Section I - The Vine and Its Branches

John 15:1-17

The subject matter in these three sections is the future work of the Apostles - its nature, honors, hardships, and joys. Much of what is said can be applied to Christians in general, but the reference is undoubtedly to the Eleven who were present. Only by keeping this in mind can we gain a clear idea of the importance of the whole discourse.

The first part of Jesus’ charge to the future Apostles is intended to impress upon them the idea that they have a great work ahead of them (Jn. 15:1-17). The main point in the passage can be found in these words: “You did not choose Me, but I chose you, and appointed you, that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain” (vs. 16). Jesus wanted the men He selected to understand that He expected more of them than just not being discouraged when He left the earth. They must be great leaders in the world and permanently leave their mark on its history. In fact, they must take His place, act in His stead, and carry on the work He had begun. They would do it in His name and by His power.

In order to help the disciples clearly understand their responsibilities, Jesus used the beautiful illustration of a vine. He introduced it at the very beginning of His discourse. “I am the true vine.” That is the theme. In the words that follow, its meaning is worked out in considerable detail. The illustration and its interpretation are freely blended together in the exposition. The question has often been asked, “What led Jesus to adopt this particular symbol to convey His thoughts?” Many conjectural answers have been given. However, since the narrative itself does not provide us with that information, we must be content to live without an answer on this point. And we must not attempt to invent one. This is no great hardship. After all, what difference does it make why a particular metaphor is used (sometimes the person using it doesn't even know), provided it appropriately accomplishes the intended purpose? What about the appropriateness of the metaphor that is used here? There can be no doubt in anyone’s mind who carefully considers the wise use which the Speaker made of it.

Let's turn our attention, then, to Jesus’ explanation of the text He chose. We cannot avoid noticing the way in which Jesus quickly speaks about fruit. As He introduces the illustration of the
vine, we probably should have expected that He would first make it clear what the symbol represented. After hearing the words, “I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser,” we expect to hear these words: “and you, My disciples, are the branches through which the vine brings forth fruit.” However, that is not said here. Instead, the Speaker immediately tells His hearers how the branches (they have not been mentioned yet) are dealt with by the divine Husbandman. He indicates that the fruitless branches, on the one hand, are lopped off, while the fruitful ones are pruned so they may become even more productive (vs. 2). This shows us the primary thought Jesus has in His mind. His heart’s desire is that His disciples be spiritually fruitful. “My disciples - fruit, fruit!!” In essence, this is what He is saying. “You are useless unless you bear fruit. My Father desires fruit, and I do as well. The way He deals with you will be regulated by His objective to increase your fruitfulness.”

**Personal Holiness and Fruit-Bearing**

Even though Jesus is urgent in His demand for fruit, we see that He does not reveal what kind of fruit He wants to see. It is nowhere to be found in this discourse on the vine. However, when we think about the people to whom He is speaking, we do not have any doubts about what He primarily intends. The fruit He is looking for is the spread of the Gospel and bringing souls into the kingdom of God. The disciples were to do this as they faithfully performed their apostolic duties. Personal holiness is not overlooked. But it is required as a means by which fruit is produced; it is not the fruit itself. The pruning of the branch leads to increased fertility.

The next sentence is, “You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you” (vs. 3). It seems best to regard this as a parenthesis in which, for a moment, the symbol of the vine has been lost. When He mentions that the unproductive branches are cut off, it reminds us of the Lord’s thoughts about one who had already been cut off - the false disciple, Judas. This leads Him naturally to reassure the Eleven that He has higher hopes for them. The process of excision had already been applied among them in this one instance. Therefore, they should not be arrogant; they should fear. On the other hand, He had told them during the feet-washing that they were clean, with one exception. Now He was saying they were all clean, without exception, through the word He had spoken to them. As branches, they might need pruning, but they would not be cut off.

