

September 23, 2012

Living Out The Gospel In Real Life

Vital Connection or Formal Association

John 15:1 – 11

The men are going through a study right now called 'Not a Fan' written by Kyle Idleman. And the premise of the book is that when it comes to Christianity, there are basically two types of people – **fans** and **followers**. Fans are those who like Jesus, they admire Him, they'll sing songs about Him and occasionally pray to Him. But ultimately something is missing. They want to be close enough to Jesus to reap the benefits, but not so close that it affects their lifestyle. These people have all the right answers to questions like: Do you go to church? Are your parents or grandparents Christians? Did you raise your hand at the end of sermon once? Or did you walk forward on the twenty-seventh verse of 'Just As I Am'? Do you own three or more Bibles? Has your name ever appeared in a church directory? Is your ring tone a worship song? When you pray are you able to utilize five or more synonyms for God? Have you ever worn witness wear? Have you ever kissed dating goodbye? Do you say, 'bless their heart' before speaking badly about someone? Do you understand phrases like 'traveling mercies' and 'sword drill'?

I'm not saying that if some of these things characterize you that that makes you a fan. But it might. Unless there is a fundamental change in your life after you meet Jesus – you might just be a fan – you might be participating merely in the formalities, but you don't have a vital connection to Christ. You might be associated with Him, but you are not really connected to Him. On the other hand, maybe you're not a fan, you're a follower. A follower is someone whose life is radically changed the moment they hear Jesus say, 'Follow Me'. A follower is someone who realizes that it will cost something to follow Christ. A follower may do all the things we just listed above – but they are not the measure of their relationship. A follower is someone who has a vital relationship with Christ – not a set of rules or regulations to hold up as evidence that they belong to Him. The question Idleman asks his readers is the same question this text asks us this morning: what is the nature of your relationship to Christ – is it a vital connection or is it a formal association? Let's define the relationship.

Jesus tells His disciples several things in this text. First of all He lays out the relationship with three nouns: **the vine, the vine dresser and the branches**. He is the True vine, the Father is the vine dresser, and those who are connected to the vine are the branches. Then He uses three verbs to describe what happens in that relationship: **abiding, bearing, and pruning**. And finally He gives us two words to describe the result of that relationship: **love and obedience**. And then He tells us that this is all for our **joy**.

"I am the true vine, and My Father is the vine dresser." John 15:1 This is the last of the great 'I Am' statements in John. And just like the others, Jesus didn't just pick this metaphor out of thin air. Each one had context. Remember in chapter 6 when He said, '**I am the Bread of life**'? He had just fed the five thousand and they thought He was a great meal ticket, and they followed Him across the other side of the lake. But Jesus was not saying, 'Come to Me and you'll always have food in your house'. He was saying, 'I'm the only thing on the menu', and the crowd had to decide if He really was enough. When He told the crowd in the Court of Women in the Temple that '**I am the Light of the world**', He didn't suddenly decide that the right metaphor there was light. As we saw, there was a great candelabra in the courtyard that lit up the sky at night during the feast days and here it was the end of the feast when the lights were extinguished and Jesus was standing in that dark temple proclaiming the reality that real Light had come into the world.

And so here Jesus is with His eleven, Judas had gone to betray Him, and He was giving His disciples some word pictures to describe a vital connection with Him. From the beginning of that evening, there was this stark contrast between the eleven who followed Jesus, and the one fan who merely admired Him. There were eleven that had a vital connection to the vine, and one who merely had a formal association with Him. And so Jesus starts talking about vines and vine dressers and branches.

First of all He says that He is the **True Vine**. And the word here means that He is the real, true, genuine vine as opposed to what is fictitious, counterfeit, imaginary, simulated or pretend. What He is saying is that He is the True source of life, the real fountain of joy, and the genuine giver of peace and the source of all the other virtues we need and want. He implies that there are other vines with counterfeit joys and imaginary life and pretend peace and simulated happiness. But as the True Vine He is the genuine thing. You won't get it anywhere else. And then He adds that His father is the **vine dresser**, the **georgas** – the husbandman, the tiller of the soil, the gardener. The job of the vine is to supply all that the branches need to grow and bear fruit; the work of the vine dresser is to cut away the dead branches and prune the living ones.

