

# The Vine and the Branches

## (John 15:1-10)

Expository Lessons from the Gospel of John

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### I. Background for the Farewell Discourse

- a. As we resume in the text, it is Thursday night, the night before Jesus is to be crucified.
  - i. Jesus has had his Last Supper with the disciples, at which (we know from **Matthew, Mark and Luke**) He instituted the Lord's Supper with the bread and the cup.
- b. After dinner has ended and Judas has departed, but before Jesus and his disciples cross over to the Garden of Gethsemane (where Jesus will be taken prisoner), Jesus gives a lengthy and very significant talk to the apostles.
  - i. The passages we will cover in this lesson are part of that "Farewell Discourse", which we find in **John 13:31-17:26**.
- c. In our last lesson we discussed some things Jesus taught regarding Holy Spirit: that the Holy Spirit would bring to the remembrance of the apostles all things He had said to them.
- d. In the prior lessons we looked at what Jesus said about the importance of the Holy Spirit, and the roles the Spirit plays in inspiring the writers of Scripture, leading the apostles to "all truth", dwelling in us, and guiding us individually and as the church.

### II. Why this Lesson is So Important Today

- a. The two-fold challenge for Christians in our age:
  - i. To persuade the unbelieving 2/3 of the world that Jesus was the Son of God, who was crucified for our sins and rose on the third day, in fulfillment of the prophecies
  - ii. To call the 1/3 of the world that believes in Jesus *to do what He said!*
- b. There are *two significant challenges* to calling those who believe in Jesus to actually do what He says, to follow His commandments.
  - i. Our first challenge: Many Christians simply enjoy the short-term pleasures of sin. Various temptations by Satan. Desires of the flesh. People do not want to live a life of self-control and holiness. Our job is to call people to repent of their sin and help them overcome.

- ii. Our second challenge: Many Christians today, especially Protestants and those influenced by Reformation Theology (very popular in the Western 'Christian' world) are taught that *obeying* the teachings of Jesus is not necessary for salvation.
  - 1. They teach that all you need to do is believe in Jesus and place your trust in Him.
  - 2. This false gospel is spread through seminaries, popular Christian books, radio, podcasts, TV, etc. This message even manages to influence groups that are not Protestant, where people *should* know better!
  - 3. While this may seem very bizarre to many of us, this teaching is spreading throughout the West and into many other parts of the world as well.
  - 4. Within the ten verses we cover in today's lesson, we find one of the most clear and compelling teachings of Jesus that demolish this counterfeit gospel.
  - 5. To prepare for this lesson, I picked up and reviewed a popular evangelical book on grace. I wanted to understand the reasoning and justification that Protestants use. For me, it was very disturbing to read this book.
    - a. The experience felt like being in a circus "fun house" with curved mirrors that distort how your body looks (while all the familiar parts are there, they are all distorted).
    - b. The author of the book used familiar Bible passages, but they were distorted, twisted, or taken out of context. Even the meanings of key Bible terms (like 'grace', 'faith' and 'works') were changed.
- c. Here is how the argument is often made by those who hold to Reformation Theology (going back to Protestant reformers like Luther and Calvin from the 1500's) and how they typically present the gospel:
  - i. They claim that fall of man was *complete and total*. Since that time, there has been is no ability for us humans to do good. Therefore, to God, "all our righteous deeds are like filthy rags". (They take Isaiah's statement in **Isaiah 64:6**, directed toward the Jews of his time out of context and applying it to *everyone, at all times!*)

- ii. They conclude that we are completely spiritually bankrupt as we approach God. There is nothing good in us. We are unable to obey God's commands.
- iii. They define "grace" as unmerited favor. Therefore, *if we do anything at all* (which they equate to "works") related to our being saved, we are denying the grace of God.
  - 1. Consider this definition in light of what Peter says in **1 Peter 5:5**: "Gods opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble."
    - a. Here Peter is quoting directly from Proverbs 3:34. There it says we can be either be prideful or humble, and God's response of extending grace *actually depends on something we do* (choosing to be humble, rather than proud).
    - b. Grace cannot be defined as "unmerited favor", as Protestants typically attempt to do. According to Peter and Solomon, it can be extended (seen by this example) to people as a blessing based on the condition of their hearts.
- iv. They point to "the finished work of Christ" and a person's belief *of an instant* as the only things required for salvation. Therefore, they claim that once a person is saved, that person *cannot lose their salvation*. They state that a believer can have complete assurance that they will be saved in eternity, *regardless of how they live their lives* (since they claim we will be saved even if we live in total disobedience to core teachings of Jesus).
- v. They teach that Jesus not only "wipes the slate clean" when we become Christians; they claim that *He smashes the slate altogether*. He forgives all our sins past, present and future, unconditionally.
- vi. They say that if anyone (like us) believes they need to do anything (including obey Jesus, remain faithful to Him in the way we live), that person does not understand that we are saved by grace; we are being "legalistic", "trying to *earn our salvation* through being good", or being "self-righteous".
- vii. They present it this way: "Either we are saved by what Jesus did for us (dying on the cross), or by what we do." Or sometimes as "Either we are saved by the righteousness of Jesus, or by our own righteousness".
  - 1. This is a classic false dichotomy: only two choices are offered (where in reality there is at least one more option).

