

On a Mission from God: Becoming a Missional People From Dormant to Fruitful

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Digging Deeper (Questions are on the last page)

On a Mission from God: Becoming a Missional People — From Dormant to Fruitful

Written by: Robert Ismon Brown (bbrown@chicagofirstnaz.org)

Background Notes

Key Scripture Text: John 15

Introduction

Israel was part of an agricultural society, living close to the land. To the average Jew in the days of Jesus, the land held both promise and shame. Blessed by God, it would produce a fruitful harvest; cursed by God it become barren and its seeds dormant. Those faithful to Torah's teachings knew the connection between loyalty to Yahweh's covenant and blessings in the land. Warnings of failed crops and withered vines dominate the pages of Old Testament Scripture. The worst expression of fruitless land was exile, and God's people knew a great deal about that. Some ancient texts illustrate these points:

¹⁶ Take care lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them; ¹⁷ then the anger of the LORD will be kindled against you, and he will shut up the heavens, so that there will be **no** rain, and the land will **yield no fruit**, and you will perish quickly off the good land that the LORD is giving you (Deuteronomy 11:16-17).

¹⁷ Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor **fruit** be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields **yield no** food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be **no** herd in the stalls, ¹⁸ yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation (Habakkuk 3:17-18).

But being fruitful meant more than merely meeting immediate needs or even the physical needs of the nation. As we shall see in this week's study, God intended to make Israel fruitful, not to satisfy their selfish wants, but to bless the whole world. That is the true nature of *mission*: to be the means by which God's grace reaches His whole creation. A failure to become fruitful doesn't affect only the church — it affects the world. When the church is off its game, the rest of creation suffers.

To illustrate that powerful point, Paul wrote a few words in Romans 8:

¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God (Romans 8:19-21)

Notice how "creation" (the whole world) anticipates the day when God's people ("sons of God," "children of God") finally reach the goal of God's *mission* for them. It isn't so much that the world *consciously* knows that the Christ community holds the key to its own liberation, but surely the whole world *knows* that something must be done to right the wrongs and put things right. A deep yearning and longing appears in the human quest for such things as beauty, relationships, justice and order.¹ Through many failed attempts, humanity has tried to achieve each of these.

The church, as we learned in our last study, is the "fullness of him who fills all things" (Ephesians 1:23). But the church is also an imperfect society, marked by its own failures and disappointments. It looks to Christ to become the "glorious church," washed in the blood of the lamb. It looks to Christ for power to overcome its weakness. And it looks to Christ for its mission in the world — to live beyond its selfishness and reach out to God's creation.

For this week's study, we examine the significance of Israel's spiritual agricultural roots as expressed in the familiar allegory found in John 15 — "the vine and the branches."

¹ The reader is encouraged to read N.T. Wright's wonderful little book, *Simply Christian*.

Vine and Branches: *The Mission Branches Out* (John 15:1-17)

The Literary Context

If we follow Raymond Brown's suggestion, the Gospel of *John* consists of two large books: *The Book of Signs* (1:19-12:50) and *The Book of Glory* (13:1-20:31), to which are pre-pended a *Prologue* (1:1-18) and appended an *Epilogue* (21). The first book largely provides us with a thematic overview of Jesus' public ministry, while the second book becomes more intimate, beginning with the Last Supper, containing within it the Last Discourse, and climaxing with Jesus' death and resurrection--his entrance into "glory." The passage we examine this week, John 15:1-17, falls within *The Book of Glory* as part of the *Last Discourse*. For the wider context we must look to the *Last Supper* (chapters 13-17), where, in John's telling of it, the washing of the disciples' feet becomes the prominent event within the Passover meal. That unexpected action of Jesus revealed his humility and love for his disciples, but it also became the occasion to encourage them "to love one another," and thus create a lasting precedent for "being [his] disciples" (13:31-38).

This latter emphasis — love one another — belongs to the message of chapter 14. There Jesus announces his departure from the disciples, and that he is on his way to the Father's house from which he will return and bring them there as well. "I am the way..." Jesus tells them — the only way back to the Father (14:6). Then, in a powerful section which brings together Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Jesus reveals that all three will come to those who love Jesus:

1. The Holy Spirit (called the *paraklētos*) comes to the disciples (14:15-17, 25-26).
2. Jesus comes back, after his departure (14:18-21, 27-29).
3. The Father comes with Jesus (14:23-24).

These interpersonal connections, within the Trinity of God and with the disciples, provide the "grid" for understanding what Jesus has to say in John 15, the reading for this week's study. It is of some interest that 15:31 is the only place in the New Testament where it explicitly states that Jesus loves the Father, and Jesus expresses this love precisely by doing what his Father asks of him. In turn, that loving-by-doing model is applied to the disciples who are asked to imitate it.

The transition from John 14 to John 15 is found in the words "Rise, let us go from here" (14:31). Some scholars believe that the Last Discourse section of the first edition of John's Gospel ended here and was immediately followed by John 18:1, "When Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the Kidron Valley, where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered." However, another suggestion is that Jesus spoke the words of this discourse, not while in the Upper Room at the Last Supper, but while he walked on his way to the garden, deriving the images for his sayings from objects encountered along the way. For example, his comment about "many rooms" in his Father's house (14:1) might well have been prompted by a walk through the Temple precincts. In the case of John 15, a walk through a vineyard served to evoke the picture of the vine and branches. While we cannot demonstrate conclusively either viewpoint, this latter one has much to commend it.

Outline

A simple outline of John 15:1-17 might be:

1. The image of the Vine and Branches (15:1-6).
2. The meaning of the Vine and Branches (15:7-17).

It is possible to see a further internal structure to 15:7-17 which forms a chiasm, much like the one we discovered in John 9 (our study, two weeks ago):

- A My words remain in you (15:7a)
- B Ask and it will be done (15:7b)
- C Bear fruit and glorify Father (15:8a)

Old Testament Background to the Vine Image

The vine as a symbol for God's people, Israel, is well-established in the Old Testament. The principal passages are these:

1 Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. 2 He 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; and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. 3 And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. 4 What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? 5 And 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. 6 I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and briars and thorns shall grow up; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. 7 For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting; and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, an outcry! (Isaiah 5:1-7).

2 In that day, "A pleasant vineyard, sing of it! 3 I, the LORD, am its keeper; every moment I water it. Lest anyone punish it, I keep it night and day; 4 I have no wrath. Would that I had thorns and briars to battle! I would march against them, I would burn them up together. 5 Or let them lay hold of my protection, let them make peace with me, let them make peace with me." 6 In days to come Jacob shall take root, Israel shall blossom and put forth shoots and fill the whole world with fruit.... 10 For the fortified city is solitary, a habitation deserted and forsaken, like the wilderness; there the calf grazes; there it lies down and strips its branches. 11 When its boughs are dry, they are broken; women come and make a fire of them. For this is a people without discernment; therefore he who made them will not have compassion on them; he who formed them will show them no favor (Isaiah 27:2-6, 10-11).

21 Yet I planted you a choice vine, wholly of pure seed. How then have you turned degenerate and become a wild vine? (Jeremiah 2:21).

