

When our theological colleges teach their students Greek they almost always begin with the gospel of John. Why? Because John writes in short simple sentences using straight-forward vocabulary with loads of repetition.

*The Apostle John is the Dr Seuss of Ancient Greek!*

Even Bear's with small brains like me can feel like learned scholars after only 1 class of Ancient Greek! The Genius of God in John is that he expresses profound truth in simple words.

*Like Einstein's  $E=mc^2$ , it seems simple enough but actually it'll have you thinking for a life-time.*

So when Jesus says in John 15 "*I am the vine and you are the branches*"

He is saying something profound in a very straight-forward way.

He is talking about Him being the key to growth and fruit in our life.

What he is saying is that "in me" you have the potential for enormous personal change and fruitful growth.

*Fruit like: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control... Gal 5:22*

What Jesus is saying is that "I am the key to this, in your life"

How can a selfish person become unselfish?

How can a "spiky person become warm"?

How can a worrier be at peace?

How can we exercise self-control?

Jesus says "I am the key to this".

There can't be one of us here who sees a list of character traits like this and doesn't say

"boy, I'd love some of that in my life – I'd love to be loving, more joyful, more patient, more kind... more self-controlled".

*Amanda and I went up to the Natural History Museum on Monday and we decided to save the tube fare by walking from Victoria – but then we realised we needed to buy a map – which blew away our cost savings! But hey!*

*So as we queued up in WH Smith to buy the cheapest map we could find I couldn't help notice an entire book-case (floor to ceiling) filled with self-help books on how to be more "loving, joyful, peaceful, etc, etc"*

We all long for this stuff in our life

And Jesus says "I am the Vine, I am the key to this growth".

With me

It is possible to change,

It is possible to grow.

It is possible to draw on my life and so to change yours.

Jesus says 3 things that I want to highlight:

that change is a real possibility

that growth comes from being organically connected to Jesus; and

that growth happens when we draw our life from His life in us.

So if there is some aspect of your life that troubles you,  
some part of your character that you struggle with

you can change, you can, you can draw your life from his.

### 1. Change is a Real Possibility.

Would you turn with me to John chapter 15 where we see in v16 Jesus says to his ordinary, flawed disciples

*“I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit - fruit that will last”*

“I chose and appointed you”

In Romans 8, God says

“I called you for a purpose – to become like Jesus – to be glorified”

“Before the beginning of time, I knew you (Oh I knew all your weaknesses, all your flaws, all your struggles) but still chose you and I have called you to bear fruit – to be great – to reflect my glory!”

Doesn't this stagger you that everything Jesus has done –

his putting aside of heaven, his incarnation on earth, his death, his resurrection - everything Jesus has done is for this one purpose that you might become like him, to bear fruit, to reflect God's glory!

This story – this Universe is all been about your journey to reflect God's glory.

*Why does a gardener garden?*

*Why does he plan the layout, dig the ground, prepare the soil, plant the flowers, tend them, weed them and prune them?*

*So that the garden may be glorious!*

*So that it may be fruitful!*

This is the plan of God for you!

God is a gardener.

Jesus is the Vine

You and I are branches whose purpose is to be filled with the pulsating life of Jesus – that you may grow and change and bear much fruit.

God's promise and his purpose is that Change in you is a real possibility.

The obstacle is that all of us have things going on in our life (habits in our life) that make us and others unhappy

There are attitudes within us, habits of behaviour, patterns of thinking that grieve the heart of God and we're just living with them, letting them happen,

we are simply living with them!

- because the truth is we're pessimistic about ever being able to change.

- we think we can't – we've tried and failed and so now we're just living with them.

Jesus Christ says, listen,

I am the one who brought the stars into existence

I am the one who made you;

I am the one whose life has been given for your greatness; and

I am the one who **can** change you

Every problem, every flaw, every weakness in your life – I can change.

I have the power to transform your beauty.

This is the promise of God

Do you see that this is true for you?

You say “I see it Steve”, “I’m not sure I believe it”, and “I certainly can’t see how to do it”  
but I see the promise.

I see the promise that before the beginning of time Jesus knew me, (AND STILL) he chose me and (AND STILL) he appointed me to bear fruit...

I’d just love to know how!

Jesus says “you can change, you can grow”

and he says

## **2. This growth is Organic.**

The picture that Jesus gives is one of a grape-vine, with the branches drawing goodness from the main stem.

He says:

*“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit”. John 15:5*

What he is saying that our growth happens organically and inwardly.

### **2.1 not mechanical and externally.**

This is really important to get.

Jesus does not say *“I am the handle and you are the cog,*

*And if you apply enough pressure you will change”.*

Our growth, change does not happen mechanically through effort.