2. When someone presents you with a false dichotomy, they are either knowingly or unknowingly presenting that there are only two choices, and those two options are mutually exclusive.
  - a. There is no “third choice”.
  - b. There is no way in which both options can be true.
  - c. This can be a classic technique used in debating.
  - d. Some people may not be doing this dishonestly; and may be genuinely unaware that there are other options. Nevertheless, this is one of the oldest tricks in the book, one often exploited politicians, advertisers, and others who are trying to get you to believe or do something.
3. Other examples where we often see false dichotomies:
  - a. Often used to get people to support a war. During the Viet Nam War, the pro-war people would frame the choice as: “America - *love it or leave it*”. (To which the anti-war people would reply “America - *change it or lose it*”.)
    - i. Yet consider, there is another option that the pro-war sloganeers had ignored. You can love the nation (America) *yet be opposed to its wars*.
  - b. More recently, President George Bush said, “You’re either with us or with the terrorists”.
    - i. Really? If I do not support spending billions of dollars and losing thousands of lives to support for your endless “war on terror”, then I am pro-terrorist? *Is there no other option?*
  - c. Recent claims the if you are concerned about the poor in America, you will support socialism.
  - d. In politics. Mussolini, a fascist, came to power in the 1920s by presenting himself as the only viable alternative to communism.
  - e. We see the same today in the U.S.: pretend there are only two alternatives and demonize the other one to manipulate people into a flawed choice.
  - f. Saying “you’re either a conservative or a liberal” or “either you’re for Trump or against him”.

- i. Wait; can't I be *supportive of some* of Trump's policies or views, while *opposing other* positions of his?
  - g. In advertising. If you care about your family's health and happiness, you will buy our product.
- 4. Whenever someone tells you there are only two choices (and that both cannot be true at the same time), stop and consider if that person may be trying to manipulate you with a false dichotomy!
- 5. Let us beware when Christians tells us we are saved by *either* what Jesus did or by what we did!
  - a. Are these two options really *the only ones*?
  - b. Let's read **John 15:1-10** and find out.

### III. Jesus is the Vine, and We are the Branches (Read **John 15:1-10**)

- a. Jesus uses an allegory to explain important spiritual principles. Let's look first at the elements of the allegory.
  - i. Jesus is the vine (think of a grape vine, for example).
  - ii. His Father is the vinedresser (person who tends the vines).
  - iii. Jesus' followers are the branches that are attached to the vine.
- b. Using this analogy, what does Jesus teach here?
  - i. Jesus admonishes his followers (represented by the branches) that they must "abide in" Him.
  - ii. If they abide in Him (and He in them), they will bear much fruit.
  - iii. Without Him, they can do nothing.
  - iv. If they *do not* abide in Him, they will be cut off. As a result, they will wither and die; and be cast into the fire.
    - 1. The fire here, into which the withered branches would be cast, clearly represents hell fire. (Consider what Jesus said in **Matthew 18:9** and **Mark 9:45-48**.)
  - v. If they abide in Him and his words abide in them, they will ask and it will be done for them (ability to request things in prayer, and God will answer).

- vi. In bearing much fruit, the disciples of Jesus will glorify God (the Father).
- c. A few words on fruit vine gardening.
  - i. For vines that produce fruit, you have one vine that supplies nutrients and water to each branch attached to it.
  - ii. Branches come from the vine, and bear flowers which become fruit (vine type tomatoes, grapes, etc.).
  - iii. A wise farmer will deliberately prune (cut off) unproductive sub-branches in order to force the branches to bear more fruit rather than just creating more leafy branches.
- d. Some key words in the passage
  - i. The word translated “vinedresser” is same as word for “farmer”.
  - ii. The word translated “prune” in **John 15:2** is essentially same word that is translated “clean” in **John 15:3**.
    - 1. We typically think of “clean” in terms of washing dirt off. However, after someone tells you they just caught a fish and then “cleaned” it, they mean they *cut away all the unwanted parts*.
    - 2. It seem to me that the word “clean” is being used in a similar way here (referring to cutting away the unwanted parts of the branches, or pruning them).
  - iii. The word “abide,” which is critical here in understanding what Jesus is telling the apostles, is not one we typically use a lot in conversation.
    - 1. I have read this passage in several translations. It is also translated “remain in” or “continue in”.
    - 2. Examples where the same Greek word shows up elsewhere in the New Testament (which you can see for yourself with an interlinear New Testament):
      - a. “You go up to this feast. I am not yet going up to this feast, for My time has not yet fully come.” When He had said these things to them, He remained in Galilee.” (**John 7:8-9**, NKJV)
      - b. “without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but

made like the Son of God, *remains* a priest continually.”  
(**Hebrews 7:3**, NKJV)