Psalms 80:7-19 7 Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved! 8 You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. 9 You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land. 10 The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches. 11 It sent out its branches to the sea and its shoots to the River. 12 Why then have you broken down its walls, so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit? 13 The boar from the forest ravages it, and all that move in the field feed on it. 14 Turn again, O God of hosts! Look down from heaven, and see; have regard for this vine, 15 the stock that your right hand planted, and for the son whom you made strong for yourself. 16 They have burned it with fire; they have cut it down; may they perish at the rebuke of your face! 17 But let your hand be on the man of your right hand, the son of man whom you have made strong for yourself! 18 Then we shall not turn back from you; give us life, and we will call upon your name! 19 Restore us, O LORD God of hosts! let your face shine, that we may be saved!

The passages from the prophets (Isaiah and Jeremiah) emphasize the efforts of Israel's God, Yahweh, to plant, cultivate, prune, and otherwise nurture his vineyard, Israel. The purpose of God in all of this is that Israel might become a "fruitful vine." But having been planted "a choice vine," Israel turned degenerate and became a wild one. What sort of fruit did Yahweh want from His people? Clearly, He sought justice and righteousness, but harvested violence instead. In fact, a bonfire awaits the dry and broken branches of the failed and dying vine. This is a tragic story, since, as the Isaiah 27 text explains, in future days, the fruit of Israel the vine will "fill the whole earth." God's ancient people were a vine destined for great fruitfulness, but turned instead into something worthless. Yet He has not abandoned them. The picture of the vine points to Israel's future mission: to be God's people throughout the world and through their testimony bring the nations into covenant relationship with Yahweh. Within the vine metaphor is contained the heart of God's covenant with Abraham: "in you and your seed will all nations be blessed" (Genesis 12:3).

That is why the Psalm (80) is wrapped with words "Restore us, O God of hosts..." (80:7, 19). In this psalm, the poet chronicles the history of Israel from the Exodus ("you brought a vine out of Egypt," 80:8a) through the occupation of Canaan ("and planted it. You cleared the ground for it, and it took root and filled the land," 80:8b-9). The growth of the vine was immense (80:10-11), covering the mountains with shade, and extending its branches west and east. But tragedy struck the vineyard: its wall was torn down and its grapes plundered by "all who pass by" (80:12-13). What the psalmist tells us next is crucial. How will Yahweh recover His broken down vine? The answer which follows points forward to the coming of "the true vine":

1. God is asked to "watch over this vine," whom He now calls by an all-important name: "**the man at your right hand** (80:17a)." Here is language immediately recognized in the New Testament as a reference to Jesus, God's Son and Israel's Messiah who, after his death and resurrection, ascended to the right hand of God in heaven (key passages include: Matthew 22:44; 26:64; Mark 12:36; 14:62; longer Mark 16:19; Luke 20:42; 22:69; Acts 2:25, 33-34; 3:7; 5:31; 7:55-56; Romans 8:34; Ephesians 1:20; Colossians 3:1; Hebrews 1:3, 13; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2; 1 Peter 3:22).
2. This "man at your right hand" is called "the son of man you have raised up for yourself" (80:17b), a not-too-subtle reference to Jesus, Son of Man, risen from the dead.
3. What this coming One will achieve, writes the psalmist, will cause Israel "not to turn away from" God, but will be Israel's source of "revival", and the occasion for Israel to "call on your name" (80:18).
4. In both 80:7 and 19 the psalmist refers to Yahweh God Almighty making His "face shine upon us that we may be saved." Written within the context of "the man at your right hand...the son of man you have raised up," the psalm expresses the hope that one day the vine would become the object of God's love and purpose in the world.

All of these Old Testament passages lay the groundwork for understanding the *meshal* of Jesus in John 15, and to that passage we now turn directly.

I Am The Vine

As with the other "I am" sayings in the Gospel of John, this one reveals the character of God through the person of Jesus, His Son. No sooner does Jesus call himself the "vine" than he immediately calls His Father "the gardener." Who Jesus is and what Jesus does always uncovers the true nature of God. If Jesus is the vine, there must be a gardener--and that is God the Father.

1. The Greek word for "vine" is *ampelos*, and it is related to the Latin *vitis* from which we derive the science of caring for vines: viticulture. The care of vineyards and the cultivation of grapevines was essential to the Jewish economy. The principal product was wine, styled in a variety of ways. The following summary of its importance concludes with the role of Israel as *exporter of wine to the world*.

Israel is the original "old world" wine region. The Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean was the cradle of the world's wine culture thousands of years before the vine reached Europe. Wine has been produced in the Land of Israel since Biblical times. Whether you call it the Tanakh, Hebrew Bible, or the Old Testament, surely you are familiar with the story of the spies, Noah's ark, or other Biblical stories that hark back to the first stories of Israeli wine. Ancient wine presses and wine making equipment are frequently found in archaeological digs. Often, these finds have even occurred at new wineries that have opened up only in the past decade. In fact, wine making is thought to have originated in the area between the Black Sea, Caspian Sea, and Sea of Galilee. Noah was the first recorded viticulturist who, after the flood, "planted a vineyard."

As the vine traveled throughout the Middle East and Mediterranean, the Jewish attraction to wine was shown in the developing literature. In 1800 BCE, there was a communication that the land of Israel was "blessed with figs and with vineyards producing wine in greater quantity than water." The prophet Micah's vision of peace included every person sitting "under his vine and under his fig tree." In the book of Numbers, the story is told about how two men sent by Moses to scope out the land of Israel returned with a great cluster of grapes that they had to carry together. That image is now used by Carmel Winery and the Israeli Tourism Ministry. The Bible also speaks of the Israelite kings have vast vineyards. King David's wine stores were so vast that he had a special official just in charge of his wine. The vineyards of ancient Israel are mentioned throughout the Bible. Excavations frequently uncover ancient presses and wine storage vessels from the Golan Heights to the Negev Desert. Grapes and vines were frequent motifs on coins and jars in ancient times.

During the period of the Second Temple period winemaking was at its peak. It was a major export and economic mainstay. However, upon the destruction of the Second Temple and the dispersion of the Jews, the wine industry was forsaken. The Arab conquest in 600 CE further weakened the wine industry, due to Islam's prohibition on alcohol. The wine industry in the Land of Israel lay dormant for another thousand years, until the return to Zion. Rabbinic texts also speak of good wine. In fact, it is a *mitzvah* – a sacred commandment – to drink good wine on the Sabbath and Festivals.⁴

⁴ "Israel: The Original Old World," *HaKerem: The Israeli Wine Blog*, December 15, 2008, <http://www.israeli-wine.org/2008/12/15/israel-wine-the-original-old-world/>.

Jesus lived during the Second Temple period and was fully aware of the role wine making had for his nation. When he chooses this image of the "vine," he does so with both the Old Testament and his own generation in mind. **To produce wine was to produce wine for the world.** When Israel's vines bore grapes in abundance, the whole world benefited from the exports. For a person "to sit under his own vine and fig tree," was the symbol of God's blessing and prosperity in ancient Israel (1 Kings 4:25; 2 Kings 18:31; Isaiah 36:16; Zechariah 3:10; Micah 4:4).

