

## Jesus Is The Vine; We Are The Branches

'I Am the True Vine and My Father is the Vinedresser. Any branch in Me that does not bear fruit He cuts off; while every branch that does bear fruit, He prunes so that it will bear more fruit. You are already clean and pruned because of the Word I have discussed with you. Remain in Me and I will remain in you. Just as no branch can bear fruit without remaining in the vine, neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in Me. I Am the Vine; you are the branches. Whoever lives in me and I in him, bears much fruit. Apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers. Such branches are gathered up, thrown into the fire and burned ... When you bear much fruit, My Father is glorified and you prove yourselves to be My disciples' (John 15:1 to 8).

The above parable provides us with a beautiful scriptural picture of the relationship we can have with God the Father through Jesus the Son. One basic truth emerges; Christianity is primarily a relationship between God and man. It is not primarily theology or religion. This is where the thinking of many Christians has to change. They think in terms of what they believe, the creed they repeat, the doctrines they embrace or the theology they believe. All these things have a place in Christianity along with the words spoken by Jesus in the scriptures, but if we make religion our primary focus, we may miss the real truth and purpose of the Christian faith. What is primary, is the relationship that each of us must have with God through Jesus. Without a strong relationship with God the Father through Jesus the Son, all the doctrine in the world will be useless. Theology and doctrine are correct only if they produce the correct fruit. The parable of the vine and branches spoken by Jesus, reveals the total nature of the tri-une Godhead – the representation of all that which is truly God. In the New Testament, God is revealed as one God but three Persons; the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and in this picture of the vine, we see the picture of all three Persons.

We will study this passage of scripture verse by verse. John 15:1; 'I Am the True Vine and My Father is the Vinedresser, Gardener or Owner'. In a living vine, there has to be sap which flows up from the roots, up through the trunk, into the branches and leaves. Unless the sap reaches the branches and leaves, they wither and cannot produce fruit, so the sap is the lifeblood of the vine; the key to the whole life of the vine is the sap. Although the sap is not mentioned in this parable, it would obviously be there or the said vine would have no life in it. In this parable, the sap is a 'picture' of the Holy Spirit. We are redeemed from sin and spiritual death through Jesus' death, then we enter into His Life because of His righteousness imputed to us through faith, and having His righteousness, we partake of His Life. We partake of the Life that flows from the roots up the trunk and into the branches, and that Life, is the Holy Spirit. 'If Jesus dwells in you, then although the natural body is dead because of sin and guilt, the Holy Spirit is Life because of the righteousness that He imputes to you' (Romans 8:10). Jesus is the Vine; God the Father is the Vinedresser – the Gardener – the Owner; we believers are the branches which bear fruit. That completes the picture of the whole vine.

'Any branch in Me that does not bear fruit (including those who stop bearing fruit), He cuts off; while every branch that does bear fruit, He cleanses and prunes so that it will bear more excellent fruit' (John 15:2). The essence of this verse is: As long as we branches remain steadfast in the life of Jesus and continue to bear fruit, we have the life of the Vine, we please God and we are spiritually and eternally safe. But if we ever drift away from God and withdraw from His life giving 'sap' then we lose our eternal life and ultimately, we are burned in the lake of fire.

What does God expect from us as 'branches' in the vine? He expects us to bear spiritual fruit. First Jesus talks about bearing fruit, then He talks about bearing more fruit, then He says more excellent fruit; better fruit than before. There is a clear progression – and that is the life we have in Jesus. God requires good fruit, so it is not enough for us to say, "At least I don't bear bad fruit." God demands fruit, good fruit, more fruit and then excellent fruit. There are several actions that can be deemed as spiritual fruit, but all 'fruit' in this context, are the various ways in which we serve the Lord in order to increase the Kingdom of God.

