
Day 1

Learn: Prayerfully read John 15.1-17. Jesus says he is the “true vine.” He means “true” in the sense of “authentic.” In the Old Testament, the vine frequently characterized Israel as the representative people of God under the Mosaic covenant. But the emphasis in all those passages is on the vine’s failure to produce good fruit for God, and God’s response of judgment against it. [If you want, look at Isaiah 5.1-7; Jeremiah 2.21; Ezekiel 15.1-8; Hosea 10.1-2; Psalms 80.1-19.] In contrast to Israel’s failure to reflect God’s character and represent God well, Jesus is the *authentic* vine, the one who *will* bear good fruit for God the Father, and thus fulfill mankind’s, and Israel’s, obligations to God. People who are faithful to God and trust in the Messiah-savior whom God sent will become part of that true vine as the representative people of God in this New Covenant era.

Reflect: If believers are branches of the vine that is Christ, what is the source of our life and vitality? Can we have true life apart from Christ? Can we be fruitful for God apart from Christ? What do you think about the relative importance of our own efforts to accomplish things compared to the importance of remaining closely connected with Christ? Should this change how you approach daily life? how you approach helping others or serving in church?

Day 2

Learn: Prayerfully read John 15.1-8. All the major English translations say God removes every branch that is not bearing fruit, but many pastors teach that this verb should be translated as “lifts up,” such that God is helping the ailing branch, not removing it. The translators have it right: these non-fruitful branches are non-believers, people who were following Christ around back then [or hanging out in churches today] who do not really believe in Jesus as their savior [like Judas Iscariot]. Because they are not depending on the vine, Christ, for life and vitality, they bear no fruit for God, and so God removes them. The point is that people – no matter how nice or sincere they are – are worthless to God if they are not in a healthy relationship with Christ, so worthless they might as well be removed and burned like a dead branch. Fire often represented God’s judgment in prophecy, so this also is a warning for the contemporaries of Jesus and for ours today: their choice is spiritual life through Christ or eternal condemnation.

God the Father also prunes every branch that is bearing fruit; that means he will prune you, so that you can bear more fruit. In the long-run, this is good for you, as it will allow you to grow spiritually and thus be more fruitful for God [see Hebrews 12.7-11]; but in the moment of pruning, it might be painful. The Greek word translated as “prunes” [καθαίρω = kah-THIGH-roh] is not the word you normally would use in this situation, but it is a play on words in two different ways. First, it is similar to the word for “removes” [also translated “takes away” or “cuts off”; αἶρω = EYE-roh], emphasizing that both branches get cut, one to remove it for being worthless and the other to prune it so as to be worth more. Second, it can also mean to make something clean, and in the next verse Jesus told the apostles they already were “pure” or “clean” with another similar sounding word [καθαροί = kah-thah-ROY (plural form of the adjective)]; so they were pure or clean through believing in his gospel, but God would continue to prune or clean them so they could be more fruitful.

Reflect: If to be fruitful we have to remain close in our relationship with Christ, will God prune or discipline believers today to remove distractions from that relationship? to call us back into that relationship? to draw us deeper into that relationship? How might God prune or discipline people today, to help them be more fruitful? Are there steps you should take to fix issues in your life and relationship with Christ, so God will not have to prune you as much?

Day 3

Learn: Prayerfully read John 15.1-8. Christ told the eleven apostles with him that they were pure or clean because of their faith in what he had taught them: they already were connected to him and thus receiving life and vitality through him. Now they must remain in him and he in them: they had to continue to depend on Jesus, the vine, for the ongoing pulse of life and vitality that would lead to fruitfulness for God; they had to stay connected to him by faith and obedience to bear fruit. Jesus was teaching about the New Covenant he would inaugurate with his blood the next day [Luke 22.20]. In the Old Testament, there were numerous prophecies about the New Covenant God would bring to replace the Mosaic Covenant [if you want, see Deuteronomy 30.1-6; Jeremiah 31.33-34; Ezekiel

11.14-19; 36.25-27]. Under the New Covenant, God would cleanse his people, renew them with his vitality, and send his Holy Spirit to indwell them, so they could remain connected to him in faith and obedience.