Jesus says “you grow organically, as you are grafted into me, spliced, connected into my life I will bring about a deep change within you”.

One of the privileges I have as a clergyman is that people share their struggles with me.

It might be that someone is struggling with an issue of self esteem and is cutting themselves

It might be that someone is struggling with alcohol and their marriage is in trouble

It might be that someone is struggling with masturbation and internet pornography

It might be that someone is in bad company and finds it difficult not to get into trouble

It might be that someone finds it difficult not to worry, not to be critical of others, not to be impatient.

And what I see happening again and again:

is that people try really hard to stop, they try really hard to get a grip, to take control and for a while they do, it works, but they can’t keep it up and then they crash and burn and go back to their old way of life.

And sometimes we pick ourselves up and try again

And sometimes we feel so wretched and defeated that we don’t bother and

therefore we either live with it and hide it as best we can; or

we feel let ourselves slowly sink.

What is happening is that we are trying to live holy lives by doing something external and mechanical.

We are restraining ourselves, biting our tongue, resisting temptation, wrestling with our habit by sheer will-power, but

Jesus didn’t say “I am the handle and you are cog” its not about external force.

Guilt and will-power and even a determination to be holy cannot change our inner life.

Jesus said v5 “apart from me you can do nothing”

In our own strength, in our own power we can only force external change and

that will never last

Jesus said “growth and change” does not happen mechanically.  
and

## **2.2 It doesn't happen by being busy either.**

Our instinct to have the life of God flow through us is to try hard.

That's not unreasonable is it really.

Our desire for God to bless us drives us to get busy.

And therefore our natural inclination, if we desperately want God to change us, is to do stuff for Him.

The problem is that we can be so busy trying to *appropriate the life* of God that they forfeit experiencing it.

We can get ourselves so busy trying to *appropriate the life* of God that they miss experiencing it.

Do you remember the parable of the Prodigal Son?

*There were two Sons.*

*The younger son was a real shmuck.*

*He took his Father's money squandered it all on wine, women, and song –  
came to his senses –*

*felt a deep sense of repentance and returned home –*

*As he appeared over the crest of the hill his Father ran to him, embraced him, welcomed him, put a gold  
ring on him and threw a party –*

*The younger Son **experienced** the love of his Father.*

*The Older Son felt aggrieved –*

*There he was (and I quote) “working like a slave in the field” and  
the Father had never hugged **him**,  
never given **him** a ring and*

*certainly never thrown **him** a party!*

*In other words “he was so busy slaving away in the field that he had never experienced the love of the  
Father in his life”.*

The point of the parable is this

He didn't need to work in the field to earn his Father's approval -  
he ALREADY had it.

He didn't need to appropriate his Father's love – it was ALREADY his.

What he needed to do was spend time – *not in the field* – but in his Father's presence.

enjoying the intimacy of his friendship,

the joy of sharing his life with him.

Do you remember Mary and Martha?

It's the same thing!

*Martha working like a slave in the kitchen – while Mary sat at Jesus feet listening to him.*

*Martha gets more and more worked up until she explodes and says don't you care Jesus that “I'm doing all  
the work around here!” and Jesus says*

*“Martha, Martha you worry about many things – but only one thing is necessary – Mary has chosen what is  
better”*

Now I'm not saying that the fields didn't need digging, or

that the dinner didn't need preparing

but the strength and joy to do that is found in drawing from the life of God in us.

That is our top priority!

The Older Son was Unforgiving and Martha was worrying...

And the power to change and to grow was available in focussing on the friendship of Jesus.

Its not mechanical and external –

Its not about working hard

### **3.3 It about a growing relationship**

And relationships are organic, they grow slowly.

The key to our change and growth is to invest ourselves in our friendship with Jesus – that is the power that gives life and it can't be earned or obtained by will-power.

There is no short-cut in this: listening, walking, talking, involving Jesus in our life, in our decisions, in our priorities. There is no other way.

The power of his life in us comes when we share our life with him.

If we make Jesus the reason for our doing **everything**

The reason why we get out of bed in the morning

Make him our life... the fruit will grow.

Jesus says "If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit"

So how do we do that?

### **3. How do we remain in him?**

Well to explore I want to talk about the time in our life when we *least* want to connect with God

For if we can do it then, then we can do it at other times too.

The times in our life when we least want to connect with God are those times when God cuts things away from us.

*In John 15v2 Jesus says "My Father cuts off every branch that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he **prunes** so that it will be even more fruitful.*

If you go into a vineyard at pruning time it will look (to someone like me, to someone with an untrained eye) like a disaster!

