

The True Vine (What CAN You Do?)

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The Twelve|Enrolled in the School of Jesus Christ

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John 15.1-17

4.7.19

"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. 17"This I command you, that you love one another.

We've been looking at the FOUR GOSPELS...as we usually do moving from Christmas to Easter each year. This year we've focused on a prominent theme: The Training of the Twelve.

Jesus Christ was like a Potter and the disciples were the clay (His masterpiece!); He shaped them to continue His work, to BE ALWAYS conveying the faith to the next generation. They were disciples who would make disciples, who would then make disciples, who would also make disciples...on and on!

John's Gospel sort of saves this theme for the end where Jesus Christ withdraws from the crowds and gives this long charge to The Twelve. It's a summary of the whole training course and WE get to listen. It's "holy

ground” – like a coach in the locker room and no television cameras are aloud IN...but WE are aloud in! We’re training with The Twelve!

We hear Jesus Christ issue the last of His seven self-identifying titles, sometimes called the “I AM statements”... “I am the Bread of Life... I am the Light of the World...I am the Good Shepherd” and today, the final one: “I am the True Vine”.

In that statement and IN what follows, Jesus Christ concludes His three-year course on LIFE...and He gives the disciples strong assurance that they WILL THRIVE in the work even after He is no longer physically present. They will be fruitful!

I want to be fruitful... I want to realize the purpose for which I was made. I want to live a consequential life (as, I’m sure, you do too!) So we should “listen in” – pay close attention. How to live a significant life, the fruitful life, according to Jesus Christ:

1) The Quest for a Fruitful Life

2) The Guiding Metaphor and What It Means

3) Remaining Issues

This passage was spoken to the disciples...not to me and before I can apply it to myself and to YOU...I have to see what it said to the original hearers.

They had only the faintest idea that their lives were about to change... Their hopes would be dashed... their Teacher taken from them. And the

words Jesus Christ was speaking will come back to them – even though they don't understand them NOW.

In just a few hours they'll be convinced that they had made a very bad investment: they'd wasted three years learning from this astounding Person and thinking He was the long-promised Messiah...but His arrest and His crucifixion will CRUSH them and leave them totally disillusioned. They'll be convinced they had chased a pipedream and Jesus of Nazareth turned out NOT to be the Messiah – just defeated/dead... It had all been a fruitless fantasy.

Their three years with Him turned out to be a waste. Some of the prime years of their youth are now gone with nothing to show for it – it was all a waste.

I think we all have similar regrets/fears (especially as we get older). We wonder about our family of origin – “If only I had been born in this kind of family...”

We wonder about our schooling – “Had I only graduated from High School...or from a better High School...If I had just applied myself...gotten into college or a better college...chosen a better profession...a better spouse...gotten married...spent more time with my kids – I've wasted time and opportunities and it was all fruitless. AND I'm not even sure that what I'm doing NOW will really ever mean anything.”

And – you know – you can never go back.

So, Jesus Christ is telling them – “Brace yourselves for what you're about to see – the last three years have NOT been a waste and the future will NOT be fruitless – in fact, YOU’LL go on to live lives that are wildly consequential and fruitful beyond imagining!”

Some say the core section of the five-chapter-long discourse is when Jesus Christ says, “I am the True Vine”. Some think that they may (look at the last verse of the previous chapter) they MAY have left the upper room they and MAY have stopped at the Temple to teach them. And there at the Temple over the curtain on the West side of the Holy Place (the altar) was a sculpture, a vine made of gold. The artists continued to add to it regularly so that it appeared to grow...There were solid gold clusters of grapes some of which were as tall as a grown man.

Maybe Jesus Christ was referencing that amazing gold sculpture when He said, “I am the TRUE Vine.”

Or maybe He was referencing Isaiah Ch. 5 (written about 700 BC) where God sings about Israel, His precious vine. He transplanted it from Egypt and tenderly cared for it. Took all the stones/weeds out of the ground, kept the pests away and put a wall around it...watered it...loved it...tended it. BUT as if this vine had a mind of its own, it refused to produce good fruit...only SOUR grapes and worthless!

“What more could I do for my vine?” asks God. Then He answers, “I will remove its hedge and it will be consumed; I will break down its wall and it

will become trampled ground. I will lay it waste. It will not be pruned or weeded, but briars and thorns will come up. I will also charge the clouds not to rain on it."

Jesus is saying that Israel is the Vine that failed, that would not produce, the worthless and fruitless and false vine...BUT I AM THE TRUE VINE! I AM the delightful Son (Matt 2.15) that Israel failed to be, fruitful, vital and brimming with life... AND yet I will be cut off, trampled, parched and dried out...I will be without water crying out on the Cross, "I thirst" and I will wear weeds on My head, briars and thorns for a crown...I will accept the penalty for My people, for the disappointing VINE...and I will suffer in their place."

"Then, I will emerge, the fruitful and True Vine, a New Israel, fulfilling everything that old Israel should have been but was NOT. I will live the life you failed to live and die the death you deserved to die and I will RISE, a new VINE, the source of sap, vitality and grace."

