

JOHN 15:1-11

JESUS, THE GREAT I AM: I AM THE TRUE VINE

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. 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. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. 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. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. 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. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.”¹

Christians are saved to serve. The question could legitimately be asked of each Christian, “What are you doing for Christ’s sake?” The Master saved you that He might be glorified in you. This is made evident during the High Priestly prayer of the Master. Jesus prayed, “I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you. For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them” [JOHN 17:6-10]. Indeed, we may be confident that He will be glorified in His saints and marvelled at among all who have believed at His return [see 2 THESSALONIANS 1:10]. What is important for believers to note is that at His return He will be “glorified *in His saints*”; and even now He is being glorified in all who believe.

This raises the question of how the Saviour is being glorified in believers at this time. According to the Word, God is glorified through *answering the prayer of His people* when they ask according to His will [JOHN 14:13]. Believers glorify the Son of God when they are *united* in heart and soul [ROMANS 15:6]. When our actions *reflect the righteousness of God*, we glorify Him [1 CORINTHIANS 6:20]. God is glorified through *generosity toward His people* and through *submission to His will* [2 CORINTHIANS 9:13]. Christians glorify God through *conscientious exercise of the gifts He has entrusted* for the building up of His holy people [1 PETER 4:10, 11].

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

In the text before us, we see that the Father is glorified as we “bear much fruit.” Whenever you have heard a message referring to this passage, it is likely that the preacher spoke of the fruit sought as souls saved. To be certain, the fruit resulting from the preached message is transformed lives; however, Jesus makes no mention of winning the lost in the passage before us! I do not want anyone to draw the conclusion that soul winning is optional, that testifying to the grace of God is something that we can do if we feel like it or ignore if it is inconvenient. Witnessing to the grace of God is expected behaviour from each believer. Candidly, you are testifying in one way or another by how you live, what you tolerate and how you speak. According to this text, however, Christ the Master says that the Father is glorified as His people abide in Him, asking and receiving according to His will. Vitally connected to Christ the Lord, we will of necessity bear fruit. After all, He is “the True Vine.”

LOOKING FOR FRUIT — “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. 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... 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.”

Producing fruit is the emphasis of the text. However, it is distressingly easy for us to overlook a vital truth—bearing fruit is *the* identifying mark of a true believer! It is fair to say that if an individual is not bearing fruit, he has no vital relationship to the True Vine. What an individual claims is of small moment; bearing fruit is expected of the connected life.

Understanding Jesus’ words demands that we attempt to grasp what the disciples heard when the Master spoke. Indeed, the Master presents emphatically Himself as “the True Vine.” Clearly, He anticipated that the disciples would be thinking of some particular vine, and He wanted to stress that the vine they envisioned was not “the True Vine.” The imagery of the vine was deliberately chosen to shake up the disciples.

The vine is one of the most prominent images used of Israel in the Old Testament. Israel is frequently portrayed as God’s choice vine or as God’s vineyard. One prominent prophecy has Isaiah speaking for God and saying of Israel:

“Let me sing for my beloved
my love song concerning his vineyard:
My beloved had a vineyard
on a very fertile hill.
He dug it and cleared it of stones,
and planted it with choice vines;
he built a watchtower in the midst of it,
and hewed out a wine vat in it;
and he looked for it to yield grapes,
but it yielded wild grapes.

“For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts
is the house of Israel,
and the men of Judah
are his pleasant planting!”

[ISAIAH 5:1, 2, 7]

Likewise, Jeremiah compares Israel to a choice vine of pure seed.

“I planted you a choice vine,
wholly of pure seed.”

[JEREMIAH 2:21a]

Ezekiel, also, compares Israel to a vine in **EZEKIEL 15:1-8**, and again, when he writes:

“Your mother was like a vine in a vineyard
planted by the water,
fruitful and full of branches
by reason of abundant water.”

[EZEKIEL 19:10]

The comparison of Israel to a vine is a theme also found in the Psalms:

“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.
The mountains were covered with its shade,
the mighty cedars with its branches.”

[PSALM 80:8-10]

This same theme is witnessed in Hosea’s prophecy:

“Israel is a luxuriant vine
that yields its fruit.
The more his fruit increased,
the more altars he built;
as his country improved,
he improved his pillars.”

[HOSEA 10:1]

I have pursued this line of reasoning to emphasise the point that the disciples would have been trained from earliest childhood to believe that Israel is the vine—because they were Jewish they were God’s delight. Suddenly, here is the Master saying, “I am the True Vine”; all other vines are, by implication, imperfect. The Master is not saying that He is the true vine and every other vine is false; rather, He is saying that He is “the one perfect, essential and enduring vine before which all other vines are but shadows.”² With this statement He challenged every assumption the disciples could ever have held concerning their position before the Living God!

