

# The Vine and the Branches

***“I am the true vine,  
and my Father is  
the vinedresser.  
Every branch of  
mine that bears no  
fruit, he takes  
away, and every  
branch that does  
bear fruit he  
prunes, that it may  
bear more fruit.”***

***—John 15:1,2,  
Revised Standard  
Version***

## **ON THE NIGHT BEFORE**

he died, Jesus gathered together in the upper room with his beloved disciples. John records: “Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.” (John 13:1, *RSV*) One of the ways Jesus loved his disciples “to the end” was by giving

some final lessons. One lesson was a “new commandment,” to love one another as he had loved them. (vs. 34) He also encouraged his disciples, telling them that he was going to “prepare a place” for them, and that he would return and take them to be with him. (John 14:1-3) He promised to send a helper to his disciples, the “spirit of truth,” the Holy Spirit. (vss. 16-26) Jesus did not want his disciples to be discouraged after his departure,

especially when difficulties and trials would be permitted to come upon them.

In addition to these encouragements, Jesus gave the parable of the vine and the branches, recorded in John 15:1-8. Jesus began this lesson by stating that he was represented in the parable as the “true vine,” and his Father as the “vinedresser,” as seen in our opening text. Here is one example, among many others recorded in the Gospel accounts, in which Jesus honored and glorified his Heavenly Father, emphasizing the fact that God was greater than himself.

God, described as the vinedresser, is the one who, in the parable, owns the vineyard. The Apostle Paul emphasizes this important point of God’s preeminence, and also of the fact that the Father and the Son are separate beings. He says, “There is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.”—I Cor. 8:6, *RSV*

In the parable, Jesus states that he is the “true vine.” This language implies that there is also a false vine, a church system which the Heavenly Father has not planted. On an earlier occasion during his ministry, Jesus alluded to this when answering a question posed by his disciples. He said, “Every plant which my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up.” (Matt. 15:12,13, *RSV*) Similarly, we are told in the book of Revelation that the symbolic “vine of the earth” would be cut off with a sickle and destroyed in “the great winepress of the wrath of God.” (Rev. 14:19) The fruitage of the true vine is love and its associated character qualities. These

are precious to our Heavenly Father, whereas the fruitage of the false vine, selfishness and its sinful counterparts, are unacceptable in his sight.

## **FRUITAGE REQUIRED**

Jesus continues the parable by saying that every branch of the vine which bears no fruit is taken away by God, but every branch that bears fruit he prunes so that it will produce more. (John 15:2) The branch referred to in this verse is symbolic of each individual who is united to Christ Jesus. As part of the one true vine, each individual branch has a personal relationship with Jesus, and an individual responsibility to abide in him, and to bear fruitage in harmony with the example he set for us.

In the case of the branches that bear fruit and are pruned so that they will bring forth more fruit, the meaning of the original Greek text includes not only the thought of pruning, but also that of cleansing. This thought is similarly found in Paul's words when he says, speaking of Jesus, that he "gave himself for us to redeem us from all iniquity and to purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds." (Tit. 2:14, *RSV*) In the parable, the explanation given as to why branches which are already bearing fruit are pruned is that they might bear more fruit. The Greek word translated "more" denotes not only more in quantity, but also higher in quality.

The fruitage produced by the branches are the Christ-like qualities of character which are manifested in our life by means of the influence and help of God's Holy Spirit. The Apostle Paul explains that "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience,

kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.”—Gal. 5:22,23, *RSV*

## **GOD’S METHOD OF PRUNING**

The thought of pruning may often be contrary to the inclinations of our fallen human nature. In the plant world, it is important to prune trees in order to have them produce a plenteous amount of good fruit. When this takes place, not only is the length of each branch trimmed, but also small shoots, called suckers, that may have sprouted on the sides of the branches are cut off. These produce no fruit, but consume valuable nutrients from the fruit-bearing part of the branch. When pruning, we may at times wonder if we have cut off too much, and possibly ruined the tree or vine. Indeed, it does not at first seem natural to trim branches which appear to be healthy. Yet, it is necessary in order for a branch to remain in good health. Even the best-looking branches on a tree need to be pruned in order to produce good fruit in abundance.

As followers of Christ and as branches in the symbolic vine, we too need to be pruned in order to be spiritually healthy. How comforting it is to know that our Heavenly Father does this work in each of our lives and that in all cases it is for our greatest spiritual benefit. Such pruning includes all the experiences and trials which God permits in our life. Citing in part the words of a “faithful and wise servant” of the Lord concerning this subject, we quote: “God’s methods of pruning should be understood, or else we might become discouraged. Sometimes, the pruning is by taking away earthly wealth or property, or cherished plans. God’s prunings may

also include persecutions, or loss of a good reputation or earthly friendships. God's prunings may also be the permission of experiencing illness."

