

A Commentary on John 15.1-11; Abiding in Christ

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Introduction

In the lifetime of a human being unusual weight is assigned to the first and final words that bookend an individual's life. Many parents record or remember the first words spoken by their children hoping to gain some special insight into the child. Similarly, a person's last words are held as sacred, special or important by those closest to them. Some even chose to record their parting words in the form of a video or will.

The Gospel of Matthew seems to assign special importance to Jesus' seminal teaching in the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5-7. The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' longest recorded teaching found in the synoptics and lays out the ethic of the Kingdom, foreshadowing the ministry of Jesus and the lifestyle He presents to the disciples.

Similarly, the Gospel of John presents Jesus' Upper Room discourse in chapters 14 -17 as His farewell address or parting words. The Upper Room discourse holds a special place as the longest continuous teaching in John and provides a hopeful summary and forecast of life with Christ.

Context

Near the center of Jesus' farewell discourse is a powerful illustration of life with/in Christ, intimacy with God and the subsequent results. In John 15.1-11, Jesus uses a vine, it's branches and its fruit, as well as it's gardener, as a memorable word-picture of the Christian life.

While John does not use the term "parable" to refer to any of Jesus' teachings (he is the only Gospel writer to avoid this term), the illustration of the vine and the branches does have the look and feel of a parable. As the Jewish Annotated New Testament commentary observes; this passage is "...often seen as a parable, similar to a Jewish 'mashal,' though John...does not explicitly use the term 'parable.'"¹

¹ Brettler, Marc Zvi and Levine, Amy-Jill. *The Jewish Annotated New Testament: Second Edition*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011 (208)

The significance of Jesus' illustration may be lost on modern readers who are unfamiliar with the Old Testament's use of the vine as an illustration for Israel. In Psalm 80, Asaph compares Israel to a vine; "removed from Egypt" that was planted, taking deep root and filling the land. At one point the vine thrived, but at the time of Asaph's writing the vine was faltering.²

Furthermore, prophets like Isaiah and Hosea address the faltering vine. Isaiah dedicates his own prophetic parable to the vine, representing Israel. The vine was shown favorable treatment and given everything necessary to succeed in bearing good fruit. Despite the efforts of the gardener, the vine in Isaiah 5 bears "worthless fruit."³ Similarly, Hosea refers to Israel directly as a "luxuriant vine"⁴ and outlines how Israel's short-term prosperity led to idolatry.

The Jewish people knew that they were the vine that the Old Testament prophets referred to. They also knew that God was the gardener who provided for their success. Finally, they knew that despite God's provision, they had been repeatedly rebuked by the prophets for failing to bear good fruit. Israel had been a false vine.

Biblical Scholar Andreas J. Kostenberger sets the stage for Jesus' vine illustration:

The prophetic message that centered on Israel as God's vineyard in the Old Testament is therefore this: God carefully cultivated His vineyard and in due time expected to collect fruit from it, but Israel yielded only bad fruit; hence God will replace Israel with those who are more fruitful...Nevertheless, John does not teach a replacement theology, whereby the church takes the place of Israel. As a closer look at John 15 indicates, it is not believers in Jesus who are depicted as the vine. Rather, the vine is Jesus.⁵

The purpose of the vine/branch/fruit allegory is to illustrate the essential concept of connecting to, abiding in and relying upon Jesus as the foundation for the Christian experience.

² Psalm 80.80-19

³ Isaiah 5.1-7

⁴ Hosea 10.1

⁵ Kostenberger, Andreas J. *Encountering John*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013. (149)

Exposition

John 15.1: "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser."

In this sentence, Jesus begins to identify the major players or characters in His illustration. Jesus identifies Himself as the true vine, introducing a new dynamic into the understanding of Israel as the vine. Craig Blomberg explains; "Jesus' use of the vine metaphor may also suggest that He is presenting himself here as the new Israel."⁶

It is worth restating here that Jesus is not putting forth His disciples or even the church as the new Israel, but that He Himself is the new Israel.

