

Thoughts From Other Minds:

We are meant to learn first, from these verses, that *the union between Christ and believers is very close*. He is "the Vine," and they are "the branches."

The union between the branch of a vine and the main stem is the closest that can be conceived. It is the whole secret of the branch's life, strength, vigour, beauty and fertility. ... The sap and juice that flow from the stem are the origin and maintaining power of all its leaves, buds, blossoms, and fruit. Cut off from the stem, it must soon wither and die.

The union between Christ and believers is just as close, and just as real. In themselves believers have no life, or strength, or spiritual power. ... They are what they are, and feel what they feel, and do what they do, because they draw out of Jesus a continual supply of grace help, and ability. Joined to the Lord by faith, and united in mysterious union with Him by the Spirit, they stand, and walk, and continue, and run the Christian race. But every jot of good about them is drawn from their spiritual head, Jesus Christ.

The thought before us is both comfortable and instructive. Believers have no cause to despair of their own salvation Let them consider that they are not left to themselves and their own strength. Their root is Christ, and all that there is in the root is for the benefit of the branches. Because He lives, they shall live also. ... "When I am weak," said Paul, "then am I strong." (2 Cor 12:10.)

We are meant to learn, secondly, from these verses that, *there are false Christians as well as true ones*. There are "branches in the vine" which appear to be joined to the parent stem, and yet bear no fruit. There are men and women who appear to be members of Christ, and yet will prove finally to have had no vital union with Him.

There are myriads of professing Christians in every Church whose union with Christ is only outward and formal. Some of them are joined to Christ by baptism and Church-membership. Some of them go even further than this, and are regular communicants and loud talkers about religion. But they all lack the one thing needful. Notwithstanding services, and sermons, and sacraments, they have no grace in their hearts, no faith, no inward work of the Holy Spirit. They are not one with Christ, and Christ with them. Their union with Him is only nominal, and not real....

Christians of this stamp are aptly represented by branches in a vine which bear no fruit. Useless and unsightly, such branches are only fit to be cut off and burned. Just so will it be at the last day with false professors and nominal Christians. Their end, except they repent, will be destruction. They will be separated from the company of true believers, and cast out, as withered, useless branches, into everlasting fire. They will find at last, whatever they thought in this world, that there is a worm that never dies, and a fire that is not quenched.

J C Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on John*, Vol, 3, pp. 105-107.

Camperdown Noorat Terang Presbyterian Charge

5 June 2016 — Lord's Supper

Sermon: "*Jesus – the Christ who is the True Vine # 1*" (text: John 15:1-11)

Scripture: John 15:1-17

Sermon Notes

Introduction: The seventh and last of the 'I ams' of Jesus is 'I am the true vine' (Jn 15:1). In John, 'true' often means 'real' or 'genuine' ('The true light, 1:9; 'true worshippers' 4:23; 'true food, and ... true drink' (6:55) and 'the only true God' (17:3). So 'I am the true vine' means 'I am the real vine, the genuine vine'.

In the Old Testament the vine is common symbol for Israel, God's Old Covenant people (Ps. 80:7; Isa 5:1-7; 27:2ff; Jer 2:21; 12:10ff; Ezk 15:1-8; 17:1-21; 19:10-14; Hos 10:1-2). In these the emphasis is on Israel's failure to produce good fruit; so Israel of old was the false vine.

Jesus is the true vine, the one to whom Israel pointed, the vine who bears good fruit. Jesus is claiming that after many centuries when the way to become a part of God's people was to join Israel (like Rahab and Ruth) the way to join God's people now is to be joined in a living union to him.

Spiritual life is through believing in Jesus, by being his disciple (Jn 3:14-15); Jesus' disciples were/are the branches; they had believed in him as the Saviour of God's people; their faith in him had brought them into a spiritual union with him, so that life flowed from him to them as life flows from the vine into its branches.

1. United to Christ

The vine is a picture of the people of God, of the church—of the visible church, not a building, but 'all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and ... their children' (WCF 25.2). The invisible church, made up only of true believers, is known only to God, for only he knows our hearts and tests our fruit.

Jesus is the vine, and people like us who profess our faith in the Lord Jesus and belong to the church are the branches; the Father is the farmer (vinedresser, ESV, gardener, NIV) who looks after the vine; he removes branches that do not bear fruit, and makes fruit-bearing branches more fruitful. What is the 'fruit'?

