

SESSION 6

Joining God's Work



QUESTION 1:

When has a task looked bigger than your ability to get it done?

THE POINT

Believers are to join God's work in both the church and the world.

THE PASSAGE

John 15:1-8

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

Some jobs just sound harder than others. I think we'd agree that fields like brain surgery or teaching advanced physics would top the list, but what about ministry? Some view ministry as one of the hardest jobs out there.

The night of my ordination I sat alone on the steps of my college dormitory. Something about the formal ceremony had jolted me into reality. I knew that pastoring was too big a task for a young person like me, but I also had a calm, yet cautious confidence that I could do this. It wasn't because of my education or experience; I had little of either. Neither did my confidence come from naïve optimism; it came from knowing I would not be doing this alone. God would be working through me.

You may never be formally ordained for a ministry position, but you are called to minister. *Every* follower of Christ is called to minister. We do not need to fear the work. The same confidence I found applies to all believers: We are called, and we are not alone.

John 15:1-3

1 I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman.

2 Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit.

3 Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you.

In the Gospel of John, we see seven “I am” statements Jesus made about Himself.

1. “I am the bread of life” (John 6:35,48).
2. “I am the light of the world” (8:12).
3. “I am the door” (10:7,9).
4. “I am the good shepherd” (10:11,14).
5. “I am the resurrection, and the life” (11:25-26).
6. “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (14:6).
7. “I am the true vine” (15:1).

In using the construction, “I am,” Jesus was associating Himself with God. The Jews were familiar with Exodus 3:14, where God instructed Moses to tell those who inquired that “I AM” had sent him to bring the Israelites out of Egypt. “I am” is the essence of the name *Yahweh*, the name expressing God's covenantal relationship with the Jews. The seven “I am” statements in the Gospel of John identify Jesus with God: the One who sent Moses to do His work (Ex. 3:10), the One who sent Jesus (John 17:3), the One who would send the Holy Spirit (15:26), and the One who sends us (20:21).

When Jesus said He is “the true vine,” He signaled He was fulfilling the purpose that Israel didn't. Many Old Testament writers used “the vine” as a metaphor for Israel, God's covenant people.¹ Sadly, in most of these instances, Israel was the vine that failed to bear fruit. In stark contrast, Jesus is *the true vine*—the vine that produces fruit.

DIGGING DEEPER

“I AM” IN JOHN

Jesus’ “I Am” statements in John’s gospel offer one of the most significant components in establishing His preexistence, messiahship, and deity. The emphatic Greek phrase *ego eimi* (“I am”) occurs in two distinct forms in the Fourth Gospel. Seven “I am” sayings include an explicit predicate

noun; and in a series of seven sayings, the “I am” stands by itself without a predicate. The background for the sayings is the revelatory formula “I am” in the Old Testament (Ex. 3:14; Deut. 32:39; Isa. 40–55). In these texts, God disclosed His unique identity as the one and only God creator, and sovereign Ruler of all that exists.

Bobby Kelly, “‘I Am’ in John,” *Biblical Illustrator*, Spring 2016, 11-14.

However, Jesus does not do it alone. He produces fruit through the branches—believers who are God’s co-workers (1 Cor. 3:9). In God’s grand design, He works through believers to do good works according to His will (Eph. 2:10). Jesus, the vine, produces the fruit through the branches under the watchful care of the gardener.

The Father is the gardener who trims and prunes the branches. He does this to increase the fruit-bearing capacity of the branches so that they will bear more fruit. In the analogy, the branches do not *decide* to bear fruit. If we are connected to the vine, we *will* bear fruit. It is a natural outcome of being connected to the vine and cared for by the gardener. In His care, though, the gardener does not tolerate non-fruit-bearing branches. If the Father sees a branch that is not bearing fruit, He removes it—severs it from the vine.

What kind of fruit are we producing?

1. Some people equate fruit with evangelistic success, meaning how many people you lead to faith in Jesus.
2. Some people connect fruit to acts of service, meaning the ministry you do in the name of Jesus.
3. Some people insist fruit is about personal growth, the character of Jesus that God shapes in you.

