

The Gospel of John

Session Thirty: Jesus's Teaching at the Last Supper, Part 3

Commentary

John 15:1-25

15:1. Though this section of our study is only two paragraphs, it is impossible to separate the components of the analogy that our Lord put forth. They appear as contrasting couplets throughout the passage. First we have the vine and the branches. This was imagery that every Jew would understand. In the Old Testament the vine appeared regularly as a symbol of Israel (Ps. 80:8–10; Isa. 5:1–2, 7; Jer. 2:21). The Father owns the garden, Jesus is the vine, and his followers are the branches.

Christ and not the church is the true vine. Branches placed anywhere else are false branches. The word for gardener is *georgos*, the common word for farmer, a role retained by the Father himself. The vine with which these disciples would have been familiar was Israel, described in some detail in Psalm 80. There the psalmist prayed, “Return to us, O God Almighty! Look down from heaven and see! Watch over this vine, the root your right hand has planted, the son you have raised up for yourself” (Ps. 80:14–15).

15:2. Three types of believers are named or inferred in this first part of the chapter: those who bear no fruit, those who bear some fruit and, later in verse 5, those who bear much fruit. The fruit-bearing branches, it would appear from the text of this verse, represent true believers. But to whom does the text refer when it says, he cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit? This passage is capable of dangerous interpretation, especially when the idea of fruit-bearing centers in evangelism. Some people teach that those who do not win others to Christ will themselves be snatched out of the vine. Such an idea is alien to the teaching of the New Testament. Perhaps Galatians 5:22–23 helps us here: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.”

Viewing the removed branches as unregenerate professing Christians is not the only possible way of handling the text. Westcott says, “Even the unfruitful branches are true branches,” but then he chokes on the later reference to being thrown away and notes, “It is not perhaps necessary to attempt to determine the mode of this removal” (Westcott, p. 217). Perhaps it is best not to force every reference in this parable any more than any other but to focus on the pruning.

Boice escapes the difficulty of interpretation by translating cuts off (*airo*) as “lifts up,” certainly one of its meanings. He argues, “This translation makes better sense of the passage in every way, and in addition it is much better theology. First, the emphasis of this opening section of the parable is, quite rightly, upon the care of the vine by the Father. It would be strange, granting this emphasis, if the first thing mentioned is the carrying away of unproductive branches. But it is not at all strange to emphasize that the vinedresser first lifts the branches up so that they may be better exposed to the sun and so the fruit will develop properly” (Boice,

James M. *The Gospel of John* (5 vols.). Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1977, p. 228).

15:3. The disciples, however, needed neither cutting off nor trimming clean (a nice handling of the Greek word by the NIV) because they had already been cleansed by the Lord's word. One thing is clear at the outset of the chapter: this is not a passage on salvation, a topic John covered in earlier chapters. Here he dealt with requirements for a fruitful life on the part of believers.

15:4. Another key here is the word remain (abide) which appears no fewer than eleven times in the passage. It seems to suggest an effortless resting in the Lord, confident in the promised union between the vine and the true branches.

Furthermore, John used the word remain forty times in his Gospel and twenty-seven more times in his epistles. In the context of this passage, it seems to emphasize an ongoing faith and loving obedience to the Father and the Son that results in fruit. The fruit in this passage seems to focus on spirit-generated behavior of Christians, though again this is not the only interpretation. Many sermons have been preached on emphasizing fruit as other people who have been influenced by the gospel.

This is new covenant thinking. The disciples and all believers since then must give up the idea that true Christianity emphasizes memberships and associations rather than life in Christ through the Spirit. True believers, demonstrating the fruit of the Spirit because the Spirit of God lives in them, are pruned so their fruit will increase.

15:5. Here we have the key verse of the passage, although it only expands what we have already learned on the first paragraph. Gromacki writes, "Christ identified Himself as the true Vine, the believers as the branches, and God the Father as the vine dresser (John 15:1, 5). The fruit of the vine is Christlikeness. Although the Holy Spirit is not called a vine, He is a producer of fruit. The analogy could refer to a grapevine or to a fruit-bearing tree" (Gromacki, Robert. *The Holy Spirit*. Nashville: Word, 1999, p. 57).

Let us go back to the Galatians passage and see how this teaching of John 15 links closely to what Jesus has already said in John 14 about the Holy Spirit: "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other" (Gal. 5:24–26). In my view, John 15 is not a passage on evangelism and the fruit does not describe new believers. This passage probably deals with discipleship and fruit describes godly behavior.

15:6. Verse 6 narrows other possible interpretations of verse 2. We struggle a bit with the words, "he cuts off." But thrown away and withers takes it further than we want to go in any reference to people who may have been true believers at one time. Certainly the words thrown into the fire and burned could never refer to those who were at one time true believers.

