

“The Vine and the Branches”

John 15:1-17

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Text Comment

- v.1 This is the last, the seventh of the “I am” sayings in the Gospel of John. In the OT Israel was often likened to a vine, but usually to a vine that was not bearing fruit. The fruitless vine was an image of Israel’s spiritual failure. Jesus, on the other hand, is the true vine and if one wants to be part of the true people of God, he or she must be connected to Jesus.
- v.2 In 14:20 the Lord spoke of the mutual indwelling of the believer and Jesus. Here the same idea is expressed in the image of the branch in the vine. The Father does two things. He cuts off every branch that does not bear fruit and prunes the fruitful branches so that they might bear more fruit. Clearly the image is being extended to include the entire church, both the insincere, the merely nominal Christians, or the Christians who have already apostatized, and, on the other hand, the real believers. Obviously we have here the same teaching we have encountered already in John and find many other places in the NT: true believers bear fruit. It is their mark.
- v.3 The disciples are already clean because of the gospel he has spoken to them and which they have believed. The pruning of the Father takes them on from that point. The Lord is mixing his metaphors.
- v.4 The possibility of bearing fruit, of life itself for that matter, utterly depends upon connection to the vine. We all know this. And lest we mistake the meaning of the image the Lord leaves it momentarily and talks directly about their remaining *in him*.
- v.6 Vv. 5-6 repeat the thought of the previous verses more explicitly.
- v.7 Remaining in the Lord Jesus and remaining in his words amount to the same thing. Now, vv. 7-16 will be an elaboration of the thought of the image of vine and branches. We still hear about fruit though nothing more about the vine. Notice the change from the third person to the second. “If *you* remain in me...” The Lord is now applying the truth of his figure of speech – the vine and branches – directly to his disciples.
- v.8 If you are wondering what the “fruit” is that Jesus is talking about, it is all that Christians pray for in the Lord’s name and everything that brings the Father glory. We will hear soon of joy as we heard of peace in the previous paragraph, we will hear of brotherly love, we have heard and will hear again of witness. It is all fruit: character (or what Paul calls the “fruit of the Spirit”), Christian experience, obedience and service. All this is the fruit that a Christian bears because he is connected to the true vine.

- v.10 This is part of what it means to “remain in Jesus” or “to remain in his love”: to obey his commands, just as the Son remained in the Father’s love by obeying his commands.
- v.11 Christian obedience leads to joy; it is not a matter of cheerless, grinding obligation. As John will say in his first letter, “the commands of the Lord are not burdensome.”
- v.12 To love the brethren is not the only command to keep, but here it stands for all the rest.
- v.13 John says in 1 John 3:16: “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.” This is, of course, an anticipation of the Lord’s soon-coming death that the disciples, at this point, had not really grasped.
- v.15 Clearly, obedience is what *marks* them as his friends; it is not what *makes* them his friends. It is a point worth making that in the Bible various people are called the friend or friends of God or of Jesus. *But neither God nor Christ are ever said to be the friend of anyone.* God certainly loves his people greatly, but there remains an order, even a certain distance. This is not the entirely mutual, entirely reciprocal friendship that we think of in the modern world; it is not a relationship of parties on the same level. The modern evangelical church is in danger of forgetting this fact!
- v.16 Once again, so that there be no misunderstanding of the privilege the Lord has granted them as his friends, he reminds them that this comes not because of their wisdom or goodness or right choices, but because of Christ’s choice of them. Man always feels that the initiative lies with him, but Jesus takes pains to disabuse us of that idea. [Morris, 676] Once again as in 14:14 and 15:7, the means of bearing fruit will be prayer in the Lord’s name. That is, prayer offered in accordance with what Christ stands for, his purposes.

The idea of their “going” to bear fruit has suggested to many that the Lord is thinking of the witness of his disciples to the world.

I have a particular fondness for this text. It was upon this text that I preached my very first sermon. And I was grateful for this text when I came upon it. I was a first year seminary student, assigned to prepare my first sermon, and I had gone through the entire Bible from Genesis to Revelation and had not found one single text that submitted itself to an expository sermon – not one! And then I looked again at John 15:1-17 and realized that there were the makings of a sermon here. I’m sure it was a poor sermon. Mercifully, I was unable to find it in my files so I didn’t have to read it over again.