2. The adjective "true" (Greek: *alēthinē*) modifies the word for "vine" and emphasizes that Jesus is "the genuine vine," by contrast to what Israel had become, as we have seen described by the prophets. The biblical idea of "true" and "truth" means more than intellectual certainty. Rather, the "true" is the "faithful," that on which one can depend. The Hebrew root for "truth" (*'emeth*) is actually based on the idea of something one leans upon, such as a staff (*'emunah*), and is the basis for our English expression "amen." Whereas Israel had become the faithless vine, failing to bear fruit for God, Jesus, the genuine vine, now becomes the true Israel himself, doing for Israel and the world that which Israel had failed to do. At the end of the day, it is Jesus who is the true Israel, the faithful remnant through whom God will fulfill all of His promises to Abraham and the world. Ironically, the land, which produced literal grapes and literal wine to supply *the wine needs* of the world, had not been as successful in fulfilling their obligations as God's vineyard for *the spiritual needs* of the human race. Jesus has come to remedy this defect.
3. The idea of "the true vine" comes very close to the biological term *cultivar* when applied to a species of plant, in this case, the grapevine. Technically, the cultivar is defined as: "an assemblage of plants that has been selected for a particular attribute or combination of attributes, and that is clearly distinct, uniform and stable in its characteristics and that, when propagated by appropriate means, retains those characteristics."⁵ Notice the emphasis on preserving the identifying traits during the process of propagation. This is, of course, the distinctive nature of Jesus: that the fruit which comes from him faithfully reflects his person, his nature and his mission in the world. God chose Jesus, the vine, for the express purpose of filling the world with the fruit of His righteousness (see especially Philippians 1:11).
4. We pause here to remind ourselves that the first miracle Jesus performed in Cana of Galilee was turning water into wine, and this event appears at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry in the Gospel of John (chapter 2). Intimations of Jesus' role as giver of new wine appear from the very outset. Elsewhere in the other Gospels, Jesus speaks about the kingdom and about his own work within it as "new wine," requiring "new wineskins" to contain it (see Matthew 9:17; Mark 2:22; Luke 5:37-39). And, paradoxically, when the disciples address the crowd on the day of Pentecost, their proclamation of the Good News, in other languages, is mistakenly viewed as intoxication (see Acts 2:13)! A number of Jesus' parables cite the vineyard as the place where God's kingdom work takes place and also where questions of faithfulness or unfaithfulness are raised (see Matthew 20-21; Mark 12-13; Luke 20 for some examples).
5. The role of the Father as "gardener" comes to the foreground. The Greek word used here is *geōrgos*, ordinarily applied to a person who "tills or works the ground" (*gē*=earth + *ergos*=work). The common name "George" derives from this combination. Some translations see the nuance "vinedresser," a special kind of gardener, and translate the word in this way. Others prefer "husbandman" or "farmer" which amounts to the same thing. The emphasis on God as tiller of the ground connects this work to that of Creation, which, as we have already noted, is a familiar theme in John's Gospel. After all, God formed the human being from "the ground." Now, as tiller of the vineyard, He pays special attention to the vine and the branches which grow there. Jesus tells his disciples that God the Father is now taking personal and direct interest in what happens in his vineyard. In the past, that work has been delegated to others, with mixed results, as the parables (see above) clearly suggest.

You Are the Branches

The immediate consequence of God the Father's personal involvement in His vineyard is His tending to the branches which grow from the vine. Viticulturalists call this the "cane", a shoot which has matured into a woody, brown one-year-old structure. There is absolutely nothing wrong with the vine itself. What has gone

⁵ *International Code of Nomenclature for Cultivated Plants*, 2004, Art.2.2.

wrong appears in the condition of its branches, the cane. Throughout the history of God's ancient people, He faithfully maintained His commitment to them. Jesus seems to be saying that he has, all along, been the true vine; that, behind the human representations of that vine, he has always been God's source of life for His people. Jesus does not say, "I will be the vine," or "I am becoming the vine," or "I am replacing the vine." Quite the contrary: "I am the vine" reveals the continuing and persistent role God's Son has played within the whole scope of human history. As John 1:4 expressly states, "In him was life." From the moment of Creation until Jesus spoke these words, he has been the true vine. Throughout that long and spotty history, God has had His branches, growing from the Jesus-vine, drawing life from him. But a new time has dawned for the people of God. The Father has arrived within His vineyard to put things right at last. His Son, the vine, will infuse fresh life into the branches by dying and rising again. As symbolized by the cup at the Last Supper, filled with the "fruit of the vine," the blood of Jesus, God's Son, will wash away the sins of the world and become the basis for a new covenant.

The grapevine is the world's most widely grown fruit plant, and is cultivated on all continents except Antarctica. *Vitis vinifera*, the common grapevine, is a highly adaptable species and can be grown in a variety of settings throughout the world. Climate, especially something called "heat summation," certainly affect its growth, but the skill of the "gardener," combined with technology, determines the success of the viticultural enterprise. God's relationship to the human race exhibits a corresponding skill. By sending Jesus, the vine, to put down roots into the soil of His human creation, God grafted onto the human species a whole new kind of life: one that took its source from the life of God Himself. The branches grafted into this vine would one day extend their boughs into every corner of the globe. God committed Himself to a fruitful vine much as the master gardener dedicates himself to the growing of vineyards in a variety of environments.

Jesus tells his disciples that the Father's work is both judgment and nurture. In what follows, Jesus alludes to the practices of viticulture (the nurture and care of grapevines).⁶

1. The Master Gardener "cuts off" the branches which do not bear fruit. The Greek word for fruit is *karpos* and, in this case, represents the "clusters of grapes" hanging from the branches. The failure of the branch lies in its refusal to draw life from the vine for the purpose of yielding fruit. Conceivably, some branches might be lush with leaves, but absent bunches of grapes. In the world of Jesus, cultivated grapevines were often grown along the ground. Grown in a wild state, the vines produced large numbers of small bunches of fruit. But once the master gardener applied his skill, as a crop plant, the grapevine was severely pruned so as to reduce bunch number and to increase fruit size and fruit quality. The vine has a remarkable ability to re-grow after pruning and to produce new crops of extension shoots, and this enables the annual renewal of the vine. Historically, carefully tended grapevines can remain productive indefinitely. The Great Vine at Hampton Court Palace, London, England, was planted in 1769!
2. What does the gardener seek in his vines, as he trims their branches? Vigor, regenerative capacity, stress tolerance and longevity are among the most important properties contributing to fruitfulness.⁷ God expects no less from His people, and in the case of Israel at the time of Jesus, much pruning would be required. Those who claimed to be the official representatives of Israel, grafted into the vine, were found fruitless. Perhaps John the Baptizer stated it best in his speech at the Jordan River before Jesus began his ministry:

7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. 9 And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. 10 Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees.

⁶ An especially helpful book on this subject is Michael G. Mullins, Alain Bouquet and Larry Edward Williams, *Biology of the Grapevine*, Cambridge University Press, 1992 (hereafter, Mullins). Included are the following main subjects: 1. The growing of grapes; 2. The grapevine and its relatives; 3. The structure of the grapevine: vegetative and reproductive anatomy; 4. Developmental physiology: the vegetative grapevine; 5. Developmental physiology: flowering and fruiting; 6. The cultivated grapevine; 7. Genetic improvement of grapevines

⁷ Mullins, p.37.

Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire (Matthew 3:7-10).

Branches failing to bear fruit tax the whole vine-system, drawing off needed nourishment from branches which show promise of bearing fruit. Many in Israel would fall under God's judgment, culminating with the destruction of Second Temple Judaism in 70 C.E. Still others who claimed to follow Jesus, but did not hold up under the stress of persecution and who yielded to the glamour of this world's pleasures, would likewise come loose from the vine (see Jesus' parable of the Sower, Mark 4 and parallels). When his audience became aware of the high cost of following Jesus, many stopped doing so (see John 6:66). In the same context (John 6:70-71), Jesus pointed out another kind of "branch" who would not remain connected to God's vine: Judas, who would betray him.