What exactly is spiritual fruit? One type of 'fruit' is Christian character, behaviour or conduct. We can tell where a person is placed spiritually by their fruit or Christian character. 'By their fruits you will know them' (Matthew 7:16 to 27). In this full passage of scripture, Jesus again warns those who claim to be believers – yet they continue to act sinfully – so He warns them of their eternal consequences. The people Jesus was warning, were not acting like the devout believers they claimed to be, so in this context, the fruit Jesus was talking about was conduct. We cannot go to a pub on a Saturday night and get drunk, then attend church on Sunday and expect to have any credibility in our witness for God. We need to conduct ourselves as Christians all the time. Even if other people cannot see the hidden sin – God sees it, takes note, writes it down in His book and we will have to give an account of it on Judgement Day. We need to pay attention to the warnings spoken by Jesus, and obey God's command to be holy and righteous.

A scripture that ties in the fruit of Christian conduct with the fruit of service to God is this one; 'Walk, that is to live and conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to Him in all things, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God' (Colossians 1:10). So we see here that another type of spiritual fruit is to be a witness to the unsaved, both in word and actions; working hard to bring people into the Kingdom of God. When Paul and Timothy wrote to the Philippian church, they said as long as they were alive, they would be fruitful (Philippians 1:22). That meant they would never cease to serve the Lord and spread the Gospel, leading people into the Kingdom of God.

Another spiritual fruit is to serve or help those who are already saved. 'And I commend to you Phoebe, who is a servant in the assembly (church) at Cenchreae' (Romans 16:1). 'Now Brethren, you know that the household of Stephanas were our firstfruits in Greece and how they have devoted themselves to the service of God's people' (1 Corinthians 16:15). In this scripture, the 'fruit' of Paul's labour (which was the household of Stephanas) resulted in the household bearing spiritual fruit by serving Paul. The same applies to modern believers. We are to love and serve one another. There are many ways in which we can show love to each other; supporting missionaries, helping the sick by cooking them meals, sponsoring a poor family so they can send their children to Christian schools, giving the elderly a ride to and from church, and one important way to show love is to embrace fellow believers who attend a different church or denomination. We are all branches of the One Vine and one church or denomination is not 'better' than another.

Being born-again and sanctified by Jesus' blood, is another type of spiritual fruit. 'And now being made free from sin, and becoming servants of God, you have your fruit of sanctification and your reward of holiness and eternal life' (Romans 6:22). Being born-again and allowing God to change us from the inside, so that people can see the inner change outwardly, is a form of abundant fruit. One example may be that of a former member of an outlaw motorcycle gang who committed heinous, violent crimes, but once that man is born-again by the blood of Jesus, and his former gang can see a radical change in his life and conduct, and hears him preaching the Word of God, that kind of fruit truly glorifies God.

Going back to the fruit of Christian character; what exactly is God looking for in our character and conduct? Love. We are commanded to love our fellow man. Jesus said, "I give you a new commandment; that you should love one another. Just as I have loved you, so you too should love one another" (John 13:34). "This is what I command you; that you love one another" (John 15:17). Love is not an option – it is a command. If we don't love others, then we are being disobedient and are not bringing forth the fruit God requires. Love always comes first. 'The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control' (Galatians 5:22 & 23). This list is the nine different manifestations of the spiritual fruit of love. That is the Christian character that God requires in us as being fruitful branches in the vine.

We are speaking of a plant. God ordained that plants should produce seed only in their fruit. Therefore, if a plant does not produce fruit, it does not produce seed and it will not reproduce itself. An essential requirement for a plant to reproduce itself is; it must produce fruit which has in itself the seed, which will produce another plant after its own kind. Right from creation onwards, plants produce the fruit with the seed in it (Genesis 1:12). 'The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life and he who wins souls is wise' (Proverbs 11:30).