I remember that the gist of my sermon was a refutation of an interpretation of this text that had been made popular by A.W. Pink, the famous biblical expositor of the first half of the 20th century. In his large work on the Gospel of John, Pink had argued that the fruitless branches, mentioned in v. 2 were not cut off, but, rather, “lifted up” -- which is another possible translation of the Greek verb, lifted up so that they could get that exposure to the sun that had been denied them and so that, as a result, they could become fruit-bearing branches also. [Carson, 518] In

other words, there was nothing here about merely nominal Christians or about the judgment of those who were in the church in only an outward way. A permutation of that interpretation, also popular in evangelical preaching in the 20th century, was that the branches that were cut off were an image of Christians who were taken out of the world by death, and sent immediately to heaven, *because they were bearing no fruit on earth*. Because they bore no fruit, these Christians were of no value to the Lord on earth, even though they were his people, so he took them straightaway to heaven. In that sense, their early death was a judgment on the fruitlessness of their lives, but, nevertheless, being believers in Christ, they went to heaven.

But these are very unlikely interpretations and v. 6 is the proof of how unlikely. These are not branches taken to heaven; they are burned in the fire. They are not lifted up to the sun; they are cut off the vine and thrown away.

In the case of both of these popular interpretations of this text there was a concern to be sure that the interpretation of these verses did not contradict the strong assertions earlier in the Gospel that Christ's sheep can never fall away, that he will lose none of those whom the Father has given to him. These Bible teachers felt that if the idea of branches that were *in* the vine subsequently being *cut off* the vine were allowed to stand, then we would have an instance of Christians losing their salvation, an idea that is clearly incompatible with what is taught elsewhere in this Gospel and the rest of the Bible.

But, as we have already seen in the Gospel of John, not all who are *in* the covenant are *of* the covenant. There are those who are or have been *with* Christ who were never *in* Christ. These are those who are represented by the branches that are cut off. Surely they were never Christians, never believers *really*, but they were taken to be, they were thought to be. The proof that this is what the Lord is talking about here is found in v. 3 where he tells his disciples, in the context of fruitful and unfruitful branches, that *they* are all clean. That same statement was made, you remember, in 13:10, where, in reference to Judas, who was still present in the Upper Room, the additional clause was added, "though not every one of you." At that moment, not everyone was clean, but now that Judas was gone – the unfruitful branch that would be cut off – they were all clean. So, clearly, the Lord is talking about people who belong in an outward way but not in the way of true and living faith in him. They are the unfruitful branches and they will be cut off. Judas represents this class of people: taken to be Christians who never really were.

There are, as you know, a great many texts in the NT that make the same point. Fruitfulness is a mark of true spiritual life, of genuine faith in Christ, of real union and communion with Christ. "Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven," Jesus said, "but he who does the will of my Father in heaven." That seems to be very much what is being said here.

Fruitful vines will be pruned to bear more fruit; unfruitful vines will be cut off and destroyed. And how does one become a fruitful vine? By remaining in the Lord, or in his words, or in his commandments. That is, by trusting him as one's Lord and Savior, believing what he has said to be absolutely true, communing with him in prayer, and living accordingly a life active dependence upon Jesus Christ present by his Holy Spirit leading to cheerful obedience and eager, willing service.

We have, in other words, in v. 5 and its famous axiom, “apart from me you can do nothing,” a wonderfully unique religious principle. All the other religions and philosophies of the world reduce to single principles of self-effort. It may be “know yourself” as the ancient Greeks might have said; or “control yourself” as the Stoics of the Roman imperial world would have said; or extinguish yourself as the Buddhist might say; or subordinate yourself as the Muslim might say; or improve yourself as a modern positive thinker might say. But here is a completely different principle. Here, in Christianity we are told: “without Christ we can do nothing.” It is absolutely a religion of personal responsibility – *we must do something, we must remain in Christ, we must obey, we must pray* – but it is first a religion of grace – we can only do these things if God first acts for us and works in us. How different this viewpoint from what men naturally think! Cicero spoke for most men when he wrote (De Nat. Deorum iii 36), “For gold, land, and all the blessing of life, we return thanks to God; but no one ever returned thanks to God for virtue.” And the Jews of the Lord’s day thought the same. They said, “Neither evil nor good comes from God; both are the results of our deeds” (Midrash Rab.) and “All is in the hands of God except the fear of God” (Megilla 25a). No, says Jesus, without me, you can do nothing good, bear no fruit.

