

"THE VINE AND THE BRANCHES"

I. Introduction

A. The theme of this passage is the Christian's union with Jesus Christ.

1. The doctrine of union with Christ is of fundamental significance for every aspect of our salvation.
2. The importance of this doctrine can be seen by the fact that the apostle Paul uses the phrase "in Christ" over 160 times in his letters.
3. John Calvin emphasized the centrality of union with Christ when he said that "The Lord Jesus never gives anyone the enjoyment of his benefits except by giving himself." [*Institutes*, 3.16.1]

B. While verses 1-17 of this chapter comprise a single unit of thought, they can also be divided into two parts.

1. In verses 1-8 Jesus sets forth the metaphor of the vine and the branches.
2. And then in verses 9-17 he offers further commentary on this metaphor.
3. As we study the first eight verses of the chapter today, we will see why union with Christ is so central to the Christian life.

II. The True Vine

A. The passage begins with Jesus referring to himself as "the true vine."

1. Jesus was not inventing a new metaphor when he said this.

2. He was building upon a metaphor that had been used before.
3. In the Old Testament, the vine was a symbol for Israel as God's covenant people.
4. We see this in Psalm 80, where Israel is described as a vine that the Lord brought out of Egypt and planted in the Promised Land.
5. The psalmist writes, "You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land." (vv. 8-9)
6. The same metaphor is employed at several points in the book of Isaiah.
7. In Isaiah 5, the prophet sings a song about Israel as God's carefully tended vineyard that only produced rotten fruit.
8. Isaiah's point is that Israel proved to be a faithless and fruitless vine.
9. But then in Isaiah 27, the Lord makes this startling promise about Israel as his vineyard: "In days to come Jacob shall take root, Israel shall blossom and put forth shoots and fill the whole world with fruit." (v. 6)
10. This helps us to see what Jesus means when he calls himself the *true* vine.
11. He is the fulfillment of that promise in Isaiah 27.
12. He is the fulfillment of what Israel failed to be.
13. He is the true Servant of the Lord, the true Israel, the One in whom God's promise of worldwide fruitfulness reaches its fulfillment.

- B. Jesus further develops this metaphor by saying that God the Father is the vinedresser, the one who tends the vineyard.
1. There are two ways in which the Father carries out his work as the vinedresser.
 2. He takes away the branches that do not bear fruit, and he prunes the branches that do bear fruit so that they will be even more fruitful.
 3. By “takes away,” Jesus means that fruitless branches are lopped off of the vine.
 4. In other words, these are people who will be cut off from Christ and will no longer be counted among his people.
- C. This might seem to contradict what Jesus said back in chapter 10 about how none of the sheep that the Father has given him can be snatched out of his hand. (see Jn. 10:28)
1. But we have to remember that not everyone who professes faith in Christ is truly one of his sheep.
 2. This was the case with Judas Iscariot, and it is also the case with others.
 3. Not everyone who calls himself a Christian has true faith in Jesus Christ.
 4. There is a distinction between the visible church, which is made up of all who profess the true religion, and the invisible church, which is made up of all of the elect.
 5. Those do not have genuine faith will not be able to produce the fruit of saving faith.
 6. Their lives will not be characterized by things like a constant reliance upon Christ for forgiveness, a reliance upon Christ for strength to live a holy life, a hatred of sin, a desire to

please God, and a faith that perseveres in the face of life's many trials and temptations.

7. Jesus is saying that at some point -- perhaps in this life, perhaps in the world to come -- these fruitless members of his body will be exposed for what they really are.
8. Because they have no vital union with Christ, they will not remain in Christ.

D. The other way in which the Father carries out his work as the vinedresser is by pruning the branches that do produce fruit.

1. I don't know much about viticulture, but it is my understanding that vines have to be pruned or else they will not be productive.
2. This tells us something extremely important about the Christian life.
3. It tells us that we require pruning if we are going to grow as Christians.

E. As I was thinking about this, I recalled a few times growing up when my dad pruned some of the bushes around our house after letting them grow too big.

