

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
7 September 2025

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
Gathering Sunday

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“Visualizing our Vineyard”

Introduction to *Abide & Grow: Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit*

NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide but is not exact to what was preached in the moment.

John 15:1-17 and Galatians 5:13-26

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

Anyone lucky enough to have enjoyed wine tastings in Napa Valley or toured vineyards in Burgundy, France or Tuscany, Italy? Anyone chatted with a sommelier about a fine wine at Tavernetta or Vin Rouge Wine Bar here in Denver? Maybe you're like me and it's more your style to grab a bottle of affordable wine at Costco or Trader Joe's, looking for a creative or witty wine label that grabs your eye, instead of caring about what type of wine is in the bottle. Anyone enjoy movies that take you through wine country: *A Walk in the Clouds*, *Sideways* or shows like *Wine Country* or *The Kings of Napa*?

Maybe you have zero interest in wine, but at the very least you know that wine is an important symbol in our Christian tradition—representing the blood of Christ, and the abundant joy of life as we displayed at the Wedding of Cana when Jesus turns water into wine, and the symbol of

remembrance at the Last Supper.

In one way or another, if you follow Christ, you are a wine connoisseur. Yes, you just heard your pastor give you permission to be a wine connoisseur. Drink responsibly and in moderation, of course. Or don't drink at all, but *do* be attentive to the Vineyard of our world, the branches of our community and church, the spiritual fruit that is growing on your particular branch of the vine.

John is very generous in his gospel to give us seven different metaphors, or ways of thinking about who Jesus is in our lives and in the world. They are called the I AM statements. In Exodus God reveals God's name to Moses saying: “I AM WHO I AM (Exodus 3:14). In the Jewish tradition in which Jesus was raised, I AM is a name for God, for the divine. So it is intentional and significant that Jesus uses I AM statements

to teach his disciples about who he is. With every I AM statement Jesus is identifying himself with the Divine and with a distinctive aspect of God's presence: I am the Bread of Life / I am the Light of the World / I am the Door / I am the Good Shepherd / I am the Resurrection and the Life / I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life / (and today): *"I am the True Vine,"* (John 15:1).

Why does Jesus use the image of a Vine or Vineyard? There are a few reasons. First, is his religious context. Throughout the Old Testament/Hebrew Scriptures, Israel is described as God's vine or vineyard by the psalmist and several of the prophets. Isaiah 5:1–7 tells the story of God planting a vineyard, and tending it, yet it produces only "bad fruit." Isaiah 5:7 reads:

*"The vineyard of the Lord Almighty
is the nation of Israel,
and the people of Judah
are the vines he delighted in.
And he looked for justice, but
saw bloodshed;
for righteousness, but heard
cries of distress."*

Jeremiah 2:21:

*"I had planted you like a choice
vine of sound and reliable stock.
How then did you turn against
me into a corrupt, wild vine?"*

Whereas the prophets speak of the vine of Israel letting God down, the Israelite psalmist turns the tables, lamenting that the Vine Grower (God) has let its Vine (Israel) down:

*"You transplanted a vine from
Egypt; you drove out the nations
and planted it.
You cleared the ground for it,
and it took root and filled the
land.
The mountains were covered
with its shade, the mighty cedars
with its branches.
Its branches reached as far as
the Sea, its shoots as far as the
River.*

*Why have you broken down its
walls so that all who pass by
pick its grapes?
Boars from the forest ravage it,
and insects from the fields feed
on it.
Return to us, God Almighty!
Look down from heaven and
see!
Watch over this vine, the root
your right hand has planted...
...revive us...
Restore us, Lord God Almighty;
make your face shine on us,
that we may be saved."*

(Psalm 80:8-19, selections)

This is to say, the Vine/Vineyard Image for Israel is prominent in Jewish tradition, but usually it's not a positive one—whether from God's perspective or Israel's. One side is feeling let down by the other.

