

When The Tables Are Turned

Part I

John 15:1-11

Introduction

In west Texas, there is a famous oil field known as Yates Pool. During the Great Depression of the early 1930's in America, this field was a sheep ranch, owned by a man named Yates. Mr. Yates was not able to make enough money on his ranching operation so he, like many others, had to live on a government subsidy. Month after month, as he grazed his sheep over those rolling west Texas hills, he was troubled about how he would be able to pay his bills.

Then, a seismographic crew from an oil company came into the area. They told Mr. Yates that there might be oil on his land and asked permission to drill a wildcat well. He signed a lease and, at 1,100 feet, they struck a huge oil reserve which would produce 80,000 barrels a day. In fact, thirty years after the discovery, a government test of one of the wells showed that it could still flow 125,000 barrels of oil a day.

And Mr. Yates owned it all. The day he purchased the land, he received the oil and mineral rights, yet he lived for years on relief. Potentially, positionally a multimillionaire; experientially, poverty stricken. Why? He did not know the oil was there. He owned it, but he did not possess it.

I cannot think of a better illustration of one of the great problems facing Christians today. Feverishly seeking to win or earn God's approval; fervently trying to make something of their lives by their own fleshly efforts – they plan, they resolve, they vow and decide, they work – but they are still impoverished; spiritually poverty stricken.

If we learn anything today, let us learn, or re-learn, that victorious, fruitful living is not the by-product of a self-improvement course. Spiritual fruit is not the result of improving our resources; spiritual fruit is the result of resting in our relationship, of possessing what we already own!

John, Chapter 15 An Overview

Now, according to John's gospel, in chapter 15, our relationship with the Son of God will result in three things. Let me give an overview of these.

The privilege of fruit bearing

1. First, in verses 1 through 11, there is the privilege of fruit bearing.

The prize of friendship

2. Secondly, in verses 12 through 17, there is the prize of friendship.

The pain of being forsaken

3. Thirdly, in verses 18 through 27, there is the pain of being forsaken.

These three experiences are the lot and portion of every believer, in some form or another.

John, Chapter 15, Verses 1-11 An Introduction

Ways the Bible Serves the Believer

Now, when you study the Bible, depending on the passage in front of you, the Bible can serve in a number of different ways. Let me list several of these.

As a sword

1. It can serve as a sword, which pierces your heart and peels back your motives.

As a window

2. The Bible can also act as a window, that allows you to see the panoramic view of history and humanity, the character and quality of God, and the glory of the cross.

As a mirror

3. The Bible can act as a mirror, and when you look into its pages, you come face to face with yourself. You are struck with your depravity and your deep needs, as well as your areas of improvement.

As a model

4. Finally, but not exhaustively, the Holy Spirit, through the Bible, can provide you with a model. It shows you what God is intending to make of you; what He desires you to be. It paints a picture of all your privileges, and, if you have been reading it that way, you have discovered that you are, potentially, positionally a multimillionaire.

The challenge is to translate our potential into performance.

One wonderful thing about the Master Teacher, Jesus, is that just as He did with His earlier disciples, so He does for us now – He never presents a model of Christian experience without providing the means. To do so would incredibly frustrate us. He would become like the Egyptian Pharaoh who demanded more bricks from the Israelite slaves, yet, at the same time, stopped the delivery trucks that hauled in the necessary straw.

It would be like a father demanding that his son make first string on the high school basketball team and yet, never allowing him to practice. It would be like a mother demanding that her daughter make her own clothes and yet, never showing her how to use a sewing machine.

In John, chapter 15, we are given one of the greatest challenges in our Christian experience. At first glance, it is overwhelming, but with closer study, it is actually encouraging – for it not only provides a model, but reveals the means.

Let us read verses 1 through 11. By the way, included in verse 1 is the last of Christ's "I am" statements in the gospel of John.

I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser.

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

You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you.

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.

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.

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.

If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you.

By this is My Father glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples.

Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love.

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.

These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full.

Now, the verses we have just read are called, in the science of Bible interpretation, an allegory. That is, this passage is an extended metaphor – a word picture that immediately links the student with the color and drama of a cultural setting. We are placed into that setting as one of the objects.

In this allegory, the reader is invited to a busy Palestinian vineyard. We notice right away, the owner and operator is God the Father. The massive grape vine is the Lord Jesus. And, the many branches, that hang with juicy clusters of grapes, are believers.

John, chapter 15, is perhaps one of the most widely known allegories. Psalm, chapter 23, is another well-known allegory.

Ways the Bible Communicates Truth

Now, when you study the Bible, you soon discover the many different kinds of vehicles which carry the truth. Let me give you a few of these:

1. hyperbole,
2. simile,
3. parable,
4. allegory, and
5. figure of speech.

Two Warnings For Interpreting Allegories

I looked at Roy Zuck's volume entitled, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, which was the actual content of the seminary course which Dr. Zuck taught me and many others. I read some of the material again from his volume. It was fun this time, because I knew I would not be tested on what I had read the next day!

Dr. Zuck gave two warnings in his section on allegories, which I will give to you. I am doing so, simply because John, chapter 15, has within it the potential of distorted theology, unless carefully interpreted. In fact, we have just read in verse 2, and in verses 5 and 6, that if we do not bear much fruit, then we are in fear of hellfire!

Do not attempt to interpret details in allegories that are not explained

1. Warning number one is, do not attempt to interpret details in allegories that are not explained.

For instance, in the allegory of the house being built by wisdom, in Proverbs, chapter 9, we do not need to ask what the meat, the table, or the maids represent. They are not explained, therefore they are not necessary in order to understanding the main point of the allegory.

Several points in John, chapter 15, are never explained. So, since this is an allegory, the Lord was not concerned with the details, but rather, with the main point. We will look at that point in a moment.

Do not attempt to attach spiritual significance to every detail in an allegory

2. Warning number two is, do not attempt to attach spiritual significance to every detail in an allegory.

This, by the way, was the very mistake that gave rise to, what is called, the Allegorical Method of Interpretation. That is the method whereby the Bible interpreter makes a spiritual and even theological connection with every detail. This method goes all the way back to Origen, of the second century, who declared that every verse in the Bible had a hidden, subtle meaning.

So, as scholars allegorized – the donkey Christ rode upon was the Old Testament, and the young colt following behind was the New Testament. Or, in the book of Ruth, the field is the Bible, Ruth represents students, and the reapers are the teachers. Or, as scholars conveniently argued, the prodigal son came home, and home represented the church.

The tragedy of this Allegorical Method of Interpretation is that it eventually led, among other things, to the Dark Ages. Not only was there a historical period known as the Dark Ages, but a period in church history as well – and they coincided!

By the Middle Ages, the Bible had become a closed book to the population at large. The uneducated laity certainly could never understand the deeper things of God's Word. So, by this time in history, the common populace firmly believed that it would take a priest, a church father, or a Bible scholar to really understand this mysterious book. There were cathedrals with Bibles, literally, chained to the pulpits. The common person feared the Bible – it was untouchable. As a result, the organized church would twist the Scripture and contort it into saying whatever they wanted it to say, in order to control the common person.

It would be, ultimately, the Protestant Reformation that would unchain the Bible from the cathedral pulpits and the secret orders and would strike a blow at the allegorical method of Origen. And, it would be a bold monk, by the name of Martin Luther, who, in the early 1500's, would launch a movement that, eventually, put the Bible into the hands of the people.

Martin Luther, a man who rarely minced words, actually wrote, "Allegories are empty speculations and, as it were, the scum of Scripture."

So much for winning friends! He would also write, "Origen's allegories are not worth dirt."

The point is, in an allegory, the details do not carry some hidden, secret theological truth; the details

are simply a part of the story that add color and culture.

