

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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The seven "I Am's" - "I am the True Vine"

Hello. We have an apple tree in our garden. When we moved in, it was giving good fruit. As the years passed, one branch produced less and less fruit and it had to be removed. This happened a second time. Now, we are going to have to cut down the whole tree. You may well ask why. Branch by branch, the tree has been giving no fruit and dying. It was originally planted to give fruit and I am left with no option but to take away the whole tree. In these broadcasts, we have recently been speaking of the seven 'I AMs' found in John's gospel. Today we are going to think about the statement of the Lord Jesus - "I am the true vine". You will find this in John 15:1-9.

When we read of a vine, the first thing that comes into our minds is the thought of those delicious grapes! In fact, the whole purpose of a vine is to produce fruit; there is no other purpose. It is worse than my apple tree, for the wood is useless. The book of Ezekiel 15 tells us - "What is the vine tree more than any tree ... shall wood be taken thereof to do any work? Or will men take a pin of it to hang any vessel thereon? Behold, it is cast into the fire for fuel ... behold, when it was whole, it was meet for no work" (Ezekiel 15:2-5). The vine is planted in the earth and should bring forth fruit, more fruit and much fruit for the good of the owner. It is cultivated for one purpose only - that of fruit bearing. When the Lord Jesus says, "I am the true vine", He is first referring to the fact that He is fruitful for God in this world. He tells us that He is the vine and His father is the husbandman, or owner.

We find the vine is used in the Old Testament as an illustration of the nation of Israel, spiritually. The writer of Psalm 80 calls to "the Shepherd of Israel", and says "Thou hast brought a vine out of Egypt: thou hast cast out the heathen and planted it" (Psalm 80:8). Israel was that vine. But what was the result? In Isaiah 5, the prophet speaks of the loving care spent on the vineyard. It was in a very fruitful hill, planted with the choicest vine, and God "looked that it should bring forth grapes, and it brought forth wild grapes" (Isaiah 5:2). "What could have been done more to my vineyard, that I have not done in it?" asks God (Isaiah 5:4). The result of all God's care was 'wild grapes'. God says the same thing about Israel through His prophet, in Jeremiah 2:21, "Yet I had planted thee a noble vine, wholly a right seed: how then art thou turned into the degenerate plant of a strange vine unto me?" And Hosea says in chapter 10 of his prophecy, "Israel is an empty vine, he bringeth forth fruit unto himself" (Hosea 10:1). Where was there fruit for God in the world? Adam was a failure and all who have succeeded him have failed too. Well then, God calls one man, Abraham, to Himself and makes a nation of him, and gives them the Law. But Israel failed too! This world can produce no fruit of itself for God. It needed the Lord Jesus to come from heaven and, as a perfect Man on the earth, to say, "I am the true Vine".

The Lord Jesus speaks of the 'true' vine by comparison with the old vine of Israel, which was never a 'true' or genuine vine. We can also remind ourselves of the title the Lord uses - 'I am', eternally, I AM. He always has been one with God. Now, in coming to the earth, He confirms in the word 'true' or 'genuine' the thought that God's original desire is realised, where Israel was an imperfect failure. This was justified by the voice of God from heaven when He said "This is My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). Then there were those who said, "we have heard Him ourselves, and know that this is indeed the Christ" (John 4:42). How genuine, how true to the original concept of the Vine was the Lord Jesus when He was in this world. What a comparison with the old vine, what pleasure to God! Meeting that original concept means that He is supreme.

We can also see that the Lord was also totally separate or distinct from the old vine. When He came perhaps there were those who saw Him as the One member of the Israelite race who would improve that old vine, a branch that would bear some fruit. What was the reaction to His perfect life? "Crucify Him, crucify Him" they cried (Luke 23:21). There was no place for Him amongst them. It took one of the two who were crucified with Him to add "this Man hath done nothing amiss." (Luke 23:41). So we see that He was totally separate from the old vine. The Lord Jesus was not just another branch but the genuine 'Vine'.

