

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Scripture Memory		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	60		Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	John 15:1-17		
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THE TRUE VINE (Part II)

The late James Boice points out that the language Jesus used on this occasion would have not escaped the disciples: “The vine is the preeminent symbol of Israel. Thus, over and over again in the Old Testament Israel is portrayed as God’s choice vine or God’s vineyard. Isaiah had written, *I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard: My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with her choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well. Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit. . . . The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are the garden of his delight. And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress* (Isa. 5:1-2, 7). In a similar vein, Jeremiah recorded, *I had planted you like a choice vine of sound and reliable stock. How then did you turn against me into a corrupt, wild vine?* (Jer. 2:21). Ezekiel 15 compares Israel to a vine also, as does Ezekiel 19, *Your mother was like a vine . . . : it was fruitful and full of branches* (v. 10). Hosea wrote, *Israel was a spreading vine; he brought forth fruit for himself* (10:1). One of the best-known passages is from the Psalms: *You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it, and it took root and filled the land. The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches* (Ps. 80:8-10). The vine was well known, then, as a symbol of Israel. Indeed, a bunch of grapes from the vine is a symbol seen in Israel even today. But the truly extraordinary thing about the use of this image in the Old Testament is that it is always brought forward as a symbol of Israel’s degeneration, rather than her fruitfulness. The point of Isaiah’s reference is that the vine has run wild, producing sour grapes.”¹

- I. **THE NATURE OF PRUNING.** Pruning was also an essential part of first-century viticultural practice, as it is today. The first pruning occurred in spring when vines were in the flowering stage. This involved four operations: (1) the removal of the growing tips of vigorous shoots so that they would not grow too rapidly; (2) cutting off one or two feet from the end of growing shoots to prevent entire shoots being snapped off by the wind; (3) the removal of some flower or grape clusters so that those left could produce more and better-quality fruit; and (4) the removal of suckers that arose from below the ground or from the trunk and main branches so that the strength of the vine was not tapped by the suckers. Spring pruning did not involve the removal of wooden branches or their subsequent burning. The second pruning occurred in autumn after the grapes were harvested and the vines were dormant. This involved the removal of unwanted branches, those that had produced fruit in the previous season but would not produce fruit in the ensuing season. It also involved cutting back the desired branches (the shoots from the

year-old branches that would produce fruit in the coming year) to ensure maximum fruit production. After the autumn pruning the cuttings, including many wooden branches, were gathered up and burned.”²

II. ABIDING AND FRUIT BEARING. As Jesus spoke of the true vine, the disciples may have thought of Psalm 80, where Israel is pictured as the vine that brought forth wild grapes rather than the intended fruit of God’s desire. When Jesus came, he was the True Vine of God’s planting. This created the opportunity for God to display to the whole world the results of lives vitally related to himself. Jesus says he is the Vine and all believers are branches tended by the Father. The spiritual graces or fruit that adorn believers reflect the work of God. It is not something *we do* that produces fruit; it is something *God does* because of our existence in Christ Jesus. The fruit Jesus speaks of here is God expressing himself through the believer. Elsewhere in the Scriptures fruit can signify converts, or in some cases the effects of one’s conduct, but here Jesus is talking of character. The words of Jesus are words of comfort and assurance, not commands. He certainly is not demanding that we do something. He is saying, you are a part of me; we are together, united as is a branch and vine. As you remain steadfast in your trust of me, your *remaining* will naturally, spontaneously reveal God’s fruit. Even in our abiding, it is Christ who sustains that union. If we are apart from him, there simply is no fruit of God’s producing. The beauty of this relationship is that there is no striving, no works, no pressure to perform, no wearing of sackcloth and attention-getting self-denials. Jesus did not say, *I am the room; find the secret key and we’ll be together*. There is no spiritual elitism, no secrets to the *deeper life*, no complicated, burdensome, stressful, demanding discipline initiating one into an exclusive type of Christianity. We must simply recognize whose we are and where we are – in him. Jesus puts it as simply as possible: You are a branch; abide in me. What can a branch do except abide? Our abiding is absorbing Christ, dwelling in his words, recognizing that he is with us, and enjoying the pleasure of his company. Remain in him, unlike Judas, who never really was a part of him and so was purged. Professing religious people having never had the life of God, having never received his sustenance, are finally severed from their superficial connection with Christ, like withered, dead branches removed by the gardener who cares for his vineyard. Anyone and everyone outside of Christ is dead and totally incapable of producing God’s fruit. If there is no fruit, it’s evident that the profession of abiding in Christ is spurious. But every branch truly connected to the Vine will have fruit.”³

CONCLUSION: G. C. Berkouwer, the accomplished Dutch theologian, insists that John 15 can only be rightly interpreted in the larger context of John 13-17, especially what is called the high priestly prayer of John 17. “This prayer includes not only the small group of disciples, but at the same time all those who through their testimony believe in Him (John 17:20). It is only for them, for His entire Church, that He prays for unity, sanctification, and preservation. Without this intercession they cannot live. But by means of this prayer their life is preserved, for it is a powerful and efficacious prayer: *Father, I will that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am; that they may behold my glory, which thou hast given me* (John 17:24). The complete dependence of the disciples and of the entire Church appears here again. They never stand in their own strength. Christ had

said before that without Him they could do nothing (John 15:5), and now they must certainly again be supported by Him in prayer. The Church has its praying Lord who, in His prayer, also includes their future. That He prays for them in this way is almost intimately connected with the work that He has completed (John 17:4), and with His sanctification for them in the hour that has now come (John 17:19). In their unity in the face of a world that has not known God (John 17:25), they will manage to stand because they stand in His name. If Christ has made known to them the name of the Father, He will also do so in the future in His everlasting revelation, *that the love wherewith thou has loved me may be in them, and I in them* (John 17:26). This high-priestly prayer is full of the permanency of the love of Christ and of preservation by the Father. They are inseparably one in these blessings for the elect. *And all mine are thine, and thine are mine; and I am glorified in them* (John 17:10). Those who belong to Him may not for one moment live with the idea of taking things for granted, or with the notion that without His help they can keep themselves from the evil one, can sanctify themselves, or can preserve themselves in the truth (John 17:17, 19). Their entire lives, both present and future, are decided only through this intercession. The high-priestly prayer firmly impresses on us that in the perseverance of the saints we are confronted with the miracle of His intercession, just as this miracle is manifest to us also in the heavenly holy places. This perseverance can only be understood and confessed through faith in Him, who in His sanctification, in His sacrifice, guarantees that His own will be and abide with Him and will one day view His glory.”⁴

ENDNOTES

¹ J. M. Boice, *The Gospel of John: An Expository Commentary IV* (Baker, 1999), p. 1160.

² C. G. Kruse, *John: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (IVP, 2003), p. 315.

³ P. W. Comfort and W. C. Hawley, *Opening The Gospel of John* (Tyndale, 1994), p. 242.

⁴ G. C. Berkouwer, *Studies In Dogmatics: Faith and Perseverance* (Eerdmans, 1958), p. 139.