And then the point – "therefore, as you are about to face the terrible weight of wasted life, you must know: I am the True Vine, remain in Me..."

And this REMAIN/ABIDE idea is to say, "Stay connected to Me and you will not be swept away and dried up in the day of disappointment... I will push life into you and you will flourish and thrive as if by some secret Source... I will make YOU fruitful...I will produce My virtue and beauty THROUGH you!"

In some ways, He's saying, "All that Israel was and was supposed to be, I AM... All the Temple system of sacrifice and worship, all the promises, all the commands (Law and Prophets) is all condensed in ME... I am fulfilling spirituality and religion and morality... and you need ONLY this: remain in Me!"

He's not really teaching how to get connected. He's simply telling those who ARE connected and who are about to be devastated when they see Him die, "Just stay connected...abide in Me ...dwell ...remain in ME!"

Now two "REMAINING" issues: I want to consider: 1) What are the components of discipleship? 2) How do they fit together?

1) What IS it to be a Christian? What IS it to be a student or follower or a disciple of Jesus Christ? What, when you boil it all the way down, what's it all about?

Well, some people say it's a system of beliefs, of doctrines and teachings and creeds...but is it? Is being a Christian about believing certain facts and propositions and dogmas? ANSWER?: Sure! That's a part of it! Jesus Christ says it, "You are clean because of MY word ..." (v.3) and again, "If...My words abide in YOU" That's teaching/dogma that Jesus Christ taught. There's content in this way of seeing the world.

But that's not ALL... There's also LOVING involved. Your volition, your will, your consent or agreement is required. You call Him "LORD" because you intend to obey Him. "If you keep My commands". So, it's more than just learning or philosophy or a set of beliefs. It must and it

WILL affect your lifestyle and you will actually follow Him as a student follows a teacher.

But thirdly, there's also a MYSTICAL aspect to being a disciple or a Christian. There's a transfer of energy or life or power. There's an intimacy and a relational side of things in which the believer has spiritual contact and experience with Jesus Christ. AND this all comes out in a kind of ORGANIC produce or fruit.

The old writer Henry Scougal (1650–1678) wrote a very famous little book on this theme called *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*. George Whitfield said, “I never knew what true Christianity was until I read that book”.

It IS, I think, a missing element for some people, like a three-legged stool that's missing a leg and their whole religious and spiritual life is forced and without power and this awkward balancing act.

So, being a Christian is really all three – a system of beliefs/truths/teachings AND there's an ethical component (obedience, following Jesus Christ, loving) AND there's this mystical side.

BUT thē real issue is HOW does it fit together? What are the “dynamics of spiritual life” (Richard Lovelace) and THIS really IS thē all-important question.

There are a number of “if-then” type clauses in today's text and it's crucial to get the order right. To remain in Christ means to continue believing. We

get the all the promises of God and we take them or receive them by believing, by faith.

We persist in that honest, open sequence – we fail and we see our need for a Savior. We fall down and we face our faults honestly before the One True Vine who was cut off so we could be grafted IN.

As we do that again and again, we repent and believe, like exhale/inhale, we grieve over our sins, and we rejoice that our sins are forgiven and that because of Jesus Christ, the Spirit of Holiness is claiming more and more ground in the DARK CONTINENT of our hearts...and on the cycle goes: repent and believe, repent and believe...

It's what Francis Schaeffer called "active-passivity". We receive God's promises in Jesus Christ and we sort of force ourselves to rest in that, to REMAIN!

And out of that doctrine, which we receive by faith and by that kind of intimacy and relationship with God that leads to response and prayer and communion (*The Life of God in the Soul of Man*) AS WE BELIEVE, our character begins to change. The sap rises up into our motives!

Sometimes its very slow. But it happens, something that's not just forced morality or obligatory niceness or being good/respectable... not simply like rules-keeping... but something organic, like fruit growing on a vine. Love begins to assert itself...and insinuate Himself into our lives...and it's beautiful and sweet and like a growing, living thing. It's joyous obedience that comes by the power of God's life, received by faith.

It's often sort of indirect...like we're not even aiming for fruit (anymore than a mango tree is deliberately making mangos). It's the dynamic of spiritual life the Gospel generates.

Here Jesus Christ says, "Apart from Me you can do nothing..." and I take that to mean that even our so-called obedience and compliance with the rules WILL not amount to anything...will be sour grapes (like ancient Israel and the Pharisees) UNLESS that obedience comes as the fruit of our remaining in Christ.

St. Paul would later say, "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me..." (Phil 4.10) He didn't mean that he could dunk a basketball or win an election; he meant that he could enjoy life's sweeter moments in a way that glorified God OR he could endure life's bitterest disappointments in a way that glorified God – he could face the highs and the lows as the sap of Christ strengthened him.

The Christian life begins when we first repent and believe... and the fruit of love grows as we continue to repent and believe... this is what it means to remain...abide... to dwell in Christ.