

The Blade of Christ



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It was Jesus' final night with the disciples and he knew his time was short. They had just finished supper and Christ wanted to impart to his friends one last teaching while on earth. He summoned them, "Rise, let us go from here" (John 14:31, ESV) and led them on a walk. Along the way he gave them this analogy:

"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" (15:1-5).

What a lovely image summing up our relationship to the Son and the Father. Jesus is the vine and we are branches extending from him; he is the source of all life flowing into us. Overseeing all of this life-flow is our heavenly Father, the gardener who tends to our growth. Could there be any more serene an image of our life in Christ?

Yet also embedded in this analogy is a different kind of image: "Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away" (15:2). Many Christians flinch as they read this verse. Nobody likes the thought of being "taken away" by God if their life doesn't bear saintly fruit. To them, this verse is reason enough to cling to performance-driven religion, a system by which they can measure whether they're bearing fruit. Yet is that really what Jesus is after here?

There is a lot to unpack in this one passage—and I can assure you, all of it is good. The image I chose for the title of this message—a blade—may seem on the surface to be harsh or severe. But the blade I refer to is the instrument of an expert gardener—our merciful, compassionate, loving Lord. I want to explore the deep beauty contained in this parting message he gave to his church.

The first key to understanding this passage is Jesus' phrase "true vine."

Christ is telling us he is more than a life source to us—he's THE life source. Other "vines" may appear to promise life but none contain true life as he does. Some Christians seek life from other vines, sources that aren't legitimate for any Christian and that destroy life. Others seek life from sources that seem good and legitimate—ambition and drive, success and comfort—but these vines in themselves are lifeless. They can't produce true life. Jesus wants us grafted firmly into him so that we may drink deeply of his abundant life every day.

Moreover, when Jesus refers to himself as the "true" vine, he's talking about more than accurate information. "True" here carries the same sense as the phrase "true friend"—meaning real, genuine, authentic, on hand to support you with substance.

So what about the vinedresser, our heavenly Father? He tends his garden lovingly and perfectly. It's his job to keep life flowing through us, and he can be trusted to put the right things into place to make them grow. Therefore, as we abide in Christ, attached to the vine, we don't have to stress or worry about our lives. We are given true life-flow from Jesus and are caringly tended by our Father.

With this perfect vine system in place, how is it possible for us not to bear fruit?

Jesus makes clear, “Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away” (John 15:2). How strange: If we’re grafted into the vine, shouldn’t we bear fruit naturally? We know we are saved and secure in Christ and graced by the Father’s love. How could fruit not come from this?

Again Jesus supplies the key word: “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” (John 15:3- 4). Here is another phrase that sets off alarms in a lot of Christians: “unless you abide in me.” Some followers grow fearful when they read this. They become hyper-vigilant about how they “abide” in Jesus, creating do’s and don’ts that actually cut them off from true life.

It’s true that Jesus’ statement here is conditional, meaning we have a part to play. But that’s only half of his statement. He completes it by saying, “Abide in me, and I in you.” The other part of the equation is this: Jesus abides in us—and his presence in us is steadfast, stalwart, immovable: “I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Hebrews 13:5). When Christ says “unless you abide in me,” he isn’t referring to our salvation. He’s not saying we’re saved one day and lost the next based on how well we abide in him. Our salvation was secured by him on the cross.

No, when Jesus says we are to abide in him, he’s speaking of the fruit of the Spirit in our lives—our witness, our righteous walk, our joy and peace. “As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me” (John 15:4).

As you read this, you may still object, “But Jesus says the Father ‘takes away’ those branches that don’t bear fruit.” Yes, he does say those exact words in verse 2. Yet what did Jesus mean by this statement? The word he uses for “takes away” here is *airo*—meaning to lift up or elevate. This tells us everything we need to know about branches that don’t bear fruit.

If you visit a vineyard, you’ll notice vines wrapped around wooden stakes. At the bottom of each stake, near the ground, the vine is thick and strong. But as its branches grow upward they’re thin and tender. It’s vital for those branches to be kept off the soil, which is acidic and contains bugs and debris that could damage or kill them.

