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Bible study Methods Fall 2021

Interpreting John 15:1-8

One passage in the New Testament that is frequently interpreted apart from its context is a favorite among Christians—John 15:1-8. This is Jesus’ discourse on the Vine and the Branches. The interpretation usually given is more of an application. Much too often interpretation and application get conflated or confused. This happens particularly in this passage.

In John 15:1-8, one of the first observations we should make is where Jesus’ discourse takes place. It occurs in the Upper Room with eleven of His disciples. Chapters 1-12 and 21 of John’s Gospel are primarily given to eight of Jesus’ miracles recorded by John so that, according to John 20:31, “you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.” So these chapters, along with chapters 18-20, which record Jesus’ arrest, trials, crucifixion, and resurrection, are primarily evangelistic. But when we come to chapters 13-17, we see a shift in John’s purpose. These chapters are written to show us Jesus’ private interaction with His disciples the night He was betrayed leading up to His arrest. And the purpose of Jesus’ discourse in these chapters is to show us Jesus’ love and comfort for His disciples right up to the end of His life here on earth.

To summarize these chapters, chapter 13 begins with John’s comment that it was the feast of the Passover, and that “Jesus knew that His hour had come that He should depart from this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end” (1). He then showed His love by washing His disciples’ feet as a servant would do for guests at a feast. During this demonstration of love, He revealed to them that “you are clean, but not all of you” (10), referring to their spiritual standing before God in salvation. So Jesus says eleven of them were saved but one of them was not. Later they would learn that He was referring to Judas as the one who was unclean or unsaved.

After this He instructed His disciples that as He had done for them, there were to do for each other (14). But a few verses later, He revealed to all twelve that He was not speaking of one of them (Judas, the one who was not clean). The reason He was telling them this was so that “when it does come to pass, you may believe that I am He” (19). In other words, He was telling them ahead of time that when the Scripture comes to pass (Psalm 41:9) that one of them would lift up his heal against Jesus, they would know that He was God in flesh. Jesus then told them plainly in verse 21 that one of them (the one who was not clean, the one who would lift up his heal against Him) would betray Him (21). And although the disciples did not understand it at the time, Jesus identified Judas as His betrayer by giving him a piece of bread (26). Judas then departed on his heinous errand (30). So from 13:31 on, Judas is not present in the Upper Room with Jesus and the remaining disciples.

In chapter 14 Jesus continued to comfort the eleven by assuring them that even though He was going away, He would not abandon them. Rather He would return for them and take them to His Father’s house (1-4). At this point, panic had already begun to overtake the disciples (Jesus calls it a “troubled heart” in 14:1, 27), as they began to understand that He was going away and would no longer be with them. He then answered a series of panicked questions from four of His disciples: Peter (13:36), Thomas (14:5-7), Philip (14:8-21), and Judas (not Iscariot, 14:22-26). He concluded the chapter by promising these eleven men peace, but also told them His time with them was short (27-31). This brings us to chapter 15.

So the question when we come to 15:1-8 is, why is this passage here? What purpose does it serve in the Upper Room discourse? How is Jesus comforting His disciples with this metaphor of the vine and the branches? More simply, how do we interpret these verses in their context?

Most often, this paragraph is interpreted apart form its context as a stand-alone passage where Jesus describes His relationship to Christians—He is the vine and believers are the branches, and that as branches, if they abide in Him, they will bear fruit (2). But if they do not abide in Him, they will not bear fruit—“for without Me you can do nothing” (5). But is this what this passage teaches? Practically speaking, this understanding is more of an application than an interpretation.

To properly interpret this passage it cannot be forgotten that the disciples are panicked (contextually their hearts are severely troubled). It also cannot be forgotten that Judas is no longer with them in the Upper Room. The remaining eleven do not yet know that he has betrayed Jesus, but Jesus told them several things about Judas earlier:

* “You are not all clean,” referring to Judas (13:11)
* “I do not speak concerning all of you,” referring to Judas (13:18)
* “Now I tell you before it comes, that when it does come to pass, you may believe that I am He,” referring to Judas lifting up his heal against Jesus (13:19)
* “It is he to whom I shall give a piece of bread when I have dipped it,” referring to Judas (13:26)
* “You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you,” unlike Judas who is not clean (15:3)

Jesus told the elven all of these things beforehand, even though they did not understand Him at the time, so after He was crucified, and after they heard of Judas’s betrayal and suicide, they would fully understand what happened to Judas. If Jesus had not told them before hand, they would not know that it was God’s plan all along for each one these events to take place, particularly Judas’s betrayal.

