

“Vital Vintage Union”

John 15.1–6

¹“I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. ²Every 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. ³You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. ⁴Abide 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. ⁵I 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. ⁶If 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.” [NASB]

HOPE
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I. Introduction

There was not a little confusion when Lily Tomlin moved into Steve Martin’s body in the 1984 movie “All of Me.” Imagine asking the question “who am I,” and getting two very reasonable—but very different—answers. Roger and Edwina both claimed possession and dominion of the flesh they inhabited, although Edwina perhaps needed to make a few more adjustments than Roger did. Two souls in one body. Very confusing. Is this why we resist the Lord Jesus Christ abiding in us and us in Him? Or are we more like Donald Sutherland in the 1978 movie [Invasion of the Body Snatchers], terrified that Jesus will mount an invasion while we sleep and snatch our bodies away from us?

Like the doctrine of election, you just cannot avoid in Scripture the doctrine of union with Christ. It is everywhere in Scripture. Even in passages that seem to have nothing to do with this union... the very reading of the passage confronts you with the decision: will you abide in the Word you are reading and will it abide in you?

Our union with Christ is a very great mystery. Even the Apostle Paul who does not shy away from declaring things which are “difficult to understand”^{2Pe3.16} calls this union a great mystery.^{Eph5.32} Nevertheless, from the image Jesus give us here we can understand some vital vintage principles of our union with Christ. I will discuss four such principles.

II. Vital Vintage Union Begins with Father and Son

First principle: *Vital Vintage Union Begins with Father and Son*. ¹“I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser.” After all the discussion of the peace Jesus leaves with us and gives us, don’t you just expect Him to start this picture of the vine with something like, “I am the vine, you are the branches”? In fact... what words do you usually think of when somebody mentions the “Jesus as the Vine” parable? Don’t you normally think of the words, “I am the vine, you are the branches”?

But how does the Bible begin? “In the beginning you...”? No, but “In the beginning God...” And so begins this parable. ¹“I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser.” Hey! Doesn’t even mention you and me! So let’s hear first of the Vine and the Vinedresser.

A. I AM the true vine

I AM the true vine. This is a very exclusive and a very inclusive statement. *Exclusive*, because Jesus means that He is the ONLY true vine. There are other vines, and if you are a branch of another vine then you are a branch sustained by the poison sap of untruth and deceit. *Inclusive*, because Jesus means He is the vine from which *any* who would be a branch will be nourished with truth and vitality. Even as Jesus said earlier, ^{6:51}“I am *the* living bread that came down out of heaven; if *anyone* eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread also which I will give for the life *of the world* is My flesh.” Inclusive: *anybody*. Exclusive: *Only Jesus*.

B. My Father is the vinedresser

My Father is the vinedresser. Jesus does not jump right to the branches. He first declares His Father. Before we even start thinking of ourselves in this picture, Jesus draws our attention to One who is much bigger and more prominent than ourselves. Without even any mention of branches, Jesus declares the One with whom all branches have to do. It may be sort of obvious and intuitive that if we are branches we are branches of a vine. (Though we sure like to ignore the obvious.) But before even mentioning the branches, Jesus names the One who will *prune* or *remove* the branches.

This may strike us as surprising, but the vinedresser—the branch pruner and chopper—is actually more important and more powerful than the branches. Furthermore, the Vinedresser is

even more prominent than the Vine. He is, after all, dressing the Vine. His purpose is to make the Vine perfect and productive and glorious.

Principle #1: Vital vintage union begins with the Father and the Son. From all eternity the Father promised to the Son a pure, spotless, holy bride. For His part, the Son promised to the Father to be the life-blood of God’s elect. Thereby the Son would uphold the glory of God’s mercy and faithfulness to keep His promises.

III. Vintage Union Finds Vitality in the Visible Church

Second vital vintage principle: *Vintage Union Finds Vitality in the Visible Church.* ²“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.”

We are immediately struck by the question, “How can there be a branch in Christ that does not bear fruit?” Or we might fearfully come to the next question, “Haven’t you been assuring us that we who are saints in Christ will undoubtedly persevere to the end? What is this about being cut off or taken away?” Vintage union finds vitality in the visible church. Or we might put it this way: the visible church is the place of distinguishing, of vitality, and of fruit-bearing.