Our pruning, permitted by God, instead of discouraging us should be an encouragement, because when we have such experiences, it shows the Heavenly Father's love for us, and that he is looking at our eternal interests. From a fleshly point of view, when we go through a difficult experience, we may not always consider it an encouragement. However, as New Creatures we must realize that such experiences are permitted and overruled by God. By taking this view of our experiences, we can avoid becoming discouraged.

Concerning his own experiences, Paul wrote: "To keep me from being too elated by the abundance of revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh ... to keep me from being too elated." (II Cor. 12:7 *RSV*) In his letter to the brethren at Philippi, Paul also spoke of his personal prunings: "Whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. ... For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own, based on law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith."—Phil. 3:7-9, *RSV*

## **IN THE UPPER ROOM**

While in the upper room on that most special evening, Jesus took a towel, poured water into a basin, and began to wash the disciple's feet. (John 13:3-5) Peter's response when the Master came to him, was, "Lord, do you wash my feet? Jesus answered

him, what I am doing you do not know now, but afterward you will understand. Peter said to him, You shall never wash my feet. Jesus answered him, If I do not wash you, you have no part in me. Simon Peter said to him, Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head! Jesus said to him, He who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but he is clean all over; and you are clean, but not all of you. For he knew who was to betray him.” —John 13:6-11, *RSV*

A few moments later, Jesus said to his disciples, “One of you will betray me.” Upon hearing this, the disciples became greatly concerned, and the Apostle John asked Jesus, “Lord, who is it? Jesus answered, It is he to whom I shall give this morsel when I have dipped it. So when he had dipped the morsel, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. Then after the morsel, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, What you are going to do, do quickly.” “So, after receiving the morsel, he immediately went out; and it was night.” (vss. 21,25-27,30, *RSV*) Based on the foregoing narrative, we believe it was sometime after Judas had left the group gathered in the upper room when the lesson of the vine and the branches was given. At the beginning of the parable Jesus said, “You are already made clean by the word which I have spoken to you.” (John 15:3, *RSV*) This is in corroboration of the statement previously made to Peter, “you are clean.”

## **ABIDE IN CHRIST IN ORDER TO BEAR FRUIT**

Jesus continued the parable, saying: “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. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.” (John 15:4,5, *RSV*) To abide in Christ, we must do more than just decide to consecrate our all to God. This decision is only a first step. We must also begin, and continue, the work of cultivating in our character the fruits and graces of the Holy Spirit.

To abide in Christ means not only to recognize Jesus as our Redeemer from Adamic sin, but also to recognize him as our “head,” and to look to him as our “chief Shepherd.” We are to additionally recognize him as the “chief corner stone; ... In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.”—Eph. 4:15; 5:23; I Pet. 5:4; Eph. 2:20-22

To abide in Christ entails submitting humbly and joyfully to all the pruning which God, in his wisdom, permits for our greatest spiritual good. In the Old Testament we are told: “Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.” (Prov. 3:5,6, *RSV*) One of the ways we can apply these words is in our daily prayers, since an important objective of prayer is to bring our hearts and minds into closer harmony with God.

How vitally important are Jesus’ words that whoever abides in him “bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.” We may wonder if the fruit Jesus referred to included such things as the building of large, impressive churches, orphanages, or hospitals. As wonderful as these efforts might be, we do not believe these are the fruits Jesus was

speaking of, since neither he nor the apostles did this. We might also think that our activities in the service of the Truth, at the expense of our time, effort, and wealth, constitute fruitage, or that our study of the Lord's word equates to fruit-bearing. However, none of these things, by themselves, signify the production of "much fruit."

Our studying of the Lord's word and our activities in his service are accepted by God only to the extent that they are accompanied by the development of the fruits of the Holy Spirit in our heart. Indeed, we must cultivate and develop the qualities, previously noted, of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, in order to be pleasing to God, irrespective of time and effort we may expend in the areas of study, activity or service.

Our demonstration of the fruits of the Holy Spirit may, to a limited degree, be noticed by some of those with whom we come into contact. However, we should not expect that it will often bring us their approval or admiration. Oftentimes the efforts made in displaying the fruits of the Holy Spirit in our daily lives might be interpreted by others as being weak, soft, or even foolish.

Jesus explained that the world in general would not approve or admire his followers. (John 15:18-21; 17:14-16) If our consecration is not wholehearted, we might miss the fellowship and admiration of the world and crave for even their slightest approval. Thus, the disapproval or misinterpretation of our efforts by others, as we strive to exercise the fruits and graces of the Holy Spirit, is part of the testing of the "royal priesthood."



