

Adult Teaching Resources

April 29, 2018



Easter: Keeping Close (April 1-May 20)

Mark 16:1-8 – “Too Good to Be True?”

Psalm 133, Acts 4:32-35 – “Happy Together”

Luke 24:13-49 (RCL 24:36b-48) – “The Road to Hope”

John 10:1-18 – “The Good Shepherd”

John 15:1-8 – “The True Vine”

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The True Vine

John 15:1-8

FIT Teaching Guide

by David Woody

This adult teaching outline is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartlege, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

Bible Background

“Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.” John 15:4

Metaphors are powerful teaching tools, especially with biblical topics. Today, Jesus teaches about being faithful and responding to God, using the image of grape vines. For those who know a lot about gardening, this metaphor is perfect and explains what Jesus’ hope is for us. He takes a difficult topic and makes it understandable.

Regardless of your knowledge or comfort with vines and vineyards and gardening, this is a lesson everyone can comprehend.

Opening

After everyone has arrived, have each person to find a partner. Ask each person to answer these questions:

How “green” is your thumb? In other words, if you were put in charge of a garden (flower or vegetable, it doesn’t matter) what would the outcome be?

What is your experience with gardening?

What is your knowledge with gardening?

If someone starts talking to you about planting, pruning, and producing, do you have any idea what they are talking about?

After everyone has had some time to share, open the conversation for the entire class.

Who is your “master gardener,” the one everyone would go to for help?

Who is your “flower killer” the one no one wants near their plants?

Reading the Bible

Who does Jesus say he is? (the true vine) Who does Jesus say God is? (the vinegrower)

What does the vinegrower do? (he removes every branch that bears no fruit, he prunes every branch to make more fruit)

What are we? (the branches) What will happen for those who abide in Jesus? (they will bear much fruit)

What will happen to those who don't abide in Jesus? (they are thrown away and will wither, thrown into the fire and burned)

What will happen if we abide in Jesus and Jesus' words abide in us? (ask for whatever we wish and it will be done)

What is Jesus's ultimate hope in all of this? (God will be glorified, we will bear much fruit, and we will become disciples)

Making Connections

The metaphor of a vine and vineyard is common in scripture. Using the same message and lesson Jesus wanted to convey, what metaphor would you use for today's readers?

Jesus says he is the vine and God is the vinegrower. Who do you say that Jesus is? Who do you say that God is?

Using the vine metaphor, how is God "pruning" you and keeping you growing in a healthy way? What are some of the dead vines that God has pruned from you? What new growth has sprouted from those pruned branches?

Our Lesson Writer says, "although Jesus attributed pruning to the Father, there must be an element of self-pruning, too. In what ways are you self-pruning on your faith journey? What specific words of Jesus help you with your self-pruning?"

What does "abide in" mean to you? How does your definition relate to this passage? What does it mean to you to abide in Jesus?

As you think about this passage and the metaphor of producing good fruit, what good fruit have you produced? What good fruit are you currently producing? What good fruit are you working on producing?

So What?

Have everyone find their partner from the beginning of the lesson. Share the words of our Lesson Writer:

“When we as branches abide in Christ the vine, we will produce good fruit and live in joyful harmony with God, so Jesus could say “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you” (v. 7). While this may appear to be a blank check for answered prayer, it is not a promise that every plea for healing or success or profit will get a positive response. Those who fully abide in Christ and his words will seek the same things Christ seeks.

When we do this, we will ask according to God’s will, not our own will – and that will result in producing good fruit for the kingdom, to the glory of the Father. “My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples” (v. 8).

Notice the connection between “bearing fruit” and “becoming my disciples.” The two go together. Bearing fruit is a natural result of discipleship.”

Ask each partnership to explore these questions:

Do our actions point to us as authentic disciples producing the good fruit of love expressed toward both God and others?

Can we – as individuals and as members of the community of faith – say with confidence that we abide in Christ and follow his word?

Give everyone time to share and then gather the large group to discuss the answers.

