

Gospel of John Study

Session 29

In our last session, Jesus continued His farewell address to His faithful disciples. He was attempting to comfort them about His departure but they were confused and anxious about what the future held for them and how the One they knew to be the Messiah would die. Jesus let them know that in time they would follow Him to heaven but in the meantime the Father was going to send the Holy Spirit to be with them. This would actually be a benefit for them.

Now in this session, Jesus is going to continue His farewell address as the disciples left the upper room after the Last Supper and are now en route to the Garden of Gethsemane. While chapter 15, as a whole, will show Jesus to discuss three relationships His disciples will have to navigate after He leaves, we are only going to deal with the first one in this session. We will look at the disciples' relationship to Jesus, the post-resurrection Jesus and how their relationship with Him will be essential for their on-going kingdom mission. On another level, this chapter, also deals with development of the church and its role in displaying the new covenant to the world.

1. The disciples' relationship to Jesus

Jesus used the metaphor of a vine to describe the relationship that believers were going to have with Him after He left and the Holy Spirit came. Remember that this discourse was being given by Jesus as He was leading His disciples from the upper room, where they partook of the Last Supper, to the Garden where Jesus would be arrested. As the band traveled across the Kidron Valley to the Mount of Olives, the disciples would have seen the golden vine, the national symbol of Israel, on the Temple in gold. As light hit this golden vine, it would have been like a beacon announcing that Israel was the vine of God. The Lord frequently used the metaphor of a vine to describe His people, Israel, in the Old Testament but it was not used in favorable light.

[Psalm 80:8-9]

This sounds promising. The Lord took Israel and planted her in the Promised Land. He cleared out choice space for this vine to grow and it was to take over the entire land and be fruitful. However, that's not what happened.

[Psalm 80: 1-19]

Looking at the entire picture of this psalm, we see that it is a prayer begging God to turn His anger away from them and protect and bless them once again.

Q: In v.18 what does the psalmist imply is the reason for God's anger against Israel? (*They turned their backs on God.*)

[Isaiah 5:1-7]

Q: Who is the vine in this parable? (v.7 - Israel)

Q: What blessings and advantages did God give His choicest vine? (vv. 1-2 - *He planted it on a fertile hill, built a wall around it, put a tower in its midst, built a wine press in it*)

Q: What did the Lord expect from this choicest of vines? (v.2 - *good grapes*)

Q: What type of grapes did the vine produce? (v.2 - *worthless ones*)

Q: What was God's response to discovery that this vine growing only worthless grapes? (vv. 5-6 - *He was going to remove it's wall, allow briars to grow in the vineyard, the ground will be trampled, God will lay it waste and not prune or hoe the ground any further, He would not allow it to rain upon that ground any longer*)

Q: When you consider these two illustrations of God comparing Israel to a vine, what do they have in common? (*They both show God as loving and gracious and setting up His people to thrive. Yet they also both show God's people turning their backs upon their gracious God and bearing worthless, bad fruit due to their unfaithfulness.*)

This is common in the Old Testament. The vine parable is used to show God as faithful yet His people as unfaithful, even though He blessed them in advance with everything the needed to bear good fruit for Him. That's the vine under the old covenant. Remember, this metaphor is part of Jesus' farewell address to His disciples. He is preparing them for what will be their ministry after He leaves to return to heaven. So the big questions pertain to how this section relates to the Christian life and ministry when the Holy Spirit is present.

[John 15:1-6]

This represents a seismic shift in the use of the vine metaphor in Scripture. The disciples would have been quite familiar with the Old Testament passages that referred to Israel as a vine and how they pointed to Israel's unfaithfulness. However, as we'll see Jesus has replaced the image of Israel with Himself and that makes all the difference in the world.

Q: Who is the vine in this metaphor? (v.1 - *Jesus*)

Q: Who is the gardener or vine-dresser or farmer in this metaphor? (v.1 - *The Heavenly Father*)

There are parables in the New Testament concerning vines and vineyards that Jesus gave in the other gospels. They all have two things in common: 1) They contain a narrative plot. There is a story line that progresses, 2) The vineyard or the people connected to the vineyard represent Israel or at least part of Israel. However, John's use of the metaphor here is unique in the New Testament. It does not contain a plot but merely gives the state of being and Jesus is the true vine, not Israel.