There are common but varying interpretations burned branches:

* The burned branches are Christians who lose their salvation
* The burned branches are carnal Christians who lose their rewards
* The burned branches are professing Christians who appear to be saved, but their lives reveal they are not saved, and therefore, they are cast into hell

The first interpretation that these are Christians who lose their salvation cannot be correct since a true believer cannot be lost. The other two are possible, but do they fit the context? Remember, Jesus is speaking to and comforting His eleven disciples in a panicked condition; He is not directing His words to every Christian. In this passage Jesus is contrasting two types of branches—those that abide in the vine and bear fruit, and those that do not abide in the vine and do not bear fruit (2). The NIV has “remain,” which is a better translation of in the context. But, again, why is Jesus saying this to these eleven men? We cannot abandon the context to interpret this passage.

Because the eleven are panicked, Jesus is explaining to the eleven what happened to Judas. When they find out in a day or two what happened to Judas, what will prevent them from thinking that the same thing could happen to them—that they could abandon Christ just like Judas did? Remember, Judas was arguably the most trusted disciple among the Twelve—he carried the money bag, he was in charge of the money. Logically speaking, the one who controlled the money would be the one most trusted. Judas would have arguably won the disciple-of-the year award three years in a row. Further, he apparently spoke for the disciples as he did in John 12 (compare Matthew 26:8) by asking why Mary’s perfume was “not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor.”

If anyone thought someone was going to betray Jesus, Judas would probably be the last or one of the last to be suspected. So Jesus knew that when the eleven found out in a day or two that Judas betrayed Him, their panic would increase even more, not decrease. So if Jesus did not further explain to them that there was a difference between them and Judas related to salvation, they could all very well think the same thing could happen to them. Each one might think, if the most trusted one of them could betray Jesus, what about me? But in this passage Jesus told them there was a substantial difference between them and Judas—verse 3 “You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you.” This is a reminder to the eleven of what Jesus said in 13:10 “you are clean, but not all of you.” Later they would understand that this was a reference to Judas. Jesus explained to them that the vinedresser will prune them so that they will bear more fruit, but that they could not be taken away from the vine, that they could not be cast out as a worthless branch and withered and thrown into the fire and burned. Why? Because “you are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you” (15:3).

Jesus was telling the eleven in this passage that Judas did not abide in Christ. Judas was a devil from the beginning (6:70). Judas was not “chosen” by Christ (13:18; 15:16). Judas was the branch that did not abide or remain in Christ, who did not bear fruit, and who the Father “takes away” (2). He was the one who did not abide or remain in Christ and “is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned” (6).

Jesus was telling the eleven that because they were different than Judas, they would remain in Him; and not only would they not succumb to the same fate as Judas, they would instead bear fruit (2), bear more fruit (2), and eventually bear much fruit (5). The fruit mentioned here refers to their apostolic ministries (16). They would record the New Testament under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (16:13), lay the foundation of the church (Ephesians 2:20), and their fruit would remain. Thankfully their fruit has remained to this day spiritually benefitting every believer in Christ. Also in their ministries, they would ask the Father in Jesus’ name whatever was necessary to fulfill those ministries, and the Father would give to them what they would request (16).

But what about the application of this passage? From the context the interpretation refers to the eleven disciples. But is there application for believers today? Of course there is. Is it true that every professing believer who does not bear fruit, the Father takes away in judgment and is cast out as a branch and is withered and burned in the fire? Yes it is; and there are other New Testament passages that testify to this. Is it true that every true believer bears fruit and is pruned or sanctified by the Father through various trials so he or she will bear more fruit and even much fruit? Yes it is; and there are other New Testament passages that testify to this as well. Is it true that the only way a believer can bear fruit is by abiding in Christ? Yes, this is also true. Is it true that this passage gives every true believer great comfort knowing he or she is clean or saved by the blood of Christ, and that when that person’s life testifies to abiding or remaining in Christ, that person can never be lost? Yes, this is a great comfort to every true believer. So there are vital applications of this passage for every true believer, each one being confirmed by many other New Testament passages. But we cannot confuse application with interpretation. We must properly interpret the passage in its context to arrive at the proper application.

An important lesson in this exercise is to show us that context is critical in interpreting Scripture. Sometimes we need to go beyond the immediate context of the paragraph itself to the paragraphs before and after. Sometimes we even need to go to other chapters or even the whole book to arrive at a proper interpretation of any given passage. In this particular passage, we cannot overlook the context of Jesus comforting His panicked disciples in the Upper Room as He prepared them for His departure to His Father via His unjust arrest, trials, beatings, and crucifixion.