



JESUS CHRIST DISCIPLEMAKER

Remain in Me: The Way of Fruitfulness

John 15:1-8

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ² He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. ³ You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.

⁴ Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

⁵ “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. ⁷ If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. ⁸ This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.” – John 15:1-8

It’s the month of April, AD 33. Jesus has shared the Passover meal with his disciples in the upper room of a residence in Jerusalem. He then, in an amazing act of humility, washes the disciples’ feet. They are probably now making their way to the Garden of Gethsemane by way of a vineyard outside the city. And, as Jesus often did, he uses the natural surroundings to illustrate an important lesson for his disciples. Here, Jesus uses the image of a vine, with its branches and fruit, to illustrate God’s will for these disciples. Just as a vine bears fruit, so they were to bear fruit.

How far they had come in their journey of discipleship over the past three years! Jesus had initially invited them to “come and see.” It’s as if Jesus were saying to these spiritually curious followers, “Explore my claims to Messiahship, and see if I am not the true Lamb of God who can forgive your sins.” Jesus initially wanted to bring these followers to the point of saying “no” to themselves, and “yes” to himself. “Come and see” – this is the way of faith.

About one year later, Jesus is walking along the shores of the Sea of Galilee. He seems some of these same disciples who had apparently gone back to their fishing. He calls them, saying “Follow me.” Being convinced now that Jesus was who he claimed to be, they did just that, they followed Jesus. And for the next several months they were learning to say “yes” to growing in their newfound faith, and “no” to staying the same. “Follow me” – this is the way of growth.

But then Jesus begins to take these disciples to the next level of growth and service. He goes up on a mountain in Galilee and calls the Twelve to “be with him.” He is now, over the next two years, going to lead these disciples into ever greater levels of commitment. They are entering into a period of “on-the-job training.” They are learning to say “yes” to serving others, and “no” to the many distractions that could keep them from following God’s call on their lives. For two years they live with Jesus, they walk with Jesus, they eat with Jesus, they serve with Jesus, they listen to Jesus. For two years Jesus is taking these men from being growing followers to being equipped workers. “Be with me” – this is the way of service.

The time has now come for Jesus' departure. If the work is to be carried on, it will be carried on through these men. And so Jesus reminds them, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last" (15:16). But are they ready? Will they follow-through? What final instruction do they need in order to be prepared? What do they need to remember? They were the fruit of Jesus' three-year investment. But will they now in turn bear fruit? Jesus tells his disciples, "Remain in me" – this is the way of fruitfulness.

The Fruit

I've often wondered, "Just what kind of fruit is Jesus taking about here?" I know what these vines produce, they produce grapes. Our home in southern France was surrounded by such vineyards. And the fruit of the vine in this area was not only appreciated, but known world-wide.

But how does translate into our lives? Just what "fruit" is Jesus talking about? Some have understood Jesus' image of fruitfulness to refer primarily to what the Apostle Paul calls the "fruit of the Spirit" in Galatians 5:22-26. In this case it would refer to those character qualities such as love, patience, peace and kindness that are produced by God's Spirit in our lives. And I'm quite sure that Jesus would include that in his idea of fruitfulness in John 15.

The context, however, seems to indicate that, while including this, it is more than this. Remember, Jesus has just spent over two-and-a-half years training his disciples to be "fishers of men." And within days of giving this instruction in John 15 to his disciples, he calls them to a mountain in Galilee and says, "Go, and make disciples of all the nations." And then, right within this teaching on fruitfulness, Jesus seems to clearly indicate what his emphasis is when he says in verse 16 "I appointed you *to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last.*"

The "fruit," then, is not simply the fruit of the Spirit, i.e. character change in the disciples. It is the fruit of seeing others become and grow as Christ-followers. If for the past two years Jesus was instructing his disciples to say "yes" to serving others, and "no" to other distractions, he is now calling his followers to say "yes" to being spiritual parents, and "no" to remaining childless, i.e. remaining fruitless. "Remain in me" – this is the way of fruitfulness.

And the way of fruitfulness is the way of joy! In fact, Jesus says it himself. He says in verse 11 "I have told you this so that my *joy* may be in you and that your *joy* may be complete."

