

Effective Discipleship

Reading: John 15:1-17

I am going to read this passage from 'The Passion Translation', but I want to say that this version is more of a paraphrase of Scripture where the meaning is conveyed, than a word-by-word translation.

Introduction

This is 7th and last of the great '**I am**' teachings from Jesus which we can read in the Gospel of John, where he used allegories from every-day life to explain the Kingdom of Heaven and his own Kingship.

(I am the **bread of life**, I am the **light of the world**, I am the **gate for the sheep**, I am the **good shepherd**, I am the **resurrection and the life**, I am the **way and the truth and the life**, I am the **true vine**).

In 'I am the true vine' Jesus is teaching his disciples the demands of discipleship and the conditions under which they can become effective as the New Israel of God. The use of the vine or vineyard as a picture would be one that all Jews would understand as it had been used many times before in the Old Testament as a picture of God's chosen people, Israel.

In **Psalm 80** we can read how this vine had been brought out of Egypt by God and planted in a goodly land and made great.

***⁸You transplanted a vine from Egypt;
you drove out the nations and planted it.***

***⁹You cleared the ground for it,
and it took root and filled the land.***

***¹⁰The mountains were covered with its shade,
the mighty cedars with its branches.***

***¹¹Its branches reached as far as the Sea,
its shoots as far as the River.***

But the picture of God's vineyard continues with God, the owner of the vine, after having invested so much, expecting to reap his rightful harvest, and how the vine had so often failed to give fruit that God had often abandoned it. This comes out in **Isaiah 5:1-7**

***¹I will sing for the one I love
a song about his vineyard:
my loved one had a vineyard
on a fertile hillside.***

***²He dug it up and cleared it of stones
and planted it with the 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***

***⁷The vineyard of the LORD Almighty
is the nation of Israel,
and the people of Judah
are the vines he delighted in.
And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed;
for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.***

In **Mark 12:1-10** and the parable of the tenants, again with a picture of a vineyard, Jesus reminded his listeners how the Israelites had on numerous occasions ill-treated and killed the messengers sent by God to collect what was His due.

So, when in **John 15:1** Jesus says ...

I am a true sprouting vine, and the farmer who tends the vine is my Father.

... Jesus makes the claim, and its context is understood by his disciples who are listening, that he is the genuine and perfect fulfilment, in Himself, of what Israel had been called to be, but what Israel had never become. With Jesus, a new Israel has emerged, where the members of which will draw spiritual sustenance from Him alone. Believers, that is the branches of the vine, in order to bear fruit, have to remain in the closest of union with the vine, that is Jesus, in order to be fruitful in a way that Israel had never been.

This morning, I want to look at this teaching of effective Christian discipleship from the view of the 3 types of branches that are mentioned within this passage. Unfruitful branches, fruit-bearing branches, and the separated branches.

1) The unfruitful branches

I am a true sprouting vine, and the farmer who tends the vine is my Father. ²He cares for the branches connected to me by lifting and propping up the fruitless branches ...

The purpose of the branches is to produce good fruit, so the branches must be connected to the vine in order to do so. The branches have no source of life in themselves, but draw the sap from the stem of the vine. And likewise, Believers need to be in union with Christ in order to draw from his life and be fruitful. The farmer who tends the vine is God the Father. So here we have a branch that is connected to the vine and the sap is flowing through the branch from the vine. But although it is connected and living and has leaves, it hasn't produced fruit.

Most other Bible translations of this verse 2 say:

²He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit NIV

But the Greek phrase can also be translated "he takes up [to himself] every fruitless branch." He doesn't remove these branches, but he takes them to himself. As the wise and loving farmer, he lifts them up off the ground to enhance their growth.

This view can be supported in Scripture in several ways:

a) Separated and severed branches are dealt with in verses 4 to 6, so why be repeated again in verse 2.

b) Jesus says in **Matthew 12:20**

A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out, till he has brought justice through to victory.

This is a Messianic quotation from **Isaiah 42:3**. Jesus is the Servant King. The weak and the vulnerable are the special object of his mission, and he deals with them with gentleness. Far from letting them be broken or quenched (or cut off), he will lead them to victory, for in him they will find justice.

c) Christ's endless love for his disciples on the last night of his life on earth seems to emphasize God's love even for those who fail and disappoint him (and who don't bear fruit). Peter's denial didn't bring rejection from Jesus, but led to restoration and fruitful service.

d) In the parable of the fig tree in **Luke 13:6-9** we again see God's great mercy.

⁶Then he told this parable: 'A man had a fig-tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any. ⁷So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, "For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig-tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?"

⁸"Sir," the man replied, "leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig round it and fertilise it. ⁹If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down."

