

AND WE BEHELD HIS GLORY - Studies in John's Gospel

Part fifty-seven - Sunday, October 6th, 2024, 10 a.m.

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HOW CAN I KNOW IF I'M A CHRISTIAN?

John 15:1-11 - "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. [2] Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. [3] Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. [4] Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. [5] I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. [6] If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. [7] If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. [8] By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. [9] As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. [10] If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. [11] These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full."

When I was on holidays my normal practice was to go out on our deck in the morning, before it got hot, take my tea, my Bible, and a book, and just study in the quiet. Those were great times for me. I wasn't preparing for sermons. I was reading and thinking for my own heart. Sorry, but in those moments you people weren't even on my mind.

One of the books I read was **Peter Beck's, "The Voice of Faith - Jonathan Edward's Theology of Prayer."** I'm not recommending it to you, not because it's not a great book, but because I know you will come to hate me if you buy it and start reading and re-reading each page. I don't want you all thinking me insane for my use of holiday time.

One morning, with no one around but the doves and the squirrels, I read these words of **Peter Beck** as he described Edwards' understanding of **faith**: ***"To approach God's throne requires something special, an intimate, personal knowledge of the saving work of Christ and faith in the sufficiency of that work."***

Nothing that new there. Then Beck went on to describe the way Edwards wrestled with the **meaning** of inward faith in Christ. So challenging was this for Edwards that he actually **invented a word** to capture the essence of the living, dynamic, continuous nature of inward faith:

"For in Edwards....faith, or 'union' as he often called it, formed the connective tissue between soteriology [being 'saved'] and spiritual blessings - past, present, and future. Without faith, the death of Christ on the cross was a senseless act of violence perpetrated on an innocent man. With faith, his sacrifice becomes the freeing gift of grace that God intended it to be."

Beck continued to hold my attention that morning with those interesting words, *“living tissue,”* in describing inward faith: *“‘Unition’ played a key role in Edwards’ understanding of faith. He used the words ‘faith’ and ‘union’ interchangeably. Edwards defined faith differently than many do today. Rather than believing faith to be simply a passive resting in Christ in the past, faith meant more to him. For Edwards, faith as expressed in ‘union’ should be ever present and active. In Edward’s words, ‘God doesn’t give those that believe a union with, or an interest in the Savior, in reward for faith, but only because faith is the soul’s active uniting with Christ, or is itself the very act of ‘union,’ on their part.”*

“Unition, [Edwards] argued, is an active state of being, not just a past act of thought. Unition must be an ongoing reality in the life of the believer or he is no believer at all.” (Hence, the title of this teaching, *“How Can I Know If I’m A Christian?”*).

With no conscious effort on my part **John 15** flashed into my mind as I read those words on my deck. How could Jesus more clearly show what Edwards was trying to show in inventing that word “**unition**” to describe the nature of genuine faith? Jesus’ picture is perfect. A **branch united to a vine**. This is exactly what **Peter Beck** meant when he said Edwards considered faith forming a “**connective tissue**” between salvation and ongoing spiritual life. And it also explains what Edwards meant when he said this faith - this **living “connective tissue”** - must be an **ongoing, present reality** or the one professing faith is “**no believer at all.**”

Lest someone think that statement extreme let me point you back to the words of Jesus in our text - **John 15:2 - “Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.” - IPAD TEXT**

Clearly, in Jesus’ words, branches are either **cut back** (pruned) or **cut off**. Branches either **ongoingly** increase in fruitfulness or they aren’t preserved in any way. This Jesus repeats in **15:6 - “If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.”- IPAD TEXT**

This is Jesus' way of saying genuine saving faith must be an **ongoing** "**connective tissue**" between the professing believer and his or her Lord. Jesus' divine influence must be connecting Him to us. There can be no Christian life **by memory**. There can be no Christian life **by self-declaration**. You can't just profess some magic words. Faith doesn't come by **heredity**. Parents can **raise** Muslims. No one can **raise** a Christian. Faith receives Christ the way your lungs receive air and your heart pumps blood. We're not left merely **imagining** Christ's life in us.

All of this to say today's text is a **big** text. It's a vast ocean of truth, not a bath tub. This is not a text for the casual. We kneel here. We don't dabble. Put your texting away, deepen and sharpen your thinking, and let your heart listen along with your ears.

1) **WHAT ROOTS ARE TO TREES, JESUS IS TO LIFE**

IPAD TEXT - John 15:1 - "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser."