There is no joy like the joy of seeing God use your life to impact another. There is no joy like the joy of being a "spiritual parent" – leading someone to Christ or helping another believer become effective for Christ. In fact, Jesus himself says that this is why he is telling us these things.

I keep a file in my office that I could call my "joy file." In it I save little memories of ways in which God, in his grace, has worked through my life to bring fruit in the life of someone else. Sometimes when discouraged, I rummage through this file and God brings me encouragement. One of the notes in that file is from a fellow that I met way back in the late 70s and with whom I had the opportunity to share the story of God's grace. I had pretty much forgotten about him as we had lost contact. But then, several years ago, I got a letter. He says this:

Dear David,

I do not know if you remember me, but while you were at Dallas Theological Seminary, you shared the love of God with me.... Often in our life we share the good news with a friend or stranger and never know how the story ends. The seed that you planted almost 20 years ago is doing well. Although I lost touch with you and all my friends in Texas, my relationship with God is stronger than ever. You were the first person that explained Jesus to me and mostly I just wanted to say THANK YOU.

Your friend in Christ,
David Widding

Your tendency may be to think, “But you’re the pastor. See...you we’re in seminary. You were trained for this fruit-bearing stuff. Not me!” Again, I would remind you that this call to “remain in Christ” and bear fruit is *not* for a special class of Christians. If you are a “branch” (and you are if you are a believer) in the “vine” (which is Christ), then you are designed to bear fruit. Oh, it will look different for each person. Some will be used to lead many to Christ. Others will be used to help establish younger believers in their faith. Some will be used in a one-on-one mentoring relationship. But as Christ-followers, all of us have been designed to “bear fruit,” i.e. reproduce the life of Christ in others. “Remain in me,” Jesus said. For this is the way of fruitfulness.

TESTIMONY: Tim and Tammy Radmacher

The Vine

The imagery is intriguing. “I am the true vine,” Jesus says (15:1). Did Jesus say these words as he walked by the vineyards on the way to the Garden of Gethsemane? We don’t know. But we do know that the grape vine in Israel was the symbol of prosperity, life and blessing. It was the national symbol of Israel. It was engraved on all their coinage. Over the temple doors was engraved a golden vine with its fruitful branches.ⁱ

But now Jesus is saying that he is the *true* and only vine that can provide real life.ⁱⁱ Did his disciples catch the point? Do we? Even as Christ-followers, we are so often prone to seek out substitutes for the genuine life that only Christ, the true vine, can provide. We can do this by reading books about Christ, rather than spending time with Christ. We can do this by thinking that it is our job to bear the fruit, and forget that the source of true fruit is in the vine.

The branches of a vine are worthless apart from the vine. They *cannot* produce fruit on their own. And in the same way, fruitfulness in the Christian life can *never* come apart from the vine which is Christ himself. Jesus’ words are clear and unmistakable: “Apart from me you can do nothing” (15:5).

The Branches

But Jesus not only said, “I am the true vine.” He also said, “You are the branches” (15:5). As branches, we do not have life in and of ourselves. Our life comes from the vine, from Christ. And our fruit comes from the vine, from Christ. The branches of a vine *bear* fruit, but they do not

produce fruit. That comes from the vine. On the other hand, the vine does not bear fruit by itself, but only through the branches.

Snap a branch from a vine and it will die! That is why more than ten times in these verses, Jesus urges us to “remain.” Over the years, many devotional writers have described this idea of remaining (or as the older English puts it, “abiding”) as some type of higher spiritual state or attitude into which we enter by means of extended times in prayer and Bible reading. And no doubt, as we will see, prayer and God’s Word play an important part in what it means to “remain” in the vine, i.e. Christ.

It seems to me, however, that Jesus tells us right in this passage exactly what it means for us as “branches” to remain in Him, the “vine.” To “abide” or “remain” means simply to “stay in close proximity with.” For example, the same word is used in John 4 to describe Jesus who “remained” for two extra days with the Samaritans (John 4:40). In fact, earlier on that memorable night Jesus said to his disciples, “All this I have spoken *while remaining with you*” (14:25).

The point is this. Jesus, in telling us to “remain” in him, is not speaking so much of relationship as of fellowship. As branches in the vine, we never risk losing our relationship with Christ, but we can certainly compromise our fellowship with Christ. Jesus here is speaking more of communion with him than of union with him.

