

The Gardener, The Vine, The Branches

Jesus often clothed his teachings in artistic literary styles and figures of speech such as similes, metaphors, and parables. Like an artist who veils a scene in color, Jesus would veil truth in the artistry of language. An example of this pictures our relationship metaphorically as he portrays himself as a vine with God as the vine-dresser, and disciples as branches (John 15:1-11). We sometimes refer to these figures of speech as illustrations of truth but, rather, they actually veil a message that could have been stated more plainly.

Usually, the message of a literary device was terse and limited. But preachers of my time stayed up late studying how to make extended applications. We milked truths out of them that were not in them! For instance, in regard to this text, we might ask if the vine bore red or white grapes, if the fruit was table grapes, grapes for raisins, or for wine-making (thus becoming partners in wine-making!). We might wonder if the vine was from a seed or a cutting, and if this extended metaphor (parable) was to be meshed with the grafting Paul wrote about later in Romans 11. We might create points about the type of soil, whether it was irrigated, and how insects were controlled. All points and conclusions from such a faulty basis would be questionable and invalid. Figures are not the truth itself, and no illustration can fit all details of truth.

Without straining the text, we might visualize Jesus and the disciples passing by a vineyard as the worker cared for the plants when Jesus stated, *"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-dresser"* and *"I am the vine, you are the branches."* Fitting themselves into the picture, the lessons would be evident. It is about relationships. The Father is in charge and is concerned for each branch. Christ is the source of life and productivity of each disciple. So two things are required of the branches -- sustained relationship and productivity.

"Every branch of mine that does not bear fruit, he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit." Who are these branches? Some people have concluded that they are the various denominations, but Jesus was not addressing the church or denominations. There are no denominations in Christ -- only individuals -- though some of these persons may be aligned with different groups. Jesus left no doubt about the identity of the branches, for he explained, *"If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch..."*

The father "prunes" from our lives the excesses and diseased elements of our lives that would prevent our more abundant fruit-bearing. He told his disciples that he had already made (not accounted) them clean by the words he had spoken to them. So he used teaching to refine their conduct.

The vine works through its branches to bear fruit. It is a necessary inter-relationship requiring reciprocal action. Christ works through us and we depend upon him as our source. There are two ways that relationship may be severed. Yes, we can be severed from Christ, but only those in him can be severed from him. First, A person may alienate himself from Christ; *“If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned”* Wait a minute, you may be protesting, for you have been taught that once a person is in Christ, he is forever secure. Second, *“Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away..”* “Horrors! That is getting into “works religion”, and everybody knows we cannot work our way to heaven. “Everybody knows” except Jesus who must not have known any modern theology!

The lopped off branches are not restored. They are piled together where they wither and dry and are then thrown into the fire and burned. That, however, was not the purpose for which they were in the vine. The Father offers the greatest care and aid to make them productive. He promised, *“If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will (which relates to a fruitful life. ch), and it shall be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples.”* Yes, we glorify God and prove our discipleship by bearing much fruit. These are not works of merit but obedience of faith. The branch that is only a decoration may give the gardener more cause for ridicule than praise.

This extended metaphor is about the most satisfying of all relationships. *“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love.”* Surely, we want to remain / abide in this loving relationship, but how do we do it? What is fruit-bearing? *“If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments (a legalist? -ch) and abide in his love.”* We are willing! But what commandments? *“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.”*

Is this teaching burdensome? *“These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.”*

How is this commandment applied? This commandment is not a legal requirement to be fulfilled in formulas, rituals, quotas, and specific applications. It is a principle of conduct, a rule to apply to all of life involving constant decision making day by day. It is the cluster budding, blooming, and developing, increasing and maturing in volume, color, and flavor until the time of harvest.

In this brief essay, we have tried to gain the forthright lessons that the disciples gained as they heard the words of Jesus. Jesus did not pull snippets of teaching from here and there to add to it; so we should be cautious about muddying his clear teaching by such a manner of interpretation.

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