

STUDY ON THE TEACHING OF JESUS

THE TRUE VINE

Read John 15:1-5

Introduction

John's Gospel is full of rich nuggets of truth that teach us about our Father, Jesus, salvation, eternal life, and the Holy Spirit. This lesson helps us explore the dynamic relationship between a disciple and his Lord.

Jesus' teaching on the vine and the branches isn't like most of the parables in the Synoptic Gospels, which are usually stories with one or more spiritual points. Here, as in Jesus' discourse on the Good Shepherd (10:1-18), we see an extended metaphor. Jesus draws our attention to a fruitful vine and then provides two primary applications for us to learn from -- pruning the branches and abiding in the vine. These 17 verses are not long but contain some of the most important and beloved passages in the Bible about the disciple's love relationship with Jesus.

I Am the Vine (15:1-3)

The vineyard is often used to identify Israel herself, referred to by the prophets as "my vineyard" (Isaiah 3:14). In the Song of the Vineyard (Isaiah 5:1-7), the vineyard is the "house of Israel" that yields only the bad fruit of injustice and oppression. But in Day of the Messiah, this vineyard will flourish:

"In that day sing to her, "A vineyard of red wine! I, the Lord, keep it, I water it every moment; lest any hurt it, I keep it night and day." (Isaiah 27:2-3)

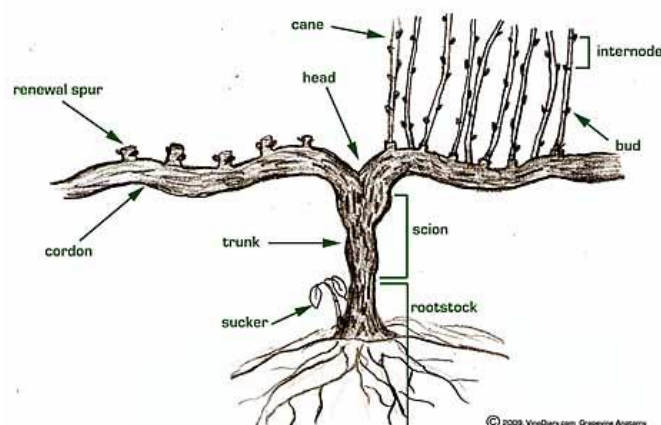
The Psalms, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Hosea, and Micah all use the figure of Israel as the Lord's vineyard. Jesus himself carried on this identification of Israel as God's vineyard in his Parable of the Wicked Vinedressers (Matthew 21:33-44; Mark 12:1-12; Luke 20:9-19) and Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16).

So, for Jesus to say, "I am the True Vine" (in the seventh and last of Jesus' "I AM" sayings"), we see an announcement that, as the Messiah, He now becomes the true Israel, the true focal point or representation for God's people. When you think about it, it is an astounding revelation!

"I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser." (15:1)

The nation is epitomised in the nation's true King, Jesus. Relationship with Jesus defines the true Jews...

If Jesus is the True Vine, then His Father is the Vinedresser, the One who tenderly cares for the Vine, cutting and pruning so that it produces the maximum amount of fruit possible.



A grapevine consists of the woody trunk with one or more cordons, woody extensions of the trunk that remain from year to year. Together, the trunk and cordons are what Jesus refers to as the "vine." The fruitfulness comes from the canes, shoots, or spurs that grow from these woody cordons. These canes, shoots, or spurs Jesus is calling the "branches." The fruit forms from buds on the new canes. The old canes do not produce again.

Pruning takes experience and skill. After the harvest, winter comes when the leaves fall off and the vine goes dormant. During this time, before the new buds of spring, the pruning takes place. Our text discusses two operations -- (1) removing unfruitful branches, and (2) pruning the fruitful ones.

The vinedresser looks for any shoots that didn't bear fruit the previous season, due to disease or damage of one kind or another. These he cuts off entirely so that the energy of the plant is not wasted on unfruitful or diseased branches but can go into branches that do bear fruit.

The fruitful branches are pruned back to the first two nodes on the old shoot to form new canes for next year's growth. Without pruning, the fruit for the new season will be dramatically diminished, and the vine will begin to grow wild, producing some grapes, but making it hard for the plant to get enough light and making it difficult to harvest what few grapes are produced. Pruning shocks the plant, to be sure, but in the hands of a skilful vinedresser, the vine remains healthy and produces maximum fruit year after year.

