

The Heart of Christ – the message of the Upper Room Discourse (John 13-17)

“...having loved His own who were in the world, He love them to the end”(John 13:1.)

The Communing Savior

The Believer's Relationship to Christ (Part 1)

John 15:1-8

1 I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. 2 Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit. 3 You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. 4 Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. 5 I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. 6 If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned. 7 If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8 My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples.

In his great and masterful work, “A Sure Guide to Heaven” – the Puritan Joseph Alleine begins with these words:

“The devil has made many counterfeits of conversion, and cheats one with this, and another with that. He has such craft and artifice in his mystery of deceits that, if it were possible, he would deceive the very elect. Now, that I may cure the ruinous mistake of some who think they are converted when they are not, as well as remove the troubles and fears of others who think they are not converted when they are, I shall show you the nature of conversion...”

The nature of conversion; what does it mean to be a genuine follower or disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ in contrast to a counterfeit disciple. Alleine continues his discourse with the statement, “*Conversion is not the taking upon us the profession of Christianity.*” In other words, simply saying you are a believer, or a follower, or a disciple of Jesus Christ; simply claiming to be a child of God does not make you one.

As we come to John 15, Jesus introduces a new train of thought. Whereas the last chapter focused on issues of comfort, it would appear that one of the key themes of this chapter is focused on issues of relationships. Jesus will address His disciples concerning their relationship to Himself (John 15:1-11); to one another (John 15:12-17); to the unbelieving world (John 15:18-25); and finally to the Holy Spirit (John 15:26-27). Of course we will take our time examining these relationships beginning this morning with this theme of our relationship to Jesus (of being in union with Him) as found in verses 1-11.

Now before we look at this issue directly, let me take you back to the last statement of John 14:31 where Jesus says, “**Get up, let us go from here.**” As best as I can discern, it would appear to me that it is at this point that Jesus and His disciples dismiss themselves from the upper room. Having partook of a meal, of the Lord's Supper and having their feet washed along His teachings on love, sacrifice and comfort, Jesus and the disciples begin to make their way from the Upper Room, through Jerusalem, on their way to the Brook Kidron and to the Garden of Gethsemane. It would have been late, but we know from the time of year that the moon would have been full. As Jesus and the disciples make their way through the city, they would have crossed in front of the Temple, the beautifully adorned edifice where the people of Israel

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worshipped God. And across the front of Herod’s Temple was the “Great Golden Vine” – a golden carving of a vine that stretched across the entrance of the temple. It might every well be that Jesus, the master communicator of truth saw His disciples gazing upon the beauty of the temple and then utilized the “Great Golden Vine” to use as a metaphor – a symbolic means of teaching His followers the means by which they might know they are rightly connected to Him – that they could be called true disciples. So then, when we read in John 15:1, Jesus saying, “**I am the true vine...**” we can understand why He chose this picture – as it was before them and, as we will come to see in a moment, why this picture would have spoken so powerfully to the disciples.

So then, this morning, as we look to this theme of the believer’s relationship to Jesus, let me set before you this question; this concern that was evidently on the hearts and minds of the disciples and a question that ought to be ever before us as well; that question being, “How can we know that we are rightly connected to Jesus?” How can we know that we are real followers – for Judas had seemed real but proved to be fake? How can we know that we are in union with Jesus? (Are you rightly connected to Jesus because you go to Hope CBC? Because you read out of the NAS Bible? Because the preacher quotes from the Puritans? Because you “think” so? Because your parents say so? Because you are not a Mormon or a Jehovah’s Witness?) How can we know that we are “real” or “genuine” disciples verses those counterfeit ones spoken of by Joseph Alleine? To this question let me make this proposal...based on our text, *if we would be found true disciples of Jesus, then we must understand the essential truths of discipleship as revealed by Jesus.* The issue at hand is what is it that we must know if we would know ourselves to be true followers of Christ?

This morning I wish to hit on just the first set of truths as pulled from verses 1-3 and I see then that true disciples, true learners or followers of Jesus Christ must....

- I. Know the character of Jesus
- II. Know the character of the Father
- III. Know the character of false disciples
- IV. Know the character of true disciples

Let us consider this “musts” one by one beginning with the imperative truth that every true disciple must...

I. Know the character of Jesus (15:1a)

I am the true vine...

Indeed the first and most fundamental questions that must be answered by every true disciple of Jesus – by each of us who says we are followers of Jesus, are these, “Who is Jesus” and the “Who is Jesus to me?”

Our text begins with this great affirmation by Jesus Christ. As He passes by the Temple and sees the Great Golden Vine upon the entrance, He turns to His disciples and says, “**I am the true vine...**” Now, without getting too lost in the theology here, suffice it to say that Jesus’ statement was understood by His disciples as a reference to His deity, a proclamation of Jesus by which He testified that He was in fact the same one who identified Himself as “I am” to Moses and to Israel. Jesus was equating Himself to being Yahweh, the LORD, the eternal and Self-existent One who created the heavens and the earth, and who, as we will come to see, is the sole source of true life.

