

Christ the Vine: a Theological Exposition of John 15:1-8

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Introduction

"It is nothing new to your ears, beloved," writes St. Augustine, "that the Evangelist John, like an eagle, takes a loftier flight, and soars above the dark mist of earth, to gaze with steadier eyes upon the light of truth" (P. Schaff, ed., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Vol. 7*, Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1994, p. 99). In this illuminating description of the Gospel accorded to St. John, the learned Church father St. Augustine reveals the sublime and profound theology of the beloved disciple John. When recording the prologue to his Gospel on the subject of the Incarnation (cf. Jn. 1:1-18), or witnessing the cruel death of the Savior on Golgotha (cf. Jn. 19:17-37), St. John's writing reaches a level of literary beauty difficult to surpass. One of the many gems written by the disciple takes place at Our Lord's discourse in the Upper Room (cf. Jn. 13-17); specifically, the parable of the "Vine and the Branches" (cf. Jn. 15:1-8). This parable will be the focus of our study: an examination that surveys rich theological truths and their spiritual applications for the disciple of Christ Jesus.

Parabolic Language

As a prelude to examining John 15:1-8, the literary device of the "parable" should be explained. The term "parable" (Greek: *parabole*) is simply a type of figurative speech, whereby images are drawn from nature and common life. The parable is an earthly story with heavenly meaning: heavenly truth is unfolded in everyday language and figures. According to the late Fr. Leopold Fonck, the Lord spoke in parables for the intellectual benefit it afforded His audience. Fonck states: "Their understanding would thus more easily and clearly recognize these truths, their will would embrace them with greater firmness and decision, and their memory would retain a deeper and more lasting impression on them" (*The Parables of Christ*, Harrison: Roman Catholic Books, 1918, 1998, p. 26). The New Testament is filled with the parabolic sayings of Christ Jesus, not only in the Gospel of St. John, but also in the Synoptic Gospels of St. Matthew (cf. Mt. 25:1-13, "The Ten Virgins"), St. Mark (cf. Mk. 12:1-12, "The Wicked Tenants"), and St. Luke (cf. Lk. 18:9-14, "The Pharisee and the Publican"). The parable was a common teaching method that was employed by the Divine Teacher to spread the "Good News" of salvation.

The Text of John 15:1-8

Beginning our study, St. John's parable of the "Vine and the Branches" states:

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, He takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. You are already may clean by the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch can not bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples (Jn. 15:1-8).

Identifying the different characters of the parable will assist us in our exegesis: the "vine" is Christ Jesus (cf. Jn. 15:1,4,5), the "vinedresser" is the Eternal Father (cf. Jn. 15:1), and the "branches" are the Lord's disciples (cf. Jn. 15:2,4,5,6). We can infer from the context of John 15:1-8 that "fruit" symbolizes good deeds (cf. Jn. 15:2,4,5,8).

John 15:1

The opening passage sets the context for the entire discourse: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser" (Jn. 15:1). This image of vine and vinedresser would have been well known to Our Lord's audience, considering agriculture was a major part of daily life in Palestine. Concerning the vine, the Frenchman Henri Daniel-Rops rightly states: "It was not by chance that the Old Testament compared the Chosen People to it [a vine], nor by hazard Jesus likened Himself to the vine, and made of wine the tangible symbol of His blood" (*Daily Life in the Time of Jesus*, New York: Hawthorn Books, 1962, p. 32). The Lord's Jewish listeners would have seen the significance of the vineyard, hearkening back to the prophets of the Old Testament (cf. Is. 5:1-7; Jer. 2:21; Hos. 10:1). One of the most beautiful images of God's benevolence for His people, using the imagery of the vine representing Israel, is discovered in Psalm 80:8, "Thou didst bring a vine out of Egypt; thou didst drive out the nations and plant it." This passage refers to the protection that the Lord God of hosts granted Israel over and against her enemies. In addition, Almighty God also uses the image of the vine to express coming punishment, as in the prophet Ezekiel: "But the vine was plucked up in a fury, cast down to the ground; the east wind dried it up; its fruit was stripped off, its strong stem was withered; the fire consumed it" (Ez. 19:12).

