

**ST AUGUSTINE ON JOHN 15:1-8 (5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter Year B)**

1. This passage of the Gospel, brethren, where the Lord calls Himself the vine, and His disciples the branches, declares in so many words that the Mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, 1 Timothy 2:5 is the head of the Church, and that we are His members. For as the vine and its branches are of one nature, therefore, His own nature as God being different from ours, He became man, that in Him human nature might be the vine, and we who also are men might become branches thereof. What mean, then, the words, I am the true vine? Was it to the literal vine, from which that metaphor was drawn, that He intended to point them by the addition of true? For it is by similitude, and not by any personal propriety, that He is thus called a vine; just as He is also termed a sheep, a lamb, a lion, a rock, a corner-stone, and other names of a like kind, which are themselves rather the *true* ones, from which these are drawn as similitudes, not as realities. But when He says, I am the true vine, it is to distinguish Himself, doubtless, from that [vine] to which the words are addressed: How are you turned into sourness, as a strange vine? Jeremiah 2:21 For how could that be a true vine which was expected to bring forth grapes and brought forth thorns? Isaiah 5:4

2. I am, He says, the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman. Every branch in me that bears not fruit, He takes away; and every one that bears fruit, He purges it, that it may bring forth more fruit. Are, then, the husbandman and the vine one? Christ is the vine in the same sense as when He said, The Father is greater than I; but in that sense wherein He said, I and my Father are one, He is also the husbandman. And yet not such a one as those, whose whole service is confined to external labour; but such, that He also supplies the increase from within. For neither is he that plants anything, neither he that waters; but God that gives the increase. But Christ is certainly God, for the Word was God; and so He and the Father are one: and if the Word was made flesh — that which He was not before — He nevertheless still remains what He was. And still more, after saying of the Father, as of the husbandman, that He takes away the fruitless branches, and prunes the fruitful, that they may bring forth more fruit, He straightway points to Himself as also the purger of the branches, when He says, Now you are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you. Here, you see, He is also the pruner of the branches — a work which belongs to the husbandman, and not to the vine; and more than that, He makes the branches His workmen. For although they give not the increase, they afford some help; but not of themselves: For without me, He says, ye can do nothing. And listen, also, to their own confession: What, then, is Apollos, and what is Paul? But ministers by whom you believed, even as the Lord gave to every man. I have planted, Apollos watered. And this, too, as the Lord gave to every man; and so not of themselves. In that, however, which follows, but God gave the increase, 1 Corinthians 3:5-7 He works not by

them, but by Himself; for work like that exceeds the lowly capacity of man, transcends the lofty powers of angels, and rests solely and entirely in the hands of the Triune Husbandman. Now you are clean, that is, clean, and yet still further to be cleansed. For, had they not been clean, they could not have borne fruit; and yet every one that bears fruit is purged by the husbandman, that he may bring forth more fruit. He bears fruit because he is clean; and to bear more, he is cleansed still further. For who in this life is so clean as not to be in need of still further and further cleansing? Seeing that, if we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us; but if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness; to cleanse in very deed the clean, that is, the fruitful, that they may be so much the more fruitful, as they have been made the cleaner.

3. Now you are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you. Why does He not say, You are clean through the baptism wherewith you have been washed, but through the word which I have spoken unto you, save only that in the water also it is the word that cleanses? Take away the word, and the water is neither more nor less than water. The word is added to the element, and there results the Sacrament, as if itself also a kind of visible word. For He had said also to the same effect, when washing the disciples' feet, He that is washed needs not, save to wash his feet, but is clean every whit. And whence has water so great an efficacy, as in touching the body to cleanse the soul, save by the operation of the word; and that not because it is uttered, but because it is believed? For even in the word itself the passing sound is one thing, the abiding efficacy another. This is the word of faith which we preach, says the apostle, that if you shall confess with your mouth that Jesus is the Lord, and shall believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved. For with the heart man believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. Romans 10:10 Accordingly, we read in the Acts of the Apostles, Purifying their hearts by faith; Acts 15:9 and, says the blessed Peter in his epistle, Even as baptism does also now save us, not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience. This is the word of faith which we preach, whereby baptism, doubtless, is also consecrated, in order to its possession of the power to cleanse. For Christ, who is the vine with us, and the husbandman with the Father, loved the Church, and gave Himself for it. And then read the apostle, and see what he adds: That He might sanctify it, cleansing it with the washing of water by the word. Ephesians 5:25-26 The cleansing, therefore, would on no account be attributed to the fleeting and perishable element, were it not for that which is added, by the word. This word of faith possesses such virtue in the Church of God, that through the medium of him who in faith presents, and blesses, and sprinkles it, He cleanses even the tiny infant, although itself unable as yet with the heart to believe unto righteousness, and to make confession with the mouth unto salvation. All this is done by

means of the word, whereof the Lord says, now you are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you.

1. Jesus called Himself the vine, and His disciples the branches, and His Father the husbandman; whereon we have already discoursed as we were able. But in the present passage, while still speaking of Himself as the vine, and of His branches, or, in other words, of the disciples, He said, Abide in me, and I in you. They are not in Him in the same kind of way that He is in them. And yet both ways tend to their advantage, and not to His. For the relation of the branches to the vine is such that they contribute nothing to the vine, but from it derive their own means of life; while that of the vine to the branches is such that it supplies their vital nourishment, and receives nothing from them. And so their having Christ abiding in them, and abiding themselves in Christ, are in both respects advantageous, not to Christ, but to the disciples. For when the branch is cut off, another may spring up from the living root; but that which is cut off cannot live apart from the root.