And then He begins to talk about the **branches**: *"Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit."* John 15:2 Right away the focus is on the fruit. The work of the vine dresser, the purpose of the vine, the job of the branches, is fruit production. Jesus makes this point again in verse 8: *"My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples."* John 15:8 The evidence that we are really followers, not fans, is that we bear much fruit. We'll talk about what that looks like in a moment, but first I want us to focus on the work of the vine dresser – cutting away the dead branches and pruning the living ones. The Father is the vine dresser and He's looking for fruit. The vine dresser is examining the branches to see whether their relationship is formal or vital. And those who do not have a vital relationship to the vine, the vine dresser **takes away**.

What Jesus is saying is that there are branches that seem to be connected to the vine – they are associated in some way – but there is no real relationship between the vine and those branches. There is no vine life flowing in them. They're attached in some way – but there is not a vital connection. And if you are keeping the context of these verses in mind, you realize that Jesus is highlighting the contrast between Judas and the eleven. Judas was associated with the Lord, but it was a formal association – not a vital one. He was attached in some way – but there was no life and no fruit. He was associated with Jesus for three and a half years; he probably heard all the sermons; he was even the church treasurer; he went out evangelizing with the other disciples; **he looked just like the other branches in many ways** – but his connection to the vine wasn't a vital one. The life of the vine never flowed through him. The question for you is this: is your connection to Jesus formal or vital? Is it mechanical or organic? Are you a formal religious person, or an organically born-again person?

There are lots of people who have a formal association with Jesus – they admire Him, they profess allegiance to Him, they identify with the Christian Coalition, attend church, maybe even have membership in one – but there is a problem. Eventually you realize – there is no fruit. And one thing Jesus makes clear is that there is no such thing as a no-fruit Christian. There are Christians with little fruit, some with more fruit and others with much fruit – **but never no fruit**. You cannot be a Christian and not bear fruit. Just because Jesus calls all those who are attached to Him in some way, branches, does not mean that He considers all who identify with Him as bona fide Christians. Jesus says that there will be those who profess to follow, who grow up right alongside real branches, they are associated in some way with Jesus, but in the end they are removed by the vine dresser because they never produce fruit.

And Jesus makes the point that a real connection to the vine is the issue. In verse 6 He says: *"If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned."* John 15:6 Jesus was giving His disciples a word picture they readily understood. They would have understood that the only thing to do with dead branches was to take them off the vine, gather them up and burn them. If you are only playing at this Christian thing – if you are simply associated with Jesus – the only one you are fooling is yourself. The vine dresser knows – and you can't fool Him.

The vine dresser not only removes the non-fruit-bearing branches – He also **prunes** the one that do produce fruit. The word is **kathairo** – and it means to cleanse of filth and impurity. The Greeks used the term to describe pruning trees and vines from useless shoots. There are branches that have a vital connection to the vine that are fruit-bearing, and any gardener worth their salt knows that the way to keep the branches healthy and to get them to produce more fruit is to prune them. You take the clippers to them and ruthlessly cut off all the useless shoots – **the sucker branches**. They are called suckers, because they suck the life that flows through the branches, but they never produce any fruit – they just get bigger and bigger. Sooner or later ...if they are not pruned off, they will take over, killing the fruit-producing branches. And the vine dresser knows this. Our heavenly Father is faithful to work in our lives to remove all the things that suck the life out of us.

And it usually hurts. Pruning happens in those circumstances that come into our lives that are hard to bear. When we talk about pruning we are talking about suffering. The image is one of cutting – taking out the shears and whacking away at the suckers. And pruning works to cut off the things that suck our attentions and affections away from the vine – the suckers that dissipate the life of the vine. Our faithful vine dresser brings trials and hardship into our lives for one main purpose – to prune the suckers. Sometimes the Father brings trials and hardship – sometimes He allows sickness and tragedy – sometimes it is persecution or slander. Sometimes He uses a great big set of **pruning shears** – sometimes He uses a **small pruning knife**. Sometimes it feels more like a **chainsaw**. But the object is always the same – to cut away those things that hinder us from fruitfulness.