A. *The Place of Distinguishing*

The visible church is the place of distinguishing vintage union. I’m starting with this one because once again, Jesus is not so much talking about you and me bearing fruit. Rather, He is focusing on the work of the vinedresser. There are only two primary actions in v2: taking away, and pruning. And there are only two kinds of branches: those that bear fruit and those that do not. Those that do not get taken away. Those that do get pruned. The confusing thing is that both kinds of branches are branches *in Jesus the true vine*.

We must take care not to push metaphors and parables further than the Author intended. But we also must not underestimate Jesus’ use of them. Jesus is speaking to the disciples, not to the world at large. In this very Upper Room where they are gathered they had just witnessed a striking demonstration. A branch who from all appearances was in the vine has been taken away. Judas Iscariot was part of the visible church. But any fruit he bore was rotten in the core, regardless of what it looked like on the outside. And now Satan had entered into him and he has gone to betray Jesus.^{13.27}

How long Jesus had kept the door open for Judas! Even as Jesus dipped the morsel and gave it to Judas, Judas could have received Jesus and repented—showing fruit of vitality—and shown himself part of the invisible church. But he was not, and with the words “What you do, do quickly,” Jesus excommunicated the disciple who had proved himself a dead branch and no part of the invisible church.

Within the visible church is where fruit-bearing branches will be distinguished from non fruit-bearing branches.

B. *The Place of Vitality and Fruit-Bearing*

Oh, okay, so that means that if we don’t want to be distinguished, we should just not be part of the visible church! No, not so. Outside the visible church, there is no distinction because Jesus never indicates we should expect vitality outside the church. Only dead wood, drying and ready for burning. No distinction necessary.

To the contrary, the visible church is the place not only of distinguishing but also THE place of vitality and fruit-bearing in vintage union. Fruit bearing and more fruit bearing... on account of vitality and pruning. Pruned with a purpose. Make that into a license plate! This is one of those

passages in which we both delight and dread, is it not? Like, ^{Heb12:6}“For whom the LORD loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives.” Good result... painful process.

We are fed *in the Church* by the Word and the Sacrament. We are also pruned *in the Church* by the Word and the Sacrament. *In the Church*, God leads us by the hearing of the Word, to faith and repentance. Fruit and pruning.

Did you know that every branch of a tree begins at the pith of the trunk... that is, at the center of the core of the tree? A branch does not start in the outer rings of the trunk, it starts at the very core. That is how deeply you are united to Jesus... to His very core. You get all your life from Him. If anything interrupts the flow of sap from the vine to the branch, the branch dies. If anything could interrupt the flow of grace from Christ, our souls would shrivel up and die.

The place where He has ordained for grace to flow to us is *in the Church*. It is also the place where we face our greatest tribulations. Yes, the world mocks us because we are in the Church. But the dangers and conflicts we face *within* the church are more trying than the discomforts and persecution from outside. Yet, having peace with God through faith in Jesus Christ, these trials produce hope that does not disappoint. Fruit and pruning... that we might bear yet more fruit. In the visible Church.

IV. Vital Vintage Union is Necessary for Justification and Sanctification

Third vital vintage principle: *vital vintage union is necessary for justification and sanctification*. There can be no justification and there can be no sanctification apart from vital vintage union with Jesus.

A. Justification

Justification. ³“You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you.” Cleansed by the Word. Listen to Paul. ^{Titus3.5}“[God] saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, ⁶whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.”

Justified by His grace; made heirs according to the hope of eternal life. Your conscience is cleansed by the Word of his promise. You have no hope of eternal life if your conscience convinces you that you must bear the guilt of your sins. Such guilt incurs eternal death and destruction under the righteous anger of our Holy God. But if Jesus persuades you by His promise that He bore the guilt of your sins on the cross, and that no guilt is left to your account, then your conscience is free from condemnation.

God is satisfied because His own Son satisfied the Law’s penalty for your sins. Furthermore, your conscience cannot accuse you of not having done enough—not having fulfilled all requirements of the Law for obedience—because Jesus did far more than enough for you. He fulfilled all righteousness and gave you the ticket—the title to heaven—that comes with such obedience. When you receive the word of His promise by faith, the works of His obedience are all accounted to you.

Again, notice: “You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you.” Just minutes before, Jesus had said, ^{13.10}“You are clean, but not all of you.” But now, the unclean one—Judas Iscariot—has left. The unclean one is no longer among the clean ones; he is out plotting to kill the Cleanser of consciences.