2. And then He proceeds to say: As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abides in the vine; no more can you, except ye abide in me. A great encomium on grace, my brethren — one that will instruct the souls of the humble, and stop the mouths of the proud. Let those now answer it, if they dare, who, ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God. Romans 10:3 Let the self-complacent answer it, who think they have no need of God for the performance of good works. Fight they not against such a truth, those men of corrupt mind, reprobate concerning the faith, 2 Timothy 3:8 whose reply is only full of impious talk, when they say: It is of God that we have our existence as men, but it is of ourselves that we are righteous? What is it you say, you who deceive yourselves, and, instead of establishing freewill, cast it headlong down from the heights of its self-elevation through the empty regions of presumption into the depths of an ocean grave? Why, your assertion that man of himself works righteousness, *that* is the height of your self-elation. But the Truth contradicts you, and declares, the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abides in the vine. Away with you now over your giddy precipices, and, without a spot whereon to take your stand, vapour away at your windy talk. These are the empty regions of your presumption. But look well at what is tracking your steps, and, if you have any sense remaining, let your hair stand on end. For whoever imagines that he is bearing fruit of himself is not in the vine, and he that is not in the vine is not in Christ, and he that is not in Christ is not a Christian. Such are the ocean depths into which you have plunged.

3. Ponder again and again what the Truth has still further to say: I am the vine, He adds, you are the branches: he that abides in me, and I in him, the same brings forth much fruit; for without me you can do nothing. For just to keep any from supposing that the branch can bear

at least some little fruit of itself, after saying, the same brings forth much fruit, His next words are not, without me you can do but little, but ye can do nothing. Whether then it be little or much, without Him it is impracticable; for without Him nothing can be done. For although, when the branch bears little fruit, the husbandman purges it that it may bring forth more; yet if it abides not in the vine, and draw its life from the root, it can bear no fruit whatever of itself. And although Christ would not have been the vine had He not been man, yet He could not have supplied such grace to the branches had He not also been God. And just because such grace is so essential to life, that even death itself ceases to be at the disposal of free-will, He adds, If any one abide not in me, he shall be cast forth as a branch, and wither; and they shall gather him, and cast him into the fire, and he is burned. The wood of the vine, therefore, is in the same proportion the more contemptible if it abide not in the vine, as it is glorious while so abiding; in fine, as the Lord likewise says of them in the prophet Ezekiel, when cut off, they are of no use for any purpose of the husbandman, and can be applied to no labour of the mechanic. Ezekiel 15:5 The branch is suitable only for one of two things, either the vine or the fire: if it is not in the vine, its place will be in the fire; and that it may escape the latter, may it have its place in the vine.

4. If you abide in me, He says, and my words abide in you, you shall ask what you will, and it shall be done unto you. For abiding thus in Christ, is there anything they can wish but what will be agreeable to Christ? So abiding in the Saviour, can they wish anything that is inconsistent with salvation? Some things, indeed, we wish because we are in Christ, and other things we desire because still in this world. For at times, in connection with this our present abode, we are inwardly prompted to ask what we know not it would be inexpedient for us to receive. But God forbid that such should be given us if we abide in Christ, who, when we ask, only does what will be for our advantage. Abiding, therefore, ourselves in Him, when His words abide in us we shall ask what we will, and it shall be done unto us. For if we ask, and the doing follows not, what we ask is not connected with our abiding in Him, nor with His words which abide in us, but with that craving and infirmity of the flesh which are not in Him, and have not His words abiding in them. For to His words, at all events, belongs that prayer which He taught, and in which we say, Our Father, who art in heaven. Matthew 6:9 Let us only not fall away from the words and meaning of this prayer in our petitions, and whatever we ask, it shall be done unto us. For then only may His words be said to abide in us, when we do what He has commanded us, and love what He has promised. But when His words abide only in the memory, and have no place in the life, the branch is not to be accounted as in the vine, because it draws not its life from the root. It is to this distinction that the word of Scripture has respect, and to those that remember His commandments to do them. For many retain them in their memory only to treat them with contempt, or even to mock at and assail them. It is not in such as have only some kind of contact, but no connection, that the words of Christ abide; and to them, therefore, they will not be a blessing,

but a testimony against them; and because they are present in them without abiding in them, they are held fast by them for the very purpose of being judged according to them at last.

1. The Saviour, in thus speaking to the disciples, commends still more and more the grace whereby we are saved, when He says, Herein is my Father glorified, that you bear very much fruit, and be made my disciples. Whether we say *glorified*, or *made bright*, both are the rendering given us of one Greek verb, namely *doxazein* (δοξάζειν). For what is *doxa* (δόξα) in Greek, is in Latin glory. I have thought it worthwhile to mention this, because the apostle says, If Abraham was justified by works, he has glory, but not before God. Romans 4:2 For this is the glory *before God*, whereby God, and not man, is glorified, when he is justified, not by works, but by faith, so that even his doing well is imparted to him by God; just as the branch, as I have stated above, cannot bear fruit of itself. For if herein God the Father is glorified, that we bear much fruit, and be made the disciples of Christ, let us not credit our own glory therewith, as if we had it of ourselves. For of Him is such a grace, and accordingly therein the glory is not ours, but His. Hence also, in another passage, after saying, let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works; to keep them from the thought that such good works were of themselves, He immediately added, and may glorify your Father who is in heaven. Matthew 5:16 For herein is the Father glorified, that we bear much fruit, and be made the disciples of Christ. And by whom are we so made, but by Him whose mercy has forestalled us? For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works. Ephesians 2:10