3. But not all of the work is judgment, but **nurture** instead. Branches bearing fruit are partially pruned and not cut from the vine. Proper pruning will help maintain a grapevine's potential of producing a good quality fruit crop, develop good vine structure, increase sunlight exposure into the canopy, promote the development of next year's fruiting wood, and potentially reduce disease and insect pressure. The key to good pruning is selecting good quality fruiting wood to leave for cropping. As green shoots mature in the late summer and fall, they will begin to harden-off by developing a *periderm* (bark layer) that is reddish-brown in color. Healthy shoots will harden-off the full length of the shoot. Any green growth (generally at the tip) remaining at frost will be killed. Proper pruning can help to reduce the amount of unproductive wood and balance the level of fruit crop with the overall vegetative growth each year. Once pruning is completed, the remaining fruiting wood is spread out over the entire allotted space for the vine.

It is interesting to note that grapevines need proper pruning during **the first three years**. Once they start producing fruit, annual pruning is needed to maintain the balance between vegetative growth and fruit production. If grapevines produce too much fruit in one year, they will not produce a good crop next year and could suffer winter damage. If grapevines produce too little fruit one year, they will produce too many shoots and leaves that year. Jesus understood the spiritual equivalent of this process. During three years, Jesus taught, worked and lived his life with the disciples. As he expressed to them in 15:3, "You are already clean because of the world I have spoken to you." Jesus used similar words at the Last Supper when he washed the feet of Simon Peter (see John 13:10-11). In the Greek language, a number of words are in play in 15:1-2 which have a similarity to each other and to the word used in 15:3 for "clean."

- a. "Take away" is from *aireō* which means "take"
- b. "Prune" is from *kathaireō* which means "take down, put down, reduce, remove."
- c. "Clean" is from *kathairō* which means "clear, clean, free of" and is the basis for our English word "catharsis."

The goal of each action verb is to make the vine fruitful. The reason Jesus spent three years disciplining his followers was not just to improve their lives or make them more successful, but rather to cultivate rich fruit-bearing which would benefit the mission of the vine and bring blessings to the world.

4. Bearing fruit is not a solitary task of the branch, but the cooperative process between branch, vine and the diligent work of the gardener, the *geōrgos*. That is why Jesus tells his disciples to "remain in him," since the branch cannot bear fruit "by itself," but can only do so by remaining connected to the vine.
 - a. The word "remain" is from the Greek *menō*, meaning "remain, stay, abide, live, dwell, last, endure, continue, wait for." The form of the verb is imperative aorist: it is a command which calls for a decision, something decisive and settled.
 - b. But the burden for fruitfulness does not *entirely rest with the branch*, for Jesus reciprocates with his promise: "I will remain in you..." God never commands what He does not provide. Making a commitment to base our life on Jesus, the vine, is sustained by his commitment to supply his life to us. The form of this statement in 15:4 is covenantal. The vine precedes the branch as a source of life. It is from the central vine that the branches emerge. When Jesus became a human being, like a vine, he took his earthly life from the ground his Father had prepared: the womb of the virgin Mary. Grapevines normally started vegetatively by grafting or rooting cuttings from established varieties. The Old Testament described the coming Messiah as a "root out of dry ground" (Isaiah 53:2), and from the

beginning of his earthly existence, Jesus "lived by the Father": "As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me" (John 6:57). What Jesus requires of the branches, he, as the vine, requires from his Father. The life which flows to the branch from the vine, ultimately originates from God Himself.

- c. Our salvation depends on our relationship with Jesus (John 14:6). By the same token, our ongoing relationship with him determines the fruit born in our life. As Paul expressed it: "7 For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. 8 If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. 9 For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living" (Romans 14:7-9). Cultivating a consistent relationship with Jesus Christ is the fundamental requirement for bearing fruit. Nothing can be taken for granted. It is of some interest that the two sacraments, Baptism and the Eucharist, symbolize both the "once-for-all" nature of the Christ follower's salvation, and the "ongoing" need to continually replenish the spiritual supply. We are normally baptized once⁸, but we celebrate the Lord's Supper (Communion or the Eucharist) often. The Bread and Cup symbolize the ongoing spiritual process at work in our lives, as we continually come to Christ for nourishment, sustenance and spiritual food.
- d. A powerful connection exists between John 15 and John 6 where Jesus feeds the 5,000 and then offers an extended teaching on "eating the living bread," that is, feeding on him. Perhaps the following passage from that setting best illustrates Jesus intended meaning for the phrase "abide in me":

51 I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." 52 The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" 53 So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. 54 Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. 55 For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. 56 **Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. 57 As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me.** 58 This is the bread that came down from heaven, not as the fathers ate and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever." 59 Jesus said these things in the synagogue, as he taught at Capernaum. 60 When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?" 61 But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, said to them, "Do you take offense at this? 62 Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? 63 **It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is of no avail. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life** (John 6:51-63).

Of course, the disciples stumble over the idea of literally "eating" the flesh and "drinking" the blood of Jesus. That is why he clarifies that it is not the "literal" act he is referring to, but the spiritual one, namely, taking nourishment from **the words of Jesus**. Those words are energized by the Holy Spirit (as we saw in last week's study), so too, here, the words are called "Spirit and Life." This teaching is consistent with the idea that, through the cross and resurrection of Jesus, we have life offered to us in the Gospel. By receiving this offer through faith, the life of Jesus enters into ours, and we are nourished by it. That is why the Eucharist is essential to spiritual life. Not because magic happens when we partake, but because it is God's ordained way to periodically renew our spiritual lives by returning to the symbols of the cross and through their use find our way into a deeper connection with Jesus. No, the symbols do not possess any power to change us or to feed us. But the inward realities to which they refer do possess that power. As Paul reminds us, the cross is "the power of God for salvation" to those who believe, both "as they believe" and "when they believe" (Romans 1:16; also, 1 Corinthians 1:24).

⁸ This is a controversial statement, and has been debated by the Christian church throughout its history. Some argue that baptism is the gift of the whole church, not just the property of a single branch of it. Persons who leave one faith tradition and join another may find themselves wanting to "renew" their covenant, and baptism "again" becomes the way that takes place. The movement known as the Anabaptists got its name from the fact that they baptized "again" those who had been baptized as infants. The Nazarene tradition respects a range of choices and the decision is left up to the individual Christ follower.

5. The phrase "abiding in Christ" sometimes appears in writings on living the Christian life. It comes from John 15. The word "abide" (the Greek word *menō*) has a number of important meanings:⁹
- to wait for
 - to endure without yielding
 - to bear patiently
 - to accept without objection
 - to remain stable or fixed in a state
 - to continue in a place

To abide has to do with the concept of **being** instead of **doing**. Doing in relation to the Christian walk is: reading the Bible, going to church, praying, witnessing, doing good works, fleeing sin, etc. These are all good things to do as a Christian. These are things we should be doing. If we are not doing these things our walk with God and others will suffer. However, if we are doing these things just because we are suppose to, or we are doing them in our own strength, we will not have victory or peace and miss out in having an intimate relationship with Christ. If we are not careful, we can become works oriented instead of Christ oriented.

To Abide in Christ is to be in the **being** mode. We still are doing the things that God has called us to, but we are doing it in His strength. Abiding in Christ is about having an intimate relationship with Him. The relationship is more important than the things we do or don't do. The more we are abiding in Him, the more we will be faithful. We will hear His voice clearer, not be works oriented, and have more peace in our life. To abide is to experience His presence.

