell conversation with His disciples. He took time to speak words of great comfort and encouragement to them. He foretold of Peter's denial and told them that He Himself was leaving, but promised them the Holy Spirit, and spoke about His return. Then Jesus said these troubling words "I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no claim on me, but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father."

Chapter 14 then ends very abruptly with "Rise then, let us go from here." Some scholars say that this is a saying used outside of the gospels in a military context, literally meaning "Up then! Let us meet the foe!" and Jesus is saying this as a charge to stand firm against the devil. Others say no, this shows that Jesus at this moment got up and left the upper room with his disciples- beginning to walk toward the garden of Gethsemane. Either way, at this point Jesus begins to share the rich allegory that is at the very heart of his farewell discourse.

Let's read John 15:1-4 together.

"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 does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. ³ Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴ 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."

To facilitate our time in the Word I've broken this passage up under three headings. We will be looking at;

The True Vine (Verse 1)

The All-Wise Vinedresser (Verses 1-3)

The Abiding Branches (Verse 4)

Let's dive right in to our first heading: ***The True Vine***

We know that each time Jesus says I AM He is using the personal name of God revealed to Moses in Exodus 3:14 when God said "I am who I am." In Judaism, "I AM" is unquestionably understood as the name of GOD. Jesus is stating "I AM YAHWEH." At this point in Jesus' ministry, his disciples know this. But here Jesus reveals yet more of Who He is. He says: I and my Father are one- and I am the TRUE VINE.

The nation of Israel was very familiar with vine imagery. Not only do they come from a climate where grapevines are as common as our poplar trees, for most of their history as a nation Yahweh, had referred to them as His own vine. He likened their rescue from Egypt to plucking them out- and planting them on His own mountain in Exodus 15:17. And in order to be connected to Yahweh, you had to be a part, or a branch, of the vine of Israel.

In Israel if you are blessed with children, you are said to have a fruitful vine. (Psalm 128) When King Herod rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem just before the birth of Jesus, he had a giant, stone grapevine cut in the archway over the entrance, and overlaid it with pure gold. Some of the grape clusters were over six feet long. And to this very day, the Jewish people STILL view themselves as a vine- so commonly that in much of their art, textiles and symbolism they

frequently decorate with the vine. To be a part of Israel meant that you were a branch of the Vine.

Here in central Alberta- vineyards are not common. However, vines are by no means foreign to us, especially in farming country. We have cucumber vines, squash vines- pea vines, bean vines, melon vines- various decorative, climbing vines... And by their nature, they are all quite flimsy. We have to stake them or have them climb a wall or trellis. We know that a vine is not a hardwood. A vine is not used for structural support.

What is the purpose of a vine? Well, interestingly enough, a vine's unique, and sole purpose is to produce fruit. It's true. Be it pumpkins, beans, grapes, hops or flowers, the primary purpose of a vine is production. Listen to 16th century theologian William Burkitt's words;

“As the vine is a fruitful plant, though it has little pomp, yet it has much plenty, and is only useful for fruit bearing and brings forth both plenty and variety of sweet fruit to make glad the heart of man.

The Lord had planted and tended this vine and commissioned Israel to show His glory to the nations that through Israel, they would be blessed and know that He is God. This was the Abrahamic covenant in Genesis 12.

But we see that the vine imagery for the nation of Israel was also used as in speaking about their widespread, national rebellion.

Psalms 80:8-9 which would have been frequently sung says: “You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land...” and in verse 14 “Turn again, O God of

Hosts! Look down from heaven, and see; have regard for this vine, the stock that your right hand planted...”

Yahweh through the prophet Hosea spoke with sorrow about Israel as a fruitful vine. In chapter 10:1-2 He “Israel is a luxuriant vine that yields its fruit. The more his fruit increased, the more alters he built; as his country improved, he improved his pillars. Their heart is false...”

In the book of Isaiah, we find another very sad love song about the vineyard Israel. Isaiah 5:1-7 says “Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard. My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; He built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. And now O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it?”

Jesus said I am the True Vine. The disciples could not miss the imagery of what He was saying. They knew the vine of Israel had failed to honour and glorify the Lord among the nations. It had taken all His blessings- and produced wild grapes. Israel had a false, adulterous heart.