Almost unconsciously the disciples were relying upon their citizenship in Israel—their adherence to Jewish religious tenets—as the means of pleasing God. Their native, and naïve, assumption was not dissimilar from that held by far too many evangelical Christians who rely upon membership in a particular church or adherence to a particular doctrinal position to convince themselves that they are pleasing to the Lord. Let me say very plainly that God seeks those who love Him. You can have the right theology and displease the Living God. Alternatively, your theology can be imperfect, but if you have a heart to follow God He will bring your theology into line with divine truth.

Jesus speaks of abiding in His love, drawing a strict connection between obedience to His commandments and abiding in His love. The fruit that is sought grows out of abiding in His love and through obedience to His commandments. Moreover, the fruit that is sought is related to glorifying Him through receiving answers to the multiplied prayers presented.

The relationship between abiding in His love and keeping His commandments should not be surprising. Earlier, the Master said, “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments” [JOHN 14:15]. The way in which we show love for God is through keeping His commandments. This neglected truth is iterated when Jesus says, “Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him” [JOHN 14:21]. Again, the Master taught those who would be disciples, “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him” [JOHN 14:23].

This builds on what is taught under the Old Covenant. Remember that Moses wrote, “And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and statutes of the LORD, which I am commanding you today for your good” [DEUTERONOMY 10:12, 13]?

God is looking for fruit in the life of those who are vitally connected to the True Vine. The fruit obviously is a life that reflects that vital relationship. This is nothing less than the practical application of the command issued in the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus taught, “Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness.” Those who obey this command have the divine promise that all that is necessary for daily life and for effective service in the Master’s cause will be provided [see MATTHEW 6:25-33].

² James Montgomery Boice, **The Gospel of John, Volume 4: Peace in the Storm (John 13-17)**, (Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI 1985, 1999) 1160

PRUNING FOR FRUIT — “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... Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.”

The Father is intimately involved in the life of the believer. The translation I am using, and likely your translation also, says that He takes away, or cuts off, unproductive branches and prunes those branches that are productive. I am not certain that this is the best translation for a very simple reason. Notice that Jesus speaks of “Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit.” Whatever we might say about the work of the Father, we must remember that the focus of Jesus’ words is that He is working on those branches that are *in* Christ Jesus. While some branches may be unfruitful, they are nevertheless in Christ.

It is important to keep two points in view as we consider what is taught in this passage. First, this periscope is an extended metaphor—a mashal.³ As such, it is evident that Jesus is not focused on the matter of salvation, but rather on fruitfulness. Second, because Jesus is employing a mashal to instruct the disciples, we must be cautious not to read too much into what He says. We must be careful to interpret the passage in light of the entirety of the Word. Frequently, preachers try to impose unrealistic concepts onto a parable, and that is often true when commentators address this particular metaphor.

It may be that “takes away” is not the best translation for the underlying Greek term *aíro*. Doctor Boice argues convincingly that the term has four basic meanings: “(1) to lift up or pick up, (2) to lift up figuratively, as in lifting up one’s eyes or voice, (3) to life up with the added thought of lifting up in order to carry away, and (4) to remove.”⁴ Though the majority of translators have chosen the fourth meaning, Boice argues that a more accurate translation would be that the Father lifts up the vine that is drooping or falling out of the sunlight.

This translation would fit with the picture of the Father as the Vinedresser. As the viticulturist, God lifts up the Christian that is unproductive, drawing that one closer to Himself so that he may become productive. Of course, that is precisely what is done with grapes. Unlike vines that bear pumpkins or squash, grapes do not produce well when they string out onto the ground; the vines must be exposed to the sun. Anyone who has observed Okanagan vineyards will verify that this is why the vines are stretched onto an arbour or allowed to twine along wires stretched from pole-to-pole between the plants. It seems best to understand that the Father seeks to create true devotion in the believer by lifting him or her up.

The vines develop suckers—non-productive shoots that drain energy from the vine. These suckers require pruning to ensure that the primary vines are unhindered in producing fruit. One truth that we need to seize upon is that pruning is for our benefit! Let me restate that matter: ***though pruning is undoubtedly painful, pruning is always good for the child of God.***

³ Article, “Mashal,” Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mashal>)

⁴ Boice, op. cit., 1161

The word that is translated "prune" in our text is the Greek term *kathairo*. We derive our English word "catharsis" from this Greek word. The word normally refers to cleansing. The pruning is designed to cleanse the vine of any insects, moss or other foreign materials. Of necessity, cleansing or pruning includes removal of the sucker vines. It should be obvious that in spiritual terms the reference is to the removal of anything that would be detrimental to the production of fruit. It means that in the life of the believer, bad habits are stripped away, priorities are rearranged and values are changed. At times, this pruning may well mean the removal of friends that hinder rather than advance spiritual development.