Jesus had strongly declared the indispensableness of bearing fruit in order for them to stay connected to the vine. Next, He proceeded to set forth the conditions of fruitfulness and the relationship that existed between Him and His disciples (we might have expected this at the very beginning of the discourse). “I am the vine,” He said (to take the latter first), “you are the branches” (vs. 5). In this statement, He explains why He insists that His disciples be fruitful. The reason is that they are the means through which He Himself brings forth fruit. They serve the same purpose to Him that the branches serve to the vine. His own personal work had been to choose and train
them - to fill them, so to speak, with the sap of divine truth. Their work was now to turn that sap into grapes. By sending His Son into the world, the Father had planted Him in the earth. He was a new, mystic, spiritual vine, and had produced the Eleven as His branches. His personal ministry was coming to an end. Now the branches were to carry on their work. They were to bring forth a crop of fruit in the shape of a church of saved people who believed in His name. If they failed to do this, all of His labor would be in vain.

The Conditions for Fruitfulness
Now let's look at the conditions Jesus indicated were necessary for a life of fruitfulness. He expresses them with these words: “Abide in Me, and I in you” (Jn. 15:4). These words point to a dependence that the disciples had on their Lord. There are two concepts that He wants them to understand about this dependence. The analogy of a tree and its branches makes it easy to tell them apart. The branch abides in the vine structurally; and the vine abides in the branch through its sap, vitally. Both of these abidings are necessary for fruit-bearing. Unless the branch is organically connected to the vine, the sap which makes the fruit cannot flow through it. On the other hand, the branch may be organically connected to the vine, yet if the sap from the vine does not ascend into it (this is possible and common in the natural world), it will be as fruitless as if it were broken off and lying on the ground.

All this is clear. But when we consider the question, “What do the two abidings signify with reference to the mystic vine?” the answer is not quite as easy. The tendency here is to make the two into one and to make the distinction between them only nominal. The best way to get at the truth is to stick as closely as possible to the natural analogy. What, then, would you say most closely corresponds to the structural abiding of the branch in the vine? Our response: it is abiding in the teachings of Christ, in the doctrine He taught. It is also acknowledging Him as the source from whom it is learned. In other words, “Abide in Me” means to “hold on to, and profess the truth I have spoken to you, and simply be My witnesses.” The other abiding signifies the indwelling of the Spirit of Jesus in the hearts of those who believe. Jesus helps His disciples understand that while they are abiding in His teachings, they must also have His Spirit abiding in them. They must not only hold on to the truth. They must also be filled with the Spirit of truth.

The two abidings are not only different in conception, but separable in fact. On the one hand, a person may strictly embrace Christian orthodoxy, but have little or no spiritual life. On the other hand, another person may have a certain amount of spiritual vitality, great morals, and in some respects, desires that are similar to a Christian, but has seriously departed from the faith. This first one can be compared to a dead branch on a living tree - bleached, without bark, covered with moss, and in the summer, leafless. It stretches out like a withered arm from the trunk to which it is attached, and with which it still maintains an organic structural connection. The other is a branch that is cut off by pride or self-will from the tree. It is full of the tree's sap and
clothed with greenness at the moment of excision and foolishly imagines that, because it does not wither immediately, it can live, grow, and blossom independently of the tree. Haven't these two conditions existed since the beginning of Christianity? Yes, but we wish that were not the case! In the grand primeval forest of the Church, too many dead orthodoxies have been obvious. And as for branches that have departed from the faith, their name is legion.

The two abidings, then, can be separated - and often have been. But they cannot be separated without fatal consequences. The results always show up in the end and illustrate the truth of Christ’s words, “Without, or severed from, Me you can do nothing” (Jn. 15:5). Dead orthodoxy is notoriously impotent. Feeble, timid, powerless, opposed to anything strenuous or heroic - at best, this orthodoxy moves one’s thoughts or conduct. In the end, however, it becomes insincere and demoralizing: salt without flavor, fit only to be tossed out; worthless vine-wood, good for nothing except for fuel, and not worth much even for that purpose. On the other hand, heresies - not abiding in the teachings of Christ - are equally helpless. At first they possess a false, short-lived, vitality and make a little noise in the world. But after a time, their leaf begins to wither, and they bring forth no abiding fruit.