- *To wait for*-We as Christians need to spend much more time waiting on God. By this we mean spending time with God, seeking His will, not jumping ahead of Him.
- *To endure without yielding*-To be determined to experience God's presence.
- *To bear patiently*-To abide in Christ when we don't feel like it. To be patient waiting for God to reveal His will and Himself.
- *To continue in a place*-We need to spend more time, staying in His presence.

What Sort of Fruit?

If God is the gardener, Jesus is the vine, and God's people are the branches, then what is the **fruit**? The Greek word *karpos*, by itself, offers no clear indication, since it's the ordinary word for the produce of grapevines and other fruit trees. Our first context for answering that question is the Gospel of John itself.

1. John 4:36 uses the word when the Samaritans from Sychar come out of their town to see Jesus *after the woman at the well gave her witness to them*:

35 Do you not say, 'There are yet four months, then comes the harvest'? Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest. 36 Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and **gathering fruit for eternal life**, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. 37 For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' 38 I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor (John 4:35-38)

What the disciples saw when they "lifted up" their eyes, was a large number of Samaritans, unlikely candidates for the kingdom of God, at least in the Jewish mind. These are the harvest, Jesus tells them, the "fruit for eternal life." That is an important phrase, because it helps decide how John's Gospel understands the notion of *karpos*. **Fruit equals human lives who respond to the Gospel and receive Jesus and his message.** Fruit is "fruit of witness," born by Christ followers to the world.

Though only separated by thirty-five miles, Samaria was a long way from Jerusalem *in a cultural sense*. The rabbis did not consider the region to be part of the "holy land" at all. Yet, Jesus "the vine" whose boughs reach outward and northward, touches this land of the untouchables and from this encounter bears

⁹ From *In His Steps Ministries*, <http://www.creatingfutures.net/abide.html>.

"fruit for eternal life." This is one reason why the vine imagery is so powerful: the vine is a **spreading plant** which reaches upward and outward, sending forth its canes and cordons, bearing fruit as it grows. Israel, by God's design, was intended to be such a vine, bringing life to the nations. What Israel failed to do, in this case to reach its Samaritan neighbors, Jesus proceeds to do, proving himself to be "the genuine, true vine."

2. John 12:24 applies the word "fruit" in an allied though differently nuanced fashion.

24 Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; **but if it dies, it bears much fruit.** 25 Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. 26 If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him. 27 "Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. 28 Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven: "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again" (John 12:24-28).

In this connection, Jesus compares himself to the "grain of wheat", dying but rising again so that it might "bear much fruit." As long as Jesus remained a solitary human being, he was confined to time and space. His ministry and mission would be restricted. However, through his death and resurrection, he offers the promise of eternal life to the whole world. Bearing witness to Jesus also means that a person will "follow" Jesus. God will honor the one who so follows Jesus in the same way God glorifies (=honors) His Son by raising him from the dead. What had once been a single life, lived only for itself, becomes a life lived for the salvation of the world. And that is the heart of being a faithful witness.

The majority of the references to "fruit" appear in John 15, the passage we are studying:

1. 15:2, "not bear fruit...bear fruit...bear more fruit."
2. 15:4, "cannot bear fruit by itself."
3. 15:5, "bear much fruit."
4. 15:8, "bear much fruit and prove to be my disciples."
5. 15:16, "bear fruit that remains."

Of special interest is the progressive nature of fruit-bearing in our text:

Bear Fruit → Bear More Fruit → Bear Much Fruit

That is, Jesus fully expects that his disciples will become **increasingly fruitful** in the future. Once he returns to the Father, after his death and resurrection, the disciples will advance the work he has begun and multiply its fruit in the world. This progression is consistent with words spoken earlier in this discourse:

Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father (John 14:12).

The word "greater" (Greek: *meizōn*) is generally recognized as referring not to the immensity of the works but their number and scope. The grain seed, falling into the ground, dying and then rising up as "many seeds," multiplies its existence, as we noted in John 12 above. In this case, the departure of Jesus from the world, his ascent to the Father, and his giving of the Holy Spirit will effectively *multiply his influence and activity through every one of disciples*. Scattered throughout the world, the disciples of Jesus will multiply fruit-bearing, thus the language "fruit, more fruit, and much fruit." That's how the mission of God grows in the world.

The sort of fruit, then, which John's Gospel recognizes is *missionary fruit: the fruit of evangelization*. From the metaphor of the vine we learn that the life of Jesus flows from the Father through his disciples, the branches, and into the world as fruit from lost souls brought to the Gospel. Elsewhere in the New Testament fruit-bearing is described in similar ways, as these examples suggest:

1. Expecting release from his "chains," Paul looks forward to "fruitful labor" (Philippians 1:22).
2. Fruit is growing throughout *the whole world* (Colossians 1:5-6).

Multiplying the numbers of disciples was a measure for God's blessing within the early Christian community, and we read about God "adding" to his growing community throughout the book of *Acts* (2:41, 47; 5:14; 11:24).

Of course, the language of "fruit" is also used of personal, spiritual development. In order to be an effective witness to the world, blessed with the fruit of lives saved by the Lord, the Christ follower must be exhibiting a godly character and evidence of spiritual transformation in word and deed. Credible witnesses "walk the talk," and the New Testament is equally insistent on "fruit" born from the growing and maturing spiritual life:

But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the **fruit** you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life (Romans 6:22).

Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear **fruit** for God (Romans 7:4).

22 But the **fruit** of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,

23 gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law (Galatians 5:22-23).

for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true (Ephesians 5:9).

...walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing **fruit** in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God (Colossians 1:10).

For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful **fruit** of righteousness to those who have been trained by it (Hebrews 12:11).

17 But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good **fruits**, impartial and sincere. 18 And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace (James 3:17-18).

All of which underscores Jesus' singular affirmation: "Without me you can do nothing" (15:5b).

The Risk of Being Fruitless (15:6)

Jesus then offers a solemn warning about those who "do not remain" in him (15:6). John's Gospel uses the present active form of the Greek verb *menō*. The implication is that those who fail to *consistently* draw their life from Jesus, those who fail to make it a regular practice to "abide in Christ," will, as a matter of course, "fall off the vine." They become like branches lying beneath the vine, reminders of what happens when branches disconnect from their source of life. The clean-up crew gathers them and throws them in the fire and burns them. These are branches who are not merely fruitless; they are branches which are lifeless. No doubt Jesus had in mind certain members of official Second Temple Judaism who claimed to be part of God's vine, calling themselves "children of Abraham," and laying claim to their spiritual pedigree. Or, he might well have thought about the failed Messiahs who proclaimed themselves the deliverers of Israel, mounting abortive revolutionary efforts against Rome, only to be seized and crucified, but not rising from the dead afterward. These are all branches fallen from the vine, cast into the bonfire of history.

Theologians debate the relevance of this text to hotly contested questions, such as, can a person lose their salvation? We would do well to inquire whether Jesus had this issue in mind when he spoke these words. Ordinarily points of doctrine should not be built from biblical analogies or metaphors, like this one, unless their truth is found elsewhere in Scripture. Since this week's study is not a debate about such matters, we simply allow the words of Jesus to achieve their purpose: to remind us that without Jesus we can do nothing, and those who seek to accomplish "great things" for God's kingdom without the power of Christ and his Spirit are doomed to failure. Applied to bearing witness for Christ, this principle tells us that only by the enabling of God's power and presence can we effectively tell others about Jesus Christ.

