

PEACE IN A TROUBLED WORLD 4

The Vine & Branches – John 15:1-17

Context

Jesus has been preparing His disciples for His departure and for life in the Church age. So far we have seen that:

- Jesus was aware of the cross and saw it as the time of His glorification (13:31&32)
- Jesus promised to prepare a place for His disciples in His Father's House and to return to take them to be with Him (14:1-4)
- Faith is central to the relationship of the Church with its Lord (14:1)
- Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life who reveals ultimate reality (14:5-11)
- The Holy Spirit will live in the disciples, giving them power to fulfil God's will, intimacy with the Father and the Son and peace despite the world's opposition (14:12-31)

In 14:31 Jesus said "Come now; let us leave". This phrase was commonly used to describe a call to arms, literally "Let us go to meet the advancing enemy" (according to scholar CH Dodd). This is quite appropriate in the context, where Jesus has just described the advance of the "prince of this world". A spiritual battle is about to be fought at the cross, and Christ is about to win the most resounding victory. Satan will be defeated as Christ dies to "destroy him who holds the power of death" (Hebrews 2:14). We do not know if Jesus and the disciples actually left the Upper Room at that point (some commentators suggest that there may have been a gap between Him saying this and 18:1 where we are told that "Jesus left with His disciples and crossed the Kidron Valley" and that the words of Chapters 15-17 are spoken in the Upper Room). I like the suggestion that at 14:31 the group left the Upper Room and began their journey towards Gethsemane (located across the Kidron Valley) and that Chapters 15-17 may have been spoken as they walked towards the Valley. The picture of the Vine used by Christ in the passage we are considering may then have been inspired by an actual vine they passed or by the sculpture of the Vine on the front of the Temple.

The "True" Vine

Jesus here calls Himself the "true" vine, and this should raise the question in our minds of why He said this rather than just calling Himself the vine. What is He contrasting Himself with? What is the false or failed Vine? Verse 1 is the last of Jesus' seven "I am" sayings in John's Gospel. Each of these is a dramatic statement about His identity and His mission. Often they are full of resonance with Old Testament symbolism:

1. **"I am the bread of life.** No one who comes to me will ever be hungry again." (John 6:35)
2. **"I am the light of the world.** If you follow me, you won't be stumbling through the darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life" (John 8:12)
3. **"I am the gate for the sheep** ... Those who come in through me will be saved. Wherever they go they will find green pastures... My purpose is to give life in all its fullness." (John 10:7-10)
4. **"I am the good shepherd.** The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11)
5. **"I am the resurrection and the life.** Those who believe in me, even though they die like everyone else, will live again. They are given eternal life for believing in me" (John 11:25&26)
6. **"I am the way, the truth and the life.** No one can come to the Father except through me" (John 14:6)
7. **"I am the vine;** you are the branches. Those who remain in me ... produce much fruit" (John 15:5)

The phrase "I am" itself is full of Old Testament significance. "I am" was the name God told Moses to use when speaking about Him to the nation of Israel (Exodus 3:13-15). It spoke of the eternal, unchanging nature of God. Jesus used this phrase in reference to Himself in John 8:58, when He said "Before Abraham was, I am". He was claiming to be the God of Moses, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

It should not surprise us, then, that we have to look into the Old Testament to understand Jesus' picture of the Vine. The terms "Vine" and "Vineyard" are used several times in the Old Testament to describe the nation of Israel:

- **Psalm 80:8-19** – this Psalm uses a wonderful picture of Israel as a vine, brought out of Egypt by God, but planted by Him in a perfect fertile place. Initially the Vine grew and extended its branches, but now it has been cut down and burned. It seems that God has neglected His vine and allowed passing people and wild animals to feed from its fruit. The Psalmist calls on God to

return to His vine and restore it, expecting Him to do this through a person at God's right hand, "the son of man you have raised up for yourself".

- **Isaiah 5:1-7** – this passage has been called the "Song of the Vineyard. In it Isaiah describes Israel as the Lord's vineyard, tenderly planted by God and provided for. The vineyard, however, produced only bad fruit. The gardener (God), therefore says that He must remove the hedge around the vineyard and allow it to become a wasteland. The fruit God expected was justice and righteousness, but the bad fruit He received was bloodshed and distress (v7).
- **Jeremiah 2:21** – God speaks of how He planted Israel like "a choice vine" but she had turned into a "corrupt, wild vine"
- **Jeremiah 6:9** – God describes the remnant of Israel as being like a vine, but one that will be plundered by the invading enemies as a the grapes might be stripped from a vine
- **Ezekiel 15:1-8** – God describes Jerusalem a useless vine – its wood is useless, fit for nothing except to be thrown onto a bonfire and burnt up. The idea is that the vine has failed to produce fruit and is fit only for destruction.
- **Ezekiel 19:10-14** – in this lament Israel is described as a vine that once was glorious but that was destroyed by the "east wind" (meaning the invaders from the East) and is now planted in the desert. It has no branch left that are strong enough to produce a king's sceptre. The picture is of the nation being weak with no ruler and no hope of a ruler.
- **Hosea 10:1** – Israel is described as having been like spreading vine, but one which produced fruit only for itself, and which began to set up altars to false Gods.

