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MY FAVORITE FRUIT John 15:1-8

Laurie has an interesting quirk. We'll be at a restaurant and she will eat most of her food but have some left. She'll say "I am stuffed. I couldn't eat another bite." Then they bring a dessert menu and she starts having fits over which of the delicious options to order. I'll say, "Wait a minute. I thought you couldn't eat another bite. Why do you want dessert?" Laurie has an interesting rationale. She insists she has another stomach that is specifically for dessert and that one is not full. The irony for me is even if I'm hungry I probably won't see a single item on the dessert menu that is appealing to me. Laurie has a couple of disappointments to deal with in our marriage. One is that I usually don't share desserts with her and the other is that I don't drink coffee with her.

She has her quirks, but I've got mine to. She has a dessert issue, and I've got a fruit issue. I love fruit. But I am a fruit connoisseur. I have high standards for fruit, so I drive her crazy with the need to find just the right cherries in cherry season and peaches in peach season. I'm a real peach snob. Crummy peaches are a major disappointment for me. Ask any member of my family and they will tell you that in Hawaii I make a pest of myself insisting we have to buy apple bananas. That's fruit you just can't get here and I love it.

Now my preference for fruit is actually theological. You see, God loves fruit too. That's why I like it. That and it tastes good. But the truth is the kind of fruit God loves is fruit you long for as well. In fact, I can tell you with total confidence if your life doesn't produce the kind of fruit he likes, not only with this be a problem with him, you will discover that your life is barren. It will be a disappointment to you in the end. In fact, whether you know it or not you are at every moment of life trying to produce this fruit. Let's look together at John 15:1-8 where Jesus talks about this fruit. We'll see if we can learn what it is and how we can have it.

THIS PASSAGE IS AN ILLUSTRATION

Just in case you didn't realize it, when Jesus said, "I am the vine" he didn't mean that literally. He is not a grapevine. He was giving an illustration. This passage has suffered from some misinterpretation that has led to some unnecessary theological confusion for many people. It also leads to some misapplication of the lesson Jesus was teaching his men that actually runs contrary to his point.

The big theological question that bothers people is sparked by Jesus' statements in verses 2 and 6. In verse 2 after saying he is the vine and we are the branches he said of God, "He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit." Then in verse 6 he said, "If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned." Wow, that sounds severe. God is going to cut them off and throw them into the fire. The people he spoke of there are branches, "in me that bear no fruit." Whoa! Doesn't that sound like someone who is a Christian who ends up being cut off and thrown into the fire and burned? Some freak out at that point, fearing they can lose the salvation that they thought they had.

Another area of confusion stems from Jesus' statement that we must "remain" in him. The King James and later the New American Standard translations of the Bible rendered that "abide." That's a word we rarely use today. One of the few times I remember hearing it was in the original *Star Wars* movie when C3PO said, "I can't abide these Jawas. Disgusting creatures." In that context it means "tolerate." But that clearly is not the meaning that Jesus had in mind. He wasn't saying in verse 4 "tolerate me and I will tolerate you." The command to "abide in me" has been given by some a sort of special religious meaning. You will hear entire sermons on how we "abide in Christ." Entire books have been written about "abiding in Christ." I suspect the disciples of Jesus who first heard him say this would have been astounded at this discussion of "abiding."

I would like to simplify this passage for you and relieve any theological concerns you might have. I will point out two simple but crucial ideas we must keep in mind as we interpret this passage. The first idea is that speakers use an illustration to illuminate one idea. If we try to press every aspect of the illustration we will inevitably come up with points the speaker never intended.

For instance, when we looked at Jesus' statement in John 14:6 where he said "I am the way," I used the illustration of flying to Mississippi. I said the airline didn't give us a manual on how to fly an airplane and the course to fly to get where we were going, but they actually took us there. The illustration was to point out that Jesus doesn't show us the way into the Father's kingdom, he actually takes us there when we entrust ourselves to him. The illustration had that one point. What would happen if pressed all the details of the illustration? You might say that since we had to pay to buy the tickets to get on the plane, so you have to pay to get Jesus to take you to the Father's kingdom. Uh oh, that's a theological problem. There was no food on the flight. The only thing we had to eat was what we provided for ourselves, so the lesson is you'd better take care of yourself as you're on your way

to the kingdom. And oh by the way, if you want to take any baggage with you to the kingdom you'll have to pay for that too. Do you see the problem? If you press the details of an illustration you are going to end up with things it was never intended to say.

Jesus had one idea he was aiming at with this illustration. Much of the detail he gave about the vinedresser pruning the branches and fruitless branches being cut off and burned up was just providing context, color and support for the one main point.

