

The True Vine

The figure of the Vine is used in the Old Testament Scriptures to speak of certain aspects of Israel. For instance, Isaiah chapter 5 includes a song regarding the Vineyard (vs1-2) And the interpretation is given:

“For the vineyard of Yahweh of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah his pleasant plant: and he looked for judgment, but behold oppression; for righteousness, but behold a cry” (Isa. 5:7).

Because of their failure to produce usable fruit (vs. 2), the judgment was given:

“I will lay it waste: it shall not be pruned, nor digged; but there shall come up briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it” (vs. 6).

These verses (see also Jer. 2:21 and Psa. 80), provide an Old Testament background to the parable of Messiah. In John chapter 15, Jesus declares: “I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman” (Jno. 15:1). Here, as in other places, the word “true” means substance as distinct from shadow, rather than truth as distinct from falsehood. Whilst Israel was a representative vine, the reality of the symbol is seen in Messiah, he is the fulfilment of all the imagery and Types of the Old Testament record.

Later in the parable, the Lord refers to his disciples:

“I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit for without me ye can do nothing” (vs 5).

Notice, that here, Jesus is not a branch (although that description is used elsewhere of the Master – see Zech. 3:8 for instance), but he is the entire vine. A similar metaphor is used by Paul, describing the ecclesia as being a body:

“as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members of one another” (Rom. 12:4-5, see also 1 Cor. 12:12-14)

Notice, there is only one Christ-body, and each member is part of that body. Even so, there is one Christ-Vine, yet made up of many branches who yield fruit suitable for the Husbandman’s use.

The Lord Jesus Christ himself brought forth such fruit. He likened his shed blood to the wine which comes from the bruising of grapes:

“... he took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, Drink ye all of it; for this is my blood of the New Testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins. But I say unto you, I will not drink henceforth of this fruit of

the vine, until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom"
(Mat. 26:27-29).

In order to produce wine, a fruit must first be formed, and then it is crushed to obtain its juice. Even so, Messiah was fruitful in his Father's service, and his shed blood is represented in the "fruit of the vine".

The believers must also bear fruit:

"every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit" (vs 2)

Judas was an example of a branch who did not bear fruit, hence he was to be cut off, and taken away. He was the son of perdition (Jno. 17:12) who was "lost". Again, using a different comparison – the olive tree – the Apostle describes how the Israelitish branches were "broken off" – temporarily, until they are grafted back in again. Hence the exhortation is given:

"... thou wilt say then, The branches were broken off, that I might be grafted in. Well, because of unbelief they were broken off, and thou standest by faith. Be not highminded, but fear ..." (Rom. 11:19-20).

A PURGING

Returning to the parable, we find that the branches that do bear fruit are purged, or pruned (but not cut off), in order for them to bring forth more fruit (vs 2). The comparison is made elsewhere with a loving father who chastises his son in order to teach him to be obedient:

"For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as sons: for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not? But if ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye illegitimate, and not sons" (Heb. 12:6-8).

Here is the point that the natural man finds it difficult to grasp. The difficulties that we experience in life are actually tokens of God's love towards us! They are Divinely ordained to develop our characters, or as per the parable, to encourage us to bring forth more fruit. We must beware: if all is going well in our lives and we have no challenges or problems to overcome, it is a sign that we are illegitimate, and not sons!

THE FRUIT

But what is being represented by the metaphorical fruit? Matthew 7 records the words of the Master:

"ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit, but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a

corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them” (Mat. 7:16-20).

The fruits then are those attributes which determine whether a tree is good or bad. The True vine is a good tree, that brings forth grapes for the husbandman’s use. So it is that the attributes of those who follow the ways of the spirit are described thus:

“the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, Meekness, temperance ...” (Gal. 5:22).

Notice that here, there is only one fruit – the “fruit of the Spirit” – singular, yet it is made up of many component parts. Like a bunch of grapes, made up of many individual elements, yet still one type of fruit.

Though the fruit is usable, it also needs to be washed. Hence in the parable, the Lord tells his disciples: “Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you” (vs. 3). The cleansing effect of water can make natural fruit even more suitable, and the cleansing effect of the water of the Word can purify the Christ-body:

“.. Christ also loved the ecclesia, and gave himself for it; that he might sanctify and cleanse it with *the washing of water by the word*, that he might present it unto himself a glorious ecclesia, not having spot, or wrinkle or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish” (Eph. 5:25-27 see also Psa. 119:9).

The washing of the disciples’ feet also comes to mind, when they were cleansed by their master’s act of humility.

ABIDING IN THE TRUE VINE

In order to be fruitful the branches must remain attached to the True Vine:

“he that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing”

To abide in the Christ-body is necessary: the two metaphors are brought together by the Apostle, speaking of the various members:

“.. but speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ ...” (Eph. 4:15).

Notice the association of Truth and Love here: both qualities must be exhibited by members of the True Vine, and the One Body: only if we remain in Christ can we be beneficial, without him we are, and can do nothing.

The way in which Christ abides in us, is by having a spiritual disposition, styled by the Apostle, “the mind of Christ” (2 Cor. 2:16). And again, “let this mind be in you, which was

also in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:5). He dwells in us to the extent that we display the mind of the Spirit (Rom. 8:9), having his words within our thinking and mindset:

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing each other in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord” (Col. 3:16).

We must therefore have a grasp of the words of Christ. They must be indelibly written into our hearts, lest we fail and fall from grace. These words are those described by Paul: “by which ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain” (1 Cor. 15:2). To keep words in our memory, we must first deposit them into our minds – only then can the words of Christ dwell richly within us.

KEEPING MESSIAH’S COMMANDMENTS

The concluding aspect of this parable, is the keeping of those same words:

“... if ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father’s commandments, and abide in his love ... this is my commandment, that ye love one another, as I have loved you ...” (vs. 10-12).

Whilst it is true that: “by grace are we saved through faith; and that not of ourselves” (Eph. 2:8), it is also true that we must seek to follow the commandments of Christ. Herein is love: “greater love hath no man than this, than that a man lay down his life for his friends. Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you ...” (Jno. 15:13-14).

If we love the Lord, we will delight in his commandments, which are not grievous (1 Jno. 5:3). Only if we obey him can we be said to abide in him:

“... whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him. He that saith he abideth in him ought himself also to walk, even as he walked ...” (1 Jno. 2:5-6).

The greatest display of love is seen in the Son of God laying down his life for his friends. And this is the love that believers show to each other:

“hereby perceive we love, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren” (1 Jno. 3:16).

The encouragement then, is to become part of, and remain, in the True Vine, yielding fruit fit for the purpose of the husbandman. To abide in Christ, and have his word abiding in us, by contrast to the branches that are broken off. We must hold fast the things of the Truth, having them committed to our memory – and we must lay down our lives in service to each other, for only by service and humility can the true fruit be brought forth.

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