So Jesus is very intentional in employing this metaphor, reclaiming the Vineyard as something positive and showing us what a healthy relationship between Vine Grower and Vine looks like. Instead of Israel's "up and down / cold then hot / push and pull" covenantal relationship with God which is full of wandering and wavering, disobedience and inconsistency, Jesus' life is consistently loving and faithful, reflecting the very nature of what it means to abide in, and dwell in God. And how do we know this? We know this by the "fruit" his life bears—he loves his neighbor as himself / cares for the stranger / welcomes the widow and child / forgives the sinner / dines with the outcast / converses with the 'unclean' / and so on and so forth.

Another reason for using the Vine language is that there were massive golden vines that adorned the entrance to the temple. The Temple, of course, in Jewish tradition was the place that was believed to house the physical presence of God. First century Roman-Jewish historian Josephus describes it like this: *"The gate opening into the [Temple] was completely overlaid with gold, as was the whole wall around it. It had, moreover, above it the golden vines, from which descended grape-clusters as tall as a man."*¹ Because the verse right before this passage tells us that Jesus said, "Rise, let us go from here," (John 14:31), some scholars think Jesus might have been walking through the city with his disciples and might have walked past the temple gate with the vines and grapes and used it as a teaching moment. Reminding his disciples that the presence of God was not permanently located in that physical structure but rather is now in him and in them as the Living Spirit of God.

And then of course, Jesus might also have used the imagery of

¹ Josephus, *Wars*, 5.210–212, cited in Kruse, TNTC, p364 as referenced in Ian Paul, "Jesus the true vine in John 15," *Psephizo Scholarship Serving Ministry* (28

April 2021), accessed on September 7, 2025 at <https://www.psephizo.com/biblical-studies/jesus-the-true-vine-in-john-15/>.

Vines, Vineyards, Branches, Fruit just because of how prominent viticulture (growing grapes) was in the first century. Patterns of pruning and training vines would have been common conversations among farmers and families—whether for grape vineyards or olive tree groves. We’ll explore the ‘pruning’ aspects of this text in January after we’ve allowed our branches and fruit to grow a bit this year. For today, we are just familiarizing ourselves with the Vineyard itself, and seeing ourselves as an integral part of it.

Interestingly and most importantly for understanding the context and importance of John 15, this is the only I AM statement to be followed by a YOU ARE statement.² Jesus is not only telling his disciples something about who *he* is in John 15, he’s also giving them a sense of who *they* are: “I am the vine, *you are the branches*,” he says. In other words, I cannot exist without you. What is a vine without branches? Just a singular strand that is brimming with nourishment but with nothing to nourish. A vine cannot bear fruit without

branches, which means, Jesus is saying, YOU all being the branches is absolutely essential to my existence and mission. For me to carry on, I need branches, and I need those branches to bear fruit—fruit that will nourish the world / fruit that will show people my love in very real tangible ways / fruit that will last / fruit that tastes like “loving one another.”

And it makes a lot of sense as to why Jesus chooses *this* moment to give his disciples this directive about their identity and purpose. John 15 is the final part of what is called Jesus’ Farewell Discourse to his disciples. He is saying goodbye to his disciples and preparing them for what is to come: his death, and the fact that he will no longer be with them in person, and also the hatred and scrutiny they will receive from the world. Times ahead will be tough. You can imagine how confused, scared, worried, and grieved the disciples are in this moment. Perhaps hearing what Jesus is saying, but not understanding what it means for their lives. Yet even as he tells them they themselves will suffer too, he

² Karoline Lewis, “Commentary on John 15:1-8,” *Working Preacher* (April 28, 2024), accessed on September 7, 2025 at

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-of-easter-2/commentary-on-john-151-8-6>.

assures them of their place and purpose in the world.