What do we have to do to produce the fruit that God requires of us? We must remain in Him. Jesus said if we remain dwelling in Him, we would bear much fruit. We don't have to think about a lot of religious activity or programs; we have to focus on our personal relationship with the Lord. He has given us the guarantee, that if we remain in Him, we will bear much fruit. Fruit doesn't come by a lot of effort – it comes by maintaining a close relationship with God. This is a matter of relationship rather than doctrine or theology, which are important, but if they don't produce the fruit of a loving relationship with the Lord, they are in vain. We have eternal life only in Jesus and there is no other way. How can we remain or abide in Jesus? We are to hold fast to the words of Jesus Himself and never, ever step away from our relationship with Him.

'If anyone really loves Me, he will obey My commandments and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him' (John 14:23). The test of whether we love Jesus, is if we will keep His Word, and if we do keep His Word, not only will He love us, but God the Father will love us. Jesus said, "We", that is our heavenly Father and the Son will make their home with us. Almighty God is willing to come and make his abode in us – the condition is that we keep the Words of Jesus and obey His commands. Jesus said "If" we obey – then and only then will the Father and Son abide in us, and those are the conditions He puts on us. The success in Christian living is simple – we must hold fast to the Word of God. It is not enough to simply know what is written in the Bible, we must obey what is written in it.

'Any branch in Me that does not bear fruit (including those who have ceased to bear fruit) He cuts off; while every branch that does bear fruit, He prunes so that it will bear more fruit. You are pruned already, because

of the Word which I have discussed with you' (John 15:2 & 3). What is the process of 'pruning'? The care of a natural vine involves pruning. While it is true that God corrects and punishes His disciples (Hebrews 12:5 to 11) which removes that which is bad, and this process can be very, very painful indeed, that is not pruning. Pruning is cutting away good fruit to make room for better fruit, and that process is not painful, but exciting. Many Christians feel, when God cuts away some fruit, they are being punished for wrongdoing, but that is not true. Pruning is being washed so we can produce more and better fruit. Pruning is not dealing with sin, pruning is removing good fruit to bring forth better fruit and it is God Who does the pruning. It requires a person to know the voice of God, so when God tells us He is going to prune us, we can look forward to what is coming up next. We have to learn to distinguish between being disciplined and pruned. Discipline comes because we have done wrong – pruning comes because we have done what is right. All Christians will be subjected to the Father's pruning but many do not know how to respond. For example, they feel 'put out' when God ends a successful ministry. They do not realise God has been pleased with their efforts and is pruning that ministry, or pruning the good fruit away to make room for a better ministry, or better fruit. They sometimes ask God what they have done wrong, but is quite the opposite. God only prunes away good fruit when He knows we are capable of producing better fruit but the better fruit will not come until after the pruning process. God removes that which is good and replaces it with the best, and usually, but not always, God will put another person in to take over our 'good fruit ministry' so we can move onto the 'better fruit ministry'. Usually, but again, not always, God will give us a time of rest between our fruitful ministries. This is a time where we need to be careful not to feel discouraged. Sometimes there could be a year or two between ministries and at those times we could feel just a little bit useless, but if we remain focussed on the Lord, He will in due time, lead us in the right direction and we could be amazed at what the Lord is leading us into. Sometimes there are two or three steps we need to take before we begin our new ministry, but it is all part of the pruning process. It is because we have been bearing such good fruit, our Father wants us to bear even better fruit and only God knows what we are truly capable of. The sharp tool God uses for pruning is the two-edged sword of the Word of God, as Jesus so explicitly explained in John 15:3. How are we trimmed clean? By the Word of God. It is so very important we stay in the Word of God.

'Remain in Me and I will remain in you. Just as no branch can bear fruit by itself and has to remain in the vine, neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in Me. I Am the Vine; you are the branches. Whoever lives in me and I in him, bears much fruit. Apart from Me you can do nothing' (John 15:4 & 5). This scripture is self-explanatory. If we step away from Jesus and are not vitally attached to Him, then we cannot produce the fruit He wants us to produce, and our fruit will be 'dead' fruit, which will be burned up. 'If any man's work is burned, he will suffer the loss of losing his reward though he himself will be saved, but only as one who has passed through the fire' (1 Corinthians 3:15). Without Him we don't have faith, and faith without works is dead (James 2:26).