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We see Jesus referring to Himself as the vine and so, if we would be genuine disciples of Jesus Christ, we would want to know the meaning behind the use of this metaphor. Why does Jesus equate Himself here with a vine? What use is a vine? From an earthly standpoint, the wood of a vine is not stout or thick enough with which to build houses. Never did we see Solomon procure timbers from the vines of Israel for the house of the Lord but rather what...the great cedars of Lebanon. And the wood of a vine is not strong enough with which to build enduring furniture. Neither is the wood of a vine dense enough for fuel. When dried braches of vines are put on a fire, they burn very hot and very quick. So, with all of this, what use is a vine and why would Jesus use it to describe for the disciples His character? Let me tell you the one intended use of a vine; the one great purpose for which God created it – *a vine was intended to bear fruit.*

In the Old Testament, Israel was often referred to as a vine. In Psalm 80:8-10 we read:

8 You removed a vine from Egypt; You drove out the nations and planted it. 9 You cleared the ground before it, and it took deep root and filled the land. 10 The mountains were covered with its shadow, and the cedars of God with its boughs.

Israel was likened to a vine that was taken out of Egypt and planted in the land of promise. And just what was God's intention for planting this vine in the land of promise? Let us look at one other passage – Isaiah 5:1-7 where we read:

1 Let me sing now for my well-beloved a song of my beloved concerning His vineyard. My well-beloved had a vineyard on a fertile hill. 2 He dug it all around, removed its stones, and planted it with the choicest vine. And He built a tower in the middle of it and also hewed out a wine vat in it; Then He expected it to produce good grapes, but it produced only worthless ones. 3 And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, Judge between Me and My vineyard. 4 What more was there to do for My vineyard that I have not done in it? Why, when I expected it to produce good grapes did it produce worthless ones? 5 So now let Me tell you what I am going to do to My vineyard: I will remove its hedge and it will be consumed; I will break down its wall and it will become trampled ground. 6 I will lay it waste; It will not be pruned or hoed, But briars and thorns will come up. I will also charge the clouds to rain no rain on it. 7 For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel And the men of Judah His delightful plant. Thus He looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; For righteousness, but behold, a cry of distress.

God intended that Israel would produce good grapes, that the vine would produce fruit, that Israel would become a light to the nations and would proclaim the salvation of the Lord to the ends of the earth. Instead, Israel became corrupt and dreadfully sinful. But Israel, as a nation, had a hope that one day they might become fruitful, the problem was that they were seeking to be fruitful in their own way, by their own means. As the vine over the Temple might indicate, Israel had come to believe that their efforts to please God by trying to keep the Law in their own strength would make them fruitful and delightful to God. Rather than by looking to and trusting in God, they were looking to and trusting in their own abilities. If I just do this one thing, then God will be pleased with me. If I just do more good than bad, then God will be pleased with me. If I can just keep from trouble, then God will be pleased with me. But even with all their efforts and

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even with all our own efforts to try to please God on our own, we produce nothing but sour grapes.

When Jesus comes along and says to the disciples, “I am the...vine...”, He is saying that everything Israel had tried to do and failed, I am. Jesus adds the adjective, “true” – **“I am the true vine.”** The word “true” there does not so much have to do with what is true verses what is false, although such could be said, but rather carries the idea that Jesus is the perfect, essential, one and only, always enduring vine. In John 1:9, Jesus is called the “true” or perfect, essential, one and only light. In John 6:32, Jesus refers to Himself as the “true” or perfect, essential, one and only, bread of life.

What is it that genuine disciples are to know about Jesus and apply to themselves? Well...here we have it. Jesus is the true vine. He is the only vine. Jesus is the only one who has ever proven to be perfectly and enduringly fruitful. Whereas Israel failed to be a light to the nations, Jesus has come and provided us with everything necessary for life and godliness. Who is Jesus to you? Is He your vine...your sole source of fruitfulness. Of course we read in John 15:5 that apart from Jesus, without being rightly connect to the vine, the source of life, and sustenance, you can do nothing? We sing songs that proclaim Jesus is our “all in all.” We sing words like, “Jesus is all the world to me...” For the true disciple, such truths are more than words, they are present and visible realities. The true disciple (as the Philippians 3:8 reminds us) counts all things as lost in comparison of the surpassing value of “knowing Christ Jesus” as Lord.

How about you? Do you see Jesus as being so valuable that nothing else in your life competes with His supremacy in your life? I know, we all have those things that fight for the number one place in our lives and until Jesus returns we always will. But don’t let the presence of the fight dull you to your need to be “taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5).