Note the parallel thoughts that believers must remain in Christ and he/his words must remain in us. Note the connection Jesus makes between remaining connected to him, keeping/obeying his words, getting prayers answered, and bringing glory to God through our fruitfulness which proves we are following Christ [15.7-8]. If we remain in close relationship with Christ through faith, then we will follow/obey Christ, thus we will pursue his gospel mission, then we will be praying for God to glorify himself through us with ministry success, and then our prayers will be answered with fruitfulness that will both prove our relationship with Christ and bring glory to God.

Reflect: True faith results in fruitfulness for God. Jesus did not define fruitfulness here, but he gives us some hints: it means allowing Christ to live and minister through us, such that we walk in intimacy with him, reflect his character, do his work, and see results that glorify God. Do you see fruitfulness in yourself and your life that brings glory to God? Why might your fruitfulness not be as great as God desires? Would you expect God to prune you in that case? In what areas would you like to be more fruitful for God? In his commentary on this gospel, scholar D.A. Carson says the teachings of Jesus, as a set, must so lodge in your mind and heart that conformity to Christ, obedience to Christ, becomes your way of life; spiritual vitality from a relationship with Christ will lead to outward obedience to Christ; and such union with Christ is what leads to fruitfulness. What do you think about these ideas?

Day 4

Learn: Prayerfully read John 15.9-17. Earlier in this conversation, Jesus said those who loved him would obey him [14.15]. Now he says to obey him is to remain in his love, to remain in him. Though those truly saved by grace through faith in Christ can never lose their salvation, if we fail to obey, fail to submit, we in that moment walk away from Christ, we disconnect ourselves from the vine, we fail to remain in Christ and his love. We have said before that we can obey only by grace, we can obey only because we have been reborn in spirit, have been given spiritual life, are connected in relationship with Christ, are empowered by the Holy Spirit, and are undergoing transformation of character and nature by the Holy Spirit. But having that empowerment, we now have to choose each moment of the day whether we will obey and thus remain connected to Christ and his love or we will turn away. Jesus perfectly kept God the Father's commandments and thus perfectly remained in God the Father's love and empowerment, and that is the perfect standard toward which we strive. We will fail [and then we confess and get cleansed; 1 John 1.9], but we view this as our goal: remain intimate with Christ, fed by the vine, by obeying Christ every moment.

Reflect: Many churches emphasize the love and grace of God to the point that they diminish the righteousness and morality of God, and thus they emphasize assurance of salvation to the point that they diminish the obligation to obey. We are saved by grace, but we are saved to obey, to be God's people [see 15.16!]. In what areas are you not obeying completely, either by willfully going against what you know is right or by neglecting to learn and do what the Bible says is right? Sometimes we feel stifled by the obligation to obey, but actually God wants to bless us through it: he designed us to thrive in a certain way of life, to thrive when connected to the vine, and he knows that if we can get past our fleshly hesitations then our joy would be complete [15.11]! Can you believe that learning to live God's way will result in greater joy for yourself? If not, why not? If so, what will you change to obey more?

Day 5

Learn: Prayerfully read John 15.9-17. If the apostles were already clean through their faith relationship with Jesus, then they already were loving God with all of themselves, so a summary of what they now needed to do to obey [and thus show their love for Christ] was to love each other as he had loved them. While slaves must obey even without understanding, friends are taken into Christ's confidence and obey with understanding of the king's heart and mind. Jesus emphasized that he had chosen them to be his friends, to bear fruit for God.

Reflect: Note in scripture, people are sometimes called friends of God or Jesus [besides the apostles, Abraham and Moses], but God and Jesus are never called our friends: don't let their extreme love for you deceive you into treating them casually or with irreverence. How might people take this relationship too casually today? Should you change anything about your relationship approach to God and Christ?