

The Secret of Spirituality

by Mariano Di Gangi

The secret to a fruitful Christian life is to remain in Christ and let his life flow through us, resulting in a personal relationship, a fruitful relationship, and a life that glorifies God.

Duration: 27:50

Scripture: John 15:1

Topics: "Spirituality", "Abiding in Christ", "Spiritual Fruitfulness"

Description

Mariano Di Gangi emphasizes the importance of a personal and fruitful relationship with Jesus, as depicted in John 15, where Jesus describes himself as the true vine and believers as branches. He warns against a 'cut flower religion' that lacks a living connection to Christ, leading to spiritual decay. Di Gangi stresses that true spirituality comes from abiding in Christ, allowing His word and spirit to dwell within us, which results in a fruitful life that glorifies God. He highlights the necessity of faith, obedience, and repentance to maintain this relationship, and the consequences of being spiritually barren. Ultimately, he calls believers to bear fruit that confirms their discipleship and glorifies God.

Transcript

On these Sunday evenings, we have been considering the self-portraits of Jesus as these are given to us in the Gospel according to John. Next Sunday evening, we conclude the series speaking on Jesus as friend of sinners. But tonight, we consider the passage that is found in the 15th chapter of the Gospel according to John.

The word of the Lord Jesus, I am the true vine, and my father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes, so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.

Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself. It must remain in the vine.

Neither can you bear fruit, unless you remain in me. I am the vine. You are the branches.

If a man remains in me, and I in him, he will bear much fruit. Apart from me, you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers.

Such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you remain in me, and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my father's glory that you bear much fruit,

showing yourselves to be my disciples.

On the communion table, week by week, we have a beautiful display of flowers. They're set on the table, nicely arranged, a delight to the eye. We look at the different sizes and shapes of flowers.

We marvel at the rainbow-like spectrum of colors that they present. And if we get close enough to them, right after they have been picked, we can enjoy their fragrance as well. But let them stay a while, and you will notice that the colors begin to fade.

The petals shrivel up and fall. And what was once a thing of beauty and a joy almost forever, becomes a festering mess that must be deposited elsewhere. Why? Because these flowers have been cut from the living root that would have given them sustenance and continued life.

The great Quaker theologian, Elton Trueblood, says that you and I are living in a society that has a cut flower religion. Oh, it's got beautifully arranged ideals that come from the heritage of the past, from the Judeo-Christian tradition. And people still talk about peace, and they still go on record demonstrating for justice, and they cry for freedom, and they campaign for equality, and they're concerned about the environment, about the state of the creation.

All of this is a show of fair flowers, cut from the root, separated from faith in the living God and a relationship to our Lord and Savior. And already, if one looks closely, one can begin to see the signs of decay. The colors are fading, the petals are falling.

The monumental ignorance of many regarding the Bible. The commercialization of one day in seven so that all days are now paved over in favor of the God called Mammon. The breakdown of marriages, the cheapening of life through the increased practice of abortion.

All of this shows that while the flowers may appear fair at the top, the process of decay is going on relentlessly. Because our society's faith, our society's religion is of the cut flower variety, we are not rooted in a living, loving relationship to Jesus Christ. And that is what our text for tonight is all about.

Jesus gives us a self-portrait of himself, but he uses symbolic language. And when we consider the metaphor, we derive a great deal of spiritual benefit from it. He doesn't portray himself as the good shepherd, and we can visualize the shepherd with his flock, but he speaks of himself as a vine related to many branches.

He's speaking symbolically and yet significantly. In a living relationship to him, we recover our spiritual vitality and true spirituality. It's all about our living relationship to the living Lord.

And the first thing that I'd like to underline in this connection based on the words of our text is this, that it must be a personal relationship. I must abide or remain in Christ, and Christ must abide or remain in me. It must be a one-on-one interpersonal relationship.

For if I am severed from him, I cannot have spiritual life. You ever notice in the papers that pathetic phrase regarding someone who has been murdered or someone who was committed a murder, and they'll pass the individual off as a vagrant and mention that he had no fixed address. A Christian is one who can say, I have a fixed address.

I know where my roots have gone down. They are firmly planted in Jesus Christ and his life flows through to me. A Christian is one who has a fixed address.

He abides in, he remains in Jesus Christ. And that preposition, in, brief as it is, has a world of significance crammed into it. You'll find this over and over again in the epistles of Paul.