Now here was Jesus, saying that He was TRUE Israel! He was the fulfillment of the Old covenant. Where Israel fully failed, He fully succeeded. He perfectly kept the law. He perfectly displayed the fullness of the glory of God. While Israel’s prosperity led only to pride, rebellion and adultery- Jesus the promised Son of David was humble, faithful and was true. While Deut 28:37 tells us that the very name “Israel” had actually become a byword- a term- used to describe horror and

destruction- not blessing to the nations, Jesus was the promised seed of Abraham that brought blessing to all the earth. Where Israel had only produced wild, useless grapes- Jesus Christ was mere hours away from being freely and generously poured out as a drink offering for the forgiveness of our sins. He is a faithful, fruitful, vine. And until He comes again- we remember his sacrifice with the fruit of the vine, don't we? Israel was a false vine. Jesus Christ is the true vine.

Previously, being "connected" to God was recognized as being attached, or a branch in the vine of Israel- through birth, and/ or circumcision, and with full adherence to the Old Testament law. But with the coming of Christ, came the end of the Old Covenant. Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the law. The ONLY way to be connected to Yahweh- the only way to be a part of God's chosen people, is by being united by faith to Christ, The true Vine. To be a branch in the vine of the Lord Jesus Himself. Paul explains this in detail to the Galatians, in Galatians 3:23-29. "Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise."

What glorious truths for those of us who are in Christ!

Ephesians 1 is a richly instructive and deeply encouraging chapter expounding on this reality. In just the first 14 verses we find over 13 references to the blessings of

being in Christ by faith. Let me walk through five of these for you. Allow these precious truths to soak into your heart.

- 1) Verse 3: If you are in Christ you are blessed with EVERY spiritual blessing both on earth and in the heavenly places! These blessings are ours forevermore.

- 2) Verse 4: If you are in Christ you were chosen IN HIM before the foundation of the world. This means God took the initiative in your salvation. Before you even existed- you were chosen. Ephesians 2:8 further illustrates this: “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.” Romans 11:29 says “the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable.”- they can’t be reversed! You cannot become “unsaved”. What a great comfort!

- 3) Also in verse 4: If you are in Christ, you are called to be holy and blameless. And what God calls us to do, He empowers us to do. This means you will be empowered by His Holy Spirit to say no in moments of temptation, and to live in a way that will glorify Jesus. He will change your desires and interests. He will conform you ever more into the likeness of His son. This process is called sanctification. It will go on until we die. If you are in Him- you ARE being sanctified. 1 Thessalonians 5:24 says “Faithful is He who has called you- and He will bring it to pass.”

- 4) Verse 5: If you are in Christ, you were chosen IN LOVE to be adopted according to the purpose of His will! Not because you are more beautiful,

more wise, more talented than someone else. Not because God thought you'd make a great addition to His "team". Not because God learned- by looking down the tunnel of time that you would choose Him- God can't learn ANYTHING!! He is all knowing! Psalm 147: says that His understanding is INFINITE. It has no beginning and no end. God knows that you were an enemy of Christ, Romans 5:10. You were chosen to be adopted simply because He loves you- He wanted you. He chose you. Romans 9:19 says "Who can resist His will"? And the obvious answer is: No one.

- 5) Verse 6: If you are in Christ, you were adopted in love to the praise of His glorious grace. He has adopted you- to bring Himself glory, so that you would praise His glorious grace! That you would show His glory to the world through the transformation of your life, that His grace would be put on display in you- and that He would be praised.

All this and more is ours if we are in Christ, the True Vine. There is no other vine.

But- before we move on to our next point it would be unwise of me to assume that everyone here, is in Christ. In fact, if you are not in Christ these next two points only speak of pain and judgement for you.

So I must ask. Are you in the true vine dear friend? Do you know that you are a sinner? Your sin is against a Holy, Righteous, Perfect, and all-powerful God, and the punishment for sin is an eternity in Hell. But Jesus Christ the perfect son of God- lived a perfect life. He came to earth as God in human flesh and lived the life that you and I can never live. He was completely obedient. And being so rich in

mercy He took on His own body all of the punishment for your sins. His own Father, punished Him- through a horrific, brutal death on a cross instead of you. So that you would be able to spend eternity with Him! The very fact that you are here this morning- hearing this good news is not an accident. This is God's kindness and love toward you. This is call to you- this morning, to confess your sins. He is faithful and just to forgive you for your sins. Won't you accept His free gift of salvation, trusting in Him alone by faith, to save you that you may live a life that will be pleasing to Him?