As Biblical Preaching Professor Karoline Lewis points out, “The disciples need to hear reassuring words. Jesus’ statement is not ‘You have been’ or [even] ‘You will be, but ‘You *are* the branches,’ and this present-tense promise is the peace needed for troubled hearts... ‘I am the vine, you are the branches’ is both promise and possibility. In the midst of sorrow and loss, it is often hard to look ahead much farther than the next minute, but ‘You are the branches’ sets in motion the disciples’ purpose.” It makes their lives absolutely necessary for the fulfillment of verses like John 3:16. How can God love the world without the disciples, *without us*?³

The context of this teaching raises its urgency and relevance for us. We, too, live in a world that is confusing and worrisome. We, too, wonder why it feels like God is absent. We, too, know what it is like to receive conflicting messages from our culture about what it means to be a faithful Christian. Perhaps you are feeling the grief and worry and confusion just as Jesus’ first disciples did.

It's easy to feast on the 24/7 news cycle and be despairing about hope, wondering where God is, where love is, where human decency is? Yet Jesus reminds us in John 15, that WE are that Hope, WE are that LOVE, WE are the Presence of God that the world needs. It is us. It is not something apart from us. It *IS* us. *We* are the Love. *We* are the Hope. *We* are the Transformation. We are the Branches of the Living God and as we abide in, remain in, dwell in God’s nourishing love—we then bear fruit to the world, telling the story of who God is and what the nature of Christ is like by the fruit that we bear.

BUT— *before* we bear fruit, we *abide*. The Greek word for “abide” is *ménō* and means to stay or dwell, and the tense of the verb throughout this passage conveys a “continual dwelling and remaining,” a relationship that is not a simple “meet and greet” but is connected at its root system from the very beginning. We abide and dwell the Vine continually draws nutrients from Creation itself (soil, sun) and also from the loving actions of its Creator:

³ Lewis, *ibid*.

pruning back, watering, care-taking.

We soak in God's love, letting it nourish our roots. We keep connected to Christ and to one another, knowing that if we are cut off from God or cut off from community—we will wither.

Our theme—*Abide & Grow: Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit*—begins with *Abide* for a reason. We need practices in our lives that tether us to the divine. We need to be in community each week to draw our hearts and minds to the divine within us and around us.

I want you to close your eyes for a moment and imagine a beautiful, health, IMAX movie-quality vineyard. Paint the picture in your mind of rows upon rows of vines in the Vineyard. Perhaps it's sunrise or sunset. Does the sun reflect off the leaves? How do the vines look from far away? Are they in neat rows? Or do they circle and wind? Are there well-worn paths between the rows?

Do you see bugs fluttering about the vines? See watering systems spraying the vineyard from afar, or see rainclouds in the distance that will nourish the roots?

As you draw in closer, can you see the vine's leaves, the twists in the vine, the different thickness of the branches?

Imagine yourself, now, walking in the vineyard barefoot—can you feel the soil underneath your feet, the sun on your face?

As you walk between the vines—stop when you see a vine that is particularly healthy looking. Can you smell the sweetness of the grapes? Or when you bite in, are they still unripe...a bit sour? What color are the grapes?

Take the branch or tendril of that vine and hold it in your hand. Feel it's strength and its delicacy. Imagine yourself as this branch. Abiding in this beautiful vineyard, soaking in the sun and rain, drawing strength from the branches and roots. Not alone, but thriving in community. Do you feel your singular purpose in the midst of this vast Vineyard? What makes *your* grapes unique? What will your fruit one day become? How will your fruit serve the world? As plucked off the vine, freshly washed and packaged as a snack a child in their lunchbox? As a dried out raisin in a box of Raisinets someone enjoys at the movie theatre? As

a delicious glass of champagne or Prosecco that someone uses to toast their special occasion? As the grape juice poured out and held up in a worship service during communion?

You may open your eyes now.

I wanted you to take a moment to Visualize this Vineyard so that you have an image to return to throughout the year. I have a feeling you may not feel as luxurious or purposeful or healthy or thriving as what you imagined just now. I have a feeling you may look around you and see desolate ground, not fertile vineyards. Many of us feel parched and thirsty, barely hanging on to the Vine, perhaps even feel cut off from the Vineyard altogether. Or perhaps we feel that the fruit we are bearing feels insignificant or perhaps not even edible. Or maybe our branch is weighed down with too much fruit, too much striving to always do the right thing. We haven't been pruned back in a while and we're a big gnarly, over-grown, over-extended.