1. There was at least one occasion when my mom looked at the bush afterward and thought that my dad had destroyed it.
2. But sure enough, it wasn't long before the bush was in need of another trim.
3. God's work of pruning can be like that.
4. Sometimes, the amount of pruning that God does in our lives is staggering.
5. Sometimes it seems like it is too much.

6. But we have to remember that our heavenly Father is the expert vinedresser.
 7. He knows exactly when and exactly where to use his pruning shears.
 8. He knows when we require discipline.
 9. He knows how to use trials and troubles to keep us mindful of the fact that we are completely dependent upon Christ.
 10. He knows perfectly well what is necessary to make us fruitful.
- F. After speaking of the Father's work as the vinedresser, Jesus tells the disciples "Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you."
1. There is a play on words here that is not evident in the English translation.
 2. The Greek verb "prune" also means "clean," and it shares the same root as the adjective that Jesus uses in verse 3 when he says that the disciples are "clean."
 3. In the Greek, verses 2 and 3 sound like this: "every branch that does bear fruit he cleans, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you."
 4. This reminds us of what Jesus said to Peter back in chapter 13 about only needing to have his feet washed because he was already clean.
 5. The Father's pruning work in our lives represents the same thing that Jesus' washing of this disciples' feet represented.
 6. It is an image of the process of sanctification.

7. And Jesus' assertion that the disciples are already clean points to the fact that we are justified, or declared righteous by God, when we receive Jesus' word in faith.
8. This is what Jesus means when he says that his word is what makes us clean.
9. The gospel affects cleansing in the lives of those who receive it in faith.
10. If you receive Christ's word in faith, you are already clean.

III. Abiding in the Vine

- A. In the next part of our passage, the emphasis is upon the importance of abiding in Christ.
 1. The word "abide" appears six times in verses 4-7.
 2. What does it mean to abide in Christ?
 3. How do we do abide in Christ?
 4. Unfortunately, this has sometimes been taken to mean that we need to perform certain duties in order to ensure that we will continue to abide in Christ.
 5. The problem with that way of thinking is that it gets things completely backwards.
 6. It is not by bearing fruit that we abide in Christ.
 7. The branch of an apple tree does not abide in the tree by producing fruit.
 8. It is the other way around.
 9. It is by abiding that the branch is able to produce fruit.

- B. This gets us back to our original question: how does one go about abiding in Christ?
1. The important thing to realize here is that abiding in Christ is not some heightened spiritual experience that is only attained by the most rigorous and elite Christians.
 2. Every Christian is united to Jesus Christ.
 3. You become a Christian by being united to Christ.
 4. And this union is brought about by the Holy Spirit through the instrument of faith.
 5. The way we abide in Christ is the same way we got united to him in the first place: by faith.
- C. J.C. Ryle offers this helpful paraphrase of what Jesus is saying here: "Abide in Me, cling to Me, stick fast to Me, live the life of close and intimate communion with Me, get nearer and nearer to Me, roll every burden on Me, cast your whole weight on Me, never let go your hold on Me for a moment."
1. The passage itself tells us what it means to abide in Christ in verse 9, where Jesus tells us to abide in his love.
 2. We abide in Christ by continuing to believe that he loves us.
 3. Whenever you are tempted to doubt Christ's love for you, remind yourself that it was not anything in you that caused him to set his love upon you in the first place.
 4. Listen to this counsel from Thomas Boston: "When through deadness and darkness of spirit, whether arising out of some conscience-wasting guilt, or otherwise, your faith of the promise is failed, and you cannot fasten your grip upon it, because you see no good in you; embrace Christ again... For as the goodness in you was not the ground of the promise; so the evil in you doth not overturn it, and make it of none effect. The foundation of the promise stands sure in Christ,

whatever alterations the frame and case of a believer's spirit do undergo." [*A View of the Covenant of Grace*, 95]

