

E. Charging the Disciples (15:1-27)

This discourse is John's record of Jesus' final instruction to His inner circle of disciples before His crucifixion. He initiated it by announcing His impending departure in death and followed that announcement with a series of assurances and encouragements. He wasn't leaving them permanently, but was going to return to them. And then He would be with them forever, not in the way they had known to that point, but with a new intimacy through His indwelling Spirit by which He'd endow them with new knowledge and power. The thought of what lay ahead left the apostles troubled and fearful and Jesus reassured them that the agony of the next few days would produce glorious fruit; indeed, they were going to experience a joy, peace and intimacy with Him that they couldn't begin to imagine at that time.

Everything about their relationship with Him was going to be renewed and transformed, but this new relationship would bring new responsibilities. Jesus was going to join them to Himself and His Father by giving them His Spirit (14:18-20, 23), but they would need to *own* that union. His abiding in them would obligate them to abide in Him, a point He poignantly made by drawing upon the imagery of a grapevine and its branches. This metaphor was suitable for at least two reasons: First, it suited Jesus' emphasis on *fruit-bearing* as the central issue in the disciples' obligation to abide in Him. But it also connected Him with *Israel* in that the grapevine was a common scriptural symbol for the covenant nation.

1. The heart of Jesus' encouragement to His apostles was that His departure was only temporary. His death wouldn't end their connection with Him; quite the opposite, it would facilitate a new and profoundly intimate union: He in them and them in Him. But this new relationship would introduce new dynamics and new responsibilities and Jesus used the grapevine metaphor to illumine these truths. He began by identifying Himself as the *true* grapevine and His Father as the vinedresser (15:1-2). This self-depiction served first of all to illustrate the relationship between Himself, His Father and His disciples: They are joined to Him like the branches of a vine and His Father tends to them with the goal of making them fruitful in their participation in His life.
 - a. This relational dynamic will be examined in greater detail, but it's appropriate first to consider the grapevine symbolism itself. As mentioned above, this was a longstanding scriptural symbol for Israel. Most importantly, this symbolism wasn't arbitrary, but used specifically in relation to Israel's election, calling, performance and future as Yahweh's covenant son (cf. Psalm 80; Isaiah 3:13-15, 5:1-7, 27:1-6; Jeremiah 2:14-21, 5:1-11, 6:1-9, 12:7-10; Ezekiel 15:1-8, 17:1-21, 19:1-14; Hosea 10:1; Nahum 2:1-2; etc.).

As the corporate embodiment of Abraham's covenant seed, Israel was a select vine, well tended and cared for by Yahweh, the vinedresser, but one which nonetheless bore only bad fruit. By taking up this imagery and applying it to Himself, Jesus was alluding to the truth highlighted by Isaiah that unfaithful Israel was to find its healing and covenant faithfulness (its "fruitfulness") in a faithful seed – a true son of Abraham. In Him, Israel would at last become Israel *indeed* – Yahweh's fruitful vine – and so fulfill its covenant election.

- b. Jesus depicted Himself as the *true vine* and His Father – Israel’s covenant God – as the *vinedresser*. The Greek noun denotes a farmer or person who tills the ground, but in context it refers to a vinedresser as the person intimately involved in cultivating and tending to the grapevine to insure its optimal fruitfulness. Jesus described this role in terms of taking away the branches that bear no fruit and pruning the fruit-bearing branches to make them even more fruitful (15:2). This statement has challenged readers and scholars across the centuries, especially as it is interpreted in terms of Jesus’ saving work.

The focal point of the difficulty is Jesus’ assertion that His Father “takes away” the branches in Him that are unfruitful. For some, this seems to support the notion that a person can lose his salvation: If someone comes to Christ so as to become a branch in Him and then proves unfruitful in this union, God will remove him (cf. 15:6). Others interpret the verb (“take away”) in the positive sense of *bearing* or *taking up* (cf. Matthew 4:6; Mark 2:3; John 5:10), arguing that Jesus was saying that His Father supports and nurtures the fruitless branches in Him so that they can become fruitful. The verb has a broad semantic range and the negative and positive connotations referenced here are widely represented in the New Testament. In the end, the context must determine the intended sense.