Let's pray.

"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 does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. ³ Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴ 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."

This brings us to our second point. "The All-Wise Vinedresser."

What is a vinedresser? Simply put, the vinedresser is the farmer. The word "Farmer" is actually a more literal translation as the Greek word here is "georgos". Which literally means "earth-worker."

Now most of us from the prairies understand a little bit about the importance of farming and recognize that the purpose of all farmers or in this case, vinedressers, is to ensure maximum plant production. I've been blessed by many friends who

are brilliant gardeners. I am not! I am too forgetful- and then make up for my negligence by overwatering. My plants grow spindly and awkward- and usually end up with some sort of very ornate fuzz on the soil. I'm always amazed at the faithful, consistent, diligent efforts by my gardening friends. And their faithfulness is rewarded. One dear friend enjoys strawberries and tomatoes from her indoor plants in the middle of February. Another friend feeds her large family all year round with the produce of her hardworking hands. If you are a faithful gardener, you are exemplifying one of the traits of our heavenly Father. He is the gardener.

This declaration of Jesus- that His Father is the vinedresser who cares for the branches would not have surprised the disciples. They KNEW that Yahweh, Jesus' Father, had always been the vinedresser of Israel.

Just as God the Father was the vinedresser of Israel, God the Father is the vinedresser of Jesus Christ, the True Vine. But unlike Israel, Jesus did not rebel under the tender care of His vinedresser. At His Baptism of a voice from heaven thundered "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." Matthew 3:17 Jesus was perfectly obedient.

"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 does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.

Notice that there are only two types of branches on the vine. Branches that bear fruit, and branches that don't. Jesus tells His disciples in verse 5 that we, professing believers, are the branches.

What kind of vinedresser is the Father? We know He is Omniscient- meaning all knowing. He is Omnipotent- meaning he's all powerful. He is Omnipresent- that

means he is everywhere, all at once. So in regards to caring for His vine, He knows all things. He knows exactly what to do to care for the vine at all times and in all seasons. He is all powerful and able to do all that needs to be done with the branches. And He is everywhere. Not a single branch escapes His gaze. God our Father is the perfect, expert, all-wise, vinedresser.

This is important as we consider the two separate actions of the vinedresser in this passage.

Firstly, the vinedresser removes the branches that don't bear fruit.

We saw this just take place-possibly less than an hour ago in the upper room didn't we. Turn with me for a moment to John 13:21. I'll read to verse 30.

"After saying these things, Jesus was troubled in his spirit, and testified, "Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me." The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he spoke. One of his disciples, whom Jesus loved, was reclining at table at Jesus' side, so Simon Peter motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. So that disciple, leaning back against Jesus, said to him, "Lord, who is it?" Jesus answered, "It is he to whom I will give this morsel of bread when I have dipped it." So, when he had dipped the morsel, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. Then after he had taken the morsel, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, "What you are going to do, do quickly." Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. Some thought that, because Judas had the moneybag, Jesus was telling him, "Buy what we need for the feast," or that he should give something to the poor. So, after receiving the morsel of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night."

Judas had just been cut from the vine. The vinedresser had quietly, skillfully and with precision, removed him because he had no fruit. The disciples thought Judas was one of them- he looked like he was attached into the life of the vine. He sounded like he was attached into the life of the vine.

It's very possible to look like a Christian, sound like a Christian, act like a Christian and fool everyone around you- but 2 Timothy 2:19 says "The Lord knows those who are his".

Now, we need to consider an important reality: Judas didn't backslide. Judas didn't lose his salvation. He never had it to begin with. Judas was an apostate. An apostate is someone who has totally abandoned what they once professed- thus proving that profession false.

Jesus taught about various forms of apostasy in His in the parable of the Sower and the seed in Luke 8. In verse 13 He spoke about the seed that fell on rocky soil. This seed sprouted up quickly but soon withered. Jesus said that this seed represented those whom, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But have no root; they believe for a while, but in times of testing fall away. They may seem to be truly saved, but they are not.

1 John 2:19 says "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us."

People who are unsaved- but outwardly seem to attach themselves to Christ will always be present in the true church until the coming of Christ. Jesus describes them as the tares among the wheat in Matthew 13:25-30.

