

The Densest Moment | Jesus Christ's Farewell Conversation "The True Vine"

John 15.1-16

2.26.23

"I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. 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. ³ "You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. ⁴ "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. ⁵ "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. ⁶ "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. ⁷ "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ "My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples. ⁹ "Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love. ¹⁰ "If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. ¹¹ "These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full. ¹² "This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you.

¹³ "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends. ¹⁴ "You are My friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵ "No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you. ¹⁶ "You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and that your fruit would remain, so that whatever you ask of the Father in My name He may give to you.

We've been listening in to a behind-the-scenes meeting of Jesus Christ and His disciples (now only 11 disciples since Judas Iscariot left). It's their last supper before Jesus is unexpectedly snatched from them. The full weight of all Jesus has said and done now comes to a needle-sharp point in this densest moment.

As they'll soon be ALONE, feeling like orphans ("I will NOT leave as as orphans" said Jesus "but will send you Another Helper, the Spirit of Truth") so, now the Teacher speaks to what will certainly be a factor in their coming emotional collapse, i.e., the crushing awareness that they've WASTED the last three years of their lives.

When the unthinkable takes place (in only hours), they'll be jobless and without prospects for the future. The god they've come to know in Jesus Christ will be shown to have been an idol, a false concept taught by a deluded fanatic now disgraced and dead. They'll be marked men with no spiritual home ...without hope and without God. Three unproductive wasted, fruitless years with nothing to show for it. They'd left their homes, families, synagogues; they've disappointed everyone... including God.

Do you ever wonder that way? That your own life has been (IS BEING!) squandered...that you've invested or "been INTO" interests that really won't pay off? Does life ever feel redundant (like the LAUNDRY!); routines,

making lists, attending endless meetings, doing tasks that get undone?

Have you disappointed people, yourself, GOD? Will your life MATTER and will you leave a mark... NOT that you have to be famous but that your life was well-invested and that God Himself will consider your life significant?

The secret, as we'll see, has to do with your connections – where you LIVE and WHOM you know...and Jesus Christ is telling us HOW. Let's look at:

- 1) **An Essential Connection**
- 2) **A Real Connection**
- 3) **A Vital Connection**

The disciples enter Jerusalem and ascend that rooftop or second-story dining area assuming they were about to take charge of the government of Israel, that their Teacher, being finally recognized as the Son of David (the Messiah-King) would rid Israel of her enemies and usher in a Golden Age of peace and prosperity... and... they were right!

BUT they were WRONG on the method: Jesus is indeed going to make all things new (in Israel, on Earth and in the whole universe Eph 1.10, Phi 2.10) BUT His method is love and atonement – He'll be the sacrificial Passover Lamb. His method is death, resurrection and New Life!

And now they're not quite getting it, but they DO see something ominous and grave about this meal on that holiday in a very crowded Jerusalem – something is going to happen (even they can feel it and they have questions).

And now Jesus, always preparing them for the shock that's coming, now Jesus addresses a fear that'll soon grip them: that they'd wasted their lives. They threw away their college years on a sketchy Dreamer who'll soon be the laughingstock of all Jerusalem and THEN He'll be a spectacle... a horrific, bloody, hideous vision of FAILURE.

And if there is...or WILL BE...any pining for life before they met Jesus, if they want to go back to family and fishing and the way they related to life and to God before they met Jesus (and we know they DID attempt such a return; John 21) the Teacher rules out that option. "To return to 'business as usual' would be to truly squander your lives... In fact (v. 5) *apart from Me you can do nothing.*"

Do you know the scene; their attempted return to business as usual it was without Jesus Christ? Remember (last CH of this Gospel)? "*Simon Peter said to them, 'I'm going fishing.' They said to him, 'We'll also come with you.' They went out and got into the boat; and that night they caught nothing.*" (21.3) See? "*Apart from ME you can do nothing*" (same exact word/form)!

