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## The True Vine John 15:1-5

**Intro:** At the conclusion of ch14, we saw that even though Jesus was leaving His disciples, He wasn't leaving them as orphans – He wasn't leaving them without resources. He's given them quite a few wonderful promises, not the least of which is the promise of the Holy Spirit. He also told them that He was leaving them His peace (4:27). This statement necessitates a discussion of the difference between peace with God and the peace of God. One of these is judicial and one is experiential. Peace with God occurs the moment you accept Jesus Christ as your Savior. At that point, you are declared by God to be at peace with Him. You're no longer His enemy; no longer a child of wrath.

The peace of God is experiential and can only be experienced after you are at peace with God.

Consider the nature of this peace. Jesus didn't just give the disciples peace; He left them with "His peace." This was the peace of the One who could sleep soundly in a boat that was caught in the middle of a violent storm. How was this possible? It was only possible because the peace of Jesus didn't rest on external circumstances but on internal realities, on eternal truths. Jesus was unconcerned about the storm because He knew that He came to die on a cross not in a boat on a lake. This very same peace is what He was leaving with the disciples; it's the very same peace that He gives to all those who turn to Him in faith and enter into a state of judicial peace with God the Father.

His peace isn't the only thing He is leaving the disciples. In ch15 we'll see that He is also going to leave them His love (9-10) and His joy (11). Little by little, Jesus is increasingly imparting Himself to His followers. Of course, it's not by accident that the first 3 fruits of the Spirit listed in Gal 5:22 are "love, joy, peace..." All of this has some bearing on our text today. Jesus, having called them to depart with Him, continues His discourse as they make their way along.

**1-5-** Jesus introduces a new topic by way of parable. He employs the allegory of the vine to reveal the importance of fruitfulness in the believer's

life and the truth that this is a result not of human achievement but of spiritual union with Himself. He opens this parable with another of the 7 “I am” statements found in this Gospel. Jesus said, “I am the true vine” and the emphasis is on the word “true” which simply means genuine. It doesn’t mean He is true as opposed to what is false but that He is the one, perfect, essential and enduring vine before which all others are just shadows. It’s used in the exact same sense elsewhere when Jesus is described as being the true light (1:9), the true bread (6:32).

But what other “vines” are there? The most obvious reference, the one the disciples would have immediately thought of is the fact that the “vine” was the preeminent image of Israel throughout the OT. Over and over again, Israel is portrayed as God’s choice vine or God’s vineyard. Isaiah wrote about it (5:1-2, 7) as did Jeremiah (2:21), Ezek 15 & 19; Hosea 10:1. One of the best-known passages is Ps 80:8-10. The vine was a well known symbol of Israel but the amazing thing about the OT use of this image is that it’s always used to point out Israel’s degeneration instead of her fruitfulness. The point of Isaiah’s reference is that the vine has run wild, producing sour grapes. “What more could have been done to My vineyard, than I have not done in it?” God asks. Yet it brought forth “wild grapes” (v4). Jeremiah calls Israel a “degenerate plant” and “alien (strange) vine”. Hosea calls her “empty,” only producing leaves. The context of Ps 80 is a plea for God’s renewed favor after the vine has been burned and the hedges broken down.

There’s another vine mentioned in Rev 14:18-19 – the vine of the earth. This vine represents the economy of this world, not the financial enterprise of the countries of the world but the mindset or system of this world as directly opposed to the economy of heaven. The denizens of this planet are, for the most part, willingly entangled in the vine of this world’s system. They are not just participating in it but are wholly committed to it, some more than others, of course. But, they are bound to it, dedicated to it, even imprisoned by it and will one day be judged for it by God.

So, there are actually 3 vines seen in Scripture: the vine of Israel, which failed; the vine of this world, which will be judged and the true vine, the genuine vine of Jesus Christ. Israel was a vine planted by God to be fruitful but it was not. Israel had been counting so much on her religious system but it hadn’t gotten them anywhere. They had the temple, they had all kinds of sacrifices going on; all kinds of religious practices constantly being engaged

in but none of it had produced any fruit. Remember that curious episode when Jesus cursed the fig tree? It was a picture of the nation of Israel – they weren't bringing forth any fruit. Contrast Israel with Jesus Christ, the true vine, the One who, by His very nature, brings forth fruit unto the Father.

