

## How to be a Branch 101

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### John 15: 1-8

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen, and... *Happy Mother's Day!*

Before we learn some great things from the words of Jesus this morning, I thought I would honor all the mothers here and especially my own mother by sharing the top 10 things I learned from MY mother..... and you from yours.

- #1 Mom taught me to be an adult: *If you don't eat your vegetables you'll never grow up!*
- #2 Mom taught me anticipation: *Just wait til your father comes home!*
- #3 Mom taught me logic: *you fall off the roof you can't go to the store with me!*
- #4 Mom taught me patience: *just wait until your father gets home!*
- #5 Mom taught me genetics: *you look just like your father!*
- #6 Mom taught me family history: *hey, were you born in a barn? Close the door!*
- #7 Mom taught me science: *keep crossing your eyes and they'll stay that way!*
- #8 Mom taught me justice: *one day YOU will have kids and they'll turn out just like you and then you'll see what I have to put up with!*
- #9 Mom taught me humor: *when you cut off your toes with the lawn mower, don't come running to me!!*

And finally...

- #10 Mom (and dad) taught me to be a disciple of Jesus Christ: *Christ is the vine, Mark, and you are one of His branches....bear good fruit!*

As a baptized believer in Jesus Christ, that is the relationship He makes perfectly clear for us in today's Gospel, He is the Vine..... We are the branches.....and branches are expected to produce fruit!

The setting for this teaching of Jesus comes in the middle of a series of farewell discourses (John 14-17) in which Jesus is teaching his followers about what is expected of them after he leaves....which is why this text is placed just prior to the Ascension of Jesus into heaven. Jesus uses a number of metaphors not only to explain who HE is, but also to teach his followers who THEY are: I am the bread, I am the good shepherd, I am the way, I am the door, I am living water come down from heaven, I am the vine.....and YOU are the branches.

God, the Father and Creator of all things, has been using the image of vineyards going way back into the Old Testament. In Isaiah 5, God plants and tends a vineyard and expects it to produce.....(what?)..... grapes! Good ones! Juicy ones, and lots of them! But in a metaphor designed to sting the people for their apostasy against God, Isaiah reminds them that they have been producing only “wild grapes,” fruit that was inferior, small, and bitter. Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Hosea all use the same images, joining the concepts of “fruitfulness” to “faithfulness” and reminding God’s people over and over that HE was the ultimate and finest winemaker.

Why do people plant grapevines? Is it because they like lots of long and tangled branches? Is it because they haven’t discovered model railroading? Is it because they have a desire to grow big green leaves? Of course not: it’s all about the FRUIT, the GRAPES...and, of course, what can be DONE with the fruit! There are over 8000 varieties of grapevines planted around the world, all with one goal: growing good grapes.

Look closely at any grapevine and one of the first things you will notice is that *it’s very difficult to tell one branch from the other.* They all twist and curl and wind around each other to the point where you can’t tell where one stops and the other begins. Jesus’ use of the branch imagery is His way of saying that it’s NOT the achievement of the INDIVIDUAL branches or stems that matters, it’s all based on the quality of the VINE.

That’s a point that’s important for us to remember, living as we do in our Individualistically Oriented Society, that’s crucial to the understanding of the use of

vine/branches/grapes metaphor that Jesus uses in John 15: it's not about the branches, it's about the grapes. Branches are only good for one thing and one thing alone: to produce fruit. And if they do, GREAT!

Return with me to the thrilling days of Biology 101 and answer one simple question: how does a branch produce fruit? It has to remain firmly attached to the vine. It's the vine that provides the nutrients. It's the vine that provides the water. It's the vine that provides the support. And when the branch is connected to the vine....the result will be FRUIT!

What exactly does Jesus MEAN by *FRUIT*??? What is it that we are supposed to be "producing?" Let's start THAT discussion by asking all the mothers in the congregation: What were your hopes and dreams for the children you brought into the world? I imagine you wanted them to be kind and loving, to be successful and independent (moving out of the house before age 40 counts here!), and (going out on a limb here) to produce some grandkids for you to spoil. And if our kids get 2 or 3 of these things going, we parents....and you moms are proud!

In Galatians 5, St. Paul outlines 9 different "FRUIT of the SPIRIT" that we Christians "produce" when we remain firmly attached to Christ: *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control*. These things, Paul reminds us, are ALL brought out in us when we draw our very lives straight from Christ.....and the list begins with *love*. It's hard to see a single negative in any one of these descriptives, especially because it's not multiple choice-Chinese menu. We don't get just 2 or 3 of them: it's all nine of them that become literally a part of our DNA when we remain attached to Christ.