This is the first job mentioned of our Heavenly Father, the Vinedresser. He faithfully removes fruitless branches. Any gardener will tell you that fruitless branches are actually a hindrance to the growth and fruit production of the other branches. Matthew Henry says that “Unfruitful professors are unfaithful professors... They are taken away in justice to them and in kindness to the rest of the branches...” Later on in John 15 we read that the fruitless branches are gathered and cast into the fire and they are burned. A picture of the terrible eternal judgement that awaits those that have never been saved.

This is a sober warning for us to examine ourselves – are we truly in the faith? The apostle Paul exemplifies this for us in 1st Corinthians 9:24 “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.” Judas, after preaching to others, was himself disqualified. Let’s run that we may obtain the prize!

This brings us to the second action of the vinedresser. He prunes the fruitful branches.

Pruning is cutting away parts from a plant for the purpose of increasing fruit production.

I’ve been asking myself a question for the past several weeks as I’ve been preparing this message. It’s a painful question. Am I bearing much fruit? Our

passage says: **every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.**

How does our heavenly vinedresser prune His vines? One interesting gardening article I read, spoke about how intimately a vinedresser knows His vines. Each cut He makes is strategic and thoughtful. A vinedresser uses several different types of tools depending on the branch that needs attention. One columnist mentioned hand shears, lopping shears and a saw. I winced when I read that- thinking in light of myself as a branch. But the next line also caught me off guard! The author wrote “Grapevines that are pruned often bleed heavily. However, the bleeding will not harm the branches.”

So, how does our heavenly Father prune us? **Verse 3 of our text explains how we are pruned. Jesus said: “Already you are clean because of the Word that I have spoken to you.”** That word “clean” comes from the same Greek word that is translated “prune” in the previous verse. Although clean and prune seem different, they both come from the Greek word “purify.” And we can see how these two words are related in this context. This verse could read **“every branch that does bear fruit he purifies- he cleans, or prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are purified because of the word that I have spoken to you.”**

Did you catch that? “Already you are purified because of The WORD”. It is the Word of God that prunes the Christian. The Word first saves us, and the continued work of the Word then prunes us.

You might be wondering- how does the Word of God prune us?

Romans 12:2 says “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God,

what is good and acceptable and perfect.” By reading, soaking in and dwelling on the words of the Lord, the Holy Spirit transforms us by renewing our minds. And as Psalm 12:6 says “The words of the Lord are pure.” The Word of God has a transforming and purifying effect on the mind of a believer.

Philippians 4:8 says “Whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” and Psalm 119:11 says “I have stored up your word in my heart that I may not sin against you.” The Word of God has a staying or preserving influence in the life of a Christian

Hebrews 4:12 says “The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” And Jesus prays to the Father in John 17:17 “Sanctify them by the truth; Your word is truth.” The Word of God pierces our hearts and reveals to us our thoughts- and our intentions, so that we can become more like Christ.

These are only some of the ways that the Word of God prunes us.

But I’m sure many of you are wondering, like myself, about the role of suffering in the life of a believer. Isn’t suffering a form of pruning? Doesn’t God use discipline- often painful and uncomfortable discipline to teach us and correct us?

Charles Spurgeon a 19th century English preacher was a man who spent the majority of his life battling bouts of sickness, bouts of depression- and finally enduring a great persecution where most of his closest Christian friends turned their backs on him. He answered the question about the role of suffering in

pruning a believer so poignantly and precisely that I'd like to read his words to you. It's a long passage- but I know you will be blessed and challenged, as I was, by it.

"It is the Word that prunes the Christian, it is the truth that purges him, the Scripture, made living and powerful by the Holy Spirit, effectually cleanses the Christian. "What then does affliction do?" say you. Well, if I may say so, affliction is the handle of the knife; affliction is the grindstone that sharpens up the word; affliction is the dresser which removes our soft garments, and lays bare the diseased flesh, so that the surgeon's knife may get at it; affliction makes us ready to feel the word, but the true pruner is the word in the hand of the Great Husbandman. Sometimes when you lay stretched upon the bed of sickness, you think more upon the word than you did before, that is first great thing. And next, you see more how the word applies to yourself. And third, the Holy Spirit makes you feel more, while you are laying there, the urgency and weight of the word than you did before.

Beloved, always remember there is no more ability in affliction to sanctify us than there is in prosperity; in fact, the natural tendency of affliction is to make us rebel against God, which is quite opposite to sanctification.