Our heavenly Father is all about lifting up weak, drooping branches that don’t bear fruit. I’m talking about compromised Christians who by weakness or willfulness have fallen to the ground in sin. When the vinedresser sees these branches, he kneels down, picks them up and restores them to a higher place where they’re safe and able to grow again.

Let me be absolutely clear: God is for you, not against you. He wants you to be free from the things of this earth that drag you down toward death. And he is ready at all times to lift you from any mire of compromise or doublemindedness. He wants to elevate you again to the high calling Christ has prepared for you. That’s the loving work of the vinedresser.

What happens to branches that do bear godly fruit?

So you’ve been lifted up by God, who has begun a new work in you. You’re a faithful follower who’s happy in your walk with Jesus. Your life has born the fruit of the Spirit, which is clear to all who know you. What does Jesus say about you in this analogy of the vine? Does God reward you for bearing fruit? Does he throw a party for you? No, Jesus says: “Every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit” (John 15:2).

Christians who bear fruit get pruned. What? That’s not what most of us expect from a life of service to God. Deep down most of us expect a reward. Isn’t that fair after all?

What Jesus says here is counterintuitive and countercultural. When I grew up, it was tough to get a compliment for any achievement. Today, if a child merely participates in a team sport, he or she is awarded a trophy. Don’t think I’m some bitter old guy who thinks he never got his due; I’m all for the amazing support many parents give their children today. But our society is starting to discover a negative effect of coddling our children:

It teaches them to hate being corrected. When they’re celebrated for everything they do, they believe everything they do is right.

This describes much of the church today. As Christians we enjoy unconditional love but hate being corrected. In his analogy of the vine, Jesus says our Father wants us to know a deeper love than that of a coddling parent. Our

loving God says, in effect, “Yes, you’re bearing good fruit, and that pleases me. But I want to increase your joy of abundant life. And I accomplish that by pruning you further.”

“He prunes, that it may bear more fruit” (John 15:2). Most of us do not get this concept. Kelly and I learned it the hard way last year, when a gardener took a pruning blade to our plants. We returned from a trip to find every green thing in our yard reduced to nubs. Our beautiful garden looked like the barren landscape of a lonely planet. We were ready to fire the guy!

But when spring came this year, every plant had doubled its blossoms. Each one had shot up faster and fuller, and what was once clutter was now clean and beautiful with flowering fruit. God’s pruning work in our lives is like that. It isn’t easy on us—it’s painful. And it isn’t pretty—but it yields glorious fruit that could not have come in any other way.

God’s grace not only saves us but also trains us.

“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people” (Titus 2:11). What great news: Paul extols God’s glorious grace which saves us—end of story! No, that’s hardly the end of the story. Paul quickly adds that this same grace “train(s) us to renounce ungodliness” (2:12).

Paul is describing here what it means to abide in Christ. It involves “renounc(ing) ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age” (2:12). In other words, God’s grace provides not only eternal life but abundant life now, today. The part we play by abiding in Christ leads to a blessed, godly, peaceful life.

But Paul doesn’t stop there. He instructs Titus boldly, “Declare these things; exhort and rebuke with all authority” (2:15). Remember, Paul’s subject in this passage is grace. He’s stating, in essence, “When grace is preached but it doesn’t train you to deny ungodliness, something is missing.” If we want to serve Jesus, we can’t avoid correction, whether it comes from God’s Word or from our respected friends. Yet we are also promised this about God’s corrective pruning: “Later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it” (Hebrews 12:11).

His pruning is powerful—both in its pain and in its glorious fruit. Do you lack peace? Have you drifted from the vine, your source of life, to draw from other sources? Ask God to take his pruning blade to your heart. He may cut, clear and take away things that don’t belong. And when he’s finished, the glorious tree in your yard may appear to be no more than a stump. But what grows from that stump is fruit you never could have imagined—and something you couldn’t have produced on your own.

Why a blade in this parting teaching from Jesus? He explains, “These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full” (John 15:11). “Full” indicates thorough, complete, powerful. What good, true, beautiful parting words he gave to his disciples—and they are manna for us today. God’s cutting and pruning ends up producing joy—all from the hand of the expert gardener who loves us. Amen!

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