

“I Am the True Vine”

The Forty-Seventh in a Series of Sermons on the Gospel of John

Texts: John 15:1-17; Isaiah 5:1-7

Their time together is apparently over. Jesus has ended the Passover celebration, he has revealed to his disciples that he is leaving them, and he has told them that he will send the “Helper” to be with them after he departs. Then he pronounced his word of “peace” upon the disciples. But the disciples are still confused. They have so many questions. And so when Jesus gets up to leave, the conversation continues on. To help the disciples understand what is about to happen both to him and to them, and to prepare them for what is soon to come, Jesus takes the familiar metaphor of a vine and its branches (one, which he has used several times earlier in his messianic ministry), and now uses it to describe his relationship to his people after his departure. To bear fruit (to believe the promises Jesus is making and then strive to obey his commandments) one must abide in Jesus, the true vine, who gives fruit-bearing life to those who abide in him. In using a familiar metaphor in a decidedly different way than he has previously, Jesus is revealing to the disciples that redemptive history has come to a major turning point, and that through abiding in him (the true Israel), the disciples will bear fruit. In fact, Jesus has chosen them to do this very thing.

As we continue with our series on the Gospel of John, we come to John 15 and yet another of the extended discourses given by Jesus found through this Gospel. This particular discourse—Jesus’ use of the vine and the branches metaphor to explain his relationship to his people—is itself found within a larger discourse (the Upper Room Discourse of John 13-17). As we saw last time, in the first half of chapter 14 of John, Jesus introduced the person of the Holy Spirit to the disciples, when he tells them of another Helper who will come and indwell them, after Jesus departs to go to his Father to prepare a place for them. In John 14:16-17, Jesus told them *“I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.”*

The disciples readily accepted that Jesus was Israel’s Messiah—he had performed countless miracles, and it was clear to them that Jesus was the coming one promised throughout the Old Testament. But the disciples were struggling to understand how both YHWH and Jesus could be the one true God. And now, in their few remaining moments together, Jesus reveals to them that there are three divine persons who are the one true God, each of them sharing the divine nature. The Trinity is a difficult doctrine in many ways, but one well-known to Christians across the ages. Yet to the disciples, this is all new information which they must now immediately process. It is precisely because Jesus has so little time left, and the disciples need to know in advance what Jesus is about to do for them, that Jesus reveals to them the person of the Holy Spirit (the Paraclete or “Helper”) who is the third person of the Holy Trinity, and who will be with them after Jesus departs.

The Father has revealed to Jesus that his hour has come. This means that the Passover celebration, as well as Jesus’ time with the disciples, has come to an end. With the hour getting late, in John 14:27, the disciple tells us that Jesus pronounces his word of “peace” (his “*shalom*”) upon those from whom he is about to depart. *“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.”* This is goodbye. At the end of verse 31, Jesus tells the group, *“Rise, let us go from here.”*

Yet, John recounts three more chapters (15-17) of additional discourse, before we learn in John 18:1-2, that Jesus departs for Gethsemane for his encounter with Judas and the Sanhedrin. It is likely that as Jesus prepared to leave, with the disciples still struggling to understand him, the conversation continued on for some time, with Jesus using the vine and branches metaphor in chapter 15, then giving them more information about the Holy Spirit in chapter 16, before his high-priestly prayer on their behalf in chapter 17. You can imagine the scene—Jesus gets up to leave, yet the disciples are not ready for him to go. They are confused and still have many questions, and so the discourse continues for three more chapters.

The vine and branches discourse of John 15 is often divided commentators into two parts. The first part (vv. 1-8) includes Jesus' use of the vine and branches metaphor to describe his own unique role in redemptive history, while in the second half (vv. 9-16) Jesus explains the metaphor.¹ It is important to keep in mind that Jesus has already used the metaphor of the vine and its fruit in a number of parables, but with an entirely different meaning than found here: The parable of the laborers in the vineyard in Matthew 20:1-16; the parable of the wicked tenants in Luke 20:9-16; and the parable of the tenants in Mark 12:1-9. In each case, the parable centers around Israel not bearing fruit, and the declaration that covenant judgment has come upon Israel with the dawn of the messianic age.

Jesus' use of the vine metaphor in John 15, however, has a much different focus, because in this use of the metaphor Jesus declares himself to be the vine (not Israel), and it is not Israel's lack of fruit which is the point of the metaphor, but the believer's union with Christ.² The disciples' union with Christ is especially important for them to grasp because of Jesus' imminent departure from them. Because Jesus is leaving them, they must remain united to Jesus by faith, through the indwelling Holy Spirit, *if* they are to bear the kind of fruit Jesus has been describing in chapter 14—regeneration and faith in Jesus, producing obedience to God's commandments as a demonstration of love for God and for neighbor.

