

The Greatest Picture of the Christian Life

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Everyone who tries to explain something to someone else, uses analogies, comparisons. A teacher, a parent, a friend might be explaining a concept, so he uses something familiar to us, to explain what is unfamiliar. Analogies. Pictures. They form bridges from the known to the unknown, the familiar to the unfamiliar. The Bible is full of them, on every page. God is compared to light, to water, to a captain, to a fountain, to a shepherd, to a lion, to a husband, to a father. The Bible uses comparison to explain God, to explain the Word of God, to explain who we are, as the people of God, to explain the Christian life.

And the Master of using analogies was the Lord Jesus Christ. Almost every time He taught, there were images, analogies, pictures, comparisons, and stories. Much of what we have to learn as Christians is quite hard for us to imagine. Concepts like love, holiness, faith, grace, can seem invisible, faraway, abstract. So the Lord Jesus always used images to bring the invisible, abstract spiritual life into visible, concrete understanding.

Here we have a portion of Scripture that has become a favourite of Christians for centuries. And with good reason. This is the only extended analogy that Jesus gives of the Christian life. It is not a parable, strictly speaking; the Gospel of John has none. Parables usually contain some characters or elements in a short story form. John 15:1-11 does not really tell us a story, like the parables; it gives us a picture. A powerful, memorable picture of the Christian life.

You remember that John 15 falls within the last major teaching Jesus gave His disciples before His death. Known as the Farewell Discourse, because it is all about how the disciples must now live as Jesus departs, bids them farewell and goes to accomplish redemption at the cross. It answers the question: how do you live the Christian life if Jesus is not physically present with you?

It is also called the Upper Room Discourse because the teaching began in the Upper Room, that specially prepared room where Jesus washed the disciples' feet, ate the Passover meal with them, and then, once Judas had left, instituted the Lord's Supper. But because Jesus knew that Judas had gone to fetch the officers to arrest Jesus, at about midway through this discourse, Jesus told his disciples to get up and walk with him. This will buy them time, because Judas will come to the Upper Room with soldiers and find it empty, and then have to go looking.

Jesus is walking with His disciples towards Gethsemane, and it is not unlikely that they walk past grapevines on the way. Perhaps that brought about this teaching, but even if not, Jesus knows that the image of the vine would brilliantly capture the meaning of the Christian life.

Now, importantly, this is not an image of how to become a Christian. No, Jesus told parables about that, parables about giving up all to get the precious pearl, parables about debts needing to be forgiven, parables of invitations to feasts, parables of lost sheep and lost coins, and prodigal sons.

This is not a story of how to be saved. This is an image of how you live the Christian life once you are.

So I would imagine every Christian would love to have the Christian life simplified into a basic, simple picture. Here we will learn all kinds of things about who we are as Christians, what God does for us and to us, what we should be doing as a way of life, and what the results will be. We are to locate ourselves in this image, and see what God does, and what we are supposed to do.

To begin with, I want us to zoom out, and see the whole thing at once, and then in the next sermons we'll examine more closely some of the details. As we try to take in the whole picture today, the clearest way to understand it is to see who is involved in our Christian lives, what is done to us and by us, and what the result will be. The actors, the actions, and the outcome.

I. The Actors in the Christian Life

¹ "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, 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, 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, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. ⁶ If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw *them* into the fire, and they are burned.

So here is the picture of a vine, which has its trunk emerging from the ground, but soon divides into sprawling branches. Those branches usually have to be supported on some kind of trellis, or else they end up on the ground, bearing very little fruit.

Branches differ in their fruitfulness. Some branches have almost no fruit. Some have a few bunches of grapes. Others have more, and some branches seem to be just bursting with delicious bunches of juicy grapes.

And then there is the one who dresses the vines, meaning he tends, cultivates, looks after them. He lifts up branches on the ground and ties them to a support. He prunes leaves. He removes dead branches. And of course, he gathers the grapes when they are ready.

So who are the characters here?

Verses 1 and 5 give us the identities of the characters in this image. Verse 1: Jesus says He is the vine, and the Father is the vine-dresser, the farmer. Verse 5, Jesus repeats He is the vine, and He says to the disciples. You are the branches.

God the Father is the farmer. God the Son is the actual vine. Believers are branches in the vine.

This is actually not a new image. The disciples would likely have been reminded of a few Old Testament Scriptures. In Isaiah 5, God compares Israel to a vineyard and God to a farmer, who "dug the land up and cleared out its stones, And planted it with the choicest vine, and built a tower in its midst, And also made a winepress in it; So He expected *it* to bring forth *good* grapes, But it brought forth wild grapes. (Isaiah 5:2). That image is repeated in Psalm 80, and in Ezekiel 17. We read this morning the parable Jesus tells about the religious rulers, who stole and hijacked God's vine for themselves.

