

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

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The Way of the Vine

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Intro:

Welcome to the National Community Church podcast. We're thrilled to be able to share this weekend message with you. If you'd like to subscribe, find us on iTunes or go to theaterchurch.com.

Pastor Joshua:

So good to be with you all this weekend. Shout out to all seven of our campuses and even those of you who are our extended family joining us online. If you have a Bible, will you meet me and John, chapter number 15, we'll get there in just a moment. You all know that February is Black History Month and that was last month and I don't know if you know, but Black History Month started out as a week in 1926. Well, it's March now and this is Women's History Month. That also started out as a week 40 years ago. And speaking of Women's History Month, I have been reflecting on this over the last couple of weeks. And I've been reflecting on it personally and historically. Personally, I think about my mother, who broke rank and went against the grain as the first lady of our church, a church that my dad was pastoring. In the black Baptist Church, we kind of have these specific roles of what people are supposed to do, but my mother decided she was going to become my first youth pastor because the kids in the church were kind of cutting up in the back and making noise and things and so she was motivated by the need to engage with us but also motivated by Jesus' command to make disciples.

I'm also thinking about this month, historically as well, all of the women who have gone before us some names we will never know but have been straight bosses as I would say and really opening major doors along the way. One woman who I want to highlight in particular that I've been thinking of 55 years ago in 1965, a wife 39 year old mother of five, her name is Viola Liuzzo. And she is forever etched in history because like so many women before her, she went against the grain of culture for what she believed. It was not the place for a white woman to leave the comforts of her home and her children to drive from Detroit, Michigan, to Alabama, to join blacks in Selma to fight for voting rights but she did. She drove down in order to engage with this protest and also to help coordinate this march that Dr. King was promoting at the Edmund Pettus Bridge, which many of you have seen before. And I don't think I need to tell you that in 1965, there was some serious racial tension all across of the south and it was coming to a head in Selma, Alabama. Now, Viola is over 800 miles removed from this volatility. She's more than 12 hours drive away from all of these things that are going on. When Viola decided to leave her home, her husband or her children did not know that she would not return. As she was driving one day, she was driving a 19 year old young man by the name of Leroy Moulton between Selma and Montgomery. And members of the KKK rode up against her car shot in it twice, hitting her in the head and killing her. The car went off into a ditch. Leroy Moulton played dead and so he lived through this ordeal. But Viola's husband warned her before she left. He said, "This is not your fight." And she said, "Baby, you're right, it isn't. It's everyone's fight." Later on her daughter said that my mom believed Jesus when he said, the suffering and the needy are our people.

Viola was said to be the only white woman to die in the civil rights movement. But as I thought about that, and I thought about this weekend, I'm really thinking about the words of Viola's husband. They're reverberating in my mind this weekend because his concern even though it was legitimate for his wife and for his family, it is an indication of the powerful influence of comfort and control in our lives. Now we don't like commands, because we want control. And we want control because we don't want to be inconvenienced and we don't want to be uncomfortable. I love the way I lead pastor, Pastor Mark says that he says, "We follow Jesus to the point of inconvenience", and I would add discomfort.

As we continue this series, 'The Jesus Way'. I want to pick up in John chapter 15. And in John 15, Jesus is talking about, guess what? Following Him and His commands, stuff that we love, right. Let me give you a little background of John 15 before we get into it, Jesus' words to His disciples is Jesus talking to his disciples and His words are significant for them at this particular time. It's kind of like how your parents will tell you something, but you don't realize how significant it is until later on. This is one of these moments for the disciples, Jesus is about to leave them physically and he's about to go back to the Father, which is the language that he uses. And so the disciples are a little bit nervous, they're a little bit anxious; they're a little bit confused. Jesus is kind of talking a little crazy to them right now. He's talking about people betraying him; he's talking about going to the Father, preparing a place for them. And the disciples are like, wait, whoa, whoa, Jesus, wait, where are you going? And why can't we go with you? Show us the way. These are all of their questions and concerns. So John 14 through 17 historically is known as the farewell discourse. It's Jesus' final instructions that he's giving to the disciples.

Last week, Pastor Joel mentioned that this section is also called the book of glory. And so scholars would know that there are four different sections to the book of John. And this would be a part of the book of glory. And it's a shift from the focus of Jesus' messiahship to God's glory through Jesus. And by the way, I should tell you that this glory is reflected in Jesus' degradation, suffering, and also seemingly failure. Now, those are not words that I think of when I think of glory. I don't know about you, but this is essentially what we are seeing Jesus model here. Jesus knows exactly what's about to go down. And he knows that his next stop is the cross. He also knows that the success of the disciples or should I say, the fulfillment of their purpose is dependent upon them following his instructions and his commands.

