**“I AM VINE, YOU ARE THE BRANCHES”**

John 15:1-11

This is a familiar passage of scripture. Here we have the last of Jesus’ seven “I AM” statements. Earlier in our study of John we heard Jesus say, “I am the bread of life” (6:35), “I am the light of the world” (8:12), “I am the door of the sheep” (10:7), “I am the good shepherd” (10:11), “I am the resurrection and the life” (11:25), “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (14:6). And of course by using “I am” Jesus is tying Himself to the Lord God, Yahweh, of the O.T., making Himself equal with God. That’s what the Pharisees picked up on and that’s why they wanted to kill Him.

Here His audience is the 11 true disciples. As we read in John Ch 13 Judas has departed to carry out his evil plan of betraying Jesus. We noted at the end of last week’s lesson that Jesus and His disciples have left the upper room where they had observed the Passover. Ch 14 ends with Jesus saying, “Rise, let us go from here.” So they head out into the dark streets of Jerusalem, out the city gate, down thru the Kidron Valley and then up the Mount of Olives. There Jesus continues teaching His disciples beginning in our passage this morning, John Ch 15. It’s now only a matter of a couple of hours before Jesus will be arrested not far from where Jesus and His disciples sit. Jesus, knowing this, imparts His final words to His disciples.

Speaking to the 11, Jesus says this: 1 “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. [referring back to what He said in Jn 13:10 – “you are all clean”] 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.”

Of course Jesus continues on with His teaching but we’ll stop right there and look at these verses. How many of you have ever heard a lesson or a sermon from this text? Like I said it is a familiar passage. But it is also a misunderstood and misinterpreted passage.

Let me begin by briefly telling you two wrong interpretations. Then I will tell you what Jesus is really saying. Some denominations that teach that a person can lose their salvation will use this passage as one of their proof texts. And at first glance you might think that that’s what this passage is saying. After all you have these branches that are in Jesus being cut off and cast into the fire. But I’m going to show you in a minute why this is incorrect, why the branches that are being cut off do not represent true believers at all. The second wrong interpretation goes to the other extreme. This is the interpretation that many Baptists are guilty of teaching. They say, correctly, that we know (based on other passages in the Bible) that we can’t lose our salvation. So the branches being cut off are not being thrown into hell. Instead Jesus is teaching a spiritual lesson that we can lose the joy of our salvation and that our fellowship can be damaged if we don’t continue to abide in Jesus’ words, to be obedient to Him. And while all that is true doctrinally, it misses the point that Jesus is making here. So let me explain my position and this is based on the context of this passage.

When you study and interpret scripture always understand the purpose of the writer and the context of the passage. Proof texting is problematic because it pulls verses or parts of verses out of its context and uses them to support a certain theological position without regard to that verse’s context. Bible verses were not given in a vacuum. They have an intended purpose and a proper context.

So here is the context for this passage. Fresh on Jesus’ mind is the desertion of Judas. Earlier that evening Jesus had identified Judas as His betrayer. Chapter 13, v 27 – “Then after [Judas] had taken the morsel [the piece of bread from Jesus], Satan entered into him [into Judas]. Jesus said to [Judas], “What you are going to do [which is to betray Jesus], do quickly.” And with that Judas goes out, he leaves. This had happened maybe an hour or so before. So this is fresh on Jesus’ mind. With that context let’s look closer at the passage.

V 1 “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser.” So Jesus is using a metaphor. This is not really a parable, but it IS a spiritual truth. Jesus the Son of God is the true vine. God the Father is the vinedresser (the one who takes care of the vine). Perhaps this metaphor comes to Jesus’ mind at this particular time because He and His disciples are in the middle of a vineyard somewhere on the western slope of the Mount of Olives. If you go to Jerusalem today you will see at this location a whole bunch of graves, houses, churches, and hotels. But back then, 20 centuries ago, it was all agricultural, primarily grape vineyards. So that’s the setting.

Jesus contrasts Himself as the true vine from Israel who had been God’s choice vine (Ps 80, Isa 5, Jer 2, Ezek 15, Hos 10). God lavished His care and attention on Israel but Israel, God’s vine, produced bad fruit. It all culminated with their rejection of their own Messiah, Jesus.