Q: What adjective does Jesus use to describe Himself as the vine? (v.1 - *true. Jesus is the*

genuine, faithful and only vine that is tended by the Father. He contrasts Himself against the faithless Israel of the Old Testament. This lets us know that Jesus is the genuine stock.)

This is important to know as no fruit can be better than the vine that produces it.

This is the last of the “I AM” statements of Jesus in the book of John. As we peel back the meaning of this metaphor, we will see that Jesus is showing just how vital He is to the Christian life and ministry. What is important to know is that Jesus is replacing the storyline of the Old Testament/Old Covenant vine of Israel with it’s New Testament/New Covenant fulfillment. Whenever the vine was mentioned in the Old Testament the message always focused on the vine’s failure to produce good fruit and that it ended with judgment. But now there is a new message from Jesus. Jesus always bears good fruit. Think of this: in the book of John we have already seen Jesus supercede the Temple, the Jewish feasts, Moses, and now He supercedes Israel as the center of God’s people. Remember that John wrote John to Jews who were of the dispersion primarily. Due to Jesus calling Himself the “true vine”, if a Jew wishes to be part of God’s chosen vine, they must be rightly related to Jesus in order to be rightly related to God the Father. They cannot put their hopes in their ethnicity alone any longer.

Q: Who are the branches of the true vine in this metaphor? (*v.5 - the disciples of Jesus*)

Q: What makes a disciple fruitful according to this metaphor? (*vv. 4-5 - to abide in the vine, in Jesus*)

Thus the center of life for the believer is not based upon one’s ethnic identity but rather it is based upon one’s relationship with Jesus Christ.

Q: What happens to the branch that does not bear fruit? (*v.2 - The Father takes it away - takes away from the vine.*)

It is the Father who gets rid of the dead wood so that the living, fruit-bearing branches may have more of the life of the vine for more growth and fruit.

Look at the phrase “in Me” in v.2. Here there is always a temptation by those who don’t believe in eternal security to press this metaphor beyond what it is truly saying to make it say, “*See there! Jesus is saying that a person can lose their salvation!*” (As they jump and squeal with delight.) However, that is certainly an abuse of this metaphor that pushes the meaning beyond what Jesus was actually saying in this passage. What Jesus is saying is that there are no true Christians without some measure of fruit being produced in their lives. Fruitfulness is the infallible mark of a believer. If there is no fruit, then one is purely dead wood. Already in this study of the book of John we have witnessed the difference between superficial faith (John 5 & 6) as opposed to genuine saving faith (John 4 & 9). The superficial faith here is seen as dead wood.

[Romans 8:3-11]

Q: What does this passage teach us about who is a genuine Christian? (*v.9 - Those who have the Holy Spirit dwelling in them belong to God.*)

So we can see that the Holy Spirit is the life-giving sap and vitality of the true vine. The vine then gives this sap, the Spirit, to true believers, who then as a result of having the Spirit within them, bear spiritual fruit for God. Imagine a person who is associated with a church yet their lives never testify to the grace of God transforming his life. The believer is going to be known for his fruitfulness is some capacity at some point in his life. (An important side note here, we are not the vine-dresser and so we are not in a position to make the judgment call as to which branches bear fruit and which do not.)

Q: What happens to the branch that does bear fruit? (*v.2 - God prunes it.*)

Q: Why does God prune the fruit-bearing branches? (*v.2 - So that they will bear more fruit*)

Q: What percentage of the fruitful branches get pruned? (*v.2 - Every - 100%*)

So we see that the Father's purpose is a loving purpose though it may not be pleasant to be pruned.

[Hebrews 12: 4-11]

Q: From this metaphor of the vine, what can we see as a reason for divine discipline? (*To bear more fruit for the Father*)

Nestled in this metaphor about Jesus' disciples and their relationship to Him being the vital relationship of their lives, we get a nugget about one of the purposes of suffering for the Christian. It is so that we become more fruitful. When a person experiences a hardship and remains with the Lord through it, that person will grow to understand how to comfort others through similar hardships, thus bearing fruit for the kingdom. The hope is that if you see purpose in your suffering (that God is lovingly working in your life to make you more fruitful), you will be able to endure it with patience and faith in Christ.

