

Home Group Leaders Discussion Guide

I AM the Vine... (John 15:1-17)

One of the consistent points that we've made throughout this series is the sheer audacity of these statements of Jesus. They are bold statements. They are shocking statements. They are statements that ought to cause the hearer/reader to ask the question, "Who is this guy?" That really is the focus of this series: Who is this Jesus? We're allowing Him to inform us through these statements, in His own words, from His own mouth.

With that in mind, imagine what it must be like to hear the words, "*I am the vine, you are the branches. If a man remains in Me and I in him, he will bear much fruit. Apart from me you can do nothing.*" On one level Jesus is claiming superiority over us. (Which the disciples in this passage, and those of us who call ourselves Christians, wouldn't really have a problem with. But imagine a not-yet-believing friend reading these words in Scripture. As humans, we are not naturally inclined to admit to someone/anyone being superior to us.) On another level Jesus is stating that we are nothing without Him. As believers we might intellectually assent to that idea...but do we truly function/live in such a way that we are really nothing without Him?

It's important to understand that the use of the image of a vine has a long history in the Bible. N.T. Wright puts it succinctly, "*Within Jewish tradition, the vine was a picture of Israel. God brought a vine out of Egypt and planted it in the Promised Land. It had been ravaged by wild animals [neighboring nations] and needed protecting and re-establishing. The vineyard of Israel, said Isaiah in chapter 5, has borne wild grapes instead of proper ones. Other prophets used the same picture.*" This picture of a vine and/or a vineyard representing Israel is a predominate metaphor in the Old Testament, used quite liberally by the prophets. So, it's also important to note that Jesus was narrowing the image from Israel to the disciples. (Actually, the "true Israel" got narrowed down to just One...Jesus, Himself.) But the disciples, and then the Church, would become the New Israel, the new vineyard.

Sticking with N.T. Wright for a moment, he also explains the point/purpose of pruning (regardless of the type of plant we're talking about—rose bush or vine). "*A [plant] left to itself, will get straggly and tangled, and **grow in on itself**. It will produce quite a lot of not-so-good [fruit] rather than a smaller number of [quality fruit]. **It will, quite literally, get in its own light. So, you prune it to stop it wasting its energy and being unproductive.** You cut out, particularly, the parts of the plant that are **growing inwards and getting tangled up**. You encourage the shoots that are **growing outwards, toward the light**. You prune [the plant], in other words, to **help it to be its true self.**" (emphasis added)*

OK, time for a little geeky word study. The word "prune" (verse 2) and the word "clean" (verse 3) in Greek are related words. Jesus was saying that they (the disciples) have already been pruned/cleaned (again, describing essentially the same process), but also—as they would naturally understand—pruning isn't a "one and done" type of thing. Pruning is naturally a reoccurring thing. In the plant world, it's seasonal. In other words, Jesus was telling them (and

us) you have been cleaned/pruned, and you will be cleaned/pruned again. Also important is WHO does the pruning...our loving God...so we can trust that it is good (even if it's painful).

And that really is the key to abiding/remaining in Jesus...do we trust that He is good, that He has our best interest in mind, that He is for us, that nothing could be better than abiding in Him? Additionally, not only do we need to trust that it's good, but on an existential level we need to enjoy it. Do we relish, do we delight in, do we take pleasure in spending time with Jesus? We will not become like Jesus (which is what it means to be "fruitful"—His life and character in us—i.e. the fruit of the Spirit) if we don't spend time with Jesus. And we won't spend time with Jesus if we don't enjoy it (or learn to enjoy it) and believe it's good for us.

God is glorified (see verse 8) as we reflect Him well, and represent Him well, to the world. He is glorified when people can look at those who claim Him as their God and see the resemblance of Jesus. Or as Paul puts it in Galatians 4:19, "...until Christ is formed in you." That's the goal: Christ formed in us. Or as Paul states it in Romans 8:29, "...to be conformed to the likeness of His Son." God prunes us to help this process along.

In the past we've talked about False Narratives vs. True Narratives. Nowhere is this more important than in our understanding of God. Do we function from a true narrative of God or a false narrative of God? Deep down do we believe that God is ready to punish us for every mis-step? When we face difficult, challenging times, do we think God is punishing us? Or do we believe/understand that God may be pruning us for our own benefit and growth...to produce more fruit. A lot of this depends on how we view God. It is well worth the time to dive deep into what we really believe about God. And the best way to get an accurate understanding of God is to look at Jesus. Even as we look at God through the written record of the Old Testament, we need to remember to do so through the lens of Jesus. God is like Jesus. God has always been like Jesus.

Verse 9, then, becomes incredibly important. "*As the Father has loved Me, so have I loved you. Now remain in My love.*" Should we ever doubt God's love for us, let us consider His love for Jesus. That is the level in which we are loved. So HOW, then, do we REMAIN in His love? By obeying His commands (verse 10).

The closing paragraph of this passage has some very important ideas/truths for us to grasp. We are chosen by Jesus. We are appointed to bear fruit...fruit that will last. We are called Jesus' friends if we do what He commands. And, what does He command us to do? Love one another. Remember, bearing fruit means having Christlike qualities become realities in our life. His chief quality is love. We love because He first loved us. (I John 4:19) In fact, the evidence/proof that we know Him is our love for one another, as John repeatedly points out in I John. We can only love when we first understand how we've been loved and are being loved. Going back to N.T. Wright's description above regarding pruning, we need pruning when we're tempted to turn inward. Love is by its nature outward focused...toward the other. We are our true self, who we are designed to be, as we love. God is faithful to keep us from getting too self-absorbed.

- Q. (This question, or some variation of it, has been asked the past two weeks, but it's worth asking again...) Do you enjoy spending time with Jesus? What does that typically look like for you?**
- Q. Do you operate from the posture/position/mindset that you are nothing without Jesus? Explain. How does that play out in day-to-day life? (We could also ask this question communally—do we as the Church operate from the attitude that we are nothing without Jesus? How does that play out?)**
- Q. Do you want to be more “fruitful”? What does that mean? What does a “fruitful life” look like?**
- Q. Share some seasons of “pruning” you’ve experienced.**
- Q. How might you reframe the painful seasons in your life as a “pruning season”?**
- Q. How does God get glory from our “fruit”?**
- Q. How do we cooperate with God in the pruning process?**
- Q. How are you organizing your life around being connected to Jesus? (How are you being intentional about spending time with Him so as to become more like Him?)**
- Q. What stirs your affections for Jesus? What distracts you, or robs you, of your affection for Jesus?**
- Q. How do you know that God loves you? How do you express your love to God?**
- Q. Do you find joy in knowing and obeying Jesus? Explain/describe.**
- Q. Do you believe, deep in your soul, that our Triune God is the most joy-filled being/community in existence, and wants you to share in/experience that joy? Explain.**
- Q. What do you think/feel about the idea that God chose you and wants you to know Him?**
- Q. Would other people say that you love well? (If you’re not sure, ask someone.) Would other people say that you know Jesus? (Again, if you’re not sure, ask someone.)**