But it's even bigger than that. He's not just telling the disciples, "There's no going back; you won't succeed!" He's also laying down an immutable spiritual truth that WITHOUT AN ESSENTIAL CONNECTION TO JESUS, WE CAN DO NOTHING THAT'S SPIRITUALLY ACCEPTABLE TO GOD. "*Apart from ME you can do nothing.*"

Only if a truly innocent, righteous, pure, good, holy Person, whose heart and hands are clean, whose every motive and action is ONLY pure – ONLY if such a Person keeps the covenant with God that Adam and all-

humankind after him BROKE... only if a Second Adam, who volunteers to live and die in our place, who succeeds where the first Adam failed...can the human race be acceptable to God.

Psalm 24: *“Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD? And who may stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who has not lifted up his soul to falsehood and has not sworn deceitfully. He shall receive a blessing from the LORD and righteousness from the God of his salvation.”* (3-5)

There’s also the TRAGIC then TRIUMPHANT vision of the Apostle John in *The Apocalypse*: *“And I saw a strong angel asking with a loud voice, ‘Who is worthy to open the book and to break its seals?’ And NO ONE in heaven or on the earth or under the earth was able to open the book or to look into it.”* (Rev. 5.2-3) And John weeps, inconsolable, until he’s directed to an unlikely Champion: *“Then I began to weep greatly because no one was found worthy to open the book or to look into it; and one of the elders said to me, ‘Stop weeping; behold, the Lion that is from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has overcome so as to open the book and its seven seals.’ And I saw between the throne (with the four living creatures) and the elders a Lamb standing, as if slain... (Rev. 5.4-6a)*

Only ONE truly loving, good, obedient human can be found.

But...there’s MORE! For your actions/deeds to be fruitful and acceptable before God... you must be connected, united to Jesus Christ.... Even your “good works” are not acceptable to God because they’re NEVER selfless. Only by Jesus Christ living the life we failed to live and dying the death we deserved to die can our sins be cleansed and our works be purified. *“Apart from Me, you can do NOTHING.”*

The corollary, the positive side of this truth, this deeper magic, is found in St. Paul’s Letter to Philippi... *“I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.”* (4.12-13)

In other words, I couldn’t be POOR in a way that pleases God and I couldn’t be WEALTHY in a way that pleases God unless I was connected to Jesus Christ. But if I AM tied into Him, then tying my shoe is an act pleasing to God – if I’m NOT joined to Him NO GOOD WORK IS PLEASING TO GOD.

Jesus Christ says *“Apart from ME you can do nothing”* and St Paul adds, *“In Christ, through Christ I can do all things in a way that glorifies God – Jesus cleanses our sins and purifies our good deeds and our mundane tasks. The laundry, the lawn is not futility but fruitful IN CHRIST!*

Second, an essential connection and a REAL connection. In saying this, Jesus Christ is pointing out that everyone gets “life” from somewhere. People justify their existence by connecting to and identifying with an ethnic group or a political group, a vocational group (“I’m a professional _____... that’s what makes my life worthwhile”). I have children, I’m married, I’m single, I’m successful, I’m a socially-conscious person; I’m a Marlin’s fan; I’m cool; I work out. We connect with THIS or THAT vine (source).

But all those are “false vines” and Jesus Christ is saying, *“I am the TRUE VINE...”* Israel was God’s Vine. Psalm 80 (read at the start of today’s service) and Isaiah CH 5 and several other texts in the Hebrew Bible (Ps 80; Hos

10.1; Isa 5; Jer 2.21 & CH 5; Ezk 19 et al) refer to Israel as the vine God transplanted FROM Egypt into the Promised Land but that God's vine became a great disappointment.

By the Prophet Jeremiah God says to Israel: *"I had planted you like a choice vine of sound and reliable stock. How then did you turn against Me into a corrupt, wild vine?"* (Jer. 2.21 NIV)

As the passage ended last week with Jesus saying "Let's get up and leave here", some scholars think this part of the discourse may have spoken enroute to Gethsemane and perhaps in the Temple where there was a giant sculpture of a vine, a symbol for Israel. It was a gold sculpture and they added to it year by year. Some of the grape clusters were 6 feet tall... Israelites felt safe and secure before God because they were IN THE VINE (of Israel) represented by this magnificent sculpture in the great Temple.