And, it is in this interplay between God’s grace given to us, his help, his power, his provision, on the one hand, and our responsible living, our obedience, our service, on the other, that the unique and extravagant character of Christian faith and life appear and receive their demonstration and their proof.

Think of it. By this remaining in Christ, by our being in him and he in us, through our faith and obedience, which themselves come from his grace and work in us, see what remarkable things ensue.

1. First, there is joy! Joy is a new note being sounded in this Upper Room Discourse. The word is found seven times in chapters 15, 16, and 17. Joy is the pinnacle of human experience. It is what everyone seeks, however futilely. That experience of perfect wholeness of life. Delight in everything. And that is just what Jesus speaks of in v. 11. He says, surely most remarkably when you stop to think about it, that by our remaining in him we will have *his* joy – we will participate in the perfect joy that exists in the Trinitarian life of God. Just as we will know the love that exists between the Father and the Son, as he said earlier in this same discourse, so we will know the joy that exists as a result of that love. That joy will be ours. And it will be a complete joy.

The Lord’s joy was the joy of complete victory, of accomplishment of all that he set out to do. It is the joy of an artist who has just laid down his brush and steps back to survey a splendid painting, a painting into which he had poured all himself and all his talents, and now, finally, after all the work is done, the painting is wonderful beyond words. *And that is to be our joy as well*, because united to him, we share in his great work and his triumphant life.

2. Then, there is a life of singular devotion. The Lord speaks of our remaining in him by keeping his commandments and then goes on to illustrate what he means by such obedience by speaking of our laying down our lives for our friends, for one another. Forget mere

inconvenience born on behalf of another; forget sacrifices of time and effort; this devotion extends past all of that to the laying down of one's life for the life and well-being of another. It is a life, an obedience, a following of Christ marked by extravagant self-sacrifice in imitation of Christ's own surrendering of himself for us.

In other words this is a great life, a singular life, a life apart from the ordinary run of human experience, a life that transcends the normal expectations of human beings. A life of nobility, of supreme accomplishment. A head-turning life, a life that others will speak about with reverence and amazement.

3. And, then, finally, there is this extraordinary significance of this life of joy and devoted obedience. The Lord speaks of this in v. 16. We will bear fruit, but, more than that, the fruit we bear *will last*. As we said, almost certainly, a large part of this reference is to the bearing of our lives on the salvation and the eternal happiness of others. Twice already in the Gospel the idea of fruit has been used of the souls that are saved through faithful obedience in the work that the Father has appointed for us. Through our obedient service, through our prayer, through our imitation of Christ, other human beings will give glory to God forever and ever. What a remarkable thing this is! We must never lose sight of what an extraordinary thing it is – whether as evangelists of unbelievers around us, as friends seeking to win friends to Christ and salvation, as parents raising our children in the covenant to love and serve the Lord, as those who pray for the salvation of others, as those who support the work of missionaries and evangelists elsewhere – I say, what an extraordinary thing it is that Christ should have involved us, dignified us, exalted us to have a part in the great work of bringing eternal life to the world. To think of it: that there will be those in heaven, for ever and ever, who see themselves, in this way, as the fruit of *our* labor – all by God's grace, to be sure, but, as Jesus promises here, *the fruit of our labor!*

What a remarkable life it is that those live who abide in Christ by faith and obedience, who walk with him through prayer! It is life, like Milton's *March of the Angels* lived "high above the ground."

But, now wait a minute. This is *us* the Lord is talking about! Joy unspeakable, and full of glory; laying down our lives for our friends, leaving lasting fruit? Could that possibly be a description of people whose lives are as ordinary as ours? Could that be us, Jesus is talking about, when we stumble and fail as often as we do? I doubt there is a one of us who is comfortable finding ourselves in the Lord's description of the vines that remain in him and bear fruit of joy, of sacrificial love, and of lasting blessing in the lives of others. We may see a bit of this, but we see much more as well that does not belong at all to the Lord's picture here.

