

THE TRUE VINE

Last year, Marketdata LLC, a leading independent market research publisher, reported that the ‘personal growth market,’ in the United States of America has a value of thirteen billion, four-hundred million dollars. This market includes self-improvement books, personal coaches, and motivational speakers. Some say that personal growth products and services have helped them, but others are critical. Christopher Buckley and John Tierney satirized the industry in their book, *God Is My Broker : A Monk-Tycoon Reveals the 7 1/2 Laws of Spiritual and Financial Growth*. The authors sarcastically conclude, “The only way to get rich from a self-help book is to write one.” Steve Salerno, a journalist and Part-Time Instructor of Journalism and Media Studies at University of Nevada at Las Vegas has criticized the Self-Help Actualization Movement in his book, *SHAM: How the Self-Help Movement Made America Helpless*. One of Salerno’s concerns is “How the Recovery movement has eradicated notions of personal responsibility by labeling just about anything—from drug abuse to ‘sex addiction’ to shoplifting—a dysfunction or disease.” People can sometimes better themselves with the help of others, but true personal growth, true spiritual growth, can only come in union with the Lord Jesus Christ.

After Jesus triumphantly entered into Jerusalem, He spoke to His disciples, as He had done on a number of occasions before, of His impending death. Certain Greek proselytes came to Jerusalem to observe the Passover feast, and they told Philip that they wished to speak to Jesus. Philip told Andrew, and together they told Jesus. Jesus said to them:

The hour is come, that the Son of man should be glorified. Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit. He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal. If any man serve me, let him follow me; and where I am, there shall also my servant be: if any man serve me, him will my Father honour. (John 12:23–26)

Jesus had several times before told His disciples that the rulers of Israel would have Him killed. On this occasion, Jesus said that the time for Him to die had finally come. Yet, His death would, from a certain point of view, bring about good. God has created the world to operate according to a certain principle, a principle of His own character. Death leads to life. If a kernel of wheat is separated from its stalk and falls to the ground, it produces a new stalk. As in the natural realm, so in the spiritual. The Son of God became man so that He might give His life for men so that they might have life. So, if a man loves living his life his own way, he shall forfeit his life. If, however, gives up living his life his own way, then God will give him eternal life. If a man would have eternal life from God, then that man must give up his life to Jesus. If a man will become Jesus’s servant, then Jesus will be with him, and God will honor him.

After Jesus’s last Supper with His disciples before His death, He told them that one of them would betray Him, and then He indicated to Saint John that the traitor was Judas. Judas then left Jesus, and went out into the darkness of night to betray Him. After Judas departed Jesus told those that remained that He would soon leave them, and He desired to give them final instructions. He said to them:

Now is the Son of man glorified, and God is glorified in him. If God be glorified in him, God shall also glorify him in himself, and shall straightway glorify him. Little children, yet a little while I am with you. Ye shall seek me: and as I said unto the Jews, Whither I go, ye cannot come; so now I say to you. A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I

have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another. (John 13:31–35)

The time had come for Jesus to be glorified. The time had come for Him to die for the sins of the world, to rise from the dead, and to ascend into heaven to receive from His Father dominion over the whole world. Jesus, the Son of God, would by His obedience glorify His Father in heaven. Jesus would not be much longer with His disciples, but, as He had before told the Jews, he would go to a place where they could not follow, to heaven with God. Jesus would leave this world for heaven, and he gave His disciples a new commandment. To love each other as He had loved them. The commandment to love was not new. In the law of Moses, God said, “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.” (Leviticus 19:18) Jesus said this is the second great commandment after the command to love God with one’s entire being. (Deuteronomy 6:5) Jesus’s commandment to His disciples was new in this respect: Jesus would love His people by giving His life for them, and so His people ought to love each other by giving their lives for each other. This selfless love characterizes Jesus’s followers. Jesus told His disciples that He is the way, the truth, and the life, and no one comes to the Father except by Him. (John 14:6) The prospect of Jesus’s leaving the disciples caused them much consternation. So, Jesus told them that He would ask the Father to send the Holy Spirit, and in this way Jesus would come to His disciples. (John 14:16)

Asaph wrote in the Book of Psalms:

