

I have a vine here. I want to use it to illustrate what Jesus is saying to us in our Scripture Lesson. Jesus used a vine to teach his disciples a spiritual lesson about the-church membership. "I am the true vine," Jesus says, "and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away,"

Here is the kind of branch that Jesus is talking about. If you can see, it's brown and withered and dead. It is connected to the vine but it isn't receiving any life from it. This dead branch will never grow anymore. I can break it off and no harm will be done to the vine or the other branches.

There is a solemn lesson in this. Jesus says that branches which are not fruitful are purged out. He probably has in mind what the OT prophets said about unfaithful Israel, "Go up through her vine-rows and strip away her branches, for they are not the Lord's. For the house of Israel and the house of Judah have been utterly faithless to me, says the Lord (Jer. 5:10). Jesus is probably referring also to Judas when he refers to a branch that bears no fruit. Judas was a member of Christ's church but was not converted and did not have Christ's spirit in him. He was like a dead branch still

connected to the vine. But Jesus is also refering to unconverted members of his church today; People who are members of a church but they are not united to Christ through faith, and do not have his spirit, These are branches that bear no fruit.

But there is also a hopeful side to what Jesus says. "Every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes, that it may bear more fruit." Now Kay told me if you take one of these branches and break off the end several branches will grow in the place of one. There is a way to make make this vine thicker and more luxuriant. It will cost a little. You have to snip off a little but in the end the plant is richer.

Jesus says that branches which are fruitful will be purged so they will bear more fruit. Jesus is referring to disciples who are faithful to him and living fruitful lives in his service. But they still have sins and weakness and faults which, Jesus says, God will purge away so they will be more fruitful. "Every branch that beareth fruit, he cleanseth it, that it may bear more fruit."

Not only is there a solemn side and a hopeful side to what Jesus says there is also a joyful side. Jesus

to his disciples
 says, "Already you are made clean by the word which I have spoken to you." In other words ~~his disciples believed what Jesus said.~~ Their sins have been washed away, they have been cleansed, because they trust the word of Jesus. This tells us that none of Christ's disciples are saved by doing good works. Our good works do not contribute one little bit to the forgiveness of our sins. There is nothing we can do to wash away our sins. There is an old Gospel hymn which says, "What can wash away my sins? Nothing but the blood of Jesus. What can make me clean within? Nothing but the blood of Jesus." We can do nothing of ourselves to wash away our sins. We are made clean by the word which he speaks to us. The only thing that can cleanse us is trusting the word of Christ.

Not only is there a solemn side and a hopeful side and a joyful side to what Jesus says, there is a warning; a warning to his disciples. ~~"Abide in me, and I in you.."~~ if a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned." "As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me."

that illustrates what Jesus said.

Now here is a shiny green branch on this vine.[^] If I break it off it will soon wither up and turn brown because it is cut off from its source of life. And you see there is no way I can separate this branch from all the other branches without separating it, at the same time, from the vine.

This means that Jesus' disciples must live in close fellowship with him and other believers. A disciple of Christ cannot separate himself from fellow-believers without separating himself from Christ as well. When a man or a woman or a child cuts himself off from the fellowship of believers he cuts himself off from Christ as well. When a man or a woman grow up and leave town to live far away they must immediately ~~become-involved-in-~~ join other believers in the worship and service of Christ or else they will spiritually die. "As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me."

Now I would like to apply our Scripture Lesson more specifically to our church. This year the session has been reviewing the membership rolls. In a few days one letter will be sent out to 22 inactive members who

are living in or around Reedsville. Another letter will be sent to 30 non-resident members. So all in all 52 people will be contacted or $\frac{1}{4}$ of the total membership of the church.

First, let's take a look at the letter to inactive resident members. This letter draws attention to their inactivity and expresses an interest in the reasons for it. Then, to quote the letter, it says, "If you choose to remain absent from your church the session will have no alternative but to transfer your name from the current active roll to the inactive member roll."

