

The Parable of the Vine and the Branches
John 15:1-11

Introduction

1. Our parable today is the Parable of the True Vine and the Branches, and it's the last of the seven "I am" statements made by Jesus recorded in the Gospel of John
2. During our introduction I mentioned that not everyone agrees on what constitutes a parable so there is no definitive list of the parables of Jesus (it can vary from 30 to 70)
3. Because of this, there is also disagreement among scholars as to whether or not the Gospel of John contains any parables:
 - a. In his commentary on the parables, John MacArthur wrote, "Some of the longest, most detailed records of Jesus' public sermons are found among the discourses recorded in John's gospel, and none of them includes any parables" (p. xxii)
 - b. This is pretty much what you will see if you google "parables in the gospel of John"
 - c. Other scholars disagree, and some of our English bibles even label Jesus' discussion of the vine and the branches (today) and the Good Samaritan in the Gospel of John as parables
 - d. The debate focuses on whether or not allegories are a form of parable:
 - 1) Some argue that parables only include the use of simile (e.g. like or as), but since allegories are based on metaphors ("I am the true vine and you are the branches") they cannot be parables
 - 2) It's like Egon warning the other Ghost Busters not to cross the proton beams from their particle throwers: "There's something important I forgot to tell you...don't cross the streams. It would be bad. Try to imagine all life as you know it stopping instantaneously and every molecule in your body exploding at the speed of light."
 - 3) Personally, I think the debate over whether something is a parable vs. an allegory is like splitting hairs; they are both figures of speech that Jesus used to illuminate a spiritual truth through the use of comparison (the definition I used in my introduction)
 - e. So, at the risk of crossing streams and every molecule in my body exploding at the speed of light, I'm going to call what we will be studying today the Parable of the Vine and the Branches (if it makes John MacArthur feel better, maybe I'll call it an allegorical parable)
4. Outline:
 1. As we did last week, today we're going to start with looking at the context surrounding the parable first
 2. We'll then examine the parable by looking at the role Jesus plays, the Father plays, and we play in the parable

A. The Context

1. The context of the Parable of the Vine and the Branches is John 13:31-16:33 which is referred to as Jesus' Farewell Discourse:
 - a. It takes place on Thursday, the day before His crucifixion, and involves some of His most personal and intimate dialog and instruction with the Disciples
 - b. By the time we come to chapter 15, Judas has already left to betray Jesus so only the 11 are present with him

- c. According to 14:31, they've also left the Upper Room and have begun to walk from there down to the Garden of Gethsemane
2. There are some themes that are repeated during this time that will help us interpret the parable and understand it's purpose:
 - a. One of the prominent themes is Jesus' departure to return to the Father which is referred to over and over and over again, along with His promise to send the Holy Spirit to serve as their Helper in His absence
 - b. The themes of betrayal and denial are also prominent: Judas' betrayal is first hinted at during the foot washing, but then described in detail in chapter 13; on a similar note, immediately following this Jesus' warned Peter that even he would deny Him three times (Matthew 26:31-35 says that Jesus warned all the Disciples that they would deny Him and they all argued they would not)
 - c. The theme of love is also quite prevalent, and in a multitude of ways: the love between Christ and God the Father, Christ's love for the Disciples, and the need for the Disciples to not only demonstrate their love for Christ through obedience to His commands but their need to love one another
 - d. One final theme, that of persecution, doesn't come until after the parable but it's part of the same discussion; He warned the Disciples that the world would hate and persecute them just as it did Him
 3. Jesus knew what the Disciples would face after He left and the pressure and temptation they would face to deny and abandon Him:
 - a. Jesus just finished telling the Disciples that He would be betrayed by one of them, denied by the rest, that He was leaving to return to the Father, and that they would be hated and persecuted because of their relationship with Him
 - b. He clearly sensed how this must have disturbed them because He repeatedly offered them words of encouragement:
 - 1) 14:1: **"Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me"**
 - 2) 14:3: **"...I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also..."**
 - 3) 14:27: **"...Do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful."**
 - 4) 16:22: **"Therefore, you too have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your heart will rejoice, and no one will take your joy away from you."**
 - c. So, when Jesus spoke this parable to His disciples, it was to encourage them not to give up their faith and continue to abide in Him

B. The Parable (READ John 15:1-2)
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1. This parable is an agricultural metaphor related to growing grapes which was common in Israel
2. The three most important things needed to grow grapes are:
 - a. A grape vine that provides support and nutrients to the branches
 - b. A vine-grower (farmer) to prune the vine
 - c. And, healthy branches to produce the fruit
3. In this parable, Jesus is the vine, God the Father is the farmer, and the Disciples are the branches

