

JOHN 15:1-17

In Chapter 14 Jesus has been preparing his disciples for his departure and explaining why it is a good thing for them that he goes – he is going to prepare a place in his Father's house, and far from being worse off with him physically absent, his followers will be better off as he is going to send his Spirit to dwell in them.

In this section Jesus now turns to how his followers are to live after he has gone. The main point is that Jesus' followers will live fruitful lives in union with Christ, as his words remain in us and we obey them.

The imagery at the start of chapter 15 may appear to come from nowhere but Jesus is actually picking up on the illustration of a vine that has already been used in Scripture. God's people are described as a vine planted and tended by God in a number of places in the Old Testament. Often where that imagery has been used in the past it has been to emphasise the failure of God's people – they were meant to be fruitful, but were not (see Isaiah 5:1-7). However there have also been hints in the Old Testament of a coming day when God's vine will bear fruit (see Psalm 80, and Isaiah 27:2-5). Here Jesus is drawing together these themes. God has a vine and its branches will bear fruit, but the only way we are part of the vine is if we are united to Jesus (who is the vine, the fulfilment of who Israel were meant to be). If we are united to him, then his life will flow through us and lead to fruit – which is all it means to be in relationship with him, including obedience (Verse 10), love for others (Verse 12), and answered prayer (Verse 7, 16). This fruit is important not just for our personal fulfilment, but to bring glory to the Father (Verse 8). The vine exists to bear fruit so the Father is glorified.

The disciple united to Christ will be fruitful, and God will do everything to ensure that is the case. This includes pruning (Verse 3), that often painful process of discipline – using all the circumstances of our lives to expose our sin, and draw us to greater repentance and faith and reliance on him. There is a terrible warning for those who only have the external show of being disciples but are not united to Christ. They cannot bear fruit (Verse 4, 6), and they will be cast off. Obviously this is stark warning to the Jews in Jesus time who still claimed to be part of the vine (God's people), but wanted nothing to do with Jesus. However it is also clearly a warning about those like Judas who claimed some allegiance to Jesus, but did not really know what it was to be "In Christ" by faith. They will be exposed and cast off – either at some point during their life here as who they really are comes to light, or certainly at the coming judgement.

What is the means of our remaining in Christ? What does this look like in practice? Notice the centrality of the word of Christ. To remain in Christ is to have his words remain in us (Verse 7). We come to be in Christ because his powerful converting word has brought us to life (Verse 3, see also 1 Peter 1:23). We keep going by listening and obeying his word (Verse 7, Verse 10), an obedience which involves self sacrifice for the sake of others (Verses 11-13).

This is no simple academic exercise – this is what it means to live in personal intimate relationship with Jesus Christ. To remain in Jesus' words is to remain in his love (Verse 9). It is important to notice that the way we remain "in Christ" is the same way in which Christ remains in the Father – he obeys him, and bears fruit (Verses 9-10).

Although the Holy Spirit is not mentioned in this section, these verses are sandwiched between teaching on his role in our lives, and the implication is that Jesus' word and his Spirit work together. As we listen and obey the Spirit Jesus has promised is at work in our life producing the fruit of our union with Christ. Jesus is not saying our perseverance is dependent on our effort, as if we are saved by grace but go on by works. The entire imagery of the passage is arguing against that, the only way we bear fruit is if the life of Christ works through us. But the passage is helping us to see what perseverance looks like from our perspective. If we are "In Christ" we will hear and obey, we will keep going and bear fruit. And we will do that together as branches on the one vine. We are united as disciples "In Christ". The particular command to love one another is important – this is not a call to a personal individual faith "just me and Jesus" unrelated to the church.

There is a wonderful note of intimacy running through this section. Although we are to obey Jesus we do not do this as slaves. No, Jesus calls us his "friends" (Verse 14-15). We are told why we are to obey as we are given insight into his purposes for us. There is also the great promise that if we are in Christ and pray "in his name" the Father will answer (verse 7, 16). In the context it is clear that these are prayers that will bring glory to the Father and will bear fruit for the vine.

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Read Isaiah 5:1-7, and Isaiah 27:2:6. How are God's people described? What has happened to them? What is promised in the future?

Read the illustration Jesus gives in verses 1-8

- Who is the Vine? (Verse 1)
- Who is the Gardener? (Verse 1)
- Who are the branches (Verse 5)? How have they become part of the vine (Verse 3)?
- What does the gardener expect from the branches? Why? (See verse 7)
- Why do the branches produce fruit? (Verse 4)
- What does the gardener do to branches who do not produce fruit? Why don't these branches produce fruit? (Verse 2, Verse 6)
- What does the gardener do to help branches produce more fruit? (Verse 2)
- How does this fulfil what we saw in Isaiah 27?

Read how Jesus explains and applies the parable in verses 9-17

- What is Jesus calling his disciples to do? (Verse 9)
- How are we to do that? Who is our greatest illustration of this? (Verse 10)
- Is there such a thing as a Christian who does not listen to and obey Jesus' words?
- What will be one of the fruits of this? (Verse 11)
- What particular command does Jesus focus on in verses 12-13? How does this remind us that Jesus isn't just calling us to personal, private devotion to him in this passage?
- Does this emphasis on obedience mean that we are like slaves? What does Jesus say about our relationship to him (Verses 14-15)?
- What promise are we given in verse 16 (also in Verse 7)? How is that connected with the rest of the passage?