No doubt, the disciples were very familiar with such botanical metaphors which were widely used throughout the ancient world and which repeatedly appear throughout the New Testament. As Jews, the disciples were also quite familiar with the Old Testament's repeated use of the vineyard metaphor as a reference to Israel. There are a number of such references found throughout the Old Testament, but one of the more prominent (and well-known) was the so called "Song of the Vineyard" of Isaiah 5, which we read as our Old Testament lesson. Another reference to Israel as the Lord's vineyard is Psalm 80, where in verses 14-18 we read "*Turn again, O God of hosts! Look down from heaven, and see; have regard for this vine, the stock that your right hand planted, and for the son whom you made strong for yourself. They have burned it with fire; they have cut it down; may they perish at the rebuke of your face! But let your hand be on the man of your right hand, the son of man whom you have made strong for yourself! Then we shall not turn back from you; give us life, and we will call upon your name!*"

As God's vineyard—which YHWH has cared-for—Israel is to bear lush fruit—faith in God's promise and obedience to God's commandments under the covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai. But when the messianic age dawns in the person of Jesus, the Messiah finds Israel bearing little or no fruit. As a consequence, Jesus tells the vineyard parables in the gospels, just mentioned, as a declaration of YHWH's judgment upon Israel, informing his disobedient people that he will find new tenants who will bring forth the fruit of faith—good works. In the new covenant era, the gospel will go out to the ends of

¹ Carson, The Gospel According to John, 510-511.

² Carson, The Gospel According to John, 510-511.

the earth. This will bring in a great harvest, including the salvation of countless Gentiles, along with believing Jews.³

So, when Jesus speaks of himself as the vine in John 15, he is affirming that he is the true Israel, and that those united to him through faith and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, will produce the kind of fruit which Israel should have brought forth, but did not. Just as Jesus has declared himself the true temple (John 2) so here, Jesus declares himself to be the true Israel, and that the future course of redemptive history will center around his person and work, not a building (the temple) or a piece of land in Palestine (the nation of Israel). What makes this so difficult for the disciples to understand is that this completely foreign to them, even though Jesus has spoken about these things to them previously.

Jesus' statement "*I am the true vine*" raises a number of difficult questions for them—especially in the light of Palm Sunday when Jesus entered Jerusalem in triumph. *If* Jesus is the true temple, and *if* he is the true Israel, what will happen to the Jerusalem temple and to the nation of Israel? This is the theme of the "Olivet Discourse" recounted in Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 19 and 21, which was likely given on Wednesday, when Jesus answered many of these same questions. But on this night (about twenty-four hours later), the disciples are still having trouble understanding such a complete reversal of their life-long expectations about the coming of the Messiah. Given this confusion, it is no wonder that in Acts 1:6 the disciples' last recorded question to Jesus immediately before his ascension is this: "*Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?*"

According to Luke, just before Jesus ascends into heaven (as he has told the disciples he will do), he answers them (in Acts 1:7-11): "*it is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.*' And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, '*Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.*'" The disciples are still confused about the future of Israel and its temple right up to the moment of our Lord's ascension. But after Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit is poured out upon all flesh, it will make perfect sense to them that Jesus is the true temple of God, whose spiritual body (the church) is composed of living stones (God's people) indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and that God's promised land now extends to the whole world, not just the land (Israel) lying between the Red Sea and the Euphrates river.

No doubt, Jesus substituting himself for Israel was difficult for the disciples to understand. But so was the fact that Jesus uses metaphors like this to explain Scripture as though he was the Bible's author—this is what is meant when we read that Jesus spoke with a divine authority, unlike the scribes and Pharisees (Matt. 7:29). This is why these words and doctrines which are so familiar to us, are so foreign to them. No one had ever said such a thing about the future of Israel with such authority.

With this in mind then, we turn to our text where, in verse 1, Jesus declares, "*I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser.*" Not only does Jesus switch the focus of the vine metaphor from Israel to himself when he declares that he (not Israel) is the "true" vine, but he also identifies YHWH as the one who prunes the branches, and cares for the vine (the "vinedresser"). As Carson points out, this would be

³ Köstenberger, Encountering John, 158-159.

an especially important point for John to emphasize when writing this Gospel to Jewish refugees after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70. Jesus is the true Israel, and salvation is found only through union with him.⁴ The nation of Israel and the temple have been superceded.