In keeping with the Psalmists and Prophets understanding of the vine imagery, Jesus retains the Father in the role of the gardener. The term "vinedresser" is often translated as "gardener" in other translations.

John 15.2: "Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit."

There has been much discussion about the nature of the fruit in this passage. Is the fruit Christlike character as Paul identifies in Galatians 5? Or are fruit evangelistic results in keeping with the harvest imagery used throughout the New Testament? Craig Blomberg suggests that it can be both; "Certain branches (faithful believers) are pruned (disciplined) so as to bear more fruit (all of the marks of Christian obedience)."⁷

Like Blomberg, D. A. Carson takes a broad view of what "fruit" can be. Carson suggests that the fruit can be; "everything that is the product of effective prayer in Jesus' name, including obedience to Jesus' commands (vs. 10), experience of Jesus' joy (vs. 11)...love for one another (vs. 12), and witness to the world (vs. 16, 27)."⁸

⁶ Blomberg, Craig. *Jesus and the Gospels*. Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1997. (336)

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Carson, D. A. *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to John*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1991. (517)

Both in ancient gardens and today, viticulturalists use pruning as a way to keep vines healthy and productive. The idea is to cut off anything that is not essential to the bearing of fruit. In many cases, the pruning cuts are made as close as possible without doing damage to the vine itself. Once fruitless branches are removed the life-giving nutrients are free to be directed to the branches that do bear fruit.

John 15.3: “You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you.”

In this sentence the word for “clean” (καθαρός) comes from the same root word for “pruned,” (καθαίρω). Jesus is communicating to the disciples that have a fresh start and have already been pruned. It appears that Jesus’ pruning device is His “word.” This may foreshadow John’s mention of a sword that issues forth from Jesus’ mouth when John sees the glorified Christ in Revelation 1.

John 15.4: “Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me.”

Jesus begins repeated use of the word “abide” or “remain” (μένω), imploring His disciples to stay connected to Him the way that a branch would remain connected to a vine. Craig Keener explains; “The most basic point of the imagery is the obvious dependence of branches on the vine for their continued life.”⁹

The significance of this term is not lost on John, who returns to it frequently in his epistles.

John 15.5: “I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.

⁹ Keener, Craig. *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1993. (301)

Only now has Jesus identified who or what the branches are - His disciples. As He does in John 17, Jesus presents the idea of inter-dwelling; “he...in Me and I in him.” This type of relationship is mutually intimate..

Jesus also suggests that apart from Him, the disciples can do nothing. He likely means nothing spiritually significant or meaningful. They can bear no supernatural fruit apart from abiding in Christ.

John 15.6: “If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned.”

Jesus begins to introduce the idea that not all who appear to be in Christ will remain in Christ. Later in this discourse Jesus will state; “While I was with them, I was keeping them in Your name which You have given Me; and I guarded them and not one of them perished but the son of perdition...”¹⁰

Blomberg offers some insight; “This category of person is best interpreted by another Johanine passage: ‘They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us...(1 Jn. 2.19) In this context, Judas is the most obvious example of someone who did not ‘remain.’”¹¹

The punishment for those that fail to remain is severe - to be cast into the fire and burned. According to Craig Keener; “Jewish teachers believed that God had awful punishments in store for apostates, because those who had known the truth and then rejected it had no excuse.”¹²

John 15.7: “If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it

¹⁰ John 17.12

¹¹ Blomberg, Craig. *Jesus and the Gospels*. Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1997. (336)

¹² Keener, Craig. *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1993. (301)

will be done for you.”

Jesus' invitation to effective prayer presupposes at least two things; 1) that the disciples are remaining in Christ and that 2) Christ's words are remaining in the disciples. Essentially, intimacy with God and familiarity with His character, attributes and will, increases the likelihood that we are praying in agreement with His will and are in pursuit of the very same things that He intends to do. “...This is not *carte blanche* but likely refers forward to v. 8...Insofar as they are part of the ‘vine’ that is Jesus, their requests pertinent to bearing fruit will be granted.”¹³

John 15.8: “My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples.”