- c. “But He, because He *continues* forever, has an unchangeable priesthood.” (**Hebrews 7:24**, NKJV)
- d. “Then they drew near to the village where they were going, and He indicated that He would have gone farther. But they constrained Him, saying, ‘*Abide* with us, for it is toward evening, and the day is far spent.’ And He went in *to stay with* them.” (**Luke 24:28-29**, NKJV)

- 3. Clearly, from context, this word translated “abide” here means to stay in one place, to continue there, to remain there over time.

e. The *directive* of Jesus *to his disciples*, in this allegory

- i. Jesus says they must abide in, remain in, continue in Him and in His words, over time.
  - 1. He says that if we keep His commandments, we will remain in His love.
  - 2. We must obey His commands to remain in His love, just as He obeyed all His Father’s commands, and remained in His Father’s love. We must follow His example.
- ii. Jesus says that if they do not remain in this relationship with Him, they will be taken away by His Father. They will be cut off; they will wither and be thrown into the fire.
  - 1. Being cast into the fire here clearly refers to gehenna, the place Jesus warned of where the wicked would be cast at the Day of Judgment.
    - a. “If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed, rather than having two hands, to go to hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched—where “Their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.” (**Mark 9:43-44**, NKJV; where Jesus is quoting **Isaiah 66:24**)
    - b. In the story of the Day of Judgment (Sheep and the Goats) from **Matthew 25**:

- i. “When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left.” **(Matthew 25:31–33, NKJV)**
  - ii. “...Then He will also say to those on the left hand, ‘Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.’ Then they also will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?’ Then He will answer them, saying, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.’ And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” **(Matthew 25:41–46, NKJV)**
- 2. It is clear what Jesus is teaching here: If we do not remain in Him (a relationship with Him that includes loving Him and obeying His commands), we will be cast into the eternal fire at the final judgment.
- f. **Question:** Is Jesus really teaching that we must obey his teachings in order to be saved, and that one of His disciples can lose his salvation if he or she does not persevere and remain in Him to the end?
  - i. **Answer:** Clearly, yes.
- g. **Question:** Is He teaching that our salvation is conditional upon something we are called to do (obeying His commands, and persevering to the end)?
  - i. **Answer:** Yes.
    - 1. He makes the same point at end of the Sermon on the Mount, in **Matthew 7.**



2. “And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold. But he who endures to the end shall be saved.”  
(**Matthew 24:12-13**, NKJV)
- h. **Question:** But is this teaching that we can earn our salvation by ourselves, that we can merit our own salvation by being “good enough”?
- i. **Answer:** No. Jesus said He is the vine; we are the branches. Without Him WE CAN DO NOTHING.
  - ii. Back to the “false dichotomy” (either saved by what Christ did for us, or by what we do). Both are involved. We are saved through a relationship with Him that requires us to follow the example He provided with His Father.
  - iii. We must love Jesus and following His commands. God will extend his grace to those who have a loving, obedient relationship with His Son, and who faithfully maintain that to the end.
    1. In **Hebrews 2:17-3:6** it reminds us that Jesus is the faithful High Priest over the house of God (fulfilling the prophecy of **1 Samuel 2:35**).
      - a. “but Christ as a Son over His own house, whose house we are if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm to the end.” (**Hebrews 3:6**, NKJV)
- i. This teaching of Jesus on the vine and the branches refutes several of the core tenants of Reformation Theology. Here Jesus teaches, in contrast to reformers like Luther and Calvin:
- i. We must obey the teachings of Jesus to be saved.
  - ii. “Once saved/ always saved” is false teaching. We can lose our salvation. If we do not remain in the vine, in a loving and obedient relationship with Him, we will be cast into hell fire.
  - iii. Our salvation comes from *a relationship* and involves participation by both parties.
    1. Without Christ, we can do nothing. We cannot save ourselves.
    2. However, we must follow His example and be faithful to our Lord to the end if we want to be saved on the Last Day.

#### IV. Other Important Things to Consider with This Teaching

- a. **Question:** When Jesus says, “I am the true vine”, is He referring to some Old Testament prophecy about a vine?