So then in John 15 it's like this summary of what Jesus has already been saying to the disciples, but he chooses to use this particular metaphor that we're going to read about tonight. Starting in verse number one of John 15 here are Jesus' words:

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ² Every branch in me that does not produce fruit he removes, and he prunes every branch that produces fruit so that it will produce more fruit. ³ You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴ Remain in me, and I in you. Just as a branch is unable to produce fruit by itself unless it remains on the vine, neither can you unless you remain in me. ⁵ I am the vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in me and I in him produces much fruit, because you can do nothing without me. ⁶ If anyone does not remain in me, he is thrown aside like a branch and he withers. They gather them, throw them into the fire, and they are burned. ⁷ If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you want and it will be done for you. ⁸ My

*Father is glorified by this: that you produce much fruit and prove to be my disciples. Christlike Love ⁹
"As the Father has loved me, I have also loved you. Remain in my love. ¹⁰ If you keep my commands
you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love."*

This weekend, we continue our series 'The Jesus Way' talking about the way of the vine. And there are just a couple of things that I want to highlight for us this weekend. One of them is this metaphor that Jesus is using the vine? Why is he using this metaphor? What does it mean? And then the second thing I want to illuminate for us is this word that is repeated over and over and over again in these verses that I just read this word, remain, which in some translations, it says, abide. And the word is repeated about 10 different times in the verses that I read. And then throughout John, in 16, of the 21 chapters, John is using this word. And so I want to drill down on these things this weekend to help us grasp what is the way of the vine

First, speaking of the vine this metaphor that Jesus is using viticulture, which is just a word that means a wine growing, is common in ancient Mediterranean times, right? The disciples would have understood this metaphor clearly like culturally this is what they would have known. The most common fruit producing crops of this time would have been figs, olives, and vines which produce grapes. Now, what you need to know about these crops is that the vine required the most attention. So right off the bat with Jesus using this metaphor and talking about the vine he is indicating a high level of engagement in intimacy. Jesus is the vine, God is the gardener and those of us who are in Jesus, we are the branches. And then he says God's role is to prune the branch, that's us. That's God's role is to prune us. Why? So that we can produce more fruit. And the state of the fruit is equal to God's care for the fruit.

Now, you also need to know that every branch, every branch gets cut everyone, either A) for no production, or B) for increased production. If there's no production its cut off its thrown into the fire as indicated in verse six. And then smaller branches producing fruit are cut to divert more nutrients for more productive branches. You know what that means? That means that there's some good fruit producing areas in our lives, things that are going well and things that are seemingly good that will get cut, because God has a vision for something greater. And so as the pruner and as the one who is looking down the road, those are things that will sometimes get cut because there is a bigger vision. Jesus is saying God's purpose is to prune us and to perfect us.

Now, one of the things that I want to make note about this metaphor is that the vine or Jesus talking about the vine is also related to ancient Israel itself because ancient Israel was also synonymous with the vine. Or the vine was kind of like a national symbol kind of like maybe the bald eagle would be the national symbol of the United States, it would be very similar. The other thing is this vine, in the temple there was like this golden image of a vine in the temple. And Jesus speaking about this vine in some instances could be saying or redirecting the focus away from Israel when he says, I am the true vine.

Overall, here's the point about this metaphor and the vine overall, Jesus is just trying to get an image to the disciples. Disciples, they would have understood viticulture, the gardener's role, the importance of grape production, references to Israel. This is all cultural stuff that they would have known. And he's using this metaphor, because he's trying to get them to see what he wants them to do.

And so what does he want them to do? Well, that's the second thing that I want to illuminate for us this weekend. And it's very simple; he wants the disciples to remain. And this is Jesus' focus this word remain or abide whichever translation that you're reading, and it's mentioned several different times it's repeated several times. I don't know about you but when my parents repeated certain things that kind of meant something. It was important. They wanted me to get it. And so Jesus is repeating this over and over again. And yes, we do see another phrase mentioned several times 'produce fruit' that's mentioned about six times. But understand this fruit is a byproduct. Okay? It's an indicator, and it's an output, meaning that it's evidence of what it's connected to or evidence of what it is. Like we are what we produce, right? Well, much of the world is preoccupied with outputs or fruit, I should say. It's how we judge worth, success, identity progress, and I'm not suggesting that those things are not important. I'm not one of those parents who was telling my kids, "Oh, its okay, everybody wins. The results don't matter." No, yes, they do. The results do matter. They are important, but they are not everything. But we are often misguided when we focus on outcomes, when we focus on the fruit.