The Vine and Branches: The Significance of the Metaphor (15:7-17)

Starting with 15:7, Jesus takes the metaphor of the vine, outlined in 15:1-6, and he considers its deeper significance for the disciples. What are the natural consequences of believing that Jesus is the vine, we are the branches, bearing fruit is the goal and "abiding" in Jesus is the means? It was common, in rabbinic texts, for such symbolic accounts to be followed by some sort of **explanation**.

The Impact of Prayer (15:7)

The reader is tempted to see a *carte blanche* in Jesus' statement, "Ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you" (15:7b). But those words *depend on* abiding in Christ and Christ abiding in us (7a). The Greek construction is an "if-then" statement, where a conditional "if" is followed in the *protasis* clause by a consequential "then" in the *apodosis*:

Protasis	Apodosis
If you abide in me and my words abide in you	[then] whatever you wish, ask, and it shall come into being for you.

Similar invitations "to ask" and "receive" appear throughout the Johannine writings in the New Testament (see John 14:13-14; 15:7, 16:23-24; 1 John 3:22; 5:14-16). Of these, 1 John 5:14 places the caveat that we "ask according to his [God's] will." This comes closest to Jesus' intention in John 15:7. The person who lives his life by a close relationship with Jesus, the vine, becomes intimately aware of what God wants. Jesus reveals to his "branches" the word of God which enlightens them concerning the will of God. Our "wishes" are greatly modified by knowing and embracing the will of God, such that, they are no longer "wishes" based on personal desire alone (see James 4:1-3 for a clear explanation of this). Knowing the purposes of God for His world transforms our *wants* into His *concerns* instead.

No, Jesus is not offering a *carte blanche* for prayer, but he is challenging his disciples to pray according to the will of God. Abiding in Christ, discerning his purposes for the world, impacts the way we pray and receives answers which further the kingdom of God.

The Integrity of God (15:8)

How does the world perceive God? Through what lens does His true nature pass before the world "sees" what God is like? Revealing God to the world so that the world might believe in Him lies at the center of Jesus' coming to earth. Not seeing God clearly or correctly is equivalent to the idea of "darkness" in John's Gospel. The Word (*logos*) became flesh to reveal the "glory" of God. "No one has seen God," the Gospel declares in 1:18, but "God's Son who is closest to the Father has made him known." By contrast to the world's ignorance of God is the "light" which Christ's coming shines on darkened hearts. With Jesus' imminent departure from the world, his followers will need to supply that deficit, and they will do so by "bearing fruit" in the world. When human beings look at the followers of Jesus, they ought to see evidences that God is achieving something wonderful and permanent through their work and the fruit they bear, "fruit that remains."

This is the meaning of Jesus' words, "This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples" (15:8). The word for glory in this passage is actually the verb form *doxazō* used in the aorist tense which suggests either a decisive event or a beginning one. Either the fruit of the disciples definitely glorifies God or, once it starts producing, it begins to glorify God. Such verb forms have "punctiliar action", that is, occurring at a point in time or place. The meaning of the verb is to "praise, glorify, exalt." The noun *doxa* has a number of nuances, not the least its connection to the brightness of the sun. The glory of God is His unequaled and inestimable majesty, a reference to the utter uniqueness of His character, and is also an expression of His holiness. When we speak about God's various attributes (character traits), we pile up one quality after another that belongs to God, and taken together, these make up His glory. Jesus himself, when he became a human being, "lived among us, and we saw his glory, the glory of the only begotten of the Father full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). Now, as Jesus' disciples bear witness to him and multiply his followers through their witness, more and more persons start to exhibit the glory of God in their lives. **In keeping with the metaphor, the branches reveal the character of the vine and spread that character throughout the world.**

From the burdened heart of the prophet Habakkuk comes a hopeful promise about the future:

For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea (Habakkuk 2:14).

It is not enough for God's glory to fill our individual lives, though He deeply desires that. The fruitful life of the Christian brings the glory of God to the whole world. That is the heart of witness and its ultimate destination in the purposes of God.

The Intimacy of Love (15:9)

Unless God is more than a *solitary* person, He could not be essentially *love*. Yet, John's writings affirm, "God is love" (1 John 4:8). That is why the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is not just a theological nicety but a joyful proclamation about the true nature of a relational God. Much is said about "the love of God" in the Johannine materials. From the Gospel of John we have these important texts:

The Father **loves** the Son and has given all things into his hand (3:35).

For the Father **loves** the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. And greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel (5:20)

For this reason the Father **loves** me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again (10:17).

I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I **love** the Father (14:31).

As the Father has **loved** me, so have I **loved** you. Abide in my **love** (15:9).

I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his **love** (15:10).

I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you **loved** me (17:23).

Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you **loved** me before the foundation of the world (17:24).

I made known to them your [the Father's] name, and I will continue to make it known, that the **love** with which you have **loved** me may be in them, and I in them (17:26).

Most of this material appears within the Last Discourse section (14-17), with an especially intimate conversation between Jesus and his Father in John 17. *The overwhelming emphasis is on the Father loving the Son.* What Jesus deeply seeks from his Father is that the "name" of God would be so clearly "known" that the "love" of God might be transferred into the lives of the disciples (17:26). The reason for this desire is summed up with the telling words: "so that the world may know that I love the Father" (14:31) and "so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them as you loved me" (17:23). God is love, Jesus tells his followers, but love is never solitary but reaches out to another, in this case the human race whom He has created and for whose redemption He has sent His Son into the world. God wants His love to be visible in the loving unity of Jesus' followers: **that the world may know.** **The love of God made known through the community of Jesus becomes the most powerful form of witness to the world, for through this love God is revealed to the world.**

The letters of *John* reinforce this message. One text is particularly germane:

No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us (1 John 4:12).

God becomes visible when His love lives and grows in us. Comparing this text with an earlier one in John's Gospel (1:18), we discover that Jesus, the Word, by his coming in human form, **made visible the God who was unseen.** By thoughtful parallel, 1 John 4:12 is saying that **we** also express in human form the unseen love of God. Our lives as followers of Jesus, living in community, are to be revealers of God's love, and by this, in Jesus' words, "shall all know you are my disciples" (13:34-35). Cultivating a community of God's love is the principal task of John's first letter. You are encouraged to read and study these passages which provide helpful insight for doing so (1 John 2:5, 10, 15; 3:1, 10-11, 14, 16-18, 23; 4:7-12, 16-21; 5:1-3).

The Invitation of Obedience (15:10)

Jesus, in 15:10, proceeds to connect *love* with *obedience*. A few remarks are in order about the meaning of the Greek word *agapē* used for "love" through these passages. Scholars point out that this Greek term was not particularly popular before it was taken up by the Christian message. Words like *philos* or *eros* were of greater significance. To generalize on the various expressions used for "love":

Eros: Physical, carnal, passionate, erotic, fleshly, romantic love.

Storgē: Natural affection - family, kin.

Philos: Tender affection and brotherly love.

Agapē: Of the will, not the emotion. It is commanded. Not a mere "liking" Agape is the course of active good will even to enemies.

The New Testament's preference for *agapē* seems to derive from the obscurity of its meaning in classical usage. As we have noted in previous studies, the Bible takes up a word with marginal content and fills it with new meaning. *Agapē* bears the weight of God's love for His Son, the Son's love for Him, and, together, their love for the world. Moreover, the disciples of Jesus are summoned to embody afresh God's love for each other and thereby witness the love of God to the world.