Blum treats this carefully and wisely:

These words have been interpreted in at least three ways: (1) the “burned” branches are Christians who have lost their salvation. (But this contradicts many passages, e.g., 3:16, 36; 5:24; 10:28–29; Rom. 8:1.) (2) the ‘burned’ branches represent Christians who will lose rewards but not salvation at the judgment seat of Christ (1 Cor. 3:15). (But Jesus spoke here of dead branches; such a branch “is thrown away and withers.”) (3) the “burned” branches refer to professing Christians who, like Judas, are not genuinely saved and therefore are judged. Like a dead branch, a person without Christ is spiritually dead and therefore will be punished in eternal fire (cf. Matt. 25:46) (Blum, Edwin A. “John.” *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*. Ed. by John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck. Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1983, p. 325).

15:7–8. The focus of this passage is on the positive side (the branches remaining) and the Lord put aside all reference to branches that are removed. He also indicated that fruit-bearing is to the Father’s glory and that those who bear much fruit demonstrate their relationship to Christ. The distinctive factor here links an effective prayer life with fruit-bearing. Carson sums it up: “In short, Christians must remember that the fruit that issues out of their obedient faith-union with Christ lies at the heart of how Jesus brings glory to his Father. Those who are contemplating the claims of the gospel, like John’s readers, must reckon with the fact that failure to honour the Son is failure to honour God (5:23)” (Carson, D. A. *The Gospel According to John*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991, p. 518).

But John also talked here about complications in the application. Even when we understand the metaphor and grasp the analogy, we struggle with how best to make this work in our own lives. Let us understand Jesus’ words: You are already clean; you must remain in me; your fruit glorifies God. Even in this temporary life, some things remain. The abiding realities of this passage include answered prayer, the Father’s glory, and Jesus’ affirmation of discipleship.

15:9–10. Here we enter one of the great love passages of the New Testament. Six times in the next eleven verses the disciples will be told to love one another. Once again, Jesus placed himself between the Father and the disciples. The Father loves first; then the Son reflects that love; and we, his people, remain in his love. Remaining in the Lord’s love also requires obedience and brings joy.

If we thought that abiding in the vine-like branches constitutes some mystical relationship, we learn immediately that it centers on obedience—a theme that John has emphasized before. And when we obey Christ’s commands, we follow his example with the Father.

15:11. A new word enters the chapter as the Lord told the disciples he wanted them to experience the joy he had already found in obedience. Morris observes, “It is an inspiring thought that Jesus calls his followers into joy. The Christian life is not some shallow, insipid following of a traditional pattern. It is a life characterized by ‘unexhausted (and inexhaustible) power for fresh creation’” (Morris, Leon. *The Gospel According to John*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971, p. 674).

15:12–14. Not only do the friends of Jesus remain in his love; they must also obey his commands. These three verses represent a power-packed passage of the New Testament. John never forgot these words. They appear in various forms throughout his three epistles, particularly the first. John 15:13 is one of the most dramatic verses of the New Testament: Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. But we sometimes forget verse 14 that links friendship with obedience to the command to love. Sometimes Christians get so busy figuring out how they should be loving God that they forget to love one another. In fact, a constant and genuine love for one another would be one way to show love for God. We do well at this point in the Gospel of John to remember Romans 5:8: “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

When we study the imperatives of the four Gospels, we see that Jesus left many commands for his disciples and for us. But this one seems to take precedence over all the others. The central command has nothing to do with doctrine, church size, or the order of worship. It could not be more simple to understand or more difficult to carry out: Love each other as I have loved you. Tenney comments, “Unity instead of rivalry, trust instead of suspicion, obedience instead of self-assertion must rule the disciples’ common labors. The measure of their love for one another is that of his love for them ... which would be further demonstrated by his forthcoming sacrifice” (Tenney, Merrill C. *The Gospel of John*. Expositor’s Bible Commentary. Vol. 9. Ed. by Frank E. Gaebelin. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981, p. 153).

15:15. The disciples were Jesus’ servants, but he wanted to elevate their status to friends. But we must not forget that servant (*doulos*) was a positive Old Testament concept. The word friend may have shocked the disciples, since in the Bible only Abraham is called God’s friend (Jas. 2:23). It is interesting, too, that Jesus linked this friendship with his teaching. These disciples had become Jesus’ friends because of what he had shared with them about the Father’s truth.

We need to remember, particularly in this day of easy language about relationships with God, that the friendship of this passage is not reciprocal. Jesus may call the disciples his friends, but they still address him as Lord and Master. In fact, that is the pattern of the entire Bible. As Carson points out, “Neither God nor Jesus is ever referred to in Scripture as the ‘friend’ of anyone. Of course, this does not mean that either God or Jesus is an ‘unfriend’: if one measures friendship strictly on the basis of who loves most, guilty sinners can find no better and truer friend than in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Son whom He has sent. But mutual, reciprocal friendship of the modern variety is not in view, and cannot be without demeaning God” (Carson, D. A. *The Gospel According to John*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991, p. 522).

