



GRACE

REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH

SOLI ♦ DEO ♦ GLORIA

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

Sermon Notes

The Vine and the Branches, Part I

John 15:1-8

April 23, 2006

BACKGROUND

- ❑ The final verse of Chapter 14 reads, [Jesus told His disciples], “Get up, let us go from here.”
- ❑ It is quite possible that Jesus was leading His disciples out of the Upper Room to the Garden of Gethsemane.
- ❑ Furthermore, Jesus and His disciples, on the way to the Garden, could have passed a vineyard, leading Jesus to give the *Vine and Branches* discourse.
- ❑ However, this could have also occurred in the Temple, as the band stopped there on the way to the Garden of Gethsemane.
- ❑ In the first century, a large golden vine hung over the entrance to the temple in Jerusalem. The Jewish historian, Josephus, wrote:

The gate opening into the building was, as I said, completely overlaid with gold, as was the whole wall around it. It had, moreover, above it those golden vines, from which depended grape clusters as tall as a man.

Jewish War V.210-212

- ❑ Therefore, Jesus could have given this discourse in the Temple courtyard, with “the great golden vine glinting in the light of the Passover moon.” Colin Kruse

- ❑ Before one can understand Jesus’ words in John 15, he or she must, first, understand that that Old Testament often refers to Israel as a vine.
 - Psalm 80:8-19
 - Isaiah 5:1-8
 - Jeremiah 2:21; 6:8-9
 - Ezekiel 17:6-8; 19:10-14
 - Hosea 10:1-2

- ❑ Possibly, the most significant of these passages is **Isaiah 5:1-8**.
- ❑ In first century Palestine, farmers would perform two primary tasks, in order to ensure fruitful vines:
 - (1) Train the Vines
 - (2) Prune the branches
- ❑ The farmers would train the vines, either by (1) allowing the vines to stay on the ground until they began to produce fruit, then prop the branches up which were bearing fruit, either by rocks or poles in order to ensure better grapes; or (2) train the branches early on by poles or trellises.
- ❑ Also, farmers would prune the vines in order to ensure a better harvest. According to Colin Kruse, “the first pruning occurred in spring when vines were in the flowering stage. This involved four operations:
 - (1) the removal of the growing tips of vigorous shoots so that they would not grow too rapidly;
 - (2) cutting off one or two feet from the end of growing shoots to prevent entire shoots being snapped off by the wind;
 - (3) the removal of some flower or grape clusters so that those left could produce more and better-quality fruit;
 - (4) the removal of suckers that arose from below the ground or from the trunk and main branches so that the strength of the vines not tapped by the suckers.

Spring pruning did not involve the removal of wooden branches or their subsequent burning.

The second pruning occurred in autumn after the grapes were harvested and the vines were dormant. This involved the removal of unwanted branches, those that had produced fruit in the previous season but would not produce fruit in the ensuing season. It also involved cutting back the desired branches (the shoots from the year-old branches that would produce fruit in the coming year) to ensure maximum fruit production. After autumn pruning, the cuttings, including many wooden branches, were gathered up and burned.”

- ❑ In the Ancient Near East, as the cultural was agricultural, it is no wonder that the vine/vineyard theme is quite important in ancient religions.
- ❑ Furthermore, vines and vineyards were important themes in multiple parables in the Synoptic Gospels:
 - Matthew 20:1-16; 21:23-41
 - Mark 12:1-9
 - Luke 13:6-9; 20:9-16
- ❑ **In each of these examples, the vineyard, or the people associated with it, represent the nation of Israel, or a part of Israel, God’s choice vineyard, who failed to bear fruit.**

Verse 1

- ❑ This is the final *ego eimi*, εγω ειμι, I AM statements in the Gospel of John; the last of seven.
- ❑ It is also the only I AM statement that adds an additional truth: “I AM the true vine, *and My Father is the vinedresser.*”
 - In other words, in this analogy, Jesus Christ is the vine, and the Father is the One who trims and prunes the vine.
- ❑ What is so significant about this verse, however, is this:

Jesus is not just another vine, like Israel, He is the *true* vine.