Thou hast brought a vine out of Egypt: thou hast cast out the heathen, and planted it. Thou preparedst room before it, and didst cause it to take deep root, and it filled the land. The hills were covered with the shadow of it, and the boughs thereof were like the goodly cedars. She sent out her boughs unto the sea, and her branches unto the river. Why hast thou then broken down her hedges, so that all they which pass by the way do pluck her? The boar out of the wood doth waste it, and the wild beast of the field doth devour it. Return, we beseech thee, O God of hosts: look down from heaven, and behold, and visit this vine; And the vineyard which thy right hand hath planted, and the branch that thou madest strong for thyself. It is burned with fire, it is cut down: they perish at the rebuke of thy countenance. Let thy hand be upon the man of thy right hand, upon the son of man whom thou madest strong for thyself. So will not we go back from thee: quicken us, and we will call upon thy name. (Psalm 80:8–18)

Ancient Israel, the covenant people of God, were like a vineyard, which God planted, and cultivated until it was expansive. Yet, because it did not bear fruit, God would cut it down and burn it. So, Asaph asked God to revive the nation. Isaiah the prophet sang a song about God and Israel, His vineyard:

My wellbeloved hath a vineyard in a very fruitful hill: And he fenced it, and gathered out the stones thereof, and planted it with the choicest vine, and built a tower in the midst of it, and also made a winepress therein: and he looked that it should bring forth grapes, and it brought forth wild grapes. And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem, and men of Judah, judge, I pray you, betwixt me and my vineyard. What could have been done more to my vineyard, that I have not done in it? wherefore, when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes? And now go to; I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard: I will take away the hedge thereof, and it shall be eaten up; and break down the wall thereof, and it shall be trodden down: And I will lay it waste: it shall not be pruned, nor digged; but there shall come up briers and thorns: I will also

command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah his pleasant plant: and he looked for judgment, but behold oppression; for righteousness, but behold a cry. (Isaiah 5:1–7)

God delivered Israel from the land of Egypt, the land of bondage, and He brought them to the land of Canaan, the promised land. He removed the heathen nations from the land, and protected Israel, He made Israel into a great nation. Yet, the Israelites did not bear spiritual fruit. They were not wild, and not tame. They were not morally fruitful. So, God would remove His protection from the nation, and allow it to be made desolate.

When John the Baptist was preparing the way for the Christ, he preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Many came to him to receive his baptism, but he said to them:

O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits worthy of repentance, and begin not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, That God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham. And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: every tree therefore which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. (Luke 3:7–9)

The people came to John to be baptized by him, as God required them to. Yet, they did not understand that they needed to repent of their sins, and that their baptism meant nothing without their repentance. Israel were once again in danger of God’s judgment for their sins, and the only salvation was baptism and repentance.

So, Jesus said to His disciples:

I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman. Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit. Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me. I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing. If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned. If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you. Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples. (John 15:1–8)

When the first man, Adam, committed the original sin, his nature changed from righteous to sinful, and his consciousness concerning sin changed from ignorance to knowledge. He became thoroughly sinful, and this nature is inherited by all his descendants. So, every man comes into the world enslaved to sin, so that it is not possible for them not to sin. (Romans 6:15–20) Even Saint Paul, who, before he believed in Christ, was a devout and zealous Jew, continually failed to keep God’s moral law. He wrote, “For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin. For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I.” (Romans 7:14, 15)

God’s people are His vineyard, and God is the vinedresser, the one who tends the vineyard so that it bears fruit. Jesus, the Son of God, is the true vine. He alone is what a vine in God’s vineyard ought to be. He has life in Himself, because God gave to Him to have life in Himself. (John 5:26) God’s covenant people are connected to Christ as branches are connected to a vine. If one of God’s people does not bear fruit, if he does

not flourish, then God will remove that worthless branch. If one of God's people does bear fruit, God nurtures him so that he will bear even more fruit. Jesus's disciples were already clean, already made fit for God's vineyard, through Christ's teaching to them over the course of His earthly ministry. Jesus commanded them to see to it that they remained in Him, and He in them. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit unless it is joined to the vine, so also Jesus's followers cannot do good unless they stay with Him. Without Christ the source of spiritual life a man can perform no truly good act. Jesus is the vine, and Christians are branches joined to Him. If a man does not remain with Christ, then that man is cast aside, and all such branches will be gathered together and destroyed. If a man remains in Christ, if He continues to believe what Christ has said, then He can make request to Christ for anything that he needs, and Christ will grant his request. God is glorified when His people, His vineyard, bear much fruit. If a man bears much fruit, then he is truly one of Jesus's followers.

