

Justification and Works

John 15:1-8

Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 62-64

Studies in the Heidelberg Catechism #31

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I AM the true vine. This is the seventh and last of Jesus' "I am" sayings. Do you know them? "I am the bread of life," "I am the light of the world," "I am the door of the sheep," "I am the good shepherd," "I am the resurrection and the life," and "I am and the way, the truth, and the life." By giving us seven sayings John communicates a sufficient revelation of Jesus to us.

Jesus' statement, **I am the true vine**, has a whole biblical history behind it. As the true vine he is saying that ancient Israel was a typological vine pointing forward to him. Psalm 80 describes the Lord clearing a field of the nations and Isaiah 5 of stones so that he could plant his vine. When Jesus says, **my Father is the vinedresser**, he is saying the Father is the *georgos*, the one who makes the vineyard beautiful by removing the stones. Yet as Isaiah 5 goes on to say the vine of Israel produced bad fruit so the Lord uprooted it and sent it into exile. In restoring the people of God back to the Promised Land the Lord re-planted his vine until the coming of the Lord, the true vine.

Jesus speaks here in the plural of his **branches**. When Jesus says **you** in this chapter he is not speaking to you and me individually, but as members of him, our vine. Of course what is said applies to us individually, but we must primarily understand these texts corporately. That's why he can say **every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit** (v. 2). And he tells us as branches **abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing** (vv. 4–5). What is Jesus speaking of here? The fruitfulness of our lives because we are grafted into him our vine.

This theme is so important for you and me to learn and be clear about. When we are clear about what our works do and don't do we can be clear about our salvation. And when we are clear about our salvation we can be clear about being assured we belong to Jesus Christ. This brings us to our Catechism questions tonight.

True faith (Q&A 21) embraces all the Gospel promises us (Q&A 22–58). We saw last time that when we believe God's promise of Jesus Christ we

receive his righteousness as our own so that we are justified. Faith alone receives this righteousness; our works do not make us righteous or cooperate to make us righteous. The question is this: “Why can’t our good works be our righteousness before God, or at least a part of our righteousness?” (Q&A 62)

A. Because the righteousness which can pass God’s judgment must be entirely perfect and must in every way measure up to the divine law. But even our best works in this life are all imperfect and stained with sin.

Because God is righteous **the only righteousness** able to **pass his judgment must be entirely perfect** itself and...**in every way measure up to the divine law**. What the big problem with trying to stand before God based on our works? **Even our best works...are all imperfect and stained with sin**. In *Master Chef* Gordon Ramsey will put out one of his signature dishes for the contestants to re-create. Then comes the judgment! It’s amazing at how tiny things stand out: “Not enough salt in your pasta water, too much cream in your sauce, where’s the oregano in the meatballs?” Imagine standing before God. Do you really think you can withstand his scrutiny? This is why Paul says so strongly, “by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight” (Rom. 3:20). Again, “all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does

not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them” (Gal. 3:10).

Sadly, though, many of our Bible-believing evangelical friends miss this. In Ligonier’s recent survey called, “The State of Theology,” it asked respondents to react to this statement: “By the good deeds that I do, I partly contribute to earning my place in heaven.” Sadly, 36% of self-identified evangelicals agreed or somewhat agreed with this statement.¹

So we’re strong on preaching that Jesus Christ’s good works alone meet the standard of God’s law and ours cannot. But our Roman Catholic friends will point out, “What about the biblical promises of rewards?” Look at Q&A 63: “How can our good works be said to merit nothing when God promises to reward them in this life and the next?”

A. This reward is not merited; it is a gift of grace.

We accept the biblical teaching that God rewards works from this life in the life to come. At the end of the Beatitudes, Jesus says, “Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven” (Matt. 5:12). The writer to the Hebrews tells us at the beginning of his “hall of faith”: “without faith it is

¹ <https://thestateoftheology.com>. Accessed September 4, 2017.

impossible to please [God], for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him” (Heb. 11:6).

The issue is the reason for this reward. We say it is of grace while Rome says it is of merit. Think of it like this: Rome views our rewards like we view credit card rewards; I bought enough stuff then I get to cash in. We view rewards like a gift debit card with money already on it. As creatures—especially fallen creatures—we cannot merit anything from God. Jesus says we are “unworthy servants” of God in this life and that whatever we do was our duty as his creatures. This means God owes us nothing. But the fact that he promises and grants rewards shows grace!

“But doesn’t this teaching make people indifferent and wicked?” That’s what Q&A 64 goes on to ask. How does it answer?

A. No. It is impossible for those grafted into Christ by true faith not to produce fruits of gratitude.

There is a scene in the old black in white film, *Martin Luther* (1953), where Luther’s spiritual mentor asks him if he gets rid of all the works Rome taught were necessary, what would he put in their place? Luther says, “Christ!” It’s a glorious scene. It’s because we belong to Jesus Christ and all he has done is ours that he is going to continue being at work in us. Jesus

says back in our text: **I am the vine; you [all] are the branches** (v. 5).

That's the language of being "grafted" or "united" to Jesus Christ. **Branch[es] that do[...] not bear fruit he takes away and...branch[es] that do[...] bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit** (v. 2). And this fruit bearing does not happen by itself but by virtue of **abid[ing] in the vine...for apart from me you can do nothing** (vv. 4, 5). This language of **apart from me you can do nothing** reminds us of the graciousness of sanctification and that even the good works we do have already been prepared for us to walk in (Eph. 2:10). This fruit bearing glorifies the Father and proves that we are Jesus' disciples (v. 8).

I am the true vine. As his branches that receive all their life from him, let's rest in the life he's already given; let's go forth in gratitude serving him and our neighbors in true love. Let's pray...