How then do you and I “stay connected” to the Vine, Christ? How do we see our communion and fellowship with him grow and produce fruit? Jesus tells us in verse 9: “remain in my love.” And how do we remain in his love? Jesus says in verse 10: “You will remain in my love *if you obey my commandments.*”

Earlier, before leaving the Upper Room, Jesus had said to his disciples: “Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him” (John 14:21). So we continue in close fellowship with the Vine, Christ, by *obeying* the Son. It is impossible to be in close fellowship with Christ, the Vine, apart from obedience.

But there is more. We “remain” in Christ by loving the brethren. Jesus adds in verse 12: “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.” We *remain* in Christ by obeying Christ. And we obey Christ by loving those in the Body of Christ.

This is the way of fruitfulness. Love the Son and love the brethren. Obey the Son and serve even to the point of death (15:13).

The Gardener

For a vineyard to produce good fruit, there must be a gardener. If Jesus is the true vine and we are the branches, then God our Father is the gardener. “I am the true vine, and *my Father is the gardener,*” Jesus says (15:1).

The role of the gardener, of course, is to tend to the productivity of the harvest. And that is precisely what God does in our lives. He wants us to be fruitful. And he is willing to do what may be painful to help us be fruitful.

Notice that the gardener “cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit” (15:2). This is an unfortunate translation, leading us to believe that if we don’t bear fruit then we might lose our relationship with the vine; that is, lose our salvation.ⁱⁱⁱ Or maybe the Lord will judge us, taking us home through a premature death like the well-known story of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5).

However, the more likely translation of this verse is “He *lifts up* every branch in me that bears no fruit.” Jesus is probably referring to the spring “training” in viticultural terms. This “training, or what is sometimes called “trellising,” is a concept first introduced by the Romans. The branches of grapevines, if not propped up and supported with a trellis, have the tendency to grow *out* rather than *up*. But if they grow out on the ground, they may be stepped on. They also fail to receive the necessary sunlight and aeration necessary for productive growth. In this case, it was common for the gardener to “lift up” these unfruitful branches from the ground and connect them with the fruitful branches on the trellis, giving them both proper sunlight and airflow.

I believe that God, the master gardener, does the same in our lives. If you, as a believer, are not bearing fruit, the Father’s desire is not to “cut you off,” but to “lift you up.” Just like that limp branch, lying on the ground, he will lift you up into the light of His Son and aerate you with the winds of his Holy Spirit. This is the way of fruitfulness for those not bearing fruit.

But for each branch that does bear fruit, the Master Gardener wants it to bear even more fruit. Verse 2 says, “while every branch that does bear fruit he *prunes* so that it will be even more fruitful.” The “lifting up” of low lying branches is spring training. But the “pruning” of the branches is spring trimming. Here the gardener trims off the small “sucker shoots” that potentially suck the life out of fruiting branches. They would also clean out the leaves and debris that gathers at the juncture of branch and vine.

Just as God, the master gardener, lifts up the branches that need to be trained, so he prunes the branches that need to be trimmed. Are you in need of trimming? When our lives are encumbered with “sucker shoots” and all kinds of dirt and debris from this world, we cannot bear fruit. What in your life is “sucking out” the potential of fruitfulness? What debris and dirt needs to be cleansed?

Interestingly, the word “prune” is the same word translated “clean” in verse 3 where Jesus says, “You are already *clean* because of the word that I have spoken to you.” So how does the Father trim us? He does it through his word. No wonder the psalmist says, “How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word. I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you” (Psalm 119:9).

Ask yourself these questions:

1. How would you describe your present level of fruitfulness – “no fruit” (v 2a), “fruit” (v 2b), “more fruit” (v 2c), or “much fruit” (vv 7- 8)?

2. Take a closer look at these verses (vv 2, 7-8). What does the Master Gardener use to move us from one level of fruitfulness to the next?
3. To “remain in the vine” means to obey the Son and to love the brethren. In what area of your life is God calling you to greater obedience and love?
4. The Master Gardener wants you to be fruitful. In what area of your life do you need to submit to his pruning? How can you best do this?

ⁱ *Antiquities* 15.11.3

ⁱⁱ Psalm 80:6-18; Hosea 10:1; Isaiah 5:1-7.

ⁱⁱⁱ Cf. John 10:27-29.