B. Sanctification

Sanctification. ⁴“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.” The washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit go beyond our right relationship in Jesus Christ to the Law. Regeneration and renewal are works of sanctification, of being renewed in the whole man after the image of God. These are works where Christ is being formed in us. ^{Gal4.19} These are works where Christ in you, the hope of glory, becomes evident. ^{Col1.27}

These are works where Christ becomes not only wisdom and righteousness, but sanctification. ^{1Co1.30} These are works where Jesus Christ pours into you His own holiness of His human nature. This is a *real* change—a newness of heart—that builds from the change of your status *relative to* the Law. And this real change is what produces fruit.

Now, lest you be concerned that you are Steve Martin or Donald Sutherland, how is it that Christ abides in you? This is more than living in a house. This is more than sitting under the influence of a teacher. This is an inward, enduring personal communion... a *union*. Jesus gave us another very graphic picture of this when He said, ^{6.56}“He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him.” Deep, deep union.

Christ abides in you by His Spirit dwelling in you. You are the temple of God’s Holy Spirit. And Christ abides in you by transferring the holiness of His human nature into you; Christ is formed in you. And Christ abides in you by conferring *grace* into you, empowering you to live according to the holiness of Christ’s human nature formed in you.

I have just described a *habitual* sanctification. Holiness inhabits you. It is not confused with who you are, and it has not snatched your body away from you. But it transforms you, conforms your will to God’s will. And it bears fruit. Much fruit. But only as you abide in Him and He in you.

You need the sap or you die. You need it constantly. You cannot say, “Okay, I’ve got a store of grace and of sanctification that should last for, say, nineteen or twenty days.. I can probably squeeze it out for twenty-one... so see y’all around in three weeks.” See, if you are apart from Christ for three minutes—three microseconds... nay a mere instant of time no matter how small, all bets are off. All prospect of fruit is nonexistent. The gatherer of rotten and dried up branches is on His way, and you’re sticking straight out into His path.

Vital vintage union is necessary for justification and sanctification. Constant... eternal union.

V. Vintage Union Presents Consequences for Vitality and Hypocrisy

Fourth and final vital vintage principle: *vintage union presents consequences for vitality and hypocrisy*. ⁵“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. ⁶If 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.” Fruit or fire; productivity or perdition.

A. Fruit

Fruit. “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.” Okay, He’s finally out with it. You now know He is talking about *you* when He mentions the branches. But Jesus employs some unexpected logic here. He says that if you remain in Him and He in you, you will bear much fruit, because without Him you can do nothing. Well, logically, we could say “Okay, without Him I can do nothing... but that only means that with Him I *can* do *something*. I don’t *have* to do something, but I *can* if I want to since I am in Him.

Much as we love our logic, we're better off abiding in Jesus' logic... abiding in Jesus' word. What Jesus does here, is set up a mutually exclusive contrast. There is no middle ground. Apart from Him you can do nothing and you will do nothing. Abiding in Him you not only can but you *will* bear fruit—no, not just fruit—*much* fruit. It's all or nothing; much fruit or no fruit. No middle ground of just bearing *some* fruit at your discretion.

Do you feel fruitless? Do you feel like your efforts in the church and outside the church are worthless? Do you wonder if you can ever do *anything* of value as a citizen of God's kingdom? Will you please listen to this? “I AM the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit.” Believe the Word rather than your fluttering eyes. Believe the Word rather than your fluctuating feelings. If you abide in Him and He in you, *you bear much fruit*... whether or not you feel like you do!

B. Fire

Fire. The image is too obvious, and I shan't spend much time on it. The message here is very similar to that of Hebrews 6. ⁴“For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, ⁵and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, ⁶and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame. ⁷For ground that drinks the rain which often falls on it and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is also tilled, receives a blessing from God; ⁸but if it yields thorns and thistles, it is worthless and close to being cursed, and it ends up being burned.”

If you abide in Christ and He in you, you will never fall away. You can't. Jesus is eternally united to His Father, so if you are in Him you cannot be *disunited*. You will bear much fruit—good fruit not thorns and thistles—and God will be glorified. Don't *worry*, be happy.

But if you are not in Christ and He in you, don't *wait*, be unhappy. Be very unhappy with the prospect of being cast into the fire and burned. Be very unhappy until you fly to Jesus and dive into His embrace for life. As soon as you do, you will know that He is already in you, never to leave you barren. Ever. Vital and fruitful. Forever.