

I am the True Vine

A. Literary Context

New narrative section, following

- Last Supper
- foot washing,
- exit of Jesus to betray Jesus.

“And it was night” 13.30

Then, with Judas gone, Jesus begins a new discourse – 13.31

“Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once” (5x)

Runs through to 17.1 where we read:

When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you... I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed” (5x)

What’s this discourse about?

= The Son glorifying the Father and the Father glorifying the Son.

The Father glorifies the Son by raising him from death and seating him at his right hand in glory.

How does the Son glorify the Father?

= By “having accomplished the work the Father gave him to do” (17.4), i.e.

- Showing perfect obedience } CROSS
- Showing perfect love } CROSS
- Demonstrating God’s great power over creation and Satan
- By redeeming God’s people – “guarding them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction” (17.12)

But Jesus is also conscious that this last aspect of his work is not complete and will not be completed until his return. Not only do the remaining 11 need to learn perfect obedience and love, so too will all those who will believe in Jesus through their word (17.20).

Jesus knows the 11 are about to undergo the ultimate test, as he is taken away from them and their own lives are threatened. Peter will deny him, and the others will flee.

So, amidst this discourse which is focused on glory/glorification, he must reassure (re his abiding presence) and instruct the disciples so that they too glorify the Father, and him, and share in their joy.

Series of pieces of advice:

1. New commandment: love one another as I have loved you. By this you will glorify me (Jesus), as others will know you are my disciples
2. Don't let your hearts be troubled but believe in God and believe in me: I go to prepare a place for you...
3. God will send another Helper/Advocate/Counsellor, the Spirit of Truth who dwells with you and will be in you.

#4 = “Abide in me” : I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser – 15.1-17

B. In OT vine = familiar metaphor for Israel:

Isa 5.1-2

I will sing for my beloved
my love song concerning his vineyard:
My beloved had a vineyard
on a very fertile hill.

²He dug it and cleared it of stones
and planted it with choice vines;
he built a watchtower in the midst of it
and hewed out a wine vat in it;
he expected it to yield grapes,

Jer 2.21

I planted you a choice vine, wholly of pure seed

Ps 80.8-11

⁸You brought a vine out of Egypt;
you drove out the nations and planted it.

⁹You cleared the ground for it;
it took deep root and filled the land.

¹⁰The mountains were covered with its shade,
the mighty cedars with its branches;
¹¹it sent out its branches to the sea
and its shoots to the River.

Image of vine remained an important one, and reminder that God's people (vine) – see coins minted during the Bar Kokhbah revolt against Rome (A.D. 132-135), stamped with the image of a vine.

Sole purpose of a vine = to bear fruit – grapes!

No other use – see Ezek 15.2-4a

“Son of man, how does the wood of the vine surpass any wood, the vine branch that is among the trees of the forest? Is wood taken from it to make anything? Do people take a peg from it to hang any vessel on it? Behold, it is given to the fire for fuel.

What did God expect from Israel? – Fruit!

What did that fruit look like? – Glory and praise to him.

C, How was Israel to bear fruit/glorify God?

- By obeying his commands/being a faithful covenant people/bride
⁶You must observe them (i.e. the statutes and commandments) and perform them, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!' ⁷For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is whenever we call to him? ⁸And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today? Deut 4.6-8
- Offering true worship and praise to God, proclaiming his glory to the nations – see, for example, 96
Ps 96.2-3 Sing to the LORD, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day.
Declare his glory among the nations, his marvellous works among all the peoples.

THEN

- Through Abraham's descendants (Israel) all the families of the earth will be blessed (Gen 12.3)

This = the fruit YHWH expected from his vineyard: glory to himself, to be the praise of all nations.

A vine that didn't bear fruit for YHWH = untrue, ie. Unfruitful because faithless, both through disobedience and false worship (idolatory).

D. Israel had proved to be an unfruitful ('*untrue*') vine:

- didn't bear fruit
- bore rotten fruit.

Isa 5.2-4

he expected it to yield grapes,
but it yielded wild grapes.

³And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem
and people of Judah,
judge between me
and my vineyard.

⁴What more was there to do for my vineyard
that I have not done in it?
When I expected it to yield grapes,
why did it yield wild grapes?

Jer 2.21

Yet I planted you a choice vine, wholly of pure seed.
How then have you turned degenerate and become a wild vine?

E. Consequence - God's judgment came upon his vine/vineyard (= Israel)

Isa 5.5-6

⁵And now I will tell you
what I will do to my vineyard.
I will remove its hedge,
and it shall be devoured;
I will break down its wall,
and it shall be trampled down.

⁶I will make it a waste;
it shall not be pruned or hoed,
and it shall be overgrown with briers and thorns;
I will also command the clouds
that they rain no rain upon it.

Jer 5.10-11 (speaking of a nation which YHWH will send from afar (i.e. Babylon)

Go up through her vine rows and destroy,
but do not make a full end;
strip away her branches,
for they are not the LORD's.
For the house of Israel and the house of Judah
have been utterly faithless to me,
says the LORD.