V 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.” So here we see what a vinedresser does. He cuts off the branches that are not bearing fruit so that they won’t sap the resources needed for the rest of the vine. The other thing the vinedresser does is he prunes the productive branches in such a way that they will be even more productive. In this metaphor there are two kinds of branches and they represent two types of people who have associated themselves with Christ. One branch, the branch that gets pruned represents true believers, born again Christians. The other branch that gets cut off and burned would be false believers, pretenders, they’re not really saved, they’re superficial, not real.

And as Jesus continues to teach using the vine metaphor He explains how you can tell the genuine believer from the pretend believer. True believers “abide,” they remain. They stay connected to Christ. They depend on Him. False believers leave. We refer to these as “apostate.” They are not depending on Jesus. They don’t need Him. They are relying on themselves and their own understanding and goodness. Both branches, both types of so-called believers associate themselves with Jesus. Both claim an identity with Christ. So how can you tell if one is a true believer or not. Listen to John 8:31: “So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, ‘If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples,’” If you abide, if you remain, you are truly His. And this is the essence of what Jesus teaches in v 4-10 where he uses the word abide TEN times.

By the way, Jesus teaches this same truth elsewhere in the Gospels. He just uses a variety of metaphors. Here in John Ch 15 it’s the vine and the branches.

Matthew Chapter 7

15 "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. 16 You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? 17 So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. 18 A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

Matthew Chapter 12

33 "Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit.

At the beginning of Matt Ch 13 Jesus gives the parable of the soils. Four types of soils – hard paved path, rocky soil, thorns, good soil. The same sower (Jesus) sows the same seed (the Gospel) but with different results based on who hears it. Jesus explains who it is that each type represents. Hard path = unbelievers, the evil one snatches away the truth they hear, it never takes root; good soil = true believers, hears the word, understands it, bears fruit; the other two types of soil are the false believers. Rocky soil = first receives the truth with joy, endures only for a while then falls away; Thorns = hears the word, choked out by cares of the world and is unfruitful.

Matthew Chapter 13

24 He put another parable before them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, 25 but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. 26 So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. 27 And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?' 28 He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' So the servants said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' 29 But he said, 'No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. 30 Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'"

Matthew 25 the teaching regarding the final judgment where Jesus will separate the sheep from the goats.

So Jesus’ teaching here in our passage, John Ch 15, the metaphor of the vine and branches, is consistent with His message throughout the gospels. You have true believers who really love Jesus and follow Him and obey Him and their lives reflect that. And then you have pretend believers. And by the way, both types exist side by side in the church! Paul in 1 Cor 11:19 says, “For there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized.” 1 John 2:19 says, “They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.”

So when you understand this fundamental principle, the rest of the passage makes perfect sense. What does it mean to bear fruit? Simple. Your life as a true believer will bear that out thru your good actions, your good works (Eph 2:10), general moral behavior, priorities, etc. Paul teaches that if you are in Christ you are not going to act like the world. You will be different. A true believer will also exhibit a good attitude, the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5) – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. So a true believer WILL bear good fruit, maybe just a little bit. But it will be there. By the way a true believer could have good actions without a good attitude. This is called “legalism.” A true believer might even exhibit a good attitude but without good actions. This is called “laziness.” But no fruit at all is a big red flag. It is an indication of an unbeliever.

Why would a person who is not really saved want to associate with Christians and pretend to belong to Jesus when they don’t? Any number of reasons: peer pressure, family ties, business associations, cultural acceptance, personal reasons. So, yes, a person can spend their entire life in the church pretending to be saved but never having truly asked Jesus to be their Lord and Savior. In case you don’t know it, there are a lot of people who are very good at pretending to be something they’re not. And Jesus teaches here in John 15 and in those other passages that in the end those who are not truly His followers will be identified, cut off, thrown into the flames of hell.

So let me end this lesson on a positive note.

In John 6:37 Jesus said, “All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out.”

In John 10:14-16: “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.”

In John 10:27-30: “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one.”

Back to John 15, v 11, “These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.” He is talking to the 11 true disciples. So as we close the application is simply this – Are you His? Do you hear His voice and follow Him? Do you know Jesus? Is there evidence of fruit in your life? These are all pertinent questions that we need to ask ourselves. If you haven’t settled this issue, then settle it today. Jesus is calling. He’s waiting for you!