'If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers. Such branches are gathered up, and thrown into the fire and burned' (John 15:6). The only alternative to bearing fruit is bearing no fruit, and those who do not bear any fruit are tossed away. That is a very clear warning to us to stay close to God or suffer the eternal consequences. John the Baptist gave the first warning in the New Testament; 'The axe is already at the root of the tree and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire' (Matthew 3:10; Luke 3:9). We can look again at the way Jesus warned the religious people who lived in His time (Matthew 7:12 to 27).

'If you remain in Me and My words remain in you, ask whatever you will and it shall be done for you' (John 15:7). This verse seems very promising at a glance. It indicates we only have to believe in Jesus, serve Him and all our prayers will be answered. The reality of Christian life is not that simple. Yes, we must remain dwelling in Jesus; yes, we must serve Him and bear fruit; yes, we must ask but there is much more to having our prayers answered. We must be sure our request is totally in the will of God (1 John 5:14). We must be sure we have the right attitude and motive (James 4:3). We must not have unforgiveness or any other sin in our hearts or the Lord will not hear us (Psalm 66:18). We must not doubt, change our minds back and forth or be 'in two minds' about our request (James 1:6 to 8). A man will have his prayers hindered or even cut off, if he does not treat his wife correctly (1 Peter 3:7). The person praying may have to wait for God's perfect time (there are nearly 700 scriptures that show us God has a time or a season for everything). We must consider a person's own will when we are praying. God will never override a person's will so if we are praying for the salvation of a loved one, we must take into account that person's own choice. There are many other conditions we have to meet before God will answer our prayers. The hardest answer we will ever hear is "No" and sometimes God says no, we cannot have what we ask for, even when we have met all of His conditions. It is vitally important to ask the Lord's will before we pray and ask for things, then we must accept that His will may not be what we want, otherwise we can wait for many frustrating years for an answer, and end up terribly disappointed. If we want something desperately, we can believe that it is God's will, and yet we can be mistaken. The Lord will say "No" if the prayer is not in our long-term best interests. He will say "No" if He has another path for us to walk. On the other hand, we may think He is saying "No", when

in fact He is saying, "Wait". God is sovereign and He does not have to explain Himself to us, nor does He have to obey us – we have to obey Him.

'When you bear much fruit My Father is glorified and you prove yourselves to be My true disciples' (John 15:8). It is one thing to say we are Christians, it is another thing to prove it by the way we live and serve God. Many people lay claim to the title of Christian, but do they live it? We prove it by bearing much fruit. We need to concentrate on bearing fruit and that will glorify God and that will prove we are a disciple of Jesus.

To remain dwelling in God's love, is to live with His Presence every day of our lives. God is love and to show that love, God abides in us and that abiding is having His Prince living within us. Jesus is the Son of God's love (Colossians 1:13) so having Jesus abiding in us, is the same as the Father's love abiding within us. That is the place of total security and fulfilment. When we are abiding in the love of God, then all our deepest spiritual needs are fully met. We have a place of security in God. Our lives are hidden with Jesus in God (Colossians 3:3). We have a double covering of the life that abides in Jesus. It is not visible on earth, but one day it will be revealed. The world cannot see it now because we are still hidden in Jesus, but those who are in that safe, secret place know they are in it (Psalm 91). They walk through life with serenity and a confidence that others can only long for. As we abide in Jesus, He promises double joy – divine joy and human joy. The divine joy is Jesus' own joy and the delight He now has, because of what He has succeeded in doing for us by enduring the cross (Hebrews 12:2); and the human joy, is the joy and gladness of our salvation and the security we have in knowing we are safe for eternity; then our joy is of full measure, made complete and overflowing (John 15:11). We are all very glad to be eternally safe.

Amen and God bless you.

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