

Fed by Grace | Food in the Gospels

The True Vine

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4.6.14

John 15.1-11

"I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. ² "Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit. ³ "You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. ⁴ "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. ⁵ "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. ⁶ "If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned. ⁷ "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ "My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples. ⁹ "Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love. ¹⁰ "If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. ¹¹ "These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full.

We've been looking at the life of Jesus Christ in the four Gospels... They're not really biographies as you can see by how uneven the coverage is, i.e. they focus so much on the last week of Jesus Christ's life.

The four accounts highlight NOT so much His teaching or wisdom or advice; they show Him not telling us how to get happy or blessed or saved or enlightened. He's not giving us a plan to follow – HE IS CARRYING OUT THE PLAN. He accomplishes something for His people and He does that in His death. Many people are known for what they achieve in their lives, but He achieved something in His death.

We've been looking at the theme of food and today (and next week) we look at FRUIT (grapes and figs) and we hear Jesus Christ issue the last of His seven self-identifying titles, sometimes called the "I AM statements"... I am the Bread of Life, I am the Light of the World, I am the Good Shepherd and today the final one, "I AM THE TRUE VINE".

In that statement and IN the paragraph that follows, Jesus Christ addresses a specific group and for a very definite purpose. It's now JUST the Twelve disciples (and Judas has now left the dinner, the Last Supper) and there in that Upstairs Room the Rabbi is concluding His three-year course on LIFE. And He knows something His students do NOT

know...He knows that in just a few hours, they will face the most crushing disappointment we could possibly imagine.

This statement, "I am the True Vine" and the words that stem from it are a kind of antidote, a kind of safeguard against disappointment. And though YOU may not have had a big disappointment this week, you MAY next week...but some time, when you least expect it, something you HOPE for will not happen, someone will let you down, something you are counting on will not come through and THEN you'll be very glad that you have this protection.

So let's look today at: 1) The Dire Moment 2) The "(Re)Main" Idea 3) Remaining Issues.

They have come into Jerusalem; the Triumphal Entry and Palm Sunday (which we hope to see NEXT week) has taken place and the disciples can feel the electricity (If you've seen Godspell, "what's the buzz...?") and even though there's tension and controversy... these fishermen are now famous! And they're still vying for cabinet positions and they're pretty sure this is going to end with Jesus enthroned and with them right by His side – celebrated statesmen!

And it's another huge national (even international) holiday and Jerusalem is packed...So Jesus Christ takes them into this rented room and they eat the Passover meal. And when the door is shut and the meal begun, the Teacher, the Master (as we saw last week) gets up and serves the servants (Luke 12.37); He washes the feet of the disciples.

And then He begins their final lessons before the Big Test. He has been telling them it was coming (Mark 8.32) but they don't seem to get it. Mary of Bethany got it (and we also saw that two weeks ago) but they must have thought it was an allegory or a riddle and they just couldn't SEE that He was come to Jerusalem to suffer and die – to pay the debt that WE owe (and that THEY owed) but they couldn't see it. They were eating the Passover with the Passover Lamb (the one toward whom all OT sacrifices pointed) but they couldn't see it.

And there's this buzz...this excitement...the City... the center of the Universe for the Jewish people... So, He goes to work, tells them how to put on their life preservers...because they're going to need them very soon. He WILL be enthroned, "Enthroned Upon the Awful Tree" (as the hymn-writer put it) and they will be scattered! (16.32)

So He tells them, “when I go (They all ask, “Lord, where are you going?”) He says, “When I go, I will send another Helper to live IN you” (meaning the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Trinity). He tells them that He will give them peace, “My peace I give to YOU...” (14.27) and “I will, by the agency of the Divine Spirit I will bolster you, sustain you buoy you in the raging waters of disappointment... These are the final words. Listen well. Hold on to what I say”.

Some say this is the core section of the whole five- chapter-long discourse, when He says, “ I am the True Vine”. And some think that they may (according to the last verse of the previous chapter) they MAY be out of the room He and may have stopped at the Temple to teach and there at the Temple over the curtain on the West side of the Holy Place (the altar) was a sculpted vine made of gold. The artists continued to add to it regularly so that it appeared to grow...There were solid gold clusters of grapes some of which were as tall as a grown man.

Maybe Jesus Christ was referencing that amazing gold sculpture when He said, “I AM the True Vine”...

Or maybe He was referencing Isaiah ch. 5 (written about 700 BC) where God sings about Israel, His precious vine. He transplanted it from Egypt and tenderly cared for it. Took all the stones/weeds out of the ground, kept the pests away and put a wall around it...watered it...loved it...tended it... BUT as if it had a mind of its own, it refused to produce good fruit...only SOUR grapes and worthless!

“What more could I do for my vine?” asks God. Then He answers, “I will remove its hedge and it will be consumed; I will break down its wall and it will become trampled ground. I will lay it waste; It will not be pruned or weeded, but briars and thorns will come up. I will also charge the clouds to rain no rain on it.”

Jesus is saying that Israel is the Vine that failed, that would not produce, the worthless and fruitless and false vine...BUT I AM THE TRUE VINE! I AM the delightful Son that Israel failed to be, fruitful, vital and brimming with life... AND yet I will be cut off, trampled, parched and dried out... I will be without water crying out on the Cross, “I thirst” and I will wear weeds on My head, briars and thorns for a crown... I will accept the penalty for My people, for the disappointing VINE...and I will suffer in their place.