Let me just hit the rewind button all the way back to the beginning, because this has been man's struggle for a really long time. If we go back to Adam and Eve in the beginning, they were preoccupied with this particular fruit for some reason of the tree of good and evil. And so their adversary comes and says, "Did God really say you couldn't eat the fruit? Oh, this is listen, God just knows that you're gonna be like him." Well, here's the thing. And this is where they lost sight of this whole situation. They were already like him. They were created in his image. So there was no need to be preoccupied with something that was not going to benefit their life. As a matter of fact, it was going to do just the opposite. All they needed to do was the one thing that Jesus is telling the disciples 'remain'. That's all they had to do remain in fellowship, remain in relationship with God.

Now Jesus is talking to the disciples about fruit, but understand he's talking about it in the context of an input, which is to remain. And if they did that, everything would take care of itself, all of the questions, concerns, what ifs, what about's, scenarios, fill in the blank. And here's the other thing. We're so preoccupied sometimes with fruit and output in all this other stuff, and I get that, but really, there's only one thing we control, input. That's it, that's the only thing that we have full control over. And this is what Jesus is telling his disciples to put their attention towards.

So what does it mean to remain? Well, if you look in an English dictionary, something like Merriam Webster, very simple definition just means to stay in the same place or with the same group or person. The Greek translation of this word which is a word called meno, very unremarkable as our theologian in residence; Peter Hartwig would say there's nothing remarkable about this word. It just means pretty much the same thing to stay, alright. But there are references to like staying in place, which is why it's translated in some translations as abide, or stay as in persevere, which would be more related to remain.

So I just want to drill down on those for just a moment. Reference here to place as it relates to remain, the metaphor of the vine that Jesus is presenting is helping disciples to understand what he means by remain. Now remain is not about a physical place, but to be in step with or in relationship with. It's about unbroken fellowship. John 15:4 Jesus says, "Remain in me, and I in you." Basically keep our relational connectivity intact. Jesus knows he's about to go to the cross. He knows what's about to go down. And

he knows that the disciples are going to be afraid they're going to be uncertain and they're going to be uncomfortable. And those are exactly the factors that will make us want to take control. It's getting a little crazy up in here I need to take the reins. Why? Because of fear, because of the lack of control, particularly of the outcome. And in those situations, we are often tempted to disconnect.

Well, there's a phrase that we use in our culture now, 'consciously uncoupling'. And here's the thing when it hit the fan, Peter did exactly what Jesus said he was going to do. Denied him three times when he had just said, Jesus I will die with you. But when it hit the fan, this is what happened. He did so because he was worried about the outcome. The situation was unstable. It was unpredictable. It was uncomfortable. And so he denied him. And here's the thing. This is the reason why I believe we are inconsistent in our 'remaining'. The circumstances, a little bit uncertain, stuff is happening, I feel a little bit uncomfortable. I don't have I can't control the situation. And so we don't remain and we disconnect, because the circumstances is a little bit shifty. We've become distracted by the circumstances. And I have done and still do the same thing in my own life. Where I'm influenced by the potential output or the potential outcome as I'm trying to do my own math, which I'm not great at, but I'm trying to do the math and it's not adding up. And so it causes me to want to take control because that's ultimately what we want to do. We want to influence the outcome we want to control it. You know why? Because sometimes God, he's going the wrong way. Or sometimes God he didn't get the message or didn't get the memo, or this is not how we're supposed to do it. So we need to help him, God let me help you. That did no, right, not left, right, right. And we get out of step, out of phase, out of relationship with God.

