2021 New Year's Day Sermon

Happy New Year! The year 2020 was the unprecedented and most challenging year for most of us. Due to the pandemic, many people lost their loved ones, friends, coworkers, jobs, and livelihood. Many businesses had to be closed, and the nation's unemployment rate went up sky high. Besides the pandemic, we also had many natural disasters: we had a record-breaking number of hurricanes, wild-fires, tornadoes, and floods. In addition to all these disasters, our country is polarized more than ever.

So, even though the new year has arrived, our hearts are still heavy. According to the Chinese Zodiac, 2021 is the year of the cow. (Pic#1) A cow usually has a good temper, patient, hard-working, dependable, polite, and calm. I hope that this year would be peaceful and quiet, like a cow. But that would be an unrealistic expectation. 2021 will be another challenging year for us before it gets any better. This morning, I would like us to think about our spiritual strategy for the new year, based on John 15:1-10.

So, let us read John 15:1-10 responsibly. "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. **2**He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John%2015%3A1-10&version=NIV#fen-NIV-26702a)] so that it will be even more fruitful. **3**You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. **4**Remain in me, as I also 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.

**5**"I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. **6**If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. **7**If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. **8**This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

**9**"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now 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.

**REMAIN IN ME, AS I ALSO REMAIN IN YOU**

Look at verse 1. "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener." In the Bible, the nation of Israel is often described as the vine. (Mt. 20:1-6; 21:23-41) But in today's passage, Jesus identifies himself as the true vine. We also find three characters in the figure of speech: Jesus, God, and believers. Each character has a different role and position in fruit-bearing. Christ Jesus is the true vine, God the Father is the gardener, we, Jesus' disciples, are the branches.

In verse 2, we see what God does for fruit-bearing. Look at verse 2. "He cuts off every branch in the true vine that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful." According to this verse, as the gardener, God does two things for fruit-bearing: 1) he cuts off everything in the true vine that bears no fruit, and 2) he prunes every branch that does bear fruit.

What does it mean that God cuts off and prunes. First of all, the phrase "cut off" gives the impression that God would punish and judge every fruitless Christian. But that is not the case. Most Bible scholars believe that the phrase "cut off" is an inadequate English translation. The original Greek word for the translation of the phrase "**cut off**" is ***"airo,"*** which means to **"elevate, lift up or raise up from the ground."** Instead of punishing or judging fruitless branches, God would lift them up, removing and washing the dirt, so that they can be ready to bear fruit. Our God is merciful.

Verse 2 says that God also prunes every branch that does bear fruit to be even more fruitful. So, what does the phrase "God prunes" mean? The Greek word for **"prune**" is the same Greek word that is translated as **"clean"** or **"cleansed,"** just as Jesus said to his disciples in verse 3, "You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you." We wonder, *"If we are already clean because of Jesus' words, why does God still prune us?"* Well, that's a good question. What do you think?

I think it's because the initial cleansing through our faith in Jesus' words is just the beginning, not the completion, of our salvation. God continues to transform and sanctify us throughout our lifetime. Here, we see God's vision for each of us to bear the choicest fruit in great abundance (Pic#2).

In other words, God disciplines his loving children to be even more fruitful. We must know that God's love is not always sweet, but it is tough. It reminds us of what Hebrews 12:7 and 11 states, "Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children… No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it." God works in us to make us fruitful, sometimes lifting us up and sometimes disciplining us.

Then what is our role as the branches? Our primary role as branches is to remain in the true vine no matter what. Look at verses 4-6. "Remain in me, as I also 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 you remain in me and I in you, you will bear fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you don't remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned." In these verses, Jesus emphasizes the importance of our remaining in him. The word **"remain"** is repeated six times in these verses and four more times in the following verses, verses 7-10. The primary role of a branch is to remain or abide in the vine. The branch should never separate itself from the vine. Remaining in Jesus is not automatic. We forget to remain in Jesus. So it should be intentional.

