

The Vine and the Branches, Part 1

John 15:1-7

1. Jesus, who has been talking about betrayal, his own departure and death, has just ushered them out of the upper room, uttering the cryptic and alarming statement, “I will not say much more to you, for the prince of this world—Satan—is coming.” As they walk around Jerusalem at night, he tells them of the vine and the branches. Vine and vineyard imagery was used in the OT to refer to Israel, and almost always in a context of judgement. (Ps 80:8, 14, Jer 2:21, 6:9, 8:13, Ezek 15:1-8, 17, etc.). We read this and hear a children’s message; they would have heard a diagnosis of cancer.

A prime example of the vine imagery from the OT is Psalm 80, which is a post-mortem plea after the fall of the northern kingdom. Read Ps 80: 4-7; 14-19. Does anything strike you about Ps 80?¹ In what way does Jesus maintain the traditional metaphor, and how does he turn it on its head?

2. The “fruit” is best understood as becoming more like Jesus in showing the “fruit of the Spirit” (Gal 5:22-23, “love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control”).² This is consistent with the OT use of this metaphor, where character change leads to justice and faithfulness to God. Focusing on character change, name someone who epitomizes this sort of Christlike character. (I.e., what’s the goal look like?)
3. The Father wants you to grow and bear fruit. Jesus doesn’t mention water or the sunshine, focusing instead on pruning. Why would it have been important for the disciples to hear about *pruning* on this particular night?
4. Early church writers interpreted Jesus’ reference to pruning to mean persecution (Justin Martyr³), purges (Chrysostom), or simply letting go of our pleasures and desires (Cyril of Alexandria, and later, Calvin). Pruning may mean turning from an unhealthy obsession or relationship, or even giving up something good, the loss of which brings you closer to God.

Have you ever experienced such a loss? Is there anything you feel God might be calling you to surrender?

5. In verse 3, Jesus says the disciples are already “clean.” This is not the non sequitur it appears to be; the Greek for “clean” (καθαρός/*katharos*) also means “pruned.” Jesus is saying that the disciples are “pruned” because of his teaching. This echoes 8:31-32, where Jesus says, “...if you **abide** in my word, you are truly my disciples. You will know the truth and the truth will set you free.” How did Jesus’ words “prune” the disciples? What does this say to a modern disciple who would like to be more fruitful (2), more free (8:31-32), more joyful (11), more loving (10), closer to Jesus (15), and experience more answered prayer (16)?

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Fun fact: The temple of Herod “sported a massive (and annually augmented) golden vine,” probably meant to represent Israel. Some commentators “suspect that Jesus, who had led the disciples out of the upper room in the upper city in 14:31, now points to the golden vine in the temple, which they are passing; after all, the temple doors were reportedly left open at night during the Passover season.” (Keener’s John commentary, p. 992. Pure, but interesting speculation.)

¹ Note that in 80:15, the Hebrew word translated “son” also means “branch.”

² Some also see fruit as obedience (vv. 16-17) particularly in the form of love (v. 12), and spreading this love (i.e., evangelism).

³ “For it is plain that, though beheaded, crucified, thrown to the wild beasts, and chains and fire and all other kinds of torture, we do not give up our confessions.”

Be still and know that I am God,
be still and know that I am God,
be still and know that I am God.

In thee, O Lord, I put my trust,
In thee, O Lord, I put my trust,
In thee, O Lord, I put my trust.

Leader's Intro:

1. The vine metaphor was used in the OT typically in the context of judgment, the vine being Israel. Here, *Jesus* is the vine.
2. Perhaps the most relevant OT use of this imagery is from Ps 80...
3. Note the plays on words in vv. 1-2:

God "cuts off" [αἴρω/*airo*] (15:1) unfruitful branches

God "prunes" [καθαίρω/*kathairo*] (15:2) fruitful branches

The disciples are already "clean"/pruned [καθαρός/*katharos*] because of Jesus' words.

Earlier (13:10) Jesus told them, "you are clean but not all", a likely reference to Judas

Themes and question ideas:

- What is meant by "fruit"? Carson: obedience, new converts, love, Christian character. "These interpretations are reductionistic. The branch's purpose is to *bear much fruit* (v. 5), but the next verses show that this fruit is the consequence of prayer in Jesus' name, and is to the Father's glory (vv. 7, 8, 16). This suggests that the 'fruit' in the vine imagery represents everything that is the product of effective prayer in Jesus' name, including obedience to Jesus' commands (v. 10), experience of Jesus' joy (v. 11 – as earlier his peace, 14:27), love for one another (v. 12), and witness to the world (vv. 16, 27)." [517]
- Pruning: suffering and loss that bring growth. Is there a time in your life when, looking back, you can see that losing something (a habit, an attachment, an unhealthy relationship, a goal, a dream, etc.) drew you closer to God? Is there something in your life now the loss of which would draw you closer to Jesus?
- Abiding and fruit-bearing as modeled in Jesus' relationship with the Father: abiding speaks to a relationship. We
- Being cleaned by Jesus' words
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John's gospel is unlike the others because of the degree to which John writes on multiple levels, but with the simplest vocabulary of any of them. At first it sounds like a fortune cookie—it's so repetitive, the sentences so short, the writing so seemingly artless. But if you take the time to sit in it and pay attention and follow his hyperlinks which are so central to his writing, it pays off and you start to see things the way Neo does in the matrix, and a whole world opens up.

