

## 30. Jesus The True Vine

John 15:1-17  
The Gospel According to John

We are continuing from our last study, 29: The Promise of the Holy Spirit. Judas had already left the upper room, and the eleven disciples were reclining around a low table and eating the Passover supper. The Lord was sharing heart-to-heart with them, preparing them for what would happen in the next hours. He gave them words that would encourage them in the dark time ahead. After Jesus had talked to them about the coming of the Holy Spirit, He got up and began to leave (John 14:31). The traditional site of the Upper Room, where Jesus ate His last supper with them, was located in the Upper City to the west of the Temple Mount. To get to the Garden of Gethsemane, they had to walk past the Temple area itself. Like any Rabbi at the time, Jesus continued to talk as they walked.

It is likely that, as they walked, they could see the golden grapevine that hung across the four columns at the entrance to the Temple. Each of the clusters of the grapes was the size of a man.<sup>1</sup> The *Mishnah*, a book embodying the oral tradition of Jewish law, says that people would make a freewill offering to God by purchasing a golden leaf, berry, or cluster, which the priests would then attach to the vine. Jewish people who gave generously to the Temple had their names inscribed on the golden leaves. It is possible that, as they looked at the golden vine of the temple, Jesus continued to share further about the spiritual fruit that God would bring from their lives:

<sup>1</sup>I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. <sup>2</sup>He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. <sup>3</sup>You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup>Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. <sup>5</sup>I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. <sup>6</sup>If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. <sup>7</sup>If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup>This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples (John 15:1-8).

### I Am the True Vine

We come now to John the Apostle's recording of the seventh and final "I Am" statement of Jesus, "I am the true vine" (v. 1). When the Lord brought His people out of Egypt, Moses was given a message for the children of Israel. When the Israelites asked Moses who had sent him, he was to reply with the answer God gave him: "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you'" (Exodus 3:14). The English expression "I Am" is the translation of the Hebrew word *YHVH*, vocalized as "Yahveh" and translated into English as LORD. It was the personal name by which God revealed Himself and occurred over 6,000 times in the Old Testament. The meaning of *YHVH* is not completely clear to biblical scholars, but most scholars believe that the name means, "I am who I am" or "I will be who I will be." The

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<sup>1</sup> Josephus. *Antiquities* 15. 395.

Lord was saying to His disciples and us that He would be everything to us that we need Him to be. The six other “I–Am” statements are, “I am the Bread of Life” (John 6:35), “I am the Light of the World” (John 8:12), “I am the Gate” (John 10:9), “I am the Good Shepherd” (John 10:11), “I am the Resurrection and the Life” (John 11:25), “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life” (John 14:6). This vocalizing of the ‘I Am’ statements by Jesus angered the Pharisees to the point of stoning Him for blasphemy (John 8:58-59). They understood, correctly that Jesus was saying that He is the same *YHVH* that delivered the Jewish people from slavery. Now here in this passage, Jesus is telling them that He is the True Vine. What did He mean? This analogy of Jesus being the Vine is what we will consider in this study. □

The idea of a vine or vineyard was a well-known symbol in the Scriptures of the nation of Israel. We see it used as a common theme, often as an analogy:

<sup>1</sup>I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard: My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. <sup>2</sup>He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well. Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but **it yielded only bad fruit.** <sup>3</sup>Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. <sup>4</sup>What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it? When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad? <sup>5</sup>Now I will tell you what I am going to do to my vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it will be destroyed; I will break down its wall, and it will be trampled. <sup>6</sup>I will make it a wasteland, neither pruned nor cultivated, and briers and thorns will grow there. I will command the clouds not to rain on it. <sup>7</sup>The vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the nation of Israel, and the people of Judah are the vines he delighted in. And **he looked for justice,** but saw bloodshed; **for righteousness,** but heard cries of distress (Isaiah 5:1-7 Emphasis mine).

When inspecting His vineyard, the people of Israel and Judah, for what kind of fruit was God looking? What kind of fruit does He want to produce from our lives?

The Lord was saying through this prophetic word by Isaiah that God is the Gardener and that He had planted His covenant people into the land to bear a strong testimony to His Name. After all His work in supplying them with complete provision for fruitfulness, He looked for a crop of good grapes that were exhibiting justice and righteousness (Isaiah 5:7), but it yielded only bad fruit (Isaiah 5:2).

