

THE VINE AND THE FRUIT

by Ray C. Stedman

In the 15th chapter of John's gospel our Lord uses the beautiful symbol of the vine and its branches. We who live in California are surrounded by vineyards. Thus we are particularly well situated to understand something about the culture of the vine, how it grows, and how it produces fruit.

Chapter 14 closed with the word of Jesus to the disciples. "Rise, let us go hence." It appears that our Lord and the disciples then left the Upper Room, situated in the southwest corner of the old city of Jerusalem on the side of Mt. Zion, to wend their way through the vineyards that grew around Jerusalem at this time. It was the Passover season, and that meant a full moon. In the bright moonlight, Jesus and the eleven disciples passed through the vineyards, down across the Tyropoeon Valley, around the walls of Jerusalem, eventually through the Kidron Valley and up to Gethsemane's garden on the Mount of Olives.

Without a doubt the disciples were struggling to apprehend the magnificent truths that Jesus had been teaching them in the Upper Room. Several times he had referred to his return to the Father by means of his death. This had saddened them and awakened foreboding in their hearts. He had spoken about a coming Spirit who would take his place, and yet, in a remarkable way, bring him back to them. This must have puzzled them because as yet they knew nothing of the Day of Pentecost. Especially were they pondering the meaning of the strange phrase Jesus repeatedly used, "You in me and I in you." So, in that wonderful way that Jesus had of using whatever was at hand to illustrate truth, he picked up a vine and said these words:

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. You are already made clean by the word which I have spoken to you." {John 15:1-3 RSV}

These familiar words have aroused considerable discussion as to their meaning. It would be interesting to guess how the scholars would have interpreted this if our Lord had used the phrase which he used in many of his parables. "The kingdom of God is like a vine and its branches." They would undoubtedly have come up with some weird concepts. I have often quoted Martin Luther, "When the angels want a good laugh they read the commentaries."

But Jesus does not leave the interpretation up to us. He identifies what this rich symbolism means. "I am the vine," he says, "the true one." By that he contrasts himself with the well known symbol for the nation Israel:

The psalmist was clearly referring to Israel when he wrote in the 80th Psalm. "Thou hast brought a vine out of Egypt and planted it in this land," {cf, Psa 80:8}.

The 5th chapter of Isaiah has a beautiful picture of the "vineyard of the Lord of Hosts" {Isa 5:7}, how God guarded it and provided for it, and when he came looking for fruit he found nothing but sour grapes.

In the words, "I am the true vine," Jesus is not saying that Israel was a false vine. What he means is that he is the true vine of which the nation was a symbol, a picture. It is he who will produce at last the fruit that God was looking for through the centuries.

"My Father," Jesus declares, "is the gardener." This is the Greek word *georgos*, which means "earth worker" (the word from which we get the name "George.") That is the Father's work -- he is the "vinedresser," the gardener who takes care of the vineyard. In Verse 5, Jesus clearly identifies that believers are the branches of the vine: "I am the vine, you are the branches." Further, he indicates there are two kinds of branches -- fruitless branches and fruitful branches. Thus right at the beginning of this teaching there is a clear indication that there are two kinds of believers. The difference between them is whether they produce fruit or not.

The first work of the Father in this great vineyard is: "Every branch of mine that bears no fruit" (every fruitless believer) "he takes away." That word literally means "he lifts up" -- he removes it. When Jesus stood at the tomb of Lazarus, about to call him back out of death into life, and a great stone lay over the top of the tomb, his word to the bystanders was. "Take away the stone," {John 11:39 RSV}. There he used the same word that is used here "Take away, lift it up, remove it."

In Northern California, where we are so abundantly provided with vineyards, at a certain time of the year vinekeepers cut off certain "sucker shoots" from the vines. It is because they will never bear fruit. They will grow leaves abundantly, but they will never produce fruit. If allowed to remain, these shoots will actually sap the life of the vine and greatly reduce the quantity of fruit it will bear. The first work of the vinekeeper is to totally remove fruitless branches.

We do not have to guess what this means, although many commentators have struggled with this. It had recently happened to one of the disciples. The Father had removed Judas, the fruitless branch from the disciples' band. This was the work of God. Within the congregation of the faithful there appear from time to time men and women who appear to be believers, but they will never become fruitful branches. They may give every evidence of life, as Judas did, for he manifested the power of Christ to heal the sick, raise the dead and to cast out demons, etc. But they have never borne true fruit and never will. It is the work of the Father to remove them.

