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B0630 – July 30, 2006 – Jn 15:1-3 – The Christian's Fruitbearing – Part 1

INTRODUCTION

Theme Verse (John 10:10)

Jesus came for two purposes

Have life

Have abundant life (chapters 13-17)

There is possession of eternal life and there is enjoyment of eternal life

2 Kinds of Believers (Mark 4:13-20)

Carried away by world

Bear fruit

This passage, known popularly as “The Vine and the Branches”, has a range of interpretations and is the center of considerable controversy. I prefer to call it “The Christian’s Fruit Bearing”.

IDENTIFICATION OF THE VINE AND VINEDRESSER

John 15:1 *I am the genuine vine and My Father is the vinedresser.*

In the phrase **I am** some commentators claim Jesus is identifying Himself with the great I AM in Exod 3:14 when YHWH revealed Himself to Moses in the burning bush. While Jesus does do this in John 8:58 He does not do that here. Here He is not identifying Himself with YHWH but distinguishing Himself from the Father. This verse presents the distinction between the Father and the Son. Both the unity and diversity of the Father and the Son are taught in the Gospel of John. For example, in John 10:30 (unity) and John 1:1 (unity) as well as John 1:1 (diversity) and John 15:1 (diversity). The Trinity is a clear teaching of Scripture. God is one in essence and three in person. In this verse both the Father and Son are God but they have distinct roles in the vineyard.

Where Jesus spoke the discourse is a matter of uncertainty. “Some suppose that after the words, “Get up, let us go from here” (14:31), the disciples still lingered at the table. Others that the discourses were spoken on the way to the Mount of Olives; and others, again, in the court of the temple.” All of these views assume that Jesus used something from their surroundings as a teaching device. Those who suppose they lingered at the table suggest the cup of wine that they had recently partaken of or a vine whose tendrils had crept into the room. Those who suppose that Jesus spoke these things while on the walk to the Mount of Olives through the Kidron vineyards suggest the vineyards and fires burning on either side of the valley. Those who suppose the discourse was given in the temple court suggest the great golden vine over the temple gate or the vine growing over the courtyard wall. Others still reject that the figure was stimulated by any external object and suppose our Lord is picking up the familiar OT symbolism of the vineyard (cf. Ps. 80:8-19; Isa. 5:1-7; Ezek. 19:10; Jer. 2:21; Hos. 10:1-2).ⁱ Wherever they may have been it is doubtless true that the point is that Jesus Christ is now identifying Himself as the true fruit-bearing vine. What is more important is that this discussion happened during the spring and later discussion will show how this is related to 1st century viticulture practices.

By the noun **vine** is meant not a mere fruitless vine, which could cause misunderstanding, but rather a “fruit-bearing vine”.ⁱⁱ The Latin Vulgate translates this word *vitis* from which the agricultural taxonomic category “viticulture” is taken, a name with primary reference to “vines that produce clustered fruit”. Viticulture was abundant in Israel from the earliest times of the OT as evidenced by the countless wine presses. Thus, the viticulture analogy would be quite common to Jesus’ apostles and the nation of Israel.

The adjective **true** is used to describe the kind of vine that represents Jesus. Notice that Jesus did not use the word **truth** which was used in John 14:6, “I am the way and the *truth* and the life”. Instead he used **true** which means genuine over and against a fraud. Jesus is saying, I’m a genuine vine that produces genuine fruit. People who adhere to false philosophies and false religions have attached themselves to a fraudulent belief system that does not have power to produce genuine fruit. False philosophies and religions have no power, no energy, no person apart from the flesh behind their operation. They are all fraudulent vines but Jesus Christ is the genuine vine.

The Father of Jesus is represented as the *georgos*, the “vinedresser” or “husbandman”. The word is a crasis of two Greek words *ge* meaning “earth” and *ergo* meaning “to work”. Thus, the Father is the one who works the earth in caring for the vine. He is the

caretaker of the vineyard. “The cultivation of the vine requires constant care or the fruit will very soon degenerate. After the rains the loosely made walls require to have breaches repaired; the ground must be plowed or harrowed and cleared of weeds--contrast with this the vineyard of the sluggard (Prov 24:30-31); in the early spring the plants must be pruned by cutting off dead and fruitless branches (Lev 25:3,4; Isa 5:6) which are gathered and burned (Jn 15:6). As the grapes ripen they must be watched to keep off jackals and foxes (Song 2:15), and in some districts even wild boars (Ps 80:13). The watchman is stationed in one of the towers and overlooks a considerable area. When the grape season comes, the whole family of the owner frequently take their residence in a booth constructed upon one of the larger towers and remain there until the grapes are practically finished. It is a time of special happiness (compare Isa 16:10).”ⁱⁱⁱ Therefore, Jesus Christ thinks of the Father as the one who oversees everything. The Father sits high in the tower overlooking the vineyard, preparing it, cultivating it, and pruning it.

THE NON-FRUIT BEARING BRANCH AND THE FRUIT BEARING BRANCH

John 15:2 Every branch in Me not bearing fruit He takes away and every one bearing fruit He cleanses/prunes it so that it may bear much more fruit.

In this verse there are two branches: 1) non-fruit bearing branches and 2) fruit bearing branches. The Father deals with each distinctively. The subject is fruit-bearing so the assumption is that these are believers and we’ll prove that in a minute. First, let’s consider those branches that do not bear fruit. Notice the words **in Me**. When Paul uses these words he means being in *union* with Christ. When John uses these words he means being in *communion* with Christ. Paul uses them of “relationship” and John uses them of “fellowship”. So, what John is saying here is that you have two kinds of branches, both are abiding in Him, but only one is bearing fruit. The question is “Why”? and “Who are the branches not bearing fruit”? These questions have to be answered from 1st century viticulture.