When Jesus depicted Himself as the True Vine, I believe He was using a visual picture as He often did when teaching. He was contrasting Himself either with the nation of Israel that failed in its fruit-bearing or with the artificial vine hanging on the temple, suggesting that, if the disciples offered themselves to Him to the degree that people offered their substance to this golden symbol, the result would be abundant spiritual fruit.

Jesus had come to establish the prophesied New Covenant: “The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah” (Jeremiah 31:31). He had come to be the source of eternal life and fruit-bearing to all who would come to Him and become one with Him as branches are connected to a life source,

such as the trunk of the vine. He is the True Vine. The time was coming and has now come for both Jews and Gentiles to be grafted into the True Vine. Jesus wanted to show them what true covenant life was and the kind of fruit it would produce. Just as He was “One with the Father” (John 14:20), He knew that the only way the people of God would produce fruit was to have His life in us, flowing through us. The church is not an organization, but an organism, and we are to be organically connected to the life-source: Christ in us, the hope of glory (Colossians 1:27).

### The Father is the Gardener

Imagine you worked as a laborer in a vineyard during the growing season. What would the gardener be doing? How would these thoughts illustrate the work of God in our lives?

Working in a vineyard during the growing season would be hard work. Unlike other fruit and vegetable plants, there was much to do if you wanted to see clusters of grapes at harvest time. Jesus said that the Father was at work in cutting off some branches and yet pruning others (John 15:2). The Greek verb *airō* is translated as “cuts off” by the New International Version, but in the King James Version it is translated as “takes away.” Some people wonder if they can lose their salvation if they are not good enough. Jesus said that the branches to which the Father gives attention are both “in Him.” “He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit” (John 15:2). It is possible that the taking away is a reference to Judas, but Judas never was in Christ. He never became a believer: “Yet there are some of you who do not believe” (John 6:64). The Scriptures say that he was a devil (John 6:70). The branches the Father is training are all believers in Christ. The Greek word *airō* has the primary definition of “to lift from the ground.” Author Charles Swindoll in his commentary, *Swindoll’s New Testament Insights on John*, says:

The Greek verb *airō*, translated by the KJV as “takes away,” has the primary definition of “to lift from the ground,” although the term can and often does mean “to lift with a view to carrying, to carry off or put away.” John uses *airō* in both senses: “to take away” (John 11:39; 11:48; 16:22; 17:15;) and “to lift up” (5:8-12; 8:59). Therefore, a strong case for either definition can be made. I favor the definition “to lift up” for a couple of reasons. First, these two verses introduce the illustration in summary fashion, describing the general care of a vinedresser nurturing a vine. Vinedressers are rarely seen cutting off branches during the growing season. Instead, they carry a bundle of strings and a pair of pruning shears as they work their way down a row. They carefully lift sagging branches and tie them to the trellis—a procedure called “training.” They also strategically snip smaller shoots from branches to maximize their yield of fruit, which is called pruning. Second, a combination of “takes away” and “prunes” places too great an emphasis on cutting the vine when Jesus appears to be highlighting the Father’s care during the growing season. The image of carrying off dead branches is a detail that will appear later as He refines His illustration.<sup>2</sup>

Clusters of grapes lying on the ground can be food to all kinds of insects, and of course, when it rains, the mud will also spoil the fruit. If we agree with Charles Swindoll, this seems to speak of the Father’s care and training of us while we are growing in Christ. These thoughts follow naturally after Jesus tells the disciples of the Helper, the Holy Spirit. He is the One who will

<sup>2</sup> Charles R. Swindoll. *Swindoll’s New Testament Insights, Insights on John*. Published by Zondervan. Page 257.

continue the training and lifting of the clusters of grapes to maximum fruitfulness. There have been many times in my life where I have received the Father's nurturing care amid the troubles that I have experienced. I believe the primary emphasis of this teaching is to illustrate the pruning and the careful cultivation and tending of His people, His Vineyard.

Thinking about this analogy, can you recall a time when God had to pick you up off the ground and restore you to your position so that you could grow?

If you are a believer in Christ, you will be fruitful. As to how much fruit comes from your life is up to the choices and decisions you take through your life. There are levels of fruitfulness according to the sacrificial ways that people live for Christ. Jesus talks about this in the Parable of the Sower:

**Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop--a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown** (Matthew 13:8).

