



## Daily Manna for Thursday

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Prepared for you by

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### John 15:1-8

[Jesus said:] <sup>1</sup>"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. <sup>2</sup>He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. <sup>3</sup>You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup>Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. <sup>5</sup>I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. <sup>6</sup>Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. <sup>7</sup>If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup>My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples."

There are certain ideals in American culture that seem uncontested, those which I think many of us would be hard-pressed to consider ourselves against. We like to pride ourselves on our values of self-reliance, our independent spirits, our capacity for work and our willingness to help others do the same. Our collective stories tell us that we are pioneers, innovators, and creators, narratives which still hold power even after they've been contested. These cultural values do not stop at the church's door – if we examine the main threads of American Christianity, priorities of self-help and community-building are central to how we read Scripture and worship together. Jesus came to the world, and offers us salvation, and while we wait for our final salvation, we are meant to strive toward building ourselves up in obedience, purity, and helping ourselves and others. This ethic, in my view, is central to mainstream American theologies.

So what would it mean if we were to live as if this ethic was not true, or was not nearly as important as we think it should be? What if these individual ethics of hard work and self-improvement have become so overgrown that they obscure the genuine meaning of living a Christian life? When Jesus tells the disciples that he is the "true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower," he is not telling them ('the branches') that they are now being commanded to go forth and begin new vineyards. If God is the vinegrower, and Jesus is the vine, then all of the agency, the power to act and improve the state of the vineyard, is in God and Jesus' hands. If we are the branches, and only the branches, the growth and love and peace we receive never ultimately comes from ourselves, but instead from Christ. This is not to say that the branches do nothing, but it does emphasize that we are not the shapers of our destiny, nor are we charged with having to figure out our own best fulfillment. In some ways, Jesus is telling the disciples (and therefore telling us), that we are instead being instructed to simply abide, to live into our role as the fruiting branches of the vineyard, blessed to be a blessing to others, to bear love and goodwill to others as a direct result of God's goodwill toward us. In our cultural context, in the shifting winds of modern and post-modern America, we are constantly being prodded to create meaning for ourselves, through our work or our consumption or some other philosophy of self-fulfillment. In Jesus, we are offered another path, one which takes this weight of meaning-making, this Sisyphean task of 'finding our bliss,' and instead assures us that we can simply abide in God's love and bear this love to others. Thanks be to God, the vinegrower, and to Jesus, the true vine.