When you, the Bible interpreter; when you, the royal priest, approach John, chapter 15, verses 1 through 11, and any allegory, the question to ask is, “What is the main point and purpose of Jesus’ teachings? What is the thrust?”

Then stay with it! Corral your imagination for the moment.

This allegory tells us that we are branches which bear fruit. Does that mean we need lots of fresh water and sunshine? Say, “Yes,” and we will quit early! If the detail is to be taken as a direct analogy, then we might as well plan to spend lots of time fishing or golfing – doing both in the sunshine and in or near the water. When I golf near water, I usually get wet!

Does this allegory mean that, just as grapes hang in clusters, so our fruit will come in bunches – never one at a time?

And, more seriously, does He mean that if I do not bear fruit, I am going to be cut off of the body of Christ and thrown into the fires of hell? That is what it says in verse 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.

Wow! Imagine being a Christian and thinking, “If I don’t bear fruit, I’m going to hell after all.”

First, that is inconsistent with what it means to become part of the body of Christ. I did not become a part of the body of Christ by producing good fruit.

Then, is He saying that I can only remain a part of the body by producing good works? *No!*

That is inconsistent with other scripture that is clearly explained. Paul writes, in Romans, chapter 7, in effect, “That which I don’t want to do I do, and that which I want to do I don’t.” Then, he says, in verse 24b,

. . . Who will set me free from the body of this death?

In other words, Paul is struggling with his lack of fruit. He knows there could be more! But he goes on to say, in chapter 8 of Romans, verse 1,

There is . . . no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

The important thing about John, chapter 15, is that Jesus is not giving an allegory on “sonship”; He is giving an allegory on fruit bearing.

I have recently read the writings of some commentators who dissected each verse, like Origen of old, drawing theological meanings here and there, and developing analogies from every fine point. They were forgetting, all the while, that this was an allegory – a metaphor that must be interpreted as a metaphor.

Look, for example, at the allegory of Psalm, chapter 23, which is another well-known extended metaphor. I am told that I am a sheep and the Lord is the shepherd. The main point of that allegory is that, just as a sheep is cared for by the shepherd, so I am cared for by the Lord.

But, Psalm, chapter 23, verse 2, says,

He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters.

Am I to apply that detail literally? Is God going to provide me with a three acre lot that has a lot of grass and a pond of still water on it?! No! That is missing the point of the allegory.

The point of John, chapter 15, is that we are to recognize our life source as Christ and, in light of that life, bear fruit. And if we do not, we are as useless to the cause of Christ as a branch that did not bear fruit was useless to the cause of bearing grapes.

The literal interpretation of Scripture takes an allegory and treats it like an allegory – by trying to uncover the main truths and leaving the details alone.

John, Chapter 15, Verses 1–11

The Main Idea

With all that said, the question remains, “What did Jesus want these first disciples, and us, to walk away with? What are the legitimate points of comparison between the life of the believer and the life of a vineyard?”

Spiritual fruit bearing is the direct result of a relationship

1. Principle number one is, spiritual fruit bearing is the direct result of a relationship. That is, the key to a branch bearing fruit is its dependence on and relationship to the vine.

Look again at John, chapter 15, verses 4 and 5.

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. 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.

Part of our spiritual poverty comes from the fact that we are convinced that we can produce fruit – so we keep trying, time after time. But, the truth is, *we cannot produce fruit – we can only bear fruit.*

As Andrew Murray wrote,

The branch is nothing more than a rack from which the fruit of the vine hangs. It is the sap from the vine, coursing through the branch that produces fruit. Likewise, it is the life of Christ, flowing in us that produces anything worthwhile.

Paul put it this way, in Philippians, chapter 1, verse 6, and in chapter 2, verse 13,

. . . He who began a good work in you will perfect it . . . for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.

For most Christians, we sincerely believe that salvation is the work of God in grace, but growing up as a child of God – you are on your own.

“Okay, Lord, I’ve got three areas of life I’m going to straighten out. Let’s see, how’d I do today? Where am I coming along? What’s the progress report?”

