

### Exegesis

**15:1** – Jesus says, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman.” These words mark the *last* of the seven ‘I am’ statements in John’s account (cf. 6:35; 8:12; 10:9, 11; 11:25; 14:6).<sup>1</sup> But what did the Lord mean by this? The vine was a common symbol in both the Jewish and non-Jewish world. For instance, Dionysus was the Greek god of fruitfulness and vegetation, and, as such, he was often depicted holding a large chalice in one hand and a cluster of grapes in the other. Consequently, due to the alcoholic nature of wine, the demi-god was associated with festivals.<sup>2</sup>

For Jews, however, the symbolic nature of the vine/vineyards was far more *sobering*. Whenever this image was employed in the O.T., it illustrated how Israel had *failed* to be fruitful (cf. Ps. 80:9-16; Isa. 5:1-7; 27:2; Jer. 2:21; 12:10; Ezek. 15:1-8; 17:1-21; 19:10-14; Hos. 10:1-2).<sup>3</sup> For example, in Isa. 5:1-7, the prophet depicts God as a hardworking farmer who planted a vineyard—i.e., Israel. This Farmer did his due diligence. He planted the vine on a fertile hill, cleared out any stones that might've impeded growth, and even built a watchtower for defense. Yet, despite all the tender loving care, the vineyard produced only "wild grapes," aka *sour grapes*.<sup>4</sup> In other words, God came to Israel looking for the fruits of justice, but instead, he found "oppression;" he came seeking a harvest of “righteousness” but discovered “a cry” of injustice (Isa. 5:7). In response to Israel’s faithlessness, God condemned the nation so thoroughly that any passerby, be they “boar” or “wild beast,” could “waste,” “devour,” and “pluck her” (Psa. 80:12-13). Thus, scripturally, vine imagery was most often used to criticize the *fruitlessness* of God’s people.<sup>5</sup> It was a *pleasant* metaphor loaded with an *unpleasant* message.<sup>6</sup>

But, as we’ll see, the way Jesus uses vine imagery in this context is surprising for *two* reasons. Firstly, while there are *negative* consequences for not being a part of the “true vine,” the tone

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<sup>1</sup> Klink (2016), p. 650, “These seven formal “I am” statements are emphatic descriptions of the person and ministry of Jesus and cumulatively form a detailed picture of Jesus Christ.”

<sup>2</sup> Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia, "Dionysus," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 13 Oct. 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Dionysus>, [accessed 15 November 2023], contrary to modern depictions, Dionysus was associated with madness as much as merriment. In fact, Dionysian mythology includes stories where adherents would "tear living victims to pieces before indulging in a ritual feast."

<sup>3</sup> Carson (1991), p. 513, also points out that, in the N.T., Jesus utilized vine imagery to condemn the Jews (cf. Mat. 20:1-16; 21:23-32, 33-41; Mk. 12:1-9; Lu. 13:6-9; 20:9-16).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>4</sup> The Hebrew word used for “wild grapes” is, literally translated, “stink berries.”

<sup>5</sup> An exception to this rule would be how Joseph is likened to a “fruitful vine” in Gen. 49:22.

<sup>6</sup> The fact that a golden grapevine adored the gates of Herod's Temple does not discount this observation. During the inter-testament period, the vine symbolized wisdom and messianic dominion (Köstenberger (2008), p. 450).

of Jesus' extended allegory is mostly *positive*. And secondly, as you no doubt noticed, rather than speaking of Israel as the vine, or, for that matter, the church, Jesus identifies *himself* as the "true vine."<sup>7</sup>

In claiming to be the "true vine," the Lord implicitly contrasts himself with the *false* vine: *Israel* (cf. 4:23; 6:32; 17:3; Jer. 2:21).<sup>8</sup> Where the Jews had failed to be fruitful, Jesus will *succeed* (cf. 4:34-38; Mat. 13:23; Lu. 10:2). As the Messiah, the Lord is the *culmination* of the Israelite ideal. He is *everything* that God wanted his people to be, and so, anyone wishing to be of "Abraham's seed" must "belong" to God's Son (Gal 3:29). Thus, Jesus' words were quite revolutionary. Just as the Son of God replaced the temple (cf. 2:19), Jerusalem (cf. 4:21-26), and Moses (cf. 5:45-46), so now the Lord surpasses "Israel as the center and source of God's people."<sup>9</sup> Henceforth, the Son of God will forever be the *focal point* of God's presence. Faithful Israel would no longer be some nationality bestowed at *birth*.<sup>10</sup> Instead, the term "Jew" will become a metaphor to describe the spiritual characteristics of all those who *believe* (Rom. 2:28-29; 9:6-8; cf. Lu. 3:8; 9:6; Gal. 3:1-9, 16; 1 Pet. 2:4-10).

When the Lord said, "My Father is the husbandman," he was saying that God was his gardener (cf. 2 Tim. 2:6; Ja. 5:7). In other words, God the Son was subordinate to God the Father in the same way a crop is under the authority of a farmer. This is a crucial theme throughout John's account (cf. 3:16; 6:38; 12:49-50; 14:28; etc.). The fruit the divine Vine produces is a direct result of the divine Vinedresser's work (cf. 1 Cor 3:6-7).

**Vs. 2-3** – Jesus now introduces a *third* component to his vine imagery: *branches=disciples*. He says, "Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit. Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you."

