

"I am the true vine."

Thoughts on John 15

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There is no place where the selfishness of our nature oftener betrays itself than in the way we look at scripture. We do not ourselves always know how our thoughts of the word of God tell the tale of our state in the sight of God. I do not speak merely of such extreme cases as that of the avowed unbeliever — though he too shows what his condition is — as being not merely bad but unable to appreciate what is good, not only not obedient in heart but rejecting and rebelling against the only light whereby God Himself brings a man out of darkness to the knowledge of Himself. It is plain, therefore, that, rejecting the word, he as good as says to God that he desires not the knowledge of His ways. But then the children of God themselves let us see what their state of mind is, not only by their want of relish for the word, or their want of appetite for every means that will give their souls an increasing enjoyment of the Lord, but, further, by the way in which they take it up, by their understanding or rather misunderstanding of it. For this is the secret of true intelligence: people do not understand the word by brighter minds than others, but by a more obedient heart. It is the single-eyed desire to do the will of God which insures intelligence of His word. And the Spirit of God it is that produces both the one and the other. Assuredly it is the will that darkens the understanding; and, where the Spirit of God gives a soul to please the Lord, there the obstruction in the way of His word disappears. When by grace we want to do His will, the light of God is assuredly not withheld: it is the will when not judged which produces darkness for us.

In no instance perhaps do we find this more frequently than in the way in which this chapter is taken. When men are not thoroughly happy in the Lord, they use the vine as a means of assurance to their souls, comforting themselves with the thought that they are in Christ, and that they will be kept by Him. They take the vine as the Lord viewed as a Saviour. But this is not the meaning of the chapter; for the vine is not introduced to shew His sustaining grace in carrying us through, but the responsibility of all who bear the name of Christ, the true vine, and the means of producing fruit unto God. Consequently it is not a question of abiding in Christ simply for security, nor of the grace that keeps up the feeble. Where this is required, the Lord presents Himself as a rock; and no matter how feeble one may be, if one rests on the foundation, the feeblest thing cannot be moved. There is indefeasible security for us in Christ. So again, if He tells us that we have eternal life, He shows also that we are in His hand and in His Fathers hand. It is evident on the face that none will be able to pluck us out of their hand.

But when we reach the figure of the vine, there is another truth. It is to show the absolute necessity of fruit being borne for God; and consequently the Spirit of God tells us here what the hindrances, at least what the ways of God with us, are. Now the first and grand point is that Christ Himself is the spring of all that contributes to fruit-bearing in any. It is not good desires only, nor the word of God; and it is not at all our being saved, though all these are precious and blessed and important in their place. Nay, it is not even prayer, nor is it the various means that God gives for sustaining our souls and cheering us on. But the one secret of fruit-bearing is having Christ before our souls and continually reminding ourselves that we belong to Him as branches to the vine — not merely as the hymn has it:-

For as the branches to the vine,

So would we cling to Thee.

The sense is not at all here one of security, though this be of course most true, but dependence on Christ and bringing Him in responsibility to God

The Jews regarded themselves as the only people in the world that God looked upon. Consequently their tendency was always to put inordinate value on the fact of being Jews. It was very important that the Gentiles should own the place of the Jews, but it only puffed up the souls of the Jews themselves to be occupied with it. It was all right for the centurion to feel how precious the Jews were to God; but there is no strength in the Jew continually boasting of his peculiar privileges. We want more than that if we are to bear fruit, and this is what Christ substitutes for it — Himself; to have Him as the One that we are inseparably a part of, wherever we may be or whatever our duty. Supposing I am in a family which puts me to great trial, if I look at either the family or the trial I may give way to a murmuring spirit; but let me remember, in the midst of that family, in my business, or in anything else, the secret that produces fruit is that I look up to God, remembering that I am a part of Christ in this sense — a branch of the only true vine. It is full of solemnity withal, and checks the spirit of finding fault. Does not Christ know all about the family, the business, the bodily health, the snares or the malice of others, the sorrow, all the things that try me day by day? What has He put me here for? To bear fruit. Of what kind? The fruit that suits the vine, even our Lord Himself. You are in Christ as branches in a vine.