We are looking under every leaf for fruit. Results, results, results . . .

So, you put the fruit of the Spirit on a list and put it on your refrigerator, or on the dash of your car, or in your journal. You say, “Let’s see, this week is patience week. Lord, I’m going to develop that characteristic of patience in my life.”

Do you know what will happen? You will have war all week.

I am convinced, if you pursued the fruit of the Spirit, one at a time, that by the time you reached the end of the list, you would have already lost your patience, and probably love. Why? Because, by God’s grace, He will not allow you to be able to do something by yourself that He has already said, only He can do in you.

That is why it is called the fruit of the Spirit. It is not the fruit of Stephen, or John, or Susan, it is the

fruit of God’s Spirit. All I can be is an available branch upon which His fruit, His life, His strength, His patience, and peace, and love – His character is displayed.

Jesus Christ is in the process of turning the tables on the way we naturally think! This is a reversal of the typical Christian thought.

The condition of every Christian is not that we are strong, but that we do not have any strength at all. It is not that we are slightly in need of help, but that we are totally helpless. Paul said, in Philippians, chapter 4, verse 13,

I can do all things through [Christ], who strengthens me.

The Lord, in John, chapter 15, said the same thing in a different way. Notice verse 5b, where Jesus Christ said,

. . . for apart from Me you can do . . .

. . . something . . .

. . . a few things . . .

No, you can do . . .

nothing.

The point is, we are not simply handicapped, we are paralyzed.

Look again, at chapter 15, and underline one of two main points in Christ’s allegory:

- Abide in Me verse 4a,
- abides in the vine verse 4b,
- you abide in Me verse 4c,
- he who abides in Me verse 5b,
- abide in Me verse 6a,
- you abide in Me verse 7a,
- My words abide in you verse 7b,
- abide in My love verse 9b.

Again, the main thrust of this allegory is seen in the repeated use of this phrase, “Abide in Me.” This means to remain in fellowship with Jesus Christ. And, when you and I have a relationship with Jesus Christ, He gives us His insignia – that stamp that reveals our relationship. Verse 8 spells it out.

By this is My Father glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples.

The authentic stamp of a disciple is fruit.

In fact, according to the mind of Christ, when His life flows in and through us, the second principle comes into view.

Spiritual fruit bearing is the expected result of our relationship

2. Principle number two is, spiritual fruit bearing is the expected result of our relationship.

The main thrust of this allegory is abiding and fruit bearing. You could also underline the many times Jesus uses the words, “bear fruit”. Notice verses 7 and 8a again.

If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you. By this is My Father glorified, that you bear much fruit . . .

Now, is He talking about grapes? No. He is talking about spiritual fruit.

It is interesting that the metaphor of fruit is used throughout the New Testament.

For example, when you praise and thank God for whatever you will, your lips are considered fruitful. Look at Hebrews, chapter 13, verse 15.

Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name.

When you acknowledge God’s control over your finances and you give to the work of the ministry, your gifts are considered fruit. In Philippians, chapter 4, Paul referred to the offering of the Philipian church to be a basket of “karpos,” or fruit.

Turn back to John, chapter 12, verse 24.

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains by itself alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

Notice, in this verse, that Jesus again uses a metaphor. He is not saying to go and bury yourself six feet under, He is saying, “When you sacrifice your own plans and dreams for the sake of God’s plans and dreams, your life is considered fruitful.”

Then, there is the fruit of the Spirit, in Galatians, chapter 5, verses 22 and 23a.

. . . love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control . . .

Now, I happen to believe that many a disciple is frustrated because they are pursuing the right things in the wrong way. The fruit of God’s character is a right thing, but we cannot have it independently of Him.

Notice again, John, chapter 15, verse 5a, where Jesus says,

I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit . . .

In other words, “If you pursue the fruit, you will never have it, but if you pursue a relationship of intimacy with Me, you will eventually bear fruit.”

