

## The Vine and the Vinedresser (E. Radmacher)

1. Study carefully John 15:1. What is Jesus saying with the imagery of the "vine" and "vinedresser"? Who are the vine and the vinedresser?

Jesus begins His analogy of the vine and branches by saying that He is the "true vine" and God the Father is the "vinedresser" (or husbandman). He has mentioned the Father twenty-three times already in the immediately preceding context. Now He pictures the loving care of His Father for Him and the disciples through the picture of a vinedresser's concern for his plants.

A vinedresser, or husbandman, is more than a mere farmer. Grapes are more than an annual crop. The vinedresser's grape vines remain with him for decades. He comes to know each one in a personal way, much like a shepherd with his sheep. He knows how the vine is faring from year to year and which ones are more productive or vigorous than others. He knows what they respond to and what special care certain one's need. Every vine has its own personality. And the vinedresser comes to know it over the years. The vinedresser cares for each vine and nurtures it, pruning it the appropriate amount at the appropriate times, fertilizing it, lifting its branches from the ground and propping them or tying them to the trellis, and taking measures to protect them from insects and disease. (1)

So, when Jesus calls His Father the Vinedresser, He is describing Him in terms of His relationship and attitude as well as His actions in the lives of the disciples. We cannot stress enough how important it is to recall the attributes and actions of the Father from the previous context. To call Him a vinedresser is to tell them He cares for them personally and is wise to know exactly what to do to make them fruitful. With such a Vinedresser, the branches can experience complete confidence and security.

When Jesus describes Himself as the vine, He calls Himself the "true" vine. By "true" He means, "genuine." But why does He use this picture of Himself? And, what does He mean by this? He uses the definite article to describe Himself and thereby says I am "the" vine, not "a" vine. This use of the article may indicate that He has a specific image in mind. He is "the" true vine in contrast to something that the disciples might consider the true vine. This emphasis may indicate He is alluding to something in Scripture to which the disciples would be familiar.

Why a "vine" rather than other plants? In the Old Testament the imagery of a grapevine is used to describe Israel. But it does not just designate Israel as a nation. It describes Israel in its relationship to God. For example, in Psalm 80:8 Israel is described as a vine that God brought out of Egypt and planted in the land of promise. In verse fifteen the nation is then compared to a vineyard belonging to God. In this lament psalm, where the Psalmist prays to God to restore the nation, his emphasis is on God's relationship with the nation as the one who cares for it. Isaiah used the same imagery to describe Judah's relationship with God. In Isaiah 5:1-7 the nation is described as the "vineyard of the LORD of hosts and "the men of Judah" as "His pleasant plant." But in Isaiah, the nation is guilty and unfruitful, facing judgment. In Jeremiah 2:21 God addresses the nation and says that He planted them "a noble vine" but they had turned from Him and become a "degenerate plant of an alien vine." Thus, the Old Testament imagery of Israel as a vine repeatedly focuses on God's care for the nation in light of their failure.

Jesus' use of "true" to describe Himself as the "vine" God cares for can be very well alluding to the nation's failure and to the fact of His *good* relationship with God. Where the nation failed God, Jesus had been the complete embodiment of everything they were supposed to be. This same concept is evident in the first chapters of Matthew. There, Matthew describes Jesus' early life and experiences before beginning His ministry as a parallel to Israel's history. Where Israel came out of Egypt to the Promised Land; so did Jesus. Where they were tempted for forty years in the wilderness, and failed, Jesus was tempted for forty days without failing. There are other parallels as well.

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By applying this title to Himself Jesus is "claiming to be the divine source of an abundant spiritual harvest." (2) Hudson Taylor wrote these words as he meditated on the truths of the analogy of the vine and branches,

"As I thought of the Vine and the Branches, what light the blessed Spirit poured direct into my soul...I saw not only that Jesus would never leave me, but that I was a member of His body, of His flesh, and of His bones. The Vine, now I see, is not the root merely, but all-root, stem, branches, twigs, leaves, flowers, fruit; and Jesus is not only that: He is soil and sunshine, air and showers, and ten thousand times more than we have ever dreamed, wished for or needed." (3)

When the whole analogy is examined, the focus is not on the nation of Israel and what it should have been; compared to the analogy in Isaiah, John 15 is a contrast. Jesus does not focus on Israel / Judah, but on the disciples. He does not focus on the nation's sins and responsibility, but on the disciples bearing fruit. In that same light, the analogy is not focusing on the issue of what is true or false. Jesus is not contrasting true and false believers. Rather He is focusing on the relationship believers have with the Father and the resulting fruitfulness that brings. Thus, the focus of the analogy is on the nature of a vine. It is from this truth that Jesus builds His words of encouragement and cleanses and lifts the disciples unto greater fruitfulness.

Having noted the analogy, we need not to attempt to draw too many parallels or contrasts between Israel and Jesus. Rather, we need only recognize that Jesus, as Messiah, does indeed embody everything Israel should be. But, that having been said, the point of the analogy has to do with the nature of the vine, not with the past or present life of the nation. And so, as we listen to the words of Jesus we need to look to the first century viticulture in Israel in order to understand His message through this parable. We need to *see* what the disciples were *seeing*.

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### References:

1. In modern times our vineyards have grown in size and the individual notice has probably been lost in most cases. But in ancient times the vineyards were smaller and the vinedresser could know each vine. Even now, vinedressers know their vineyards well and can describe their characteristics in terms of areas and varieties of grapes being grown.
2. Cook, The Theology of John, 57.
3. In F. J. Huegel, Bone of His Bone (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1966), 105.

While the book of John contains elements of the gospel and is useful in explaining the good news to unbelievers, John was addressed to Gentile believers in order to encourage their faith. Indications that he wrote to a predominately Gentile audience is seen in his habit of:

#### translating Jewish names

- Rabbi as "Teacher" (John 1:38).
- Messiah as "Christ" (John 1:41).
- Cephas as "Peter" (John 1:42).

#### locating Palestinian sites

- Both the Sea of Galilee / Tiberias (John 6:21; 21:1) and the place of Jesus' crucifixion (John 19:17) are given their Greek and Hebrew / Jewish names.
- The relationship of Bethany to Jerusalem is given, which is something most Jews would know (John 11:18).

#### explaining Jewish customs

- The process of binding Jesus' body in linen wrappings is described as a burial custom of the Jews (John 19:40).
- The prologue of John's Gospel (John 1:1-18) could only be understood by people possessing a developed biblical as well as theological background; thus, the audience is likely Gentile believers who were familiar with the Scriptures, but not with Judaism and Judea.

This article was adapted from The Disciplemaker: What Matters Most to Jesus by Gary Derickson and Earl Radmacher (Salem: Charis Press, ©2001) and used by permission from its authors. Salvation is one of the great themes of the Bible. For this reason the idea of salvation-history is considered by many to be the driving force behind the development of the biblical text. Certainly from the time of Abraham, if not from the fall in the garden, God's acts and words within human history have been to elicit a response to His offer of redemption that culminated in the offering of the Son of God on the cross. Yet there is a more inclusive "center" for theology recognized by other scholars, that of the glory of God. With this in mind, we might understand that God does not only want to redeem us from sin and to declare us innocent of our sin. He wants to create in us the image of Christ. Paul, writing in his letter to the Ephesians, makes plain that all God's work on our behalf is to "the praise of His glory." Salvation, then, is much more than justification. Drs. Gary Derickson and Earl Radmacher show us that it includes the ongoing work of sanctification, and the culminative work of glorification.

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