STAY CONNECTED TO JESUS TO BEAR MUCH FRUIT

1. Why is staying connected to Jesus so important?
2. What’s the fruit all about?

We live in an interconnected world. You connect on Facebook with your friends. The Internet connect us in so many ways beyond social networks. How much of our shopping, emailing, banking, doctoring, even the power grid, touches the Internet even if you do not own a computer? Or think of how phones connect us today, not only in our homes but wherever we are, as long as we are in range of a cell tower. In this interconnected world we can lose track of the most important connection of all. Our reading reminds us: **Stay connected to Jesus.**

That is one of the truths Jesus pictures when he calls himself the true, genuine Vine. My fellow Christians, you are the branches. And Jesus’ picture brings home why it is so important for you and me to stay connected to him. Let’s think about that question.

Why is it so important to stay connected to Jesus? Some might answer: To get to heaven. And there is truth in that. Jesus is the only way to heaven. Anyone not connected to Jesus is a dead branch that will be thrown into the everlasting fires of hell, separated from God’s love and cut off from all hope. Jesus clearly brings that out: **If anyone does not remain in me, he is thrown away like a branch and withers. Such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.** Only Jesus saves. He alone is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Without faith in Jesus, you are a dead branch cut off for the fire. Only those connected to Jesus, like branches to the vine, will be in heaven.

But if getting to heaven is your only motive, then you are a dead branch or soon will be. Yes, if you think getting to heaven someday is the only reason staying connected to Jesus is important, then your faith is quickly drying up, if it has not already. The Gardener will cut you off. That is what happens to all too many people.

You see, if we imagine that Jesus is important only for getting us into heaven, why bother too much about him until death is closer? And even when we realize we could die at any time, if we are just concerned about having enough faith to slide into paradise, that is an artificial faith. It is a faith that knows God’s truth but does not really trust it. A branch needs the vine continuously. Only the vine brings the sap to nourish, strengthen, and keep the branches alive. A branch connected to Jesus continuously depends on his Word of truth for strength and life.

My friends, depend on Jesus continuously. Keep feeding on his Word of truth. Do not live your life thinking that you just need enough faith to slide into heaven. Do not live with the attitude that wants to get by with just enough church, just enough Bible study, just enough religion, so that you have just enough faith. That is not faith. Faith depends on Jesus continuously, like a branch depending on the vine. Faith always draws its strength from his Word of truth, eager to know him and his Word better and better. Faith knows and believes that the importance of staying connected to Jesus is not just to get us into heaven someday.

So why then is it so important to stay connected to Jesus? Think about what Jesus says here: **I am the vine; you are the branches.** What is it that branches do when they are connected to the vine? They produce fruit - and not just a little bit of fruit, but as Jesus say **much fruit.** That is why it is so important to stay connect to Jesus: not only so that
you get to heaven but so that you bear fruit, much fruit, today and every day until then.

What is the fruit all about? Think of the Christian virtues that St Paul lists as the fruit of the Holy Spirit in Galatians 5 - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, an self-control. Think of how those virtues show themselves in your words and actions. Both those virtues and the works they produce are fruits. Unbelievers may imitate these actions to a certain extent, but that is fake fruit. It might fool us human beings, but it does not fool God. Real fruit comes only from branches connected to Jesus, branches that receive their strength and nourishment from the true, genuine Vine. Jesus says: **Remain in me, and I am going to remain in you. A branch cannot bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Likewise, you cannot bear fruit unless you remain in me.** Remain in Jesus. Stay connected to Jesus to bear much fruit.

The branch connected to Jesus does not think: **I've already produced enough fruit. I can put aside Jesus and his Word for the time being.** You do not see branches taking time off from the vine, do you? Faith knows that we always have room to grow in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, and the works that follow. There is never too much fruit. Faith always wants to be producing more.

Your faith knows how great Jesus’ mercy toward you is. He took us dead in sin and made us alive in himself. He took us with our inborn filth and washed you and me clean through water and Word of Baptism. He took us wild branches, rebellious against God, and grafted us on to himself, the true Vine. Through his death, you have life. Through his resurrection, you have reconciliation to God. His blood purifies you from all sin, and he presents holy, radiant, and clean, clothed with his righteousness. Jesus says: **You are already clean because of the Word I have spoken to you.** No wonder we want to stay connected to Jesus and bear much fruit! No wonder we want to grow closer to such a Savior! No wonder we want his Word to flow from the Scriptures and Sacraments into our hearts always!

Even our view of troubles, hardships, and suffering changes. We know and believe that Jesus has suffered the full punishment for all our sins. For the Christian, troubles, hardships, and suffering are not extra punishments, as if Jesus’ sufferings were not quite enough to atone for us. Rather, think of how the Gardner treats the fruit-bearing branches. He prunes them so that they grow stronger and bear much fruit.

Sometimes that pruning cuts deep. The luxuries of this world as well as its cares and worries can sap our strength. Success and wealth can make us look like a healthy, leafy branch. But if the leaves are sapping all our time and energy, don't they need to be pruned, as much as that might hurt? No matter how good a branch might look, if it is not producing fruit, it is not worth keeping. So through troubles, hardships, and suffering the Father is at work so that you bear much fruit. Jesus says: **My Father is the Gardener. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit, he is going to cut off. And he prunes every branch that does bear fruit, so that it will bear more fruit.** Think about that when life hits you hard. Don't despair. Your heavenly Father is at work, pruning you to bear much fruit.

Do you see how this also changes our prayers? Rather than telling God how we want life to be, we pray that he does whatever is necessary to keep us connected to Jesus so that we bear much fruit. Some have called that praying dangerously, because our old self will not like the answers. Only as God’s Word fills us can we pray like that.
Only God’s Word can bring our will in sync with his will. Only God’s Word can change our wants so that what we truly want matches what God wants. That is why Jesus says: *If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.* That is not a genie promising three wishes. That is Jesus’ promise to you that as your prayers, wants, and wishes flow from God’s Word, which has been brought into your heart, they will be answered. As branches, we wish to bear much fruit as we stay connected to Jesus. That is what we pray for, and that is what he gives.

And finally why do we want to bear much fruit? Because it glorifies our Father in heaven. Jesus says: *My Father is glorified by this: that you continue to bear much fruit and prove to be my disciples.* For example, as we bear the fruit of love, others glorify the Father who loved us first. Also, as we bear the fruit of patience in affliction, others glorify the Father and want to know what strength he gives to bring such endurance. So my friends, bear much fruit to bring him glory, showing yourselves to be Christ’s disciples.

So to wrap it up, stay connected to Jesus. Stay connected through his Word and Sacraments. What a Savior you have, crucified for you and risen from the dead to give you his victory! In him alone you have forgiveness, life, and salvation. Cherish him, the true Vine. Relish his promises. Stay connected to Jesus as you remain in him and his Word remains in you. Then you will bear much fruit. Amen.

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