NB. In Jeremiah's prophecy, God says "but do not make a full end".
i.e. God has disciplined Israel but not destroyed her.
= Severe pruning.

And God promised - Isa11.1:

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him."
= a person/man

So too Ps 80. 14-19

Turn again, O God of hosts;
look down from heaven and see;
have regard for this vine,
¹⁵the stock that your right hand planted.
¹⁶It has been burned with fire; it has been cut down;
may they perish at the rebuke of your countenance.
¹⁷But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand,
the son of man whom you have made strong for yourself.
¹⁸Then we will never turn back from you;
give us life, and we will call on your name.
¹⁹Restore us, O LORD God of hosts;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.

i.e. Restore your vine, and be glorified/display your glory ("let your face shine")!

F. Jesus = the true vine

It is against this OT background that Jesus says "I am the true vine" –

- the shoot from the stump of Jesse (Is 11)
- the one at God's right hand (Ps 80)
- the Son of Man whom God has made strong for himself (Ps 80).

i.e. he will truly glorify God, his father.

He will do so by

- perfect obedience
- perfect love (v's Israel who played the whore, see Hosea)
- proclaiming and demonstrating God's power - signs and wonders
- redeeming the world from sin and defeating Satan

In this sense he surpasses anything expected of Israel – who was to be a light but not the instrument of salvation.

And God, the Father, continues to be the owner and dresser of the vine.

This signals a big change in application of vine metaphor:

- The vine is no longer ethnic Israel, the physical seed of Abraham, but Jesus himself, and anyone connected to him.

John has already explained this in ch 8. Paul will develop it further in Rom 9-11.

G. We are the branches

Distinctiveness of image because we are a part of the vine – the branches.

Other images of Jesus and God = separate/distinct entity: light, bread, living water, resurrection and life, Way-truth-life.

BUT He = vine and we = branches, therefore we are a part of this image.

As the branches, we are to be the bearers of fruit. Jesus, the vine, bears fruit through us.

BUT, we can only bear fruit if we remain/abide in the vine.

Our lives an extension of Christ's

You may say, don't need to be a Christian to bear fruit, to be loving and good.

Misses the point: this is fruit for God, to give him glory. "Fruit that will last" (v.16)

Actually problematic: because there is some good in human beings, makes us think basically good, and that can save ourselves. Both = untrue.

Jesus' perfect life wasn't about him looking good/being a saint, but glorifying the Father.

Consequence of bearing no fruit/ ceasing to bear fruit = cut off

- refers to branches which physically attached to the vine, in metaphorical sense. 'Christians'!
- Church goes, church leaders, may be branches which grow vigorously - but do they bear fruit which glorifies God (v's themselves)?

H. What does 'to abide' mean?

1. Be enlivened and walk by the Spirit of Christ, the Helper – 14.15-17

¹⁵ “If you love me, you will keep^[a] my commandments. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate,^[b] to be with you forever. ¹⁷ This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him because he abides with you, and he will be^[c] in^[d] you.

2. Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly (Col 3.16)

²⁴ Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you will abide in the Son and in the Father. (1 John 2.24)

3. Sacrament. “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in them” (6.56). No coincidence that Jesus used a cup of wine as symbol of his blood.

I. What is the fruit God expects us to bear?

- Love cf. New Commandment in 13.34f
- Obedience – displaying God's saving power

No particular goals or achievements: about character.

The fruit will be the fruit of the Spirit (=one fruit) – Gal 5.22-23

Love can only be expressed in obedience..., to glorify Christ...

The obedience of love isn't the obedience of a slave, but of a beloved brother/sister/friend.

- Slave's service = uncomprehending submission.
- Friend's service = eager partnership

Will be pruned to bear more fruit

- Cf. Jesus who “learned obedience through suffering” (Heb 5.8)
- “God disciplines those whom he loves” (Heb 12.6)

There is great joy in wine - and in obedience and love.

Jesus was obedient in suffering, even enduring the cross “for the joy that was set before him” (Heb 12.2)

Westminster Confession: Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever.

John Newton’s hymn “Glorious things...”

Savior, since of Zion's city
I through grace a member am,
let the world deride or pity,
I will glory in Thy name.
Fading is the worldling's pleasures,
all his boasted pomp and show;
solid joys and lasting treasures
none but Zion's children know.

Suggested Discussion Questions

1. How does one determine whether one’s life is glorifying God?
Thinking of your own life, what do you think brings most glory to God?
2. How do you think God prunes us to make us bear more fruit? Can you think of a time in your life when you have felt pruned? How did it help you to bear more fruit?
3. How are you intentionally abiding in Christ? In what area are you weakest, and how might God want you to address that?
4. Bearing fruit is more about character than deeds. To what extent are you walking in the Spirit, as Paul describes it in Gal 5? ‘Fruit’ is singular in Gal 5.22; how significant is that?
5. What do you think Jesus meant by “fruit that lasts”?
6. How do we share in Jesus’ and the Father’s “joy”?