And just so we don't get the idea that the trials and hardships and difficult things we go through have any intrinsic value – that just because we suffer some tragedy or grief or pain that the suffering itself is enough to produce fruit. There are plenty of people that suffer tremendously and there is no evidence of the work of God in their lives. The trouble that the vine dresser sends and allows into our lives has a way of cutting us open to let the word of God do its work. It is **the word of God that does the pruning**. Look at what He tells the disciples: *"You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you.* John 15:3 Jesus uses the same word translated '**prunes**' in verse 2 to describe the action of the word of God in verse 3. In other words, the trouble and trials and hardships only serve to open us up to the pruning work of the vine dresser. What happens in the life of those branches that have a vital connection to the vine when trouble comes, is that it drives them to the word of God.

It is at those times when we feel the sharp cut of the pruning knife, the steel jaws of the pruning shears, and we feel like our life is over, that the word of God comes in, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to send more vine life into our branch. The pruning actually opens us up to more of the life of God – not less. You see the most important thing for growth and fruit production in any plant is not just to fertilize or water or weed, those are essential too, but the most important thing is pruning. Pruning has the effect of opening up the plant to receive and use and employ more of the nutrients that stimulate growth and fruit. And that is the most important work of the vine dresser. His job is to bring out the very best in the vine – to help the vine reach its full potential. So what does he do? He attacks it – he goes into the vineyard and prunes it ruthlessly.

In fact if you look at a vineyard after the vine dresser gets done with it, it really doesn't look that good. Every time I go to Kenya I get this object lesson over and over. The area around Limuru where our home base is, is covered with **tea plantations** and they are beautiful. But as you go through those plantations, every so often you'll see a **field that has been pruned**, and it is ugly. The plants look like they've been ravaged by pestilence. There are branches still with green leaves lying all around – the place looks like devastation personified. And to the untrained eye it looks terrible – it looks like random destruction. But to the one who knows something about the value of pruning, they know that there wasn't a single random stroke of the knife or accidental snip of the shears. And every cut of the vine dresser was to protect the plant and develop it and make it more fruitful. There was nothing cut off that was not a **loss to keep and a gain to lose**.

We see this principle operating all around us. If you have some gold-bearing rock – what do you need to do? You give it to the guy with the furnace and he throws it in and all that is not gold is burned off and skimmed away until all that is left is pure gold. You give an athlete to a coach and what does the coach do? He trains him to bring out the best in him. He works him mercilessly – another 30 laps – another 500 situps – another 300 pushups. He works on his form, eliminating all the things that keep him from being his best. My parents knew the value of pruning. There were too many times when I was growing up that I felt the steel of the pruning knife in my life – cutting away at the things I thought were so important and needful. I remember thinking sometimes when that happened – 'Life as I know it is over.' I remember thinking especially when I was grounded for one reason or another – 'You've ruined my social life forever'. But as I look back on that, as imperfect as earthly parents are, there was nothing I lost that was not a gain somehow, and nothing that if I had kept it would not have turned out to be a loss instead.

And we have a heavenly Father who is the perfect vine dresser and He knows just how much needs to be cut away and how much left. Through caring design, under sovereignly controlled circumstances, our Father goes into the vineyard of our lives and prunes and cuts and slices away all the things that if left unchecked would destroy us. The pruning work of the vine dresser serves to get the branches to draw on the life of the vine in a way they never have before. When you find yourself being pruned, when you find circumstances seeming to conspire against you, when you feel the knife and the shears you need to trust the loving hands of the vine dresser who knows what you need best.