- i. For example, when Jesus said “I am *the* good Shepherd” in **John 10:11**, it seems clear He was referring to the Shepherd promised in the prophecy of **Ezekiel 34:23**. Could it be that Jesus was referring to some Old Testament prophecy about a vine when He said, “I am *the* true vine” in **John 15:1**?
- ii. I explored many passages from the Old Testament that speak about vines, vineyards, branches, etc. While I may have gone down many “dead-ends” in my search, I did notice a few interesting possibilities. While I cannot be sure which (if any) of these were what Jesus had in mind, I will share them with you for your consideration. Three interesting Old Testament passages I found that could pertain to the “true vine” Jesus spoke of in **John 15:1** are:
  1. Read **Psalm 80:8-19** (designated **Psalm 79:9-20** in LXX)
    - a. Things that could point to Jesus include:
      - i. Brought out of Egypt (**Matthew 2:14-15**).
      - ii. Its shade covered the mountains; its branches reached to the sea.
      - iii. It would be badly treated, abused.
      - iv. “Let your hand be upon the man of Your right hand, and upon the son of man, whom you strengthened for yourself.”
  2. Read **Isaiah 5:1-7**
    - a. Note that **Isaiah 5:1-7a** is about a bad vineyard, referring to Israel.
    - b. **Isaiah 5:7b** could refer to Jesus.
      - i. “..and the man of Judah is His beloved plant” (from **Isaiah 5:7**, LXX, OSB)
  3. Consider **Genesis 49:11**
    - a. Hippolytus (c. 170-236 AD), a presbyter of the church in Rome, pointed to this reference to a vine in the account of Jacob’s famous blessing to Judah as pointing to the vine Jesus spoke of in **John 15:1**.
    - b. “Now the blessed Jacob speaks to the following effect in his benedictions, testifying prophetically of our Lord and Savior: ‘Judah, let your brethren praise you: your

hand shall be on the neck of your enemies; your father's children shall bow down before you. Judah is a lion's whelp: from the shoot, my son, you have gone up: he stooped down, he couched as a lion, and as a lion's whelp; who shall rouse him up? A ruler shall not depart from Judah, nor a leader from his thighs, until he come for whom it is reserved; and he shall be the expectation of the nations. Binding his ass to a vine, and his ass's colt to the vine tendril; he shall wash his garment in wine, and his clothes in the blood of the grapes. His eyes shall be gladsome as with wine, and his teeth shall be whiter than milk.

- c. "... 'Binding his ass to a vine': that means that He unites His people of the circumcision with His own calling (vocation). *For He was the vine*. 'And his ass's colt to the vine-tendril:' that denotes the people of the Gentiles, as He calls the circumcision and the uncircumcision unto one faith."
  - i. (Source: Hippolytus, *Treatise on Christ and Antichrist*; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 5, p. 206)
- d. Points made here by Hippolytus:
  - i. The older donkey represented the Jews
  - ii. The young colt which had never been ridden represented the Gentiles. (**Matthew 21:1-5, Mark 11:2**)
  - iii. Both were bound to "the vine", which represented Jesus.

b. **Question:** What does the *pruning* (done to the branches by the Father) refer to?

- i. Consider Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215 AD) who wrote about this.
  - 1. "He says, 'I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman.' Then He adds, 'Every branch in me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bring forth more fruit.' For the vine that is not pruned grows to wood. So also man. The Word—the knife—clears away the wanton shoots; compelling the impulses of the soul to fructify, not to indulge in lust."

2. Clement of Alexandria then goes on to explain that the Lord rebukes us and calls us to repent of sin. He disciplines us as a loving Father or Mother would discipline a child.
  - a. (Source: Clement of Alexandria, *The Instructor*; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 2, p. 226).
- ii. This also reminds me of a similar passage in **Hebrews 12**. (Read **Hebrews 12:1-11**.)
  1. The Lord chastens us, bringing hardships into our lives *for our own good*.
  2. He does this for a time, as a loving father does to his child, for the child's own good.
  3. This painful discipline "yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness".
  4. Perhaps this kind of painful discipline is the "pruning" that Jesus was alluding to in His allegory in **John 15**.
- c. **Question:** What is the "fruit" we are to produce, that Jesus refers to in **John 15:1-8**?
  - i. Does it refer to making more disciples? (That was how this was explained to me in the past.)
    1. If that is the intent, and we are the branches, would this not result in branches that are producing *more branches*?
  - ii. Or does the "fruit" refer to righteousness?
    1. Perhaps that is suggested by the similar passage we just read, in **Hebrews 12:1-11**.
  - iii. Regardless of which of these things might be the fruit Jesus is referring to (or neither, or both), our focus must be remaining in the vine. *That* is the command. If we do this, we will produce the fruit Jesus is looking for!
    1. Staying in the vine, remaining in God's love, involves obeying all the commands of Jesus.
    2. One of the commands is to make disciples of all nations. Let's obey this one. Let's also obey all the other commands of Jesus (and there are many!) and *remain in the vine*: in a loving and obedient relationship with Christ.