This is why if I can just take this back to the Old Testament one more time. This is why the story of David and him becoming King is so remarkable to me. Because it is a picture of what it means to remain in step, to remain in relationship. First of all, David is anointed king. He's the runt of the family. So God does this out of order. He's not a firstborn, because the firstborn in ancient Israel was supposed to get the birthright and all this... So he's the runt of the family and he's got the runt job, he's keeping sheep. And so he gets anointed, he's not even in the room. They gotta call him because he out there keeping the sheep. He gets anointed and then he goes right back to keeping sheep. I mean, like, hey, if I'm getting annoying the king I'm thinking about my threads, you know where I'm gonna sleep, you know where I'm going with the after party. You know? It's time to turn up a little bit, you know. But it said he went back to keeping... this is the beginning of why we see he's a man after God's own... he remains. He remains in this position. And then he remains in his father's house, Jesse, serving. So then later on, he's on an Uber East run, you know, going to serve his brother some meats and cheese. I'm the nice King, I ain't bringing, you no cheese and bread, you know, like but he's still remaining. And he goes and then on his way he runs into Goliath this champion and everybody's afraid of and then he gets into this conversation. He ends up killing Goliath, and then boom, he gets a promotion by Saul, the guy he's supposed to replace. Saul is the current King; he's supposed to replace him. Now he's gonna go work for Saul, right. So he works for Saul, and then you know, people start loving David, and he's the man. He's a warrior and he's a singer, and he's a musician. He's just a renaissance man. And Saul gets jealous.

Now David is on the run from the man he's supposed to replace. Why is he running? He's the man and he got his own army and he's running. He goes into a cave and then Saul comes into the cave. And he's gonna relieve himself; he's going to use the bathroom. And he don't see, he don't see David. Oh,

look at God. Bring my enemy to me. He don't even see me. And I'm sure David's man like, "Bro' this is your chance you can get him right now." And as David cuts off a corner of his rope, he thought about it. He lets him go. I'm sure it's me like, what are you doing, man? We'd be out here running with you, bro'. You the king! And it said David repented because he knew the thought that he had was out of step. And he also knew that if he kills Saul that he potentially aborts his future. He potentially takes himself out of his destiny. And that's what happens with us when we do things out of step because we're impatient. 20 years, David waited until he took the throne. That's a long time.

Here's the thing. Jesus said to His disciples, *"As a branch is unable to produce fruit by itself, unless it remains on the vine, neither can you unless you remain in me"*. I've been asked this question, how can Jesus say this when I see all these people out here producing, I see them out here making moves, I see them making bread, you know, they doing their thing, right. Let me tell you something, you can produce wins. You can definitely do that according to the world's metric. But you cannot produce God's will for your life if you don't follow his way. It won't happen. Let me tell you how they told us in black church, this how I grew up. If God anointed you, he will appoint you - - - in his time. Our job is simple and hard at the same time. 'Remain', which means to stay in step in relationship.

This next reference to remain has to do with perseverance, lasting, endurance. And this is definitely where we get in trouble right here. I mean, we think about the fruits of the spirit that apostle Paul wrote about. Paul wrote the majority of the New Testament, he's writing these letters, and he wrote to one of the churches, and he's talking about the fruits of the Spirit. You know, love, joy, peace, you know, we like those things but there's a couple of those fruits that's a little suspect that we don't like. And I think first on the list is patience, the first one on the list. And I mean, look, we are so impatient. I mean, it's really hard for us right now. I mean, iPhones, I mean, we can just get stuff on an instant, right? I mean, you don't even have to wait for fast food now. Like you can just put it in the app and then like, it's right whenever you want. Like fast food was so you can get it faster, now you don't have to wait for that. But here's the thing, then James takes it to a whole 'nother level and Pastor Mark talked about this week one, James comes out of the gate. He wrote his letter. I mean, he gave no introduction, he didn't ease into it. He comes right out the gate and he said, *"Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance."*

Paul is talking about patience and we really don't love that. James is talking about perseverance. Lord knows I don't want to persevere. If a brother gotta wait, don't let me have to suffer. But Jesus knows what's about to go down. He knows there's gonna be some suffering involved. He knows that it's gonna involve persecution. And can I tell you something, to be a disciple is to sign up for life against the grain. Now you might not get physically persecuted but you're gonna go through some stuff and listen, even if nothing is happening to you Jesus is telling you to walk into it. This is what he said. He said, "Love your neighbor as yourself." What is I don't like my neighbor? But he said, I gotta love. Bless those who curse you. That's really not what I'm thinking about when they're cursing me. Then he said, "Pray for those who persecute". So if I do find myself in a persecuted situation I'm supposed to pray for them? No, I'm thinking about what I'm going to do if I get free from here. That's what I'm thinking about. But he said, No, pray for them. This is self inflicted, right? But again, listen, the power and the blessing is in remaining.

Listen to what Jesus said. He said, "If you remain in me, and my words remain in you ask whatever you want, and it will be done for you." Now I gotta stop you, this ain't prosperity gospel. And it's not prosperity gospel because if you are in him, if you're really following him, if you're really in it, then the stuff that you're going to be asking is according to His will.

