

The Mystery of the Old Vine

A few weeks ago there was quite a bit happening underground at our house. An ash tree had fallen down a few years ago leaving a massive stump. I had the front yard marked for utilities which limited how far our stump man could dig out the roots. He marked the path and then came the robotic, remote-controlled stump blasting saw. It was a show. That stump was pulverized in about ten minutes.

That same week I planted a moon glow pear tree about 10 yards away. I gather it will be 2-3 years before fruit appears on that tree. It will be establishing its root system. And I as the gardener, aspiring orchardist that I am, will learn the times, seasons, and locations for pruning branches. I didn't plant it there to be an ornamental tree. I'm expecting moon glow pears from those branches.

Rooted in an Old Vine

Well a pear tree is not a grapevine, but the goal is the same: branches were made to bear fruit. And fruit comes when the branches are healthy and strong against the trunk. Today we hear our Lord Jesus say "I am the Vine, you are the branches." We can easily forget this vine is an old vine. The stock of this Vine, Christ Jesus, is the firstborn of creation, the Ancient of Days.

We are beloved branches on his vine, but we are not the first branches. From the vine of Christ, twelve branches grew first, the twelve apostles. These twelve were entrusted with the truth of God; these branches extended the Lord's vineyard to the nations. Without these first branches, we wouldn't be connected to the vine of Christ.

About four years ago, after his travels to the Mediterranean, my dad gave me a Greek icon from the 16th century called Christ the True Vine. You'll see this image on your screen momentarily. This icon expresses the truth of Scripture in images.

Christ is the central figure, the largest figure. Twelve branches extend from the true vine. The apostles hold open books or scrolls. These signify the New Testament writings the apostles

composed to teach and defend the truth of Christ. Fruit descends from the branches, signifying the Holy Spirit's productive work in the apostles as they abide in the love of the Son. From each apostle there are numerous leaves and shoots, a sign of more saints and churches growing from this vine. We ought to see ourselves in those leaves and new branches.

I bring our attention to these twelve branches, the books and scrolls the apostles hold because if we depart from Scripture and the apostles' teaching, that offshoot, that new branch becomes infected. It won't bear fruit because it's not drawing nutrients, water, oxygen, saps and sugars from the vine anymore. Any vintner will remove diseased or withering branches because they cannot possibly grow by themselves broken from the vine's trunk and its healthy branches.

In recent years we've seen an increase in spurious offshoots, branching away from Scripture, the teaching entrusted to the apostles, the true Vine of Christ. And where is this happening most? In conversations, blogs, and books on *spirituality and the inner life*. Some Christian writers, who have written faithfully in former years, such as Richard Rohr, now promote beliefs that are foreign to our ancient faith. Mysticism is all the rage right now, but it's a false, vague mysticism that denies sin, the reality of the cross, and the ancient faith we confess in the Nicene Creed. Instead some spiritual writers are encouraging their Christian readers to embrace Buddhist practices, panentheism, and universalism. What happens when a vine gets unwieldy? It becomes all tangled up. So, new spiritualities (which are really old heresies recycled in our times) place the second commandment—love of neighbor—above and against the first commandment—love of God. It's all tangled up. These are topics I can't fully address today; however, we need to recognize the modern offshoots when Christ describes branches that cannot bear his fruit.

Abiding in the Old Vine

We desire to remain united with our Lord Jesus, the true Vine, because the first and great commandment is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. When you abide in that commandment, the Father prunes the branches connected to the trunk. He will make us holy. That's what it means to be grafted onto the vine—you take the same nature as the

Vine. And what is the nature of the true Vine? “The Father loves me.” Those are the deep roots of the Vine. Remember this is an old vine, the Ancient of Days. Vinters know that old vines reach deep into the soil and pull the most nutrients and water into itself and outward to their branches. Old vines are more drought tolerant than new vines.¹ Jesus dwells in the love of the Father and the love he receives moves upward through its branches.

“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love.” It’s interesting that through this entire discourse, the command is *not* to bear fruit. The command is to *abide*. Abide in the love of Jesus, who abides in the love of his Father.