- ❑ The word for *true* in the Greek is *alethinos*, αληθινος, meaning “genuine” or “true.”
- ❑ In the Old Testament, vine imagery was central to demonstrating that Israel was God’s chosen, covenant people.
- ❑ However, Israel failed to bear good fruit; therefore, **Israel was a mere foreshadowing of the *true* vine who would bear good fruit: Jesus Christ.**
- ❑ Throughout the Gospel of John, we see Jesus fulfilling Old Testament themes and symbols. He fulfilled/replaced/superseded:
 - Moses
 - The Temple
 - Jewish Rites (such as ceremonial cleansing)
 - Jewish Feasts
 - **[and now] the Vine/Vineyard.**
- ❑ Therefore, the “vine” here is Jesus Christ Himself, and those who are a part of and engrafted into His body.

Verse 2

- ❑ In Chapter 14, Verse 20, Jesus tells His disciples, “In that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you.”
 - This idea of **mutual indwelling** [Jesus is in us, and we are in Him] is also central here in Chapter 15, with the Vines and the Branches.
 - Jesus is the Vine, we are the branches; He is in us, and we are in Him.
- ❑ What is so important here is that that branches [Christians] derive their life from the Vine [Jesus Christ]. Without the vine, the branches cannot and will not live.
- ❑ There is a level of supreme dependence of the branches upon the Vine.
- ❑ Furthermore, the Vine produces its fruit *through* its branches.

- ❑ Jesus describes the two types of branches attached to the vine: (1) ones that bear fruit; and (2) ones that do not bear fruit.
- ❑ For the ones that **bear fruit**, Jesus says, “He [the Father, who is the vinedresser] prunes it.”
 - This is very important. Jesus does NOT say that if the branch bears fruit, the Father leaves it alone; rather, the Father *prunes* the branches that bear fruit.
 - In other words, even the fruit-bearing branches need to be “cut” or “trimmed.”
 - No doubt, for the believer, this is often a painful process, but it is perfectly consistent with the rest of Scripture.
 - READ **Hebrews 12:4-11**. In Hebrews 12:11, it states, “All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.”
 - In other words, as 12:10 states, “He disciplines us for our good...”
 - This is exactly what John 15:2 states, “every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it **so that it may bear more fruit.**”
- ❑ For the branches that **do not bear fruit**, Jesus says, “Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away;”

Leon Morris writes, “...as Ezekiel pointed out long before, a vine does not yield timber (Ezekiel 15). In a vineyard fruitfulness is not simply desirable; it is imperative; that is the whole point of the vineyard; it is what the vineyard is for. Pruning is restored to to ensure that this takes place. Left to itself a vine will produce a good deal of unproductive growth. For maximum fruitfulness extensive pruning is essential.”

- This is consistent with the practice of actual vinedressers who during the autumn pruning.
- However, the phrase *in Me* has caused many in the past, and today, to conclude that someone who is “in Christ” [i.e. a Christian] can lose their salvation if they fail to bear fruit.
- Yet, this CANNOT be the case in this Verse.
- Some people [wrongly] believe that those branches that were once “in Christ” are either (a) Jews who were, at one time, in God’s vine, but have now been cut off; or (b) Christians who have fallen away [apostates] (another popular Verse used to assert this belief in Hebrews 6:4-6).
- The first one here [Jews] cannot be the case, because they never placed their faith in Christ [the Vine].