The primary role of a branch is to stick to the vine no matter what. An overly zealous or independent person may be confused about their role in the fruit-bearing process. They may think that they should work hard to bear fruit without remaining in Jesus. But that's a great misunderstanding. They may be sincere, but they are sincerely wrong.

How can we abide in Jesus the true vine? In verses 7-10, Jesus teaches us two ways.

**First, we can remain in Jesus through his words.** Look at verses 7-8. "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples." It's interesting to see the progression of Jesus' words. He said in verse 4, "Remain in me, as I also remain in you," and he said in verse 5, "If you remain in me and I in you…"But in verse 7, instead of using the phrase "I remain in you" or "I in you," he uses the phrase **"my words remain in you."** "If you remain in me and my words remain in you."

What does it mean? It means that we can dwell in Jesus and Jesus lives in us through his words. This is something we should think about.

Jesus highlights the importance of his words. Jesus said to his disciples about his worlds in John 6:63 by saying, "The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you – they are full of the Spirit and life." Jesus said these words to his disciples after teaching that his flesh is their real food and his blood is their real drink, and whoever eats his flesh and drinks his blood remains in him and he in them (6:55-56). In verse 7, he again says that whoever hears his words from their heart can dwell in him and Christ living in them. It's fascinating. Jesus is not just to be with us. He will live in us through his words.

Suppose that the Son of God, who is the most powerful, wise, and beautiful person, lives in us day and night. When we have Jesus living in us through the Spirit, we have eternal life now and forever, having peace and joy in our hearts. Wherever we are and whatever circumstances we may be in, we can be free from fear, anxiety, and all sorts of worldly temptations.

We can indeed remain in Jesus and he in us through his words. I have been a Christian for more than 45 years. But I confess that I have paid less attention to God's word in recent years than to thought-provoking and scholarly books. But I felt convicted of my shortcomings as I studied this passage. Nothing is wrong with reading good books. It's beneficial. However, God's words are not just knowledge. God's words are life and the Spirit. So, my new year's resolution is to pay more attention to God's words. Psalm 119:103 states, "How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth." I want to dig out the words of God and enjoy reading, meditating on, and obeying them.

**Second, we can remain in Jesus by remaining in his love**. Look at verses 9-10. "As the Father loves me, so have I loved you. Now 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." Jesus said that if we keep his command of love, we will remain in him, bearing good fruits in life. People tend to think of love in terms of feelings. But there is a problem. If we think of love only as emotion, we can easily fall into an illusion and end up being hurt. But true love is more than an emotional feeling. It's an act of self-sacrifice.

Dr. Scott Peck was a Christian psychiatrist and author of a best-selling book*, "The Road Less Traveled."* He said that love is the will to extend oneself to nurture one's own or another's spiritual growth. Love is an act of will.

Christ Jesus demonstrated his love for us by becoming the ultimate sacrifice for our sins on the cross. After years of my experiences, I realized that the real problem for many of us is not that we don't want to obey Jesus' command but that we are not well disciplined in loving others. Even though we want to love one another, we end up hurting each other if we are not adequately educated and disciplined. I hope and pray that we can be discipline to learn how to love one another.

Let me close the sermon. Remaining in Jesus is not passive or lazy. It requires a lot of spiritual struggle. As we start the New Year, we are aware that this year will be another challenge for us, both individually and collectively. Jesus said, "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you." It does not mean that if we ask Jesus to make us a millionaire, he will surely do it. But it means that no matter what happens, God's good, pleasing, perfect will shall be done in and for us when we remain in Jesus. (Ro. 12:2). What a tremendous promise it is! Therefore, this year, my brothers and sisters let us make remaining in Jesus our priority by abiding in his words and love. When we do so, I believe that 2021 will be unprecedented, the most meaningful and fruitful year in our lives. May the Lord bless you. Happy New Year!