

## **Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time***

### **The Vine and the Branches**

Scripture: John 15:1-8

Code: P25

At key points in His ministry, Christ emphasized His equality with God in the clearest possible terminology. The strongest affirmations of His deity employed the name for God used when the Father first revealed Himself to Moses--"I AM" (Exodus 3:14).

Jesus had already said, "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12); "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35); "I am the Way" (John 14:6); and "I am the Door" (John 10:9). Now, the night before His death, He tells them, "I am the Vine." Like the other great "I am" passages recorded in the Gospel of John, it points to His deity. Each one is a metaphor that elevates Jesus to the level of Creator, Sustainer, Savior, and Lord--titles that can be claimed only by God.

I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit. You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned. If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples. (John 15:1-8)

The metaphor in John 15 is of a vine and its branches. The vine is the source and sustenance of life for the branches, and the branches must abide in the vine to live and bear fruit. Jesus, of course, is the vine, and the branches are people. While it is obvious the fruit-bearing branches represent true Christians, the identity of the fruitless ones is in question. Some Bible students say the barren branches are Christians who bear no spiritual fruit. Others believe they are non-Christians. As always, however, we must look to the context for the best answer.

The true meaning of the metaphor is made clear when we consider the characters in that night's drama. The disciples were with Jesus. He had loved them to the uttermost; He had comforted them with the words in John chapter 14. The Father was foremost in His thoughts, because He was thinking of the events of the next day. But He was also aware of someone else--the betrayer. Judas had been dismissed from the fellowship when he rejected Jesus' final appeal of love.

All the characters of the drama were in the mind of Jesus. He saw the eleven, whom He loved deeply and passionately. He was aware of the Father, with whom He shared an infinite love. And He must have grieved over Judas, whom He had loved unconditionally.

All those characters play a part in Jesus' metaphor. The vine is Christ; the vinedresser is the Father. The fruit-bearing branches represent the eleven and all true disciples of the church age. The fruitless branches represent Judas and all those who never were true disciples.

Jesus had long been aware of the difference between Judas and the eleven. After washing the disciples' feet, He said, "'He who has bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you.' For He knew the one who was betraying Him; for this reason He said, 'Not all of you are clean'" (John 13:10-11). Once a person is forgiven by God, he is clean and does not need the bathing of forgiveness again. All that is necessary is to clean the dust and dirt of daily sins from his feet.

His point was that a child of God who commits a sin doesn't need to be saved again; he needs only to restore his personal relationship with the Father. But Judas had not even been "bathed," because he was not a child of God, and Jesus knew it. That is why He added, "not all of you are clean." Judas appeared to be like the other disciples. He was with Jesus for the same amount of time--he had even been given the responsibility of keeping the money. It appeared that he was a branch in the vine like the others--but he never bore real fruit. God finally removed that branch from the vine, and it was burned.

Some would say he had lost his salvation. According to them, the same could happen to any believer who does not bear fruit. But Jesus made a promise to His children, "I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand" (John 10:28). He guaranteed the security of the child of God: "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out" (John 6:37). A true believer cannot lose his salvation and be condemned to hell.

A branch that is truly connected to the vine is secure and will never be removed. But one that only appears to be connected--one that has only a superficial connection--will be removed. If it does not have the life of the vine flowing through it, it will bear no fruit. Those are the Judas-branches.

There are people who, like Judas, appear by human perception to be united with Christ, but they are apostates doomed to hell. They may attend church, know all the right answers, and go through religious motions; but God will remove them, and they will be burned. Others, like the eleven, are genuinely connected to the vine and bear fruit.

## Christ Is the True Vine

Jesus was not introducing a new idea by using the metaphor of a vine and branches. In the Old Testament, God's vine was Israel. He used them to accomplish His purpose in the world, and He blessed those connected with them. He was the vinedresser; He cared for the vine, trimmed it, and cut off branches that did not bear fruit. But God's vine degenerated and bore no fruit. The vinedresser grieved over the tragedy of Israel's fruitlessness:

Let me sing now for my well-beloved a song of my beloved concerning His vineyard. My well-beloved had a vineyard on a fertile hill. He dug it all around, removed its stones, and planted it with the choicest vine. And He built a tower in the middle of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; then He expected it to produce good grapes, but it produced only worthless ones. "And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between Me and My vineyard. What more was there to do for My vineyard that I have not done in it? Why, when I expected it to produce good grapes did it produce worthless ones? So now let Me tell you what I am going to do to My vineyard: I will remove its hedge and it will be consumed; I will break down its wall and it will become trampled ground. I will lay it waste; it will not be pruned or hoed, but briars and thorns will come up. I will also charge the clouds to rain no rain on it." For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel. (Isaiah 5:1-7)

God had done everything He could to make Israel bear fruit, yet it bore none. So He took away its wall and left it unprotected. It was then trampled down by foreign nations and laid waste. Israel was no longer God's vine; it had forfeited its privilege.

