

John 15:1-17: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0:00] John chapter 15 verses 1 to 17. I am the true vine, and my father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.

Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me.

I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me, he is thrown away like a branch and withers, and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples. As the father has loved me, so have I loved you.

Abide in my love. 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. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

[1:14] This is my commandment, that you love one another, as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends, if you do what I command you.

No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing. But I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my father I have made known to you.

You did not choose me, but I chose you, and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the father in my name, he may give it to you. These things I command you, so that you will love one another. On several occasions in the Gospel of John, Jesus identifies himself as the true something. He is the true light, he is the true bread, he elsewhere speaks of the true worshippers that are coming.

Here, in chapter 15, he speaks of himself as the true vine. He is the reality to which all other things point or anticipate. They will find their realisation or their fullness in him.

[2:15] Furthermore, in saying, I am the true vine, Jesus is also likely once more hinting at his divinity. The image of the vine was associated with Israel in places such as Isaiah chapter 5, or in Psalm 80.

The vine and the olive tree are both sacramental trees, one giving wine and the other giving oil. And I don't think it is accidental that Jesus speaks of himself as the true version of these things. He is the true vine, and as such, the true root and source of Israel's identity.

As we look in the prophets, we will especially see this arboreal imagery, this language of trees and vines, plantings of the Lord, etc., being used in a messianic context.

Israel is the vine, the Messiah is the branch or the root, the one from whom a new Israel or Davidic dynasty will arise. Jesus, by identifying himself as the vine, gives us an image of a restored people of God arising from him, a broader people that has something of the character of Israel itself.

The relationship between the father as the vine dresser and the son as the vine is interesting. It ties in with other descriptions that we find in the Gospels. People are committed to the son's care by the father, and also removed from it in certain cases.

[3:26] The word that is translated prunes is also the word used for cleansed. So in verse 2 and verse 3, it is the same root word that is being used of the pruning of the tree, and Jesus' cleansing of his disciples by his word.

We might even think back to the Old Testament and the way that the cutting back of the tree and the cleansing of the tree might be clarified in part with the connection with the idea of circumcision with the pruning of trees in Leviticus chapter 19.

There the unpruned tree is spoken of as uncircumcised. Circumcision was a pruning of Israel. It was making a wild tree, a domesticated one, all by cutting back the flesh.

This purging of the flesh was in order that they would be suitable as a fruitful vine for the Lord. The disciples are cleansed by Jesus' word, which stands for his broader revelation and message.

The idea of removing branches from the tree of the people of God is similar to that in Jeremiah chapter 5 verses 10 to 11. Go up through her vine rows and destroy, but make not a full end.

[4 : 26] Strip away her branches, for they are not the Lord's. For the house of Israel and the house of Judah have been utterly treacherous to me, declares the Lord. We aren't told exactly how the branches are cut off.

Perhaps they are cut off through persecution. This would also serve as a form of pruning, cutting good branches back for greater fruitfulness and faithfulness, along with removing the branches that lack any genuine life.

John frequently speaks of abiding in both his gospel and his epistles. This is perhaps nowhere more powerfully illustrated than by the organic union between the vine and the branches.

The vine gives the branches all of their life, and the vine bears its fruit through them. Apart from the vine, the branches die, and the vine imagery can be helpful for understanding works in the Christian life.

Fruitfulness is presented not as something that we do to earn or merit inclusion within the vine, but as an outflow of the life that we have been given. They are seen as a blessing, a harvest, and a gift, rather than mere exercise of duty.

[5 : 26] We have no power to produce fruit apart from Christ. Fruit is produced as his life works itself out in our lives by his Spirit. It is produced as we abide in him. And so it's by cleaving to Jesus, by holding on strongly to him, and abiding in him, that we will produce fruit.

As we have seen, the Father is also active on the vine, helping it to grow and produce much fruit, as he acts as the vine dresser. Bearing fruit is the point for which we have been chosen.

We have been set apart in order that we might bear fruit, and that our fruit might make a difference, our fruit might last. The Lord does not just want to save us as an end in itself. Rather, he wants to produce something new, good, beautiful, and fruitful through and in us.

He wants the life of Jesus, the life of the vine, to be expressed through its branches. And we are those branches. Jesus' words must abide in us. The words of Jesus, the word who created all things, made flesh.

These are not just regular words, as we have seen elsewhere in the Gospel. These words are spirit and life. They're the words of the Father. They're the words with the power to judge. They're the words with the power to raise the dead.

[6 : 35] These are the words that are supposed to abide in us, and as these abide in us, then we will be able to pray in a new way. We're told that if we have Jesus' words abiding in us, then whatever we wish, we can ask, and it will be done for us.

As these words have their life within us, and as we meditate upon these words, as these words feed us and give us our life and germinate within us, we will find that they rise up in the form of efficacious prayer, as illustrated in so many of the signs of the book.

The power that these words have in the mouth of Christ will be a power that they have in our lives and on our lips, as we believe them and live in terms of them. Our bearing of fruit, then, is not some onerous duty that has been laid upon us, but something which God delights and wills to accomplish through us.

Jesus died in order to produce much fruit. Where does he want to produce that fruit? Through his people, through the branches. And this truth is one that we should meditate upon, as it completely reframes our understanding of what works are.

If we keep Jesus' commandments, we will abide in his love. This reverses the earlier order that we saw in chapter 14, verse 15. Indeed, there is a sort of circular character to be observed here, a gracious rather than a vicious cycle.

[7 : 48] As we love Jesus, we will obey his commandments, and as we obey his commandments, we will grow and abide in his love. Our relationship to Jesus' commandments should be modelled after his relationship to his Father's life-giving command.