An immediate claim, made by Christ Himself, is His clear and unambiguous pronouncement that He is the "true" vine; not just any vine. The term "true" (Greek: *alethine*), as an adjective, can also be translated as "dependable, genuine, real." *Alethine* has frequent usage throughout the Johannine Gospel (cf. Jn. 1:9; 4:23; 6:32; 7:28; 8:16; 17:3; 19:35); always in the context of contrasting truthfulness with falsehood. The meaning derived from John 15:1 is the primacy of Jesus Christ, forcefully expressed and meditated upon by St. Paul:

He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in Him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; He is the beginning, the first born from the dead, that in everything He might be pre-eminent. For in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of His cross (Col. 1:15-20).

No better summary of the person and work of the King of kings, the Lord Jesus Christ, as explicated above by the "Apostle to the Gentiles," can be found in any secular writings.

St. John went to great lengths to draw attention to this pre-eminence of Christ, by recording the seven magnificent "I am" sayings, enunciated by Our Lord Himself. First, the Messiah says: "I am the bread of life" (Jn. 6:35), affirming that He is the only spiritual nourishment we would need during our earthly existence. Second, He utters: "I am the light of the world" (Jn. 8:12), stating that He is our guide through the darkness that often surrounds the society in which we live. Third, He cries: "I am the door of the sheep" (Jn. 10:7), thereby demonstrating He is the only entranceway to the Father in heaven. Fourth, He appropriates the following title: "I am the good shepherd" (Jn. 10:11), showing His disciples that He can provide sufficient graces to assist the Christian from roaming away from the truth. Fifth, He preaches: "I am the resurrection and the life" (Jn. 11:25), pointing toward the hope and joy guaranteed to the disciple who perseveres in following Our Lord to the final end. Sixth, He announces: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (Jn. 14:6),

manifesting His divine sovereignty in all areas of the true, the good, and the beautiful. Seventh, He reveals in our present study: "I am the vine" (Jn.15:1), showing us that we must maintain a supernatural union, specifically with Him, in order to have any success in our spiritual endeavors.

John 15:2

Our next passage reads: "Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, He takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit" (Jn. 15:2). Two major teachings from the very lips of Our Lord are revealed in this verse: God's punishment and God's discipline.

God's eternal punishment may be one of the most neglected theological concepts in our present age. As well, it is a teaching that is often downplayed in certain quarters within the Catholic Church. For example, Fr. Richard McBrien claims: "hell is not to be taken literally" (*Catholicism: Study Edition*, San Francisco: Harper and Row Pubs., 1981, p. 1152). On the contrary, Divine revelation shows us that Jesus Christ spoke on the reality of hell far more often than He spoke on heaven (cf. Mt. 18:7-9; Mk. 9:42-47; Lk. 23:28-31; Rev. 19:20). We are on safe ground in believing this frequent mention of hell was providential, and emphasized for the benefit of the faithful as a loving warning. The words of the Divine Judge leave no doubt about the seriousness of the matter: "Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few" (Mt. 7:13-14). Any honest reader, be he a child in CCD class, or a theologian with a doctorate in Systematic Theology, can deduce the clear meaning from the words of the Savior of the world. The Lord Jesus Christ consistently stressed the importance of perseverance in the Christian life (cf. Mt. 10:22; 24:13, Mk. 13:13), for the simple fact that falling away from the living God was a very real possibility. In contrast to Fr. McBrien, the late Fr. F. X. Schouppe states succinctly: "To doubt about Hell is to doubt the infallible word of God." (*Hell: The Dogma of Hell*, Rockford: Tan Books, 1989, p. 37).

God's discipline is the next point of exegesis under examination in John 15:2. It is a fact that the followers of the Lord, in a similar fashion to their relationship with their earthly father, often experience discipline from their heavenly Father too. We read from the wisdom literature, in a father/son analogy: "My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline or be weary of His reproof, for the Lord reproves him whom He loves, as a father the son in whom he delights" (Prov. 3:11-12). This same concept of discipline is carried forward to the New Testament era:

If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers to discipline us and we respect them. Shall we not be much more subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they [earthly fathers] disciplined us for a short time at their pleasure, but He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness (Heb. 12:8-10).