In John's first letter, the apostle says of certain people: "They went out from us, but they were not of us, for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us, but they went out that it might be plain that they all are not of us," {1 Jn 2:19 RSV}. This is the work of selecting those who are fruitbearing Christians and removing those who are not. This has happened again and again throughout the history of the church.

The second work of the Father, according to our Lord, is to cleanse the fruitbearing branches, and he uses the divine Word to do so. The word here, "prunes," really should be "cleanses." "Every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. You are already made clean by the word which I have spoken to you." Since the word for "prunes" and the word for "made clean" are the same word in the original language, this should be translated either, "Every branch that does bear fruit he prunes... You are already pruned by the word which I have spoken to you"; or else it should be, "Every branch that does bear fruit he cleanses... You have already been cleansed by the word which I have spoken to you."

We can understand why the word "prunes" is chosen if we think of it, not as being "cut off" but "cut back." This is also what vinedressers do. They not only go through a vineyard and cut off shoots, but they cut back others so that they will bear more fruit. This happens in the vineyards here in Northern California. You have driven by vineyards just after the harvest and seen, not the luxuriant vines of the summer, but ugly stumps, crowned with a few twigs on top.

Pruning is a drastic process. Jesus is clearly teaching here that this is what the Father will do in our lives to make us bear more fruit. He will drastically cut back our lives in a cleansing process. In a vineyard, pruning also removes dirt, cobwebs, dried leaves, and fungus that has collected. According to our Lord, in the believer, this is done by the "word which I have spoken unto you."

Has the word of God ever corrected you in that painful way? I have recently seen people who have been going through severe struggles during which they have felt cast down and almost destroyed. This is a pruning time in their lives. Only this morning a man from this congregation said that for ten years God has been taking him through a period when he has felt utterly destroyed within. He was profoundly shocked in his spirit. Everything he thought he was capable of doing, failed, until at last he recognized that his own energy and his own natural gifts were not enough. God has thus been "pruning" him.

Most of us have had some experience of this. Sorrow, disappointment, failure, a sense of weakness or some passing experience of life left us shocked and hurt, feeling cast off and rejected. Yet here we are encouraged to remind ourselves that this is the work of a loving Father who does it so that we may "bear more fruit."

Last week I had the privilege of playing a round of golf with Steve Bartkowski, the quarterback of the Atlanta Falcons. I play what I call "apostolic golf," learned from the Apostle Paul: "That which I would do, I do not, and that which I would not do, I do!" {cf, Rom 7:15 KJV}. Steve, a strong, handsome, athletic man, was a playboy before he became a Christian. He gave himself to sell-indulgence, living a rather wild life until God reached him through the testimony of a friend on the team. He told me how the Word of God began to correct him and cut off certain aspects of his behavior. Finding he could no longer do what he had been doing, he had to change and some of that change was painful. I was delighted with his modesty, his gentle spirit and his determination to be a useful instrument to the Lord. God is using him in great abundance these days, despite the fact that he is struggling in his career right now because of injuries he has suffered. He sees those, too, as part of the pruning of the Father, preparing him to be a much more useful and fruitful Christian.

At this point we must face the key question of this account. "What exactly is this fruit that God is expecting from us?" The reason our Lord does not identify it directly is because it was already clearly identified in the Old Testament. There, in the passages on the "vine," especially in Isaiah 5, the prophet says that God came to the nation Israel, the vineyard of the Lord of Hosts, "looking for fruit," i.e., for "justice and righteousness." But what he found was oppression and misery -- mistreatment of others without, and hurt and misery within. He calls these "sour grapes" -- not the luscious, full-flavored fruit that he had every right to expect, but twisted, distorted, sour fruit.

When we link that with what we have in the New Testament, it is clear that the fruit which Jesus is referring to here is Christlikeness -- his character reproduced in us. There is no question about this, if we compare Scripture with Scripture. In Galatians 5:22 the Apostle Paul says, "The fruit of the Spirit" (that which the Spirit produces) "is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, self-control," {Gal 5:22-23a RSV}. Nine qualities gathered as one cluster, just as a grapevine produces. It consists, really, of the spiraling application of the first three, love, joy, and peace. As those reach out to involve the relationships of life they appear as patience, loving kindness, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, and self-control. So love and joy and peace are the fruit he expects in us.