Israel was a vine that did not bring to God the kind of fruit He desired.

So it is not a small thing that Jesus says, "I am the *true* vine". That seems to be a statement of contrast. This does not mean that Israel is cast away forever or replaced. It means Israel trying to keep the old covenant did not end up being what only Messiah could be with the new covenant.

Jesus, and the new life He brings, is the fulfilment of what Israel tried to produce in their own strength. Paul tells us "For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God. For Christ *is* the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes." (Romans 10:3-4)

Jesus is the living, thriving source of fruitfulness to God. Take God's nature, plant it in human flesh, and the result is a perfect plant: the true Vine. Jesus is the God-Man, true God and true Man, the perfect righteousness of God united to an unfallen human nature. Here is seed that cannot produce a bad crop: God Himself, planted within human nature.

So, it makes sense that believers in Christ are branches of the true Vine. If only Jesus brings forth fruit pleasing to God, then only those who are living extensions of Him, branches found in Him and growing out of Him, can bear fruit. Humans cannot produce works pleasing to God on their own. But if they are found in Christ, they have His life within them, and can produce works like His.

Now being Trinitarians, we might ask where the Holy Spirit is in this image. The Father is the vinedresser, the Son is the vine, so where is the Spirit? Well, we can't say what Jesus didn't say, but we can make a suggestion. Often the Holy Spirit is implicit in a passage mentioning the Father and Son. In other words, He is present, but unstated, seen if you read between the lines. And without spiritualising this passage, it seems to me that the Spirit of God in this image of the vine would be the very life of the Vine. The life-giving sap flowing within a vine flows from the vine into the branches.

So why this image? Why didn't Jesus compare the Christian life to a mountain, or to the gathering clouds of the sky, or to a flowing river? Well, step back and look at what this image tells you about the Christian life. First, it is living. The Christian life is a thing of real, personal, spiritual life. As surely as a vine can be dead, and nothing more than firewood, or it can be alive, and producing grapes, the Christian life is a living connection to the living God, which produces visible results. The Christian life is not a dead thing, an inert thing, an inanimate thing. When real Christian life is present, there is life. New life, real life.

Second, it's loving. Not only does Jesus use the word love five times in verses 9 and 10, and refer to fullness of joy in verse 11, but the very picture of a grapevine bursting with luscious, ripe grapes was one of Israel's ultimate pictures of a life of joy, pleasure, abundance, celebration. It was a metaphor in the Old Testament to speak of every man sitting under his vine: the good life. Grapes meant sweetness, celebration, delight. The Christian life is a life of love. Delighting in God, and loving what God loves. The Christian life is not a sour life of unpleasant obligations. It is not a stoney life of hard duties. It has its share of suffering, for sure. But it is a life of love.

So with this image, Jesus tells us, the Christian life is like growing grapes. My Father is like a vinedresser, I myself am the vine, and you, true disciples, are living extensions of Me, branches in me. God and man. God the Father, God the Son, implicitly God the Spirit, and then human beings.

So there really are only two possibilities to locate yourself in this passage. You are either in the vine, a branch of Christ, with His life, His Spirit in you, or you are not in the vine. Verse 6 speaks of branches not in the vine, that are dead, no living sap within them, and so fit ultimately to be used only as firewood.

Are you in the vine? Not remotely associated to Jesus, but joined to Him? A living union, where you have asked Him to forgive your sins, and take up residence within you, where He is yours and you are His? That's being in the Vine, one of the true branches that the Father works upon.

That's the who of the Christian life, the actors, the persons, the characters. But naturally then, we want to know what they do. We want to move from nouns to verbs, from the actors to their actions.

II. The Actions of the Christian Life

As we turn from the actors to the actions, you will notice that the farmer does several things in this passage, and the branches do one thing. Look for the vinedresser's actions to the true branches in verse 2;

Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every *branch* that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit.

As we'll see next time, the words translated *takes away* is probably better translated "lifts up, takes up". True branches that are fruitless, the farmer lifts them up from the dirt, and ties them. The second thing he does to true branches in the vine is that he prunes them. He cuts away growth that doesn't produce fruit. It might look leafy green and attractive, but if it doesn't help produce grapes, he removes it. He increases grapes by decreasing leaves. He cuts back, strips, removes, sometimes making the vine look quite bare and naked, as he pursues more fruit.

There's another action in verse 6 which isn't specifically said to be done by the vinedresser. But this action is done to branches not in the vine. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw *them* into the fire, and they are burned.