So which is it? We see all three concepts of fruit in Scripture. To bear fruit can mean leading people to Jesus (John 4:36); serving them in Jesus' name (Matt. 7:16-20); and developing the character of Jesus (Gal. 5:22-23). Merely giving verbal assent to being Jesus' follower is inadequate. Life change must happen—and continue to happen—as proof of conversion, and people will see that in how we influence others to follow Jesus, perform ministry acts in Jesus' name, and live with Christ-like, Spirit-filled character.

QUESTION 2:

What are some things that God expects us to produce?

John 15:4-5

4 Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me.

5 I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.

The source of the life is in the vine. The only way a branch can bear fruit is to stay connected to the vine. The fruit does not grow directly on the vine; it grows on the branches, which are attached to the vine. What a remarkable thought! God works through us to accomplish His purpose in the world. Jesus has chosen to work through us to produce His fruit. God uses us, but He only uses us if we remain connected to Him.

Momentarily breaking from the analogy of the vine and branches, Jesus spoke directly to His disciples. With a forceful command, He told His disciples they must abide in Him. He broke from the image because it failed to illustrate this point: unlike branches attached to a vine, believers have a choice of whether or

not to remain connected to Christ. Branches do not have a will; people do. Jesus, in a straightforward, forceful way commanded us to remain in Him.

Abide means to dwell within something, and it carries the idea of personal, intimate residence. Jesus emphasized His followers must abide in Him, and He in them. It is a mutually intimate, conjoined union. The intricacy and interconnectedness of the relationship between Jesus and His followers is difficult to express—and impossible to overstate. Jesus wants His followers to abide in Him as closely as He abides in them. That’s close!

QUESTION 3:

What does it look like to remain in Jesus on a daily basis?

The reason for Jesus’ call to remain in Him is fruitfulness. Jesus promised us that we will be fruitful if we remain in Him. He reinforced this point with repetition. First, He stated it negatively: “As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me.” Then He repeated the principle in a positive way: “He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit.” Jesus is clear: we will not be fruitful without Him, and we will be fruitful with Him.

A stark contrast exists between serving with Christ’s power and serving in our own power. Peter experienced both. After the authorities arrested Jesus, Peter went to the high priest’s courtyard where Jesus was on trial. At the door, a servant girl asked Peter if he was one of Jesus’ disciples. He said he was not. While the officials were interrogating Jesus, Peter stood warming himself by a fire. He wanted to be close enough to know what was going on—but not so close that he would be associated with Jesus. Two more times Peter denied his connection to Jesus (John 18:15-27).

Peter’s denial was not true—he was one of Jesus’ twelve apostles. However, in an ironic twist, his statement had some truth to it—in that moment he was not “connected” to Jesus in a

metaphorical sense. Right then, Peter was operating in his own power, and he did not bear fruit. Peter's denial is a reminder that the only way to be fruitful is to remain in Jesus.

Thankfully, that dark episode in Peter's life did not define him. Later, Peter would preach a sermon where over 3,000 people were saved (Acts 2:14-41). The Spirit of God fell upon those who gathered for the Pentecost celebration, and Peter preached with boldness. No longer afraid, he called on the very people who crucified Jesus to repent and become Christ followers. Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit and remained in Jesus. Peter's life exemplified the truth that, when the branches are connected to the vine, they will produce much fruit.

John 15:6-8

6 If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned.

7 If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you.

8 Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples.

Once the branch is separated from the vine, it is worthless—it becomes dead, brittle, dry twigs. The branches shrivel up and the gardener gathers them up to be burned in the fire. Unconnected branches are good for nothing. Psalm 1 contains a parallel metaphor: the one who walks with God is fruitful “like a tree planted by the rivers of water,” but the ungodly “are like the chaff which the wind driveth away” (Ps. 1:3-4).

The contrast is strong and it makes a point. Instead of living a life that goes up in smoke, those connected to Jesus bring God glory. We bear fruit so that God is glorified. God receives the

glory; we don't. It is His glory—His weight, His authority, His reputation—not ours. Any fruitfulness on our part comes from being connected to Jesus, so the glory is all His, never ours.

QUESTION 4:

What's the relationship between remaining in Christ and answered prayer?

Being fruitful for Christ is not a synonym for success. Abiding in Christ does not guarantee you will reach all your life goals or be successful in any worldly sense. The fruit we produce in His power is fruitful in the way it glorifies God.