But Jesus is saying, "There's no life in that sculpture or even in this national identity... You may be IN ISRAEL and NOT know God (John 3.10) But in ME you have a Home, an unassailable refuge from judgment and THE Source of Life!

All other associations, attachments, dwelling places and connections may be more or less beneficial, but NO OTHER source can provide the SAP of Life and of True Productivity in the sight of God. "I AM the True Israel. I am the One True Representative who can stand for YOU, can speak for YOU, can Champion YOU – as David championed the armies and defeated the giant on their behalf! I alone can make you thrive and become in this life and the one to come, make you all that God has planned for you to be."

Lastly, an ESSENTIAL connection ("Apart from Me you can do nothing"), a REAL connection ("I am the TRUE Vine") and third, a VITAL connection.

By VITAL we mean, life-giving. If we look for life in our children, or a softball league, a job, travel OR in anything that God defines as sin – i.e., if we seek LIFE in bad things OR if we try to make even GOOD THINGS into ultimate things – we'll be disappointed at BEST, utterly broken at worst. Those good things will become addictions and won't deliver lasting JOY, fulfilment or significance.

But in Him is LIFE (John 1.4; 5.21-29; 6.27ff; 10.10-28). As sap runs through the vine into the branches, so LIFE from God runs through Christ into the soul of the believer. *"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly"*. (Jn. 10.10) Jesus Christ makes His people ALIVE and believing, i.e., receiving and depending on HIM. It's an experiential thing and it leads us to love.

Second, this vital connection is about intimacy with Jesus Christ. The focus here, repeated at least 10x in this short passage is the word, "Abide". We remain, we dwell IN Jesus Christ. He represents us legally...but ALSO we are in an intimate relationship with Him. In Jesus Christ, the hope and goal of all history is unveiled: God dwells among His people and His people dwell in Him. He IS the Tabernacle, the dwelling of God and He is the Promised Land, where WE dwell IN GOD, IN JESUS, the New Israel!

Thirdly, our VITAL, intimate connection to Him leads to real productivity in our lives. We might think of highly effective and super productive people... but that guy that pulls the rickshaw in Calcutta of the woman who works in a rice-field who knows and is connected BY FAITH to Jesus is living a day-to-day existence that in the

final analysis is more fruitful than the tech-wizards or titans of industry whose names are daily in the news who are NOT IN CHRIST.

I'm not saying that God isn't using some of these well-known celebrities, inventors and entrepreneurs (who may NOT be in Christ) – BUT He is most glorified in anyone, street-sweeper or superstar who lives his/her life in intimate trust in Jesus Christ. I'm not saying we should have no aspirations, just that ANY apparently great productivity that doesn't flow from the life of God will in the end "be dried up and cast into the fire..." and somehow, brushing your teeth IN CHRIST will bring great glory to God...fruit that will remain.

The last truth to highlight is that God, the Father, orders the lives of those who connect to Jesus Christ by faith so that all things work for their good. Pressures, failures, pain, pleasures, successes, sickness, relational agonies and everything else are the skillful hand of the Father, trimming and pruning us to obey the New Commandment of Jesus to LOVE... and to bear more and more Fruit – the fruit of the Spirit IS LOVE.

No one's been as fruitful as Jesus Christ has been but as we join Him in His method (that looked like failure!) as we die to ourselves/agendas, the Spirit raises us and makes us truly fruitful in the sight of God. We're becoming like the Vine; we pray/live organically in God's will more and more.

That super-boring report you had to file at work, the fun of laundry, raising children, the obligations you find tedious or a love that's always a struggle... as you live life abiding, dwelling in, hiding behind Jesus Christ – that stuff is more significant than you dream.