## PROMISES CONDITIONAL

The parable continues with Jesus' words, "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you." (John 15:7, *RSV*) The word "if" indicates that there are conditions to this promise. We must abide in Christ and have his words abide in us. Having Jesus' words abide in us includes transforming our way of thinking, which formerly may have been primarily focused upon the earthly things of the present life and our own personal interests. To abide in Christ means to become more and more focused on spiritual things and on the interests of others, as he set forth by way of example.

As Jesus' words abide in us, they will help to guide us in our daily life. Therefore, we must not only seek God's grace by praying for a greater measure of his Spirit, but we must also spend much time and effort to know and apply the Scriptures. By doing this, we will be greatly helped so as to "not be conformed to the world," with its decaying standards, attitudes and methods. We will also be assisted in becoming "transformed by the renewal" of our mind, in order that we "may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."—Rom. 12:2, *RSV*

Jesus continued, saying, "By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples." (John 15:8, *RSV*) Bearing "much fruit" depends upon our continued diligence in the work of developing spiritual wisdom and of daily seeking to be pleasing to God. Along this line, Paul said to the brethren, "We have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the

knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, to lead a life worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.”—Col. 1:9,10, *RSV*

## **ABIDING IN LOVE**

After giving the parable, Jesus said to the disciples, “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.” “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” (John 15:10,12, *RSV*) This new commandment, that we love one another as Jesus loved us, speaks of a love which includes sacrifice, and which goes beyond what justice alone would require. Indeed, Christ-like love will be the characteristic of all who have the spirit of the Lord.

We will not produce the fruits of the Spirit, summed up in love, simply by reading about them or knowing what they are. Rather, possessing the same love which Jesus showed toward us includes having sympathy for and encouraging those who are going through difficulties or who are experiencing discouragement. It also means helping our brethren to grow in faith, and stirring up one another to love and good works, striving to do nothing which might stumble or discourage others walking in the narrow way of sacrifice. As we cultivate this spirit of love, it will dominate our actions, our words, and even our thoughts.—I Thess. 5:11-15; Heb. 10:24; Rom. 14:19,21

Expanding further on the lesson of having love for one another, Jesus said, “Greater love has no man

than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.” (John 15:13, *RSV*) Jesus laid down his life continuously throughout his earthly ministry by his teachings, and by healing the sick, deaf, blind, lame, and those possessed by evil spirits.

We do not possess the special gift of healing as Jesus did, but we can serve one another in many other ways. Paul admonished, “Through love be servants of one another,” and “love your neighbor as yourself.” We can do this, and we will joyfully do so, if we “walk by the spirit,” letting the Holy Spirit of God be our motivation in all that we say and do. However, as the apostle also warns, we must not “bite and devour one another.”—Gal. 5:13-16, *RSV*

## **BOTH JOYS AND TRIALS EXPECTED**

Jesus explained to his disciples, “These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.” (John 15:11, *RSV*) If our joy is dependent merely upon the circumstances of this life, we will be without joy much of the time, and perhaps, of all men, most miserable and discouraged. However, if our hope lays a firm hold upon the promises of God, and is nourished by our prayers and any opportunity we might may have in the Lord’s service, then our joy will spring up, like flowers in a desert, and be fully in bloom.

“You are my friends,” the Master continued, “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.” (vss. 14,15, *RSV*) As Jesus spoke further, he explained, “I have said all this to you to

keep you from falling away,” while also warning his disciples that they would face severe persecution after his departure. (John 16:1-4, *RSV*) After giving a few more lessons, Jesus then prayed to the Heavenly Father, asking that he preserve these specially chosen ones, and not only them, but all those who would believe in him through their words.—John 17:1,6-26

Surely there will be more or less pain in the prunings and testings of loyalty and obedience which God permits in our life. However, every manifestation of our obedience to him is part of our preparation for membership in the Bride class. Paul wrote, “For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant; later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.” (Heb. 12:11, *RSV*) May our Heavenly Father help each of us to recognize his prunings in our lives, to accept them with joy and thankfulness, and to learn valuable lessons from them. Let us continue to trust the Lord and patiently accept whatever experiences may come to us, knowing that he can intervene and protect us if it is his will. Therefore, we can be assured that “all things” are working together for our good, “according to his purpose.”—Rom. 8:28 ■

*“How precious are your thoughts about me,  
O God. They cannot be numbered! I can’t even count  
them; they outnumber the grains of sand! And when  
I wake up, you are still with me!  
Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me  
and know my anxious thoughts. Point out anything  
in me that offends you, and lead me along the  
path of everlasting life.”*

*—Psalm 139:17,18,23,24, New Living Translation*