

The vine and the branches

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Date: 26 March 2023

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[0:00] So the title I was given was Jesus the True Vine and certainly I'll refer to that but I thought it's a lot of emphasis in this passage on the branches as well so I've also mentioned the branches in the title there.

Anyway you may be wondering why I put a picture of a mobile phone in there. A mobile phone, I'm sure you've all seen one, most of you probably got one in your pockets today.

It's a bit misleading to call it a phone actually. What you've really got here is a small computer that fits into your pocket. The days when I was a student, a computer like that, you'd struggle to get it into this building let alone into your pocket.

How much it's changed over the last few years. But that's what it is, it's a computer, a smart phone. What makes it useful of course really is that it connects to the internet.

But actually even to say that is slightly misleading. It's not so much it connects to the internet as if the internet was some vague thing off, you know, out there in cyberspace.

[1:12] What actually happens of course is that when you log in your phone or your computer, it becomes part of the internet. That's what the internet is. It's not some separate thing. It's just millions of computers connected together.

These computers and their programs have various functions, you know, the buzzwords, web servers, cloud servers, name servers you may not have heard of, but they're very important actually in the way it works.

And search engines, various databases you can access, encyclopedias like Wikipedia or the Britannica. It's all information connected together.

I don't know whether you know this, but the reason you're, the bit of kit that your broadband provider gives you is called a router. And it's called a router for a very good reason.

Because its job is to find a router for a very good reason. It's called a router for a very good reason. To the particular computer that you want to talk to, whether it's two streets away or in Australia.

[2:24] It's an important bit of kit. And the routes aren't programmed in. I don't know whether you know this, the way the internet works. The route is set up dynamically each time when you make a connection.

It was designed that way for a reason. If you log into one central server, then you've only got to, if somebody takes out the server, if somebody blows it up or hacks it or something, then the whole network goes down.

The internet was designed in the 80s to be immune to attack, that sort of attack. Just as your mapping program, your sat nav, if the Dartford crossing is closed, it will find you an alternative route.

And the internet works that way. And the router and the name server are important parts of the way that works. The connection must be maintained at all costs.

That's the point of it, of course. And it's the internet that makes your smartphone really useful, isn't it? You switch it to aeroplane mode. You haven't got much more than a pocket calculator.

[3:38] Your smartphone is not so smart if it's not connected in. And this, of course, was the point that Jesus was making in our passage. Romans didn't have smartphones, though I'm sure they would have loved them if they had.

The Roman Empire was all about communication and keeping in touch with all the far-flung provinces, but they had to do it the hard way with messengers. They would have loved to have

smartphones and the internet, but they didn't.

And so, of course, Jesus takes a different metaphor in our passage. This metaphor of the vine. I am the vine.

You are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit. Apart from me, you can do nothing. That's the key verse of this passage, of course.

As I said, the ancient world didn't have computers, but the metaphor of the vine was a very potent one, particularly in Jewish thought. Most of us, of course, are not farmers or probably don't grow vines in our garden, but, of course, the Jewish society was set up originally as an agricultural society.

[5:00] And the metaphor, being able to grow things, was very important. Of course, it still is, actually. We've all got to eat. And most food is grown. So what's a vine for?

Well, obviously, the purpose of a vine is to produce fruit, isn't it? That's what it's for. If you plant a grape vine, it's because you want grapes.

If you plant a tomato plant, it's because you want tomatoes. And the grape vine was an important symbol of the Old Testament.

There's lots of references to grape vines in the Old Testament. Sometimes, just the grape vine was an indication of peace and prosperity. So you get that rather delightful bucolic image from Micah, Micah 4, verse 4, which says, Just imagine sort of relaxing under your fig tree and just reaching up and pulling off a grape or a fig.

You don't have to keep a lookout because you're protected by the Lord. And again, of course, in other places, the vine is used as a sign of God's blessing.

[6:23] So in Zechariah 8, verse 12, they read, The seed will grow well, the vine will yield its fruit, the ground will produce its crops, and the heavens will drop their dew.

