

The Way and the Vine

SPEAKER	Matt Ryniker
DATE	Sunday, January 19, 2025
PASSAGES	John 15; Romans 5; Psalm 69; Revelation 7
MESSAGE	Begins at 1:00:38 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

Jesus calls himself the *true* vine, and that word is doing work. Being joined to him does not dissolve you into a crowd or leave you a floating individual — it gives you a place, a heritage, and the only source of fruit, peace and joy there is. The whole invitation comes down to one preposition: abide *in* him, not near him.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ Your tribe, language and heritage do not vanish in God's presence — Revelation pictures them still there, gathered around the throne with dignity attached.
- ◆ Scripture holds the individual and the community together. Romans 5 says sin and death reached all of us as a species; John 3:16 says *whoever* believes.
- ◆ Jesus does not merely permit us in; he says "I will take you to myself." The hope rests on his action, not on our knocking the door down.
- ◆ Pruning, lifting and fertilizing are all vinedresser's work. A season without fruit is not an execution notice — but neither is a branch that never abides safe by association.
- ◆ Israel was God's vine in Psalm 80, Isaiah 5, Jeremiah 2 and Hosea 10. When Jesus says "I am the true vine," he is claiming that connection to God's work runs through him.
- ◆ Our unity with each other is a consequence, not a merger. Connected to the same vine, every believer in every century and culture becomes our heritage and we become their legacy.
- ◆ Being loved by the world's systems is worth trembling over. Being hated for Christ's sake — not for rudeness — is closer to the mark.

- ◆ Obedience is one of Jesus' love languages, and not because of ego. His commands are medicine for a sick situation.

► 1:00:38

Matt had been away three weeks, so he gave himself room for a preamble — the call to pray and fast for the nation ahead of inauguration day, gratitude for Philip Boucamp's message on loving the city with God's love, and thanks to the three who prayer walked the neighborhood that morning in twenty-nine degrees. Then, it being MLK weekend, he commended the Dream speech, noted that a preacher touching politics is always a gamble, and used it to open the door onto what the message was actually about.

Identity, and the dignity God insists on

► 1:04:59

One set of thought leaders wants your ethnicity and gender to dominate your identity; another insists those things mean nothing at all. Matt's read is that both are downstream of the same source. "God's enemy and yours is anti-male and anti-female — he's anti-human. His goal would be for each and every one of us to look in the mirror and feel ashamed and disgusted with what we see."

Scripture refuses both errors. Heritage survives:

"After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb."

REVELATION 7:9 ↗

And heritage does not rule you. Matt spoke about his own — ancestry on both sides of the Civil War, British blood, German blood, Viking blood, and plenty of material to feel apologetic about in the mirror if he chose to. "It was God himself who soothed my heart and gave me the chance to have dignity as I stand before him." The verse he anchored it to is Samuel being told to stop appraising David's brothers by height: "Man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart." King's emphasis on content of character over color of skin, he said, is vital precisely because it is infused with that wisdom.

► 1:10:26

The Bible holds the corporate and the individual together without strain. You have a people, a language, a community — Romans 5 is emphatic that death spread to all men, with no pockets of

humanity quarantined from it. And yet John 3:16 says *whoever*, and Romans 10:9 puts salvation in the singular mouth and the singular heart. That is the frame Matt wanted in place before opening John: in the vine, we are not droplets falling into a pool and losing ourselves. We remain ourselves, connected to him.

“Let not your hearts be troubled”

► 1:12:21

“Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.”

JOHN 14:1–3 ↗

Where the enemy works to keep you anxious about what you are and what you have done, God’s settled desire is an untroubled heart — cast your anxieties on him, do not be anxious about anything, and the one who sanctifies you completely is named the God of peace.

Matt lingered on the verb. Jesus says *I will take you* — he does not merely concede entry to whoever manages to find their own way. And the destination is not primarily an address. “I like to imagine a beautiful place, the New Jerusalem, my own apartment in it,” he said, before landing on the clause that matters: *to myself*. In his presence is fullness of joy, and healing for woundings and insecurities, “because he will love us in a way that no one else ever has or ever will.”