Certainly, everyone can relate to undergoing trials in this "vale of tears" here on earth. Often, for reasons beyond our control, we suffer crosses that are extremely difficult. Yet, the epistle to the Hebrews continues to explain why the Sovereign Lord permits us to undergo these trials: "For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant; later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it" (Heb. 12:11). According to the Holy Bible, discipline is part of the "spiritual regime" in God's "training plan" for the believer. This is a comforting thought, especially in times of tribulation, be it physical or emotional.

John 15:3

Continuing our study, we read: "You are already made clean by the word which I have spoken to you" (Jn. 15:3). To be made "clean" (Greek: *katharoi*) is the same word as "prune," and is used as a word play from an earlier statement by Our Lord in the Upper Room discourse in John 13:10. The passage may be an illusion to water baptism, where the terms "washing" (cf. Ez. 36:25; 1 Cor. 6:11) and "cleansing" (cf. Ps. 51:2; Tit. 3:5) are often mentioned. More than likely, the primary meaning of the passage may be the acceptance of the teachings of Jesus Christ; following Him as the Redeemer, and putting Him first before all things.

Putting Christ Jesus first, above and beyond all earthly interests, should be the goal of every true disciple of the Lord. The Old Testament was very clear about this, as we see in the great *Shema* prayer: "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deut. 6:4-5). Our Lord echoes this passage with an addition: "and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength" (Mk. 12:30). Our Lord's addition of the phrase "all your mind" shows the importance of intellectual assent to God's revelation. This means studying the truths of our Catholic Faith: through Bible study, reading approved catechisms, becoming familiar with Papal pronouncements, and learning Counciliar decrees. This study should be done with the expressed purpose of knowing and loving the Blessed Trinity; allowing the Father to lead us as Creator, the Son to save us as Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit to illuminate us as Sanctifier. The Holy Bible is filled with exhortations to study and ponder God's truth (cf. Ps. 1:1-3; Rom. 12:2). Rightly so does the Psalmist proclaim: "Oh how I love Thy law! It is my meditation all the day" (Ps. 119:97). Catholics would profit by keeping television viewing and radio listening to a bare minimum, and instead, uniting themselves to the Thrice Holy Godhead through serious intellectual study of the Catholic Faith.

John 15:4

John 15:4 says: "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." This passage is rendered "Make your home in me, as I make mine in you" in *The Jerusalem Bible*. An interesting translation is found in the *New International Version*: "Remain in me, as I will remain in you." Perhaps the most insightful wording is given in the *Amplified Bible*: "Dwell in Me, and I will dwell in you." Each of these Biblical translations helps shed light on the main thrust of the meaning derived from John 15:4; the absolute necessity of remaining united to Christ. The Greek word *meno*, translated as either "remain" or "abide," leaves no doubt that this is the primary meaning of the passage: union with Christ Jesus.

This union with the Lord is repeated in the other inspired writings of St. John. We read in 1 John 2:28, "And now, little children, abide in Him, so that when He appears we may have confidence and not shrink from Him in shame at His coming." The beloved disciple emphasizes the importance of remaining "in Christ" until the very end of one's life; showing that perseverance is seen from an eschatological viewpoint.

As well, St. Paul lays great stress on the importance of remaining "in Christ." "For you have died," states St. Paul, "and your life is hid with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3). Here, we see the Apostle alluding to renunciation of self, so as to follow Our Lord and Savior, no matter what the personal cost or sacrifice may be.

How are Christians to remain united to Christ Jesus? Two of the most important ways to remain "in Christ" are through purity in body, and purity in speech. Concerning purity of body, the Lord was very clear about this in the Sermon on the Mount: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery in his heart" (Mt. 5:27-28). The Savior of the world states that bodily purity is to be maintained not only physically, but also in our hearts too. This is because of the fact that our spiritually regenerate bodies, made so by undergoing the sacrament of Baptism and appropriating the fruits of the redemption through the Catholic Church, are precious in God's sight (cf. 2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15).