It is not a question of being members of His body to be cared for by Christ, but of being branches of the vine to bear fruit for God. "Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away." There are times when the Lord so does, as He has ever done. There are times when the work is done, or the Lord sees fit for any reason to take away, whether there has been all the fruit that He looks for, or whether they are not bearing fruit. "And every branch in me that beareth fruit he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit." We see that every one who is bearing fruit is tried, has dangers, difficulties, and a great deal to break the spirit. We need it. It is all a mistake to suppose that, because a branch bears fruit, He does not purge; whereas that which does bear good fruit He deals with and disciplines, that it may bear more. And what a comfort for us to know that it is all for His glory! It is only a little cup of sorrow by the way, but the fruit is everlasting. Is that very hard to bear — discipline in this world, that the fruit may last for ever?

Now He addresses the disciples, and tells them that they were already clean through the word that He had spoken unto them. He does not say, Through the blood that I am going to shed. This was not a fact yet; but the word connects itself with our responsibility, the blood with His grace. The chapter is full of our responsibility, and it is the word of God that deals with our shortcoming and makes us feel what the will of God is.

But there are two kinds of cleansing true of every Christian. There is the word, by which a man is first converted to God, when he gets a new nature that hates sin, and by the same word he is afterwards cleansed practically. It is the purifying of every day. Besides, the believer is (as all know) washed by blood, the precious blood of Christ, that he may be clear from all question of guilt. The former is connected with our responsibility to bear fruit for God. We must be cleansed first, but already it was true that they were born of God, and now the urgent call was to bear fruit. It is not here connected with the fact that their sins were forgiven. This might be true; but there was more than this true. The believer receives a new and holy nature, and it is in virtue of this that he is called upon, by having Christ before him, and the continual remembrance that he bears His name in this world, to bear fruit for God. For we can only act for the Lord by acting from the Lord; and we cannot act from the

Lord except we are abiding in Him, which means the habit of continually looking and referring to Him, of dependence upon Him. Therefore He says, "Abide in me." He does not say, I will abide in you for eternal life, but He exhorts them to abide in Him, that they may bear fruit. There is responsibility throughout.

"As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine, no more can ye except ye abide in me." It is not a question of eternal life, but of bearing fruit for God; and He who best knew says that it is by abiding in Christ. How is it that we do not bear fruit? It is when we are not abiding in Christ, where something of flesh or world carries us away; wherever we have an object that is not Christ, although the object itself may be right. If we walk in dependence on Christ, continuing in His love, and not drawn into what is unbecoming and beneath Him, we are kept: it is abiding in Christ. But wherever I have an object, even if it be a right one, I must take care that the way in which I seek to carry it out be right. Now the only thing that can make us either choose the right object, or take the right way, is having Christ before us. The vine does not represent Christ in heaven, but now on earth, and ourselves a part of that which bears His name here below. He knew it well whose words are "To me to live is Christ." His motive, his object, his life day by day was Christ. Not many of us can say this, or we may say it in very little measure. But there is nothing like it. May the Lord strengthen us earnestly to desire it, looking up to Him for grace to profit by His own word, and thus have it made true of ourselves! It was not because he was an apostle that Paul could so say. He did not lose his Christianity because he was an apostle; and we, though not possessing an official place, should earnestly seek it. Christ is better than all gifts, and better than any position in the church. Yet Christ belongs to the simplest Christian, and the simplest Christian is a branch in the vine as truly as an apostle.

Do not then let us excuse ourselves for our little faith shown in having grown so little. It is dependence on Christ that keeps one right. The strongest, if not dependent, will break down; the weakest will be kept if dependent. Let us then keep Christ simply and solely before our hearts.

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