- Furthermore, if they were *genuinely* a part of the previous vine, Israel, that was superseded by Jesus, they would have recognized Jesus as the Messiah.
- The second possibility – that those “in Christ” who were “cut off” or taken away were Christians who fell and lost their salvation – is a biblical impossibility.
- This is the case for multiple reasons:
 - The overwhelming evidence of Scripture reveals that one cannot “fall away” or lose one’s salvation.
 - Christians should not minimize the significance of this hermeneutical principle (i.e. interpreting Scripture with Scripture; or interpreting unclear passages with clear ones). This protects us from “proof-texting” or taking one Verse and building an entire erroneous theology around it.
 - Also, in this Gospel alone, the truth is clearly revealed that true disciples of Jesus Christ **will** persevere to the end (6:37-40; 10:28).
 - Secondly, there are multiple times here in the Gospel of John where the Evangelists speaks of “disciples” who were not “true disciples” (6:66). In other words, they followed Jesus, not out of a regenerate heart, but out of selfish motives.
 - This truth is surely the basis of this Verse.
 - Furthermore, in this context, Judas has just left to betray Jesus, and he was a disciple. Yet, He, too, was not a *true* disciple.
 - “Indeed, there is a persistent strand of New Testament witness that depicts men and women with some degree of connection with Jesus, or with the Christian church, who nevertheless by failing to display the grace of perseverance finally testify that the transforming life of Christ has never pulsed within them (e.g. Matthew 13:18-23; 24:12; John 8:31; Hebrews 3:14-19; 1 John 2:19; 2 John 9).” D.A. Carson
 - The issue, here, therefore, is the truth that **true disciples will bear fruit.**
 - Taken in conjunction with the words of Jesus in the previous chapter, this much can be said:

The one who loves Jesus, will keep His commandments, he/or she will keep His word, and the Father will love him/or her, and the Father and the Son [and the Holy Spirit] will come to him/or her and make their abode with him/or her; and he/or she will bear fruit and will NOT be cut off.

- Also, the Apostle Paul speaks of this in Philippians and Romans:

For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus (Philippians 1:6).

...and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified. (Romans 8:30)

- Thus, there are those who are *in Christ*, who are associated or connected with Jesus, who even profess Jesus as their Savior, yet remain dead, unregenerate (i.e. Judas Iscariot).

In his commentary on this Verse, John Calvin writes: “But here comes a question. Can any one who is engrafted into Christ be without fruit? I answer, many are supposed to be *in the vine*, according to the opinion of men, who actually have no root *in the vine*. Thus, in the writings of the prophets, the Lord calls the people of Israel *his vine*, because, by outward profession, they had the name [of Yahweh].”

John Gill also writes, “There are two sorts of branches in Christ the vine; the one sort are such who have only an historical faith in him, believe but for a time, and are removed; they are such who only profess to believe in him, as Simon Magus did; are in him by profession only; they submit to outward ordinances, become church members, and so are reckoned to be in Christ, being in a church state, as the churches of Judea and Thessalonica, and others, are said, in general, to be in Christ; though it is not to be thought that every individual person in these churches were truly and savingly in him. These branches are unfruitful ones; what fruit they seemed to have, withers away, and proves not to be genuine fruit; what fruit they bring forth is to themselves, and not to the glory of God, being none of the fruits of his Spirit and grace: and such branches the husbandman [takes away].”

- These, the Father will “cut off” and “take away.”
 - ❑ This Verse, therefore, raises a VERY serious question: What is the “fruit” that Jesus is speaking of?
 - ❑ READ Galatians 5:22: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.”
 - ❑ How do these fruits listed differ from what the world – and the Church! – define as fruits?
 - ❑ **They cannot be measured.**
 - ❑ How often do we hear: “He has been blessed with great wealth.” or “She is blessed with a beautiful voice.” or “The Lord has blessed him with a great mind.”
 - ❑ **We, as the church, even reward the people who possess these things, and parade them around as the model Christians – assuming that they have captured some aspect of the favor of God that the rest of us seem to have missed.**