[II Corinthians 1: 3-7]

It is actually worse for a branch to be left unpruned for the vine than dead wood in one sense. Dead wood no longer consumes the sap from the vine while the unpruned branch still consumes the sap yet uses it for purposes other than bearing fruit - it uses it to grow and become rambling and unproductive.

In v.3 the word "clean" is the same word Jesus used during footwashing in chapter 13 to describe the result of one who had washed.

Q: According to v.3, what makes a branch "clean"? (*The word Jesus spoke to them*)

This verse shows us that believers start off their new lives “clean” and fruitful. The power of Jesus’ words are what makes believers clean in the first place and thus faithful to God from the heart. The words of Jesus should be seen as the complete teaching of Jesus in its entirety - His words and His deeds as He is the incarnate Word of God (John 1:1, 14). His words, due to their very power of being His life, have taken hold in the life of a believer already. This cleansing here allows the branch to recognize and condemn sin, illuminate and inspire holiness, and promote growth that promotes fruit. It is important to understand that Jesus says that a living, fruitful branch is already clean and ready to bear fruit. They are devoted to the vine and thus have His life flowing through them from the onset. (In other words, the Spirit is not a later addition to the life of a believer but the essential element that defines a person as a believer.)

Q: What is the only way a branch will bear fruit? (*v.4-5 - by abiding in the vine*)

The word “abide” means to stay or remain in a certain place. It often is used to mean to dwell with someone or share a tent with someone long term. It can also mean to be present, to endure or to continue with another person. Jesus’ use of the term here is clear. For a believer to be fruitful, the believer must abide, remain, continue, dwell, or stay with Christ. So fruit production demands constant union with the vine itself. We are utterly dependent upon Christ for our life and fruitfulness. The living vine is truly “in” the branch just as the branch is truly “in” the vine. The fruit being born is part of this mutual being “in” each other. It is the branches continuous reliance upon the vine that produces life. It is essential for the continual life giving flow from the vine to be present in the branches so that the life of Christ is produced. If a supposed Christian or church merely mimics Christian conduct or Christian witness but is not impelled by the life within, this brings forth dead wood instead of living fruit. External conformity and ritualistic living (or attempting to live by the Law) achieve nothing in terms of spiritual life. The key is to abide in the vine, who is Christ.

[Jeremiah 31:31-34]

This is a prophecy concerning the New Covenant which was still to come when Jeremiah received this word from the Lord.

Q: In this new covenant, where will God put His Law? (*v.33 - within their hearts*)

[Ezekiel 36:24-28]

Q: Where will God put His Spirit in this new covenant? (*v.36 - in His people*)

A major facet of the new covenant is the shift from external conformity and obligation to internal power and devotion. The Spirit goes from being external to the person to being internal to the person who believes. These new covenant promises detail new hearts, new minds, and constant presence of the Holy Spirit in the believer’s life. God maintains these people’s lives through His daily (moment by moment) movement in their lives. Listen to the internal changes mentioned in these new covenant passages. These are not externally driven changes though they do affect external and outward behavior. Remember, it only takes a mustard seed sized amount

of faith in order to see these changes in one's life.

[Romans 6:12-14]

[Romans 12:1-2]

[I John 2:4-6] - notice the use of the "in" phrases again in this passage.

Q: What is the inevitable outcome for the believer who abides in Christ? (*v.5 - bears much fruit - as the life of Christ permeates the believer, fruit is inevitable*)

V.5 which is probably the most quoted verse from this passage is actually a summary of vv. 1-4. The "nothing" Jesus mentions in this verse means one can do nothing of consequence in the kingdom of God, cannot do God's will, without abiding in Christ. This entire section is a metaphor describing life in the new covenant. God dwelling in His highest creation always was His desire and highest purpose for our lives. It replaces completely and makes obsolete the old covenant. This is the life God enjoys and that He has created for us to enjoy (as we'll see in the next session.)

