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The Union of Christ with Believers

John 15—16

a Jesus Is the Vine (15:1-17)

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”

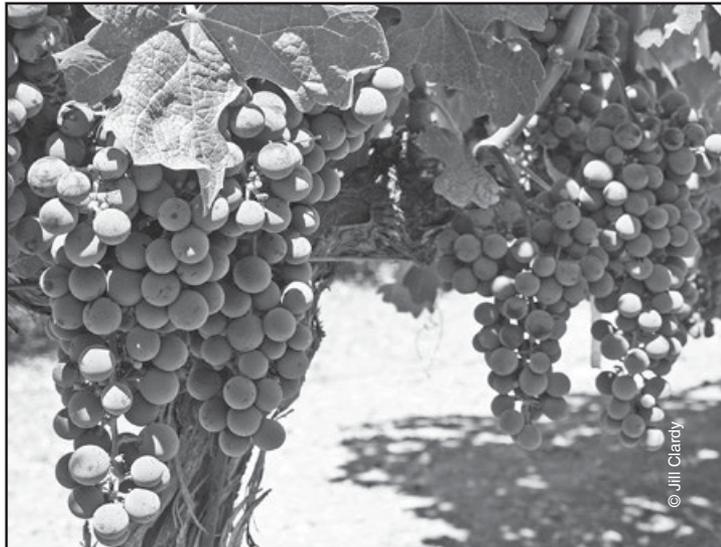
—John 15:5

Jesus’ disciples would have been familiar with the use of the vine as a symbol. Not only was agriculture a dominant feature of Palestinian life, but also the Old Testament writers had often referred to Israel as a vine (see Ps. 80:8-16; Isa. 5:1-7; Jer. 2:21; Ezek. 15; 19:10; Hos. 10:1).

Perhaps Jesus gestured toward

a nearby plant when He spoke of Himself as the “true vine” (John 15:1). This is the last of the seven great “I am” statements, all of which in some way point to Jesus’ divinity (see 6:35, 48; 8:12; 10:7, 9; 10:11, 14; 11:25; 14:6). In this case, Jesus referred to Himself as the only true source of life and power through which God, as the gardener, brings forth fruit for God’s kingdom. In the same way a gardener prunes a grapevine in order for the plant to yield the maximum number

A grapevine, its branches, and its fruit. Jesus described Himself as the vine and His followers as the branches.



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of grapes, our heavenly Father removes and discards deadwood and trims productive branches. The Father is vitally concerned with our fruitfulness and will carefully clip away anything that drains our spiritual resources (15:2).

We who are in Christ are already clean. Yet God continues to work in our lives, cutting away sin and empowering us to be like Christ. Jesus calls us to abide in Him as He abides in us. As we remain in Him, His life will flow through us, and we will continue to bear fruit. Apart from the life-giving resources of the vine, no branch can bear fruit of itself. In the same way, Christians are wholly dependent upon God when it comes to living productive lives (vss. 3, 4).

Ask Yourself . . . *What fruit have I borne for Christ this week?*

Although there is a mutual indwelling between Christ and His followers, we must not be confused about our distinctive roles. Jesus is the vine and we are the branches. Though we abide in Him and He in us, we still can accomplish nothing apart from Him. In fact, if a branch is not attached to the vine, it will be thrown away. Like a severed branch, those who are not in Christ will be cast into the fire and burned (vss. 5, 6).

Jesus returned to the subject of prayer. Again He promised to give the believer whatever is asked. There are, however, certain conditions. First, we must abide in Him. When we live in oneness with

Christ, our desires will be in line with God's will. Second, we must remain obedient to His teachings. When we are faithful in these ways, we will pray for the things God wants, and He will give them to us (vs. 7).

When we show that we are Christ's followers by the fruit we bear, we bring glory to God the Father. Since fruitfulness is evidence that God is at work in Christ's disciples, the abundance of that fruit brings honor to God (vs. 8).

Jesus shared these truths with His friends because He loved them deeply. In fact, Jesus' love for His disciples is as great as God's love for Him. Jesus told His friends to continue in His love by keeping His commands. In the same way, Jesus has stayed in the Father's love by being obedient to the Father's will (vss. 9, 10).

Obedying Christ is not a burden; in fact, it is the only thing that brings lasting joy (vs. 11). Jesus was not talking here about a life of pleasure or one filled with never-ending happy moments. The joy Christ provides is independent of circumstances because it stems from a dynamic, ever-growing relationship with the Lord—something that can never be taken away from us.

Ask Yourself . . . *How deep is my joy in Christ?*

Jesus summed up His teachings with one commandment: His followers are to love one another as He has loved them. This kind of love is demonstrated by a willingness to lay

down one's life for that friend (vss. 12, 13). Indeed, Jesus did this very thing for us when He willingly subjected Himself to death, even death on the cross. Jesus set the example of the type of sacrificial love we should demonstrate toward our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Jesus considers His followers friends, not servants (or "slaves," which the original Greek word implies). Normally servants are not in on their master's intentions or plans. Instead, they must obey instructions without question. Jesus, however, treats us like friends in that He discloses to us everything His heavenly Father has revealed to Him. By taking His disciples into His confidence, Jesus elevated His relationship with believers to a far more intimate level (vss. 14, 15). In this type of relationship, we can obey Him out of love rather than compulsion.