Pruning was (and still is) *vital* to cultivating a *fruitful* vine. In fact, viticulture requires that crops be pruned in *two* phases. "Left to itself, a vine will produce a good deal of unproductive growth."<sup>11</sup> There was a pruning that fell during the spring when vines were just starting to flower, and then a fall pruning occurred after the grapes were harvested.<sup>12</sup> In the spring, vines could be pruned for several reasons: too much initial growth, too much exposure to the elements, too many grape clusters on a single branch, and/or any offshoots coming up from the

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<sup>7</sup> Morris (1995), p. 593, "The church is no more than the branches that are "in" the vine."

<sup>8</sup> Köstenberger (2008), p. 450; Keener (2012), 2:993

<sup>9</sup> Klink (2016), p. 651.

<sup>10</sup> Though, to be clear, faith was always the basis of Israel (cf. Rom. 4:1-3).

<sup>11</sup> Morris (1995), p. 594.

<sup>12</sup> Kruse (2017), p. 365.

root system.<sup>13</sup> In the fall, the only branches to get pruned were those that did not produce or those that did produce but were trimmed "to ensure maximum fruit production" next season.<sup>14</sup> Thus, *no branch*, be it fruitful or unfruitful, is spared the pruning process. *All branches are cut*; some are cut to help the fruitful branch so that it might produce *more* fruit, while others are cut to help the vine. An unfruitful branch is little more than a parasite.

However, it is important not to press the vine imagery too far. Doing so might lead the reader to believe that when Jesus says, "Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away," he means that believers could lose their salvation. We must remember that this horticultural example illustrates a *theological* principle about *fruitfulness*, not *eternal security*.<sup>15</sup> So, what might be valid for an actual branch is not necessarily true for an actual Christian. The eternal security of the believer is an undeniable fact (cf. 3:15-16; 10:28-29; Rom. 8:38-39; Eph. 4:30; Jude 24; etc.). Once saved, always saved.

Nevertheless, is it not also true that appearances can be deceiving? And this is precisely Jesus' point. Those who might appear to be "in Christ" prove by their fruitlessness that they were never a part of Christ, so, like a fruitless branch, they are cut away. Such false disciples are distinct from true disciples: the former is utterly removed from the vine, whereas the latter is pruned ("purgeth").<sup>16</sup> A real-world example of this distinction is Judas and Peter.<sup>17</sup> Judas betrays Jesus, regrets it, kills himself, and never produces spiritual fruit. Peter betrays Jesus, regrets it, and is restored and produces untold spiritual fruit. Scripturally, the N.T. is full of passages that speak about not "falling away" and how any so-called "believer" who does fall away proves they were never a part of the Kingdom to begin with (cf. 8:31; Mat 13:18-23; 24:12; Heb 3:14-19; 1 Jn. 2:1; 2 Jn. 9). In Paul's life, Demas is a flawed but ultimately fruitless Christian (cf. 2 Tim. 4:10) whereas John Mark is a flawed but ultimately fruitful Christian (cf. Ac. 13:13; 15:37-38; 2 Tim. 4:11).

Therefore, the *true* disciple need not worry about their eternal security. Or, as Jesus puts it to the eleven, "Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you." The Greek term Jesus uses for "clean" is **καθαρός** (*kath-ar-os'*), and it is playing off the word "purgeth" **καθαίρω** (*kath-ah'-ee-ro*) in verse 2. Thus, through this wordplay, we learn that the thing doing

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<sup>13</sup> Köstenberger (2008), p. 450; Kruse (2017), p. 365.

<sup>14</sup> Kruse (2017), p. 365.

<sup>15</sup> Morris (1995), p. 594, "We should not regard this as a proof that true believers may fall away. It is part of the viticultural picture, and the point could not be made without it. The emphasis is on the bearing of fruit. That is the only reason for growing a vine; as Ezekiel pointed out long before, a vine does not yield timber (Ezek. 15)."

<sup>16</sup> Carson (1991), p. 518, explains **αἶρω**, *airō* is a broad term that refers to any sort of *removal* (e.g., "sin" (1:29), "doves" (2:16), a "bed" (5:8-12), "stones" (8:59; 11:39, 41), "joy" (16:22), etc.

<sup>17</sup> Köstenberger (2008), p. 452.

the pruning is God's word. By believing Jesus' commands, the disciple is made a part of Christ. Obeying his instructions, they demonstrate they are a branch connected to the "true vine."

## VIDEO DESCRIPTION

### **Deep Dive: The Gospel of John | Week 54 | John 15:1-3**

SPEAKER: Ben Hyrne, Pastor

As in many things, Jesus takes the image of a vine and makes it his own. We'll learn tonight that the Lord thinks of himself as the “true vine,” his Father as the vinedresser, and his disciples as the branches. This imagery has but one purpose: *to illustrate fruitfulness*. And it may come as a surprise that, in pursuit of spiritual fruitfulness, pruning is unavoidable. In fact, *all branches* are cut in some way. Some branches are pruned to help make them more fruitful, while others are taken away precisely because they're fruitless. God is a good garner; he knows when a particular branch needs cultivating and when another is good only for kindling.

**Pastor's manuscript can be found here:**

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### **Grace Pointe Baptist Church**

12029 Eastern Ave.

Baltimore, MD 21220

**Contact:** [info@GracePointeLife.com](mailto:info@GracePointeLife.com)

**Website:** <https://www.gracepointelife.com>

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