

BIBLE BACKGROUND

John 15:1-8

Verses 1-4

I am the true vine and my Father is the vine dresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he cuts off and everyone that bears fruit he cleanses it so that it may produce more fruit. You are already clean on account of my word, which I have spoken to you. Remain in me and I in you. Just as the branch cannot produce fruit of itself unless it is in the vine so you cannot if you do not remain in me.

Such simple language and yet profound truth! We cannot save ourselves by the fruit we produce. Indeed, the fruit we ought to produce cannot come from out of any strength or act of the will or **of itself** as the Lord said. Lack of fruit leads to a final judgement that Christ said he was not responsible for (3:17) but the Father would enact. He had come into the world to offer God's gift of salvation to all. Therefore, **the Father is the vine dresser** γεωργός, the one who removes a branch should it fail to produce fruit. In Matt 7:19 this same severe judgement of non-fruiting Christians is preached. Fruit, here, are the specific Christian behaviours such as worship, witness, growth in holiness and knowledge of Christ, service to others and loving fellowship within the church.

Those branches bearing fruit, **he prunes** or literally cleanses. This is an odd term but probably refers to pruning unproductive side shoots and dead wood. Jesus may have chosen this word because of the Jewish cleansing rituals in order to reveal what is true cleansing (2:6; 13:6-10). For the Christian, cleansing is a word that reminds us of baptism. Paul speaks of it as a washing of regeneration (Tit 3:5) and Saul is asked to arise and wash away his sins (Acts 22:16). However, initiation into Christ is not a concern here but the actions of the Father to purify Christian love and witness. Christ mentions that his disciples **are already clean through the word that I have spoken to you** (13:10). It was a special concern of the Lord to keep his disciples holy and separated from the world of sinful people (17:17), which could only happen through the word. So, it can be stated that the pruning of the branches is likened to cleansing because it is hardship, discipline and repentance and thus returning to the word of Christ on a daily basis that purifies and perfects Christian people.

What fruit does our Lord mean? He gave a new commandment in ch. 13, to love one another (15, 34). It is in this chapter that our Lord also mentions cleansing (10). Christ acknowledged that those he was addressing already were joined to him by faith in his **word**. The word was his saving word, not merely conversation, but the proclamation of the truth that would set them free from their sins (8:32). Though love and unity within the church are the obvious ones. Since branches are joined to the vine, then the whole character of Christ can be included in such fruit. Witness and growth of the church are also included as fruitfulness.

Just as Jesus was responsible for the disciples' salvation through the truth of his gospel, which contained grace and truth (1:17), so it is his life in us that produces fruit. His love is something real and a profound renewal takes place when the grace of God in Christ is experienced. The critical thing is **remaining in Christ**. We cannot make a decision for Christ but we can make a decision against him. This happens when we keep avoiding contact with him, which takes place in the midst of his people gathered around his word, his baptismal cleansing and the receiving of him in the Lord's Supper. Brother Lawrence calls this 'separating yourself from the presence of God.'

And so Jesus is justified in saying: **I am the true vine** ἄμπελος, the last of his I am sayings. These sayings are metaphors and they all revolve around the theme of life. Human beings cannot have life until Christ is in them and they in him. Why didn't Christ use the metaphor of a cedar or olive tree? His Father called his chosen Israel a vine (Ps 80:8; Jer 2:21; Ezek 19:10) or a vineyard (Isa 5:1). Jesus claimed to be the new Israel, the incarnation of what God wanted Israel to be in relation to him.

Christ urged this on his disciples: **remain in me and I in you**. There is something mystical about this but mostly it is a reference to faith and the continual feeding on Christ through his word. The **bread of life** metaphor picks this up in ch. 6:53. The **I am** portion is a claim to divinity and equality with the Father and the adjective **true** establishes exclusivity, that is, life in its enduring power and highest quality only exists in Jesus and in those to whom he chooses to give it. Connection with Jesus is life; disconnection is death. What he says of his indwelling also applies to the Spirit (14:17) and the Father (14:23). Our actions can be actions against Christ himself, particularly, absence from the source of life.

The direction of this life is from God to us and back to God. Thus, the divine Logos takes on human flesh and blood (1:14). This is the true **word**, the only word that can give life. In love Christ, the enfleshed word, gives himself to the world for its life. Those who come to Christ through the truth of his word via the Spirit's teaching, enter into his body and life and he enters into their bodies and lives. Because he goes to the Father, all believers in Christ are in the Father eternally, which happens now and at the resurrection.

Verses 5-8

I am the vine, you are the branches. He who remains in me and I in him bears much fruit for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me he is thrown outside and withers like a branch. People gather [dead branches] and they throw them into the fire and it burns them. If you remain in me and my words remain in you whatever you wish and ask for, it will be given to you. In this way my Father is glorified that you bear much fruit and will be [seen to be] my disciples.

Jesus applied the metaphor directly to his disciples. Each Christian is a branch and as the life of the vine flows into the branches, so Christ's life flows into every person joined to him. More than this, there is an abiding fellowship and unity that takes place, moving from the believer to Christ and Christ to the believer. As I said above, this is a mystery but is more easily understood by us as the receiving of Christ and all that he wishes to give.

Christ repeats the **I am** saying, without the adjective, **true**. The passage is much the same as above but it moves to the confidence Christians gain by bearing fruit for Christ.

The **remaining** or abiding in the vine result is the bearing of **much fruit**, has already been discussed above. The qualifier is **much**. Jesus did not speak of spectacular fruit, tremendous feats. Some can do extraordinary things and be like Paul and other great Christians. Christians display a variety of fruit in abundance, characterized by love. Another way of looking at this is that the effect of a Christian on the lives of others is to be extensive, felt by many and to have a lasting and deep impact. The example is Christ himself who changed the lives of many through his loving gift of himself in death and resurrection. Where there was no fruit of hope, love, prayer, worship and witness, now such things abound.

Apart from me you can do nothing repeats the thought of **a branch unable to bear fruit of itself** ἀφ' ἑαυτοῦ. People can live outwardly decent lives and achieve great things for others but be far from God and still have great sins of pride, greed, arrogance etc. Christ promised an inner change by experience his presence and gifts of love.

Jesus extended the metaphor by introducing the corollary of living separated from Christ. Just as branches **cut off** (2) are allowed to **wither** and dry out, then bundled and **thrown onto the fire**, so the heavenly Father judges, particularly, those who have been granted life, like Israel, but refuse to remain in Christ. There is a polemic here against the Jewish people who refused their Messiah.

In verse 3 Jesus mentions how he had cleansed his disciples through his **word** λόγον, he again mentions that the abiding in Christ is actually abiding in his **words** or **teachings** ρήματά. Christ

continues to enter or remain with his children by his gospel (8:31) but those who once remained with God will no longer if they refuse to receive him whom God gives to them, namely his Son.

The promise attached to prayer in his name is not about material needs so much as what is required to carry out the task of mission and serving in the church (14:13). It is connected with the last statement about **bearing much fruit** and revealing through this that one is a **disciple** of Christ (17:21,23). The promise of Christ's abiding presence was also given in Matt 28:20, promised in the context of mission. Bearing fruit is thus completing the will of Christ and engaging in his mission of saving the world.

The aim of bearing fruit is to **glorify the Father**. Being a disciple of Christ is in itself, already a glorification of God for Christ says, **you will be my disciples**. The glorification of Christ that comes about by believing in him produces fruit that testifies to the life of Christ in the believer (13:35), which in turn glorifies the Father who has given his Son (17:1-3,10).