

As a pastor, people often ask me interesting questions. One question that people ask me is, “Can you lose your salvation?” This is a deep question, Scripture does answer it, but it also ties into other questions that Christians ask. Things like: “Why should I attend a worship service?” “Is there an unforgiveable sin?” Or “What does it mean to be a Christian?”

These words of Jesus in John 15 help answer our questions. Jesus tells us in verse 5: **“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.”** Understanding that we are branches of the vine helps answer many of these questions. The keyword is abide. Jesus invites us to remain in Him. **WE BEAR MUCH FRUIT ABIDING IN CHRIST THE TRUE VINE.**

First, we need to understand I. The true vine has made us clean by His Word. Jesus tells us, **“Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.”** Jesus is talking to His disciples in this passage. He is talking to people who are already believers in Him.

The good news of Jesus is that you were a dead branch on the side of the road. You were brush ready for the fire. That is to say, you were dead in your sins, in your selfish desires, and in your destructive habits. You were good for nothing. What else can twigs and underbrush be used for other than to be used as compost as fuel for fire?

Can you blame somebody for throwing away, composting, or burning bramble? Likewise, our Heavenly Father made us to serve Him and worship Him, and He is rightfully angry that His creation rebelled. He is just in letting sinful humanity die, sending them to the fires of hell for their sins and selfish desires.

The Father sent His Son Jesus to live a perfect life on your behalf. Jesus produced much fruit in His time here on Earth. The true vine served humanity, loving God and loving humanity perfectly. Jesus died to pay the penalty for your sins. He rose again on the third day and because He is alive, so we are also.

Through Jesus’ work on our behalf, we are made clean. The Holy Spirit takes us dead branches and grafts us back onto the vine. Through a miracle, God is able to breathe life even into the most brittle, decayed, and lifeless branches so that they grow again and bear grapes.

This is what happens in Baptism. God washes us with His Word and we are welcomed into God’s family. We become grafted into the vine. Baptism is a true salvation from sin, death, and the devil. It is a true joy. It is a true gift of God. What does it mean to be a Christian? It means to be grafted into Jesus Christ the true vine who gives us everything we need to thrive spiritually.

But II. Branches can't do anything apart from the true vine. After Jesus tells His disciples that they are already clean because of that saving Word of Good News, He is quick to add, **“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.” Being a Christian means you have been made alive as you, a brittle dead branch, have been grafted into Jesus Christ, the true vine. You need Jesus every day to strengthen you, sustain you, and give you what you need. Abide in Jesus.

Can you as a Christian lose your salvation? Yes, you can. You are a branch grafted onto Jesus, but you can fall away. You can be cut off. Jesus gives us a stark warning in verse 6: **“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.”** When we turn away from Jesus, we separate ourselves from the only source of life that there is. Not abiding in Jesus starts a regression. It is a regression back to a dead branch after being a lively and fruitful one.

Upon no longer abiding in Jesus, the branch is thrown away. What does a fallen branch do? It withers. What do you do with a bunch of fallen branches? You gather them, you throw them into the fire, and then they burn.

A follow up question to, “Can you lose your salvation?” Is this: “Is there an unforgiveable sin?” In our minds we maybe have a list of really bad sins: robbing a bank, murdering someone, or cheating on our spouse. We take a list like that and we worry that one of those is the unforgiveable sin.

But that’s not how it works. Jesus explains it here in this text. The one unforgiveable sin is unbelief—it is a Christian choosing time and time again to reject Jesus and not abide in Him. That doesn’t happen overnight. C.S. Lewis writes in the book *The Screwtape Letters*, “It does not matter how small the sins are provided that their cumulative effect is to edge the man away from the Light and out into the Nothing. Murder is no better than cards if cards can do the trick. Indeed the safest road to Hell is the gradual one—the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts...”

Thus, the unforgiveable sin happens not in one dramatic transgression, but in small choices we make again and again. It starts with hitting the snooze button on a Sunday morning which causes you to be late to church and after a few weeks of being late to church you just decide to stay home. Staying home from church leads you to only go once a quarter, and then only Christmas and Easter, then before you know it, you haven’t been to church or read the Bible in a decade.

Needless to say, the reason you’re here today is to avoid that. You don’t want to be thrown out, withered, and tossed in the fire. The goal for every Christian should be to receive eternal life with Christ Jesus. We reach that goal by abiding in Him. **“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.”** Abide in Jesus Christ.

III. The true vine produces fruit in your life. Jesus Christ has taken you from death to life and in him alone you have life. You are saved by faith in him, and faith simply receives the gifts that He gives. A garden hose doesn't produce water, it simply transports water from the source. Likewise, you have no ability to save yourself, you simply receive salvation from Jesus, the source. Just as a branch cannot survive cut off from the vine, so you cannot survive without abiding in Jesus. You need Jesus every day.

This happens through the Word and Sacrament. God's Word and the Sacrament of Holy Communion are the lifelines that keep us Christians alive. **“Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.”** That cleansing word has to be spoken to you again and again as you get dirty from sin again and again. You hear that in God's Word. You hear that word of forgiveness pronounced to you in the Divine Service as we gather week after week. You need that word read to you as you do daily devotions, drinking from that life-giving source that is the Bible.

You need the Lord's Supper. Yes, there may be extraordinary times where necessity separates you from this life-giving meal, but those should be few and far between. Church history is paved with the blood of Christian martyrs who would rather die than to give up the weekly gifts of Word and Sacrament. The Lutheran Confessions describe communion as “...a continual memorial of his bitter suffering and death and of all his benefits, a seal of the New Testament, a comfort for all troubled hearts, and a continual bond and union of Christ's people with Christ their head and among themselves” [FC SD VII 44]. How better can you abide in the Lord Jesus than to partake of His body and blood under bread and wine? This meal connects you to God as well as to your fellow Christians who can support you and uplift you in difficult times.

Thus, you make time for Church every Sunday in the same way that you make time for meals daily. You make time for prayer and devotion in the same way that we need oxygen to breathe. We do this because we are still sinners in need of a savior, and like branches of a tree, we cannot last long separated from the trunk.

I say these things because regularly received Word and Sacrament ministry is the way that Jesus comes to us. He doesn't come to us on a hike or in a rowboat, but in His Word read. He doesn't come to us in a vision or a whisper in our ear, but in the waters of baptism and the Lord's Supper. That's just how things work.

We do these things regularly because Jesus promises to produce fruit in our lives. It's not just for the sake of not going to hell. **WE BEAR MUCH FRUIT ABIDING IN CHRIST THE TRUE VINE.** Jesus says, **“If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By**

this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.”

Abiding in Christ produces fruit even in this life. Christianity isn't just a pie in the sky when you die. Jesus wants to work in you to give you peace in difficult times, love so that you can care for those who are often loveless. He wants to give you even more faith that you can lean on Him when the future is uncertain. That's why it's so important to be part of a local church and regularly attend services: not because through it you earn salvation, but through these means you receive the tools you need to go out into this world and serve others.

“Can you lose your salvation?” “Is there an unforgiveable sin?” People ask me these questions, and the answer is yes in both cases, but the more important question is “What does it mean to be a Christian?” And we find that answer in our text today. Jesus is the true vine who has taken us from death to life. And to be a Christian is to continually receive that life through His Words of forgiveness and His Sacraments. Keep on coming to receive the gifts, and you don't need to worry about the first two questions. Amen!