Within the tangled knot of the vine, the vinedresser finds the alien branches, branches not growing from the vine but from some other plant, and removes them.

That's what the vinedresser does. But what about the vine and its branches? What actions does the plant perform in this image? Actually just one.

⁴ Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, 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, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.

The simple action of the branches is abide. Abide just means stay, remain. The branches have a living connection to the vine. They are in union with it, you can't always say where the vine ends and the branches begin. As long as a branch stays connected to the vine, and the life-giving sap flows up from the roots into the branches, those branches have life, and as long as they've been pruned, will bear fruit. Notice, the branches don't have to work to create fruit. No, the fruit comes from the vine through them. They just bear the fruit.

So here is a beautiful picture of God's part and our part in the Christian life. Once we are in Christ, and His life is in us, the Father will work to encourage and strengthen the flow of the living Word in you. He lifts up and He prunes. Sometimes that will be restoration, sometimes chastening, sometimes training, sometimes trials, sometimes challenges, all with the aim of producing fruit, and more fruit, and much fruit.

Our part as living extensions of Christ is to live in a practical union with Him. If we are in Christ positionally, then we flesh that out in a life of being one with Him. As a Christian I want to be one with Christ in my desires and my deeds. What I love I want to align it with what He loves. What I do should be what He would do. So as we seek to live in practical union with Christ, my desires and deeds are becoming His desires and deeds.

This really simplifies things, doesn't it? What must I do, what must you do? Let the living sap of Christ's Word flow richly in you. As we saw earlier in the Upper Room discourse, richly internalise the Word, and then richly externalise.

Live in union with Christ. Keep in step with Him. Align, agree, conform, with Him. Give His life, found in the Word, a great, flowing place in your life. And the good news is that the Father will be lifting up, pruning to help you do just that. He works in us to will and to do.

Those are the actions, the processes, of the Christian life.

But if we take the actors plus their actions, what does it add up to? What is the result, the product, the consequences of the actions of the actors in this image?

III. The Accomplishment of the Christian Life

Look for the repeated word in verse 2, 4, 5, and 8.

Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every *branch* that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit...⁴ Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, 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, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing...By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples.

What is the repeated word here? Fruit. There are actually four kinds of branches in this grapevine. First, some are temporarily without fruit. Second, some then bear fruit and get pruned. That leads to the third kind, those that bear more fruit. And fourth in verse 5 and 8, there are those that bear much fruit.

So here is the grapevine with branches, some producing little, some more, some large bunches of grapes. That is the end result of a vinedresser that lifts, prunes, and removes dead branches. This is the end result of branches that stay healthily connected to the vine, and let the living sap flow richly in them.

So what is this fruit? Some people suggest it is winning souls by evangelism. While it's true that being evangelistic is good fruit in a Christian's life, it is a bit foreign to the text. Some others have suggested that it is the fruit of the Spirit of Galatians 5: love, joy, peace. That is more likely, but again, a bit foreign to the flow of Jesus' thought.

I think our best clues are right here in the passage.

Notice what Jesus says about how the fruit is produced:

Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, 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, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing

A branch does not create fruit independently. The branch simply bears fruit. The branch is a conduit of the life of the vine. If the vine is Christ, then the fruit must be His life externalised.

Christlikeness, the mind of Christ, the love of Christ, the character of Christ fleshed out in His people. Also verse 8 says ⁸ By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples.

When we bear much fruit, we are shown to be true disciples, followers, imitators of Christ.

And the Father, the vinedresser is glorified by this. A grapevine doesn't eat its own grapes. The fruit is for others. It is for the vinedresser.

The Father is the one who really receives and delights in this fruit.

And what does the Father love more than anything? His Son. He says, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." So when He sees His children being conformed to His Son's image, bearing the fruit of Christlikeness, He is pleased, and glorified as the Father of the Son, and the Father of believers in Christ. The passage gives us more detail as to what that looks like, but we'll save that for another time.

If fruit is for others, how much Christlikeness can others pick and enjoy from your life? How much of His love, His peace, His joy, His gentleness, His humility, His wisdom?

We can see how the Master-Teacher has given us the whole Christian life in a simple picture. Christ is the Vine, believers in Him are branches, extensions of Him. Their goal is to produce His life in and through them, by the working of the indwelling Word and Spirit. If they live in practical union with Him, they will produce fruit. And to help them live in that union, the Father will be tending and pruning them.

You don't have to do the Father's work of pruning and tending. You don't have to do the Son's work of transmitting His life. You have to be a branch connected to the vine. So you simply have to answer two questions. One, are you in Christ positionally? Two, are you living in Christ practically?