The picture of the fig tree is very similar to that of the vine and vineyard, and the disciples would have understood it in the context of the nation of Israel and their belonging to God. Here again we have a picture of God's patience and willingness to invest, to reap a harvest.

If this is making you feel comfortable, and sounds like 'God will always love me no matter what I do', I think it is time for the wake-up call! The purpose of a branch on a vine is to bear fruit! And the purpose of a Christian disciple is also to bear fruit. Yes, our Father in Heaven is patient, tender and loving, and there may be times of unfruitfulness in a Believer's life through which he will lift us up, carry and care for us, but He still expects fruit from our lives. That is the purpose of the branches and that is our purpose!

The picture of the fig tree in **Luke 13** that we just looked at, has the decision as to whether the tree should be cut down, left in the owner's (that is God's) hands.

In the parable of the sheep and goats in **Matthew 25:31-46**, we have a picture of the gathering of the nations before the throne of Christ for the final judgement. The sheep and the goats; the saved and the lost; God's people and those who are not. The criteria for the judgement as to who are the saved people of God is what they did or did not do. Those who are called into the Kingdom inheritance are the ones who cared for the brothers and sisters of Jesus, other Believers, and so showed love for Jesus himself. And as I will show in the next section, they are the ones who bore fruit!

2) The fruit-bearing branches

"I am a true sprouting vine, and the farmer who tends the vine is my Father. ²He cares for the branches connected to me by lifting and propping up the fruitless branches and pruning every fruitful branch to yield a greater harvest. ³The words I have spoken over you have already cleansed you. ⁴So you must remain in life-union with me, for I remain in life-union with you.

As I said earlier in the introduction, this passage in John 15 is about discipleship. The image that Jesus gives of fruit-bearing branches, though simple, is very deep and full of meaning as Jesus explains further on, and should be a great challenge to each one of us. I want to try to look at it through 4 points.

a) The purpose of pruning

The farmer desires all fruit-bearing branches to bear a 'greater harvest'. So he prunes every fruitful branch for this purpose. Pruning involves cutting off little bits of a branch to focus the growth and the flow of the life-giving sap to yield better fruit.

It sounds painful if we use it in the context of God pruning bits of our lives to make us more fruitful as we follow Christ as his disciples. But I don't think it has to be, as Scripture reveals. The Greek word for 'pruning' can also mean 'cleansing'.

³The words I have spoken over you have already cleansed you.

When Jesus spoke these words to his disciples he was telling them that they were already cleansed through every teaching they had heard from his mouth, every answer he had given to their questions, and every rebuke they had received from him for their stupidity, faithlessness and arrogance.

And so for us today, this cleansing is different from the initial cleansing of coming to faith, as symbolised by baptism. It is a continual and also completed cleansing through the words that Jesus has already spoken. We have Jesus' words in Scripture, our Bibles, so it follows that obeying his teaching and commands is the pruning and cleansing that takes place, and has already taken place in our lives.

¹⁰If you keep my commands, you will live in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands, for I continually live nourished and empowered by his love.

When we obey Jesus we are cleansed. When we obey Jesus we live in that close union with him as the branches to the vine. Should obeying Jesus ever be painful? We suffer when our own desires and sin get in the way.

b) The cause of fruitfulness

⁵"I am the sprouting vine and you're my branches. As you live in union with me as your source, fruitfulness will stream from within you — but when you live separated from me you are powerless.

As the branches are intimately joined to the vine, so we are intimately joined to Jesus as we obey him. If we are not joined, we are dead branches. When we are joined and obedient, the love of Jesus flows through us.

⁹"I love each of you with the same love that the Father loves me. You must continually let my love nourish your hearts. ¹⁰If you keep my commands, you will live in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands, for I continually live nourished and empowered by his love.

It is Christ's love for us that nourishes us and causes us to be fruitful, but we have to allow this by choosing to be obedient. By being obedient we let his love nourish us, just as Jesus is nourished by God's love through obedience. Jesus tells us that his love for us is exactly the same as the love that the Father has for him, and in fact does come from the Father, to the Son, and then to us, his disciples. I find that mind-blowing.

c) The fruitful harvest

Fruit is mentioned frequently in this passage, but I just want to draw out what is the fruit that we as disciples should be bearing.

It is the root which produces the fruit through the branches. And similarly it is Christ's fruit that is displayed through our lives, not our own fruit. We should be demonstrating the character of Christ, and doing the works he was doing.

The obvious passage to look at is **Galatians 5:22-23** where the Apostle Paul gives the fruit of a Spirit-filled life as agape love.