- The first thing to note is the parallel assertion about fruit-bearing branches. The two statements draw a contrast between the two kinds of branches (fruitful and fruitless), but also parallel each other in that they both speak to the Father’s dealings with them.
- Secondly, Jesus directly identified the unfruitful branches as being *in Him*. His statement implies the same thing concerning the fruitful branches and the wider context supports this conclusion; fruit-bearing depends upon vital connection between the branch and the grapevine (ref. vv. 4-5).
- Jesus used the grapevine metaphor to highlight the critical importance of the union between Him and His disciples. Accordingly, He exhorted the apostles to “abide in Him,” suggesting the possibility that they might not continue to do so (vv. 4-7). This emphasis seems to align with the idea of the Father “taking away” branches that prove unfruitful.
- One other consideration involves grammar and syntax rather than context. The issue is the prepositional phrase, “*in Me*,” and its intended referent. Its position right after the noun *branch* (i.e., an unfruitful branch) strongly suggests that the prepositional phrase modifies it. But it’s also possible that it modifies the participial phrase (“not bearing fruit”) that immediately follows it. In this case, the prepositional phrase qualifies the matter of fruit-bearing: *Every branch not bearing fruit in Me, He takes away*. The implication, then, is that there is a kind of fruit-bearing that exists apart from vital connection with Jesus. Hence He was contrasting this false fruit with the authentic fruit of those abiding in Him (cf. Matthew 7:15-23).

These considerations point to three possible interpretations. The first two have Jesus contrasting the two kinds of branches “in Him” – those that bear fruit and those that don’t. The first option is that His Father *removes* (“takes away”) the barren branches; the second is that He *nurtures* them (“takes them up”) so that they become fruitful. The third interpretation has Jesus contrasting the branches that bear fruit in Him with those that bear their fruit apart from Him. Of the three options, the one that is most likely correct – the first one – is the most challenging; indeed the difficulties it poses are a primary reason for promoting the other two alternatives which the context less supports. For many, the awkwardness of the latter is preferable to the problems inherent in the former.

But there are ways to embrace the natural reading – “My Father removes every branch in Me that doesn’t bear fruit” – without getting embroiled in the question of whether a person can lose his salvation. One approach is more obvious and widely held; the other is more in keeping with the scriptural grapevine imagery and its relation to the covenant nation of Israel and its destiny in the Messiah.

- 1) The first approach is to treat the unfruitful branches as only *appearing* to be in the vine. The idea is that these branches symbolize people who seem to have been joined to Jesus (i.e., been saved), but really haven’t. They have a pseudo-faith, proven out by the absence of fruit in their lives. In the end, such branches are completely removed from the vine, Judas being an obvious case in point. In contrast, branches that are truly in the vine bear fruit and the Father prunes (“cleans”) them to make them all the more fruitful. The other eleven apostles were such “clean” branches (15:3).
- 2) The second approach parallels the first, but it assumes a wider salvation-historical perspective more in keeping with Jesus’ messianic mission and Israel’s role in it. Here the unfruitful branches correspond to unbelieving Israel rather than individual persons. This view conforms more closely to the Old Testament’s portrayal of the covenant nation as unfruitful and therefore subject to Yahweh’s removal. This imagery was used in relation to Israel’s judgment in exile, but as that judgment looked to another future removal associated with the coming of the Messiah. So the synoptic records have Jesus drawing upon the song of the vineyard in Isaiah 5 to explain what awaited His generation because of their unbelief – that is, their failure to bear fruit in Him. His Father was going to cut them off by taking the kingdom from them and giving it to those who would bear its fruit (cf. Matthew 21:33-43; Mark 12:1-11; Luke 20:9-17). Judas was representative of the fruitless nation, even as the Eleven were to be the beginning of the new, fruitful Israel Jesus was going to reconstitute in Himself as the “chief cornerstone” of Yahweh’s restored sanctuary (note Matthew 21:42; Mark 12:10-11; Luke 20:17). For the most part, Israel had shown itself to be a fruitless branch refusing to abide in the messianic vine; thus Yahweh was going to break it off and throw it into the fire of His wrath (cf. 15:6 with Luke 19:41-44; also Romans 11:13-21).

The second interpretation better captures the thrust of Jesus' messianic mission and the dynamics of Israel's response to Him, but it doesn't preclude the first one in the sense that the nation of Israel consisted of individual people. The covenant house of Israel was a barren branch in the messianic vine, and therefore soon to be cut off. But within the unbelieving nation there were apparent disciples like Judas (ref. 2:23-25, 6:14-15, 8:31-32), even as there were numerous authentic ones.

