

Suggested Questions for Small Groups based on John 15:1-8

An amplified version of the talk, to be preached at 9 and 11 on Sunday 25th October will be made available to accompany these suggested questions for discussion. Please choose the questions(s) that are likely to be helpful to your group or, if you prefer, ignore all of them and stick with the notes from the talk. The end notes, in red, are intended to be a help to group leaders.

“I am the Vine”

1. John does not record the Last Supper. Of course that does not mean he was unaware of it, he was there and had partaken of it. As the years had gone by he must have “done this in remembrance of me” on countless occasions. As a commandment of the Lord he would not only have obeyed but appreciated its value. He included in detail Jesus’ teaching that he was the bread of life (ch 6) and here Jesus’ teaching that he is the true vine. Given that the Lord’s Supper is a focal point of the constant feeding on and dwelling in him why do you think that John did not record the Last Supper in his gospel?
2. In the passage several types of branch are referred to:
 - The throw away branch (v.6). This could be people who were once leading Christian lives but who have stopped producing fruit. How can this come about?
 - The pruned branch (v.2). When God prunes he cuts away some things we might not want removed which can be hard at the time. Share some examples of this to encourage and help one another.
 - The fruitful branch (v.8). The goal is that each of us becomes a fruitful branch. What is a fruitful Christian?
 - The connected branch (v.4). The key is “remaining.” Count how many times the word “remain” occurs in these verses.

What sort of branch (or branches) are you?

3. Was there anything in the service or talk that you found particularly helpful, that changed your thinking or understanding or gave you a new insight?
4. If Jesus was giving this teaching in Woodbridge today he would not, I suggest, have spoken about vines and pruning, about the branches remaining connected to the main vine. In the talk reference was made to growing tomatoes and pinching out side shoots but there are undoubtedly better illustrations that could be used. What can you come up with? What are the strengths and weaknesses of your illustrations?
5. In the OT the vine was a symbol of Israel itself - see Jer.2:21; Ezek.19:10; Hos.10:1 and most clearly of all Isaiah 5:7 “*The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the house of Israel.*” The purpose of a vine is to produce fruit, but this Israel had failed to do. Jesus claims to be the true fruit-bearer. God intended that his plan and purpose should be accomplished through all humankind (see the opening chapters of Genesis). When, because of disobedience, that plan failed God channelled it through a smaller group, the people of Israel whom he raised up for that purpose. They also failed and finally his plan was channelled through the one man, Jesus. He epitomises the whole human race as it was intended to be. The purpose of God was narrowed to that one person but following his resurrection it broadens out again to the apostles, church and the whole of humankind. What therefore are the strengths and weaknesses of describing Jesus as a funnel?

1. Recording the institution of the Supper would not have added any more to the truths already given. Cf – the Transfiguration is not recorded by John either.

2. Throw away branches. Many years ago there was a carnival parade in which the oil company Esso had a float. In the middle of the parade the float came to a grinding halt – it had run out of fuel. The float organisers had done a good job but had failed to use their company’s huge resources to do the one thing that was vital, to fill up with fuel. What is vital to living the Christian life?
Fruitful branches. Fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control – Galatians 5:22-23) is not the same as gifts of the Spirit. People can have one, two or more gifts (such as gifts of mercy, teaching, prophecy etc) but we either bear fruit or we don’t. We can’t have, say, the fruit of kindness but not the fruit of love or the fruit of joy but not the gift of self-control and so on. It’s all or none!
Connected branches. The story is told of the person from a remote mountain village who went to the town and saw electricity for the first time. He was amazed at how light came from the flick of a switch and a light bulb so he took a supply back to the mountain village. People stood around fascinated as he connected the one to the other with lengths of wire. In reply to questions about what he was doing he smiled and said, “Wait and see.” Of course when he ceremonially flicked the switch nothing happened, it was not connected to an electricity supply. Jesus said, “Apart from me you can do nothing” (v.5).