Let us be careful lest we think that we are vines unto ourselves and even in some zeal to do things for God, we think we can do them our way, in our time and even to some extent to our glory. Let us remember with the apostle Paul, “For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh...” (Romans 7:18). When Jesus says that He is the true vine, He was reminding His disciples that in Him alone is life; in Him alone is the supply for all goodness and godliness. Galatians 2:20 is familiar but so apt here saying, **“I have been crucified with Christ (I am dead – that is “my” will and “my” ability to sustain anything of lasting value) and it is no longer I who lives (it’s not about me, it about Christ); but Christ lives in me...”** This is understanding Jesus as the true vine, the only fruitful one who will produce His fruit in us, if we so know Him, if we are thus connected to Him. But not only must genuine disciples know this about the character of Jesus, the must also...

II. Know the character of the Father (15:1b)

...and My Father is the vinedresser.

The next picture Jesus uses in His metaphor is that of a vinedresser by which He illustrates for us the character of the Father. In just a moment we are going to look in more detail the duties and functions of the vinedresser, but let me make a couple of observations that I hope bring some encouragement to our souls. When Jesus calls the Father the vinedresser, it tells us some important things. First, it implies ownership and sovereignty. The Father here is presented as the sovereign over the vine and the branches. They are His and He will do to them as He sees fit. Oh gracious thought that the vinedresser is both good and just.

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In addition to this sovereignty, the Father being the vinedresser implies intimacy. The Father as the husbandman or gardener, is intimately connected to the vine and the fruit of the vine. He knows by experience what is and what is not producing fruit. And to a keeper of the vine, there is nothing more important to Him than knowing that the root of the vine itself is good and viable and will produce fruit. The Father knows that the Son will produce fruit and because of this, the Father knows that every branch connected to the vine will also produce fruit.

One final observation I would make about the character of the vinedresser then is that He is providential. As we will come to see in a moment, the vinedresser makes the proper determinations as to what needs to be pruned versus what needs to be cut off. And not only that, but a good vinedresser, which I think we can safely assume the Father is, knows exactly how to prune the individual branches most effectively to produce fruit. In other words, not every branch will be pruned in the same way. Sometimes just a small shoot needs to be cut off, other times many leaves, but the Father knows the perfect circumstances to impose upon the branch to make it fruitful. So, the character of the Father is that He is sovereign, He owns the vine and the branches; He is intimate, knowing everything about the vine and its branches; and He is providential, providing everything necessary to make the branches fruitful. Is this how you see your Heavenly Father? We must know His character. But in addition to these, we must also...

III. Know the character of false disciples (15:2a)

Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away....

I do not think that it is of little importance that Jesus mentions fruitless branches before He mentions fruitful branches. Genuine disciples are to learn to be discerning of false disciples. Hear the words of Jesus from Matthew 7:15-20, saying...

15 Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. 16 You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? 17 So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. 18 A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 So then, you will know them by their fruits.

The true disciples are to know the character of false disciples and the prime determination between those who are true and those who are false is what – “you will know them by their fruits.” Well know...that’s simple enough. I mean, even the disciples understood and applied that to Judas...right? Well, okay, they messed up, but we certainly are now adept at it, right? What is the problem? It would seem that unless the fruit is just obviously rotten, we can have a hard time making the determination whether fruit is good or bad. But I read something that was profound to me and gave me an understand as to why the disciples had a hard time seeing through Judas and why we can have a hard time discerning false branches from true. Are you ready for this profundity? Our good friend, John MacArthur made this comment that answered the question. He said, “Fruit, not foliage, is the mark of true salvation.” (repeat). Beloved, sometimes the reason why we might have a hard time discerning false disciples from true disciples, sometimes the reason why there are some who are certain about their salvation when they should not be is because they are producing foliage – they are green as green can be and so we look at them and say, “Wow, they are growing!” But foliage is not the mark of salvation – fruit is – and the longer someone goes without every producing fruit, without truly growing in their love for God as

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expressed in their love for God’s people; the longer they go without growing in the true grace and knowledge of Christ, the longer they go without seeing their lives truly changed and transformed by Jesus into His likeness; then all the Bible reading (a green leaf), all the church attendance (a green leaf), all the kind words (a green leaf); all the service (a green leaf) in the world will not result in salvation. Where is the fruit?