2. Jesus declared Himself to be the true vine and His Father the vinedresser; He then brought His apostles into His metaphor, identifying them as among the fruit-bearing branches which the Father prunes clean (15:3). Again, the reason for the metaphor was to highlight the issue of fruitfulness in those sharing in the Messiah. Jesus had told the apostles that their relationship with Him was going to change in an astonishing way (vv. 20-23); now He explained what would come from that new intimacy: *He was going to abide in them and them in Him in order that they would bear the fruit of His life in them.*
 - a. Jesus identified His apostles as fruit-bearing branches by noting their *cleanness*, thereby connecting them with those whom the Father *cleans* (v. 2). Moreover, He explained that this pruning work was accomplished through His *word*. Keeping with the metaphor, fruit-bearing is the premise behind the pruning of a grapevine and this action has its goal in increased fecundity; the vinedresser doesn't prune dead branches, but prunes the fruit-bearing ones to enhance their fruitfulness. In terms of human branches in Jesus, the true vine, the Father accomplishes this pruning through the Son's word. So Jesus previously insisted that His words were not His own, but His Father doing His work (14:10; cf. 8:42-47, 12:48-50). Jesus had joined these men to Himself with spoken and enacted "words" that are Spirit and life (6:63). And this communication was the work of His Father by which He'd "cleaned" them in preparation for their mission of fruit-bearing on behalf of the Son. Thus Jesus' declaration, "*you are already clean,*" must be understood in terms of fruitfulness, not cleansing from sin as some suppose. (This is all the more evident in the fact that Jesus' *word* accomplished this "cleaning.")
 - b. The apostles' "cleanness" implied their union with their Lord as fruit-bearing branches in the true vine. They were already "abiding" in Him, but that circumstance wasn't ultimate; *they were yet obligated to remain in Him* (15:4), just as He was committed to remaining in them. This "already-but-not-yet" dynamic points back to what Jesus had already told them: They were even then joined to Him and "clean" (prepared for future fruitfulness) because of His ministration to them by the Spirit, but their present union anticipated the greater, ultimate union to be realized with the Spirit's outpouring; the One who had been *with* them in the Messiah would be *in* them as the indwelling Messiah (14:16-20). Thus the apostles' present abiding in the vine was the promise of a future, more profound abiding. But this future abiding would impose a unique obligation – the obligation to actively and purposefully live into and live out their living union with Jesus as branches in the vine. Only by abiding in Him in that way would they bear the fruit for which they were set apart and prepared. Indeed, apart from that vital union and their conformity to it, they would be barren and useless (15:5-6).

- c. The apostles – and all those who would come after them (ref. 17:20-23) – were marked out for the work of fruit-bearing, but fruit of a specific sort. Like branches in a grapevine, they were to bear the fruit that is the product of the life and vital energy of the true vine flowing into and through them. The fruit appears on the branches, but it is the fruit of the vine – *fruit that carries in itself and manifests the unique life bound up in that particular vine*. So it is with those who share in Jesus; their fruitfulness is His fruit-bearing in and through them.

By implication, all other manifestations of fruit-bearing are fraudulent and empty. Men can bear all sorts of “fruit” apart from vital union with Christ, but it is ultimately *bad* fruit because it originates from themselves in their natural state; it is shriveled fruit that appears on lifeless branches. This is what Jesus meant when He said that, apart from Him, men can do *nothing* (15:5b); they can accomplish many things, but are utterly incapable of bearing authentic fruit. However fruitful they may appear, they are as branches severed from the vine, lifeless and withered, fit only to be gathered up and burned. Conversely, those who abide in Jesus, drawing upon His life and power, will bear abundant fruit – perhaps not fruit that the world recognizes and hungers for, but true fruit nonetheless.

- d. These observations are the key to understanding Jesus’ promise in verses 7-8. This promise reiterates what He said previously (14:13-14), adding further color and light to it: There Jesus promised that He’d grant all petitions offered in His name because doing so would glorify Him and so His Father in Him; here He attached the same promise to the condition of abiding in Him, but for the same reason of His Father’s glorification. Putting the two together shows that asking in Jesus’ *name* amounts to asking as one who is *in Him*; so the Father’s resulting glorification in the *Son* is His glorification in the Son’s *disciples* who bear His fruit in the world as those sharing in His life and carrying out His mission.

Thus the union with the vine that results in fruit-bearing is a union of *oneness*: The “abiding in Me” of which Jesus spoke involves unity of mind and will. Just as the branches are the instrument for the vine’s production of its fruit, so Jesus bears His fruit in and through His disciples who abide in Him in a living union. And as the vine and branches share one will – the will of the vine which energizes the branches and determines their work, so it is with those who share in Jesus, the true vine: Their fruitfulness is the product of their union with His will.

This is why Jesus could assure His apostles that He would give them anything they asked of Him. Abiding in Him and animated and directed by His word like branches drawing their life, energy and direction from the vine, their will would become one with His. Their longings would express His designs, so that granting their petitions would see the production of rich and abundant fruit – the authentic fruit of new creational life for which the Father sent the Son and which the Father and Son produce through the renewing and indwelling power of the Spirit. In such disciples – such fruitful branches abiding in the vine – the Father, together with the Son and Spirit, is eminently glorified.