Note: Jesus doesn't say that the church is the true vine but that He Himself is. In fact, the church is not referenced here at all. What Jesus is teaching here is the necessity for a constant, continuing, personal unity with Him; not appropriated through an organization, not predicated on the performance of religious rituals or ceremony but a personal unity only possible by entering into a personal relationship that is offered by Him and enjoyed by us.

And, if Jesus is the true vine, then the Father is the husbandman (caretaker). There are 2 things the Father does in His care of the vine. 1<sup>st</sup>, He takes away the branches that don't bear fruit. This is usually thought to be a purging away of dead branches in the same sense that branches are thrown into the fire and burned in v6, but that's actually not the primary meaning of takes away in this passage. The Greek wordairo has 4 basic meanings which move from the most fundamental (common) to the most figurative: (1) to lift up or pick up, (2) to lift up figuratively, as in lifting up one's eyes or voice, (3) to lift up in order to carry away, and (4) to remove. Clearly, translating this into takes away employs the 4th (less common) of these meanings. The verse and the sequence of the verbs in it make better sense if the first and primary meaning of the word is used. If so, it would read, "Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He lifts up," that is, to keep it from trailing on the ground.

Remember, Jesus is giving us a parable here, an idiom. He's painting a word picture. He's speaking to believers about an important aspect of the Christian life. He's not talking about salvation or the loss of it. You cannot look for dogma in a parable. You cannot build doctrine from a word picture. You cannot use this verse to conclude that Jesus is teaching that a person can lose their salvation because the parable has nothing to do with that. He's teaching us something about fruitfulness; He's telling us about the importance of abiding in Him.

Translating this as lifts up instead of takes away makes better sense of the passage and much better theology. 1<sup>st</sup>, the emphasis of the parable is on the care of the vine by the Father. If this is true (and it is), it would be

strange if the first act of care mentioned is the disposal of unproductive branches. But it's not strange at all to see the gardener first lift the branches up so that they can be better exposed to the sun and so the fruit will develop properly.

2<sup>nd</sup>, lifting up is exactly what's first done with vines when they are cultivated to today. Grapes aren't like squash or pumpkins that grow great while lying on the ground. Grapes must hang free. So, any branch that trails on the ground is unproductive. It'd be a poor, short-sighted gardener who immediately cuts off such a branch without even giving it a chance to develop properly. It would be wise and normal for him to prop the vine up off the ground and raise it up into the air and sun. This is precisely how vineyards are set up; the vines are strung from pole to pole on wires.

3<sup>rd</sup>, translating *airo* as lifts up gives a proper sequence to the Father's care of the vineyard. He lifts the vines up first, then He cuts off the unproductive branches, carefully cleaning the vine of insects, moss, or parasites that otherwise would hinder the growth of the plant. This would be the ancient equivalent of using insecticides. Lifts up is the preferred translation not the least because it means that the first thing the Father does is lift the believer closer to Himself. In spiritual terms, this means the Father first creates a sense of true devotion in the believer.

The second thing the Father does to care for the vine is to purge or prune it. The Greek is *katharizo*, to cleanse, make clean, or purify (English *catharsis*). Normally, this word indicates the act of cleansing the vine of anything harmful to it (insects, moss) but pruning is also part of it. The Father is doing a work of removal, removing anything and everything that is detrimental to the most fruitful harvest. In spiritual terms this clearly refers to God's work in removing those things which are spiritually detrimental from a Christian's life. It means having our bad habits stripped away; our priorities reordered, our values changed. It may even mean removing friends who hinder our spiritual growth rather than advance it. But, the purpose of pruning is not to punish the branch but to produce more fruit.

The order of these 2 activities is also important, because the reverse only produces hypocrisy. What happens when we start lopping off "unspiritual practices" without first being drawn closer to God in true devotion? We begin to think we're quite saintly, when actually we're not. We start to look

down on others who haven't made the same denials. We consider them to be worldly and ourselves spiritual. Sadly, having eliminated these things ourselves without first having our lives filled with Christ, we now have a vacuum in our lives that's easily filled by something not at all godly. We're like the guy Jesus talked about who successfully threw 1 demon out of his life but then suffered greater loss when that demon and 7 of his friends returned to repossess him.