15:16–17. Verse 16 reminds us again that we do not find God; he finds us. The linking of answered prayer with spiritual fruit in one’s life comes at us in Scripture over and over again. The connection with the Galatians passage is important since the first and foremost fruit of the

Spirit is love. Lest the disciples misconstrue the nature of the central command, verse 17 repeats it one more time.

In the context of love, this mission for the Master goes on and goes out. These abiding, fruit-bearing, loving branches—Christian believers who obey the Father and the Son—are candidates for answered prayer as these men learned in the following years. Here, the reference to fruit can possibly be stretched to the concept of new converts, although we dare not dismiss the idea of living out the spiritual fruit of Galatians 5 in a lasting way.

Some New Testament scholars believe that verse 17 launches the next section of the chapter rather than closing this one. Loving each other is central to bearing fruit of any kind and will be a significant defense against the onslaught of an evil world.

15:18–19. Once again, the concept of God’s sovereignty leaps from the text. We were all once in the world, but those who belong to Jesus have been chosen by him out of the world. The hatred the world shows Christians is nothing more or less than a reflection of the hatred it shows Jesus himself. Believers have a different nature than “worldlings.” John 17 offers a detailed commentary on this, and the epistles of Paul develop it into a full-blown theology of two natures. Such a comparison should not lead us to pride. Jesus reminded the disciples that they had a special nature because he chose them out of the world and allowed the Holy Spirit to minister through them.

In this passage the present tense of the last verb (hates) indicates that this should be an expected and normal state of being—a Christian lifestyle. John used the word world five times in two verses, emphasizing the disharmony between those whose citizenship is in another country but who live on this planet.

15:20–21. The quotation in verse 20 comes from 13:16 and indicates the reason for the world’s antagonism: Jesus’ disciples are inseparably connected with their Master. When John wrote these words, the persecution under the Roman emperor Tacitus had already begun. In this chapter we have grown accustomed to seeing the word love, but now we see a new word—hate, which appears seven times in verses 18–25. All of us have cause at one time or another to lean heavily on John 15:21: They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the One who sent me.

Two other factors surface. We have seen that the world hates believers because they have a different nature. In verse 20, we note the world’s hatred because of our association with Christ. Verse 20 tells us the hatred stems from the world’s ignorance of the truth. This leads us into the next section where the Lord indicated this antagonism is also caused by proclamation.

15:22–23. The second reason for worldly antagonism is the resentment at Jesus’ person and message. When people are brought face to face with the gospel message and refuse it to continue in their sin, they bring upon themselves the guilt and consequences of their sin. This is strong language, especially in view of the brief statement of verse 23. The phrase be guilty of

sin “implies that the sin in question remains like a personal possession with the person who commits it. It is not something that can be over and done with” (Morris, p. 681).

The truth of the gospel convicts. When people are brought face to face with the ugliness of sin in their lives, they tend to fall back on the solution of killing the messenger. It is not difficult to picture a motorist rushing home from work, delighted that the traffic allows him greater freedom on this particular day. He takes advantage of it by driving ten or fifteen miles over the speed limit. Pulled over in a radar check, he becomes angry not at himself for speeding but at the officer for pulling him over and writing a ticket for one hundred dollars.

In today’s world of relative truth, relative ethics, and relative morality, we assume people will try to get away with anything they can and will justify their behavior when they do get caught. What we cannot tolerate in our sophisticated sinning is the carelessness of people who get caught. And since we are a society of victims—none of us responsible for our own behavior—we must find someone else to blame: our parents, the repressive culture, poverty, that pushy policeman, perhaps even God.

15:24–25. Here we add a fourth reason for the world’s hatred—conviction by the gospel. At the end of the passage Jesus redirected the disciples’ thinking to the miracles they had seen. He argued that if he had never proclaimed the Father’s message, never done any miracles, he could have gotten along just fine in the world. Once they understood that a messianic prophet was among them, they fulfilled Psalms 35:19 and 69:4 by rejecting both the Son and the Father.

So condemnation came because of Jesus’ presence, his proclamation, and his miracles. Jesus repeatedly asked anyone who would listen to place faith in him and his message, not just in the miracles. The point here is that they had rejected him, his message, and his miracles. Carson says, “Religious interests that pursue signs may be suspicious (4:48), and faith based on sight is intrinsically inferior (20:29); even so, it is infinitely better than no faith, and the signs and works of Jesus make legitimate claim on faith (4:34; 5:36; 9:32–33; 10:38). Rejection of Jesus’ words (v. 22) and works (v. 24) is thus the rejection of the clearest light, the fullest revelation; and therefore incurs the most central, deep-stained guilt” (Carson, p. 526).¹

¹ Gangel, Kenneth O. *Holman New Testament Commentary: John*. Edited by Max E. Anders. (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2000).