Israel could never be a fruitful vine for God, any more than any Gentile nation. It was not a question of improving what was wrong, or adding to it. It meant a total replacement. He is a complete substitute for the old vine. So now, the Lord is the One who can say, "I do always those things that please Him [the Father]" (John 8:29). What joy there was to God the Father, in the life of the Lord in this world - fruit, a fruitful vine, totally separate from the old vine; the true, the genuine vine.

In verse 5 the Lord Jesus says again, "I am the vine" but adds "ye are the branches". The whole process of fruit bearing is to take place through the branches. Who are the branches? "Ye are the branches". Again, the Lord Jesus says, "Abide in Me" (verse 4). It is when we come to the Lord Jesus, seek forgiveness from sin and claim Him as our Saviour that we begin to 'abide' in Him. In verse 3 the Lord Jesus assures those who are His disciples, "Ye are clean through the Word which I have spoken unto you." This means that those who are branches are those who are in communion with the Lord Jesus, who take root in the stock Vine. We take our new life and nourishment from Him; He supplies our Christian life. So the new vine of Christianity has the Lord Jesus as the Vine and all believers as branches.

Note, too, that the Lord says, "My Father is the husbandman". This word implies the earth tiller or the proprietor, not necessarily the vine dresser. The purpose of the vine, placed in the earth, is for fruitbearing on the earth. We do not wait for heaven for fruit! And yet how active the Father is. Is there a branch that shows no life, no fruit? How sad that any branch shows no result of nourishment! It is just like my apple tree, and the Father takes it away. Are there branches which, He sees, can bear more fruit? He prunes and cleanses these with loving care. He may use the testings of life to draw us to Him. The apostle Paul writes to the Ephesian church of Christ cleansing "with the washing of water by the Word" (Ephesians 5:26). The daily reading of the Word of God is so effective for this purpose and the Holy Spirit uses this for cleansing and judging impurities to produce more fruit.

Now we can consider the matter of fruitfulness. The vine is the Source of fruitfulness which is seen in the branches and the bunches of grapes. There could be no fruit outside of the healthy vine as the source. So if there is to be fruit, all must flow from the Vine, the Lord Jesus. Now note how this is put in verse 4. "Abide in Me and I in you". If you were to come to visit me, the longer you stay, the better we will get to know each other. It is by being with the Lord Jesus that there is a flow of nourishment from the source to the branch. The source and the branch are one. Colossians 2:9 tells us, "In Him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily". What resource! Every believer is enabled to receive, direct from the source, all the blessing that there is in the Godhead. The perfect source provides the means to the full life.

From the source flows the supply for fruitfulness. When the connection is established between the Vine and the branch - for the Lord said "ye are clean" - there is a supply from Him. The Lord prayed in John 17:21 "that they all may be one; as Thou, Father, art in me, and I in Thee, that they also may be one in Us." He desires that you and I should be One with Him! What unity! What a supply of blessing is available. You and I, as branches, should bear fruit. Then with the pruning or cleansing there is more fruit (verse 2). But clearly, that close communion with the Lord Jesus, a real abiding in Him, will also bring forth much fruit (verse 8). What fruit for God is seen in our lives today? There is little question of failure stated in this chapter because the Lord Jesus is 'the Vine'. There must be fruit for God.

Perhaps we ask ourselves, 'what fruit can I produce?' I must be busy in the church. I should bring others to hear the good news of the gospel so that when they believe there is fruit. These things are right and vital in their proper place but this is not the fruit we have here. What is this fruit? Let us remember our illustration of the Vine and branches. The Vine supplies the branch, the branch produces fruit from within itself. Fruit is not produced by adding a bunch of grapes to the branch and helping it to grow. That bunch comes from within. So the fruit which is pleasing to God is from within. Let us refer to the letter to the Galatians 5:22-26. "The fruit of the Spirit is ..." Paul had been listing all those things which a believer should not be displaying - things "of the flesh", he says. Now he comes to the real fruit of the Christian life, that produced by the Spirit of God and by 'abiding' in Christ. It is like a flower. We see a beautiful bud and, as we watch, the bud slowly opens, and all the remarkable characteristics of that bloom gradually take shape. All the characteristics are within but it takes growth for them to be seen. There are nine listed - love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance or self control. The word 'fruit' is a singular word but this one fruit is displayed in nine different forms. You will note, also, that they are progressive. It is necessary for us to grow in love and joy and so on before the later forms of fruit will be seen. We will look briefly at them.

