

John 15:1-7

'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. ²He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. ³You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. ⁵I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

"What Do I Want for God?"

Last week, as we were talking about what drives us to pray, I left you with a question to consider: Remembering that I come into Jesus' presence when I pray, how does that change my prayer? If you look at the title of the sermon, you might think it more appropriate to say, "What do I want FROM God?" because that is more often the way we approach God, but the deeper our relationship with God, and the better we know Jesus, the more the question becomes, "What do I want FOR God?"

Of course if we don't know who Jesus is, his presence will not change our prayer or affect our minds or hearts when we enter into his presence. True story about Francis Asbury, the first Bishop of the Methodist Church in North America, the man for whom this fellowship hall is partly named, and the man responsible for growing the Methodist movement from about 600 believers in 1771 to over 200,000 by 1816.

Once, when Asbury was nearly sixty and had been a bishop for nearly two decades, he and the 'venerable, portly' preacher Benjaming Bidlack came to the home of a 'respectable Methodist' in the Genessee District of upstate New York. Seeing Asbury riding in front, the man mistook him for an assistant and ordered him to dismount and open the gate for the bishop. Bidlack played along, and as he passed by, Asbury bowed low, offering to see to the bishop's

horse and bags. When their host realized his mistake, he was 'mortified' until he saw how much Asbury enjoyed the joke (6).

If you don't know who someone is, you can really embarrass yourself in their presence. But Jesus' sense of humor is probably better than Francis Asbury's, so you don't need to be "mortified" when you say something stupid. The point is that the better you know Jesus, the better you'll know how to act, what to say, and what to ask for in his presence.

I'll be honest: when I first read that verse that ends, "...ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you," I couldn't believe it. I thought, "How could Jesus make a promise like that?" We can all think of plenty of things we have asked God for that have not "come true." But I can't believe that Jesus was lying to us. So what did he mean? And in order to figure that out the first thing we should do is look at the first part of that verse that says, "If you abide in me and my words abide in you." That is what lawyers call a quid pro quo, and it's a big one; we must abide in Jesus, and his words must abide in us.

What does that mean? To answer that, Jesus gives us this little parable of the vine and the branches...and the vine-grower. Jesus says that he is the vine and his father is the vine-grower, the master gardener. The vine doesn't have a whole lot of influence over the vine-grower; Jesus lived a life that was totally aligned with the will of the Father, even when that was difficult – when he faced arrest and crucifixion he prayed until he sweat blood, and he even asked that the Father "remove the cup" of suffering from him, but he ended his prayer with, "Thy will be done, not mine."

And although Jesus was totally obedient to the will of the Father, he knew what the Father was up to; he knew that his life was meant to rescue all of humanity from darkness, from sin and from fear and from death itself. He knew he was here with a purpose, and it was a big purpose, and the only way Jesus could fulfill it was to be totally submissive to the Father, the master gardener, the vine-grower. So Jesus is the vine that understands his mission.

And we are the branches. That says an awful lot, and it's something that we have the hardest time accepting; we are the branches. We

don't survive apart from the vine. Jesus says very explicitly, "Apart from me you can do nothing." Some may beg to differ; some will say, "Look at me, Jesus. I'm my own person; I'm doing my own thing. I'm not doing nothing, and I'm not depending on you!" To those people I would ask, "What exactly are you doing?" Are you producing fruit? Because the "job" of the branch is to produce fruit, and the first condition for producing fruit is that it remain connected to the vine. If you're living your life just to gain as much pleasure or power as you can, to be as safe as you can and as comfortable as you can, what exactly is the fruit that you're producing?

You may think, "O I can produce fruit without Jesus; I can love others and love God and still do as I want and bear fruit." But if you're not submitting to Jesus and abiding by his words, you're not truly loving him, so you're not loving God or loving man. How can we look upon the One who carried the weight of our sins on the cross, who rose for our sake, and say, "I am not going to bow to you. I'm not going to turn my life over to you and make you my Lord"? We can go through the motions of feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, being good neighbors, but if we are not submitting to Jesus and letting his words abide in us, are we really bearing fruit?

If we really love Jesus then we truly **abide** in Jesus and his words abide in us, then it's true what he says; "Ask for anything in my name and it shall be done for you." Because whatever we ask for will be what God desires, and God will not withhold from us what he desires.

That's hard for us to accept, especially with regard to intercessory prayer which we'll talk about next week – when we pray for someone else's well-being and that person doesn't appear to get well we're left scratching our heads sometimes. But for now I'm talking about our own prayer petitions, about the things we ask for ourselves. If we abide in Jesus and his words abide in us, then we ask only for what is in harmony with God's will. And if our prayer is not answered the way we had hoped it would be, we have to nonetheless praise God and accept that what we expected was not what God wanted. God may want something better, and to achieve something better things have to happen in a different way than what we might expect.

This certainly applies to our church. We have a lot of ministries here, but not all of them will last, and new ones that we haven't imagined

yet will take their places. And if we insist on doing the same things the same way without abiding in Christ and his words abiding in us, our ministries can bear no fruit. And if a branch bears no fruit what does the vine-grower do to it?

When I was a young boy in Virginia growing up in the country, our family lived in a wonderful house that had belonged to a man whose hobby was growing grapes and making wine, so there was a grape arbor – about a dozen long rows of grapevines, and once a year for several years it was my chore to prune those grapevines...which means that I played the part of God in this parable. As the vine-grower, I had to decide what to cut and what to keep, and my decisions were guided by the question: "What will produce the most fruit?" Any vine-grower knows that bigger grapevines do not produce more fruit, because long branches that grow far from the vine rob the plant of the energy needed to produce fruit. You need to trim back those runaway branches, so that you'll have an abundance of fruit that can feed an abundance of people. God's greatest desire is that all his children are fed, and so we who are committed to serving God need to be pruned in order for us to produce more fruit. We have to allow the master gardener to trim back those branches that grow too long and too far away from the vine.

I don't want to discourage you from going to God for anything in prayer – for a new car, for a new job, for health and wealth and fame and fortune. God may give you all of these things. But if you don't get what you ask for, perhaps you should ask yourself what your intention is in asking for them. You are a branch. Are you connected to Jesus? Are you interested in bearing fruit, or are more interested in HAVING fruit? Are you asking for something FROM God, or are you asking for something FOR God?

Next week we'll be talking about INTERCESSORY prayers – that is, praying for someone else. And I'd like you to consider the following question:

Would you be willing to trade places with a person that you are praying for?