Our speech must also remain pure. We read in the Gospel according to St. Matthew: "I tell you, on the day of judgment men will render account for every careless word they utter" (Mt. 12:36). The epistle of St. James also makes mention of the importance of guarding our speech: "If any one thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this man's religion is vain" (Jas. 1:26).

Concerning purity in body and speech, some of the best advice is given to us by our first Pope:

Therefore gird up your minds, be sober, set your hope fully upon the grace that is coming to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as He who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; since it is written, 'You shall be holy for I am holy' (1 Pet. 1:13-16).

No doubt, in our present age of moral depravity, purity of body and purity of heart can be difficult to uphold. This is where recourse to St. Joseph and the Blessed Virgin Mary are most crucial. These two saints are always ready to intercede for us, with their powerful prayers before the throne of God (cf. Rev. 5:8), for the purpose of keeping us close to God's only begotten Son. It is only through constant prayer and bodily mortification that the virtue of purity can thrive and flourish. Appropriately, St. Paul said he purged himself for this very purpose: to maintain purity and perseverance in the Faith (cf. 1 Cor. 9:24-27).

John 15:5

"I am the vine, you are the branches," continues a parable, "He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing" (Jn. 15:5). This verse again puts the emphasis on looking to the Lord Jesus Christ as the source of all of our spiritual power. This passage alludes to one of the most widespread heresies in the early Church, and a doctrine that is unfortunately still common today: the Pelagian heresy.

We can sum up the main teachings of the monk Pelagius (A. D. 355-425) in five brief points. First, Adam would have died even without sinning. Second, Adam's sin effected himself alone, and at worst provided a bad example for his future posterity. Third, newborn children are in a "pre-Fallen" state similar to Adam prior to his sin. Fourth, Adam's sin will not have the effect of death on the human race, and Christ's redemption will not have the effect of the resurrection on man's body on the Final Judgment. Fifth, the law of the Old Covenant is just as efficacious for salvation as the grace of the New Covenant. As we can see, the doctrine of Pelagius severely compromises the work of salvation wrought by the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Catholic Church forcefully responded to the grave errors of Pelagius at the Second Council of Orange (A.D. 529), explicating that salvation is by Jesus Christ's work of redemption and by His distribution of grace. Orange utilized John 15:5 as it stated:

If anyone asserts that by his natural strength he [sinful man] is able to think as is required or choose anything good pertaining to his eternal salvation, or to assent to the saving message of the Gospel without the illumination and inspiration of the Holy Spirit...he is deceived by a heretical spirit...does not understand... 'Apart from me you can do nothing' (Jn 15.5)...(Canon 7).

John 15:6

We proceed with our study: "If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned" (Jn. 15:6). The beloved disciple repeats the words of the Son of God, who again places great stress on the necessity of perseverance in our walk with Christ Our King. Noteworthy is the assumption by Our Lord that His disciples will understand the salvation process as a life-long event ("abiding in me"), and not a one-time conversion experience. Contrasting the words of John 15:6 regarding the necessity "abiding in me," many "Bible Christians" view salvation as a "one-time conversion experience" with unchangeable consequences for the future (called "perseverance of the saints"). The short treatise *The Five Points of Calvinism: Defined, Defended, Documented* clearly explicates this position: "All those who are spiritually united to Christ through regeneration are totally secure in Him. Nothing can separate them from the eternal and unchangeable love of God" (D. Steele, et al, *The Five Points of Calvinism: Defined, Defended, Documented*, Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1963, p. 56).

This above position, usually labeled "Calvinism," is at complete variance with all the passages of Sacred Scripture, to include both the Old and New Testament, which state the absolute necessity of remaining united to the Triune Godhead by remaining free from serious (mortal) sin. Some Old Testament examples of those who fall away from the living God can be seen in Adam and Eve (cf. Gen. 3:16-19), Saul (cf. 1 Sam. 16:14), and David (cf. Ps. 51:10-12). As well, the New Testament has left us many examples of those who can wander away from the faith (cf. 1 Tim. 5:6), swerve from the truth (cf. 2 Tim. 2:18), and deny the Lord Christ Jesus (cf. 2 Peter 2:1).

