

The Vine and the Branches, John 15:1-17

Part 3: Big picture and big implications

Abide [μένω, *menō*]: to live (1 John 3:9), stay (Acts 9:43), remain (1 Cor 7:40), endure (2 Cor 9:9), stand (Rom 9:11), persist (1 Tim 2:13), continue (Heb 13:1)

1. What is your favorite thing which Jesus did? (Not including dying for your sins.) What thing is Jesus described as doing in the gospels, which you resonate with, cheer about, find yourself thinking about, etc.—and why?
2. In Jesus' final session with the disciples, when every minute was precious, he devotes considerable time to describing his relationship with the Father. Amazingly, despite the colossal failure and lack of understanding the disciples are going to display that evening, Jesus invites them into the same depth and character of relationship which he has with the Father (see Table below). Often Christians read this passage to mean "be close to Jesus and you'll be a productive Christian."

Is Jesus really offering the same closeness to him and the Father and they enjoy with one another? What, if anything, in Jesus' description of his relationship with the Father stands out as unusual?

3. Have you ever had a relationship in which you knew that if you earnestly and sincerely asked for anything from the other person, the answer would be yes if it could be?
4. As early as Augustine, "whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you" has been interpreted to mean that "*abiding* in Jesus and allowing his words to abide in one (which is roughly equivalent in practice) entail continuing to love and trust in Jesus, with the assurance that the lover of Jesus, whose desires are ultimately for Jesus' agendas, will receive answered prayer" (Keener, *John*, Vol. 2, 998).

We might ask whether we pray for the same sorts of things Jesus and Paul did. We might also ask whether Jesus intended this as a law of prayer, the way Christians often treat it... and when our prayers aren't answered, we find ourselves treating it as a limp tautology: "just ask what the Father *already* wants to do and the answer is yes."

Instead, let's to think of "abiding" in terms loving faithfulness and trust as in a deep, close relationship to a family member, friend, or spouse. Consider the significant other in such a relationship in your life. Have that person's responses to requests evolved as that relationship has deepened from casual to deep?

Jesus, the Father, and You:

How to be as close to the Father as Jesus is

Jesus and the Father		Jesus, the Father, and you	
They are close; the Father loves the Son	“I am in the Father and the Father is in me”; “anyone who has seen me has seen the Father”; “I have kept my Father’s commands and dwell in his love” (14:9-10; 15:10)	We can dwell in Jesus’ love and experience the same closeness with God, Jesus, and one another as the Son and the Father	“If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love”; “I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one— I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity” (15:10)
The Father empowers Jesus and fills him with life	“It is the Father living in me who is doing his work”; “For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself” (14:9-10; 6:57; 5:26)	Jesus gives us life and empowers us	“Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me.” (6:57); “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit” (15:7-8)
The Father tells Jesus his plans and gives him authority	“The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands”; “the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does” (3:35; 5:20; 14:31)	The Son tells us everything	“I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.” (15:15)
Apart from the Father Jesus can do nothing	“By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me.” (5:19, 30)	Apart from Jesus we can do nothing	“If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.” (15:5)
The Son obeys and imitates the Father	“[The Holy Spirit] comes so that the world may learn that I love the Father and do exactly what my Father has commanded me” (14:31; 5:19-20)	We must obey Jesus particularly in giving up our lives in love for one another	“Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them” (14:23)

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. ...