During the first quarter of Super Bowl XLIV, Indianapolis Colts kicker Matt Stover pointed to the sky when he made a 38-yard field goal. This is not unusual at all—many athletes show similar gratitude to God for their successes. But in the fourth quarter, with the game on the line, Stover *missed* a 51-yard field goal attempt. Yet again, he pointed toward heaven. Recognizing the significance of the gesture, the announcer noted that Stover was “a ‘spiritual man’ grateful for divine blessing in success and failure, victory and defeat.”²

God is glorified, not just because the fruit is produced, but because the fruit-bearing branches depend on Him no matter what. When we produce spiritual fruit, we glorify God and prove that we are Jesus' disciples. I would argue that Matt Stover had a fruitful day, even though he was not always successful. As he pointed to the heavens after a personal failure, he was acknowledging that it was not about him. He was acknowledging that he was dependent on God, who gave him the ability and opportunity.

As we live *in* Christ and live *for* Christ, we will bear fruit—and God will be glorified.

QUESTION 5:

Why is it so important that we produce fruit?

ENGAGE

Choose one of the photos that illustrates a good example of bearing fruit. Then write a prayer asking God to help you abide in Him so you will bear much fruit.



My Prayer:

LIVE IT OUT

Over the years of my ministry, many things have changed—but one thing has not. I remain totally dependent on God to minister through me. I can only do the work He’s called me to do and produce fruit if I remain connected to Christ. How will you join God in His work?

- ▶ **Remain in Christ.** Surrender your plans and choose to remain in Christ, living in Him and in His power. Pray for open eyes to see the ministry opportunities He places before you.
- ▶ **Mentor.** If you are already involved in a ministry, offer to mentor someone who is not. Disciple them in the discipline of abiding in Christ and help them discover how they can minister too.
- ▶ **Lead.** If God is calling you to ministry leadership, accept His call. Talk with your pastor about this calling and your next steps.



END NOTES

1. Ps. 80:8-16; Isa. 5:1-7; 27:2-6; Jer. 2:21; 12:10-13; Ezek. 15:1-8; 17:1-10; 19:10-14; Hos. 10:1-2.
2. Tim Ellsworth, "Holy hitter: Albert Pujols loves baseball—and Jesus," *World Magazine*, February 12, 2010, world.wng.org/2010/02/holy_hitter.



A small vineyard at Tekoa.

I AM THE VINE: A THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

By Paul E. Kullman

Encouraged? Surprised? Perplexed? What did Jesus' disciples feel when they heard the Master say, "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vineyard keeper," and then "I am the vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in Me and I in him produces much fruit, because you can do nothing without Me" (John 15:1,5)?

The vine was the first cultivated plant mentioned in Scripture, a fact that meant viticulture (the cultivating of grapes and vineyards) dated at least back to the time of Noah (Gen. 9:20). Although the Hebrew word for "vine" could refer to many types of vines, the term most commonly referred to either a vineyard or grapevine. Vineyards

produced fresh grapes, which could be dried into raisins or squeezed for fresh juice, vinegar, and wine. Growers used all parts of the vine: they ate the leaves and used the discarded vines to feed livestock, to make ink, or to tan leather.

VINEYARDS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Many Old Testament texts mention a vine, a vineyard, or its fruit. For instance, while being held in Pharaoh's prison, Joseph interpreted a fellow prisoner's dream, one involving a vine and grapes (Gen. 40:9-13). Although the text does not mention a vineyard, grapes evidently grew extremely well in the land of promise. When the 12 spies were in Canaan, "they cut down a branch with a single cluster of grapes, which was carried on a pole by two men" (Num. 13:23). Later, protesting Moses' leadership during the wilderness wanderings, Dathan and Abiram said, "you didn't bring us to a land flowing with milk and honey or give us an inheritance of fields and vineyards" (16:14). A generation later, God, speaking

through Joshua, reminded His people how He had fulfilled His promise: "I gave you a land you did not labor for, and cities you did not build, though you live in them; you are eating from vineyards and olive groves you did not plant" (Josh. 24:13). Centuries later, knowing that her husband, King Ahab, wanted a particular vineyard, Jezebel had two "wicked men" (*scoundrels*, NIV; 1 Kings 21:10,13) kill its owner, Naboth, so her husband could have it. And of the virtuous woman Proverbs says, "She evaluates a field and buys it; she plants a vineyard with her earnings" (Prov. 31:16).