V. 6 shares with us the danger of failing to maintain a vital union with Christ. Uselessness leads to rejection. The definite article is in v.6 speaking of the branch so that literally it should be read, "... *he is thrown away as THE branch and dries up...*" This refers to a person who didn't abide from the beginning. Judas Iscariot would be a type of person suffering this fate as he possessed only superficial faith in Christ. However, this word on judgment is a side note. The main thrust of Jesus is that fruitfulness is the normal Christian life. A fruitless life is an positive indictment that the person is not a believer. The words "thrown away" and "wither" are in the aorist tense with the emphasis on the action completed in the past with the results ongoing. Thus we see the finality of the judgment upon a dead branch. Either one remains in the vine and bears much fruit or one is thrown away and burned for being dead wood.

[John 15:7-8]

V.7 explains how this connection to the vine is maintained.

Q: What spiritual activity does v.7 describe? (*prayer*)

To remain in Christ is to allow His words to remain in oneself. This then signals a conscious acceptance of the lordship and authority of Jesus' words and constant union with Him through prayer. Jesus' words are so lodged in the life of the believer so that obedience is the most natural thing to do and asking for God's will becomes part of our new nature. Thus, the prayer is based upon a need that is in Jesus' heart that He has placed upon the heart of the believer (through the activity of the indwelling Spirit). It is important to realize that the mutual indwelling of the believer in Christ and Christ in the believer cannot be reduced to mere obedience. It is a sharing of Christ's life and all that goes with it. A truly obedient disciple finds his prayer life effective since all he asks conforms to the will of God. His heart and mind have

been transformed by the union between himself and Christ that makes obedience the natural life, not the forced or obligated life.

[John 14:13-14]

The disciple's relationship with Jesus will be one of prayer spurred on by the Holy Spirit. As long as the request is seeking to accomplish God's will, the request will be answered by God (in some form). It is critical to understand that Jesus is not promising to grant the believer's every whim but rather only answer positively those requests brought about by the vital union between the branch and the vine.

Q: What happens when a branch bears fruit? *(v.8 - the Father is glorified)*

Q: How does bearing fruit prove a person to be a disciple of Christ? *(The act of bearing fruit shows that a person is rightly related to Christ and thus is constantly receiving His life. The person bearing fruit must be vitally attached to Christ for the fruit to be produced - thus it proves they belong to Christ. People who are not properly connected to the life of Christ cannot bear fruit.)*

Just as Jesus glorified the Father through His life, so the disciples now glorify the Father through their lives in Christ. Our fruitfulness is how the Son now glorifies the Father. "That you bear much fruit" explains the phrase "This is to My Father's glory". Jesus refuses His disciples to walk away from this conversation and think that they can produce fruit through any means other than faithful, continual union with Christ. Thus fruitlessness not only brings the threat of fire but also robs God of His rightful glory. This passage is meant to encourage the disciples (and us) as it shows that if you bear fruit then you are rightly related to the true vine, Christ.

Now we are in a position to answer the question as to the nature of this fruit Jesus is talking about in this metaphor.

Q: What is the meaning of the fruit in this metaphor? *(v.7 - fruit is the result of prayer in Jesus' name or prayer borne out of our devoted union to Christ that brings the Father glory (v.8).)*

The fruit of this vine represented everything that is the product of effective prayer led by the Spirit. This includes but is certainly not limited to: obedience to God and His commands, experiencing the joy of the Lord, love for others, healthy and effective witness of Christ to the world, seeking justice for the oppressed, seeking to give comfort and mercy to those who are disadvantaged, etc. It is anything done through the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit such as using a spiritual gift or displaying the fruit of the Spirit in some situation. In short, anything that is God's will being done in the world is the fruit Jesus is speaking of here. Fruit is the outcome of persevering dependence upon the vine driven by faith in Christ which embraces all the believer's life and witness. Fruit-bearing is so bound up in Christian discipleship that discipleship can act as an effective definition for fruit-bearing.

[Matthew 28:18-20]

Making disciples is the imperative of the Great Commission. As we are going, teaching and baptizing - MAKE DISCIPLES. Making disciples takes the Holy Spirit working, bearing fruit, in the entire body of Christ for disciples to be made. It is a spiritual process not a mechanical one and it is one that every believer will be doing when they are rightly related to the vine. The reason Jesus inserted this metaphor into His farewell discourse is because He wanted to show the disciples what our relationship to Him would look like in the new covenant: lives that bear fruit and make disciples as an outgrowth of who we truly are in Christ, as we abide in Him.

Q: Do you have any questions, comments, rebukes, or rebuttals?