5. Jesus *is* a funnel through which the grace of God must pass but he is also himself the source of life for fruit bearing. Nevertheless behind him is the source of all life, the one who granted him to have life in himself, the Father. It is the Father who personally dresses or tends the vine which is his Son. It is the Father who sent the Son, it is the father whom the Son will ask to send another comforter, the Holy Spirit.

John 15:1-8

Recap

John writes from a different angle to the other gospel writers. The synoptic gospels are mainly a record of what “Jesus began to do and teach” leaving us to form our own opinion as to who Jesus is. John on the other hand gives us a statement at the beginning of Ch1 of his own view of Jesus – the rest of his account is a selection of events from the life of Jesus to support his claims.

As a young man John had spent 3 years with Jesus. He had watched and participated in all that Jesus did. No doubt over the years John thought and pondered on the things he had seen, learnt and done then as an old man – when things had crystallised in his mind - he wrote down the meaning of all that he had seen and learnt. That’s what we have here. John left out some of the incidents that the other gospel writers included because his concern wasn’t telling the story so much as making sure that the spiritual significance was grasped.¹ This gospel is John’s distilled wisdom, he has come to a conclusion as to who Jesus is and the whole gospel is written to support the conclusion he has come to.

That’s why the 7 “I am” statements of Jesus are so important. It isn’t John’s perspective of who *he* thinks Jesus is, it’s John reporting Jesus’ statement of fact. You or I might say

- I am a Mother
- I am a neighbour
- I am a student or whatever.

All statements of fact. In the same way when Jesus says, “I am the true vine” it’s a statement of fact, not a matter for debate or opinion. He’s telling it as it is and John records it.

Context

Jesus and disciples had entered Jerusalem for the last time. The events of Palm Sunday had taken place. They had shared the Passover (Last Supper) although not recorded in John. Jesus had washed the disciples feet, predicted his betrayal and Peter’s denial and promised the Holy Spirit although it hadn’t yet been given. At the end of Ch 14 Jesus says, “Come now, let us leave.” If they had left at that point they would probably have crossed the temple area and there, on the face of the temple building, they would have seen an ornate decorative vine moulding embossed in gold reminding everyone who passed of the many times in the OT that the vine was used as a symbol for Israel, the people of God. Then, at the beginning of Ch 15 comes this passage about Jesus being the true vine. A bit of a blinder for the people who thought that *they* were the vine to hear Jesus saying that actually no they weren’t, he was.

Horticulture

The first year that I grew tomatoes I had a mass of green shoots that was second to none. The greenery coming out of the grobag was most impressive. The plants needed propping up because of the weight of the stems and leaves - but there was a slight problem - not many tomatoes. I find that there’s always a neighbour willing to put you right when it comes to matters of gardening and sure enough the error of my ways was soon pointed out to me. All the strength of the plant was going into the side-shoots. I should have pinched out these non-productive shoots if I wanted half decent tomatoes. I needed to know what to do. I had to get rid of the unproductive parts.

¹ By the time he wrote most of the believers were Gentile rather than Jewish.

If we had been in Palestine in Jesus' day growing vines would have been part of our everyday experience. It would have been something that we were completely familiar with. Even less of a mystery than growing tomatoes is in this country. There would have been vines in the fields and we would have been knowledgeable about all aspects of growing and harvesting grapes. At least four of Jesus' parables featured vineyards² - all of which were about the vineyard or people connected with the vineyard and all of which portrayed Israel as being less fruitful than it should have been. What Jesus is saying here though doesn't focus on the vineyard, but on the *vine*.

Perhaps as I speak it would help you to visualise not a small and puny vine in a pot fresh from the garden centre but the sort of vine that you get in the conservatory of somewhere like Chatsworth House or Kew Gardens. Something big and established with tendrils reaching the furthest corners of the room, with twisted branches and luxuriant foliage all going back to one central stem or trunk.