5. In short, the way to abide in Christ is to keep on believing what God has promised in his Word.

IV. Bearing Fruit

- A. Jesus emphasizes the connection between abiding in him and bearing fruit by saying that we cannot produce fruit apart from him.
 1. He is the true vine, the true Israel.
 2. He is God's fruitful vineyard.
 3. Left to ourselves, we are like that faithless and fruitless vineyard that was described in Isaiah 5.
 4. The only way we can produce good fruit is if we are connected to Jesus Christ.
 5. One theologian explains it this way: "We have no life to live as Christians that is not given by God the Father, earned by God the Son, and bestowed by God the Holy Spirit. Therefore our focus is always on Jesus Christ... Christian salvation (or justification) and Christian living (or sanctification) are but two aspects of one divine reality: the life bestowed in Jesus Christ." [Seinkbeil, in *Justified*, 95-6]
 6. If we abide in Christ, there will be good fruit in our lives.
 7. His life-giving sap will course through us and produce the fruit that is in keeping with faith.
- B. Set in sharp contrast to this is the withered branch that Jesus describes in verse 6.
 1. Such branches are thrown into the fire and burned.

2. Think of your Christmas tree when you pull it out to the curb or brush pile on the day after New Year's.
 3. That tree is bone dry.
 4. There may be a few green needles left on it, but it won't take much to set it ablaze.
 5. This is a picture of what will happen to those who claim to belong to Christ but who are not truly united to him.
 6. Because they have no faith, there is no life in them.
 7. Because there is no life in them, they cannot produce fruit that is pleasing to God.
 8. And because their lives do not produce the fruit of faith, they will not share in the inheritance that is promised to those who are truly united to Christ by faith.
- C. We gain further insight into how we abide in Christ by what he says in verse 7.
1. He says, "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you."
 2. The way we abide in Christ is by having his words abiding in us.
 3. This points us back to verse 3, where Jesus said that we are already clean, already forgiven, because of the word that he has spoken to us.
 4. The same word that justifies us is the word that sanctifies us and makes our lives fruitful.
- D. In the second part of verse 7, we see a connection between prayer and the fruit that we produce as Jesus' disciples.
1. Jesus promises us that he will grant the things that we ask of him.

2. Now, of course, this needs to be understood in context.
 3. Jesus is talking about the prayers of those who abide in the true vine, prayers that are in keeping with our identity as members of this vine.
 4. He is telling us that we can pray for our sanctification and trust that he will answer those prayers.
 5. This is Jesus' promise to you if you believe in him.
 6. He tells you that if you ask him to make your life spiritually fruitful, if you ask him to make you holy, he will answer that prayer.
 7. That is a prayer that you should pray each and every day.
 8. And as you do so, remember that Jesus says in both verse 5 and verse 8 that we will produce "much fruit."
 9. Don't be satisfied with just a little fruit in your life.
 10. Ask the Lord to make you abundantly fruitful.
- E. In the last verse of the passage, Jesus sets forth two reasons why we should want to produce much fruit.
1. First, we should want to be fruitful because the fruit that we produce brings glory to God.
 2. This is your goal and purpose as a Christian -- to glorify God.
 3. Because God is the one who produces good fruit in us, he is the one who is glorified by it.
 4. Second, we should want to be fruitful because our fruitfulness is evidence that we are Jesus' disciples.

5. This is not to say that we should look primarily to our works as the source of our assurance.
6. We should always look primarily to Christ for assurance of our salvation.
7. But the fruit that we produce does bear testimony to the genuineness of our faith.
8. It confirms the fact that we really are connected to the true vine.

V. Conclusion

- A. In these verses, Jesus tells you that if you are a Christian you are already clean.
 1. He tells you that your heavenly Father is going to prune you to make you even more fruitful.
 2. He tells you that you can ask him whatever you will, and it shall be done for you.
- B. Take him at his word on this.
 1. Trust him when he says that you are already clean, that there is no condemnation for you because you are in Christ.
 2. Believe him when he says that the Father's purpose in pruning you is to make you more fruitful.
 3. Ask God to make you a branch that bears much fruit for his glory.
 4. Keep on asking him to make you more and more fruitful.
 5. You have his promise that it will be done.