Now there is a new vine. No longer does blessing come through a covenantal relationship with Israel. Fruit and blessing come through connection with Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the true Vine. In Scripture, the word *true* is often used to describe what is eternal, heavenly, and divine. Israel was imperfect, but Christ is perfect; Israel was the type, but Christ is the reality.

He is also the true Tabernacle, as opposed to the original, earthly tabernacle (cf. Hebrews 8:2). He is the true light (John 1:9). God revealed His light before, but Christ is the perfect light; He is all that can be revealed. He is also the true bread (John 6:32). God had sustained men by manna from heaven, but Christ is the highest quality of bread, the perfect spiritual sustenance.

Jesus chose the figure of a vine for several reasons. The lowliness of a vine demonstrates His humility. It also pictures a close, permanent, vital union between the vine and branches. It is symbolic of belonging, because branches belong entirely to the vine; if branches are to live and bear fruit, they must completely depend on the vine for nourishment, support, strength, and vitality.

Yet many who call themselves Christians fail to depend on Christ. Instead of being attached to the true vine, they are tied to a bank account. Others are attached to their education. Some have tried to make vines out of popularity, fame, personal skills, possessions, relationships, or fleshly desires. Some think the church is their vine, and try to attach themselves to a religious system. But none of those things can sustain or bear fruit. The vine is Christ.

### **The Father Is the Vinedresser**

In the metaphor, Christ is a plant, but the Father is a person. Certain false teachers have claimed that that shows Christ is not divine, but lower in character and essence than the Father. They say if He is God, His and the Father's parts in the metaphor should be equal; He should be the vine, and the Father should be the root of the vine.

But to make such a claim is to miss the whole point of Jesus' metaphor and the reason the apostle John included it in his Gospel. While He is affirming His equality in essence with the Father--by claiming to be the source and sustainer of life--He is also emphasizing the fundamental difference in His role and that of the Father. The point is that the Father cares for the Son and for those joined to the Son by faith.

The disciples were familiar with the role of the vinedresser. After a vine is planted, the vinedresser has two duties. First, he cuts off fruitless branches, which take away sap from the fruit-bearing branches. If sap is wasted, the plant will bear less fruit. Then he constantly trims shoots from the fruit-bearing branches so that all the sap is concentrated on fruit-bearing. Both of those duties are described in verse 2: "Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit."

The fruitless branches that are cut off are useless. Since they do not burn well, they cannot even be used to warm a house. They are thrown into piles and burned like garbage. As verse 2 says, they are "taken away." He doesn't repair them; He removes them.

Those who are removed only appear to be connected to Christ. They don't really abide in Him. They were never saved. They are Judas-branches that don't really follow Jesus, and they bear no fruit. At some point in time, the Father removes them to preserve the life and fruitfulness of the other branches.

The fruit-bearing branches are pruned so they will bear more fruit. We know these branches represent Christians, because only Christians can bear fruit. Pruning is not done only once--it is a constant process. The Father prunes a branch so it may bear more fruit. After continual pruning, it bears much fruit. As verse 8 says, "My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit."

## The Fruitless Branches Are Removed

Fruit-bearing and non-fruit-bearing branches grow rapidly and must be carefully pruned. If there is to be a large quantity of fruit, the fruitless branches must be removed, as well as the shoots that grow on the fruit-bearing branches.

In first-century Palestine, it was common to prevent a vine from bearing fruit for three years after it was planted. In the fourth year it was strong enough to bear fruit. Its fruit-bearing capacity had been increased by the careful pruning. Mature branches, which had already been through the four-year process, were pruned annually between December and January.

Jesus said His followers were like mature branches that bore fruit but needed pruning. There is no such thing as a fruitless Christian. Every Christian bears some fruit. You may have to look hard to find even a small grape, but if you look enough, you will find something.

It is the essence of the Christian life to bear fruit. Ephesians 2:10 says, "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them." The fruit of salvation is good works. James 2:17 explains the close relationship between faith and works, "Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself." If saving faith is legitimate, it produces fruit. That does not mean a person is saved by works, but works are evidence that faith is genuine.

Jesus said a genuine believer can be tested by his fruit. In Matthew 7:16-17 He said, "You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes, nor figs from the thistles, are they? So *every* good tree bears good fruit; but the bad tree bears bad fruit" (emphasis added). Jesus' illustration would make no sense if every Christian did not bear at least some fruit.

John the Baptist recognized the connection between salvation and fruit-bearing. When he saw the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to be baptized, he said, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance" (Matthew 3:7-8). Lack of fruit showed that their repentance was not genuine.

Since all Christians bear fruit, it is clear that the fruitless branches in John 15 cannot refer to believers. In fact, the fruitless branches had to be eliminated and thrown into the fire. Yet, in verse 2, Jesus refers to the fruitless branches as those who are "in Me." If they are "in Him," are they not genuine believers?