The words about branches being cut off and thrown away sound very harsh but Jesus' listeners would have known that the gardener tending vines needed only one tool, a knife, for the secret of a fruitful vine is pruning. When a vine is newly pruned it looks stark and bare. On the ground will be piles of foliage and yet it is all done to improve the branches where there is life. Dead wood is cut out and wood that is alive but has rank shoots –i.e. not of the same type as the main trunk - has to be cut back in order to remove the rank shoots. (cf roses) And this is what Jesus says the Father will do to the dead branches or those not producing fruit. Further, the branches that are bearing fruit will be pruned in order that they will produce more fruit.

Fruit

However, what is meant by fruit in this passage? It means the fruit of the spirit as listed in Galatians 5:22 (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control). It is interesting what Jesus does not say. He does not say anything about those who do not exercise the *gifts* of the spirit – it's all about the *fruit* of the spirit.

If there is real union between Jesus and the follower there will be life and fruit. If there's no fruit on a branch there's no life in the branch. The two go together. Perhaps the branch without fruit refers to the person with a nominal connection. The person who comes to church – sometimes – or the person who would never miss Midnight Communion and yet the rest of the year...or the person who comes often but to be honest the fact that they come to church makes little or no difference to how they live their life day by day.

For others, perhaps many, there can be lots of activity and mountains of work yet barrenness, no fruitfulness. A bit of a void inside - for works are not fruit. We can be busy doing good things but it can all come from us. Fruit only comes from union with Jesus.

Eight times in these eight verses we read the word *remain* or as the older versions of the Bible express it, *abide*. I don't think that's because Jesus was linguistically challenged and didn't have access to a thesaurus. I think it was because he was emphasising a very important point and he knew that we need to hear something more than once before we remember it.

² Parable of talents (Matt 21:23-41); Parable of workers in the vineyard (Matt 20:1-16); Parable of two sons (Matt 21:28-32); Parable of fig tree planted in vineyard (Luke 13:6-9)

Read “remain” parts of verses.

The key to bearing fruit is remaining or abiding in Jesus. Which is all very well but what does it mean? We are used to being busy, to be doing, to being productive, achieving, showing results. Many of us know how easy it is to be occupied by *doing* at the expense of time spent abiding. Challenged by this myself this week. Most of us aren't inclined to wait for anything but this isn't a sitting around kind of waiting it is about taking time to be connected to God through our relationship with Jesus. In our busy world a lot of what we produce is like my tomatoes – all leaves and stems. It may look good but, like my tomatoes, there's not much fruit. Jesus teaches that waiting and remaining in him will give us the results, the production of fruit.

As always, let's be practical. *How* do we remain in Jesus? It means:

- Taking time to be with God, not just putting in an hour on a Sunday morning. Spending time each day in Bible reading and prayer.
- Thinking about why we are here and concentrating on the words and music, focusing on God.
- Perhaps listening to Christian music or a tape in the car or when about the household chores. Deliberate decision to abide.
- Seeking out Christian fellowship whether through a housegroup or more informally over a cup of coffee with a friend.
- You'll have other ways.

Remaining is an intentional act. It means putting aside time to grow in understanding and relationship with Jesus, to grow and mature. Waiting for the gardener to show us the parts of our lives that are unproductive and that need removing.

Remember that the vine or tomato plant doesn't produce fruit the instant the first shoot appears out of the ground. It takes time. It has to be fed. We don't need to worry about producing fruit, that comes naturally from a healthy plant that is connected to the main stem.

You may be wondering why I have been eating grapes throughout my talk this morning. It's because fruit is irresistible. Even more irresistible than grapes like these is the fruit of the spirit; love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. The person who is demonstrating those characteristics will have an attractiveness about them that is more than skin deep, that is genuine and causes people to be attracted to Jesus himself. They don't “work up” the fruit any more than the vine “works up” the grapes, they abide, they remain, close to Jesus and the fruit comes of its own accord.

Invitation to take a grape after HC either because recognise that still on the journey and not ready to take HC or as a reminder that fruit of spirit comes from abiding in the vine.