4. As we go through the parable this morning I'm going to focus on the roles that Jesus, the Father, and we (the disciples) fulfill

C. The Lesson

1. Jesus is the TRUE vine who sustains and provides life to the branches: **"I am the true vine..."** (15:1):
 - a. One of the things that may have prompted Jesus to use this illustration is something He and the disciples would have seen as they made their way down to the garden:
 - 1) Their journey would have taken them by the temple, and emblazoned on the front of the temple was a giant golden vine which served as the national emblem of Israel
 - 2) This may have been due to the fact that throughout the Old Testament Israel is symbolically portrayed as a vine
 - 3) However, in almost every case they are likened to a vine that produces only bad fruit or no fruit at all:
 - a) Hosea 10:1-2: **"Israel is a luxuriant vine; He produces fruit for himself. The more his fruit, The more altars he made; The richer his land, The better he made the sacred pillars. 2 Their heart is faithless; Now they must bear their guilt. The LORD will break down their altars And destroy their sacred pillars."**
 - b) Isaiah 5:1-7 (READ)
 - b. This is what makes Jesus' declaration as the **"TRUE"** vine so important here:
 - 1) He was contrasting himself with Israel, a vine which produced very little fruit due to their unfaithfulness; even today, they are still a fruitless vine because they continue to reject their Messiah and continue in their unfaithfulness
 - 2) This was especially true of the religious leaders (READ Matthew 7:15-20)
 - 3) In contrast to the fruitless vine Israel and its false and fruitless religious leaders, Jesus is the true vine because only He is the true source of life; only He can provide what's necessary to produce the kind of righteous fruit that God desires
2. God the Father is the vine-grower who prunes (15:2):
 - a. The branches that do not bear fruit, He takes away (2a):
 - 1) Some believe this refers to Christians and Jesus' use of **"in Me"** and that **"takes away"** can be interpreted as **"lift up"** (e.g. God lifts up the unhealthy branches so they can bear fruit much like a vine-grower prunes up weak branches so they can grow grapes)
 - 2) There are a number of arguments against this view, however:
 - a) These branches are tossed into the fire and burned up in v. 6, suggesting believers can lose their salvation
 - b) In verse 8 Jesus states that only those who bear fruit prove themselves to be disciples, so the fruitless branches here in v. 2 cannot be Christians
 - c) It appears **"in Me"** should be taken in a generic sense to refer simply to those who profess to be followers of Jesus, which includes false disciples (those who don't produce fruit) and genuine disciples (those who do produce fruit)
 - b. The branches that remain and bear fruit are genuine disciples, and God **"prunes"** these so that they can bear even more fruit (2b):
 - 1) There's debate as to what's involved with the pruning, and many see God's work in disciplining and chastising of believers here

- 2) However, there's not enough in this passage to indicate that, and it may be reading too much into it

Pruning our bushes/trees in the backyard this year: removing all the dead branches and pruning the good branches by removing all the shoots and suckers

3. Our role as disciples is to bear fruit (15:3-11):

****Down in v. 16 Jesus said that He “chose” and “appointed” His disciples so that we would bear fruit, and there are three truths I would like to draw out of the next nine verses**

a. The first truth is that, as disciples, we have been made ready to bear fruit (READ 15:3):

1) We have already been pruned by the Father:

- a) The word translated “**clean**” here is the same word translated “**prunes**” in v. 2
- b) It has a number of meanings in the NT including to be clean, pure, innocent, and in the verb form even refers to prune (in essence, when you prune something you are cleaning it up)
- c) This statement is reminiscent of what Jesus said to Peter back when He was washing his feet (John 13:10): “**...He who has bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you.**”

2) Our “**pruning**” (if you will) is the result of accepting the Gospel (3b): “**because of the word which I have spoken to you**”:

- a) Jesus described how His disciples accepted His word in John 17:6-8 (READ)
- b) It was because they had accepted Jesus’ Word that they were now clean, and likewise why Judas was not clean; Judas was a branch that was broken off while the disciples were pruned and made ready to bear more fruit
- c) The same is true of us when we accept the word of God, the Gospel; we are washed and made clean—pruned, if you will—by the Gospel (READ Ephesians 5:25-27)

b. The second truth is we can only bear fruit if we abide in Christ (4-8):