Applying the idea of a dead branch to individuals (as opposed to churches or the religious world viewed collectively) is not without difficulty. A dead branch on a tree was not always dead. It was produced by the vital force of the tree and had some of the tree’s life in it. Does the analogy between the natural and spiritual branches hold at this point? We would say not in any way that would compromise the doctrine of perseverance in grace, nowhere taught more clearly than in the words of our Lord. At the same time, it cannot be denied that there is such a thing as abortive religious experience. There are blossoms on the tree of life that are blasted by spring frosts, green fruit which fall off before they ripen, branches that become sick and die. Jonathan Edwards remarks: “I cannot say that the greater part of supposed converts give reason by their conversation (lifestyle) to suppose they are true converts. The proportion may perhaps be more truly represented by the proportion of the blossoms on a tree which abide and come to mature fruit, to the whole number of blossoms in spring.” In other words, many blossoms are not permanent. But by saying they are not permanent, there is an admission that they were blossoms at one time.

It is a great mystery that some branches become unfruitful, and even die, while others flourish and bring forth fruit. Yet we must insist that man is responsible for his own spiritual character. Though the Father, as the husbandman, wields the pruning knife, the process of purging cannot be carried on without our consent and cooperation. For, practically speaking, the process includes removing the moral hindrances to life and growth - the worries of life, the insidious influence of wealth, the lusts of the flesh, and the passions of the soul. These evils cannot be overcome unless our will and all our moral powers are brought to bear against them. Therefore, Jesus tells His disciples that it is their duty to abide in Him and have Him abiding in them. He finally
resolves the whole issue in plain language - they must keep His commandments (Jn. 15:10). If they diligently and faithfully do their part, the divine Husbandman assures them that He will not fail to liberally give them everything that is necessary for the most abundant fruitfulness. “Ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you” (vs.7).

Jesus made it clear that any branches that fall short in either of the two ways mentioned are doomed. A branch may be in Him structurally but not bear fruit, either because it is absolutely dead and dry, or because it is afflicted with a vice that makes it barren. This branch is to be taken away - judicially severed from the tree (vs. 2). The branch that will not abide in the vine is not to be cut off - for it does that itself. Rather, it is to be thrown out of the vineyard where it is to lie until it withers. After some time has passed, and when it is convenient, it is to be gathered with all of its self-willed, erratic brothers into a heap. Then they will be burned in a bonfire like the dry rubbish of a garden (vs. 6).

**Quantity and Quality**
In the latter part of the discourse on the vine (vss. 8-17), Jesus makes it known that He has high expectations for His Apostles. He expects them to bear fruit. So He suggests several things for them to think about. These concepts, after they penetrate the minds of the disciples, might lead to the fulfillment of His hopes. In terms of fruitfulness, He made it clear to the disciples that He expected them to bear, not only fruit, but much fruit (vs. 8). This fruit would not just be abundant in quantity, but good in quality (vs. 16). This fruit should “remain.” It would consist of grapes whose juice would be worthy of preserving as wine in bottles. The fruit would be a church that would endure until the end of the world.

These two requirements, when taken together, are highly demanding. It is very hard to produce fruit that is both abundant and enduring. The two requirements, to a certain extent, limit each other. When high quality is the goal, it leads to an unnecessary thinning of the clusters. When high quantity is the goal, it can easily lead to the deterioration of the whole. The issue to be studied is how to secure as large an amount of fruit as possible, a fruit that has permanence; and, on the other hand, how to cultivate excellence with a crop that, at the same time, will repay labor and expenses. This is, so to speak, the ideal theory of vine culture. But in practice, we must be content with something short of perfection. For example, we cannot demand that all of the fruit will be able to endure. Many fruits that are produced by Christian labor are only temporary means to gain fruit that is more permanent in nature. And if we satisfy the law of Christ by producing much fruit, but only some of it remains, we do well. The permanent portion of a man’s work must always be small in proportion to the whole. At best, it can only bear such a proportion to the whole as the grape juice bears to the grapes from which it is pressed. A small cask of wine represents a much larger bulk of grapes. In a similar way, the results of a Christian life are very small in volume compared with the mass of thoughts, words, and deeds that come...
from that life. One little book, for instance, may preserve for all generations the soul and essence of the thoughts of a very gifted mind and of the graces of a noble heart. A case in point is that wonderful book, the Pilgrim’s Progress, which contains more wine in it than can be found in the massive volumes of some wordy authors whose works are only huge wine-casks with very little wine in them. Sometimes there is hardly a scent of wine.