Or does it? Remember, the Lord Jesus began by talking about the Father *pruning* the branches. Have you ever seen a vineyard pruned after harvest. The vines don't look anything like they did before the harvest. The vineyard is mass of stumps, ugly, unpromising but, as the poet has it,

next year blooms again,
Not bitter for the torment undergone,
Not barren for the fulness yielded up.

And for long months the vineyard is like that, unimpressive, forlorn, inauspicious, until the growth returns in the Spring. That is the Lord's description of us as well, after the Father has pruned us: forlorn, unpromising, inauspicious. Ah, now I can recognize myself in the Lord's description of a Christian here! And there is a great deal of pruning going on all the time among Christian people. Trouble, affliction, failure, in one way or another it is all the heavenly Father's work of pruning. Robert Murray McCheyne once said, "If we only saw the whole, we should see that the Father is doing little else in the world but training his vines." [In Bonar, 159] There will be joy, yes; there will be sacrifice for others, yes; there will be lasting fruit in the lives of others, yes. But there will also be the stumps cut way back for months on end.

Listen to this from a letter that Alexander Whyte wrote to his son.

"Bouqueron, above Grenoble, Sabbath forenoon, 19th April, 1903. My Dear Robert, -- After breakfast and family worship this morning, we each took our own favourite book and separated for the forenoon. I selected for my retreat the great vineyard that covers the sunny slope above Grenoble, and which commands a fine view of the rich valley and the beautifully-situated city below, and the splendid chain of snow-white Alps beyond. I know and am quite sure that I am now in the very heart of an immense vineyard, but it does not look like it. The scene all around me is like anything but a vineyard, as we in Scotland imagine a vineyard to be. For the vines all around me are the most unpromising, and almost forbidding things possible. They are black, dry, twisted, knotted, gnarled; hacked at the root with the vinedresser's axe, and hewn to pieces in all their branches with his pruning-knife. The truth is the vines all around me, both roots and branches, are more like brands plucked out of the burning than living things, or things with any hope of life in them. The apple-trees are covered with their snow-white blossoms. The cherry-trees and the plum-trees also are perfectly gorgeous with their gold and purple plumage. But it is only here and there that I can discover the smallest bud of green promise in all these miles on miles of vineyard. And yet though I have not been able to tell you the half of this hopeless looking scene, if you were to come to this beautiful land in autumn you would find this whole hillside simply groaning under its immense loads of gold and silver grapes.

Now, dear Robert, being a minister, and always thinking of my Bible, and of my pulpit at home, this scene this forenoon has called to mind the fifteenth chapter of John's Gospel. ... Words would fail me to attempt to tell you the express and the immense comfort that came to me that Sabbath forenoon in that vineyard above Grenoble. As I staggered about among those hard, dry, hopeless-looking branches all, as it seemed to me, ready for the burning, and as these words of my Lord were then and there shed abroad in my ear, 'Ye are the branches,' – what a comfort came to me! For that moment, as I remember well, and will never forget, every hacked and hewn and hopeless brand around me suddenly took to itself a tongue and spake comfort to me. 'Come back soon and see us,' they all said. 'Come back and eat abundantly of our golden grapes in their season.'" [*The Walk, Character and Conversation of our Lord Jesus Christ*, 324-330]

Oh no, my brothers and sisters, we are not the vine and we are not the gardener, the vine-dresser. We are just the branches in the vine. And for us to bear fruit much pruning must be done by the wise, master of the vineyard. He will see to it that we – even we! – will bear much fruit. But it will not be without pruning, much cutting back and cutting away. Whether you can see yourself now in the leafy green with fruit aplenty, or only the stump, cut back and black, it is all the same vine and the same master gardener at work in you.

“If you remain in me and my words remain in you...” You know what that means. There are a great many words of the Lord that you already know and you know very well what it must mean to remain in those words: to take them to heart, to repeat them to yourself, to dwell on them, and then to live by them as the very truth of God. Whether they are words about Christ and his love or words about the commandments he has given you to keep, they are Christ’s words and by remaining in them and living by them we remain in Christ and draw our life from him, and living, bear our fruit.