

The Vine And Branches

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As has been noted in Bible class, John does not relate any of the parables Jesus told. However, John does relate several metaphors Jesus used to describe Himself. By the time we get to John 15, Jesus had already called himself by the name of God by saying, "Before Abraham was, I am" (John 8:58.) Taking the name God gave Himself is the strongest affirmation to the deity of Jesus. Jesus had said, "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12); "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35); "I am the Way" (John 14:6); and "I am the Door" (John 10:9). Now, the night before His death, He tells them, "I am the Vine." Like the other great "I am" passages recorded in the Gospel of John, it points to His deity. Each one is a metaphor that elevates Jesus to the level of Creator, Sustainer, Savior, and Lord—titles that can be claimed only by God. Take time to read John 15:1-8 right now.

The metaphor in John 15 is of a vine and its branches. The vine is the source and sustenance of life for the branches, and the branches must abide in the vine to live and bear fruit. Jesus, of course, is the vine, and the branches are people. While it is obvious the fruit-bearing branches represent true Christians, the identity of the fruitless ones is in question. Some Bible students say the barren branches are Christians who bear no spiritual fruit. Others believe they are non-Christians. As always, however, we must look to the context for the best answer.

The true meaning of the metaphor is made clear when we consider the characters in that night's drama. The disciples were with Jesus. He had loved them to the uttermost; He had comforted them with the words in John chapter 14. The Father was foremost in His thoughts, because He was thinking of the events of the next day. But He was also aware of someone else—the betrayer. Judas had been dismissed from the fellowship when he rejected Jesus' final appeal of love.

All the characters of the drama were in the mind of Jesus. He saw the eleven, whom He loved deeply and passionately. He was aware of the Father, with whom He shared an infinite love. And He must have grieved over Judas, whom He had loved unconditionally. All those characters play a part in Jesus' metaphor. The vine is Christ; the vinedresser is the Father. The fruit-bearing branches represent the eleven and all true disciples of the church age. The fruitless branches represent Judas and all those who never were true disciples.

To me, this metaphor is not about Christians who don't bear fruit being cut off from the vine. The reality is that real Christians who are firmly connected to Jesus will bear fruit. Later John would write, "Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous." (1 John 3:7.) Righteousness is the fruit born by saints as they are connected to the vine. Judas was not so. That very night Jesus noted that not all of His disciples were "clean" (John 13:10-11.) Many today may appear to be a disciple but aren't really getting life from the vine. They may go to church, know the right answers and go through the motions but God will cut them off. We have a strong warning to be connected to the vine and not be a dead branch.