It is the word coming to us while in affliction that cleanses us; it is God the Holy Spirit laying home that truth, and applying the blood of Jesus, and working in all his divine energy in our soul; that prunes us, and affliction is only the handle of the knife, or should I say the ladder which the gardener takes to reach the vine, so that he may prune it the better!

Now, it may be that some of us have been afflicted a great deal, and have not been pruned. I know some people who have been very poor, I do not see that they are any better for it, and I know some others who have been very sick, and I have never heard that they have been improved. Alas! some people are of such a character, that if they were stricken till their whole head were sick, and their whole heart faint, they would not be benefited; if they were beaten till they were all bruises and putrefying sores, they would still go on to rebel, for these things only provoke them to a greater hatred against the Most High. We must be pruned, but it must be by the word, through affliction.”

What wise and insightful words. It is the word of God that prunes us. Affliction and difficulty have a distinct role, to soften and prepare our hard hearts to receive that Word- and to allow the Holy Spirit to transform us through it.

Do you receive affliction in this way dear friend? Do you recognize it as the means by which our Almighty, All-wise Father is preparing your heart to receive the pruning blade of His Word? And when you go through times of affliction, do you run to Christ? Or do you complain, resist and even kick against the affliction in resentment.

Psalm 32:8-9 says “I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you. Be not like a horse or a mule, without understanding, which must be curbed with bit and bridle...”

Proverbs 3:11-12 says “Do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by Him. For the Lord disciplines the one He loves, and chastises every son whom He receives.”

The Apostle Paul said in 2 Corinthians 12:7-8 “a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Psalms 119:71 says “It is good for me that I was afflicted that I might learn your statutes!”

If the Lord chooses to soften your heart through affliction- do not be stubborn like the mule, Bend under the knife of your kind, gracious and loving Father. Do you know He will not cut deeper than He has to. He is all-knowing. He is all-wise. Do not fight against this surgeon’s hand. Allow him to cut away what He sees is harming you. Don’t cling to it! What you may feel is precious- He knows is poisonous to you. Do you trust Him? You are being pruned- for your good, your growth, your sanctification, that you may bear much fruit- and bring glory to your Father in Heaven.

And let us rejoice at the great privilege we have to bear fruit for Christ!!! Fruit-bearing is the only external evidence we have proving that we are joined to the life giving vine, and that the very Spirit of Christ is flowing through us.

What is the fruit we are to bear? I’m sure many of us have Galatians 5:22-23 memorized. Say it with me, will you? “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control.”

Do we show love- or are we self-centred women? Do we have joy- or are we known as complainers? What about peace? Does anxiety and worry often have us pinned down? Let's consider patience. Am I an impatient person? This is actually a sign of pride and discontentment. Are we kind? Do we prefer others-seeking to promote their good? What about goodness? Good is the opposite of evil. Romans 16:19 says we are to be excellent at what is good and innocent of evil. Then there's faithfulness. Are we faithful to keep our word? Can we be counted on? And Gentleness is something we give far too little thought toward. Are we gentle? Tender? Or would we be classified as a crispy person. And lastly self-control. That very word flies in the face of our entire society. But it is a mark of a true believer. Do we exercise self-control? What about when no one else is watching?

Maybe like me, you are looking at this list of fruit and thinking "Oh Lord help me!" If that is so- Praise Him. Praise Him for showing you your lack. This is the work of our loving Vinedresser. This week has been one of pressure for our family. I have had my flesh rear it's ugly head time and time again. The desperate lack of fruit has been both felt and seen by my family. I have needed the pruning work of the vinedresser. There have been many apologies I have had to make- to each member of my family. I have cried before the Lord- Psalm 51:10 "Create in me a clean heart O God, and renew a right spirit within me." 1 Thessalonians 5:24 encourages us not to lose heart. "He who called you is faithful, and He will bring it to pass."

How will He bring it to pass?

This brings us to our 3rd and final point. The Abiding Branches.

Let's read John 15:4.

“ 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.”

What does Jesus mean by this word “Abide?” Well- I'm glad you asked! Once again I spent some time with my wonderful Noah Webster's dictionary- which not only gave such a beautiful array of meanings for the word, but also listed Bible verses for each one!