Jesus didn't say He was the **only** vine. He said He was the **true** vine. There are other options for fools. We will all draw life from the attachments we make. We can't endure emptiness. We all **crave**. We long to fill up our moments and days with joy and meaning. That's why Jesus calls all of us - disciples and non-disciples - **branches**. Some branches are burned and some are pruned. But **all** branches by definition **draw** life. They can't **produce** it from themselves.

You and I will spend our brief days here on earth filling ourselves up with something. Like all branches, we attach to sources from which to **draw** life. Jesus says He is the true vine in the sense that He is the only vine **tended, planted, and endorsed** by our Creator God and Heavenly Father. **This** vine - Jesus Christ - is the only vine planted by the One who made us and knows our hearts best. **Father God**, says Jesus, is the "**vinedresser**"(1) of this unique vine.

But there's something else. Jesus is the **true** vine in the sense that all other vines are dispensing **lies**. Our culture is overgrown with vines promising life. They cannot nourish the branches that cling to them. They all promise more than they deliver. All other vines are **artificial plants**. Make this discovery early if you haven't already. What roots are to trees, Jesus, the true vine, is to authentic life.

2) **THERE ARE BOTH BRANCHES CUT OFF AND BRANCHES CUT BACK**

IPAD TEXT - John 15:2, 6 - "Every branch in me that does not bear fruit *he takes away*, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit....[6] If anyone does not abide in me *he is thrown away like a branch and withers*; and *the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.*"

Can we really afford to gloss over these drastic words about those branches cut off and burned? The surprising part is these individuals are considered branches at all. But they are. Somehow there is some kind of link to the vine, Jesus Christ (Wesleyan) - or at least His visible church (Calvinist).

What seems embarrassingly true from our text is Jesus clearly considered these branches *in* the vine. With high intentionality Jesus says, "***Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away***"(2). Jesus should know. It's not just branches that *look like* they're in Him. If words mean anything you can't be *removed* or *cut off* if you aren't attached in the first place. These branches are "***burned***"(6) because they wouldn't "***abide***"(6). It's nowhere said they *couldn't* abide. Jesus simply recognized they *didn't* abide - "***If anyone does not abide in me....***"(6).

Split the theological hairs anyway you like. There are consequences for **non-abiding** Christ professors. These branches were somehow in very tight visible link with Jesus - at least at some point and on some level. They had the **look** of Christians. But their faith was **words**, not **living, "connecting tissue."** I find the fact that Jesus describes their **removal** from the vine troubling.

And here's my thesis from this text. It's **abiding** faith that matters. **Deciding** happens **once**. **Abiding** happens **always**. Church happens on Sunday. Abiding happens **always**. This is Jesus' way of saying **right now** counts as much as any other time for my salvation.

Many of us in the evangelical church have falsely reasoned we can **swap** a declaration of faith or sinner's prayer for eternal life, as though Jesus said, "**You give me this and I'll give you that. There. All done!**" No. A branch doesn't make a deal with the vine. Every part of that branch, in every minute of every day, draws its existence from the vine. The life of the branch **runs true to the life of the vine**. There is no part of the branch, not at any time, that isn't **defined** and **explained** by the character and nature of the vine to which it's attached. The branch has no independent life. The only life that should show up in the branch is **vine life**.

In some horribly uncomfortable way, **talk-branches - non-residing branches** - are going to be burned branches.

3) **THERE IS A KIND OF LIFE IN ALL TRUE DISCIPLES THAT MUST BE CONSTANTLY PRUNED AND DIMINISHED**

IPAD TEXT - John 15:2 - “Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit *he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.*”

It took me a while to learn I would get bigger tomatoes from my plants if I went out and actually cut off many of the shoots bearing only leaves. As you cut off the leaves more life from the vine goes directly into the fruit.

Here is the hard path to deep spirituality. You won't hear it from the mega televangelists. As sincere disciples attentively abide in Jesus they will increasingly feel the sting of His Word laying bare areas where there is still too much growth of what is merely self.

Church goers and Christ talkers, removed from the life of the Vine, will only see spiritual deficiencies in ***other*** people. Abiders in the vine will become keenly aware of too much self-life in their own hearts.

And here's the key point. Genuine spiritual life is always ***expensive***. It's ***free*** in the sense that we can't earn or produce it on our own. Grace is grace. But it's expensive in the sense that it only expands as self-life shrinks. Both can't be cultivated at the same time.

John 15:2b - “....and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.” The *diminishing* of one kind of growth makes way for the *fruitfulness* of another. Jesus says Father God can't tend my life without *cutting back* certain parts of it.