According to Pliny, there were two kinds of main branches. The first was called the “leafy shoot” and the second was a “year old shoot”. Both of these main branches were fruit-bearing. However, each year a new shoot called “the keeper” was left under the cross-bar. This was a young branch that did not bear fruit. Jesus gave this teaching in the spring and it was this time of year that some branches would be bearing fruit and new branches would sprout forth. It is this new branch, “the keeper” that is being spoken of here by our Lord. The immature believer parallels “the keeper”. And what does the Father of the vineyard do with “the keeper”? The English text says He “takes it away”.

Now, this verb here is *airei*. It can actually be translated two ways: 1) “takes away” or 2) “lifts up”. How it is translated is often decided by one’s previous theology but it ought to be translated on the basis of 1st century viticulture practices. On one hand, since Arminian theology claims a believer can lose their salvation they translate it “takes away” and say this is loss of salvation (cf. John 1:29; 2:16; 10:18; 17:15). On the other hand, Reformed and Lordship theology translates it “takes away” but say it refers to professing believers who have not yet exercised true saving faith. Reformed/Lordship and Arminian both claim the person represented by this branch is not saved. However, to translate this verb “takes away” does violence to 1st century viticulture practices, John’s abiding terminology, and the context since verse 3 is clear that these verses refer to genuine believers and not false professors.

An alternate translation that is supported by 1st century viticulture practices, John’s abiding terminology and the context is “lifts up”. For example, turn to John 5:8-12; 8:59; 10:24; 11:41; Rev. 10:5; 18:21. What Jesus is saying is that when “the keeper shoot” doesn’t bear fruit the Father lifts it up. Keeper shoots often drug the ground and the tendency was for the shoot to put off adventitious roots. This is very undesirable. Along the ground they were also subject to moisture which produced fungus and disease. Therefore, during Roman times the “trellis” was invented so the vinedresser could prop these weak branches up so they could mature and produce fruit the next year. So, this verse has nothing to do with loss of salvation but the Father’s special support for the young fledgling believer. The Father wants to help the young believer mature to the point where he is able to bear fruit. Isn’t this what any earthly father does with an earthly son?

Second, let us turn our attention to those branches that do bear fruit. These refer to either of the two main branches (i.e. the leafy or the year old shoot). The vinedresser *kathairei* those branches. *kathairei* means “to prune” and while some cutting took place the primary practice in the springtime was “to clean”. In the next verse Jesus tells them they are clean and uses the same word. The main idea in verse 2 is “cleansing” of the fruit bearing branches so they can produce more fruit. This corresponds to the experiential cleansing that must take place during the discipling process in order to purify our character and conduct. Character and conduct are purified through trials and even suffering. This is why James said we should consider it all joy when we suffer (James 1:2-3). The bottom line is that the only reason a believer exists on planet earth is to bear fruit. If he is bearing fruit he is useful to the Father. If he does not bear fruit then he is useless (v 6). The Father therefore prunes us or cleanses us to purify our character and conduct so we bear more fruit.

In concluding this verse there are two branches and both are abiding in Him. However, only one is producing fruit. The first branch, “the keeper”, does not bear fruit. The reason is because it has not matured enough to bear fruit. The Father lifts up these believers so they will become mature enough to bear fruit later. The second branch, the “leafy shoot” or “year old shoot” has entered the discipleship process and is bearing fruit but needs further cleansing in order to be more fruitful.

POSITIONALLY CLEAN THROUGH THE WORD

John 15:3 *You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you.*

“Now”, *hede*, “at this moment” you are “clean, *katharoi*, a word play with *kathairei* of v. 2. Earlier Jesus said “you are not all clean” when Judas was present (John 13:10-11). In this incident where Jesus washed the disciples’ feet He told Peter that he was already clean and had no need of a bath, only the washing of his feet. In other words, his body was already clean and he only needed to wash his feet since they had picked up dust as they walked along the way. The contrast between a bath and foot-washing is contrasting two different kinds of forgiveness both based on the cross work of Christ. First, to take a bath pictured positional forgiveness or cleansing; the once for all forgiveness that takes place the moment a person believes in Christ. Verse 3 is speaking of their positional cleanliness, once for all forgiveness so they don’t confuse this with the cleansing in the previous verse which is experiential cleansing.

The means of their positional cleanliness is described as *dia ton logon on lelaleka humin* (through the word spoken to you). The word of God is instrumental in people coming to faith in Christ. This is why preaching of the word is so essential and this is why sending out missionaries is so essential because if we don’t send missionaries out then the preacher can’t preach the word and if the preacher can’t preach the word then people can’t hear the word of God and if they can’t hear the word of God then they can’t believe the word of God and be positionally cleansed. The apostles had heard the word and through it they were cleansed because they believed it. The verb *lelaleka* (spoken) is in the perfect indicating a past completed action having present results. They were cleansed at the moment they believed the word of Christ and that event was a completed event, but that life-changing moment has continual effects so that on that basis they can abide in Him and bear much fruit. These words are preparatory for their future ministry described in the Book of Acts. Jesus and the Father want them to bear much fruit. But such results are not guaranteed. “The idea that genuine Christians always abide in Christ is something foreign to Scripture.”^{iv} Thus, verse 4 introduces a conditional mutual abiding.

ⁱ M.R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament* (Florida: MacDonald Publishing), 488-89.

ⁱⁱ Louw-Nida Greek Lexicon (BibleWorks 5 Software)

ⁱⁱⁱ ISBE Bible Dictionary (BibleWorks 5 Software)

^{iv} Bob Wilkin, *Believers Who Play With Fire Get Burned: John 15:6*

(<http://www.faithalone.org/news/y1994/94may3.html>)

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