Some are so devoted to the Lord to the degree that they bring forth a crop that is a hundred times what is sown. However, be aware that, if you pray to be fruitful, you will be pruned! If you have ever prayed that God will use you to work in His fields with Him, He will require a more significant commitment and a greater consecration to the work of the Vineyard. I remember reading of the great evangelist, D.L. Moody, who laid down his life for the cause of Christ. He was at a meeting where the preacher spoke these words; "The world has yet to see what God will do with and for and through and in and by the man who is fully and wholly consecrated to Him." The words impacted Moody. "He said 'a man,'" thought Moody; "he did not say a great man, nor a learned man, nor a rich man, nor a wise man, nor an eloquent man, nor a 'smart' man, but simply 'a man.' I am a man, and it lies with the man himself whether he will or will not make that entire and full consecration. I will try my utmost to be that man."<sup>3</sup>

D.L. Moody desired to make a big difference with his life as he gave himself to God in utter consecration and dedication to the work of winning the lost for Christ. We should not speak our words of devotion to Christ lightly because there is usually a cost to such dedication. Moody did experience hardship in his life. His church building burned down in the great Chicago fire of 1871, but it launched him into an evangelistic ministry to many countries. When we commit to discipleship, difficulties will come our way, but great fruit will be the reward if we consecrate ourselves to the work of saving lives for Christ's sake.

**<sup>28</sup>Then Peter spoke up, "We have left everything to follow you!" <sup>29</sup>"Truly I tell you," Jesus replied, "no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel <sup>30</sup>will fail **to receive a hundred times as much** in this present age: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and fields—**along with persecutions**—and in the age to come eternal life (Mark 10:28-30. Emphasis mine).**

There will be a reward for our consecration as we follow Christ; however, be aware that it will mean going through persecutions as foretold by Jesus in the above passage. Just as He promises that, in following Him, we will receive a hundred times as much in this life, He also promises

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<sup>3</sup> *The Life of D.L. Moody*. From the Official Authorized Edition. By his son, William R. Moody. <http://www.ntslibrary.com/PDF%20Books/Life%20of%20Moody.pdf>.

that there will be persecution. We can take comfort in the fact that it will be the Father at work in us, bringing pruning to our lives to bear forth more fruit. When difficulties come, it is a good thing to think about the blessings that God gives to us, especially our friends, and the family to which we belong in the Body of Christ. The Lord allows us to go through difficulties because only such things bring forth the changes necessary to bear the fruit God is seeking. Let's go a little bit further in John's Gospel:

### **What is the Spiritual Fruit that God is Pruning?**

<sup>9</sup>“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. <sup>10</sup>If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. <sup>11</sup>I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. <sup>12</sup>My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. <sup>13</sup>Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. <sup>14</sup>You are my friends if you do what I command. <sup>15</sup>I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. <sup>16</sup>You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. <sup>17</sup>This is my command: Love each other (John 15:9-17).

When Jesus speaks of fruit in verses 5, 8, and 16 of John chapter 15, about what do you think He is talking?

If you are a believer in Christ, there will be fruit in your life. No root, no fruit! If you, at the deepest level of your being, are rooted and grounded in love with the Lord Jesus Christ (Ephesians 3:17), there cannot fail to be fruit from your life. Why? Because the life-giving sap of the Vine, the Lord Jesus Christ, is flowing into your spiritual being, and the eternal Father, the Gardener, is at work in you and through you to produce fruit from your union with Christ.

There are two kinds of fruit that God wants to bring forth from your life. First, there is the fruit of the Spirit:

<sup>22</sup>But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup>gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law (Galatians 5:22-23).

This kind of fruit is what Isaiah the prophet said that God was seeking in His vineyard, the nation of Israel, i.e., the justice and righteousness that springs from the lives of believers in the God of Israel. These are inner qualities God brings forth from our lives as we cooperate with His Spirit. Often, we cannot see Him at work in our circumstances. It is only later when we look back upon our lives, do we see that God was at work in us to bring forth enduring qualities of humility, righteousness, love, joy, peace, etc. It is only then that we realize it was God's pruning knife at work. Gratefulness will be your experience in eternity for the work of the Gardener with His pruning knife.

Secondly, there is the fruit of other lives that we influence for Christ—lives that, because of your work and words and the fruit of the Spirit in your life, are forever changed by your relationship with them.