To meet these two requirements, two character traits are needed above everything else: diligence and patience. One guarantees quantity; the other guarantees superior quality. One must know how to labor and how to wait - never idle, yet never hurrying. Diligence by itself will not be sufficient. Bustling activity does many things badly, but nothing well. On the other hand, patience that is unaccompanied by diligence degenerates into laziness which does not bring forth any fruit at all, either good or bad. The two virtues must go together. When they do, they never fail to produce fruit (in greater or lesser abundance) that remains in a holy and exemplary life whose memory is cherished for generations. The fruit may be in an apostolic church, books, a philanthropic institution, or in the character of descendants, scholars, or hearers.

When these two requirements are applied to every believer in Christ, the term much must be understood relatively. It is not expected that everyone will produce an absolutely large quantity of fruit. But it is expected of those who, like the Apostles, have been chosen and endowed to occupy distinguished positions. The one to whom little is given, little will be required. People who have few talents ought not to attempt much but try to do well in the areas where they have abilities. Having high aspirations is good in theory. But to aspire to exceed our limits is to furnish a new illustration of the old fable of The Frog and the Ox [Note: Aesop’s Fable]. The person who seeks to be and do more than he is capable of is worse than useless. He does not produce the sweet, wholesome fruits of the Spirit. Rather, he brings forth the inflated fruits of vanity which, like the apples of Sodom, are pleasing and delicious to look at and soft to touch, but are full of hot air. When they are squeezed, they explode like a puff-ball (Note: round, white, mushroom-like fungi that burst at the touch and discharge a brown powder).

The demand for much fruit was very exacting for the Apostles to whom Jesus’ words were first addressed. Yet it also has a gracious aspect for the world. The fruit which Jesus expected from His chosen ones was the conversion of people to the faith of the gospel, the ingathering of souls into the kingdom of God. A demand for much fruit in this sense is an expression of goodwill to mankind. It is a revelation of the Savior’s loving compassion for a world lying in sin, error, and darkness. In making this demand, Jesus, in essence, is saying to His Apostles, “Go into the world focused on evangelizing all the nations. Be fruitful and multiply, replenish the earth, and subdue it. You cannot bring too many to the obedience of faith. The greater the number of those who believe on Me through your word, the more I will be pleased.” What we have here, briefly, is simply an echo of the passionate words spoken on that earlier occasion when Jesus mentioned
death as the prerequisite for abundant fruitfulness and the cross as a power by whose irresistible attraction He would draw all people unto Him (Jn. 12:24,33).

The First Pair of Motives for Fruitfulness
From these high requirements of the Lord, we move along to the arguments by which He sought to impress on the disciples the duty of bringing forth much and abiding fruit. There are no less than six arguments which are grouped in pairs. The first pair is indicated by the words, “By this is My Father glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples” (Jn. 15:8). In other words, Jesus wanted the ones He had chosen to remember that the fruit for the divine Husbandman and for Himself, the vine, depended largely on their behavior. The world would judge by results. If the Apostles brought forth much fruit, they would say that God had not sent Christ into the world in vain. Their success would be credited to Jesus whose disciples they had been. If they failed, people would say, “God planted a vine, but it didn’t make it. The vine produced branches, but there is no fruit.” Or, in plain language, “Christ chose men who have not done anything.”

The force behind these arguments for fruitfulness is more obvious in the case of these Apostles, the founders of the church, than in reference to the present condition of the church, when the honor of Christ and of God the Father seems to depend very little on the conduct of individuals. But then, the whole emphasis lay on eleven men. At this time in history, it is distributed to millions. Nevertheless, there is a great need, even today, for the church to be spiritually fruitful in order that the honor of Christ’s name may be upheld. There is a tendency, currently, for people to look at Christianity as depleted. The old vine is considered by many to be barren, past its ability to produce fruit, and a new plant is sought. This idea can be effectually discarded in only one way - by raising up a generation of Christians whose lives demonstrate that the “true vine” is not something that grows old and disappears. Rather, it has eternal vitality and is capable, not only of producing new branches and new clusters, but of getting rid of dead branches and the moss which has covered them over the years.