The second idea that can help guide our understanding of this passage is that we must keep it in its historical context. At the point Jesus told the disciples these things they did not fully understand the work he had come to do. They did not have a complete picture of how one gained salvation because Jesus had not finished that work. It will be important for us to interpret his words through the ears of his disciples. That will keep us from thinking Jesus was saying things he did not intend. With those factors in mind, what does this passage mean?

JESUS ISSUED A CALL TO REMAIN IN HIM

Jesus said, "I am the true vine." In today's vernacular he would have said, "I am the real vine." If he was the real vine there must have been a vine that was not the real one. This idea is highlighted by the grammar John used here. It tells us that Jesus was saying, "I, not someone or something else, am the real vine."

In the Hebrew Bible the vine was often a symbol of Israel. Psalm 80:8 says to the Lord, "You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it." In verses 14-15 the psalmist wrote, "Return to us, O God Almighty! Look down from heaven and see! Watch over this vine, the root your right hand has planted." Isaiah 5:1-7, Isaiah 27:22, Jeremiah 2:21 and Ezekiel 15:1-8 all refer to Israel as the vine. This was such a common picture for Israel that there was a large sculpted golden vine over the entrance to the temple in Jerusalem. The ancient Jewish historian, Josephus, said the clusters of grapes that were depicted on this vine were as tall as a man. The vine also showed up on Israeli coins and in art of the period.

First century Jews like Jesus' followers believed that Israel was God's vine, and because they were born to Hebrew parents, thus Israelis, they were automatically attached to the vine. It was being Jewish that made them part of God's people. Because they were part of God's people they would be part of his kingdom. If you're part of Israel you're part of the vine, and if you're part of the vine you'll be in God's kingdom.

Now Jesus says, “I, not anything else, am the real vine.” The vine that brings connection with God and being part of his kingdom is Jesus himself. The way you become part of the people of God is by being in Jesus, by trusting in him to make you part of his kingdom and his people. What Jesus said here was shocking to ancient Jews. He is saying he is the real Israel. He is the fulfillment of the picture of Israel.

This is why Jesus talks about branches in him that do not bear fruit being cut off and thrown into the fire. He meant people who seemed to be part of the vine because they were part of physical Israel but who would not bear fruit because they did not remain in Jesus. They did not believe in him. In fact, they wanted no part of Jesus. These are the “branches” that are going to be cut off and burned up.

JESUS SAID BRANCHES ON THE VINE WILL BEAR FRUIT

In nature a branch that is part of a healthy vine will bring fruit. That is a natural process. Jesus said this is also true spiritually. Those who remain in the vine, who are attached to Jesus by believing him, will also bear fruit.

When I was a kid growing up in Bakersfield we had a back yard full of food producing plants. We had two almond trees. We had a plum tree that was prolific. It produced so many plums my parents used to collect bags of them to give away to people. We had a nectarine tree, a pear tree and a cherry plum tree. Along one side of the yard we had grape vines. There were a couple of things I remember about those grape vines. First is they produced grapes. No plums, no peaches, no apples, no oranges, just grapes. The second was they didn’t appear to work very hard at it. They just grew there and in grape season out came grapes. They didn’t stress and strain. They didn’t toil long hours. They just did what grapevines do and out came the grapes.

Producing fruit was the main focus in Jesus’ mind. He refers to fruit 7 times in these verses. That’s a loud statement about what this illustration was intended to tell us. But what kind of fruit did Jesus have in mind? The picture of bearing fruit appeared several times in the Old Testament. Psalm 1:3 says of the person who meditates on the law of the Lord, “He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither.” Psalm 92:13-14 says of the righteous, “they will flourish in the courts of our God. They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green.”

Jesus and his disciples all thought bearing fruit was a highly desirable thing. In their culture the idea of bearing fruit was almost a shorthand picturesque way of saying, “have a successful life.” It described a life that was flourishing. Psalm 1 assumes that everyone would want to be like a tree planted by a stream that bears fruit in season. I love the picture in Psalm 92 of bearing fruit and being fresh and green in old age. What is the alternative? It is to become old, tired, useless, irrelevant. But it is possible to be alive, flourishing even into old age. That’s what it means to bear fruit. Do you want to have a life that is pointless, useless, empty, just withering even as you continue to exist? No, to bear fruit is to be fully alive.