²²⁻²³But the fruit produced by the Holy Spirit within you is divine love in all its varied expressions:

***joy that overflows, peace that subdues,
patience that endures, kindness in action,
a life full of virtue, faith that prevails,
gentleness of heart, and strength of spirit.
Never set the law above these qualities, for they are meant to be limitless.***

Jesus confirms this fruit of love in our passage in **John 15:12-13**

***¹²"So this is my command: Love each other deeply, as much as I have loved you.
¹³For the greatest love of all is a love that sacrifices all. And this great love is demonstrated when a person sacrifices his life for his friends.***

This verse 13 is prophetic of his own approaching death on the cross, but it is also a call to all disciples to live a life of sacrificial love toward other Believers. But this practice of love should never be a joyless duty. In **Hebrews 12:2** we read:

Because his heart was focused on the joy of knowing that you would be his, he endured the agony of the cross and conquered its humiliation, and now sits exalted at the right hand of the throne of God!

And so joy is the second part of the fruitful harvest we read in **John 15**

¹¹My purpose for telling you these things is so that the joy that I experience will fill your hearts with overflowing gladness!

Jesus endured the cross for the joy that was set before him, and part of that joy lay in the knowledge that his disciples, in obeying the commands that he had given them, would find in their obedience the fullness of their own joy.

The third part of the fruitful harvest is answered prayer.

⁷But if you live in life-union with me and if my words live powerfully within you—then you can ask whatever you desire and it will be done.

¹⁶You didn't choose me, but I've chosen and commissioned you to go into the world to bear fruit. And your fruit will last, because whatever you ask of my Father, for my sake, he will give it to you!

As Christ lives through us because of our union with him, our prayers, whatever the content, are effective because in fact they are the prayers that Christ is praying.

d) The purpose of a fruitful harvest

The fruit that we bear as disciples, that of love, joy and answered prayer, is not the purpose of our lives as Believers. Does that sound strange? Verse 8 gives us the reason for our fruit-bearing.

⁸When your lives bear abundant fruit, you demonstrate that you are my mature disciples who glorify my Father!

The purpose of our lives is to glorify our Father in Heaven.

⁹But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. 1 Peter 2:9

Bearing abundant fruit brings glory to the Father, and proving that we have become His mature disciples (through fruit-bearing) also brings glory to our Father. And so our discipleship is complete.

3) The separated or severed branches

The final branch that we will look at this morning is the separated or severed branch.

⁴So you must remain in life-union with me, for I remain in life-union with you. For as a branch severed from the vine will not bear fruit, so your life will be fruitless unless you live your life intimately joined to mine.

⁵I am the sprouting vine and you're my branches. As you live in union with me as your source, fruitfulness will stream from within you—but when you live separated from me you are powerless. ⁶If a person is separated from me, he is discarded; such branches are gathered up and thrown into the fire to be burned.

If a vine branch is severed from the root it logically cannot bear fruit in itself. The sap cannot flow through to the branch to cause the fruit to grow. Jesus is telling us clearly that if we are disconnected from himself, his love cannot flow through us and we are powerless in ourselves to cause His fruit to be seen in our lives. As disciples, the power to bear fruit comes only from being intimately joined with Jesus. We are utterly dependent on him.

What could cause us to be severed or separated? Pride in our own self-sufficiency and disobedience to his teaching and commands will stop us drawing spiritual strength from Jesus and block the flow of his power in our lives. Such a person becomes a dead branch unable to bear fruit. Just as these branches are cut from the vine and thrown into the fire, so these so-called believers are removed from the new Israel centred in Jesus.

I need to point out especially to you the one command we must obey in order not to be severed from union with Christ.

¹²So this is my command: Love each other deeply, as much as I have loved you.

We are all part of ONE vine centred in Jesus. We are not many vines. If we don't love our brothers and sisters in Christ, **1 John 4:20-21** says we do not love God.

Conclusion

I feel this morning that I have only scratched the surface of this passage and the meaning of true discipleship, and yet in another way it seems so simple.

Live in life-union with Jesus the Saviour by spending time with him and obeying his teachings.

When you do so you will bear fruit of love for other Believers, experience His joy, and have an effective prayer life,

This will demonstrate that you are his mature disciple, and this will bring glory to the Father!

We are not just called to be an acquaintance, or an admirer of Jesus; we are called to be his disciples, his mature disciples, and that is the challenge to us this morning and in fact every day. And this can only be done when we depend totally, utterly on Jesus and his saving love, and allow him to live powerfully through us. We can't do it on our own terms. True life comes from him only!

I would like to conclude by reading verses 4 and 8 from this passage of John 15

⁴So you must remain in life-union with me, for I remain in life-union with you. For as a branch severed from the vine will not bear fruit, so your life will be fruitless unless you live your life intimately joined to mine.

⁸When your lives bear abundant fruit, you demonstrate that you are my mature disciples who glorify my Father!

Amen!