The Challenge

This week, get a sheet of paper and make two columns. Label one “to prune” and one column, “to tend.” In the “to prune” column, make a list of what needs to be pruned in your life. In the “to tend” column, make a list of what needs to be tended for further growth. Ask God for help with the pruning and with the tending. As you go through the week, make a note of your progress with each column, thanking God for any progress you experience.

Prayer

Loving God, I have a lot of work that needs to be done in my life. Prune my dead branches away so new growth can emerge. Work with me to help me take care of the good fruit that I try to produce. Help me to abide in you all my days. Amen.

Digging Deeper

by Tony Cartlege

Digging Deeper is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartlege, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. Watch for the “shovel” icon in the THE BIBLE LESSON, and then reference that item in this Digging Deeper resource. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

Making wine—Today winemakers take special care to sanitize all of their equipment and add small amounts of chemicals to prevent bacterial growth in wine. After the grapes are crushed, a special variety of yeast is used to begin fermentation, which is carefully monitored. After fermentation, wine is aged in wooden barrels or large stainless-steel tanks.

Ancient wine makers weren’t nearly so careful. When grapes were harvested in late summer, they were typically crushed in treading floors cut into bedrock, though large clay vessels were occasionally used if distance to the treading floor was an issue. As in classic photographs from old Italy, the grapes were trodden with bare feet to prevent crushing the seeds, which could give the wine a bitter taste.



As in the example from Jezreel pictured below, the juice would run into a large vat cut from bedrock, while a depression in the treading floor collected skins and pips. Natural yeast from the grape skins and the air sparked the fermentation process. After a week or so, the wine would be transferred to jugs or skins for secondary fermentation and storage, often in silos that were also cut into stone.

Extra discourse—John 13-17 is often described as Jesus’ farewell discourse. A careful reading suggests that the author has constructed this in two stages. John’s version of the Lord’s Supper begins in chapter 13 and ends with 14:31, where Jesus says “Arise, let us be on our way.” We expect the next verse to picture Jesus and the remaining 11 disciples on their way to or in the Garden of Gethsemane, and that is precisely what we find with the first verse of chapter 18: “After Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the Kidron valley to a place where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered.”

But, between Jesus’ instruction to leave and their actual departure, we find three more chapters of dialogue, as if Jesus paused at the door and kept talking. This suggests that at one stage of the Fourth Gospel’s construction, the narrative moved directly from what we now label as 14:31 to 18:1, but at a later stage chapters 15-17 were inserted (keep in mind that chapter and verse numbers were added hundreds of years later). Some writers suggest that chapters 15 and 16 are purposefully designed to introduce Jesus’ “high priestly prayer” in chapter 17.

Digging Deeper *continued*

Prophets and grapevines—Isaiah also used the vineyard metaphor in a positive way. He also looked forward to a time when Israel would return to God and fulfill its call to live as a delightful and productive vineyard, of which God could say “I, the LORD, am its keeper; every moment I water it. I guard it night and day so that no one can harm it; I have no wrath” (Isa. 27:3).

The prophet Ezekiel used the metaphor of a vineyard to describe the Hebrews’ defeat and exile in Babylon: he spoke of Israel as a fruitful vine that ruled its land, but was later stripped of its fruit and transplanted to another land, where it grew weak (Ezek. 19:10-14). Other references to Israel as a vine can be found in Ps. 80:8-16; Jer. 2:21; Ezek. 15:1-8, 17:5-10; and Hos. 10:1.

“I am”—The Fourth Gospel records Jesus as describing his life and ministry through a variety of “I am” statements. These include “I am the bread of life” (6:35); “I am the light of the world” (8:12); “I am the gate for the sheep” (10:7, 9); “I am the good shepherd” (10:11); “I am the resurrection and the life” (11:25-26); “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (14:6); and “I am the true vine” (15:1, 5).

Pruning and cleansing—The Greek word used for “pruning” (*kathairō*) can also be used for “cleansing,” especially in the sense of ritual purity: being cleansed of all that would come between us and God, rendering us free from shame or wrongdoing.

The word is from the same root as the adjective *katharos*, which Jesus used after washing the disciples’ feet in John 13, where Jesus told a recalcitrant Peter: “One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you” (John 13:10). All were clean, that is, except for Judas.