I mentioned last year that a couple of years ago we were given an avocado tree. It was a small, very young one that we knew would have to grow for several years before we actually got avocados from it. But I still was happy about that because I love avocados. I pictured myself being able to go out and just pick a couple off the tree when we wanted some. It was going to be so organic. It hasn’t worked out quite that way. No matter what we did it never flourished. It’s not just that it never produced fruit, it just slowly sort of fell apart. It got to the place where it wasn’t a tree, it was just a stick. But we looked at that avocado stick and saw what appeared to be some buds. Hey, it was going to survive. We were way too optimistic. That thing never produced even a hint of a leaf. We tried for a long time to nurse it and coax it into full life. Finally Jesus, our yard maintenance guy, without us even asking him, quietly, mercifully removed the thing that had been standing there for so long mocking us in all its ugly barrenness. It existed. But its barrenness was pathetic. Is that what anyone wants his life to be, just a barren, pathetic and useless existence? Does anyone want to be the human equivalent of an avocado stick? No, all of us want to flourish, to be full of life, and that’s what bearing fruit means.

What will that look like? Some preachers say it means leading other people to faith in Jesus. That’s a nice idea and a wonderful thing we are all in favor of, but not really the point of this illustration. Isaiah 5:2 speaks of God planting a vine. Then Isaiah says, “He looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit.” God looked for his vine to produce fruit, but he was disappointed. In the rest of Isaiah 5 you get glimpses of what the absence of fruit, or bad fruit, meant.

The bad fruit was lives full of selfish greed and the pursuit of pleasure, lives with no regard for God’s truth or for his works, with no concern for other people, lives with no justice and no righteousness. The fruit that God looked for was lives lived in awe of God’s work, lives of justice and righteousness, lives of obedience to God’s laws, lives that were truly good. Lives full of compassion and concern for other people. In other words, the fruit that God wanted produced was a life of

goodness, of worship, of love for God that produced humility, obedience and love for other people.

In the New Testament this same idea appears in Galatians 5:22-23. There Paul speaks of the “fruit of the Spirit.” This is the fruit Jesus will produce in our lives. It is things like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, and so on. Those are the things we all desire. No matter how much money, success, fame, approval, or pleasure a person gets, if he or she does not have peace, does not have joy, does not have love, that person’s life will be empty, frustrating and barren. Conversely if a person has peace, joy, love and the rest, that person’s life will be full, alive even if he or she has little or nothing of the things the world pursues.

This is the same thing that Jesus meant when he spoke of branches bearing fruit. It’s actually fairly easy to figure out. I mentioned that the grapevines we had in our yard could only produce grapes. Jesus now is the vine. If we are growing out of him, tightly, organically attached to him, what will be flowing into us will be the very life of Jesus just like the life of the vine flows into the branches. If the life of Jesus is flowing into us, what will it produce? It will produce the kind of life he lived! It simply can’t produce anything else. It will produce love for others, love for God, joy, peace, patience, kindness and goodness.

IMPLICATIONS

BELIEVE IN JESUS

We are to remain in Jesus, but what does that mean? I believe the best way for us to understand this is to put ourselves in the sandals of the disciples. What do you think they heard as Jesus said this? They knew that Jesus clearly was from God. He had divine power. They knew that he was the Messiah, the Son of God who was promised by the prophet Daniel. They knew he had come to bring the kingdom of God to people. But they didn’t understand fully what Jesus had come to do and what it was going to take to do it.

So what do you think they heard Jesus saying in this illustration? They heard him say, “Keep believing and trusting in me.” They were about to go through total upheaval. Jesus was going to die, then he was going to rise from the dead and periodically appear to them, then he was going to ascend into heaven and sent them off with his Spirit to continue his work. They were going to face opposition, persecution and most would be killed for their faith. Jesus was saying, “Through it all, keep believing that in me you have become part of God’s kingdom. Keep believing that in me you have eternal life. Keep looking to me to provide what you need to live the way a branch looks to the vine to provide what it needs.”

The most obvious thing in the world is that a branch that is not connected to the vine is not going to produce fruit, and in fact it is going to wither and die and become nothing more than firewood. But a branch that is growing out of the vine will produce fruit. So keep tightly connected to Jesus. Keep believing in him.

How does that relate to us today? It is still the same. It means believing that in Jesus we have become a part of God's people. It means trusting that we will be in God's eternal kingdom and will have eternal life because of what Jesus has done for us. It means relying on him, looking to him, to provide what we need for life.

Can you imagine a branch saying, "I don't think the vine is giving me enough juice and I clearly need something more than I'm getting from it"? Can you imagine one sort of looking around the yard and saying, "You know, I really like how that plum tree over there looks. I'll bet if I could go attach myself to it why then I'd be a lot stronger and happier. Yeah, I guess grapes are all right, but if I could produce plums, wow, then I'd be happy." How is that going to work out for that branch? If it somehow could detach from the vine, transport itself over to the plum tree and try to attach itself to the plum tree, is that going to work well? No, what is going to happen is that branch is going to shrivel up and die, and it won't take very long. It has just cut itself off from the source of life.