Now many of these members have been associated with this church for years and years. Their parents and grand-parents were members. At one time they were members. Some of them were even elders. At one time they showed evidence of being joined to Christ in a living relationship. But now something has changed them. We don't know what. We would like to know. We are not kicking them out of the church. We are merely making official what is already a fact. They are not active members. We are only kidding ourselves if we think they are.

Some of these inactive members still contribute; some contribute generously to the work of the church.

I don't know how much they give or who gives because I don't want to know. But I have been told that some give generously. Why then are we sending them a letter that may upset them and make them angry; maybe make them stop giving? Because we want them to know that we are concerned more about their relationship to Christ than we are about their money.

"If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers;" It's important for all of us and them to realise that the session has not cast them forth. Rather we can not help but notice that they have been cast forth. We cannot help but notice that they have withered and fallen away. We are not angry with them. We do not consider ourselves more righteous than they are. We are not judging them. We are simply saying you are inactive and you cannot remain spiritually alive much less grow in Christ when you are cut off from the vine and the other branches. So much for the inactive resident members. ^R ~~Now let's take a look at the letter to the inactive non-resident members.~~

~~There are about 30 non-residents of Reedsville and the area who are members of our church. These are men~~

Now let's take a look at the letter to the non-resident members. This letter thanks them for their support ~~over-the-years~~ and the love they have expressed for the church over the years. It ~~confess-~~ draws attention to the fact that since they have moved from the community they are ^{obviously} cut off from worshipping regularly with us. It expresses concern that they become involved in the work and worship of a church near them so that they can grow in Christ. It reminds them that their commitment is above all to Jesus Christ, ~~and-not-to-a-church~~. Finally we urge them, in the words of the letter, "to consider transferring your membership to the church where you are now actively worshipping or to become active in a church nearyou."

Now many of these people have been associated with this church for years, some for generations. Some, I have been told contribute regularly. But we are concerned that they become actively involved in a church near them. They can't abide in Christ unless they worship regularly with God's people. They can't worship regularly here. So we are urging them to worship regularly where they live and become actively involved in a local church. Some of these non-resident

members may not now worship regularly anywhere. We are concerned especially with these people.

Formal church membership in this church will save no one. So if we really believe the word of Christ and if we really want to be faithful to him we ~~aren't showing~~ ~~any-love-for-friends-and-family~~ must remind them that membership in a church will not save them. Only membership in Christ can save us. And no one can live long as a Christian cut off from fellow believers. So as soon as one of our members moves away parents and friends should urge them to become involved in a church; and worship regularly and become a part of its ministry.

Now this action on the part of the session is sure to upset some people. We didn't do it to upset people. We didn't want to do it at all. But after reading the constitution of the United Presbyterian Church and the duties of elders we found we really had no choice. We are duty bound to minister to the spiritual needs of the congregation, even if it means financial disaster.

The session has taken a scary step that involves a lot of risk. Some of us are scared. I'm scared. But there is something you can do to minister to me and

to your friends and relatives.

Do you want your inactive friends and relatives to abide in Christ? Then you will write to them or talk to them and you will explain to them what it means to be a Christian. You will stress their need to trust in Christ and to be united and growing in him in the fellowship of believers. In short you will stress membership in Christ rather than church membership. You will explain that /If a person is united to Christ through faith in him then regular worship and study with fellow believers will follow naturally. I have never gone anyplace where I have not found felt at home in the fellowship of believers. So this is something you can do; you can write or talk to your inactive friends.

There is still something else you can do. You can be sure that you are abiding in Christ. There are thousands of professing Christians in every church whose relationship to Christ is only outward and formal. Some of them are joined to Christ by baptism and church-membership. Some of them go even further than this, and are regular communicants and show interest in theology. But they lack the one thing needful. Despite worship

services, and sermons, and sacraments, they have no grace in their hearts, no personal faith in Jesus, no inward work of the Holy Spirit. They are not united to Christ and Christ is not in them.

Are you abiding in Christ? Are you like one of these shiny green leaves? Are you living and growing in Christ the vine? Is he the source of your spiritual life. Have you been cleansed by his Word. Jesus says to you, he commands you, "Abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing."

AMEN