It is significant that in every one of these passages the Vine is described as a failure. Although it came from good stock (descended from faithful Abraham), and was lovingly planted in a fertile place (the Land of Canaan was fertile) it failed to produce the fruit God had desired and so He judged it through the nations of Assyria and Babylon, leaving it wasted and apparently fit for nothing. Although the vine was not completely destroyed, it seems worthless, fit only for the bonfire, with no branches to produce a King. Yet the Old Testament also contains the promise that one day "a shoot would come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit" (Isaiah 11:1). This is the Messianic hope of the Old Testament – that Israel would be restored through this new branch.

Despite the gloom of the Old Testament picture, the vine was used by the Jews as a symbol of their nation. The Temple in Jerusalem had a great golden vine trailing over its porch, and the coins minted during the Jewish rebellion against Rome in AD 68-70 bore the symbol of a vine. In fact, according to Bruce Milne, the vine was the "supreme symbol of Israel". It was to Israel what the shamrock is to Ireland. And it is against this background that Jesus says "I am the true vine". Israel had failed God. He had given them the mission of bringing light to the Gentiles – revealing His love and truth to all the nations around – but because of their unfaithfulness, injustice and idolatry they had failed. Israel as God's Servant had failed, but now stands one who claims to be the perfect Servant, the true Israel, the faithful One in contrast to their unfaithfulness. The claim of Christ is full of huge symbolism. He is claiming to be the fulfillment of the Old Testament messianic hope. The Old Covenant community (Israel) had failed to fulfill its God-given mission, but the New Covenant community will grow from a branch of Israel that is faithful. The Father, as gardener, will tend this true Vine and shape it for fruitfulness.

Spiritual Fruit

The branches of a vine exist for one purpose only – to produce fruit. The wood of a vine is absolutely useless for any purpose – it cannot be used to make tools or furniture because it is too twisted, and in the Old Testament it was even excluded from being used to fuel the fires for the sacrifices in the Temple. Michael Card has written: "The wood from the vine is good for absolutely nothing. Sacrificial law stipulated that among wood used in sacrifice, vine wood was not to be used. Its sole purpose seems to be to live and support the bearing of fruit". In the same way we must realise that as Christians we exist for no other purpose than to produce fruit for God. This might seem a little harsh, but it really strikes at the heart of the purpose for life. Life is not intended to be about our own satisfaction, for when we focus on that goal it will always elude us, like a child chasing bubbles! The only way to have satisfaction is to fulfill the purpose for which God saved us and Christ chose us. If our lives as Christians or our attitude to Church becomes more about our own desires or needs than it is about bearing fruit for God then we will become dissatisfied, unfulfilled and miserable. We will bring nothing to the Church or to God, and our lives will have nothing to attract others.

In verse 16 Jesus tells the disciples that He had chosen them. This would be no shock to them – each of them could look back to a time when He had come their way all called them to follow Him – Peter, James

and John from their boats and nets, Matthew from his tax-desk and money-bags, Simon the Zealot from his revolutionary planning and Nathanael from the shade of the fig tree. We too, as His followers in the 21st Century, can look back to the period or time in our lives when He called us. Perhaps at the time we didn't realise it, but as we look back we can see how He was calling us, convicting us, convincing us through the Holy Spirit. He chose us, we did not choose Him. When we made our choice to trust in Him it was in response to His gracious calling to us. The initiative was His, and the saving grace was His. Unless He had reached out to us we could never have grasped His hand and been rescued from the fire.

But why did He choose them? For fruitfulness! He chose them to "go and bear fruit – fruit that will last". This is our mission too! What is the fruit that Jesus speaks of? From this passage alone we can learn a great deal about it:

1. It brings glory to the Father (v8)

The ultimate goal of human existence is to glorify God – to make His name great. This was the mission of Israel, and the one at which they failed. Jesus perfectly glorified the Father through His obedience to His will (13:31&32). We too should seek to glorify God through every aspect of our lives. Hebrews 13:15 speaks of our praise to God as the "fruit of lips that confess His name". This is why our purpose statement for this church says that we exist to "Glorify God by ..." Everything else that we do should contribute to this over-arching aim. We do not just seek to worship Him through singing and prayer, but through mission, loving fellowship, discipleship leading to Christ-like character, and service. The fruit we produce is for the pleasure of the Father. He is the gardener, and He is the One who will reap the harvest of our lives.

