

I want to start this morning with a little mental exercise. This will loosen you up for what is to come. Note the two categories in your notes this morning.

Our Advantages for Understanding Spiritual Truth

- ___ average intelligence
- ___ able to understand opponents view
- ___ well fed, clothed, & sheltered
- ___ Holy Spirit in me (Christians only)
- ___ Have a Good Bible translation
- ___ access to Bible commentaries

Our Hindrances to Understanding Spiritual Truth

- ___ Not living in first century Israel.
- ___ Not have Jewish upbringing
- ___ Not lived in first century Israel
- ___ Not lived under Roman domination
- ___ Not a vinedresser or herder of sheep/goats/cattle

When we read the words of Jesus, we must first hear them as Jews living in Israel in the first century.

We must take what we have learned of the Jew in that day and hear Jesus as he or she heard Jesus. Jesus never taught Christians. He taught Jews. He taught Jews who related to God under the first covenant, through the Law of Moses.

In order to understand how Jesus' words apply to us today, we must start with what He meant in speaking to Jews under the old covenant. His words don't often apply directly to us. We must first understand what He was saying to His listeners at that time. Then we must interpret those words and meanings into our Christian context.

I felt we needed such an introduction this morning because many have been puzzle in trying to apply today's Bible passage. It had long puzzled me. I kept trying to read it as if Jesus were speaking to Christians. His illustration kept failing. It made no sense. It only makes sense when you realize Jesus was speaking to Jews under the first covenant. With that background, let's turn to John 15.

John 15:1-8 (NIV) "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. "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. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is

to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

Jesus speaks of himself as a vine. He does not mean he is a plant. He is using a metaphor, a figure of speech. He is speaking as if He were a vine to make a point.

The first step in trying to understand a figure of speech in the New Testament is to see if the same figure of speech appears in the Old Testament.

In this case it does. It was a familiar picture to Jesus' Jewish audience. The first time is in Genesis where Jacob refers to his son Joseph as a vine. We will not read that one this morning. But look with me at the first of several instances in Psalm 80.

Psalm 80:8 (NIV) You (God) brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. (also in verses 14 & 16)

Did God bring a literal vine, a plant out of Egypt? No. He brought a people out of Egypt, the Israelites. But the Psalm writer writes of them metaphorically as a vine. We see this again in Isaiah 5, with God speaking through the prophet.

Isaiah 5:7 (NIV) The vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the house of Israel...
(Genesis 49:22; Isaiah 5:1-7; Jeremiah 2:21; Ezekiel 15 & 17; Hosea 10:1)

We don't have time to examine these two passages in detail, but both of them declare God's anger at Israel. In both passages we see that the nation has failed to produce good fruit. They are disobedient, faithless, and unjust. God judged them guilty of this repeatedly through His prophets.

So a Jew, listening to Jesus speak of a vine, cannot help but remember the words of God to Israel. The vine is Israel. Israel was established by God.

Now, back in John 15. Note that Jesus says He is the TRUE vine of Israel. He is the one, true voice of what God was doing in Israel in that day. Jesus was not the only person who claimed to be someone. He was not the only one who claimed to represent God. There were a number of religious voices in that day, all claiming to speak God's truth. There were the priests. There were the Sadducees. There were the Pharisees. There were the Zealots and the Essenes and others (Acts 5:36-37). And within these groups were various divisions. You had liberal Pharisees and conservative Pharisees. They applied the Law of Moses in different ways.

Jesus came on the scene as a new voice. And the questions the others asked Jesus were sometimes an attempt to pigeon hole Him, to figure out what group He fell in with.

Here in John 15, Jesus is saying that He is in none of those groups. Instead, He alone represents the truth of God. Jesus is making a very divisive statement here. His words will cause division in Israel. None of the other voices are correct. If a Jew wants to live the truth of God, he or she must follow Jesus. What Jesus says are divisive words. They are harsh words.

They are also words of judgment. As in Psalm 80 and Isaiah 5, there is a warning of judgment in Jesus' words.

John 15:2 & 6 (NIV) He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.

If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.

In this passage Jesus makes five points.

1. You must produce spiritual fruit or be cut off from God's people.

Jesus rightly points out that there are different kinds of branches on a grape vine. Some branches bear fruit and some do not. I do not have time to get into all the kinds of branches on a grape vine. Just know that some branches produce fruit and some do not. If you were a grower of grapes you would know the characteristics of growing grapes. You would understand the illustration Jesus is using. Not being a grower of grapes is a hindrance to your understanding.

Applied to His listeners Jesus is saying that there are fruitful, faithful Jews, and unfruitful Jews. Some are seeking the truth of God and others are not. Some are seeking to obey God and others are not. Some are looking for what God is doing in the world and others are not. Some live by faith in God and others do not.