Abide has over 12 meanings, all related to one another. Here are just a few of them: To rest, or dwell, continue, be firm and immovable, to remain and endure. What a rich and instructive word. Let's put those definitions into verse 4. “ Rest, dwell, continue, be firm and immovable, remain and endure 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.”

The Puritan Richard Sibbes said “Union is the foundation for our communion.” In other words, our salvation is only the beginning of our relationship with Jesus. Once we are united to Christ by faith- that is when the “Abiding”, the relationship starts. All of His glorious life begins to flow in us and through us as we rest in His saving grace. Our heart of stone is transformed into a heart of flesh- beating with new love for Him. His Holy spirit begins to work in us- giving us new desires, new hopes and dreams, transforming us ever more into His likeness.

We abide in Christ, live in Christ, stay in Christ, remain in Christ because we are no longer our own- we belong to Jesus. He bought us with his precious blood- and

we have become a part of His body. We don't merely use Christ to quickly get some reward. We don't become joined with Him just for a moment- to take from Him and go. No! This is a permanent transaction. Everything of Jesus' is mine. Everything of mine is His. A marriage has taken place! Where there was once two, there is now one! What a glorious thought! Everything of Christ's is ours!

Through faith in Christ:

His righteousness is your righteousness.

His loveliness is now your loveliness.

His Father is now your Father,

His Home is now your Home,

His People are now your People.

His eternal life is now your eternal life.

And all this "to the praise of His glorious grace with which he has blessed us with in the Beloved." Ephesians 1:6

With all the richness He has given us- why would He need to charge us to Abide? We would be foolish to ever leave!! Yes. We are. We desperately foolish. And need this command to Abide.

Susannah Spurgeon has a short line in the back of one of her books that says "Before He saved her, well he knew- what a heart like hers would do." Jesus knows that we are fickle, easily distracted, foolish creatures.

We must guard our hearts. We must cling to Christ. We must not begin to in our new, improved state begin to grow proud and independent. This is what Israel did- and proved to be a false vine.

So how do we guard against this?

We often talk here at GraceLife about the means of grace that God has given to us. These are gifts- or graces- in the life of a believer that help us to grow in Christlikeness, help us to keep our eyes fixed on Christ and keep abiding, remaining, enduring, trusting in Him to bear fruit.

Some of these means of grace are:

His Word. Remember- this is the pruning knife of the Vinedresser. Are you daily in His word? Are you sitting under faithful preaching? If trials come- you need to know His word so that as your heart is laid bare through the trial, the word can do it's work!

Prayer. Prayer is daily communion with God. We confess our sins to Him- asking Him to forgive us and to transform us more into the likeness of His son. We ask Him to give us a greater love for Him- to show us things in our life that displease Him. We thank Him for all of His blessings, and bring to Him our concerns and desires. He delights in having His children bring their hearts to Him!

Fellowship. This is the iron sharpening iron, life on life that believers are to have with one another. As we live life together, we encourage one another to press on toward the goal of the upward call in Christ Jesus. We pray together, admonish each other, challenge each other.

The sacraments. There are two:

Believers Baptism- this is one of the first public acts of obedience a believer is to take. When you are saved, Baptism is a picture of you being united to Jesus Christ in His death, and being raised to new life- joined to Him. If you haven't been baptised as a believer please come and talk to one of the women's ministry leaders afterwards.

And the second sacrament is The Lord's Supper. This is a precious time where we as the whole church remember together the death of Jesus Christ- and take time to intentionally thank Him for all that He has done for us, through His death on the cross.

The Christian life can only be lived out of our union and daily communion- abiding, resting, in Jesus Christ. Progress, growth and fruit-bearing only comes through abiding. In fact, if you are noticing dryness- a lack of fruit-bearing, or a coldness toward the Lord, this is a sign that you may be struggling to abide. Ask the Lord to prune you. Ask Him to apply the pruning knife of His Word to your heart- and cut off whatever is stunting your growth. Ask Him to restore to you the joy of your salvation, and to renew a right spirit in you.

One of my favourite Hymns is: Come thou fount of many blessings. One of the verses sums up the constant need we have as believers to abide.

Oh, to grace how great a debtor - Daily I'm constrained to be
 Let Thy goodness like a fetter - Bind my wandering heart to Thee
 Prone to wander, Lord I feel it - Prone to leave the God I love
 Here's my heart, oh take and seal it - Seal it for Thy courts above
 This is our prayer, isn't it? Please pray with me.