You'd be forgiven in thinking that the gardener was trying to kill the plant!

When he finally stops, the ground is littered with branches and twigs and leaves, and even little bunches of grapes – all over the floor!

And then you look at the vine, and you see that it has been cut and cut and cut again

And you'd think "what madman has done this?", "what a waste!"

Look at all this stuff all over the ground!

But if we said that – we'd simply be revealing that we don't really understand gardening!

Because we know that pruning the vine will make it stronger and more fruitful. Yes?

The Gardener only ever cuts off that which would have been a loss to keep.

He only cuts off that which would have been a LOSS to keep and a gain to lose.

What the Gardener desires, is for the vine to reach its maximum fruitfulness, to fulfil its potential, to accomplish (the very reason) why it was planted.

That's what he wants!

Isn't that what God is saying here?

Jesus says: when the knife comes into your life and things that you've always wanted to keep get taken away and things you've set your heart on are removed and when the dream is smashed –

It looks (to the untrained eye) like a pointless waste and we're tempted to say:

“there is no reason why I should **not** have got that job”

“there is no reason why I should have lost that friend”

“there is no reason why this should have ever happened to me”

But then we don't understand gardening and we don't know what God knows...

Now we need to be careful here...

because I am not saying that “God will send terrible things into our life to make us a better person”

Jesus is not saying “the reason why your Mother died when you were 5 was to make you more noble, more loving, more caring”.

God is not like that!

As you read the Bible you see that God never *causes* evil to bring about good – but he does *ALLOW* the evil that is let loose in this world

(because human beings wanted to take control for themselves)

he does allow the consequences of that evil to hit us all.

Christians are not exempt from the suffering that is common to the world

The hurricane doesn't by-pass Christian homes

The plague doesn't skip every house with a cross in it

The bullet doesn't bend around God's people on the battle-field.

In v2 we see that the same knife comes onto contact with every branch.

But there **IS** a difference

Jesus says “if you are hooked into me, if you are drawing your sustenance, your strength, your vitality from me, then this knife will not destroy you”.

It will not make you bitter but will make you sympathetic to those like you,

It will not make you worry it will make trust

It will not reduce you it will make you great.

It will not but out your fire it will make you shine!

But if you are **NOT** connected into me – then that same knife, those same wounds (which are common in this world) will cut you off!!

They will be for you a pointless, senseless, waste!

Look, I have seen people wronged who struggle and struggle to ever forgive and they cannot, and it does so such damage to them... !

but I have also seen people wronged who have drawn on the grace of Jesus, hungered and thirsted for his forgiveness and the love of God has shone out of them like a beacon.

Isn't that what we see when we go to Rwanda?

When we meet those widows whose husbands and children were murdered before their eyes,  
who were raped and who live with HIV?

Isn't that what we see when we look into their eyes – they shine with the glory of God and we are humbled  
in their presence?

How did that happen?

Because their response to the cut was to draw deeper on the life of Jesus and that life flowed in them and  
changed them.

Listen, when someone says to you “you are useless” you can  
either choose to respond to that knife by listening to that voice or  
you can turn to Jesus and say “is that what you think?”

When your past comes to haunt you and you are tempted to think it **defines** who you are you can choose to  
respond to that knife by  
listening to that voice or  
you can turn to Jesus and ask “does my past really define me?”

When temptation comes, when the habits bear down, when wise decisions are hard to choose,  
we can either use our own strength to resist or  
we can draw on the joy, the friendship, the love of what Jesus has done for us – and the more we do that the  
more his life will course in our soul.

You see the only way to break a destructive habit,  
the only way to silence voices of doubt  
the only way to resist temptation  
is not to try harder,  
is not to get busy,  
it is to immediately fly to Christ empty handed, empty hearted and let him fill us with his Spirit  
this is the secret to organic growth.  
This is the secret of change

Will you do that will seek a *friendship* with Jesus?  
Will you invite him into every part of your life?  
Will you let his Spirit rise in you?

You and I, we are houses!  
When we invite God into our life he begins to work in us.  
At first there is nothing surprising –  
he stops the leaks, he cleans the rooms, he tidies up a bit –  
that's fine we get that – we understand that...

but then he begins to knock the house about and its painful,  
he seems to be making a real mess – and  
it doesn't make any sense!  
“what is he up to” we cry?  
and then the explanation comes –

He is pushing out a wing here,

He is adding a story there,

He is making a courtyard here –

And then we realise that the cottage we thought we were going to be made into is actually turning into a palace fit for the king.

For then we understand that he intends to live in us forever!

He changes from glory into glory –

He is the Vine you are the branches and you have been made for greatness!