These are, of course, what Jesus was promising in the Upper Room. We have already heard him say in Chapter 14, "Peace I leave with you;" {John 14:27a RSV}. Now he is saying, "that my joy may be in you." He speaks also of his love, mentioned again and again. Love, joy, and peace are the "fruit" of the Spirit -- Christlikeness, in one word. His image reproduced in us. In Second Corinthians, Paul puts it this way, "We all with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another," {2 Cor 3:18a RSV}. It is a process. It does not happen by magic, all at once. We are being changed from one degree of glory to another, "for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit." That is the "fruit" that God is looking for.

This is what the Father is now laboring to produce in your life and in mine. If you truly belong to Jesus, he will begin to produce the fruit of the Spirit in your life. God has wondrous ways of bringing it about. He is not looking for our happiness, but our wholeness (what we used to call "holiness"), not busyness but beauty -- beauty of life, beauty of character -- not sadness but serenity. That is what he labors to produce.

Our Lord goes on to tell us the part that we play in this.

"Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing." {John 15:4-5 RSV}

It is clearly a twofold process that our Lord asks:

"Abide in me" that is the active voice. That is something we are expected to do. We imitate that. "Remain in me." "Abide in me." "Follow me."

"And I in you." The implication is, "Let me abide in you." That is passive. It is not something we can initiate but something we can expect to happen and trust God for. It takes both to be a fruitful, Christlike Christian.

One alone is not enough. This is where many Christians make a mistake. They work at one or the other but not at both.

When I was 22, I got my first car -- a beautiful Model A Ford with a rumble seat in the back. As I recall I paid \$15 for it from my brother, who had earlier bought it for \$35. (If I still had it today it would be worth thousands of dollars.) Since it was a used car it had used car problems. Occasionally it would refuse to start. The first time I had this difficulty, I called my older brother, who was much more mechanically minded than I, and asked him to help me. He handed me a screwdriver and showed me where to put it on the spark plug, and said, "Hold that." I stood there, innocently holding the screwdriver. Suddenly I felt a terrible jolt run up my arm that almost took the top of my head off. His only comment was, "Well, the spark's OK!" Then he began to work on the carburetor. After a little adjustment here and there, he finally got the car going. But I had forcefully driven home to me a fact I have never forgotten since: It takes both gas and spark to run a car. One alone will never do it.

And when our Lord says, "Abide in me and I in you," it takes both to be a fruitful Christian. Many Christians concentrate on one or the other, but not both. But notice here that one without the other always results in the same thing -- fruitlessness. It may make you active as a Christian, and even apparently successful, but you are not rendered Christlike unless both are there.

In Verse 4, Jesus takes up the first requirement, "Abide in me and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me." The word "abide" is the simple word, "remain." "Stay with me," he is saying. "Keep close to me." In other places, it is the word, "Follow me," "do what I say," "obey my commands," "search the Scriptures," "allow the Spirit to transform you by the renewing of your mind." Renewal comes by the Word of God. Love one another, forgive one another, reach out to one another, minister to one another. Those are his commands. There must also be prayer: "Pray the Father," he says in this very discourse, "and he will give you ..." {John 14:16 RSV}. These are the disciplines of the Christian life. We must learn early that there is no chance of being a Christlike Christian unless we discipline our life, initiating habits of searching the Scriptures, praying with others, loving each other, forgiving one another, worshipping together, etc. There is no possibility of growth and bearing fruit without that. "Unless you abide in the vine you cannot bear fruit."

But notice also, in Verse 5, the other side: "He who abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing." That does not mean you are unable to function. You can do many things without a dependence on Christ. You can raise a family without him. You can run a business without him. You can be very active, even as a Christian. You can fill your days with tremendous activity and busyness, but without dependence on him you will not become Christlike. You have achieved "nothing" in God's sight.

Here is the wonderful balance of the Christian life. Without dependence, discipline is barren.

As a young Christian I gave myself, in conjunction with the work of the Navigators, to memorizing Scripture, studying the Bible, and getting up early in the morning to pray and discipline myself. Those are wonderful things -- without them there will be no growth in the Christian life -- but for awhile that was all there was in life. Though I thought I was achieving great richness in the Christian experience, I found myself barren, cold and empty! Discipline is necessary, but so is dependence. You need to expect God to work. There must be a sense of his presence with you, a consciousness that he is willing to work through you, and the patience to let him work in his own way.

Some Christians emphasize dependence. They don't bother themselves with discipline. They never read the Bible. They expect God to speak to them, and go into what I have sometimes described as "automatic pilot." They float around expecting God to do all the directing, open all the doors, and they seldom bother to deny themselves. That kind of dependence without discipline results in frothiness, in empty spirituality, a fraudulent piety that sounds good, but is very distasteful when you get close to it.