Like other disciples who attached themselves to a particular teacher or rabbi, Jesus' disciples may have thought they had chosen Jesus to be their Master. Jesus, however, made it clear that He had selected them to be His disciples. Furthermore, He had appointed them to specific tasks that would bear fruit that had everlasting value. While performing these tasks, we can ask for and receive the things we need in order to accomplish God's work (vs. 16).

At this point, Jesus once more commanded His friends to love one another (vs. 17). He knew they need each other's love because of the intense suffering that lay ahead for them.

b The World Hates Christ (15:18—16:4)

"If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first."

—John 15:18

Jesus' disciples had seen firsthand how His enemies could persecute Him. Enemies had verbally attacked Him and spread vicious lies about Him. And of course His trial, torture, and execution were close at hand. Therefore, Jesus' disciples should not be surprised when they encounter hostility in the world. In this case, "the world" included those who had rejected Christ. There is a striking contrast between the love of believers and the hatred of non-believers (vs. 18)

The world loves those who either renounce Christ or are indifferent to Him. Resistance to God or apathy toward Him is an indication of allegiance to the world. Those who follow Christ don't belong to the world, because Jesus has chosen them and set them apart from the world. The world hates those Christ has chosen because the world has lost its power over them and can no longer control them (vs. 19).

Ask Yourself . . . *How has the world demonstrated its hostility toward me recently?*

Jesus repeated what He had said to His disciples earlier in the upper room: "A servant is not greater than his master" (vs. 20; see 13:16). Before

The Suffering of the Apostles

Jesus predicted great persecution toward the apostles once He returned to the Father. According to tradition . . .

•
John was put into a cauldron of boiling oil, but escaped death.

•
Peter was crucified upside down in Rome.

•
Matthew suffered martyrdom by the sword in Ethiopia.

•
James, son of Zebedee, was slain with a sword, as ordered by Herod Agrippa I.

•
James the brother of Jesus was thrown from a pinnacle of the temple and was beaten to death below.

•
Philip was hung upside down in Hierapolis.

•
Nathanael was flayed and crucified in Albania.

•
Andrew was stoned and crucified in Scythia.

•
Thomas was run through the body in Coromandel, India.

•
Judas (not Iscariot) suffered martyrdom in Syria.

•
Simon the Zealot was crucified in Britain.

He was talking about servanthood, but now He was telling them to expect the same persecution directed toward Him. On the other hand, those who proved receptive and obedient to Christ would also follow His disciples' instructions. Following Christ brings persecution and peace—never just one or the other.

Jesus further explained that those who identified with Him would suffer because their persecutors did not know God (15:21). If they had known God, they would have recognized Jesus, because He was sent from God.

Ignorance, however, is no excuse.

The revelation of God was given to them through the appearance and teachings of Jesus Christ. Because they rejected that revelation, the guilt of their sins remained (vs. 22).

Despite the miracles Jesus had performed before His enemies, they still refused to believe in Him. In fact, they despised Him. By hating Jesus they were expressing a deeply felt hatred for God (vss. 23, 24).

The persecution of Jesus was clearly undeserved. Though Jesus' enemies contended that they were upholding God's law by opposing and persecuting Him, they were actually breaking the very law that

bore witness to Jesus as the Messiah. Jesus quoted from the Psalms to expose the hypocrisy and treachery of those Jewish rulers who were hostile to Him (vs. 25; see Ps. 35:19; 69:4; 109:3). The words of the psalmist found their ultimate fulfillment in the persecution of Christ.

God's Word is not alone in testifying about Jesus. Jesus promised that He would send the Holy Spirit to testify about Him as well. Jesus referred to the Spirit as a Counselor who comes from the Father to impart truth. An essential function of the Holy Spirit is to continue to present Jesus as the Messiah before the world (John 15:26).

Along with the Spirit, Jesus' disciples also are to testify about Him. This specific command was intended for those who were with Him at the Last Supper, for they had been with Him from the beginning of His public ministry (vs. 27).

The principle behind this command is applicable to all believers. As Christians we will want to cooperate with the Holy Spirit in testifying to the world that Jesus is the Christ.

Jesus knew His eleven apostles would undergo terrible persecution after His ascension. He knew they would be kicked out of the religious community and branded as traitors to the Jewish faith. In fact, some would even die at the hands of those who thought they were serving God (16:1, 2). So that they would not falter in their commitment to Him, Jesus revealed these truths to them the day before His

arrest, trial, and execution.

When Jesus spoke of the ignorance of His enemies, He was not talking about intellectual knowledge. They had seen His miracles and listened to His teachings. He was talking about knowledge that comes from being in intimate relationship with Him and God. This type of knowledge was profoundly absent in their hearts (vs. 3).