In the previous chapter, Jesus had spoken of how he was in the Father, and the Father was in him, as well as how *“in that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you”* (v. 20). In verse 2, Jesus uses the vine/branch metaphor to explain what he means by this. *“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.”* Those branches which do not bear fruit are pruned off the vine. All dead wood will go, says Jesus. As long as they remain on the vine they hinder its growth and the production of good fruit. As any gardener knows, pruning the living branch is necessary to get new growth and better fruit. Pruning of individuals (elsewhere described in the New Testament as “sanctification”) is a painful process, yet a necessity because God’s Fatherly discipline and care is the only way we will bear proper fruit.

Lest the disciples live in fear of the Father’s continual pruning, and so that they do not see Jesus threatening judgment (like that which will come upon Israel), Jesus tells them in verse 3, *“already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.”* Jesus has, at some point, already spoken the word of forgiveness to the disciples. They are presently “clean.” Their many sins have been forgiven. Jesus’ point is not that the disciples are saved from God’s wrath **if** they bear fruit. Rather, those who are truly “in Christ” and indwelt by his Spirit, are forgiven by (or through) God’s word spoken to us (specifically the gospel, not the law) and therefore will bear fruit. The Father loves those redeemed by Christ so much that he will do what is necessary to ensure that they do bear fruit. But those who are not truly Christ’s, will not bear fruit, and eventually, they will be removed from the vine (Christ).

In verse 4, Jesus tells them, *“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.”* This echoes what Jesus has told them previously about how, even after his departure to his Father’s dwelling, he will indwell all those united to him by the Holy Spirit through faith. As the believer abides (or remains) united to Jesus “forever” by the Holy Spirit (cf. John 14:16), so too, Jesus will remain in (indwell) every believer. And this is how the branches (Christians united to Jesus through faith) bear fruit. Christians will abide in Jesus, and will bear fruit. In fact, apart from Jesus’ abiding in those who abide in him, no one **can** bear fruit. And those who do not bear fruit do not abide (remain) in Jesus, and never really have.

In verses 5-6, Jesus repeats the substance of the previous verses adding several new details. *“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.”* This is the last time Jesus uses the “I Am” formula in this gospel. Those who abide in Jesus are indwelt by the Holy Spirit (the manner in which Jesus remains in them), will not only bear fruit, they’ll bear much fruit. But those who do not abide in Jesus (and are not indwelt by the Holy Spirit) cannot bear any fruit and they are thrown into the fire—the horrible eternal fate of all those who appear to be believers, but are truly not, and who prove as much by the absence of the fruit which Jesus brings forth in those in whom he abides—faith in Jesus and a desire to obey God’s commandments.

In verse 7, Jesus continues to flesh out the meaning of the mutual abiding of Jesus in the believer, and the

⁴ Carson, The Gospel According to Jesus, 514.

believer in Jesus. He tells them, “*if you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.*” Jesus reiterates the promise he made to them in verses 12-14 of John 14, that the disciples will do greater works than he has done, and will have their prayers answered according to the will of God. This time Jesus adds that his own words abide in us, which many take to mean that the word of God creates faith within us, and is the means through which God speaks to his people, and then stirs in their hearts a love for the Father and the Son. Through that same word, the Holy Spirit creates both the desire and the power to obey God’s commandments. This is what we mean when we say the Holy Spirit works through means—in this case “my words,” the words of Jesus as we now find them in the pages of Holy Scripture.

Those who abide in Jesus, know Jesus’ will through his word (Scripture). In fact, Jesus goes on to say in verse 8, that “*by this,*” (i.e., abiding in God’s word and asking for things in accordance with God’s will) “*my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.*” Note the cause and effect relationship here—those who bear fruit (the effect) do so because through faith they are already Jesus’ disciples who abide in him (the cause). People do not become Jesus’ disciples *if* only they bear sufficient fruit. Rather, abiding in Jesus is the source of all fruit. And, Jesus says, God is glorified whenever we do bear fruit by abiding in Jesus—whether that be through our prayers, or through believing God’s promises and obeying God’s word.

In verses 9-16, Jesus now explains the vine metaphor he has just used with them. The believer must abide in the vine, just as Jesus is one with the Father. He tells them, “*as the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love.*” In other words, the metaphor makes sense only so long as the disciples seek to understand it against the backdrop of the relationship between YHWH and Jesus as seen throughout Jesus’ messianic mission. The Father loves Jesus. Jesus loves those who believe in him. Therefore, believers are to remain (abide) in Christ, because it is through their union with Christ that they will experience God’s love, and then bear fruit. This means that God’s love for us is manifest and in through the person and work of Jesus Christ. In other words, God loves us “in Christ.”

