

Defining Discipleship

John 15:1-8

Jesus left the upper room with the disciples and they made their way to the Garden of Gethsemane. There, they continued to talk. The ominous sense of last words being shared continued and Jesus spoke with an unusual solemnity. In the garden, Jesus said, "I am the true vine and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me..." and so Jesus introduced His description of the interdependent relationship of Father, Son and disciples.

It is necessary first that we understand the character of this relationship. If we think of the vineyard, the vine dresser, the vine itself, and the branches of the vine are each engaged in a common purpose which is to bring about an abundant and fruitful harvest. The metaphor is complicated by the volitional character of disciples as opposed to the inanimate function of the branches of the vine. A farmer would trim branches of the vine without any sense of judgment. There are no good or bad branches or branches that failed as opposed to those that functioned efficiently. The farmer prunes all the branches of the vine, there are no exceptions. All of the branches must be pruned every year although there are some branches that have died. Their usefulness has consequently expired. These branches are removed completely.

Enter Jesus' metaphor. The vine becomes the Lord Jesus Himself. He is the source of life and vitality for every branch (disciple) who is attached to Him. (Or associated with Him) There are several attitudes possible for these branches (disciples). A branch might become severed from the vine, it might die on the vine, or it might be healthy but still in need of annual pruning. All of the attention given to the branches is for the sake of or toward the achievement of a bountiful harvest. The farmer wants every bit of productivity that he can muster from his vineyard. At its core, the central concern is the relationship between the vine and the branches. The branches are useless without the vine. The vine is fruitless without the branches.

So we hear Jesus saying, "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, 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, bears much fruit, for without Me you can do nothing."

These words may have been very encouraging for the disciples. They were troubled by His announcement that He was going away to a place where they could not go. Here, He is saying that it will be necessary for them to continue to abide in Him for them to be fruitful in the future which indicates that they would continue to know and to be with Jesus in that future. Even more strongly, to have a fruitful future they would need to stay connected to Jesus and to draw all that sustained them from Him.

Again, there is the volitional character of those who are called His disciples. Throughout their experience with Jesus they were known to have their own ideas about things. They were not always easy to work with. They were not always cooperative. They were not always teachable. As such, and in those instances, they were not healthy branches. Like the time that Peter, James and John were engaged in a rivalry for the honor of sitting at Jesus' right hand and His left in the kingdom. Or, when Thomas refused to believe until he had touched the wounds in Jesus' hands and thrust his fist into the wound in His side. Or, when they all thought they were going to perish in the storm while Jesus slept. Or, when they asked who was guilty of sin, the man born blind or his parents and this right in front of the man they were discussing as if he were less than human.

And so in our own lives we easily fall into habits of thought and behavior that exclude our Savior. Where we exclude Him, we no longer abide in Him. Think of ways that we choose to either remain connected or not in the course of our lives. Parents ideally work together and raise their child in unity and with mutual support and respect. And yet, each parent was raised in completely different family structures. Some families are loud and others are quiet. Some argue frequently and others may have trouble discussing differences. Some children are spanked frequently (but not abusively) while others never experienced corporal punishment. Some homes are very disciplined and others are very chaotic. Out

of all of these divergent circumstances, people get married and then they set about raising their children together. Sometimes they don't agree and they work things out and unify around an approach unfamiliar to one or both of them. Sometimes one parent will impose her will upon the family even though the other parent strongly objects. The result is a splintering of the family. Resentment may bear the fruit of seditious behaviors and the child now is empowered to manipulate the parents so that the world the family lives in is now upside down.

In this illustration the parents failed to abide in one another. In our relationship with Christ we have to be very careful in the matter of our will as opposed to what Jesus has revealed to be His will. We all have lots of ideas and feelings and preferences but where do these things stand in respect to the will of God? While God is our creator and as such the source of our individual personality this cannot be seen as His endorsement of our every thought. Instead, it is our obligation to bring every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. We begin with the premise that our own thoughts will produce our greatest happiness and sense of fulfillment in life. The Bible counters with the claim that God loves us and in fact desires our greatest experience of fulfillment and satisfaction. It becomes a choice between trusting ourselves or trusting in God. To take the path suggested by my own thinking without regard for what God has revealed to be His will for me is to become a dead or useless branch that is no longer connected to the vine. Instead, and how much better it is for you and the Lord to be so connected that you cannot move forward in any matter until you have come to an agreement with Him so that you proceed together in unity with your Savior?

Such a condition is essential if the relationship between you and your Savior is to be fruitful. And, this is what you are meant for, to walk side by side with your Savior and to engage together in all that He desires and that you desire together. Stay together. Don't go off on your own. Live for Christ and not for self. You will not miss out! You will stop missing out!