2. It is central to our witness to the world (v8)

It is by the fruit of our lives that the world will know that we are Jesus' disciples. The disciple of Jesus must bear fruit (Matthew 7:16) – this is inevitable if we are truly connected to Him (v5). It is our fruit that shows that we are Jesus' disciples. The Christian life lived in obedience to the Lord, filled with the Spirit and glorifying the Father will be immensely attractive, like ripe fruit. The world will look on and desire to have the same satisfaction, joy and love that we have. Barclay writes that: "Jesus sends us out, not to argue men into Christianity, still less to threaten them into it, not to talk about Christianity, but to attract men into Christianity, so to live that the fruits of it may be so wonderful that others may desire them for themselves"

So, we must realise that our worship for God and our lifestyle of Christ-likeness cannot be separated from our witness to the world. The true worshipper of God will be committed to mission.

3. It has to do with love and joy (vv9-13)

The fruit of relationship with Christ can be simply defined as the visible results that come from it. How do you recognise a person who has a deep relationship with Christ? They will be full of the fruit of the Spirit. In this passage Jesus speaks of two aspects of this fruit:

a) **Love** – to remain in Christ is to remain in His love (v9) and this love will flow through us to one another. The world will know that we are Jesus' disciples if we love one another the way He has loved us (13:35, 15:12, 17). However, love for Christ, as we saw in 14:15, cannot be separated from obedience to Him. The true disciple of Christ will live a life that is marked by obedience to His Master. This will be distinctively different from the lifestyle of a world whose primary aim is self-fulfillment.

b) **Joy** – joy in Scriptural terms is satisfaction, contentment and fulfillment. It cannot be shaken by circumstances and so is different from "happiness" (happiness is the good feeling we have when good things happen to us, joy comes from relationship with Christ). Jesus gives us His joy and through obedience to Him our joy will be complete (v11)

In 14:27 Jesus spoke of another aspect of the fruit of the Spirit – peace. In Galatians 5:22 Paul lists nine aspects of this fruit. The first three in Paul's list are the ones that Jesus has mentioned in these chapters – "love, joy, peace", but he continues to add to these "patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control". Who would not be attracted to a life that is marked by these qualities? This could be a description of Christ's character. It is part of God's design for the Universe that the fruit that is designed for His glory also brings such wonderful wholeness to us. He is a loving Father who is passionate about His own glory but also about the welfare of His children. As we live in relationship with Christ, led and filled by the Spirit, these qualities will increase in our lives.

4. It is of eternal value (v16)

The fruit of the Spirit produced in us has eternal value. It lasts, and cannot be corrupted. This is amazing to think – that we bring glory to God that will shine throughout eternity. Not only this, but those who are attracted to Christ through the witness of our lives will share in the eternal life of Christ. In our lives we can build into the Kingdom of God something that will last the test of time.

What a joy it will be to us in heaven to look back at our lives and see the fruit that has been born for God!

Other New Testament passages that speak of the fruit we produce for God include: Romans 7:4&5, Ephesians 5:9-11, Philippians 1:11, Colossians 1:6, James 3:17.

The branches – shaped for fruitfulness

The relationship between the vine and the branches is vital to this picture. The Vine gives life to the branches, and the branches produce fruit. A branch that has no connection to the Vine cannot produce fruit and is therefore useless (see below). In this passage Jesus reveals four keys to growth and fruitfulness.

1. Pruning by the Father (vv2&3)

The Father will prune every branch that bears fruit to make it even more fruitful. In cultivating vines the aim is to produce the maximum amount of fruit, and so the farmer will trim off all the side shoots (or suckers) from the trunk of the vine. Because these shoots are not on the fruit cane they would only deprive the main shoot of nutrition and energy if allowed to grow. As we live as Christians we will face many experiences in life, but we face each of them with the Holy Spirit indwelling us. The Father will prune us through these experiences – He will remove those parts of us that are unholy, unclean, sinful so that we can become more effective in our service and witness for Him. This process of pruning might be painful, but it is vital for us. A loving Father will always discipline His child, and so God disciplines us through difficult circumstances so that we can share in His holiness and produce a harvest for Him in due time (Hebrews 12:7-11). In fact, this image of God disciplining those He loves is one of the dominant images of Scripture. We should rejoice in painful situations as we know that through them God is producing character in us (Romans 5:3-5). God wants fruitfulness from us because this is of lasting benefit and is also best for us – He will refine our priorities and remove from our lives those things that would distract us from the purpose of bearing fruit. **If you are serious about growing, be serious about prioritising God's will for your life, even if this means sacrifice or painful experiences.**