Those Jews who were genuinely seeking to live for God, would be drawn by God to Jesus.

2. You must stick with Jesus to produce spiritual fruit.

John 15:4 (NIV) Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

The Jews already thought in these terms. They had been taught since infancy that the way to be right with God was obedience to His commands. Jesus is not denying that. Jesus is saying that the ones who are faithfully obeying God by faith will recognize in Jesus, the truth of God. Some of you will remember Jesus' conversation with the rich young ruler. This man had been carefully obeying the commands of God. Jesus commends him for this and says the next step is to follow Jesus.

The Jews who do not believe in, and stick with, Jesus as the truth of God will be cut off from the Vine. They will not inherit the promises God had made to Israel. They must now follow Jesus just as His current disciples are doing.

3. Jesus' words must live in you to produce spiritual fruit.

Jesus speaks to the fruitfulness of His first followers in verse 3.

John 15:3 (NIV) You are already clean (pruned) because of the word I have spoken to you.

They had been taught about the Kingdom of God by Jesus. The Greek word here can be translated as pruned or cleaned. Whichever one you use, you should be consistent

in its use in this passage. Unfortunately the NIV is not consistent here. I think that is because they are seeing the word pruned as meaning cut off instead of trimmed. Fruitful branches are trimmed by God. The words of Jesus living in you will trim off your prejudices, your misunderstandings of Biblical truth, your sinful desires, and more. Jesus' words living in you will change you. Those first disciples had already been changed somewhat by their years with Jesus.

To remain in Jesus means to submit yourself to Him as His disciple. Live in Him. Submit to Him. Learn from Him. Learn His understanding of the Kingdom of God. See, daily, how He wants you to live and do so.

4. The words of Jesus abiding in us prepare us for Kingdom-of-God praying.

John 15:7 (NIV) If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish...

Your prayers must be shaped by the words of Jesus in you. We see examples of disciples living with Jesus' words in them in the first letter of John.

1 John 1:10 (NIV) If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.

1 John 2:14 (NIV) I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God lives in you, and you have overcome the evil one.

See the spiritual victory over temptation of these young men. They are victorious over the devil. Why? Because the word of God lives in them. This is much more than simply being a Christian. This is much more than just believing that Jesus died for your sins. I have talked with plenty of people over the years who believe Jesus died for them. But they do not reciprocate by living for Him. Their prayers are all self-centered, not Jesus-centered. The prayers of growing Christians will be shaped by the words of Jesus in them. They will be bearing kingdom-of-God fruit.

What does words of Jesus praying fruitfulness look like?

- **Praying to be victorious over temptation.**
- **Praying faith instead of worry.**
- **Praying to love other believers.**
- **Praying for the spiritual growth of other believers.**
- **Praying for the salvation of lost people you know.**
- **Praying that your words and actions will bring glory to God.**

Do your prayers look like these? Do your prayers sound like these? Are your prayers focused on the Kingdom of God or on yourself? Are they sacrificial prayers or indulgent prayers? It is not wrong to pray for yourself, as long as it is to put yourself into the will of God and be used to bring glory to Him.

Don't pray to be healthy, just because you like it more. Don't pray to win the lottery. Don't pray to avoid inconvenience so your day is smoother.

Pray instead to be used by God in whatever way He needs to use you, ...
... even if it means you are inconvenienced,
... even if it means you suffer,
... even if it means you miss your favorite TV show,
... even if it means you get your hands dirty helping someone.

Jesus expects us to live by faith in Him. Jesus expects us to be submitting our lives to Him. And if we are doing this, it will shape our prayers. If there is more of the world in your prayers than the Kingdom of God in your prayers... well it should not be that way. You are praying the wrong kind of prayers. That is why you get so few positive answers to your prayers.

5. The proof/result of praying Kingdom-of-God prayers, in Jesus, is God's "Yes" to your prayers.

The more we are saturated by the words of Jesus, the more our prayers will be answered.

John 15:7 (NIV) If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.

This is a promise. But it is not a promise of God saying yes to self-centered prayers. This is not God saying yes to your selfish prayers. This is God saying yes to prayers shaped by your faith in Jesus and Jesus' words living in you.

This is the message Jesus had for His Jewish disciples. They must keep following Jesus by faith. They must form their prayers upon His teaching. Then they will see the power of God in, and through, them.

This is the message for us too. You, abiding in Jesus, living the words of Jesus, praying for God's glory as He builds His kingdom, will produce fruit, through you, for His Kingdom.

Invitation

Jesus is the true vine. Are you a connected to Him? God can graft you in. God can connect you to Jesus. Believe that God sent Jesus to purposely die for us. Let Jesus take on all of your sins. And God will cloth you in the righteousness of Jesus. Turn your life over to Jesus as Lord, and begin learning His word. Begin praying, with us, for His kingdom.