The first three are inward.

Love - not human love for a different word is used, - a word which describes the love of God. This is the whole essence of the nature of God - "God is love" (1 John 4:8). At the start of our Christian life, we have that love in our heads which will develop by 'abiding' in Him.

Joy - this gives strength in Christ. 'The joy of the Lord is your strength', says Nehemiah 8:10. Even in the problems of life, do we joy or rejoice in the Lord's presence with us? Again, John writes in 1 John 1:4, "These things write we unto you, that your joy" (which you already have) "may be full".

Peace - which can control our lives in every circumstance. Paul writes in Philippians 4:7, "the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep" - surround like a garrison of soldiers - "your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus".

These three, Love, Joy, Peace, are specifically the characteristics of the Lord Himself, given to believers. He speaks in John 14 to 17 of "My love", "My joy" and "My peace", which He gives to His disciples. Do we know this display of 'fruit' of the Spirit day by day in our lives?

These are followed by three forms of 'fruit' which are outward - towards others.

Longsuffering - the uncomplaining endurance or patience which characterises a believer firmly devoted to the will of the Lord. In Ephesians 4:2, Paul describes our Christian walk - "with longsuffering, forbearing (that is, putting up with) one another in love". In our relationships with fellow believers, it really comes to that sometimes! But think of the longsuffering of the Lord, "who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross" (Hebrews 12:2). Any longsuffering we show can never be equal to what the Lord has shown.

Gentleness - a kindness which is helpful and useful, it helps others. What is this gentleness? Paul writes to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:24, "The servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men". Paul, himself showed this caring gentleness to the Thessalonians, "we were gentle among you, even as a nurse cherisheth her children" (1 Thessalonians 2:7). Oh, the need to be gentle today!

Goodness - that which is good in its character and flows out to the benefit of others. The prayer of the apostle for the Thessalonians was that "God would ... fulfil all the good pleasure of His goodness and the work of faith with power". Oh that His goodness may flow through us and from us to others!

Last, we come to three forms of fruit which are really towards God.

Faith - This would be better translated as faithfulness, that is, in our daily lives, we remain faithful or trustworthy in all the things of God. Paul writes to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 1:9, "God is faithful, by whom ye were called unto the fellowship of His Son Jesus Christ our Lord." In the same way we should be showing the same trustfulness of God, day by day.

Meekness - This is very much linked to humility. A meek person is not easily offended and lives a balanced life. It is interesting to read from 2 Corinthians 10:1, that in the problems he wants them to solve, he pleads "by the meekness and gentleness of Christ". This is just what we see throughout the life of our Lord in the gospels. Moses also showed this characteristic and was known as "the meekest man in all the earth" (Numbers 12:3). Abiding in the Vine brings out this godly characteristic in us too.

Temperance - This is better expressed as self control, maintaining control over our passions and desires. How vital for our Christian testimony that we do not yield either to temptation or to the passions of our old life, but rather show the evidence of the Lord Jesus Christ working within us, in the exercise of self control.

We need to ask ourselves if these characteristics of the Spirit are really evident in our daily lives. This is the wonderful purpose of the Lord as He says, "I am the Vine, ye are the branches". No longer is there to be no fruit in this world for God. The power of a fruitful life is established in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Vine. It flows through to each one who trusts in Him so that that life becomes a fruitful witness for the Lord. This is seen in the life of Lazarus. The chief priests wanted to put Lazarus to death (John 12:10), not because he spoke mightily, but just because he displayed his new life. May the Lord help us to develop more and more a closer link, a stronger communion with Him, and to receive more nourishment from Him, "the true Vine", day by day.

Let us pray.

Lord help us to draw more closely to Thee, seeking to know Thy Word the better day by day, to follow and seek Thy purpose in every way, for the glory of God in this world. Amen.

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