- ❑ Now, these may [or may not] indeed be blessings from the Lord, **but they are NOT the fruit which marks a true believer in the Lord Jesus Christ.** For there have been countless pagans throughout the centuries who have possessed these things in abundance.
- ❑ **Let us not confuse talents, abilities, or worldly successes with fruit!**
- ❑ We never say, “The Lord has blessed him with x amount of love and joy,” but what you’re your feelings/thoughts about those fellow believers who consistently exhibit the fruit of the Spirit?
- ❑ It is these people who build up the church and glorify God, for they exhibit *true* fruit.
- ❑ Finally, it gives us greater insight into the meaning of the branches that the Father took away when we know that the Greek word for “prunes” (*kathairei, καθαίρει*) can also mean “to clean” and is a cognate of the Greek word for “clean” in Verse 3 (*katharoi, καθαροί*).

Verse 3

- ❑ Therefore, the eleven disciples Jesus is speaking to are already “clean” by His words – the life that He gives as the Vine; however, they still need to be continually “cleaned” spiritually through the “cleaning” or “pruning” of the Father.
- ❑ This Verse parallels the words of Jesus in Chapter 13: “He who has bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you” (John 13:10).
- ❑ Notice also the parallel with the words of Paul who speaks of wives who have been “cleansed...by the washing of water with the word” (Ephesians 5:26).
- ❑ Therefore, those who do not bear true fruit are not “clean,” and will not be “cleaned” or “pruned.”

Verses 4-5

- ❑ Grammatically, this verse may be taken three different ways:
 1. Conditional: “If you remain in me, I will remain in you.”
 - This is what the NIV assumes.
 - Although this interpretation views our remaining in Christ as the condition for Christ remaining in us, it is certainly understood that we will remain in Christ
 2. As a Mutual Imperative: “Let us both remain in each other.”
 - This is the least likely [although the Greek allows it] interpretation of the three.
 3. As a Comparison: “Remain in me, as I remain in you.” or “Abide in Me, and I in you.”
 - The NASB translates it this way.
 - The implication is that Christ will remain in us, even if we do not obey Him and follow His example by remaining in Him.

- ❑ Regardless of which interpretation is the correct one, they all mean essentially the same thing: **we, the branches, are totally dependent upon Jesus Christ, the Vine, for life.**
- ❑ Furthermore, we will bear NO fruit unless we abide in Him.
- ❑ Now, this does NOT mean that we will never have the **appearance** of fruit; it means we will never bear **true** fruit.
- ✳️ Jesus, then, emphasizes this point further, saying, “Apart from me, You can do nothing.”
 - This Verse is quite significant.
 - **In this specific context, we can do NOTHING that pleases God, we can never bear fruit “apart” from Him; that is, without remaining *in Him*.**
 - There is another implication here: **we can do NOTHING that pleases God, until we are living branches [i.e. born-again] abiding *in Him*.**
 - Let us not forget; however, that even those who are apart from Christ can do nothing apart from Him.

Verse 6

- ❑ Here, Jesus gives a stern warning: Those who do not abide in Christ, and do not bear fruit, are useless in a Vineyard. **The only thing they are good for is for firewood.**
- ❑ The fire reference here is certainly concerning judgment.

Verse 7

- ❑ This Verse parallels John 14:13-14.
- ❑ This statement is conditional, which is quite important.
- ❑ The logic goes as follows:

If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you [then you are in accordance with the will of God], ask whatever you wish [which will be in accordance with the will of God], and it will be done for you [for whatever you ask in accordance with the will of God will be granted to you].

Verse 8

- ❑ Finally, it is clear that all of this: the pruning, the cutting, the bearing of fruit, the asking, etc. is all done so that “My Father is glorified.”
- ❑ But notice, **the Father is not content that you [or I] bear just a little fruit**, He desires that you bear *much* fruit – which will prove that you are the Lord’s disciples.
- ❑ Therefore, let us never forget that when we are pruned, it is so that we will bear *much* fruit, for the glory of God the Father!