I will give all these things as an inheritance to the remnant of this people. The Lord's blessing, the vine was a sign of the Lord's blessing. But in many passages, there's even stronger use of this metaphor.

And that psalm that we sung at the moment, Psalm 80, is certainly one of them. Because in the Old Testament thought, very often, Israel itself is the vine.

So, Psalm 80, verse 8, says, You brought a vine out of Egypt. You drove out the nations and planted it.

And yet the problem was with this vine, was there seemed to be something wrong with it. It never grew as healthily as it should have done. And so Hosea writes, Israel was a spreading vine, but he brought forth fruit for himself.

[7:34] As his fruit increased, he built more altars. As his land prospered, he adorned his sacred stones. Instead of giving thanks to the Lord for the blessing, he gave thanks to foreign gods.

Jeremiah has a similar thought. Long ago, you broke off your yoke and tore off your bonds. You said, I will not serve you, you being the Lord here, of course.

Indeed, on every high hill, on every spreading tree, you lay down as a prostitute. So instead of laying down under the vine, remembering the Lord, they worshipped foreign gods again.

I had planted you like a choice vine, a sound and reliable stock. How then did you turn against me into a corrupt wild vine? Israel was supposed to be the cultivated vine, but it went rogue, it went wine, it went wild.

So, when Jesus says in John 15, verse 1, he is the true vine, he's really saying, I am the true Israel. as we saw in Psalm 80, did you notice that bit?

[8:56] That as your vine is cut down, it is burned with fire. At your rebuke, your people perish. Let your hand rest on the man at your right hand. So perhaps this man originally was Jacob, but we can recognize that Jesus is claiming this prophecy here, this word here, that he is in fact, the true vine.

That your hand rest on the man at your right hand, the son of man you've raised up for yourself. Then we will not turn away from you. Revive us and we will call on your name.

Restore us, O Lord God Almighty. Make your face shine upon us that we must be saved. That's Psalm 80, verses 16 to 19. Jesus is claiming in this word here, he says that the blessing rests on, the Lord rests on him and if we remain in the vine then we will not turn away.

We will be revived and we will call on the name of the Lord. So in other words, as we may put it, Jesus himself is the answer to that prayer of Psalm 80.

What's the Father's purpose in this? Well, Jesus tells us that as well in verse 8. This is to my Father's glory that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

[10:30] Verse 16, you did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.

As we've said, the purpose of a vine is to produce fruit. We plant a vine because we want grapes. That's what it's there for and if it doesn't do it, then it's useless.

And so Jesus reminds us that the vine has to be pruned. Verse 3 and verse 6. And if it doesn't do that, it might as well just be thrown away and burnt.

There's no point in keeping it. Just claiming to be part of the vine or going through religious rituals is not good enough. You might just quote again those verses from Jeremiah.

I had planted you like a choice vine of sound and reliable stock. How then did you turn against me into a corrupt wild vine?

[11:34] And he goes on to say, although you wash yourself with soda and use an abundance of soap, the stain of your guilt is still before me, declares the sovereign Lord. The fine has to be proved.

As we said, the internet is very useful. We can talk to people in Australia, which would have taken weeks at least, just a couple of generations ago.

You can talk to your relatives in Australia more or less face to face now. And yet there's much in it that is evil and harmful. There's so much talk about how you can remove the harmful material without destroying the whole thing.

Well, might be a problem for the internet, but for the vine at least, we know how to do it. You have to prune off the unfruitful branches. But amongst the people of God, it may actually be very hard in practice to maintain a pure church.

And I think that's what's being suggested here. And yet, Jesus makes it clear that the Father will do it. And I think we have to be clear on this.

[12:55] You know, we don't like to criticise people, but we have to say that liberal, compromised Christianity has a built-in death wish. It's an invitation to be pruned, cut off and divine.

So often it claims to be modern and diverse, but actually, as Jeremiah said, it's just gone wild. In practice, it doesn't bear lasting fruit.

And Jesus is absolutely clear that in that case, it's destined for burning. We see so much of it, don't we? We've seen it on these debates in the Anglican Church on marriage and so on.

People want to appear modern and up-to-date. But what they're really doing is, as I say, going wild and inviting the Lord to cut them off from the vine.