What we need to learn is that it takes not only gas -- our responsibility to keep the tank filled -- but spark from God himself, the spark of the Spirit. When both are present, life becomes fruitful. We begin to reflect the

character of Jesus himself.

Our Lord gathers this all up in this closing paragraph.

"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." {John 15:6 RSV}

That again is the first work of the Father -- removing the fruitless branches. Those like Judas who gather with the people of God for awhile appear to be believers -- they show a certain degree of life. Leaves are present -- but there is no fruit. Ultimately these people disappear from our midst. They do not stay with it. As the Lord makes clear, it is a process: There is first the "withering" of the life they apparently had for awhile. Then the branches are "gathered," then "thrown into the fire," and ultimately "burned." Here we must refer to those verses where Jesus speaks of the end of the age, when the angels will come and gather out of the Kingdom of God all that offend, and throw them into eternal fire, and they are burned, {cf, Matt 25:41-46}.

But, in Verses 7-11, are four marvelous evidences of fruit. First,

"If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you." {John 15:7 RSV}

The first evidence of a fruitful life is the impact of answered prayer. You become effective. The work you are seeking to do accomplishes something. You ask whatever you will need for that work, and it is granted. Notice our Lord links this closely to "his words," not the word "logos," which means the whole of the Bible, but the word "rhema," which means the specific promises of the Bible.

We must never forget that prayer and promise are linked together. Prayer is not a way of getting God to do what you want him to do, rather it is asking him to do what he has promised to do. We pray according to the promises. So if you want to make your prayers effective begin to read and study the promises of God. When you do, you will pray according to the mind and will of God. And, as Jesus says, whatever you ask will be done. It may take a long time sometimes, but it will be done. That is his promise.

Then Verse 8:

"By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples." {John 15:8 RSV}

Here is a life of glorifying witness. I am sure there are a hundred or more people here who could testify that they became Christians because they saw a dramatic change in the life of someone else. That is the impact of a fruitful life. It is evident in the life of a prominent Christian such as Chuck Colson, that hardhearted, ruthless "hatchet man" of the Nixon administration who once said he would run over his own grandmother to accomplish his goals. The work of Christ changed him. His ministry of working in the prisons of this country is an eloquent testimony that God has changed him.

Then Verses 9-10:

"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love." {John 15:9-10 RSV}

Once again Jesus touches upon the gift of his love. Jude, the half-brother of Jesus, says: "Keep yourselves in the love of God," {Jude 1:21}. There is hardly a more important admonition in the Bible. That is the answer to the great problem of today -- the sense of meaninglessness and worthlessness that many people have. Do you know why people feel insecure and worthless, and try to cover it up by boasting and projecting an image of success? It is because, deep inside, they feel worthless and rejected. The way to feel worthwhile is to realize that God loves you. You belong to him. Jesus loves you. The Father loves you. You are dear and precious to him. His whole work with you is to help you discover all that he has made you to be. Thus he gives you back your humanity.

There is a familiar story of Dr. Karl Barth, the great theologian, who was once asked, "What is the most profound truth you have ever discovered in the Scripture?" This man, who has been called the greatest theologian of the twentieth century, said, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." That is it! The sign of it will be an increasing sense of confidence and inner security.

Then the last evidence of fruit:

"These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full." {John 15:11 RSV}

What was his joy? In the 12th chapter of the book of Hebrews there is a verse that says of Jesus, "who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame," {Heb 12:2b RSV}. What was it that filled his heart with joy as he faced the cross, and enabled him to go through that terrible ordeal? It was the expectation that he would be the instrument of redemption for the entire world -- that a host, a great harvest of people, would be changed and redeemed and restored, their humanity given back to them -- by his action. In other words, his joy was the joy of being used of God.

I want to tell you there is no joy like that. I have seen men who were prominent leaders of industry actually tremble and weep with the joy of realizing that God had just used them to change someone else's life. Last week a man in this congregation said to me. "I've got it made. I don't need anything materially. But I am not satisfied with that. I have such a desire to be used of God."

That is the greatest joy anyone can know.

There is the inheritance of the believer -- love, joy, peace. "Peace I leave with you, my joy may be in you." As we go through the various experiences God brings into our lives, this is the fruit that he produces. What a wonderful fruit it is.

May it be abundant in our hearts these days.

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