1) The words “**abide**” and “**fruit**” are each used 8 times in this passage which gives us a pretty good idea of the point Jesus is trying to drive home with His disciples:

- a) To abide simply means to abide, so to abide in Christ means to remain in Him
- b) According to Colossians 1:10 and Galatians 5:23, fruit refers to the good works we do that please the Lord because they reflect the fruit of the Spirit

2) Our ability to bear fruit is tied to abiding in Christ so He warns us to abide in Him (RE-READ 15:5-6):

- a) This statement in the imperative (command) and Jesus intended it as a warning: we can only bear fruit if we abide in Him, and in fact can do nothing if we don’t
- b) In fact, those who abide in Him will “**bear much fruit**” (5), but those who do not will be thrown away, gathered up, and cast into the fire to be burned just like dead, dried up branches (6)

3) In verses 7-11, Jesus defines what it means for us to abide in Him and even gives us an example in Himself (READ 15:7-11):

- a) He begins in v. 7 by tying abiding in Him to His words abiding in us: **“If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you...”**
 - John wrote something similar in his first letter (1 John 2:24): **“As for you, let that abide in you which you heard from the beginning. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, you also will abide in the Son and in the Father.”**
 - More is implied here that merely knowing or obeying Jesus’ words
 - It’s a reference to accepting and embracing what He said (READ John 5:36-40; 8:37)
 - It’s what’s portrayed in the very first Psalm: **“But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night.”**
- b) Abiding also implies obedience to Jesus commands (READ 15:9-10)
- c. The third and final truth is that abiding in Jesus and bearing fruit glorifies God and proves we are genuine disciples (RE-READ 15:8):
 - 1) John the Baptist issued a stark warning to the Pharisees and Sadducees who claimed to be God’s people, but bore no fruit (READ Matthew 3:7-10)
 - 2) The language John used is similar to the language Jesus used in this parable: those who do not abide in Him and bear fruit will be cut off, taken away, and burned up
 - 3) What Jesus is saying here is pretty simple: the proof of being a genuine disciple of Jesus is abiding in Him and bearing fruit
 - 4) This means that those who do not abide in Him and bear fruit are not and have never been true disciples
 - 5) We see this reflected in what Jesus said in John 8:31, **“So, Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, ‘If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of mine.’”**

D. The Takeaway

1. There’s a tension in the Scripture that relates to our relationship with Jesus and it’s this:
 - a. On the one hand, those of us who genuinely place our faith and trust in Jesus are promised that our salvation is secure and that God will keep us (we refer to this as eternal security and the assurance of salvation)
 - b. On the other hand, the Bible is replete with warnings to those who profess faith in Christ to remain steadfast, to endure, abide, and even to test and examine ourselves to see if we’ve in the faith
2. These two realities seem to be in conflict with one another, but they highlight the fact that simply wanting to be or claiming to be a disciple of Jesus don’t always translate into being a true disciple:
 - a. This is made clear in the Parable of the Sower/Soils where two of the four seemingly receive but ultimately reject the Gospel
 - b. John recorded in 6:66 that there were many in Jesus’ day who initially believed Him, identified as disciples, but ultimately walked away
 - c. Judas certainly identified as a disciple, but he ultimately betrayed Jesus
 - d. Paul warned Timothy about those in his day who had rejected and suffered shipwreck in their faith (1 Timothy 1:9), and in 2 Thessalonians wrote about a future time of apostasy in the Church

- e. John also wrote in his first letter of those who had left the Church because they were never truly of the Church (1 John 2:19)
 - f. All of these ultimately proved to be fruitless
3. If we put this parable back into its context, it's essentially Jesus saying this to His disciples:
- a. One of you is going to betray me; but you must abide in me and bear fruit
 - b. When I'm arrested, all of you are going to initially deny me; but you must abide in me and bear fruit
 - c. I'm going to return to the father, but I'm not going to abandon you and will return; but you must abide in me and bear fruit
 - d. Some of those who call themselves My disciples, but truly are not, will be cut away like dead branches, but you must abide in me and bear fruit
 - e. The world is going to hate you, persecute you, and even kill you, but you must abide in me and bear fruit
4. The bottom line is this: true believers continue to abide in Christ and bear fruit:
- a. It's not enough to say we believe in Jesus, call ourselves Christians and go to church
 - b. Christ commands us to abide in Him and so that we can bear fruit and glorify God
 - c. If we're not doing that, we should take His warning seriously regarding the branches that are cut off, tossed aside, and burned up and question whether or not we are true disciples