“And then, I will emerge, the fruitful and True Vine, the New Israel, fulfilling everything that Israel should have been but was NOT. I will live the life you failed to live and die the

death you deserved to die and I will RISE, a new VINE, the source of sap, of vitality and grace.”

And then the point – “therefore, as you are about to face the terrible weight of disappointment, “I am the True Vine, remain in Me...”

And this REMAIN idea is to say, “Stay connected to Me and you will not be swept away and dried up in the day of disappointment... I will push life into you and you will flourish and thrive as if by some secret source... I will make YOU fruitful...I will produce My virtue and beauty THROUGH you!”

In some ways, He’s saying, “All that Israel was and was supposed to be, I AM... All the Temple system of sacrifice and worship, all the promises, all the commands is all condensed in ME... I am replacing spirituality and religion and morality... and you need ONLY this: remain in Me!

He is not really teaching how to get connected. He is simply telling those who ARE connected and who are about to be devastated when they see Him die, “Just stay connected...abide in Me... remain in ME!”

Now some REMAINING issues: I want to consider TWO: 1) What are the components of discipleship? 2) How do they fit together?

1) What IS it to be a Christian? What IS it to be a student or follower or a disciple of Jesus Christ?

What, when you boil it all the way down, what’s it all about?

Well, some people say it’s a system of beliefs, of doctrines and teachings and creeds...but is it? Is being a Christian about believing certain facts and propositions and dogmas? ANSWER?: Sure! That’s a part of it! Jesus Christ says it, “You are clean because of MY word ...” (v.3) and again “If...My words abide in YOU...” – that’s teaching. It’s truth that Jesus Christ taught. There’s content in this way of seeing the world.

But that’s not ALL...There’s also DOING involved. Your volition, your will, your consent or agreement is required. You call Him “LORD” because you intend to obey Him. “If you keep My commands”. So, it’s more than just learning or philosophy or a set of beliefs. It

must and it WILL affect your lifestyle and you will actually follow Him as a student follows a teacher.

But thirdly, there is also a MYSTICAL aspect to being a disciple or a Christian. There is a transfer of energy or life or power. There's an intimacy and a relational side of things in which the believer has spiritual encounter and experience with Jesus Christ. AND this all comes out in a kind of ORGANIC produce or fruit.

The old writer Henry Scougal wrote a very famous little book on this theme called "The Life of God in the Soul of Man". And John Wesley (founder of the Methodist movement said, " I never knew what true Christianity was til I read that book".

It IS I think a missing element for some people, like a three-legged stool that's missing a leg and their whole religious and spiritual life is forced and without power and this awkward balancing act.

So, being a Christian is really all three – a system of beliefs/truths/teachings AND there's an ethical component (obedience, following Jesus Christ, living differently) and there's this mystical side.

But the real issue is HOW does it fit together? What are (what Richard Lovelace called) the "dynamics of spiritual life" and THIS really IS the all important question.

There are a number of "if-then" type clauses in today's text and it's crucial to get the order right. To remain in Christ means to continue believing. We get the all the promises of God and we take them or receive them by believing, by faith. It's as we persist in that honest, open sequence – we fail and we see our need for a Savior. We fall down and we face our faults honestly before the One who was cut off so we could be grated IN...As we do that again and again, we repent and believe, like exhale/inhale, we grieve over our sins, and we rejoice that our sins are forgiven and that because of Jesus Christ, the Spirit of Holiness is claiming more and more ground in the DARK CONTINENT of our hearts...and on the cycle goes (repent/believe, repent/believe, repent/believe...)!

It's what Francis Schaeffer called "active-passivity". We receive God's promises in Jesus Christ and we sort of force ourselves to rest in that, to REMAIN!

And out of that doctrine, which we receive by faith and by that kind of intimacy and relationship with God that leads to response and prayer and communion (The Life of

God in the Soul of Man) AS WE BELIEVE, our character begins to change. The sap rises up into our motives!

Sometimes it's very slow. But it happens, something that's not just forced morality or obligatory niceness or being good/respectable... not simply like rules-keeping... but something organic, like fruit growing on a vine. Love begins to assert itself...and insinuate Himself into our lives...and it's beautiful and sweet and like a growing, living thing. It's joyous obedience that comes by the power of God's life, received by faith.

It's often sort of indirect...like we're not even aiming for fruit (anymore than a mango tree is deliberately making mangos). This is the dynamic of spiritual life the Gospel generates.

Here Jesus Christ says, "Apart from Me you can do nothing..." and I take that to mean that even our so-called obedience and compliance with the rules WILL not amount to anything...will be sour grapes (like ancient Israel and the Pharisees) UNLESS that obedience comes as the fruit of our remaining in Christ.

St. Paul would later say, "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me..." (Phil 4.10) He didn't mean that he could dunk a basketball or win an election; he meant that he could enjoy life's sweeter moments in a way that glorified God OR he could endure life's bitterest disappointments in a way that glorified God – he could face the highs and the lows as the sap of Christ strengthened him.

The Christian life begins when we first repent and believe... and the fruit of love grows as we continue to repent and believe... this is what it means to remain in Christ.