Abiding is about remaining connected—to God, to community, to ourselves. And whether we are healthy or unhealthy right now, we can all

Abide in God's love. Soak in God's nourishment of presence. That is the first step in every vineyard. The baseline for our growth and cultivation.

There is a chart in your Order of Worship to ground you in the key aspects of our spiritual growth this year as described in John 15. These are foundational concepts we you want to remember as you visualize your Vineyard.

The **Vine Grower**—the Pruner and tender of the entire Vineyard—is God, your Creator, the One who gives you life.

The **Vine** Itself is Jesus—the loving and nourishing expression of Life that anchors us all to the Vine Grower and connects us all to the Vine and one another.

Each Vine Branch in the Vineyard is one of us, a unique offshoot of the Vine that is unlike any other. We receive our nourishment by remaining connected to the Vine, by “abiding” in Christ—in the teachings of Jesus, in the love of God. This is not a one time or occasional “pit stop.” This is not like stopping at a gas station to refuel when you are out of gas.

This is more like realizing you are a solar panel for God's love—soaking up God's love continually and then converting that love to an active energy of “good” in the world through your tangible actions. A continually receiving and giving.

This is how you bear Fruit. The **Fruit** on our Vine Branch is the evidence of our discipleship and our connection to the Vine and Vine Grower. Our “Fruit” is the “good” that we do in the world. And it comes in all kinds of varieties and flavors.

The Apostle Paul expands this metaphor in his letter to the Galatians naming nine **Fruit of the Spirit**: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. When expressed and lived through our lives, these Fruit are evidence of our

abiding in Christ and our living by the guidance of the Spirit.

The Fruit we bear is really important. It defines and clarifies what it means to be a Jesus-follower, a Christian. In the current zeitgeist of claiming “Christ” for one's own agenda and power rather than for what Jesus taught and stood for in the gospels,⁴ it can be hard to call ourselves Christian because we look at how others are acting and ask: *Are “they” really Christians? Because if they are, then I want nothing to do with that. I'm done with Christianity.*

I grew up with the understanding that we cannot know what someone else's relationship with Christ is like—that it is between them and God. Who are we to judge the strength of their faith? And this is true. We cannot judge, and should not judge, someone's

⁴ This is especially true in today's context with the rise of Christian Nationalism and people claiming the name of Christ as a way of justifying their actions even though their actions reflect nothing of Christ's love and everything of their agenda or desire for control. To some extent, we all do this at various points in our lives—claiming Christ as a justification for behaviors that are anything but Christlike, but when that is done with intention and regularity and in such conflict with the gospels—it is easy to spot.

Russell Moore, former top official for the Southern Baptist Convention and the editor-in-chief of *Christianity Today*, is very critical about and concerned for how “Trump Christianity” is transforming the political landscape but also the religious landscape of evangelical preachers and congregations who are no longer preaching from or studying the gospels or

passages like The Beatitudes, because “blessed are the peacemakers” and “turn the other cheek” are “too weak” and are described as “liberal talking points.” (Aila Slisco, “Evangelicals Are Now Rejecting ‘Liberal’ Teachings of Jesus,” *Newsweek* (9 Aug. 2023), accessed on September 7, 2025 at <https://www.newsweek.com/evangelicals-rejecting-jesus-teachings-liberal-talking-points-pastor-1818706>.)

While Moore is concerned about the political and social implications of such thinking, Moore has been vocal about his gravest concern with “Trump Christianity” as he calls it: that it harms the church's witness and the name of Christ. I have similar concerns when I hear liberal leaders talking with hate and vitriol about people on the other side, calling them evil (rather than naming their actions as evil or harmful).

faith or what they believe. We cannot know their motivations.