I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that **I might have a harvest among you**, just as I have had among the other Gentiles (Romans 1:13).

In the years 1991-1998, I had entered into a work of Church planting in England. I had the privilege of seeing lives changed as a result of God at work in the city in which I started planting. Toward the end of that time, there was great hardship as the church went through growing pains. When I look back, I see now that we were going through a time of spiritual warfare. There was a struggle in the church, over which I felt I had little control. I wish I understood then what I know now, but that is part of how God trains us. It seemed like nothing I could do could rectify the problematic situation and restore unity and order. Eventually, after much counsel and advice from our spiritual leaders and friends, I relinquished the leadership position. It was a tough time, and although I could sense the enemy at work in that situation, God was also working. He was at work in my life to bring forth more fruit with His pruning knife. Looking back, if I had stubbornly resisted what the Lord was doing, I probably would not be writing to the degree I am now. God has taken me in a new direction. Written words can influence and train many more than my preaching to a single church alone. Sometimes, we have to trust the pruning knife of the Father. He is the Good Shepherd to all His people, and He is well able to teach us and lead us.

The way the Father works with His pruning knife can seem harsh to us, especially when we are those under His knife. I have found that God will meet our consecration with His faithfulness. If you are willing to labor with Him in the Vineyard, you will partake of the life-giving sap that comes from being a part of the True Vine. You will bear much fruit as a testimony to Jesus. The Lord will transform us from the inside out as we obey Him. Even when we go through trials and tests, we will experience the closeness to the Father that helps us overcome and gives us joy as we walk with Him. The Gardener will change us through various situational tests through which He puts us:

When American Airlines trains their pilots, they first seek to prove them by using a simulator. The simulator is designed to present the pilot with a variety of potential problems so that he will be able to handle any emergency he may be presented with in the future. First, the pilot is tested with simple challenges, which eventually build up to catastrophic situations. The pilots are given more difficult problems only after they have mastered the previous ones. The result is that when the pilots have completed their courses, they are prepared to handle any issues that come their way. This is similar to God's method of working with us. God teaches us how to manage the problems of life but never gives us more than we can handle. He teaches us through each situation so that we can be fully prepared and mature people, ready to handle the challenge in life that come our way.<sup>4</sup>

## Remaining in Christ

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<sup>4</sup> Edited by Michael P. Green. *1500 Illustrations for Biblical Preaching*. Published by Baker Book House, Page 375.

What does the Lord mean when He says again and again through John 15:4-7 about remaining in the Vine?

If you remain in me and **my words remain in you**, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you (John 15:7).

**If you keep my commands**, you will **remain** in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and **remain** in his love (John 15:10).

It is as we develop intimacy with the Lord and learn to listen and obey His Word that abiding or remaining in Christ will allow the life-sap of His life flow through us to bear fruit. Developing intimacy must be intentional, just as it is with any of our relationships. You would not expect to be close to someone by just knowing facts about him or her. Intimacy with another develops as you are sincere and transparent and actively listen to others as they, in turn, can similarly share their hearts with you. Be intentional about spending time with Christ and with those in His Body. Even when people were clamoring for Him, Jesus took time out to be with His Father.

To keep His commandments (v. 10), we need to lay up His words in our hearts. The Lord told His disciples that the Holy Spirit would bring to mind the words He had spoken. We have His spoken Word written down and available to us. The more we meditate on His words, the more we give the Holy Spirit room to illuminate His Word to us.

Do you have regular disciplines and habits you have found helpful in developing intimacy and oneness with Christ? Share any useful and encouraging tips that have enhanced your devotional life. □

Paul the Apostle, wrote: “**Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God**” (Romans 10:17). Develop intimacy with God by listening to the Holy Spirit, Who will speak to our hearts through the Word of God. Three things will help the Holy Spirit to have a more significant influence in your life:

1. Plant the Word of God deep in your heart through reading and meditation. This requires effort on your part.
2. Be open to the Holy Spirit and allow Him to illuminate His Word to you. This illumination is the work of the Holy Spirit. Combine your meditation with prayer.
3. Be obedient to the promptings and impressions that come to you from the Holy Spirit and be obedient to the clear teachings of the Scriptures.

Prayer: Father, our prayer is that the life-sap of the Lord Jesus as the True Vine will flow in us and through us to glorify Your Name. Grant us sensitivity to hear and obey Your voice. Amen! □

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