In the current text, Jesus again said to the disciples, “You have already been cleansed by the word I have spoken to you” (15:3).

Chiastic abiding—J. Ramsey Michaels points to a chiasmic structure in vv. 5-8. After the introductory “I am the vine, you are the branches” (v. 5a), the next four phrases follow an *a b b’ a’* pattern:

- a* If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit;
- b* apart from me you can do nothing (v. 5).
- b’* If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are . . . burned (v. 6).
- a’* If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples (vv. 7-8).

Michaels elaborates: “The point of the sentence as a whole is that when branches remain with the vine they bear fruit, and when they do not they die. Clearly, *a* and *a’* are promises, while *b* and *b’* are warnings or threats. In *b* the negative point is made briefly; in *b’* it is developed at some length. Similarly, in *a*, the positive point is made briefly, and in *a’* more elaborately. A saying about answered prayer has been woven into *a’* as a specific

Digging Deeper *continued*

example of fruit-bearing (v. 7; cf. 14:13–14), and at the end Jesus' thought circles back to the Father, with the Father's glory as the ultimate reason for bearing much fruit and so becoming disciples (v. 8).

(*John*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series [Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011], 271–272.)

Bearing fruit and being disciples—On the subject of bearing fruit and becoming disciples (v. 8), Sarah J. Henrich has observed, “Bearing fruit does not create disciples; bearing fruit reveals disciples. Both of these activities are dependent on abiding in Jesus, the real vine” (*Feasting on the Word, Year B*, vol. 2 of Accordance electronic ed. [Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008], paragraph 10822).

The Hardest Question

by Tony Cartlege

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How long do grape vines produce?

Teachers may find the following information helpful as background material. After planting, grape vines cultivated for wine-making are usually pruned so that they are not allowed to produce grapes until the third year. This encourages them to put their energy into building strong roots and healthy wood stock, which is bound to a trellis to shape the vines for easy cultivation and maximum productivity. After reaching maturity, when carefully pruned, vines can produce at a high level for 30-35 years before their production slows.

Older vines produce fewer grapes, but sweeter ones. Their deeper root system assures adequate water when the weather is dry, while also avoiding excess water from shallow roots that result in bloated grapes on younger vines in a wetter than average season. The sap in older vines runs slower and thicker but is more consistent, resulting in grapes that are smaller but more concentrated.

Because of the virtues of old vines, some vineyards maintain them for 60, 80, or even 100 years despite their reduced yield. Instead of mixing them with the younger grapes, they are processed and fermented separately to produce specialty (and higher priced) wines. Vines in Australia have been known to produce for as much as 150 years.

The life expectancy of grape vines is influenced by location. As a rule, typical wine grapes live longer in drier climates such as parts of California and Australia. Muscadine grapes, however, flourish in the heat and humidity of the deep South. In Manteo, NC, is a scuppernong vine (a variety of muscadine) that is known as the “Mothervine.” The massive vine has been consistently cultivated since about 1584 – more than 400 years – and continues to produce grapes. Cuttings from the “Mothervine” have been used to plant an entire vineyard for making “Mothervine” wines. A short video about the vine can be found at this link: <http://www.themothervine.com/about-the-mother-vine/history/>.

When we think of our lives as branches abiding in Christ the vine, are we in it for the long haul?

For further reading, see this article on the “Lifecycle of a Wine Grapevine” (<http://winefolly.com/review/lifecycle-of-a-wine-grapevine/>) and Beppi Crosariol’s article, “When It Comes to Grapes, Old is Gold,” at <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/food-and-wine/wine/when-it-comes-to-grape-vines-old-is-gold/article4097539/>.

For different approaches to pruning, consider these: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IU2Ovh7wFJs>, and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GxDNGtoVjS0>. Others are easily found.

The Hardest Question *continued*

Helpful articles can also be found on Wikipedia, such as this one on the annual growth cycle of grape vines (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Annual_growth_cycle_of_grapevines), and this one on old vines (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old_vine).