However, the more I study Scripture and claim Christ in my life in very public ways and have to defend and explain why I am a Christian and what that means for me, I have come to see that Jesus is very clear, and the Apostle Paul is very clear, that *we can actually know* whether someone is a *disciple or follower of Jesus* or not. We can ‘judge’ that. And that has nothing to do with whether someone says “Jesus is Lord” or has “professed their faith in Jesus” and has everything to do with how they are *living* in the world. What are their (or our) actions? Are their (or our) actions demonstrative first and foremost of the new commandment that Jesus gave in John 15, “*that we love one another as Jesus loved us*”?

And furthering Jesus’ teaching, the Apostle Paul helps the Galatians understand how they can evaluate the “markers of their faith” or the “signs” that tell the world they are Jesus-followers—which is important for them (and for us) when there are conflicting opinions going around.

We’ll unpack more of the Galatians passage mid-year, but for today, there are two things I want you to keep in mind as we begin our study.

First, after Paul visited Galatia and started the church, he left. And since then other “false” teachers have come in and are spreading their voice and influence. *They* are teaching that the Galatians (Gentiles) need to follow the law of the Jews as the *first* sign of obedience in their faith. Meaning, they are preaching that these Gentiles **DO** need to do things in Jewish law like eat kosher and be circumcised (Gal. 2:11-21; 5:2-12; 6:12-15). These teachers are claiming that following the Jewish law is the vehicle to them experience God’s Spirit in their lives (3:1-5).

Of course, Paul has been teaching that in Christ—Gentiles and Jews—are equal under God’s grace. Gentiles do not need to follow Jewish law, and it’s okay if Jews continue to follow Jewish law, but the bigger point is—we now live under the law of God’s love as expressed in the Spirit of Christ. This Spirit guides our lives, not any particular laws.

So why are the Galatians so tempted to listen to these “false” teachers? Well because, as New Testament Professor Carla Works aptly says, “Choosing circumcision is a big commitment, and a one-time act. It would publicly link the Galatians to the Jewish people and to their God. [It would ensure their ‘insider status’ and that they are ‘good with God,’ so to speak.] It would be tempting to have a [very clear] public marker of one’s faith journey. On the other hand—if the Galatians remain true to Paul’s gospel, the Spirit’s work is a process. [And a long process at that!]”⁵ And the process of growing in the Spirit is more akin to growing fruit on the branches of a vine—it takes cultivating and time and practice. It is not a one-time event. It’s a life-long spiritual journey. It’s harder.

In other words, rather than having external markers of circumcision or what foods are on their table to distinguish them as Christ-followers to the world, the fruit they show through their lives is what will show the world that they are Christ-followers. That they are

transformed as a people and now embody and carry out the love of Jesus through their lives. Their “markers of faith” are the fruit that show “they are a people who bear one another’s burdens, love one another, as Christ has loved them.” They are a people whose actions are marked by service rather than selfish desires.⁶

The second thing I want you to know about this passage is that the phrase the “works of the flesh” is used not just to talk about our bodies, but to remind us that we are to extend beyond ourselves into relationship with others. Paul was likely aware that his emphasis on freedom could be viewed as dangerous, opening the door to “anything goes” thinking. And he wants them to keep “loving others” as their focus, not serving and self and doing whatever they please (which is our human inclination).

“The alternative to loving service to one another is described in 5:15: *“If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.”* The verbs Paul uses suggest the

⁵ Carla Works, “Commentary on Galatians 5:1, 13-25,” *Working Preacher* (26 June 2022), accessed on September 7, 2025 at <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise->

[common-lectionary/ordinary-13-3/commentary-on-galatians-51-13-25-5](https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-13-3/commentary-on-galatians-51-13-25-5).

⁶ Works, *ibid*.

actions of wild animals engaged in a struggle to the death. Self-centeredness inevitably leads to seeing others as rivals rather than beloved children of God. The resulting behavior is the opposite of loving service and destroys life in community.”⁷

“Paul describes how the desires of the flesh and the desires of the Spirit are diametrically opposed. He is not describing a dualistic split between body and spirit. Rather, “flesh” (*sarx*) refers to the whole self under the power of sin, with all its self-seeking desires and self-serving ways. We tend to think of “desires of the flesh” in terms of indulging bodily desires, and certainly some of the “works of the flesh” listed in 5:19-21 fit this category. But the other “works of the flesh” Paul lists are about matters of heart, mind, and speech as these affect our relationships with God and one another. Eight of them have to do with divisiveness within the community: enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, and envy⁸—things that are opposite of “loving one another.”