So when we read this passage, at first it's ho-hum, so churchy and 2-D. Remain in me. Stick by me. I would like us to dig in and spend enough time in this passage to see beyond the churchy language to get what Jesus is saying here and be changed by it.

If you do you'll get what you pray for, a promise so amazing that it actually *undermines* the rest of passage. It would be 100x more effective to our minds if he had said, abide in me and you won't be quite as lonely and you'll get 10% less joint pain. THAT would seem amazing. THIS is a WAY bigger promise, so much so that we read it and think we have wandered into mythology and find ourselves writing it all off.

So what do we do with this passage? The only way to get into the Bible, and especially into John, is to sit with it. That's when you notice the gorilla walking behind the basketball players. That's when you notice the giant toothbrush, when you see that this passage isn't at all what you expected.

And of course you also need to ask how disciples would have heard Jesus' words. And to do that, it helps to remember where we are at. It's the last night before Jesus is going to surrender himself to torture and death, and this final lesson is one you can tell he thought about a LOT, because it's got to hold them when he's gone. What's more, he's just added

this super cryptic line where he says, “I will not say much more to you, for the prince of this world—meaning Satan—is coming,” after which he rushes them out the door, and they leave the upper city to wander Jerusalem at night. If they weren’t creeped out *before* that, if his mood and manner didn’t say that it was about to get very real, they were now.

And having told them that they could expect a change of custody because the HS was coming, and it would all be okay even though they didn’t have a clue what he meant, he now brings out this image of a vine and branches. Now these weren’t the A students, but I they probably knew that whenever this image is used in the Hebrew Bible it’s bad news, either a warning or an explanation for why things went so wrong. Where we hear this like a children’s message, they would have heard the doctor telling them they have cancer. A great example of this from the OT is Psalm 80, which is a post-mortem from the fall of the northern kingdom. Listen to these verses:

How long, Lord God Almighty,
will your anger smolder
against the prayers of your people?
⁵You have fed them with the bread of tears;
you have made them drink tears by the bowlful.
⁶You have made us an object of derision^[b] to our neighbors,
and our enemies mock us.
⁷Restore us, God Almighty;
make your face shine on us,
that we may be saved.

Then later in the Psalm, we read this remarkable plea:

Watch over this vine,
¹⁵ the root your right hand has planted,
the son, the branch you have raised up for yourself. [Heb for “son” can mean “branch”]
Let your hand rest on the man at your right hand,
the son of man you have raised up for yourself.
¹⁸Then we will not turn away from you;
revive us, and we will call on your name.
¹⁹Restore us, Lord God Almighty;
make your face shine on us,
that we may be saved.

This is NOT even REMOTELY what the disciples want to hear. But Jesus puts a twist on it that is easy to miss at first. In the Hebrew Bible, Israel is the vine, the vine that so often disappoints the farmer. In this passage, though, Jesus is the vine, not Israel. When the Psalmist wrote about the son of man, the man at your right hand, he was asking God to less their king, and to bless them. Jesus says I am that person, that king, that leader.

That’s the context. But what about the content? Jesus starts with the warning, like any good vineyard metaphor: the Father will cut off the unproductive branches. He’s about to go away, and he wants them to know what to do when he’s gone, how to keep growing when he’s not there in person to correct their weird ideas and to settle their disputes and tell them the next thing to do. More than that, he tells them how to flourish spiritually, but flourish is too churchy a word. He is telling them how to be amazing people, how to walk on water, how to be ten feet tall, how to be the kind of person people can’t forget, who makes a difference.

And this is why I think God wants us to study this passage right now, because we all crave this. It may be number 19 on our list of hopes and desires below “I hope my kids don’t break any more bones” and “I would love to get a good night’s sleep twice in a row” and “I hope I win the lottery so I can afford college and retirement.” But it’s there and when we aren’t just trying to survive, we may remember that we once dreamed of having lives that are remarkable.

There are four key themes in this passage which can be brought out for discussion:

1. Pruning: The Father *wants* you to grow and bear fruit. Jesus doesn’t mention the water, the sunshine, but rather the pruning. The disciples were about to be “sifted,” to face personal loss and disillusionment and shame. They were going to be pruned. Jesus wanted them to know that this was not a sign of God’s disfavor, but rather his

love. Similarly we face pruning. The early church writers interpret this to mean persecution (Justin Martyr—“though beheaded, crucified, thrown to the wild beasts, and chains and fire and all other) and purges (Chrysostom)

<i>Jesus and the Father</i>		Jesus and us	
5:19: <i>the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing (also 14:31). 5:20: the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does. Yes, and he will show him even greater works than these, so that you will be amazed</i>	The Son obeys and imitates the Father. The Father shows the Son all <i>He</i> does.		
5:26: <i>For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself (also 6:57)</i>	The Father gives life to the Son		
	The Father and Son are united in love		

Extra questions and observations:

1. ...