► 1:15:44

Thomas asks the way; Jesus answers

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” Then Philip asks for the Father as though it were a small request — five bucks, and we won’t bother you again. Matt caught how immense the ask actually is, and how it had already been granted:

“Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.” For men carrying a tradition that no one has seen God and anyone who does will die, hearing “from now on you do know him and have seen him” would have set a heart racing.

That claim is particular, not pantheistic. Jesus is not saying we have all seen the Father because we are all connected to everything. The Father is in Jesus and Jesus in the Father in a way that was true of no other rabbi. And notice the concession he offers: believe on account of the works themselves. Matt heard no frustration in it — more like *at least recall that I raised the dead*.

Greater works than these

► 1:19:16

“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father. Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son.”

JOHN 14:12-13 ↗

Matt refused to temper it, with one qualification he considers a clarification rather than a restraint: “if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.” This is not a mechanism for private jets. He also declined a dodge he had once been handed by a minister uneasy with the spiritual gifts — that the promise is plural and cumulative, enough small good deeds eventually outweighing Jesus casting out devils. The Greek is singular, and the accounting was never the point. Jesus healed the sick, cast out devils, ministered to the poor, encouraged the lonely. Greater works are possible because he ascended and can therefore baptize in the Holy Spirit — a thread he picks up at the end.

The true vine — and the vine that went wild

► 1:22:52

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.”

JOHN 15:1-2 ↗

“Takes away” translates a verb that also means *lift up*, which is why translators disagree. Matt’s test was horticultural and pastoral at once: when part of a plant is weak, is the first move to cut, or to prop the sagging branch up toward the light? He pointed to the fruitless fig tree, where the vinedresser argues for one more year and some fertilizer. “He wants fruit in your life and he’s willing to do work towards that.”

► 1:24:42

The imagery is not a fresh analogy picked for a Tuesday. Israel is God’s vine brought out of Egypt in Psalm 80, the vineyard of Isaiah 5, the luxuriant vine of Hosea 10. Matt thinks one text in particular is under Jesus’ hand here:

“Yet I planted you a choice vine, wholly of pure seed. How then have you turned degenerate and become a wild vine? Though you wash yourself with lye and use much soap, the stain of your guilt is still before me.”

JEREMIAH 2:21-22 ↗

Because look at what Jesus says next:

“Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.” Not lye. Not soap. His word. And to be connected to what God is doing on earth through his people now requires being connected to him, because he is the true vine.

Abide — and what abiding produces

► 1:27:53

“I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”

JOHN 15:5 ↗

Matt would not soften this to the point of falsehood: sometimes the vinedresser lifts, sometimes he prunes, sometimes he fertilizes — and a branch that never abides can be removed, because it was not truly connected. What he denied is the panic reading, that a fruitless season means God is coming for you with the shears because he dislikes you. There is a chance to repent and abide.

► 1:29:35

And here the identity question closes. Our unity is not a merger; it runs through Christ at one degree of separation. “Anyone in church history from any country, any century, any tradition, culture or language is part of our heritage, because they are connected to the vine.” You cannot divvy the saints up by ethnicity and assign them to their respective peoples. They are our heritage and we are their legacy, through him.

What abiding yields, Jesus lists plainly: asking and receiving, the Father glorified in much fruit, and then love and joy:

“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love... These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.”

JOHN 15:9-11 ↗

Matt sidestepped the perennial argument over whether joy and happiness are the same word. “He’s not stingy with his joy because he’s running low. He doesn’t have a pantry that’s half-full of grace and peace and joy.”

Friends, commands, and a world that will not be charmed

► 1:32:39

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you... You are my friends if you do what I command.” Obedience, Matt said, is one of Jesus’ love languages — and not out of ego. “All of his ideas for your life are the best. He knows they’re medicine for your sick and distorted situation. This is not controlling. This is healing.” The same note sounds in John 15:16: you did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to bear abiding fruit — the third time in one conversation that asking in his name is tied to it.