2. Remaining in Christ (v4)

To produce fruit the branches must remain in the Vine. As believers, we must constantly remain in Christ. How do we do this? Christ connects it to the idea of obedience – to remain in Him is to remain in His love, and this means to obey His commands (vv9&10). To remain in Christ we must take His teaching seriously and obey it in our lives. This is why Christ connects the idea of being included in Him with His word spoken to the disciples (v3) and connects the idea of us remaining in Him with His commands remaining in us (v7). To grow as a Christian we must feed on the word of God. How can we obey Christ unless we know what He is commanding us to do? How can we know this without reading God's Word and seeking to be taught by those gifted to teach us? It is not enough to have great head-knowledge – we must be obedient to what we learn. The words of Christ must become the foundation of our lives. **If you are serious about growing, be serious about reading the Bible and applying it to your life.**

3. Prayer in Jesus' name (vv7&16)

The third key for growth is prayer in Jesus' name. In 14:13 we have already seen Jesus' wonderful promise that He would do whatever His disciples ask in His name so that the Father may be glorified. Here He restates this promise. However, He makes it clear that this right to ask in His name depends on our remaining in Him (v7). We cannot expect God to give us whatever we ask for our own good or if we are not walking in obedience to Christ. However, the promise is clear that if we ask in Jesus' name for the power to be obedient to Christ's commands He will give it. When we seek God's glory and surrender our lives to Him we will not lack God's provision to accomplish His will. Why is it, then, that as Christians we so often neglect prayer? Our prayer meetings should be full and over-flowing, and our lives should be constantly marked by prayerful communion with the Father if we really grasp the magnitude of Christ's promise. It is interesting that this works through prayer. God will give us what we ask for – why then would we not ask? **If you are serious about growing, be serious about prayer!**

4. Love for fellow disciples (v12)

The last key for growth in this passage is love for our fellow disciples. Christianity is not an individual life – it is a life of community. It is impossible to grow as a Christian outside of the community of God's people. Commitment to a local fellowship of Christians is vital for spiritual growth. If you are not laying down your life in loving service for your brothers and sisters as Christ commanded, how

can you be fulfilling His commands? Local church fellowship is not an optional add-on to your Christian life – it is central to it. You cannot claim to love the Lord without seeking to encourage, build up and support those He loves! **If you are serious about growing, be serious about commitment to and service in your local church.**

The withered branches

Jesus speaks in verses 2 and 6 about the branches that do not produce fruit. The end result for them will be burning in the fire. These branches have no relationship with the vine and are fit only for the bonfire (just as the branches of a vine have no usefulness if they are not fruitful). This is part of the process of cultivating vines in which the dead branches are removed in the winter. These verses raise important questions about our relationship with Christ. Is it possible for someone to be a true believer and then to lose their salvation? Can someone be a true branch, connected to Christ, bearing fruit and then become unfruitful and be cut out from Christ again? This passage does not answer that question. Jesus does not say that it is possible for a branch that has born fruit to become unfruitful. In fact, the fruit that is born lasts (v16), and so it would seem that if someone has actually born fruit they cannot become a branch that does not bear fruit. To answer this question conclusively we would have to look at other Bible passages. We cannot say from this passage if fruitfulness is the evidence of a genuine connection with Christ or if it is possible for the connection with Him to be broken. However, the warning of Christ here is very stark. A person who professes to be a believer in Christ, but whose life bears no evidence of fruit, cannot truly be connected to (remaining in) Him. It may be that Christ had Judas in mind here, but His words surely have an application to those who profess to follow Christ today as well.