So this is clearly an important topic. But there are two questions that are immediately raised and now come in their minds we need to answer.

[14:13] So the first of these is what exactly is this fruit? What does Jesus mean when he says you will bear fruit? And the second question, of course, is how exactly do we remain in the vine?

What do we need to do? Or how does it work to remain connected to the vine? So let's just think about this for a little bit.

And the thing that's perhaps slightly surprising here is that in this passage Jesus doesn't actually go into a lot of detail. One thing he does say a lot about though you will have noticed is love.

Love is clearly the key. Love for the Father, love for the Son, love for one another. And this flows from the love, this flows, love, sorry, this love flows from the Father and the Son.

This comes all the way through our passage in verses 9 to 14. But love can mean a lot of different things, can't it? We need to be clear what sort of love it is.

[15:35] It is love as he loved us, verse 12. And although this was firstly addressed of course to the apostles, it surely intended for all

the redeemed everywhere you note in verse 6 it says anyone, it's not just for the apostles, anyone must remain in the vine if they want to be considered a disciple of the Lord Jesus.

And we see in verse 11 this love involves joy but its main characteristic is obedience in verses 10 and 12 and 14 and 17. Jesus returns to this idea of discipleship in verse 8 and if necessary sacrifice in verse 13.

How do we do this? Well, this obviously requires a study of all the Lord's commands. We couldn't possibly list all the stuff here. Paul does give a list though, you're probably familiar with it in Galatians 5 and 22 and 23.

He says the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Against such things there is no law. I don't think he intends this as a complete list. The point here I think is that this fruit can't be achieved by legislation.

[17:04] It's not meant as a complete list because elsewhere for instance Paul himself is more general. In Ephesians 5 verse 9 he says for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth.

And in fact in a sense it refers to more of a lifestyle. Colossians 1 10-12 says we pray that in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way bearing fruit in every good work growing in the knowledge of God being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience and joyfully giving thanks to the Father who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of saints in the kingdom of light.

Colossians 1 10-12 perhaps we can get a clue as to why we don't just get a list in John 15 from Paul's phrase that against such things there is no law if you start listing the fruit or trying to list the fruit it becomes a box ticking exercise doesn't it?

obviously the fruit does have some content it's not antinomianism it's not just a warm feeling this fruit it is definite stuff that you should be doing that's clearly the case we have after all Paul's list in fact if you think about it we have the whole of the Sermon on the Mount don't we?

surely that's all about fruit sort of fruit that Jesus requires but I think that neither Jesus nor the apostles actually want us to try to assemble a definitive list of what the fruit of the spirit might be because if you tried it would come out longer than Deuteronomy I suspect and even worse it would just be a box ticking exercise against such there is no law and that I think was why it's called fruit you plant a grape rind what you get is grapes you don't have to sort of check do you examine the biology and the biochemistry of this fruit just to check that it really is a grape if you plant a grape vine you get grapes you know it's grape because it came from the grape vine just occasionally you need to check that it's healthy there's nothing wrong with the grape vine as we already said but essentially if you plant a grape vine you get grapes and that's why I think this is described as fruit it's not a box ticking exercise it's all good works as

[20:05] Paul puts in the Puritans used to say that everything the law forbids is actually an encouragement to its opposite and I think that's perhaps a good way to think about it so the command says do not commit adultery but that's a very sort of thin thing in a sense isn't it surely it means well more than you mustn't go and literally sleep with somebody else's wife it's much more a command to an encouragement to live a faithful and fruitful married life that's what the command really means in that sense there's no law against the law in a sense gives us a hint but it's not the whole truth so the Puritans understood that well I think and we could perhaps keep that thought in mind that everything the law forbids is actually encouragement to do its opposite that is righteousness and if we look at it this way that verse 16 is a bit puzzling it seems a bit puzzling becomes clear we wonder what Jesus means doesn't he when he says you did not chose me but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit and then he says fruit that will last then the father will give you whatever you ask in my name we wonder about that don't we does that mean

