

## Thoughts on Jesus' Words - "I am the Vine"

"I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15:5, NIV 1984)

This is the last of Christ's "I Am" statements. He begins the subject by stating "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener" (vs. 1). His disciples were very familiar with the imagery of vines, since they lived in a land where grape vines abounded. No doubt they also knew that in the Old Testament Israel was referred to as a "vine." (See Isaiah 5; Hosea 10.) The priests were given the responsibility of nurturing and caring for Israel, so that God's people would bear godly fruit as a testimony to the nations who did not know God. With this background in mind, we understand Jesus' words as a paradigm shift away from Israel, as the vine and bearer of the "life" of God, to Himself as the True Vine. What Israel had failed to accomplish, God will now do through His Son and through His followers, the branches.

Drawing further upon the image of a vineyard, Jesus explains that God is the gardener who tends the branches through careful pruning. Dead wood is cut out and even the healthy branches are pruned back to promote more vigorous growth. The disciples, fully aware that Jesus was not giving them a lesson in horticulture, perhaps wondered what was coming next! But Jesus reassures them that they are "already clean because of the word I have spoken to you" (vs. 3). The Greek word for "prune" also carries the meaning of "clean." They have been cleansed and made right with God because they have believed the message that Jesus has been preaching about the Kingdom and have understood that He is the promised Messiah. As the heavenly gardener, God has already been pruning their lives through the ministry of Jesus in their midst.

It is easy to grasp that in nature only healthy branches that draw their sustenance from the vine will produce good fruit. The analogy is equally clear, only those who draw their spiritual sustenance from Christ will bear spiritual fruit. That's what it means to "remain" or "abide" in Christ. I am more familiar with apple trees than I am with grape vines. As long as an apple tree can put down its roots to find water and absorb sunshine through its leaves, then it will grow and bear fruit in season. Why? Because that's what it was created to do. Whether we are thinking of vines or of apple trees, there is a lesson here for the believer. The key to spiritual fruitfulness is to soak our minds in the Word of God and to walk in the light (ie. obey its commands). In so doing, we will experience the work of the Holy Spirit, pruning away the things that are not good for us and producing His fruit in our lives.

Jesus said, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit" (vs. 5). There is a certainty here that is so liberating! We are not left to stress and strain and work ourselves into spiritual contortions to somehow make ourselves more holy. That approach leads either to pride or exhaustion and despair. Depending on our own resources and strength is futile, for as Jesus warns, "apart from me you can do nothing" (vs. 5). That in itself is a startling statement! What about all the accomplishments of people who are not Christians? I don't think that Jesus means that only believers are capable of doing good things. After all, God is the Creator and all people owe their existence and their gifts to Him. So there is a sense in which any good that is accomplished is really from God, whether or not the producer acknowledges Him. Yet, Jesus' words remind us that living part from Him leads to nothing of eternal value. All the glories of this world are as nothing in His sight. But for the believer who "remains" rooted in Christ, there is the promise that He will produce His fruit through us.

According to the Gospel of John, Jesus spoke these words to His disciples sometime between the Last Supper and His arrest. He was fully aware that His disciples were about to desert Him as He went to the cross. Not a very promising start for the church! But Christ's promise is true and the history of the church records the fruit that has been produced not just through the early disciples, but also through countless Christians who have accomplished much for His Kingdom. Like them, may we too "remain" in Christ and cooperate with the pruning work of the Father in our lives so that His Spirit will produce in us much fruit for God's glory.