What must happen is that we first of all draw near to God and then become productive. Thus, as the harmful things are cut away, we hardly feel their going. It's simply a case of maturing, growing in grace. No one makes a kid give up playing with their toys. When they're young, they play with them. But as they grow older, they become interested in other things and eventually lose interest the kid's stuff. The child doesn't "give up" the toys. The toys give up the child because they've grown into a higher sphere of experience. Similarly, as we grow closer in our daily walk with the Lord, the dead wood and parasites begin to fall away and we either hardly notice or can hardly wait.

What's the means by which we are cleansed? The Word of God! We saw this in [ch13](#). Jesus went to wash Peter's feet and he wouldn't let Him. Jesus told him if He didn't wash his feet, he'd have no part with Him. Peter said, "Not just my feet, wash all of me" but Jesus "He who is bathed need only to wash his feet, but is completely clean" ([13:10](#)).

The point is, we are cleansed (born again) of the Word of God, of incorruptible seed. Judicially, we are declared clean by the Father through the blood of Jesus Christ and the Word of God – we are already clean. Experientially, in our practice, we daily need cleansing and growth, daily need to be renewed, daily need to be in the Word, daily need to abide in Him. Before the throne of God, judicially, every believer is clean; declared clean by the Father because of the sacrifice of the Son. We have peace with God, but daily, we need to come before God and receive and enjoy the peace of God through regular repentance, through daily adjustments in our spiritual walk. Not for salvation, that's already been determined, but to restore fellowship.

Unless we see that the Word must cleanse us, our ideas of purity are man-made and not from God at all. More than that, they're ineffective. David asked the question, "How can a young man cleanse his way?" The answer,

“By taking heed according to Your word” (Ps 119:9). Thus, Jesus’ comment in vs3. Nothing will keep sin from us but a careful attention to and application of God’s Word. Nothing else will cleanse us.

**4-5-** The secret of fruitfulness – abiding in Christ! This is not an exhortation, not a suggestion, it’s a command. If we abide in Christ, He will abide in us and we will be fruitful. These 2 abidings can’t be separated and abiding is the necessary prerequisite for producing fruit. No branch bears fruit in isolation. This is how we know Jesus is not just talking about vines and branches but about Christian lives and fruitfulness. In a normal vineyard, the vine never has to convince the branches to hang on to it, to stick with it. But Jesus is compelled to tell us exactly that because we will be as unfruitful as Israel if we don’t stick with Him. No branch bears fruit in isolation, by its own efforts and resources. It must have a vital connection with the vine.

What constitutes fruit in the believer’s life? Clearly, winning or leading others to Christ is considered fruit but it’s certainly not the only fruit or even the most common. Fruitfulness includes the production of Christian character, the visible manifestation of the fruit of the Spirit in the life of the believer. Fruit would include everything that results from a vital union with Jesus – humility, obedience, compassion, etc.

It’s said that a vine must be cultivated at least 3 years before being allowed to produce fruit at all. This means it must be trimmed and allowed to grow, then trimmed again and allowed to grow and this goes on for some time. Only then does it become useful for bearing fruit. So, if you’re going through an extended period of spiritual upheaval where you’re undergoing some radical treatment at the hands of the Father and are not feeling particularly fruitful in the midst of it. Take heart! We can’t see what God sees. Just remember, Jesus promised fruit in due season if we truly remain in Him in a close way. We can give our witness, live our Christian life and refuse to worry about the outcome because, ultimately, God is the One responsible for the vineyard.

The last sentence of vs5 is a warning. Bearing fruit cannot be done apart from Jesus. In fact, the sure-fire way to not bring forth fruit is to try and do it without Him! Some might say, “Oh well, that really leaves me just a very small part.” No, it leaves you nothing! “Well, gee, it doesn’t sound like I contribute very much.” You don’t contribute very much – you contribute

nothing – at least in the sense of being fruitful. “Don’t we need to prepare ourselves to serve the Lord?” Yes, you do need to be prepared but don’t think your efforts are going to produce fruit. You can be the most prepared Christian to ever walk the earth but if you’re not abiding in Christ – you’ll have no fruit to show for it.

But, on the other hand, if this is true for believers, how much more true is it for the unbeliever, those who are still enemies of Jesus and His gospel? They may try to do something against God’s people, they may try to thwart the advancement of the gospel; they may try to destroy Christ’s work. But, all their efforts will come to nothing because only the hand of man is involved in them and not God.

Jesus says to abide in Him. That literally means to take your shoes off and sit a spell. It means to make yourself at home in Him! Have you done that? If so, are you pursuing that intimate fellowship He graciously offers each of His followers? 😊