James finishes off what he's saying. He said, "Let perseverance (remaining). So let remaining finish its work so that you may be mature and complete and not lacking anything." So the remaining has a purpose, a greater purpose. It has a greater output, or more fruit than we're thinking of in the moment as we're going through this.

Let me just see if I can land the plane for us this weekend with maybe slightly slight turbulence, you know, so put your seatbelt on. It's clear that the prioritization and emphasis for the disciples is remaining. That's the point that Jesus is making. John, unlike all the other gospels, is only interested in elevating the connection to Jesus, that's it. That's it, that's what he's interested in. Not the authority and teaching or discipline but a living presence in us. This is what Jesus meant by when he said, remain in my love. *"If you keep my commands you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my father's commands and remain in his love."* This is not about rules, but a relationship. And the commands are about caring about what Jesus cares about.

Now, I need to say this, because we're in Washington, DC, and this is a political epicenter. And I think we need to be clear about this as Jesus followers. Caring what Jesus cares about cannot be hitched to a Christian agenda or political party. The Jesus way is not liberal, it's not conservative, it's not independent. It's not socialists, it's not communist it's not capitalist. Do not be distracted by categories, labels and jargon. And the need to feel like we need to represent this using those social constructs. Listen, I'm not telling you how to vote. I'm not telling you what party to be a part of. I really don't care about any of that and I don't think Jesus does either. This is what Jesus cares about. This is what he said, "My father is glorified by this: that you produce much fruit, (which is love,) and prove to be my disciples." That's what he's interested in. It's just a reiteration of what he said and John 13:35. Listen, they will know you by my love, not by how you defend the faith. That's not what he said. Not by how well you interpret scripture. That's not what he said. It's not that those things are not important, but they're secondary or tertiary or not even relevant at times. Listen, the fruit will prove and point to Jesus.

One final point we don't have the ability to remain and abide in our own strength. It just won't, it just won't happen. The disciples couldn't even remain in prayer Jesus was getting on like this I can't even go pray y'all over here falling asleep. They couldn't do it and then, Peter, Jesus, I'm down you my boy where you going? I'm rolling with you. Jesus, I don't even know that dude. It's just that quick. And what's so interesting to me as we... Yeah, I was talking about Women's History Month, the Scriptures say that it was the women. It was the ladies who were following Jesus closely as he was going to the cross and it was the ladies who were at the tomb and who got the word out. It was the ladies and the disciples who were with Jesus, they couldn't remain. They couldn't do it. But here's the thing. This is why Jesus said in John 14:16 & 17, he said, *"I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Counselor or advocate to be with you forever. He is the Spirit of Truth. The world is unable to receive him because it didn't see him or know him. But you do know him, because he remains with you, and will be in you."*

Listen, that's the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth that helps us carry out Jesus' commands, but it can't be activated in our lives if we don't remain in Jesus if we don't, if we don't prioritize that relationship, and that's how we're going to keep his commandments. And in order to keep his commandments, you need to know him. You need to study him, and you need to practice them. That's why we created this resource for you at NCCre/theway to help you through this Lent season and provide a resource for you.

I'm going to ask our worship teams and our prayer teams from all of our locations to come as we prepare to sing this song this weekend that kind of summarizes this theme, 'The Way of the Vine', it's called Deep, Deep Well. And we've got a video that will introduce the song.

But before we do that, I just want to pray for some of us in there just three quick categories that I want to pray through. One is, maybe there's some of us that need to establish a relationship with the vine, Jesus. Maybe there are some of us that need to reconnect to the vine, maybe we've jumped off, like Peter, and we need to reconnect. Or there are some of us who feeling the temptation to disassociate or go in a different way or whatever is going on with us. And so we just need we need strength to remain. And so I just want to pray a quick prayer for us and then our band will lead us into time of worship.

Let's pray. God, we thank you for this challenge this weekend. Thank you for Jesus showing us the way of the vine for those who need to establish a relationship with you reveal yourself to them this weekend. For those who need to re establish God let them know that your grace is sufficient and that you're willing and you're standing with open arms to receive them. And for those who are feeling like it's getting a little tight for me and it's unsettled, and it's uncomfortable and it's inconvenient or some stuff has God, give them the strength to remain. God lead us in a way that you have to go and help us to be a reflection of the Jesus way. Jesus name Amen.