So, we pursue God. If our focus is abiding in Christ, He works, in us, His character over time. That is His promise. It will happen to all those who abide in Him; that is, walk with Him, develop a relationship with Him – we will, eventually, bear the same qualities as Him.

Let me illustrate this. You never sat down with your child and said, “Okay, I’m going to teach you to talk just like me – with my particular accent. Now, repeat after me, “Yaaall.”

Mom, you never gave your little girl lessons on how to toss her hair like you do, or tell her doll stories just like you tell stories. Dad, you never gave your son a formal lesson on how to walk like you do. They learned it all over years of abiding with you. Some things you picked up from your father or mother very early, and some things are just coming out, even now, in new situations.

Fruit bearing is the result of a relationship, not of a self-improvement devotional guide. Focus on your relationship and fellowship with the Lord. He will teach you, over time, to talk like Him, view life like Him, and walk like Him. And, when you do, it will be obvious you had nothing to do with it, other than being willing to walk with Him and listen to Him. It is His life flowing through you.

John, Chapter 15, Verses 1-11

A Summary

Let me summarize by giving two statements from this passage.

Fruit bearing is not the reward of self-effort

1. Fruit bearing is not the reward of self-effort.

In other words, fruit bearing is the result of Christ's effort flowing through those believers who are His willing branches. Would you ever see a grape branch "trying hard" to bear fruit? No. It just abides in the vine, and by its attachment, enjoys the laws of its nature.

Look how strongly Christ words it in verse 16.

You did not choose Me, but I chose you, and appointed you, that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain . . .

That is, "I chose you; I place you; I know the characteristic you need for your appointment. Stop looking under every leaf; stop evaluating the nature of your branch. Look at me!"

Fruit bearing is not a reason for self-glorification

2. Fruit bearing is not a reason for self-glorification.

Notice verse 8 again.

By this is My Father glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove [reveal to the world that you are] My disciples.

That makes sense, does it not? If we did not do anything other than allow Him to display His character through us, then He gets all the credit?!

Corrie ten Boom wrote humorously,

A woodpecker tapped with his beak against the trunk of a tree, just as lightning struck the tree and split it open. He flew away and said, "I didn't realize there was so much power in my beak!"

Then she adds,

Don't be a silly woodpecker. Know where that power has come from and to whom the credit belongs.

The Lord Jesus, the night before He was to be crucified, said, "Gentlemen, abide in Me. If you will, you will bear wonderful fruit. But, don't ever worship the fruit, worship Me; don't ever pursue simply the fruit, pursue Me; desire intimacy with Me."

And when we do, His words can become reality.

Notice verse 11.

These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full.

Whose joy? Ours? Did we drum it up? Did we create the environment for it to happen? *No!* In this metaphor, we are just branches, enjoying our relationship with the vine. We are invigorated by life-giving sap, as it were, that is laced with joy.

Before I close, I want to share with you a story that helped me better understand what it means to abide in Christ. James Montgomery Boice wrote about an incident where he was having dinner with a pastor during a Bible conference. This pastor relayed to him something that he had seen. He told of visiting Dr. Ussher, a noted Bible chronologist, before Dr. Ussher died. Dr. Ussher suffered from diseases that limited his activity. Among them was an inflammation of his joints. He had himself seated in an east window in the morning, where he enjoyed the warmth of the rising sun. Toward noon, he was moved to a window with southern exposure, where the warm rays of the midday sun cheered and soothed him. As afternoon wore on, he was again moved to a window that faced westward and he sat and watched the sun as it slipped beneath the horizon. Dr. Ussher spent his day, abiding in the sun.

The question is simple, "Where is the Son?"

He asks, "Will you watch for Me? Will you follow Me? Will you enjoy Me? Will you be willing to bear My fruit in you?"

If we will abide with Him, Jesus says, the Father will receive glory, and we will receive joy – and the cause of Christ will experience the potential of precious fruit.