I'm not sure the church is very good at telling spiritually hungry people this truth. North American Christians picture spiritual life as nothing other than *an addition* to whatever life they already have and enjoy. We tell them Jesus came to give us “*life more abundantly.*” And He did. He *said so*. But then we don't go on to tell them *how* this abundant life flows from the Vine into the branch.

We picture the entrance of spiritual life like the entrance of *intravenous* - just *adding to* what is already in our lives. We need the emphasis of Jesus' description of the entrance of spiritual life - *any life He gives* - as coming by *pruning*, not simple *infusion*. *Pruning* always *takes away* in order to *add*.

The first step *isn't* an infusion of life. That's the *second* step. The *first* step is the Pruner's shears. The *first step* feels like a *subtraction* of life. And, according to Jesus, this pattern of *diminishing* one kind of life to make room for the *joyful expansion* of another is Father God's *ongoing, permanent pattern* for His Children.

My closing thought under this point is one of application. A proper understanding of ***pruning unto joyful fruitfulness*** needs constant reconsideration. If I'm not careful I will ***judge Father God wrongly*** when He seems to be diminishing what I feel is necessary for my joy. My own ***self-understanding*** of my life will be wrong if I forget the nature of a branch being pruned of self to make room for Jesus' vine life. I will see Father God's actions as ***harsh*** when they're designed to be ***fruit-producing*** and ***loving*** and ***necessary***.

Don't say "***No***" when the Father slices back what is sensitive and cherished in your life. Don't let the ***pruning*** make you ***run away***. ***Abide through the pruning***. Remember His purpose - "***....that it may bear more fruit***"(2b).

4) **THE PRIMARY INSTRUMENT OF BOTH ABIDING AND PRUNING IS THE WORD**

IPAD TEXT - John 15:3-8 - “Already you are clean *because of the word that I have spoken to you.* [4] Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. [5] I am the vine; you are the branches. *Whoever abides in me and I in him,* he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. [6] If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. [7] *If you abide in me, and my words abide in you,* ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. [8] By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.”

I've already used my time. Notice the way Jesus makes the hearing of the Word more than a mere auditory process. The Word ***cleanses***. The Word ***prunes and cuts***. The Word ***produces fruit***. Notice how Jesus can speak of ***His*** presence in our lives and His ***word's*** presence in our lives ***interchangeably*** in **verses 5 and 7 - “I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing....[7].... If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” - IPAD TEXT**

The implication of this is striking. You can't have **Jesus** living in your heart without taking the time to implant **His words** in your mind and will. Are you making it the goal of your life to **understand the parts of the Bible you haven't even read yet?** Do you allow Father God to **prune back** your television and social life to **increase the study and understanding of His Word?** This process isn't magic. It's yielding to the Father's tending of your heart.

Jesus says even our **petitions in prayer** need to be pruned and directed by the Word ruling our hearts. This lines our will and requests up - puts our whole lives **in sync** - with the things that most glorify God in this world - **John 15:7-8 - "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. [8] By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples."** - IPAD TEXT

- 5) **JESUS REMINDS THE DISCIPLES ALL OF FATHER GOD'S WORDS AND PRUNING FLOW OUT OF A LOVE DEEPER THAN WE CAN IMAGINE**

IPAD TEXT - John 15:9-11 - “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. [10] If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. [11] These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.”

Sometimes life’s circumstances look to us to be either *undirected* or *misdirected*. Events seem *random* and lacking *divine shape*. How can Jesus give hope to this ragged band of soon to be martyred followers?

Well, He does what few of us ever do. He starts talking to them about the Trinity. That’s right, the Trinity. Jesus begins to unfold what is uniquely wonderful about Biblical Christianity among the world’s other monotheistic religions. He starts telling them about how much Father God loves Him, the one and only divine Son. And then He reminds these disciples - and you and me - that He loves them just as much as Father God loves Him. In other words, in the uniquely Christian doctrine of the Trinity, we have not just a *statement* about how much we are loved. We have an eternal *Trinitarian model*. Jesus says His love for them is as huge as the Father’s love for the Son - “**As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you....**”(9).

This is the place to stand as you are being asked to ***listen to the Word when it seems to limit and correct.*** This is the place to stand when the ***Father's pruning seems difficult and diminishing.*** And this is the place to abide when the promise of deep inner joy seems distant and out of reach. The love of Jesus is an almighty love. It never gives up. It never runs out. Always give God the benefit of the doubt - and ***abide*** - **John 15:11 - "These things I have spoken to you [that's all the words we've been studying this morning], that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full."** - IPAD TEXT