Not necessarily. Other passages in Scripture show it is possible to be attached to the Vine without being a true believer. For example, Romans 9:6 says, "For they are not all Israel who are descended

from Israel." A person can be part of the nation of Israel yet not be a true Israelite. Likewise, one can be a branch without abiding in the true Vine. In a similar metaphor, Romans 11:17-24 represents Israel as an olive tree from which God has removed branches. Those branches were cut off because of unbelief (Romans 11:20).

Some only appear to be a part of God's people. Luke 8:18 says, "So take care how you listen; for whoever has, to him more shall be given; and whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has shall be taken away from him." Those who only appear to belong will be removed from God's people.

Clearly, some who appear to be in Christ do not truly abide in Him. As 1 John 2:19 says, "They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us."

If you are religious, you need to be sure your connection to Christ is genuine. The apostle Paul said, "Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you--unless indeed you fail the test?" (2 Corinthians 13:5).

We have a stern warning from Scripture to check our own lives and make sure our salvation is real. This is serious; a branch that does not bear fruit is taken away and burned. Those who say the discarded branches are Christians have a problem: the branches are burned. If they are Christians, it would mean they have lost their salvation forever.

But those fruitless branches are Judas-branches, false branches, people who associate themselves with Jesus and His people and put on a façade of faith in Him. But even though they may appear to be connected to Christ, their association is superficial. So the Father removes them.

### **The Fruitful Branches Are Pruned**

Although the fruitless branches are removed from the vine and burned, the Father tenderly cares for the fruit-bearing branches. In verse 2, Jesus told His disciples, "Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit." All the fruit-bearing branches are included. The vinedresser prunes the branches so they will bear much fruit.

*Kathairo* is the Greek word for "prune," or "cleanse." In farming, it referred to cleaning the husks off corn and cleaning the soil before planting crops. In the metaphor of the vine, it refers to cleaning shoots off branches.

In first-century Palestine, vinedressers removed shoots in several ways. Sometimes the tip was pinched off so the shoot would grow more slowly. Larger branches were topped to prevent them from

becoming too long and weak. Unwanted flower or grape clusters were thinned out.

Pruning is also necessary in our spiritual lives. The Father removes sins and the superfluous things that limit our fruitfulness. One of the best ways to cleanse us is to allow suffering and problems to come into our lives. He prunes us with a vinedresser's knife. Sometimes it hurts, and we wonder if He knows what He is doing. It may seem we are the only branch getting pruned while other branches need it more. But the Vinedresser knows what He is doing.

Spiritual pruning can take many forms. It may be sickness, hardships, or loss of material possessions. It may be persecution or slander from non-Christians. For some it is the loss of a loved one or grief in a relationship. Or it may be a combination of difficulties. Whatever the method, the effect is to narrow our focus and strengthen the quality of our fruit.

Whatever the method of pruning God uses, we can be assured He cares about us and wants us to bear much fruit. He wants to free us from the shoots that drain our life and energy. He continues His care throughout our lives to keep us spiritually healthy and productive.

Knowing the Father's love and concern should change the way we look at trials. He does not allow us to experience problems and struggles for no purpose. The problems He permits are designed to develop us so we can bear more fruit.

He does that because He loves us. As Hebrews 12:6 says, "For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives."

Do you look at trials and problems as pruning done by our loving Vinedresser? Or do you lapse into self-pity, fear, complaining, and brooding? Perhaps you feel God had good intentions but now just doesn't know what He is doing. Or maybe you ask, "God, why me? Why do I have to have problems when it seems like no one else does?"

If we remember that God is trying to make us more fruitful, we can look past the pruning process to the goal. It is thrilling to realize that God wants our lives to bear much fruit. Hebrews 12:7 encourages us to have a proper perspective on God's perfecting process: "It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline?"

In verse 10, He goes on to emphasize that it is for our good; "For they [our earthly fathers] disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness." The pruning process hurts, but the fruit--holiness--is well worth it.

The Vinedresser's pruning knife is the Word of God. In John 15:3, Jesus said to the disciples, "You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you." The word translated "clean" in

that verse is the same word He used in verse 2 to describe the pruning process. God's Word cleans the sin out of our lives. That stimulates fruitfulness.

The Father uses affliction to make us more responsive to His Word. Most of us become more sensitive to the truth of Scripture when we are in trouble. When we have a particular problem, a verse of Scripture sometimes will seem to jump off the page. In adversity, the Word of God comes alive.

Spurgeon once said,

[T]he Word is often the knife with which the great Husbandman prunes the vine; and, brothers and sisters, if we were more willing to feel the edge of the Word, and to let it cut away something that may be very dear to us, we should not need so much pruning by affliction. It is because that first knife does not always produce the desired result that another sharp tool is used by which we are effectually pruned.

The pruning process helps us bear more fruit. If there is no fruit in your life, if there is no genuine connection to Jesus Christ, you are in danger of being removed and cast into the fire of hell. If there is fruit in your life, you can rejoice that affliction is making the pruning knife more effective, and that the Vinedresser's ultimate goal is that you bear much fruit.

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