He speaks about being in Christ, in Christ, in Christ. What does he mean? He means that as fish find their vital atmosphere in the sea, as birds find theirs in the air, so the Christian finds it in the soil that is Jesus Christ being rooted in him and deriving from him the spiritual vitality that is absolutely necessary. Resting on Christ, being related to Christ, being rooted in Christ, our part of the personal relationship to be vitally linked to him.

But then Christ must abide in us. Christ must remain in us, not as a transient guest, but as someone who comes and comes to stay. Nowadays we talk about someone being in residence.

We have poets in residence. We have scholars in residence. We have diplomats in residence.

We have missionaries in residence. We even have theologians in residence. They are here for a while and put themselves at the disposal of those who want to benefit from their expertise.

Jesus promises to be in residence, not as a transient, but as a permanent inhabitant of your life and mine. In the preceding chapter, in the 14th chapter of John's Gospel, in verses 21 and 23, our Lord says that if we love him, we will keep his commandments. And if we love him, and if we keep his commandments, he will come down and take up residence within our hearts.

Better than that, he will also bring the spiritual presence of his heavenly Father with him, and they both will indwell our hearts. In the third chapter of the book of Revelation, we find one of the most familiar verses of the Bible. And at verse 20, Jesus again promises us his presence and offers to come and abide and reside within us.

Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If any man hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to him and will sup with him and he with me. Many years ago, more than I care to remember, the year that I started university at the ripe old age of 15 in the city of New York, I was part of a gospel group that went about singing in the various rescue missions of lower Manhattan.

And we'd go into all these slum areas, carefully picking our way over the bodies of derelicts who were dead drunk in the streets. And we'd be asked to conduct the service and almost without fail, one or another of our group would quote Revelation 320, urging the people who stood before us to open their hearts when Jesus knocks, to respond when they hear his voice, and to let the Savior in. It was only years later that I realized that those words were not first spoken to a group of derelicts on Skid Row.

They were spoken to Christians of First Presbyterian Church in Laodicea, Asia Minor, who were crammed full with everything else and had forgotten that they had left Christ outside. God forbid that we should ever be guilty of that, of being so taken up with our own agenda that he is on the outside calling, knocking, waiting, and still offering us the presence that fills the emptiness. We must remain in him, firmly rooted in Christ, drawing our life from him.

And he must be welcomed into our lives as a permanent honored guest. Why is it that people refuse to let Jesus in? There are three ways in which this is done, and it's done all the time. The first way is the way of

unbelief.

Faith is openness to the presence of Jesus. Unbelief slams the door in his face. The second way is that of disobedience, defying his authority, going our own way, challenging his way.

And that certainly excludes him from being enthroned at the center of our life. And then there is impenitence, the refusal to recognize that without him we can't make it, we can't go it alone, we must change our course of life, we must change our direction, and we must repent and let the Savior in. Unbelief, disobedience, impenitence, these are the things that bar the door to the entry of him who calls and knocks and waits.

How does Christ remain in us? How does Christ dwell in us? We are told in no uncertain terms. In Colossians chapter 3 at verse 16, the Apostle Paul says to those Christians of Asia Minor, let the word of Christ dwell in you richly. Christ dwells in us as we hear and receive and welcome and honor his word.

If the good seed of the word of God remains on the surface of a hardened heart, the sparrows of hell will come and sweep it away. But we must let the word of Christ dwell in us and dwell in us richly. That is how his presence is made manifest to us, as we hear his word, welcome his word, believe and obey his word.

Christ comes to dwell within us not alone by his word but by his spirit. I believe in the vicar of Christ, but he doesn't live in Rome. He lives in the hearts of those who belong to Jesus Christ.

For in the gospel according to John in chapter 14 and again in chapter 16, Jesus stresses that he is going to depart from this world, but he will send another just like himself to be with us and to live within us. And the name of his personal vicar and abiding representative is the Holy Spirit. There's a fringe benefit attached to all this.

For if you and I are personally related to Jesus Christ, if we are rooted in Christ and Christ dwells within us by his word and by his spirit, we will be so closely united to Jesus Christ that our desires and our priorities will become like his. And so we can be sure that when we ask, we shall receive. When we seek, we shall find.

And when we knock, it shall be opened unto us. For by being closely united to Jesus Christ, we will want only the things that Christ wants and these the father will never deny. The second and last thing that comes to mind on the basis of the words of our text is that Jesus not only tells us about a personal relationship, but a fruitful relationship.