By contrast, the “fruit of the Spirit” is Love with all the

qualities that flow from it: joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

To circle back to John 15, we are able to produce this kind of fruit by abiding in the Spirit continually. It’s a life-long practice, not a one and done decision.

As we journey throughout this year, we will take our time with each of the Nine Fruit of the Spirit that Paul names—taking them in a slightly different order than Paul does—exploring them on three different levels or through three different lenses. You will see these symbols in your Order of Worship each week which will help you know for that week what our focus will be.



**Foundational /
Spiritual / Personal
/ Theological
(Belief) – What do**

*believe about this value (or
Fruit) theologically and how
does it inform our personal,
spiritual life?*

⁷ Johnson, *ibid.*

⁸ Johnson, *ibid.*



**Embodied /
Relational /
Communal /
Ecclesiological**

(Church)—*How does embodying and living this Fruit in our lives affect our relationships and community, even more, what impact does this Fruit have on our church community, our vision and mission?*



**Prophetic /
Transformational
/ Global /
Eschatological**

(Kin-dom of God)—*When we live this Fruit out in our actions, how can it actually change the world and help bring about justice and liberation? What would this Fruit look like if we were already living in the kin-dom of God on earth as it is in heaven? And how do we get from Here to There?*

If we look at each of the Nine Fruit in these three ways, that gives us 27 fresh and different varieties of grapes to grow on our vine. In other words, there is something for everyone!

As we examine the fruit through these lenses, we'll create a stronger theological foundation for our faith while also gaining

practical tools for living out our faith in impactful ways.

With all that is happening in our lives and world, it is easy to feel uprooted, spiritually depleted, and malnourished. With such deep hunger and weariness, we often cope by feeding on whatever is easiest for us to consume. An All-You-Can-Eat Buffet of anxiety, fear, conflict, despair, apathy, hatred, and cynicism is placed before us daily. If we are not intentional about our spiritual health, we will consume and regurgitate this Diet of Dysfunction that disheartens and dehumanizes.

Alternatively—God invites us to feed ourselves with nourishing, life-sustaining values that honor our dignity and the dignity of every beloved child of God. And then, to feed others with these same healing values. Both in our interpersonal relationships and in our large-scale decision making, our world needs spiritually-centered people who demonstrate and embody love, peace, goodness, self-control, patience, faithfulness, joy, kindness, and gentleness.

As we abide in God's Vineyard, we imagine how bountiful and abundant the Fruit of the Spirit

are in the kin-dom of God.
Cultivating the Fruit of the
Spirit will not change us or our
world overnight, but it will
nourish us spiritually and allow
us to experience and share
God's love in greater measure.

And of course, abiding in the
presence of Christ naturally
reminds us of Communion, the
Last Supper and the connection
to grapes on the vine and wine
in the Chalice. The blood of
Christ as a metaphor for the life
force of God's love within
Christ is powerful. When we are
abiding in God, that same life
force of love is in us—and we,
too, produce the “wine of life”
or the “cup of abundance” for
the world. As John 15:11 says,
*“I’ve said these things so that
my joy may be in you and so
that YOUR joy may be
complete!”*

We are connected at the
Communion Table to the life,
death, and resurrection of Christ
/ we are connected to this
community of faith and the
community of saints / and we
are connected to the hope of the
coming and co-creating of
God's kin-dom.

As you Visualize yourself in
God's Vineyard, may you abide
in God's love and bear fruit in

Christ's likeness—and know
that we are all on this journey
together to create and embody
the most flavorful “Wine of
Christ” that we can, so that
when our lives are poured out in
service to others, people can
easily pick up on the hints of
love, peace, goodness, self-
control, patience, faithfulness,
joy, kindness, gentleness—and
be nourished by every sip.

Amen.