There's even more! The goal of the branch is to pass the nutrients from the vine on through itself and out into the grapes it produces. The branch itself doesn't hold on to the food....it passes it on and stores it in the grapes!

It's the goal of God's "branches" sitting here today and in churches throughout the world to pass on the "nutrients" of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the world around us so that they TOO can "*taste and see that the Lord is good*" and they too can be grafted onto the one vine that truly brings life.... the vine of Christ.

But what happens.....and here the teaching gets a bit harder.....when a branch doesn't do what a branch is supposed to do?

Some branches get really wrapped up in themselves. They spend all their energy growing longer and longer and producing lots and lots of leaves but no grapes. Other branches just stop producing grapes. Sometimes the branches begin to produce fruit that isn't sweet or juicy but may be bitter and tiny. Some branches get so thick they pass for the vine.

In each case, it's time for PRUNING. Out comes the owner of the vineyard with his saw and his knife and before long the ground is COVERED with leaves and twigs and stringers and, sometimes, even ENTIRE branches.....all done with love, with careful planning, and with prayer so that next year the crop of grapes will be even better. It may even make us cringe to see it happen.....

And we cringe even more when God applies the pruning to US. I've been pruned back far more than once and in lots of different ways. When I neglect my prayer life and my focus on Christ and begin to think that the faith and the church is all about ME and what I think and what I like, it won't be long before God will find a very necessary way to prune me back and help me refocus on the VINE. When I work too many hours and begin to think it's my labor that's making the difference, again, God reminds me that Christ is the vine and I am only a branch.

Let's talk a bit more about vines and branches and remaining and pruning. It's almost summertime in Virginia Beach, a time when some very amazing behavior takes place among quite a few church members: they take a vacation from church!!!! It's absolutely amazing to me. Why not take a vacation from breathing or eating? I certainly

understand a “sabbatical” from a ministry.... from Sunday School teaching or a couple of weeks vacation, but can we LIVE without the forgiveness of our sins and the strength we gain from Holy Communion? What if God were to take a vacation from us? Why give the devil 10 or 15 weeks to gain an extra foothold in your life?

It also amazes me that periodically someone will call the office, ask to speak to me and I'll hear something like this: *I am a member of YOUR church although I don't think we've met* (although I have been here almost 3 years now). Our congregational ByLaws state that if you absent yourself from worship for a year, you are NO LONGER A MEMBER of the congregation. It's self-exclusion of a branch from the vine.....and the outcome isn't going to be good. *“REMAIN in me and I will remain in you”* is a reminder from Christ we need to take seriously!

It's an anonymous quote, but good to remember anyway: The Fruit of the Spirit must be cultivated. All that grows naturally is weeds.

Which brings me to the last point: Fertilizer! We become grafted onto the vine that is Christ at the time of our baptism. Throughout our Christian lives we are continually fed. And periodically we might find ourselves being the recipient of a first-class pruning, as the Owner of the Vineyard trims away the parts of us that are unproductive or wild. Finally....we must be continually nourished, something that Christ, the vine, accomplishes for us through the Means of Grace: God's Word and the Sacrament of the Altar. To receive these blessings we must remain connected...firmly and regularly....to the church, which is God's instrument of distribution. To do so is truly a matter of life and death. It's to be our priority!

We'll illustrate this with a true story that took place on July 20, 1969 on the surface of the moon. Neil Armstrong, Michael Collins, and Buzz Aldrin had landed Apollo 11 on the surface of the moon. Aldrin had brought with him a tiny communion kit given to him by his church: a tiny chalice and wine vial about the size of a peanut and a small wafer. During the morning he radioed, *“Houston, this is Eagle. This is the LM pilot speaking. I would like to request a few moments of silence and invite each person listening*

*in to contemplate for a moment the events of the last few hours and give thanks in his own individual way.” During the radio blackout he opened the little plastic packages and poured the wine into the chalice. In the 1/6 gravity of the moon the wine slowly curled up the side of the communion cup. Then he read Scripture: “I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever abides in me will bring forth much fruit.”*

It’s amazing that the first food ever eaten and the first liquid ever poured on the surface of the moon were the elements of Holy Communion as one astronaut truly remained attached to the vine even after leaving this world!

Finally, let’s get down to the bottom line: Why grow grapes? Let’s face it, the vast majority of grapes in this world are used to make wine....and the finer the better. When you taste the wine, is it the grape you remember? Is it the branch? Is it even the vine? No...it all points back to the winemaker. Just as today we point back to our mothers and thank them for all they have done for us, in our daily lives, may ALL the FRUIT we produce point back to the great owner of the vineyard: to God the Father Himself.....so that we, and the world around us, will bring Him honor and glory.

**AMEN.**