The ability of the disciples to bear fruit - whether it be Christlike character of evangelistic results - glorifies God and proves the authenticity of the disciples' relationship to Jesus. Conversely, disciples that do not bear fruit, or bear bad fruit, do not glorify God and their relationship to Jesus is suspect and should be under close scrutiny.

John 15.9: “Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love.”

John continues this procession in 1 John 4.19 when he writes; “We love, because He first loved us.” John understands God to be the origin and source of all love; “God is love...love is from God¹⁴ The love shared by the Father and the Son is extended to the disciples and is expected to be extended further still. The love that the disciples share is initiated by God and reciprocated among one another.

John 15.10: “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.”

¹³ Brettler, Marc Zvi and Levine, Amy-Jill. *The Jewish Annotated New Testament: Second Edition*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011 (209)

¹⁴ 1 John 4.7-8

Jesus has already declared; “If you love me, you will keep my commands.”¹⁵ Many people see obedience as a consequence of fear, but to Jesus obedience was a consequence of love. Continued obedience to Jesus’ commands was evidence of love for Jesus, just as Jesus’ obedience to the Father was evidence of His love for the Father.

John 15.11: “These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full.”

Even with His impending death not far off, Jesus seeks to instill full joy in his disciples. Jesus knows that complete joy (as opposed to circumstantial happiness) will sustain them in His service for the years to come.

Application

With all the talk about bearing fruit, pruning in order to bear more fruit, fruit glorifying God and the severe consequences of not bearing fruit, one could easily think that the point of this illustration is to motivate people to turn their attention to bearing fruit. To conclude this would be to discard Jesus' statement in verse 4; “...the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine.”

The call to action in this passage is not to “bear fruit,” but to “abide in the vine.” Christians need not get worked up about what perceptible evidence of their faith they can provide to the outside world. The response that Jesus is looking for is to direct our efforts to abiding in Him. Fruit is the result of abiding. Fruit cannot be achieved aside from abiding.

How does one “abide in Christ?” While the following list is not exhaustive, Jesus does address three ways that a follower may abide in Him.

First, Jesus reminds His followers that His words must abide in them (vs. 7). To suggest that by “words” Jesus meant the Bible is both accurate and anachronistic. Obviously, the New Testament had not been written at this point and Jesus was most directly referring to His

¹⁵ John 14.15

teaching in addition to his worldview, character, attributes and nature. Nevertheless, for the modern reader, the source of these things is presently found in the pages of the Bible and by familiarizing ourselves with the Bible we are sure to have His words abiding in us.

One of the results of Jesus' words abiding in us is effective prayer. As we become more familiar with the words of Jesus we gain insight on both how to pray as well as what to pray. We can pray as Jesus taught His disciples in Matthew 6, but we can also pray in accordance with the heart, values and vision of God, assuring that our prayers will be answered.

Second, Jesus commands His followers to abide in His love (vs. 9). There are many motivating factors for relationship to/with Jesus. Fear can be a factor for some. Desperation might also motivate others. But unlike fear and desperation, love has the ability to sustain relationships. The type of love that causes one to delight in their relationship with Jesus will certainly facilitate their abiding in Him.

As John will mention later in his epistles, our ability to love others is the result of experiencing God's love for us¹⁶. As we abide in His love we are more able to fulfill the command to love others as God's love overflows through us.

Finally, Jesus communicates to His followers that He expects them to keep his commands (vs. 10). Many people see obedience as a consequence of fear, but Jesus saw obedience as a consequence of love. Jesus's own obedience to the Father was motivated by love and He invites His disciples into the same love-driven life of obedience. To Jesus, love resulted in action and in this case the action was obedience.

The picture of the vine, branches, fruit and gardener provide a relatable, simple and organic illustration of life with and in Christ. This illustration is dynamic and useful for calling people back to the "simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ."¹⁷

¹⁶ 1 John 4.19

¹⁷ 2 Cor. 11.3

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