Something must flow through the vine into the branch. If that flow is cut off because the branch isn't connect to the vine, nothing will be flowing into it. In essence its life blood has been cut off and it can do nothing but die.

Now we begin to see the impact of this illustration by Jesus. Most of the disciples' contemporary countrymen were going to reject Jesus. They were not going to "remain" in him. They were not going to look to him to be the source of membership in the people of God and acceptance into God's kingdom. They did not believe he would provide them what they needed for eternal life. The result of that is that they would be cut off from all the hope and life Jesus came to offer them. Not because God is harsh and vengeful, but because they chose to cut themselves off. And so it is with the majority of people in the world today. They cut themselves off from Jesus and in so doing also cut themselves off from the nutrients they need for eternal life and the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

Most people live as though they are independent, autonomous branches. They can go off and do whatever they wish in their pursuit of life and fruit. But Jesus tells us that ***independent, autonomous branches do not thrive and produce, they die***. That

is an indisputable and unvarying fact in nature and it is similarly inevitable in the spiritual realm. Jesus said in this passage, “apart from me you can do nothing.” We can do lots of things without Jesus. What we can never do apart from Christ is produce the kind of fruit that Jesus is talking about. And sadly that is the fruit that we all both need and want.

We have put our faith in Jesus, so we are not cutting ourselves off from him, but we can also do something analogous. If you are a believer in Jesus you do not need to worry that you are going to cut yourself off from him and lose eternal life. In 1 John 5:13 John wrote, “He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.” He went on in verse 14 to say, “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.” If you believe in the name of Jesus you are connected to the vine. You have eternal life. If that life can end by definition it wasn’t eternal.

So we’re not worrying about that. However, we can look for something other than Jesus to supply us with the nutrient we need to give us life and to produce fruit. Remember that eternal life, which Jesus promises us through his grace, is not just long life, but it is a quality of life. It is a life full of love, joy, peace, and all the rest of the fruit of the Spirit. Here’s a simple rule of thumb. ***If it cannot produce eternal life, it cannot produce the fruit you long for.***

LET THE VINE PRODUCE THE FRUIT

What so many people do with this passage is think about fruit and tell you that you need to look at your life and see if it is producing fruit. If not there is something wrong. That is true, but then the message tends to be that you need to go out and try harder to produce fruit. That is just the wrong message, the opposite of what Jesus was saying here.

In case you haven’t noticed it, I can sum up this illustration in a way that will likely sound familiar to you. I would sum it up this way: what Jesus supplies is enough. Just like what the vine supplies to the branch is what it needs, so what Jesus supplies is enough for us. This is a new covenant illustration. Biblical scholar D. A. Carson wrote in his commentary on John that “remain in” and “be in” language in John’s writing speak of new covenant theology. The new covenant is believing that what God supplies is enough. As we look to Jesus to supply what we need for life we will produce fruit.

So yes, look for the fruit in your life. But if feel you lack it the answer is not to try harder to produce it. That only leads to frustration, guilt and failure and to phony

religion. What you need to recognize is that ***somewhere in your life you are looking to something other than Jesus to provide a fruitful life***. You are trying to draw the nutrients you need from something other than the vine. All that will ever produce is failure and death. In that place give whatever that is to God. It can never give you eternal life. It can never produce love, joy, peace, patience or kindness. It will never produce fruit in your life.

I have told this story before, but it applies here. Years ago one day I was out in our garage and had the garage door open. Our automatic garage door opener has a release on it so we can open the door if the opener fails for some reason. Attached to that release is a short rope with a red knob on the end. While I was in the garage a hummingbird flew in, saw that red plastic knob and tried to poke it with his beak to get some nectar from it. He mistook it for a flower. He had to be awfully nearsighted to make that mistake. Of course when he hit it with his beak it just bounced away. So he tried it again, and the same thing happen. He backed off, hovered there briefly, then came back and tried again. I figured he had to be the dumbest hummingbird in creation. He couldn't get the picture that there was no nectar in this pretty red thing so he kept trying. He's a lot like us. We keep looking for the nectar of life, keep trying to find fruit from possessions, position, applause, thrills, and the rest of the things of this world. They can no more produce the fruit we desire than that knob could produce the nectar that bird wanted.

Are you looking to something to make you flourish? Do you believe you cannot have fruit without it? Ask this: can it give you eternal life? If not it is not crucial and it can never produce the fruit you need. It might feel good for a moment, but will ultimately disappoint you. So look to Jesus to provide you the life and the fruit you long for.