

Bible Study Guide: Week of 4-26-2021

1. Read through the passage below
2. Read my notes and commentary
3. Read the questions at the end and ponder or discuss with others

Pastor Andrew

John 15:1-8

[Jesus said to the disciples] “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. ²He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. ³You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. ⁵I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

[Jesus said to the disciples] “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower.

Like his earlier discourse with the crowds in John 10, here Jesus uses another “I AM” statement to describe his mission and identity. Unlike in chapter 10, this time his audience is the disciples alone. In John 10, Jesus identified himself as the *good* shepherd, in contrast to the “hired hands” who came before him, presumably the religious leaders of the people who fell short of their task of caring for the sheep. This time, Jesus identifies himself as the *true* vine. This is in contrast to the people of God who have fallen short of their calling to be God’s choice planting. Reading Isaiah 5—the song of the vineyard—is instructive here, as it allows us to see God’s expectations of God’s chosen people, as well as the way those people fell short of God’s plans. Here, Jesus claims that he himself is the *true* vine—the one who will fulfill God’s holy will. The Father is identified as the vinegrower. This term can also mean gardener, tiller of the soil, or vine dresser. It refers to one who is intimately and actively involved in making plants grow and bear fruit.

²He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. ³You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you.

Here Jesus extends the agricultural metaphor, stating that just as a vinedresser cuts out unproductive branches, so God “removes” those who do not yield the fruits God expects. It is not clear what Jesus means by “removing branches,” assuming the metaphor extends this far. This could, perhaps, refer to removing inattentive or “unproductive” church members from fellowship. It could also be a reference to Judas Iscariot (and, by extension, others like him)—more on this in a minute.

By contrast, Jesus claims that the disciples to whom he is speaking here “have already been cleansed” by Jesus’ word. The verb *to cleanse* here is the same as the verb translated in v. 2 as *to prune*. The Greek word in both cases is *kathairo*. Indeed, it can mean to clean, to cleanse, or to prune. In that sense, Jesus uses this word to convey a double meaning—not just the agriculturally accurate term about removing parts of a plant, but also a spiritually accurate term that refers to the purified state of those whom Jesus has called by his word.

This is the same term used to describe the disciples in John 13 when Jesus washes their feet. In that instance, he claimed that “not all of [the disciples] are clean”—referring to Judas, the betrayer. Judas left the others and Jesus at the end of that chapter. Now, all those who remain are said to be made clean by Jesus’ word. Judas, then, is one who seems to have been “removed.”

⁴Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. ⁵I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

For those 11 (and, presumably others) who remain with Jesus, he commands them to abide in him, while promising to abide in them. Jesus continues the metaphor of the vine and branches, arguing that a branch that is cut off from a vine will wither and cease to bear

fruit. The concept of abiding is central to the whole Gospel of John. It is Jesus who abided with God who came to abide with us, that we, too, might abide with God. The image of a vine and branches emphasizes this unity and interdependence that Jesus wants for his followers and himself. This is one of the few places where Jesus not only makes an “I am” statement, but also a “you are” statement. Here he defines not only himself, but also his followers as part of God’s good planting. It is not clear, again, whether he intends for the allegory to extend through v. 6 or not. What would it mean for the branches (such as Judas, for example) to be gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned? This might simply indicate the futility of trying to bear the fruit of God apart from abiding in the true vine, but it could be a more concrete threat of punishment for those who fail to respond to Jesus’ command here.

⁷If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

Often we focus on v. 7b—“ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you”—without rooting that statement in v. 7a—“If you abide in me, and my words abide in you.” That is, our abiding in Jesus will, presumably, change our will. What we wish for will not be our wish alone, but God’s, just as we pray “thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Therefore, if we ask for what we wish and what we wish is also what God wishes, God will grant it because we ask in accordance with God’s will. In other words, Jesus is not saying we can ask for anything we want and expect it to happen. God is not the lottery or a magic genie.

Jesus promises that God will be glorified as they bear fruit and become his disciples. Interesting that at this point in the Gospel, Jesus still says they are in the process of becoming disciples.

Discussion/Reflection Questions:

- 1. What does it mean to you to bear fruit?**
- 2. What does it look like in your life for God to prune you in order that you will bear more fruit?**
- 3. Jesus tells those who are his followers that they will “become” his disciples. Do you think we ever finish this process of becoming? How do we know where we are on this journey of discipleship?**