A Second Pair of Motives for Fruitfulness
A second pair of motives for fruitfulness is hinted at in the words: “These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full” (vs. 11). What Jesus is saying is that the continuation of His joy in the disciples and the completion of their own joy as believers in Him depended on their being fruitful. The emphasis in the first phrase lies in the words “may be in you.” Jesus has joy in His disciples even now, even though they are spiritually immature, in the same way that a gardener has joy in the clusters of grapes when they are green, sour, and inedible. He rejoices in them now, not because of what they are, but because of what they will become - ripe fruit. If that promise is not fulfilled, He would feel like the gardener feels
when the blossom is nipped by frost or the green fruit destroyed by mildew. He would feel like a parent feels when a son does not live up to the potential he demonstrated in his youth. He can endure delay but not failure. He can wait patiently until the growth process is completed. He can put up with all the immaturity, because He knows they will ripen. But if they never ripen - if the children never become men, if the pupils never become teachers - then He will exclaim in bitter disappointment: “Woe is Me! My soul desired ripe fruit. Is this what I find after waiting so long?”

In the second phrase, the emphasis lies on the words “may be made full.” Jesus does not say or imply that a Christian cannot have joy until his character has matured and his work accomplished. His language is compatible with the assertion that even at the beginning of one's spiritual life, there may be a great, even passionate, outburst of joy. But, on the other hand, His words plainly imply that the joy of an immature disciple is necessarily unstable, while the joy that is stable and full comes only with spiritual maturity. This is a great practical truth. All disciples need to keep it in mind. Joy, in the highest sense of the word, is one of the ripe fruits of the Holy Spirit. It is the reward of perseverance and faithfulness. To rejoice at the beginning is good, as far as it goes. But everything depends on the sequel. If we stop short and do not grow, look out. For failure in anything, especially religion, is misery. If we are relatively unfruitful, we may not be absolutely unhappy. However, we can never know the fullness of joy. The following words are spoken only to the faithful servant: “Enter into the joy of your Lord.” Full joy is reserved for the soldier who has won the victory, for the farmer celebrating the harvest, for the athlete who has been awarded the prize for his strength, skill, and quickness.

A Third Pair of Motives for Fruitfulness
The last two considerations by which Jesus tried to impress on His disciples the duty of being fruitful were: (1) the honor that accompanied their apostolic calling, and (2) the debt of gratitude they owed the One who had called them and who was about to die for them. Jesus described the dignity of the apostleship (in contrast to the menial position of the disciple) in these terms: “No longer do I call you slaves; for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you” (vs. 15). In other words, the disciples had been apprentices. The Apostles would be partners. The disciples had been like government clerks. The Apostles would be confidential ministers of the King. The disciples had been pupils in the school of Jesus. The Apostles would be the custodians of Christian truth, the reporters and expositors of their Master's doctrine, the sole reliable sources of information about the letter and spirit of His teaching. What office could possibly be more important than theirs? How important it was that they understand their responsibilities in that office!

While trying to walk in a manner that was worthy of such a noble vocation, it would also be appropriate for the Apostles to bear in mind what their obligations were to Him who had called
them to the apostolic office. Giving proper attention to these duties would be an additional stimulus for them to be diligent and faithful. Therefore, Jesus is careful to impress on His disciples that they owe all they are and will be to Him. “You did not choose Me, but I chose you,” He tells them (vs. 16). He wants them to understand that they had not provided Him with any benefit by becoming His disciples. They were the ones who received all the benefit. He had raised them from obscurity to be the lights of the world, to be His companions now, and His friends and representatives in the future. Having done so much for them, He was justified in asking them to sincerely try to realize the purpose for which He had chosen them and to fulfill the ministry to which they were ordained.

Love One Another

One more thing is worthy of note in this discourse on the true vine: Jesus repeated the commandment to love one another. At the beginning of His farewell address, Jesus encouraged the disciples to express brotherly love so they could be consoled when they were bereaved. Here, He encourages this kind of love again as one of the conditions for fruitfulness (Jn. 15:12,17). Though He does not explicitly say it, He evidently intends for the disciples to understand that abiding in each other by love is just as necessary to their success as their common abiding in Him by faith. Division, party strife, or jealousy will simply be fatal to their influence and to the cause they represent. They must be such good friends that they will even be willing to die for each other. Had Christians always remembered the commandment to love one another - a command on which Christ insisted - what a different history the Church would have had! How much more fruitful she would have been in accomplishing greater works - works for which she was instituted!