He is the vine. We are the branches. And when his life flows through to us, we bear blossom and fruit to the glory of God.

And in that connection, he distinguishes between branches that are barren sterile and branches that bear fruit to the glory of God. The concept of a vine and its branches and a harvest that comes or fails to come does not come new in the New Testament. It's there in the Old Testament.

The prophets of the Old Testament who were the great revivalist preachers of Israel often made use of the imagery of the vine to remind the people of Israel that God had made a great investment in them. In Isaiah chapter 5, for example, we are told that the Lord bought a piece of ground, planted a vineyard, fertilized it, weeded it, watered it, cared for it, protected it, and when he went to reap the harvest instead of clusters of grapes, he only found resentment and resistance. And so he was basely repaid for all the care that he had

lavished on that vineyard.

But lest we get too hard in dealing with Israel, let's look at the state of our own hearts. God has purchased, God has planted, God has weeded, God has fertilized, God has cared, God has defended, and when he comes to look for fruit, what does he find in our lives? What he expects to find? Or do we give to him a bitter harvest that says no to his grace? The barren branch that bears no fruit symbolizes those who may have a church connection but have never been vitally reunited to Jesus Christ. They profess Christianity, but do they practice it? They attend the services of worship, sing the hymns of praise, provide part of the response for the response of reading, may even contribute to the maintenance of the church and the work of missions abroad, may come into the membership of the organization, may be baptized, may partake of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, and yet fail to produce the kind of fruitful return that the Lord has every right to expect from the lives of people.

What happens to those branches that are barren? What happens to those who profess but do not practice? What happens to those whose Christianity is only a matter of externals lacking internal reality? Our Lord describes it in terms that are very straightforward, terms of admonition and warning. Such branches are cut away, discarded, bundled together with others that are just as fruitless and then burned. That's exactly what John the Baptist had said would happen in the third chapter of the gospel according to Matthew.

And now in the 15th chapter of John, Jesus, gentle Jesus, meek and mild, shows that he is also the judge of the universe, and he cannot tolerate a counterfeit that passes itself off as the genuine article. Well, the barren branch doomed to judgment. But then there's the fruitful branch, those who dwell in Christ, those who have Christ dwelling in them, those who receive life from him and bear fruit for God's glory.

These God prunes, he purges, in order that they might be even more fruitful in the future. How does he do this? He does it by convicting us of our sin. He does this by the chastisements that we providentially experience in life.

He does this by the afflictions that come to us. He does this as you and I begin to practice self-denial, take up our cross and follow him. This is all part of God's work of pruning and purging to make the fruitful branch even more fruitful than ever.

And so it is that we come to bear the blessed fruit of love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and goodness and faithfulness and gentleness and self-control. Our Lord adds two simple but significant statements that should motivate us to be fruitful in the Christian life. And the first is that in so doing we will glorify God.

The Presbyterian Shorter Catechism, drafted more than 300 years ago but now largely in a state of oblivion, even among conservative evangelical Presbyterians, begins with a magnificent statement on life purpose. What is the chief end of man? What is the chief purpose of life? To glorify God and to enjoy him forever. And you and I fulfill the purpose for which God put us on this planet.

You and I fulfill the purpose for which God made us and put us in this world. We glorify him when our life is fruitful. And not only will we glorify God in doing this, but we will lead others to do the same.

Remember the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount? Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and beholding the fruit of a life that is related to Jesus Christ, join you in

glorifying your Father who is in heaven. Glorifying God is a great motivation to fruitfulness of Christian living. And the second is that by being fruitful we confirm our own discipleship.

Along the way, the Lord Jesus drops clues as to how we can be sure that we are genuine and not counterfeit disciples. In John 8, verse 31, for example, he says, If you continue in my word, then you will prove to be my disciples indeed. In John chapter 13, he says, By this shall all men know that you are my disciples when you have love for one another.

And here now he gives us yet another way of being sure that we are belonging to him and that we are definitely his disciples, that we are not counterfeits but the genuine article. When our lives are fruitful, we not only glorify God, but we confirm our discipleship. Jesus said, I am the vine, ye are the branches.

May we be so vitally related to him as to bear fruit that will confirm our discipleship and glorify the God of our salvation. Let us pray. Lord, we thank you for your word.

We thank you for your spirit. May Christ dwell in our hearts by faith. And may our lives produce fruit to your own honor and glory.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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