I don't know why it's always a Ferrari but a Ferrari is the illustration that's always given here does that mean if we pray for a Ferrari the lord will give us one James makes it clear of course that's not

what's meant at all the point is that if you're part of the grape vine then what you will ask for is grapes that's what a grape vine does it produces grapes that's its purpose and if a grape vine could have it could pray it would pray that it would produce better grapes and this is exactly what Jesus is saying here you need to produce fruit that will last and that's what you should be asking to do you should be asking that the father will give you that fruit that will last and if we remain in the vine then he will do that what you will ask for is fruit sorry that's the slide for that point what the father gives you when you pray for it is fruit but then there's this question of how exactly how we remain in the vine isn't it it's all very well in the sense to say we need to remain in the vine but how does that work in practice what does that actually mean if we look briefly into this passage the short answer is it seems to be obeying

Jesus words in verse 7 and verse 10 but it's clear that something more than just sort of book learning is meant here isn't it that wouldn't be fruit and so we can unpick this by looking at the context of this vine illustration which as Daniel was explaining to us last week is all about the work of the spirit so in 1426 in 1526 chapter 16 in verse 7 and verse 13 to 15 I won't quote them all but it's all about the work of the spirit and there is a distinction between the word of Jesus and the spirit the point is in 1613 you won't get the word really without the spirit not in any meaningful way so if we could return to our internet illustration there is a logical distinction between the data on the server that you want to access somewhere in wherever it is in California or somewhere and the connection the internet and the router and the system the TCP

IP protocol which it all uses to bring that data to you but they're not in competition without the data sitting there on that server somewhere your internet itself is useful it doesn't bring you anything useful conversely the mechanism for transferring the data doesn't invent the data itself it doesn't introduce new data it doesn't say you know I don't like the way the server put that I'm going to change that its job is to bring that data to you as faithfully as it possibly can and this surely is the work of the spirit to bring the words of the Lord the words of Jesus to us faithfully they're not in competition the word and the spirit they're in harmony that's what the spirit does brings the word to us and again we find that so much liberal christianity wants to undermine the scriptures by saying oh that's all 2,000 years old it's all out of date now well I've looked at various bibles and nowhere have I found a use by date on it we need to listen to the spirit today of course we do but what the spirit brings us is the word of Jesus scripture doesn't come with a best before date in fact

Jesus himself returns refers to the old testament doesn't he john 10 35 said he called them gods to whom the word of god came and the scripture cannot be broken the scripture is the word of god and sure we have to think of what it means in AD 2000 when it was written in BC 500 but it's still the word of god it doesn't come with a best before date the spirit brings that word to us it's not to say we don't increase in understanding we don't just go back to what was done thousands of years before I mean when the Mayflower sailed with the pilgrims they were told the lord has yet more light and truth to break forth from his word and that I'm sure is true we talk about the church always being reformed by the word but it is by the word we don't do it by divorcing the spirit from the word and saying as if the internet would say

[27:05] I don't like that data I'm going to update it a bit that's not the way it works the spirit brings the word of god to us and it's the word of god as we find it Jesus himself constantly based his theology on the old testament didn't he he didn't say that's out of date now I've changed it on the contrary he says do not think that I've come to abolish the law of the prophets I've not come to abolish them but to fulfill them it's Jesus himself who interprets the scriptures by his teaching it's not the job of some 21st century bishop or politician to tell us what Jesus should have said so as we do to a close the way to remain in the vine is for his presence to become living water within us as he promised it would the sap as it were becomes the living water in our hearts but how do we do it we do it by remaining faithful to his word by listening to what the spirit has to say and by being disciples of the

Lord Jesus that's how we remain in the vine the wild vine as it were has lost its genetic background it's gone it's as if it's somehow got mutated or gone wrong to remain in the vine we need to remain rooted in the scriptures and in the teaching of the Lord Jesus and his apostles so that's just all no more to say really stay connected to the network remain in the vine and if you remain in the vine

Jesus says you will bear fruit because after all that's what vines do isn't it I am the vine you are the branches if you remain in me and I in you you will bear much fruit fruit he doesn't say you may bear much fruit he says you will bear much fruit if we remain in the vine and we will bear much fruit