At the heart of *agapē*-style love is the notion of *choice* and the role of the *human will*. Classical Greek actually defined *agapē* in this way. Stanley Grenz, in his book *The Moral Quest*¹⁰, points out that the verb form *agapaō* meant "to prefer, to set one aim or good above another, to esteem one person more highly than another." Love, in this sense, goes beyond emotion and is something unsought and far from inevitable. It is a principle by which we deliberately live.

Eros is a general love of the world seeking satisfaction wherever it can. *Agapan* is a love that makes distinctions, choosing and keeping its object. *Eros* is determined by a more or less indefinite impulsion towards its object. *Agapan* is a free and decisive act determined by its subject. *Eros* in its highest sense is used of the upward impulsion of man, of his love for the divine. *Agapan* relates for the most part to the love of God, to the love of the higher lifting up the lower, elevating the lower above others. *Eros* seeks in others the fulfillment of its own life's hunger. *Agapan* must often be translated "to show love"; it is a giving, active love on the other's behalf.¹¹

We should not be surprised, then, to hear Jesus tell his disciples that love is shown by **obedience to his commands**. Such requirements are not grievous or burdensome but grow from the love of Jesus for his disciples and they in response for him. Obedience to the *entolē* (command) means doing what Jesus wants, fulfilling the will of God in the world. We obey, not out of legalistic constraint or intimidation, but out of grateful love for the gracious action of God toward us in Jesus. Love *invites obedience*. This is the moral dimension of love and it is sorely needed in the world. When God sent His Son to become the redeemer of the world, as the innocent dying on behalf of the guilty, He demonstrated the essence of *agapē*-love. This was God's invitation to a moral revolution, one which would replace the rigid rules of legalism and the licentious riots of paganism.

The great gift of the witnessing community to the world is seen in its obedient love to God and to each other, the living evidence that such morality is possible. The missionary task becomes the moral one, and the followers of Jesus are invited to lead the way.

The Infusion of Joy (15:11)

At the beginning of this study, we noted that 15:7-17 has the form of a chiasm, a literary technique whereby a set of ideas are presented, climaxing at a center point, followed by a re-tracing of those ideas, in reverse order. We have presented that arrangement above (p. 3). Having discussed 15:7-10, we have now reached the pivotal crux of the chiasm, expressed in Jesus' words (15:11):

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

They express the *purpose* for this collection of sayings, as introduced by the Greek conjunction *hina*, "in order that," followed by the subjunctive mood. The words of Jesus, the "cleansing" agents of the fruit-bearing branches, have been *definitively* spoken, and *John* uses the perfect tense to say this. The words of Jesus bring

¹⁰ Stanley J. Grenz, *The Moral Quest: Foundations of Christian Ethics*, Intervarsity Press, 2000, pp.280ff.

¹¹ Ethelbert Stauffer, *Ibid.*, p. 281.

the "joy" of Jesus. In our previous series we devoted three weeks to examining the nature of joy in the life of the Christ follower. If you have not read those studies, we encourage you to do so. From a biblical perspective, joy is celebrating our confidence in God's hopeful future. Joy is God's perspective on things experienced as an attitude of heart and mind. The prospect of bearing fruit, much fruit and more fruit grows from the joy which Jesus gives. **Rejoicing in the prospect of the harvest** is one of *John's* themes and was stated succinctly in John 4:36 where sower and harvester rejoice together. Harvest festivals were always occasion for rejoicing in ancient Israel¹². No doubt Jesus contemplates the spiritual equivalent of the grape harvest which began some fifty days after Pentecost. In God's salvation plan, the giving of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost would be followed by a fruitful harvest of many Jewish lives who responded to the message of the disciples' preaching. It was the mark of the first respondents to this preaching that they celebrated "with glad hearts" (Acts 2:46), a pattern repeated in the later chapters of the book of *Acts* as the Gospel continued to bear fruit (8:8; 12:14; 13:52; 15:3).

In the same way, John would say things like this in his letters:

And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete (1 John 1:4).

Though I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink. Instead I hope to come to you and talk face to face, so that our joy may be complete (2 John 1:12).

Reinforcing These Themes in 15:12-17

As we noted in our introduction (p. 3), after John reaches the center point of his chiasmus (**H**) (the accent on "joy"), he proceeds to retrace the ideas Jesus presented, following the normal pattern:

ABCDEFG H G'F'E'D'C'B'A'

G': In 15:10 he called on his disciples to show love for Jesus by keeping his commands. Now he makes clear in 15:12-13 that loving each other is the primary fulfillment of that commandment.

F': Whereas in 15:9b Jesus declares his love for his disciples, in 15:14-15a he personalizes that affirmation by "calling them **friends**." The Greek word used here is *philo* used in its various grammatical forms. Its nuance in this context is explained by Jesus when he informs the disciples that their role is no longer merely as servants (Greek: *douloi*) who simply carry out their master's instructions. Instead, Jesus confers a companionship status on them, making them privy to his Father's work and purpose in the world. In a sense, while they are not counselors in the kingdom court, a position far above their pay grade, they are courtiers nonetheless with special insights afforded them by Jesus. This reminds us of Yahweh's words in Genesis 18:17, "Can I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?...For I have chosen him." Jesus reveals his covenant relationship to the disciples by using this sort of language. They would become "co-workers" in the vineyard of God and by addressing them in this way, he is seeking *ownership of responsibility* by granting the *openness of revelation*. As the future will unfold for the disciples, they will not only be following the Jesus-script, they will be fully invested partners in working out the details of God's coming kingdom in the world.

E': We learned from 15:9a that the Father loves the Son. Earlier, Jesus described this love by saying:

The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand (John 3:35).

For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. And greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel (John 5:20).

That is, the Father's love for Jesus involves "giving" and "revealing" what the He is "doing." This is participatory love, the love which freely shares its work with another, and invites another to contribute to what one is doing. In a similar way, we learn from 15:15b that Jesus tells the disciple all the his Father tells him. The secrets are revealed in God's family where love reigns supreme. Christianity is not like Gnosticism which

¹² Carey Ellen Walsh offers helpful insights on the range of this topic in her monograph, *The Fruit of the Vine: Viticulture in Ancient Israel*. Harvard Semitic Monographs, No.60. Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2000. Pp. vii + 259.

kept its truths for only the privileged elite, persons who arose to some higher order of knowledge. Such elitism lacks love, but is marked by conceited pride and vaunted privilege. "It shall not be so among you," Jesus would tell his followers.

D': The affirmation that the Twelve were Jesus' disciples appeared in 15:8b. Corresponding to and strengthening this fact are Jesus' further words in 15:16a, "I chose you and appointed you." The underlying Greek of the verbs in this statement reinforce the official nature of the disciples' calling by Jesus.

1. **"To choose"** derives from *eklegomai*, "to call out from." Jesus contrasts his calling to the choosing by the disciples themselves. They were his idea; they were not their own idea. Tempting though it might be to credit the followers of Jesus with taking the initiative for their work, admittedly they were an unlikely group, cobbled together from fishermen, tax collectors and zealots. To hear John's telling of it (1:19ff), not everybody was enamored of Jesus or his origins. No, the mission of the Christian community was not a human idea. It was God's idea, and Jesus picked precisely the people to bear witness and work. Time has proven him correct in his choice.