The order of lifting up and pruning is important. We tend to do it in the reverse, and it never works. When we attempt to remove that which we know to be detrimental without drawing near to God, we simply become hypocritical. We imagine that we are quite godly because we don't smoke and we don't chew and we don't go with the girls that do. However, pride and unholy attitudes are often endemic in our life in this instance. Eliminating unrighteous attitudes and ungodly practises without being filled with Christ leaves a vacuum within. Something other than godliness will inevitably and shortly fill the void we have created.

What should occur in the life of the believer is that they are lifted up Godward so that they may draw nourishment from the Sun of Life. Then, when filled with Christ and producing fruit, they will receive pruning so that they may be more fruitful still. When this happens, we will hardly miss the aspects that are removed. I do not say that the removal will be painless, but we will not pine for what is removed when we are filled with the life of the Master.

I realise that we live in a world in which we who are Christians draw back from suffering. Often, the suffering we experience is in reality pruning by the hand of the Master Vinedresser, a Father who is too wise to make a mistake and too good to needlessly hurt His beloved child. Malcolm Muggeridge has written some startling words that are worthy of consideration.

"Suppose you eliminated suffering, what a dreadful place the world would be. I would almost rather eliminate happiness. The world would be the most ghastly place because everything that corrects the tendency of this unspeakable little creature, man, to feel over-important and over-pleased with himself would disappear. He's bad enough now, but he would be absolutely intolerable if he never suffered."⁵

However, we need to weigh the biblical view of pruning against our desire for comfort. The Psalmist has written:

"Before I was afflicted I went astray,
but now I keep Your Word."

[PSALM 119:67]

⁵ Malcolm Muggeridge, **Jesus Rediscovered** (Collins, Glasgow, UK 1969) 158-9, cited in R. Kent Hughes, **John: That You May Believe** (Crossway Books, Wheaton, IL 1999) 354

He also wrote:

"It is good for me that I was afflicted,
that I might learn your statutes."

[PSALM 119:71]

It seems important to note that the cleansing we experience, the pruning that each of us will undergo if we are to be productive as the Master wishes, is dependent upon the Word of God. Until we are cleansed by the Word of God, all our ideas of purity are born of our own impure hearts. Our ideas of purity must grow out of God's Word and not from our own ideas. David asked,

"How can a young man keep his way pure?
By guarding it according to your Word."

[PSALM 119:9]

"Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her, that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the Word" [EPHESIANS 5:25, 26]. Indeed, the Master can say, "Already you are clean because of the Word that I have spoken to you" [JOHN 15:3].

The fire is hot, and we shrink from the thought of entering the forge. Why else is it necessary for Peter to encourage us? "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ" [1 PETER 1:3-7].

Take note of one other aspect of the Father's pruning. God's hand is never closer than when He prunes the vine. During those times when it seems we are receiving the deepest cut, we may imagine that God has forsaken us. However, that is precisely the time that He is closest. Pruning may be painful, but it is never harmful. When the Gardener prunes well, He will leave little more than the vine. Just so, when we are pruned, the more of Christ there will be in us.

PRODUCING FRUIT — "Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. 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. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned."

Permit me to stress a point that has been presented previously, but which is essential for our understanding of the message. Jesus looks for the fruit that reflects His life reproduced in us. If the inward grace of His Holy Spirit is not present in our lives (“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” [see GALATIANS 5:22, 23]), we must face the fact that we are not true believers. I do not say that these graces are perfected in our lives—they are not! However, I do say that they must be present and evident in the life of the child of God. There must be something of the True Vine present in us if we are vitally connected to Him. There must be Christlikeness, or we are not truly related to the True Vine. This is a tougher test than any outward fruit that may be sought, such as souls saved, moneys given, external demonstrations said to be of the Spirit or sermons preached! It is possible to have the outward signs without having the life of Christ within. However, when the inward graces of the Spirit are present, in time the outward fruit will be produced and it will be in evidence in our life!

In order to explore this business of producing fruit somewhat farther, look again at the fifth verse of the text. Jesus says, “Apart from Me you can do nothing.” Actually, we can do many things apart from Christ. We can earn a living, raise a family, entertain ourselves into oblivion, and we can even be generous. It is quite evident that people do all these things and do not abide in Christ. It is even possible to preach or to pastor a church without abiding in Christ. Surely, we recognise that there are many people who bear the title “Reverend,” who do not abide in Christ. People often counsel others without abiding in Him. The evidence is seen in countless situations in our world where individuals act on their own desires, encouraged and abetted by the counsel of others who did not resort to Christ or His Word.