What does *"every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away (15:2a)"* refer to? Since Jesus the True Vine represents true Israel, the Father is pruning off those who rebel against the Messiah. We see this expressed in the Parable of the Wicked Vinedressers who refused to pay rent to the owner of the vineyard. Jesus concludes the parable with the words:

"Therefore, I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it." (Matthew 21:43)

After getting rid of the dead wood, the vinedresser gets down to the exacting work of pruning each shoot or branch. The purposes of pruning are to:

- Stimulate growth,
- Allow the vinedresser to shape the vine,
- Produce maximum yield without breaking the branches with too many clusters for them to bear,
- Protect against mildew,
- Produce better quality wine, with more highly concentrated and flavourful grapes.

Of course, the Father does pruning in our lives, too, so that you and I will become healthy and bear much spiritual fruit. We can trust the Vinedresser and must be obedient, if we want his skill to make us whole and fruitful.

Churches, too, need pruning. How many activities are continued because "we've always done that," long past the time when they are effective in advancing the Kingdom? Sometimes people need to be removed from leadership and others moved into leadership. Pruning is needed. Some churches experience a painful time when a number of members leave over some issue. But when this loss is surrendered to God and forgiveness is sought, this "pruning" can become the impetus for new growth. Trust the Vinedresser and be obedient. Don't prune rashly but seek his season and his way.

"... every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you." (vv2-3)

The words “prunes” and “clean” come from the same root word “katharizō” which means "to clean, cleanse," can also be translated "prune" (NIV, NRSV, ESV), "purge" (KJV). Jesus is speaking to his disciples. The effect of obedience and "holding to" Jesus' teaching is freedom from the slavery to sin, and separation from evil (8:31-34). God's Word, when received, has a washing, cleansing, pruning, faith-producing effect on us:

“... Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish.” (Ephesians 5:25b-27)

Remaining, Abiding in the Vine (15:4-5)

"Remain" (NIV), "abide" (NRSV, ESV, KJV) is *menō*, "remain, stay." It can be used of a location, "stay," often in the special sense of "to live, dwell, lodge." Here, it is in the transferred sense of someone who does not leave a certain realm or sphere: "remain, continue, abide." Those who abide in Jesus' word don't give up under persecution or allow their fruitfulness to be choked by the "weeds" of worldly pressures (to use the vocabulary of Jesus' Parable of the Sower, Matthew 13:1-8, 18-23). Rather they produce a harvest of 30-fold, 60-fold, or 100-fold. Jesus taught that believers should continue in the faith (Matthew 24:13; Mark 13:3; Luke 8:15). The Apostle Paul also taught that salvation is contingent upon believers continuing or persevering in their faith:

“And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight—if indeed you continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel which you heard, which was preached to every creature under heaven, of which I, Paul, became a minister.” (Colossians 1:21-23)

What, then does "abiding" entail? We're not talking about belief as intellectual assent, but belief as embracing, clinging to, and continuing to receive spiritual sustenance from. As can be seen in John (14:15, 21-25) and see later in this chapter (15:9-10), discipleship also involves obedience as an expression of our love for him.

In the face of the clear teaching of John 15, some Christians have an extremely sloppy understanding of the doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints, asserting that saving faith need not be an enduring faith, one that perseveres. Meanwhile, it is evident that saving faith must progress to enduring faith on the journey of salvation.

Mutual Indwelling (15:5b)

Abiding also involves a person who

***"... He who abides in Me, and I in him."** (15:5b)*

This phrase intrigues me, since Jesus also speaks about his relationship with the Father the same way in a number of places in John's Gospel:

*"Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood **abides** (*menō*) **in me, and I in him.**" (6:56)*

*"but if I do, though you do not believe Me, believe the works, that you may know and believe that the **Father is in Me, and I in Him.**" (10:38)*

***"Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me? The words that I speak to you I do not speak on My own authority; but the Father who dwells in Me does the works."** (14:10)*

"At that day you will know that **I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you.**" (14:20)

"Jesus answered and said to him, "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.**" (14:23)

"... that they all may be one, **as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me... I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one...**" (17:21-23)

"... that the love with **which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them.**" (17:26)

This mutual indwelling is part of the Father's relationship with the Son. The Father and Son are the exemplars of what our relationship is to be with Jesus -- constant living together, sharing a deepening relationship of love and (on our part) obedience.

What are we to make of this? What are we to do about it? Let's not take for granted that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit live within us -- and we in them. This is your opportunity and mine to really get to know God intimately, to become his Friend. We talk about a "personal relationship with Jesus Christ." What can you and I do to develop this relationship in a personal, on-going manner? To know God! To abide in Him!