

The Upper Room (John 15)

The Setting of John 15

Setting: In 14.31 the Lord says: 'Arise, let us go hence', however, some believe that the Lord and His disciples remained in the upper room until the end of chapter 17. **WE Vine:** *This does not necessarily mean they left the upper room immediately. The greater likelihood is that they lingered there for continuing discourse and the prayer of John 17. If they stayed within the vicinity of the house, there would very likely be a vine growing up the side leading to the remarks of John 15.* Others, in agreement with Vine, suggest the comment does not signal a real change of location, but is anticipative of 18.1. **But** there is perhaps more evidence to suggest that the Lord and His disciples did move out of the upper room at this point. The teaching of John 15-17 emphasises the themes of rejection, suffering, discipleship and witness – themes more fitting for utterance in the outside world. Note also. As the Lord Jesus prays in 17.1, He lifts up His eyes 'to heaven', a statement which is easier to be applied if He was outside. The 'going forth' of 18.1 would therefore be their going forth out of the city of Jerusalem. **FB Hole:** *Departure into the outside matches a change in theme. In John 15 the disciples are seen in the world with corresponding privilege and responsibility, rather than in their new place and state as before the Father (John 14). Now they are identified with Christ in His place before the world.*

Structure: The structure of the upper room ministry is *concentric*, comprising four circles. The outer circle (John 13 & 17) concerns *cleansing* and *communion* and emphasises the ministry of our **Great High Priest**. The next circle (John 14a/16b) concerns the disciples' sense of *loss* and *anxiety*. The teaching is designed for *comfort* and emphasises the **Father**. The inner circle (John 14b/16a) concerns the provision of divine *power* and *guidance* for the disciples in the Person of the **Comforter (Holy Spirit)**. The centre circle emphasises the **Son**, the True Vine, particularly His *life* and *love*.

Sections: Salvation nor the church are in view in John 15, but rather **discipleship** and **fruitbearing**, i.e. earthly witness.

- **vv.1-8:** Our responsibility to the Father is to bring forth fruit (v.8). **Branches** sharing His *life*.
- **vv.9-17:** Our responsibility to other believers is to love one another (v. 12, 17). **Friends** sharing His *love*.
- **vv.18-27:** Our responsibility to the Son is to bear witness to Him (v.27). **Servants** sharing His *rejection*.

The Significance of the Vine and the Branches (vv.1-2, 6)

v.1: The Lord declares that He is the True Vine. The main thought of the vine in scripture is that of **fruitfulness** (see Genesis 40.10). In fact, the vine is good for nothing else. The wood of the vine cannot be made into anything useful; it is only good for the fire and even then does not burn for long (Ezekiel 15.2-5). However, the fruit of the vine brings pleasure and gladness to God and mankind. **Judges 9.13:** *And the vine said unto them, Should I leave my wine, which cheereth God and man, and go to be promoted over the trees?* But the Lord is the 'True' Vine. **True** (*alethinos*) means *genuine, authentic*, something which is *complete* or *perfect* in contrast to what is partial. Who or what was the imperfect or incomplete vine? This can be none other than the nation of Israel – the **failing** vine. Israel was given every advantage in order that they might bring forth fruit for God and thus witness for Him, but they failed miserably. The nation was a vine brought out of Egypt (Psalm 80) and the love of God was lavished upon them (Isaiah 5). Jeremiah 2.21 states that Israel was a 'noble' or 'choice' vine which became 'degenerate' (corrupt) and 'strange' (wild). Israel bore fruit, but it was fruit that was 'wild' (worthless, stinking) and for themselves rather than God (Hosea 10.1). Now, Israel is replaced with the Perfect Vine, the Person of the Lord Jesus. He is the One who brought fullness of fruit and pleasure to His Father. Only He could say: *I do always those things that please him* (John 8.29). The True Vine and His branches will now, in place of Israel, bear fruit in testimony to God.

It is as well at this point to ask the question: What exactly is fruit? It is not spiritual gift, spiritual service or blessing in the gospel (Romans 1.13). But just as grapes are an expression and outworking of the life of the vine, so spiritual fruit in John 15 is an outworking of the life and energy of the Lord Jesus in the lives of believers. To put it simply, fruit is Christlikeness, the reproduction of Christ in my life. This will be in evidence through the *fruit of the Spirit* (Galatians 5); the *fruit of our lips* (Hebrews 13) and the *fruit of righteousness* (Hebrews 12). Fruit is different to works. Works is what I do, fruit is what I am; works is conduct, fruit is character. In this passage there is 'fruit' (v.2), 'more fruit' (v.2) and 'much fruit' (v.5). Is there some Christ, more Christ or much Christ in evidence in my life?

v.2: There is *one* Vine but *two* kinds of branches. **First**, there are branches that *do not bear fruit* and are taken away. Second, there are branches that *bear fruit* and are purged or cleansed. Note. Neither salvation nor the church is in view in this passage; discipleship and witness is the prominent thought. Whilst this passage is very difficult to interpret and commentators differ widely, the weight of evidence seems to suggest that the branches not bearing fruit represent unbelieving Israel at large and/or false profession. The evidence is as follows:

- 'beareth' is in the *present continuous* tense, thus **character** is in view. It is the sum total of their profession. Here is one who is always not reproducing Christ.
- But what about the branch being 'in Me'? On strong evidence, critical translations (such as NET and see the writing of **J Carl Laney**) translate the verse: 'Every branch not bearing fruit in Me'. Thus it is not the **place** of the branch that is in view, but its character. This person does not bear fruit in the Lord Jesus – there is no *vital* link to Him. Note that the verse does not say 'in Christ' which is Pauline teaching and emphasises security.
- Verse 8 proves the Lord has false profession and discipleship in view in the passage. 'So shall ye be my disciples', i.e. this is the proof that you are *true* disciples (not just in name) and thus effective witnesses.

What becomes of such a branch? It is 'taken away'. Some commentators follow the view, originated and popularised by **AW Pink**, that this would be better translated 'lifted up'. Whilst the word can have this meaning, its most frequent translation and use in John's gospel is 'take away' and only means this in the context of viticulture. Thus, the fruitless branch is removed from the place of true discipleship and witness for God. They are taken away from the vineyard. This 'taking away' is expanded in **v.6**. It is 'cast forth' (which cannot be true of a genuine believer, John 6.37) out of the vineyard, *withered* (dried up), *gathered* and *burned*. All this speaks of Divine judgment and may have a strong reference to AD70 when the city of Jerusalem was burned to the ground and the Jews literally cast out of the vineyard. The whole sad situation of a fruitless branch is well illustrated in the man who was once so closely associated with the Lord Jesus yet proved to be false – Judas Iscariot.

The Secrets of Bearing Fruit (vv.2-5) 1. The Attention of the Husbandman (vv.1-2). 2. Abiding in Christ (vv.4-5).

The Husbandman, the divine Farmer who *attends* to and *cherishes* the Vine and branches (cf. Psalm 80.8-9), purges the fruitful branch that it might bring forth more fruit (v.2). The word 'purge' has the thought of *cleansing* and probably refers to the Spring removal of superfluous growths (suckers) and parasites all of which would inhibit the fruitfulness of the vine. This cleansing is thus '*the removal from my life of everything that doesn't have Christ for its object.*' How does the Father cleanse and purge? It may be through chastening and discipline (see Hebrews 12.11), but in the context, the water He uses is that of the word of God (**v.3**). Although this verse may have reference to *positional* sanctification (cf. 13.10), it is better to see *practical* sanctification in view. The tense is *active* (not aorist, once and for all) suggesting practical, daily cleansing. The Father uses the Scriptures (which record the word of Christ) to cleanse from the life all that is inhibiting fruitfulness and Christlikeness. Do we read the Scriptures like this?

vv.4-5: A branch cannot produce fruit; it merely bears what the vine produces. Praise God, we bear, by His grace, what Christ has produced in us. And, He rewards us for it! There can certainly be no room for boasting. The **second** secret of fruitfulness is to 'abide' in Christ. This command means to 'remain' or 'dwell' in Christ. To make Him our *home* and *cleave* to Him in dependence. We are *in* Christ (position); *walk* in Christ (practice) and *abide* in Christ (relationship). This is more than knowing Him as Saviour. It is rather that His Person has captivated my heart. He is everything to me and thus I draw life, strength and nourishment from Him for every step of the way. This will, of course, be demonstrated through obedience to His word (v.7). What does Christ mean to me? Would my daily communion, prayer life, study of the word of God or active service demonstrate that I think much or little of Him? The secret of abounding is abiding. It has nothing to do with externals. Christianity is an **inside** job. If we limit the Lord's access to our real selves, we cannot expect a life of blessed fruitfulness. **v.5:** What is the result of abiding in Him? He abides in us! As I abide in Him, He is reproduced in me. It is abiding in Him that produces 'much fruit' (v.5). Without Him, in the matter of fruit bearing, we can do nothing.

The Signs of Genuine Discipleship (vv.7-8)

- **Effective** prayer (v.7). Note the conditions! It is only as we abide in Christ and His words abide in us that we can be sure of answered prayer. To have His words abiding in us is more than just *knowing* and *believing* them; we are to *cherish* and *value* them. His words should find a place in my affections. If Christ and His word fills my heart, then what I ask in prayer (my will) is certain to conform to His mind and will. This guarantees answered prayer. **MacDonald:** *The closer we get to the Lord, the more we will learn to think His thoughts after Him. The more we get to know Him through His Word, the more we will understand His will. The more our will agrees with His, the more we can be sure of having our prayers answered.*
- **Exalted** Father (v.8). 'Herein' looks backward as well as forward. The Father is glorified when prayer is answered and 'much fruit' is produced in the believer's life. Christ reproduced in every Christian brings glory to God. However, the converse is also true. Little fruit in my life robs God of His rightful glory. Let us prove to be Christ's disciples *indeed*; **true** disciples that are *effective* witnesses for Him.