Not all who follow Jesus continue with Him. Judas was one of Jesus's twelve disciples. Not only did Judas abandon Jesus, but for money he betrayed Jesus to his enemies. Not all who are in Christ remain in Him. When Philip the evangelist preached the gospel in Samaria, a number of people believed and were baptized, including Simon the sorcerer who had captivated the people with sorcery. When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that the Samaritans believed the gospel, they sent Peter and John to investigate. Peter and John, when there, prayed for the new converts, and they received the Holy Spirit. Simon, when he saw that through the laying on of the apostles' hands the Holy Spirit was given, offered them money so that they should give him the same power. Saint Peter cursed Simon, saying:

Thy money perish with thee, because thou hast thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money. Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter: for thy heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee. For I perceive that thou art in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity. (Acts 8:20–23)

Simon's heart was not right with God. He was mercenary about religion. He did not understand that the Holy Spirit is a gift from God, and cannot be bought with money. He desired not to call people to follow Jesus, but to follow himself, and he believed this new power would help him to that end. Saint Peter told Simon to repent, and ask God to forgive him, but he gave the sorcerer no assurance of pardon, because he may have committed the unpardonable sin by blaspheming the Holy Spirit.

After this, the Holy Spirit told Philip to go south to the road that leads from Jerusalem to Gaza. There was at that time an Ethiopian man, an important official in his queen's administration, returning to his homeland after worshiping God in Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit told Philip to go to him, and, when Philip drew near, he heard the man reading from the book of Isaiah the prophet. Philip asked him if he understood what he was reading, and the man said that he needed a guide. The passage read, "He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and like a lamb dumb before his shearer, so opened he not his mouth: In his humiliation his judgment was taken away: and who shall declare his generation? for his life is taken from the earth." (Isaiah 53:7, 8) The Ethiopian understood the meaning of the passage, but he did not know if it referred to the prophet or to someone else. So, beginning with that passage, Philip showed that all of Scripture refers to Jesus. The man believed the gospel, and Philip baptized him. The Spirit then caught Philip away, and the Ethiopian went on his way rejoicing.

Saint John, in his first epistle, told his readers that there are in the world many false prophets, and so they should not trust everyone who claims to speak for God. There is a test whereby one can know if someone is of God: Everyone that confesses that Jesus is the Christ come in the flesh is of God, and everyone who denies

it is not of God, but rather is an antichrist. Christians have nothing to fear from antichrists, however, because God is greater, and God is in Christians.

God's people confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and listen to the apostles of Christ. Those who do not know God listen to false prophets and antichrists.

Those that know God, love, because God is love. Those that do not love God do not love. God revealed his love for Christians by sending His only begotten Son into the world so that they might live, and not die. Christians did not first love God; rather, God first loved them, and gave his Son a propitiation for their sins. If God loved Christians in this way, then they ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God, but he can see the love of God in action. If one Christian loves another, then God works through him. God dwells in him, and God's love is made perfect in him. God has given His Spirit to Christians, and by this Spirit they confess Christ, and love each other. Saint John and the other apostles saw firsthand the Son of God, and they have testified to what they saw.

Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God come into the world, is united to God. God dwells in him, and he dwells in God. Christians have experienced the love of God, and they believe that He loves them. God is love; so, everyone who remains in love remains in God. As God is loving, so is the one who is united to God. In this way, the Christian's love is perfected, and so he may be bold on the day of judgment, knowing that served God and man. If a man does not love, then He does love God, and God does not love him. Such a man will be in torment, fearing the just judgment of God. If a man loves, then He loves God, and God loves him. The Christian loves God, because God first loved him, and gave His only begotten Son for him. If any man says he loves God, but hates his Christian brother, then that man is a liar. If a man does not love his Christian brother, whom he can see, he cannot love God, who he cannot see. God has given Christians a clear commandment, namely, if a man loves God, His Father in heaven, then he must love also his Christian brother, who is a child of God.

Let us abide in Christ, and do good works. Let us not forsake Christ, but joyfully live for Him. Let us love God, His Son, and each other.

Now unto the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen nor can see: to whom be honor and power everlasting. Amen.