

Connected and Committed
Consecrated Stewards- Consecration Weekend
May 9-11, 2009

Focus: **Jesus said, “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in Me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from Me you can do nothing.”** (John 15:5)

What does it mean to be Consecrated Steward? It begins with something very simple but yet significant- being connected! There are many things in life that are connected. Muscles, tendons, and bones are connected together making it possible for us to move. Train cars are connected so items can be transported. In human relationships, people are connected in marriage as a blessing and gift from God. Jesus spoke of this connectedness in marriage, echoing the words of the Old Testament as He said,

⁴ “Haven’t you read,” he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ ⁵ and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’ ? ⁶ So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.”
(Matthew 19:4-6)

This connectedness is a good thing.

But when things are disconnected, tragic things happen. When a tendon is disconnected from a bone, not only is a person crippled, but they also experience great pain. We all know the bad results of trains that are disconnected. They come off the track. Couples that make commitments to each other also become disconnected, and marriages and families are devastated. Being disconnected is not a good thing.

The Gospel today reminds us that connectedness is essential in our relationship with Jesus Christ. Jesus tells us this through an analogy. First of all, Jesus tells us that He is the true vine. The vine is important. It is the source of life. When Jesus says He is the true vine, He already has begun to confront some of the disconnectedness in our relationship with God. He reminds us that He alone is the source of life. But our nature is different. We want to think of ourselves as being in control not only of our lives but of our decisions about our lives. An

expectant mother in an abortion clinic is making a statement that it is her life and her choice. Someone living an unhealthy lifestyle that is destroying their body also proclaims that it is their life. It is a declaration that they are the vine. People sitting in church who deny the truth of God's Law also declare that they are the vine. Sometimes people jokingly comment that if hell is where their friends are, they want to be there. Each of these is a tragic denial that Jesus is the vine, the source of life for us all.

Next, it is important to understand that God is the gardener. We understand what gardeners do. They plant, fertilize, water, pull weeds, cut out other unnecessary plant life. But sometimes, the action the gardener takes is drastic. In the case of God, sometimes this means even destroying the vine. Consider this extreme action taken by God as the gardener for his people, Israel.

¹⁴ Return to us, O God Almighty! Look down from heaven and see! Watch over this vine, ¹⁵ the root your right hand has planted, the son you have raised up for yourself. ¹⁶ Your vine is cut down, it is burned with fire; at your rebuke your people perish. (Psalm 80:14-16)

This work of the gardener is crucial in the well-being of the vine.

Jesus finally identifies each of us as the branches. As branches, we are expected to bear fruit. The gardener knows that the branches have a dramatic impact on the vine. There are times when the vines must be pruned. The word for "pruning" comes from the word meaning "cleanse." This fits with the next verse where Jesus says that they are already clean. Pruning is a cleansing of the portions of the branches that are unproductive or that are detrimental to the vine.

Let's assume that the gardener wants to prune us today. Where would God start? If he wants to remove the problems that disconnect us from him, what must he do? Will taking out a gall bladder or tonsils or an appendix be sufficient to prune and cleanse us? Or is the problem

deeper than that? If God pruned all the things out of our lives that disconnect us from him, what would be left? Perhaps the writer of Hebrews has said it best,

¹² For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. (Hebrews 4:12)

Where would it end? Could we even survive such a pruning? I think we know the answer.

Nothing would be left if God pruned and cleansed all that disconnects us from him.

We are truly desperate for another way to deal with this. What else can the gardener do to cleanse and prune us? God has answered that question since the beginning of time. His plan is to address the poisonous branches by destroying the vine. Jesus was cut down like a vine, not with an ax, but with a gavel of judgment. The soldiers gathered this severed vine along with other severed branches and took them out of the city, to be disposed of and destroyed. The severed vine was piled on a high pile that looked suspiciously like a place called Calvary. The vine was lifted up on this pile, sticking out of the ground in the shape of a cross. That cross attracted the fires of hell and condemnation that the Israelites had seen early in their journey from Egypt. The Bible tells us that this is what they saw on Calvary.

To the Israelites the glory of the LORD looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain. (Exodus 24:17)

The fire of God's wrath would destroy and consume the vine, as well as the poisoned branches. Now the sword must no longer cut to the heart. The cleansing and pruning has been complete. Jesus suffered this trial by fire, and embraced death on our behalf. The ashes of this cleansing, the body of our Lord, was cast into the grave and sealed securely with a stone no individual man could move. But three days later an amazing thing happened. This dead vine now began to look like the vine Isaiah had spoken about many years earlier.

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. (Isaiah 11:1)

This vine began to come back to life. Like weeds and plants that find cracks and crevices and grow, so this vine found a gap between the grave and the stone covering the opening. This vine came forth with great power, for on the third day this vine pushed aside this grave stone for all eternity. The dead and buried vine is alive again. We still can boldly proclaim the victory cry even as we read about this vine. For Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Now we live as those who have this resurrection blood flowing through our lives. The vine gives us a new life and pours into each of us a new life each day, one pruned and cleansed for serving Jesus.

So now we again consider what the source of life is for Consecrated Stewards. It is not found in ourselves. It is found by being connected to the vine. God has done this for us so that we may produce fruit. Last week we asked each of you to fill out a sheet about various things you might be able to do in service for our Lord. Please don't forget to give those back to us. But this week, we are called to be fruitful with the financial support God enables us to provide for his kingdom work. We have an opportunity to see which vine our pocketbooks are attached to. As we do, we are reminded that we have been reattached to the living vine, Jesus Christ.

Please take the commitment cards that you either received last week or today. Look at the commitment that is before you. Each of us has great opportunities for growth in our contributions to the Lord. Some may be giving at a level that is below the 10% tithe amount. We encourage you to consider increasing the percentage of your income that you give as your offering. Some may already be at the Biblical level of a tithe, or of 10%. But others may be stepping even beyond the tithe as evidence of even more fruitful giving. The challenge is before you. God has been faithful in his commitment to us to give us all that is needed. He now invites us to be willing to return an even larger proportion to him as a sign of trust.

In a few moments I am going to offer a prayer as you prepare your commitment card. There is a box where you can indicate a weekly amount. I would instead encourage you to list a percentage rather than a dollar amount. As you are blessed with abundance, you increase your

offerings based on that percentage. If God blesses you with scarcity, then you can also decrease your offerings proportionately. As you do, make your commitments as those who are attached to the living vine, Jesus Christ. Let your commitments reflect what God has done for you. Please don't give because you must. Let your heart that is reattached to the vine be reflected in your commitment. Consider the hearts of the people of Israel in Exodus 25,

² “Tell the Israelites to bring me an offering. You are to receive the offering for me from each man whose heart prompts him to give. (Exodus 25:2)

Please pray with me.

Gracious God, you are the giver of all things. We acknowledge that you provide clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, land, animals, and all that we have. You provide the daily bread that we ask for in our prayers. Now we ask that you would let the blood of the crucified and now risen vine flow through our bodies and especially our hearts as we make a commitment to you today. Challenge us in our trust in you, that even in difficult times we would give generously for the sake of others who are being cast into the eternal fires each day. We especially ask that you point us to the holy meal prepared before us, a meal offered at a great price. Fill us with the precious blood of Jesus, that we might come to life again in our love for God and for each other. Bless these commitments for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.