This has implications for our lives if we claim to be Christians, and also for how we practice evangelism. In our own lives we must make every effort to make our calling and election sure (II Peter 1:10). It would be a dangerous thing to assume that you are saved on the basis of a prayer you prayed once or a feeling you once had or a childhood profession if there has been no lasting fruit in your life. It is possible to have assurance of salvation (in fact this was the reason why John wrote his first epistle) but we should not assume it. If your life has been changed by God give thanks to Him and continue to live for Him. If you aren't sure then why not now humble yourself before Him, repent of your sin and trust in Him for salvation? Furthermore, when we evangelise we must be wise about this truth. Too often I have heard people say that x number of people accepted Christ on a particular night or at a particular event, but when I inquire how they know that they say because they raised their hand or prayed with someone. I am not saying that people cannot be saved in a single encounter with God – of course they can – but we must be careful not to give false assurance to others. It is wise when counselling new believers to encourage them to grow spiritually through seeking God's will, obeying His word, praying to Him and having fellowship with His people, and we can surely give them assurance that those who truly believe in Christ will be saved, but we should perhaps be less hasty to give them full assurance or to tell others that they have trusted in Christ. It is the Holy Spirit's job to bring assurance of salvation, not ours, and no one who is truly in Christ will be lost because we have not given them immediate assurance. It is often wise to wait and see the change in their life before giving full assurance. This requires a great deal of wisdom and sensitivity. Each case is unique, and we should be wary about a "one size fits all" approach to helping seekers. We must also realise too that a person becomes a Christian when they come to the point of surrender and commitment to Christ. This may be before they even ask someone to pray with them. Sometimes in counselling seekers we are actually helping people to understand what has already happened to them rather than actually helping them to come to that point.

In local churches I believe that the leaders have a responsibility to admit to membership only those whose lives show evidence of genuine conversion. Of course, the leaders are human and we may get it wrong some times, but we should not accept people on their word alone if their lifestyle does not match it. Sadly, in my experience, I have met people who have been professing Christians for a long period of time, baptised and members of a local church, but whose lives seem to have no evidence of love. They may even be involved in ministry and may even claim to have spiritual gifts, but there is no love for those who are different from them. It is not for me to judge, but I wonder if perhaps the Lord will say to these people on the final day of judgement "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers" (Matthew 7:23). However, in the final analysis, God knows those who are His (II Timothy 2:19), those who He has chosen (v16), and we can have confidence that if we remain in Him He will use us, prune us, and make His dwelling place with us.

Friends of Christ

In verses 13 to 15 Jesus uses a new word to describe His relationship with the disciples – friend. In the Old Testament people were sometimes called friends of God (e.g. Abraham – see James 2:23) but the words of Jesus here have a special significance. Kings in the ancient world had many servants, but they also had an inner circle of men who were closer to them than brothers. They often grew up with these men from boyhood – learning and training with them. These men had constant right of access to the presence of the King – they could even come into his bedchamber in the early morning. They were known as the “friends of the King”. Jesus is admitting His disciples into that same intimacy. I have to confess that I struggle with singing songs that describe Jesus as my friend. I am not entirely sure if this is appropriate, or if it is just a reticence on my part, but I know this much: Jesus calls us His friends. Likewise He calls us His brothers (Hebrews 2:11), although I am not sure that this gives us the right to call Him our brother. I don’t read anywhere in the New Testament where the apostles called Jesus brother or friend – perhaps we should follow their example. However, we should not lose sight of the immense privilege that this was for the disciples and is for us. Jesus gives us the right to access His presence at any time. We are connected to Him, not only as His servants but as those He loves, those with whom He shares His innermost thoughts (He made known to them everything the Father told Him – v15). What a relationship is ours!

Conclusion

We are connected to Christ – the faithful Servant who is the branch that grows from the unfaithful vine of God’s Old Covenant community. From Him we draw life and nourishment. We must seek His Father’s will, allowing Him to prune us, listen to and obey His word, live lives of prayer in His name and love our fellow disciples. So we will grow to ever greater fruitfulness – full of love and joy – bringing glory to the Father, and the world will see the transformation in our lives and know that we are the disciples of Christ.

We need, then to ask ourselves some very important questions as we apply the truth of this passage to our lives:

- Are you one of the branches that receives its life from Christ, or is it possible that you are a fruitless branch?
- Are you seeking God’s will for your life – how might He be pruning you at this stage in your relationship with Him? What things in you might He need to prune away to make you more fruitful?
- Are you learning and obeying Christ’s words? When was the last time you really read the Bible seeking to apply its truth to your life? How is your daily Bible reading? How seriously do you take the teaching you receive from others?
- Are you living in constant prayerful communion with God? Is prayer really important to you, and do you really believe that God answers prayer? Does this show in your attitude to prayer meetings in the church?
- Are you loving your fellow disciples as Christ loved you? Do you see church more as a place to be served or to serve? Are you fully committed to building into the lives of the others in your local church?
- Are you bearing much fruit? Would people look at your life and be attracted to it? Do you display love and joy in such measure that the world stops and asks why?

Brothers and sisters, we must assess ourselves and surrender ourselves afresh to God. May the Holy Spirit fill us and work through us to make us fruitful, Christ-like and effective in our witness to God. Through us may the world see Jesus and in Him find life. Israel failed to be the light to the world. The Church of Christ cannot fail, for it has His very life coursing in its veins. May I play my part in this wonderful mission of God.