What the Master meant was that it is impossible to bear spiritual fruit outside of Him. We may hang fruit on a tree, but the fruit is artificial—the tree cannot produce more fruit once the ersatz fruit is picked. The fruit of His character cannot be fabricated from a life that is unrelated to Him or disconnected from Him. There will be no lasting righteousness, no godliness, no reproduction of the life of the Master in one who does not abide in Him.

We are facile when citing the words of ROMANS 8:28-30; but do we believe what is taught? “We know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.” God’s work in our lives has purpose, and that purpose must culminate in us being conformed to the image of His Son!

ENJOYING THE FRUIT — “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. 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.”

This is a wonderful promise: "Ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you." This promise grows out of the fruitful life of one who abides in Christ the Master. We have already seen that the fruitful life is one which exhibits the fruit of the Spirit as the fruitful Christian becomes more Christlike, reflecting righteous attitudes and actions. I previously noted that a fruit bearing Christian is obedient to the will of the Master. It is necessary to say that an obedient Christian is not slavishly adhering to a set of quaint doctrines; she is seeking to discover the mind of the Master so that she can do what He wills. This obedience flows from the love the Saviour has for us, and in turn grows out of the love we have for Him.

This raises the point that the fruitful Christian is one who knows and enjoys the love of God. This love is not merely theoretical; it is practical. It is not merely an emotion; it is active. Jesus said, "As the Father has loved Me, so have I loved you. Abide in My love" [JOHN 15:9]. When we know the love of Christ in intimate fashion, we will love the brotherhood of believers. This will not be a love that is exercised when it is convenient or when we feel like it; the love of Christ the Lord will lead us to embrace the truth that declares, "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends" [JOHN 15:13].

The Master speaks, finally, of the mark of joy in the life of the fruitful believer. He said, "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full" [JOHN 15:11]. The joy flows out of the intense desire within the child of God to do the will of the Master. The joy of the Master becomes the joy of the disciple. We read of Jesus, "Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the Founder and Perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God" [HEBREWS 12:1, 2]. Isn't that a strange phrase: "who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross?" Where did Jesus get such joy? He found that joy in the intense desire to do the will of the Father. Just so, when we are consumed with intense desire to do the will of the Master we will discover real joy!

The Psalmist speaks of just such desire and subsequent joy when he writes:

"I have set the LORD always before me;
because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken.
Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices;
my flesh also dwells secure."

[PSALM 16:8, 9]

When we have such fruit in our lives, we will see the fulfilment of Christ's promise concerning prayer. There is a grave danger whenever we speak of prayer. Subtly, almost imperceptibly, we tend to fall into a trap that leads us to believe that if we apply the right formulae we will obtain what we want. Notice, however, that the promised answer is for those whose lives are saturated with the presence of the Risen Son of God! If the child of God is thoroughly immersed in Christ's love, he seeks what Christ desires and not his own gratification.

Though there may be good reason why prayers go unanswered, one great reason for these unfulfilled requests is that we become so focused on gratifying our desires that we fail to seek God's glory. Certainly, the point is addressed, though tangentially, when Jesus set the condition for answered prayer as abiding in Him. However, it was only moments before He spoke the words recorded in our text that the Master had promised, "Whatever you ask in My Name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son" [JOHN 14:13]. The condition is to ask in Jesus' Name—seeking His will rather than our desire, desiring that the Father should be glorified in the Son rather than exalting ourselves.

James is quite pointed when addressing this matter. "What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions" [JAMES 4:1-3].

Jesus is the True Vine. That is not a mere title; it is the divine declaration of the joy that is the heritage of each child of God. And that includes you, if you have been born from above. If you have never been born from above, let this be the day that you enter into the joy of the Master. Though it is possible that you are religious, you are not alive in Him if you have not been born from above. To receive the life promised in Christ Jesus, you must embrace the message of life—the message that confesses your need for a Saviour and receives the sacrifice that the Son of God has offered in your place.

Jesus died because of your sin and rose to life in order to declare you right before the Father. Therefore, the Word of God calls each person to life through faith in this Risen, Living Son of God. The Word of God calls in richest terms when it invites even you, saying, "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved." As you well know, the passage concludes by inviting you to life, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" [ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13].

I pray you are vitally grafted into the True Vine; and I pray that you become a fruitful Christian. Amen.