Jesus had not shared these things with His disciples before because His presence was sufficient to strengthen their faith. While He was present, His enemies had primarily attacked Him. When He left, however, the situation would change. Jesus' foes would direct their enmity toward His followers. When that time came, they would be able to recall Jesus' warning and remain unwavering in their devotion to Him (vs. 4).

C The Spirit Will Teach (16:5-16)

“When he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come.”

—John 16:13

Jesus had mentioned several times that He was returning to His Father. Earlier during Jesus' discourse Peter had asked, “Lord, where are you

going?" (13:36). Although Peter and the others had been distressed about their Lord's leaving them, they were not really concerned about where He was going (16:5). Otherwise, they would have pressed the issue to determine the reasons for His departure, which they did not. Instead, they were worried about what would become of themselves without Him. When Christians become too focused on their own fates, they can lose sight of Christ's ultimate purpose.

The thought of being separated from their Lord deeply saddened the disciples (vs. 6). Jesus said, however, that His leaving was in their best interest. Unless He returned to the Father, He could not send the Counselor to be with them (vs. 7). Only the Holy Spirit could transform them into the image of Christ. In addition, the Holy Spirit would provide them with the guidance and power to preach the gospel throughout the world. Until that occurred their ministry would be confined to Palestine.

Only by the Holy Spirit can a Christian accomplish all the works and ministry that Jesus has prepared that person to accomplish.

Ask Yourself . . . *How has the Holy Spirit empowered me this week?*

Like a legal counselor, God's Spirit would act as a prosecutor to bring about the world's conviction. He does not merely accuse the world of wrongdoing, but presents indisputable evidence to prove the world's sinfulness. He would establish God's case against nonbelievers

by presenting evidence in three different areas: sin, righteousness, and judgment (vs. 8).

The first area is sin. The Holy Spirit convicts the world of sin because men and women do not believe in Jesus (vs. 9). Jesus might have meant that the classic sin was unbelief, or that sin remains because of unbelief, or both. In any case, the Holy Spirit convicts people of sin because they reject and repudiate Christ's message.

The second area is righteousness. The righteousness of God was manifested in the life and character of His Son. His return to the Father vindicated His character and established Him as the standard of all righteousness. But when Jesus returned to the Father, He was no longer visible to His disciples and the world (vs. 10). It was now the Holy Spirit's responsibility to convict the world according to the standard of righteousness set by Christ.

The third area is judgment. Jesus told His disciples that God has already condemned Satan, the prince of this world. In fact, Jesus' death on the cross and resurrection from the tomb sealed Satan's defeat. Since the world has followed Satan, the world stands condemned with Him (vs. 11).

The purpose for the coming of the Holy Spirit was not only to convict the world of its guilt, but also to guide Jesus' disciples into all truth. Jesus wanted to share these truths with His friends, but He knew that what the Holy Spirit would later convey to them would be too much

for them to presently bear. Jesus might have meant that this knowledge was too difficult for them to understand, or too difficult to emotionally absorb, or perhaps both. In any case, the Holy Spirit would help them understand these truths in the future and give them the ability to incorporate them into their lives (vss. 12, 13a).

The Holy Spirit never works independently from the Father and the Son. He would pass along to Christ's followers whatever is given to Him (vs. 13b). Just as Jesus glorified His heavenly Father during His earthly ministry, the primary function of the Holy Spirit's ministry is to glorify the Son. He does this by

taking the teachings of Christ and making them known to us. Anything Christ conveys to the Spirit was given to Him by His Father (vss. 14, 15). There is unhindered communion, concert, and cooperation among the three Persons of the Godhead.

Finally, Jesus told His disciples that soon He would be leaving them, but a little later they would see Him again (vs. 16). Jesus was alluding to His imminent arrest, trial, execution, and burial. During that time they would abandon Him and not see Him. After His resurrection, however, He would appear to them several times before His ascension into heaven.

THE TRINITY

John 16:14-15 is one of the passages in Scripture describing the work of the Trinity. Bible scholar Merrill C. Tenney describes the verses this way: "Each of the three persons is separate in personality and is distinguishable from the others ... The three interact and also act separately; they are three individuals, yet but one God ... Jesus offered no philosophical statement of the Trinity. His language was extremely simple, though the profundities of his words are still unplumbed" (Merrill C. Tenney, *John: The Gospel of Belief*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972, p. 239.)

John 16:17-33 in Brief

When Jesus said He would disappear and then reappear, His disciples became confused and disturbed. Though Jesus had told them at great length that He was about to return to His heavenly Father, they still could not grasp His point. Jesus admitted that He had

been speaking figuratively to them, so now He would speak plainly. He came from God and now He was returning.

The disciples said they finally understood, but Jesus knew that their faith would falter in the coming hours. They would scatter, but the Father would still be with Him. Jesus assured them of His triumph, so He encouraged them to take heart.