We can be helped in this by what the prophets meant by wild grapes; (Isa 5:4); the grapes the Lord looked for were justice and righteousness; the wild grapes were bloodshed and an outcry over evil (see the woes that follow, as the Lord condemns their greed, drunkenness, pride, contempt for him, calling good evil and evil good).

When Jesus speaks of the branches bearing fruit he means the grapes of justice and righteousness, of obedience to God. The 'branches' that do not bear fruit may think themselves Christians, but they do not obey God; they are church members, but it makes little if any difference to the way they live.

Until God changes our hearts we do not trust him—and that change is what Jesus says happens to us when we believe in him: ‘Already you are clean because of the word I have spoken to you’ (v. 3).

Jesus told his disciples ‘every branch that does bear fruit the Father cleanses that it may bear more fruit.’ They were clean; they had believed in him; they had experienced ‘the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit’ (Tit 3:5); they had been ‘born again’, of ‘water and the Spirit’; they were able to bear fruit.

If we are to bear fruit acceptable to God, then we too must have been born again, for by nature we cannot bear good grapes; before we can be fruit-bearing branches of the vine we must first be washed clean; we must experience the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit; we must be born again.

It is not enough to be outwardly connected to Jesus, to merely look like a branch of the vine; we must be really connected to him, and only the mysterious but very real work of the Holy Spirit calling us from death to life can do that.

We don’t know how he does it—but we do know that when he does it we obey the gospel and believe in the Lord Jesus with that living God-given faith that unites us to him and causes us to bear fruit that pleases God: righteousness, godliness, the fruit of the Spirit.

2. Abiding in Christ

If we do not bear this fruit, the Father will remove us from the vine. Sometimes it happens in this life, as with Judas, and with others of our acquaintance who once looked like branches, but who did not bear fruit. If it does not happen in this life, it will happen after death.

If we are clean and fruit-bearing, the Father will cleanse us so that we may bear more fruit—and this happens as we abide or remain in Christ and he is us (vs. 4-6). We believe in the security of believers; that once we are saved we cannot be lost: ‘once saved always saved’ - but ‘saved’ is saved from sin to serve Christ.

We find ‘once saved always saved’ misleading, for many think ‘saved’ means ‘making a decision’ - and so we prefer ‘the perseverance of the saints’ because those who truly believe persevere; they show they are real believers by continuing to believe and practise the faith; they abide or remain in union with Jesus (vs. 7-8).

We abide in Christ as his word controls us, as we obey him; yet abiding in him is more than mere obedience; it is abiding in his love who loved us as the Father loved him (v. 9). We abide in his love by keeping his commandments as he kept his Father’s commandments and abides in his love (v. 10).

If we do not keep his commandments we do not abide in his love so as to continue as a branch of the vine—like Ananias and Sapphira. So we are to ‘keep ourselves in the love of God’ (Jude 20-21). Obedience is at the heart of salvation, which is from disobedience and death to life, obedience and joy (v. 11).

My Notes:

Questions for Reflection:

1. How does the Old Testament provide the wider context for Jesus’ saying, “I am the true vine”? (cf. Ps 80:7; Isa 5:1-7; 27:2ff; Jer 2:21; 12:10ff; Ezk 15:1-8; 17:1-21; 19:10-14; Hos 10:1-2).
2. Reflect on the way that ‘outsiders’ joined the Old Covenant people of God (e.g. Joshua 6:23, 25; Ruth 1:15-18); how does Jesus teaching here about the vine mark an epochal change in the way into God’s family, and how does this relate to the idea common in our culture that there are many ways to God?
3. What is the Father’s role? Who are the branches that do not bear fruit, and the branches that are fruit-bearing? What is the fruit that God looks for? (cf. Isa 5:4-7). What must happen to us before we can be fruit bearing branches?
4. What does it mean to be removed from the vine, and why must we abide or remain in the vine? (vs. 4-6). Compare Jesus’ teaching here with his teaching in Jn 6:35-40; 10:22-30; is it possible for a believer to lose his or her salvation?
5. Reflect on what it means to abide in Christ’s love (vs. 9-10), and contrast the way obedience is commanded here to the way it was commanded at Sinai.