Laws—Vineyards were valuable and work intensive; God thus established laws and ordinances to protect them. He instructed Moses at Sinai: "When a man lets a field or vineyard be grazed in, and then allows his animals to go and graze in someone else's field, he must repay with the best of his own field or vineyard" (Ex. 22:5). Planting a vineyard exempted a person from military service (Deut. 20:6). To help alleviate hunger, the Lord

commanded vineyard owners: “You must not strip your vineyard bare or gather its fallen grapes. Leave them for the poor and the foreign resident” (Lev. 19:10). This gave Israelite vineyard owners a means to share gratefully their abundance with poor and needy countrymen. The Law would also called for the land (including vineyards) to be left dormant every seventh year (25:3-5).

Symbols—The Old Testament used vineyards to symbolize peace and prosperity. Describing the calm and abundance during Solomon’s reign, the Bible says, “Throughout Solomon’s reign, Judah and Israel lived in safety from Dan to Beer-sheba, each man under his own vine and his own fig tree” (1 Kings 4:25). Ezekiel spoke of the children of Israel returning from captivity to re-inhabit their homeland: “They will live there securely, build houses, and plant vineyards” (Ezek. 28:26a).

In contrast, the destruction of a vineyard or a vineyard’s failing to produce fruit could symbolize the Lord’s judgment. Declaring His judgment on Judah, the Lord

said, “There will be no grapes on the vine, no figs on the fig tree, and even the leaf will wither. Whatever I have given them will be lost to them” (Jer. 8:13b). And describing those living in Jerusalem at the coming Day of the Lord, Zephaniah said the people, because of their sin, would not enjoy the benefit of their labors, including the wine of their vineyards (Zeph. 1:13).

Most commonly, though, the Old Testament used grapevines to symbolize Israel. The best-known text describing Israel as a vine comes from “the parable of the vineyard” (Isa. 5:1-7). In the parable, God is the vinedresser, the gardener; His people are the vines. God cleared the fertile field, built a protective watchtower, and planted “the finest vines.... He expected [the vineyard] to yield good grapes, but it yielded worthless grapes” (v. 2). In other words, in spite of all God had done, Israel was unfaithful. God, therefore, was bringing judgment: “I will remove its [the vineyard’s] hedge, and it shall be consumed. ... I will make it a wasteland” (vv. 5b-6a).

The parable is clear in describing Israel: The bad fruit is not the responsibility of the vinedresser, who took careful pains to plant and take care of the vine. ... It is the vine itself that is at fault. It produced bad grapes in spite of all the advantages it had, so the vines would be destroyed.

THE DISCIPLES' UNDERSTANDING

Against this backdrop, Jesus made statements about Him being the vine and His Father the vinedresser (John 15:1-8). The contrast between Jesus' words and the declarations in Isaiah are stark. Whereas Israel had sinned, Jesus was sinless (Heb. 4:15; 1 John 3:5). When the Lord of Hosts looked to His vineyard, Israel, hoping to find justice and righteousness, He found instead "bloodshed" (ESV) and heard "cries of wretchedness" (Isa. 5:7). God's people had not been obedient to what He had wanted them to do; instead they had been quite the opposite. Jesus, however, submitted Himself fully to the Father's will and was "obedient to the point of death—even to death on a cross" (Phil. 2:8b; see also Luke 22:42).

What did the disciples think as they heard Jesus describe Himself as the vine? They would have been familiar with Isaiah's parable in which the vine was destroyed. Jesus went on, however, to make the distinction clear. He was the vine—they were the branches, and they were to abide in Him (John 15:5). In Jesus' "I am" statement, the vine would not be destroyed. Those who did not abide in Him, those who were unproductive branches, however, would be gathered and burned (v. 6).

Jesus instructed His disciples, then, that in Him they were to bear fruit. He would be their source and their supply. As they relied on Christ and obeyed His commands, fruit would come. Rather than disappoint the Father by providing "worthless grapes" (Isa. 5:2,4), Jesus' followers would bring the Father, the "vineyard keeper," glory as they produced "much fruit" and thereby proved they were His disciples (John 15:1,8). 🍷

Paul E. Kullman is a freelance writer living in College Station, Texas.