Because the object of His loving, yet ruthless pruning is **fruit-bearing**. *"Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing."* John 15:4-5 And here Jesus uses a word that defines the difference between a vital connection and a formal association: **abide**. The word is *meno* and it means to **remain, to stay, stand fast, dwell, continue, wait, last, endure, be permanent – abide**. The difference between the dead branches and the living ones is that they are connected to the vine in a way that allows the life of the vine to course through them – and they stay in that connection. This is the key. Jesus uses this word ten times in these eleven verses. He emphasizes the fact that the key to fruitfulness is remaining, staying, abiding in this organic relationship. The issue is not so much **trying** to get connected, as it is to **remain** connected.

Because the connection is the issue. Those who are merely associated with Jesus cannot experience this mutual abiding - *Abide in Me, and I in you... he who abides in Me and I in him*. There is a constant current of life between the vine and the branch. It affects every area of the branch's life – in fact it is the single source of life for the branch. If the flow is ever cut off, not only is there no fruit, but the branch itself withers and dies. So how do we abide? How do we remain in that life flow that keeps us green and healthy and produces fruit? Jesus answers that question in verse 7: *"If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you."* John 15:7 **To abide in Christ is to have His word abiding in us**. John actually says that another way in 1 John 2: *If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, you also will abide in the Son and in the Father*. 1 John 2:24 Is the word of God abiding in you? Are you abiding in His word? Are you delighting in it, drinking it in, sucking the life juice from it like a thirsty branch?

If you are a Christian, but there is not much fruit, there is no mystery to be solved – it just means that there is not much word of God in your life. But the great thing is, our loving vine dresser will not allow weak, fruitless, branches on His vine. If the reason you're not fruitful is because you're not really connected, that should inspire fear and repentance. If you are connected but not very fruitful, be sure the vine dresser sees and knows and will be faithful to bring His pruning shears into your life. That will open you up to the living word like nothing else will. So where are you this morning? Vitally connected or formally associated? In the words of Kyle Idleman – it's time to have that D.T.R. Talk – Define the Relationship. Are you a fan or a follower? Are you committed to this – or just casually acquainted?

There is a wonderful prayer in that little book, *The Valley of Vision*, that speaks to all those who want a vital connection with Jesus. It is a prayer that echoes the heart-cry of a follower. If you're serious about this thing – if your hearts desire is to be a follower and not a fan – if you want to have a vital connection and not just a formal association – let this be your prayer today.

The Deeps

Lord Jesus,

Give me a deeper repentance, a horror of sin, a dread of its approach; help me chastely to flee it, and jealously to resolve that my heart shall be Yours alone.

Give me a deeper trust that I may lose myself to find myself in You, the ground of my rest, the spring of my being. Give me a deeper knowledge of Yourself as Savior, Master, Lord and King.

Give me a deeper power in private prayer, more sweetness in Your word, more steadfast grip on its truth. Give me a deeper holiness in speech, thought, action, and let me not seek moral virtue apart from You.

Plough deep in me, great Lord, heavenly husbandman, that my being may be a tilled field, the roots of grace spreading far and wide, until You alone are seen in me, Your beauty golden like summer harvest, Your fruitfulness as autumn plenty.

I have no Master but You, no law but Your will, no delight but Yourself, no wealth but that You give, no good but that You bless, no peace but that You bestow. I am nothing but that I receive from You, I can be nothing but that grace adorns me. Quarry me deep, dear Lord, and then fill me to overflowing with living water.

Our gracious Father,

It is amazing love that You sent Your Son to suffer in our place, dying to pay our penalty, rising to bring us to life, sending Your Spirit to teach us, lead us, live in and through us, guide us into all truth and graft us into the vine of Your love. Grant that we would not be content with a casual association but that we would be vitally connected to You. Let us welcome Your loving pruning work in our lives. Cut away all the things that suck the life from the branches so that we might be that fruitful and productive field that brings You glory and praise. Let us not mourn the cutting away of all those things that were a loss to keep and a gain to lose. May every loss be counted gain, every dark day a light of the Holy Spirit, every night of trial a song. Keep us feeding on the rich flow of Your strengthening word, sucking the life juice from every word, searching out its truths to find You there. And may we delight ourselves in You through Jesus Christ, spreading His joy through the gospel to all people we pray in the life-giving name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.