► 1:34:45

“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.”

JOHN 15:18-19 ↗

Matt was careful to put this on himself rather than the room. “It’s a fearful thing to come to realize that the world loves you and doesn’t really hate you. I tremble at these words.” With the caveat that there are unimpressive ways to make people hate you — stealing their cars was his example — hostility on account of Christ is not a mark of failure. He also confessed a mind virus he is still being cured of: the belief that he could *nice* people into the kingdom, Boy Scout them until they woke up one morning admiring him and, by some untraceable step, loving Jesus. “It’s a mirage. It’s not really there.”

► 1:38:21

Persecution follows the master (John 15:20), and those who hate him hate the Father too — because response to Jesus is response to God. As for the worry that Jesus might judge without allowing for ignorance, Matt pointed at Matthew 11:21: Tyre and Sidon would have repented in sackcloth and ashes.

He knows the difference between knowledge and ignorance, and he knows the hypotheticals. “He’s trustworthy. He’ll be the judge of the earth. I’ll just abide in him and obey him. He can be Jesus, I’ll be a branch.” The quotation of “they hated me without a cause” comes from the Psalms he had been formed by.

Don’t abide near the vine

► 1:40:07

“But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning.”

JOHN 15:26–27 ↗

This is where the greater works come from. Jesus dies, rises, is glorified, and the Father sends the Spirit on the church — so he is with this room, and with the church in Mongolia, and with the church in Europe, all at once. He never left us alone and he never will.

Which makes the closing exhortation the sharpest sentence of the morning. God has no grandchildren. There is a way of living adjacent to the vine — your wife believes, your brother believes, you go to the potlucks, you sit through services, you are patriotic and you make a mean barbecue, and the mind wanders off into bizarre rationalizations about honorary membership.

“Please don’t abide near the vine. Abide in the vine — that your joy may be full, that you may bear fruit.”

FOR FURTHER STUDY

SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE

- Revelation 7:9
- 1 Samuel 16:7
- John 3:16
- Romans 5:12
- Romans 10:9
- John 14:1–3
- 1 Peter 5:7
- Philippians 4:6
- 1 Thessalonians 5:23
- John 14:6
- John 14:9–11
- John 14:12–13
- 1 John 5:14
- John 15:1–2
- Luke 13:6–9
- Psalm 80:8
- Isaiah 5:1–7
- Hosea 10:1
- Jeremiah 2:21–22
- John 15:3
- John 15:5
- John 15:7–8
- John 15:9–11
- John 15:12–15
- John 15:16
- John 15:18–19
- John 15:20
- Matthew 11:21
- Psalm 69:4
- John 15:26–27

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Matt named the mirror as the enemy's favorite tool — shame about heritage, gender, appearance. Where has that been working on you, and what would it mean to stand before God with dignity instead?
2. Jesus says "I will take you to myself," not just to a place. Be honest: which of those two do you actually find yourself longing for?
3. The vinedresser lifts, prunes and fertilizes. Looking back over the last year, which of those do you think has been happening to you, and how did you read it at the time?
4. Matt trembles at the thought that the world might not hate him. Where do you feel the pull to be loved by the world as its own, and what does it cost you?
5. Abiding near the vine looks like church attendance without connection. Name one concrete thing that moves you from near it to in it this week.

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Matt Ryniker is Hope Chapel's senior pastor — his own description of the job — and reports to the church's governing board, who he cheerfully calls his boss. He and his wife Mandy have been held up from Hope's own pulpit as an example to the congregation. He spent a stretch of his working life as a public school teacher, and he still teaches the parent dedication classes where families commit to raising their children to follow Jesus — a theme that runs straight into this message.

Watch the full message:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=88sr9VbLLsM&t=3638s>

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.