Two summers ago I was taken captive by one of those adds for “Giant Tomato Plants” guaranteed to produce the largest, juiciest tomatoes you have ever tasted. I sent my \$19.95 plus \$5.95 for s/h and waited with great eagerness for my plants. The plants came in the mail...looking more than half dead, there was a little note that said something to the effect “Do not be concerned about appearance, just plant and water.” So I planted and watered this pathetic looking tomato seedlings and sure enough, after some time, they began to grow. They soon stood about five or six feet tall and I was tasting those tomatoes already. The flowers on them budded and I was so excited. These plants were tall, so green and I just knew the tomatoes were going to be so good. Well, the flowers did bud, and nothing happened. We had two plants and even though I waited all summer, I did not get one single piece of fruit from it. The other plant did better though, it produced one little promising piece of fruit. I watched for a couple of days and then it turned black and died. You know what I did to those tomato plants...yes...I pull them out and threw them away. They may have been called tomato plants. They even grew and were plenty green, but they were worthless plants that cost me time and money.

Notice what our text tells us about these worthless vines. The Father, the sovereign, intimate, providential vinedresser evaluates these branches that claim to be “in” Jesus, but prove not to be. For beloved, let me make this very blunt but Biblically validated statement, the inevitable result of being rightly connected to the vine is not just foliage, but fruitfulness. Now, I know that not all fruit comes at the same time, but a fruitless Christian is a phony. And now, the one question I have not answered and will not answer this week is this, “What does it mean to bear fruit?” We will answer that question next week and most of you know already many of the things that this means. But take note, if you claim to be in Christ, but are not producing fruit, then you are in a dangerous position. I would say to you to repent, to plead with God that you might be grafted in so that you might produce the fruit that is evidence of salvation.

Let us learn that just because someone looks green and leafy doesn’t mean they are fruitful. Let us learn to discern both in ourselves and others the fruit that God is looking for in our lives. This brings us to our final consideration of the day. Not only must we know the character of the vine, of the vinedresser and of false disciples, but we must also

IV. Know the character of true disciples (15:2b-3)

...and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may become bear more fruit. You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you.

It would seem somewhat evident that in contrast to false disciples who simply produce foliage, the character of true disciples is that they are healthy, fruit-bearing branches. In fact, the only validation any person has that they are truly and rightly connected to Jesus Christ is that he is producing fruit. Nothing else can bring this assurance. The question for us then is this – Are you being fruitful? Do you see within yourself repentance, confession of sin, an increasing joy and delight in the things of the Lord, a putting away and a putting off of those things that interfere or rob you of that joy and delight?

But I would have you notice that the vinedresser does something different with fruitful branches than He did with the fruitless branches. The fruitless branches are taken away (John

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1:29), but fruitful branches are pruned so that they might be even more fruitful. In the time of Christ, and I would assume the same is true today, the vinedresser would look at the fruitful branches and remove any shoots that might cause the branch to break, or he might pinch off leaves that might rob the nutrients of the vine from getting fully to the grapes.

Here Jesus then makes a spiritual application. The Father prunes His fruitful branches – this is to say, that He will remove anything that might limit our fruitfulness. The pruning of the vinedresser demonstrates His care, His concern, even His love for us. For each of us has room to grow. We are called to ever-increasing sanctification...to be set apart more and more to God and from the influences of the world. Each of us has areas of our lives that need to be renewed by the work of Spirit as we develop thoughts or habits that rob us from being as fruitful as we could be. Each of us have areas of our lives that simply need to be stripped away, shoots that steal from us the ability to bear more fruit. So then, the Father uses His skill, sometimes through circumstances, or sometimes through the care or discipline of another to pinch off or clean away sin in our lives.

But according to verse three, the primary tool the Father uses to clean or prune His braches is the word. It is the word spoken to us by Jesus, not only by His own mouth, but also through the prophets and the apostles by which we come to see the holiness of God, the sinfulness of our heart and our need for spiritual cleansing. As vinedressers would use a knife to cut off the unnecessary shoots from the branches, the Word of God become such a knife in our lives. As Charles Spurgeon said,

"The Word is often the knife with which the great Husbandman prunes the vine; and, brothers and sisters, if we were more willing to feel the edge of the Word, and to let it cut away even something that may be very dear to us, we should not need so much pruning by affliction."

Beloved, sometime the pruning process hurts. The Lord may take away something that we did love, or being something into our lives that seems hard to deal with. But will we remember that as the vinedresser, the great purpose is not to hurt or harm us, but to make us fruitful. According to John 15:8, this glorifies God, when we bear much fruit.

So then, let us understand and apply these truths to our lives. If we would be true disciples of Jesus, we must know Jesus as the perfect, essential and enduring source of all fruitfulness. He alone is life; He alone is fruitful and apart from Him, we can do nothing. Have you come to see and experience this about Jesus ? We must see the Father as the sovereign, intimate and providential vinedresser who uses circumstances and the Word to clean and prune us that we might bear more fruit and glorify Him. We must be able to discern, as best we can between simply bearing foliage, as do false disciples and bearing fruit as do true disciples. These are essential truths about discipleship; about being truly in Christ; about knowing the reality of conversion. May you know and grow in these things to His glory.

Soli Deo Gloria

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