John 15:7

John 15:7 states: "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you." As in the previous passages of John 15:4-6; once again we have reiterated the importance of "abiding" in the Savior. This "abiding in Christ" is directly linked to the main teaching of the words of Jesus Christ contained in John 15:7; the efficacy of personal prayer.

Prayer to God is absolutely crucial for a person who desires to have a close union with Jesus Christ. Just as one communicates daily with his family and friends in order to strengthen these relationships, likewise; one must communicate daily with the Thrice Holy Godhead in order to strengthen this relationship. Our Lord is revealing to us the importance of the "prayer of petition" in John 15:7; the act of prayer whereby we make known our inner most requests to the Heavenly Father.

Prayer of petition is a common aspect of prayer found in God's written word. Indeed, the "Our Father" prayer, given by the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity Himself, says we should request from God our necessities in life (cf. Mt. 6:12; Lk. 11:3). Some of the best advice on prayer of petition comes from St. Peter: "Cast all your anxieties on Him, for He cares about you" (1 Pet. 5:7). Continuing this theme, St. Paul states: "Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your request be made known to God" (Phil. 4:6).

Our prayers should also include praise offered to God the Father Almighty (cf. Ps. 21:13; Rev. 19:5), whereby we thank Him for all He has done for us (cf. Neh. 12:8; 2 Cor. 4:15). Our prayers should be persevering (cf. Rom. 12:12; Col. 4:2) and made in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Acts 3:16; 1 Jn. 5:14).

John 15:8

Our final passage under examination is John 15:8, "By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples." This theme found in John 15:8 parallels 2 Peter 1:10, where it states: "Therefore, brethren, be the more zealous to confirm your call and election." The main point in John 15:8 is "fruit" or good works performed by the disciples of Christ. We can classify this teaching under the concept of the believer "pleasing God."

Our works or deeds in this life, either good fruit or bad fruit, will have an impact on our final place of rest (cf. Rom. 14:10; 2 Cor. 5:10). Catholic apologist Bob Sungenis states: "Although God views the actions of those who seek him from the perspective of grace, nevertheless he expects a high degree of obedience that is *pleasing* to him" (*Not by Faith Alone: the Biblical Evidence for the Catholic Doctrine of Justification*, Santa Barbara: Queenship Publishing Co., 1997, p. 75).

Pleasing the Savior by presenting Him our good fruit should be a priority in our life. This concept of pleasing God is found throughout the Holy Bible (cf. Prov. 16:7; Rom. 12:1-2; Eph. 5:10). We read in 1 Thessalonians 2:4, "so we speak, not to please men, but to please God who tests our hearts." Hebrews 13:16 states: "Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God." 1 John 3:22 says: "and we receive from Him whatever we ask, because we keep His commandments and do what pleases Him."

Catholic theology classifies these good deeds done in love (cf. 1 Cor. 13:1-3; Gal. 5:6), enunciated by Christ Himself in John 15:8, as "merit." We can define "merit" as a reward promised from God; done as a supernatural work for love of Him. We can compare these works that the believer does, for love of God, to the works that a child does to impress his parents. Because the parents love the child, they will often reward him with favors because of his good work. In the same manner, God the Father looks down upon his earthly children and grants them favors; to be enjoyed in this life or the next.

Conclusion

Our study of the parable of the "Vine and the Branches," contained in John 15:1-8, has revealed many wonderful teachings. We have seen that we must stay united to Jesus Christ if we are to bear any good fruit in our relationship with the Blessed Trinity. We must also persevere in our relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, which will assist the efficacy of our prayers to heaven. Finally, our good fruits will be rewarded, and our bad fruit will be punished, as God as a loving Father renders either a benevolent reward or a just punishment to his creatures on earth.