In verse 11, Jesus returns to the now familiar theme, “*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.*” Those who abide in Jesus (through faith and through the indwelling Holy Spirit), will strive to keep God’s commandments, and experience God’s love, just as Jesus has done throughout his messianic mission. The disciples will soon discover that the supreme sign of Jesus’ love for his people is his cross, and that those who abide in him, are the ones who believe the gospel. Once again, we see the emphasis the New Testament writers (including John) place upon Jesus’ obedience to the will of the Father. Jesus not only dies in the place of sinners (turning aside God’s wrath and anger from us), but he lives in our place as well, and it is through his obedience (imputed to us through faith) that we are declared righteous. Jesus’ life of obedience is that to which we refer when we speak of the “active” obedience of Christ. Jesus has kept the Father’s commandments, and abides in his love.

Jesus has pronounced his word of “shalom” (John 14:27). He has told them to abide in his love for them, so in verse 11 he promises his joy to his people. “*These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.*” In fact, the reason Jesus is revealing all of this to them is so that the disciples may live in the fulness of joy, not under the oppressive bondage to sin. The Christian life will not be one of fear, for Jesus has promised us God’s peace—God is no longer angry with us because of the saving work of his son. The Christian life will not be lived apart from the presence of God, because those who abide in Christ will know the love of the Father and the Son through the indwelling Holy Spirit. The Christian life will not be one of servile obedience to the law as the Pharisees misunderstood

it, living under the law's curse apart from the gospel.

Those who abide in Jesus through faith and in the bond formed with Jesus through the Holy Spirit (union with Christ), will do so in a state of joy, which is not to be confused with happiness. Joy is the sense that all is right with God, even when the seasons of life take us through difficult times of death, illness, sorrow, worry, and despair. Jesus wants the disciples to know this before he departs, because in the hours ahead there will be nothing but shock, sadness, and grief.

In verse 12, Jesus returns to the central theme of the discourse so far. *“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”* But again, he adds new information. *“Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.”* In just hours, Jesus will both demonstrate this greater love, and fulfill the commandment to love God and neighbor when he suffers and dies for us, and so as to remove the guilt of our sins, when that greater love takes him to the cross of Calvary. Jesus also tells the disciples of the bond formed between Jesus and his own, *“you are my friends if you do what I command you.”* As one writer puts it so well, this obedience “is not what makes them friends; it is what characterizes his friends.”⁵

But this is not all. Remarkably, the master tells his beloved disciples, *“no longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.”* Those who abide in Jesus are the objects of his love and become his friends, not mere servants who blindly obey someone more powerful than they. No, those who are the objects of Christ's love will know his love, realize his peace, and experience the joy he brings to them. So deep is this friendship which results from abiding with Jesus, that Jesus has given them the very words which the Father gave to him, and which were spoken to them throughout Jesus' messianic mission. To be given the gift of the good news of the gospel is to be the friend of Jesus.

To ensure that the disciples understand that their abiding in him is the work of God and not of their own doing or initiative, Jesus tells them bluntly in verse 16, *“you did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you.”* Jesus found the disciples in Galilee fishing and going about their lives. He called them to follow him, and they dropped everything to do so. He chose them, they were not seeking him. Jesus will ensure that even though he is about to depart from them, that they need not worry. Because Jesus has chosen them, they will abide in him, bear much fruit, know the love of God, realize God's peace, and live their lives in joy.

And so, Jesus tells them, *“these things I command you, so that you will love one another.”* Those who abide in Jesus through faith, are loved by the Father through the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit. Because of this love which Jesus' friends experience from their union with Christ, they will now love one another—as branches drawing faith and life from the same common vine. Because Jesus has chosen them to do so, they will bear much fruit—which includes love of neighbor. They will do so because Jesus will give them the blessed Holy Spirit, who will dwell in them, give them the new birth (regeneration), create and sustain faith in their hearts, and create a deep bond of friendship and love with Jesus (in heaven) so that their hearts will not be troubled, nor will they ever need to be afraid.

In re-interpreting the vineyard metaphor found throughout the Old Testament as applying to himself,

⁵ Carson, The Gospel According to John, 522.

when Jesus says "*I am the true vine,*" he is telling us that he is the true Israel. Through faith, we are members of that true Israel (and of the body of Christ), so long as we abide in him, and understand that he is source of our spiritual life, our faith, and of our desire to obey Jesus' commandments. This is because the Holy Spirit dwells within us, and he unites to Jesus who has ascended on high when he returned to his Father to prepare a place for us.

Because Jesus has chosen us to abide in him and then bear fruit, we are also his friends. He has given us the words of life (the gospel), and he has given to us the Helper who indwells us. So, then, let us abide in Jesus through faith, and bear that fruit of which Jesus has been speaking. Let us live our lives in peace, in joy, and in love for our neighbor, all of which is ours if we abide in Jesus, the true vine.