2. **"To appoint"** comes from a rather ordinary word, *tithēmi*, which basically means "to put, place, set" and applies to a range of ordinary objects which are picked up and put down. By extension, the word comes to mean "to appoint, assign or arrange." The present context implies that meaning. There are certainly stronger words for "appoint," but John prefers the ordinary one. Jesus is, after all, not appointing officers to his cabinet or elevating them to some high political office. No, he is putting them where he wants them to be. Paul selects a similar metaphor in 2 Timothy 2:20-21 when he speaks of God choosing "vessels" "useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work."

The work of bearing fruit (the results of witness) is appointed by Jesus himself, his idea, not ours. We respond to him obediently in our witness because he has chosen and appointed us, having called us his friends, fully vested participants in spreading the kingdom of God throughout the world.

C': We noted in 15:8a (and throughout this passage) that Jesus wants his branches "to bear fruit, much fruit and more fruit." To this trilogy of fruitfulness, he now adds "lasting fruit," the fruit which "remains" (15:16b). Perhaps we might see this as an extension of Jesus invitation to "abide in me," with the further result that those who "abide in Jesus" have, in turn, "abiding fruit." In fact, the word "abide" and the word "remain" derive from the same Greek root, *menō*. The emphasis is on the persistent and lasting quality of the fruit in question. The goal is not just fruit--but lasting fruit, the kind which can reproduce.

B': From 15:7b we learned how the disciples' life of prayer is affected by "abiding in the vine." Rather than asking for things in a self-serving fashion, the disciple who derives his life from Jesus prayers for the fulfillment of God's will in the world. The language used was a simple "ask and receive." When we come to 15:16c, Jesus adds to the invitation "ask" the words "the Father in my name." Because the disciples abide in the vine (Jesus), they are granted privileges with the Father. A certain level of intimacy develops between Father, Son and the disciples which transforms the nature of prayer.

A': At last we complete the cycle of the chiasmus, returning to the condition that the words of Jesus remain in them (15:7a). In what sense does this happen? We learn the answer in 15:17 where the command to love one another constitutes the way the words of Jesus abide in his disciples. This "abiding," then, is not a mystical or mysterious experience, but the real embodiment of God's love in the disciples love for each other. When Scripture speaks of *agapē*-love elsewhere, persistence and reliability distinguish it. Paul probably says it best: "Love *never ends*...So now faith, hope and love *abides*. But the greatest of these is love" (1 Corinthians 13:8, 13). Love abides.

In John's letters we hear words of warning: "Love not the world" because "the world passes away and its lusts. But he who does the will of God abides forever" (1 John 2:15-17). The disciple knows the difference between love and lust, *agapē* and *epithumia*. Love is meant for persons not things. Love for things engenders lust, whereas love for persons fulfills the will of God.

The disciples of Jesus abide in him as branches in a vine, and thereby abide in love. The fruit which hangs from the branches is the life God offers to the world. Through faith, mission and witness the disciples of Jesus become the transforming fruit-bearers of God's new creation.

Concluding Thoughts

What Jesus reveals in John 15 is a 3D view of mission: three dimensions within *one dynamic*. In typical Johannine way, several elements are interwoven. We might express them this way:

Up/down to God: **Roots**

Round to each other: **Shoots**

Out to world: **Fruits**

We are thereby creating a new connection with God in the form of a circle, and all sharing the dynamic of God's self-giving love.

Keeping the focus on *roots*, we are not individuals under our own "vine and fig tree," but rather are one vine. Christians and the church are defined by *graftedness* into Christ's roots. In so doing we offer a radical challenge to a relativistic world. This is real hope because offers real *worth*: the dynamic of self-giving love as we say to God He says to us, "You're *worth* it — the true meaning of *worship* (worth-ship)." Our mission offers to the world someone to believe in and be believed in by: Good News!

We are *shoots*, where the plurality is intentional. As Christ, so us: we imitate Christ and love one another, operating out of the same dynamic. This brings real work – what we call ministry and mutual service; somewhere to belong and be in love: Good News!

Then there are the *fruits*, which require abiding, pruning, and discipleship — leading to *growth*. The company of Christ followers grows in faith and love, as well as in numbers — taking into consideration proper pruning! The real growth is in our ability to serve others. Once more we see the dynamic of living for others and not for ourselves. Churches — Christ communities — are still at heart of our mission. We have a vision for more, not fewer. We have some work to do to build for the kingdom in the world: Good News!

Glory to God. Amen.

Digger Deeper: *On a Mission from God: Becoming a Missional People — From Dormant to Fruitful*
(Bob Brown)

To gain a deeper understanding of *On a Mission from God: Becoming a Missional People — From Dormant to Fruitful*, carefully read the selected passages below. To aid you in your study, we invite you to visit the website <http://notes.chicagofirstnaz.org>, or pick up a copy of the *Background Notes* at the **Information** desk, or from your ABF leader. Now consider the following questions, as you ask the Lord to teach you.

1. This week's reading is John 15:1-17. After reading the passage, create a simple outline. What main image does Jesus use to illustrate his relationship to the disciples and to the world? Why is this a fitting "mission" metaphor?
2. The background to this image is found in the Old Testament. Examine the following passages and suggest some connections with our reading: Isaiah 5:1-7; 27:2-6, 10-11; Jeremiah 2:21; Psalm 80:7-19. What was Israel's primary failure and how did God intend to remedy it?
3. In what sense is Jesus the "true vine"? What relationship does Jesus have with the Father, and what role does the Father have in this relationship?
4. To what does Jesus compare his followers? How is this a fitting image? What responsibility do the branches have to the vine? The vine to the branches? The Father, as vinedresser, to both?
5. What is the primary purpose of the vine-branch relationship as "tended" by the Father?
6. The word "fruit" appears several times throughout John 15. What words are closely associated with this term?
7. How is "fruit" used elsewhere in John's Gospel? See the following passages: John 4:36; 12:24. Compare these uses of the word with some other New Testament texts: Philippians 1:22; Colossians 1:5-6. What do the following passages in the book of *Acts* tell us about the growing Christian community: Acts 2:41, 47; 5:14; 11:24)? In what sense is the early church "fruitful"?
8. A branch is fruitful when it lives in unbroken connection with the vine. Jesus describes that connection in several ways throughout 15:7-17. Using the following "paired" passages, label each of the ways: **A.** 15:7a, 15:17; **B.** 15:7b, 15:16c; **C.** 15:8a, 15:16b; **D.** 15:8b, 15:16a; **E.** 15:9a, 15:15b; **F.** 15:9b, 15:14-15a; **G.** 15:10, 15:12-13.
9. The pivotal verse is 15:11. What is its theme? What associations does this idea have with "fruit-bearing", according to John 4:36? Compare these additional passages, as you think through this implication: Acts 2:46; 8:8; 12:14; 13:52; 15:3).
10. Jesus calls his disciples "friends" (15:14-15a) and contrasts this name with "servants." Why? What special privileges attach to being the "friend of Jesus" as a fruit-bearing branch? What responsibilities?
11. What role does "love" have in unifying the fruit-bearing *mission*? What different persons are subjects of the verb "love" in this passage? Compare this theme with John 3:35 and 5:20. What role does "love" have in the mission of the Christian community?
12. How does "love" reveal God to the world in *transforming* ways? Look for similar ideas in these additional passages: John 13:34-35; 14:31; 17:23, 26; 1 John 4:12.