For the remainder of my remarks, I want to focus on abiding in Christ with simple prayers. The Lord Jesus said we would abide in his love by keeping his commandments. There is no higher commandment than loving God on a daily basis. Simple prayers train us to pray and live from the heart, to abide in Christ, and cultivate love for God day by day.

Recollection

We speak often about habits and spiritual disciplines at Apostles. We believe in the virtue and benefit of praying the Daily Office. We pray for family, friends, and intercede for others. But how do we stir up the affections of our hearts for the Lord? How often do you seek him simply for the goodness of his Presence?

Our most faithful spiritual teachers through the centuries teach about the importance of simple, sentence prayers to re-collect our soul throughout the day. The practice of recollection, as it’s called.

I want to focus on three sentence prayers of recollection to help you stir up your heart for the Lord Jesus and abide in his love.

¹ <https://winefolly.com/deep-dive/why-old-vine-wines-are-so-special/>

Abba! Father!

The first sentence prayer is simply two words: Abba! Father! St Paul gives us this prayer when he speaks of our adoption in Christ: “God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts crying ‘Abba! Father!’” With two words we’re experiencing three Persons moving in our hearts. Christ dwells by his Holy Spirit in our hearts, the Spirit sent by God the Father. Every time we pray ‘Abba! Father!’ it is a reunion of the heart with the Triune God.

Something stirs, something awakens in my heart when I pray ‘Abba! Father!’ I’m not talking about sentimentality or a momentary emotional experience; I mean something deeper. When I pray the Father’s name, I remember who I am. In the midst of my routines, my struggles, my fears, I call upon the Father to re-collect his presence. *He* has never left me. But my *attention* has left him. And when my attention drifts I forget who I am. I re-collect my heart when I pray his name.

I am his son, not by rights, but by adoption. He grafted me onto the Vine by his grace. I am not measured by productivity, I do not need to prove myself. He asks me to dwell in him, to seek him from the heart. Abba! Father!

He will not abandon me. We fear abandonment when it matters most. To pray Abba! Father! doesn’t mean you’ll always have instant relief. Growth often comes slowly. The Father is a gardener who prunes the branches of his vine. He will test our faith and trust. But persistence in this prayer means you’re training your heart for dry seasons. Your soul becomes more drought tolerant. Abba! Father!

The Jesus Prayer

The second sentence prayer to abide in Christ is known as the Jesus Prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.” In the hour of weakness; in times of temptation I call to him for help, “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.” And when I fail and sin, nursing anger or envy, stubbornly holding onto pride—any number of faults—I turn to his mercy, “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.”

Yet the mercy of God is not simply his forgiveness or his pardon. The mercy of God is also his gentleness, his healing, his goodness. His mercies are new every morning. Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me. His love is gentle, his love is healing, his love is good. Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me. Apart from you, I have no good thing. Apart from your mercy, I will never be satisfied. So let my heart awaken and pray in any circumstance, 'Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.'

Glory to God for All Things

The third sentence prayer to abide in the love of Christ is one by St John Chrysostom that I shared on Easter Sunday. St John Chrysostom said, "I have not ceased repeating these words in the midst of everything happening to me, 'Glory to God for all things'" Here is a simple prayer to abide in trials. I abide in his *love* when I do not understand what I *endure*: 'Glory to God for all things.'"

And how much more does my heart need to abide in Christ when I see his beauty and his glory? 'Glory to God for all things' when my eyes look to the southern sky in the early morning and I see the majesty of the Smoky Mountains. He has bathed his creation in glory. He gave us hearts for himself and he gave us hearts to be filled with joy. You cannot know true joy if you worship the mountain, the stars, or the planets as if they were God himself. That's where some have taken a terrible wrong turn in our time.

No, creation is a book. You look upon goldfinches, rainstorms, and rivers; moon glow pear trees, magnolias, and maples; dolphins, giraffes, and monkeys; super moons, sunsets, and constellations and we worship the Creator God saying 'Glory to God for all things.' We are priests of creation, we do not worship created things. We worship the Maker of heaven of earth.

“Praise the LORD from the earth, you great sea creatures and all deeps, fire and hail, snow and mist, stormy wind fulfilling his word!” (Psalm 148:7–8, ESV)

You need a simple prayer to stay rooted in joyful worship. Glory to God for all things. Awaken your heart with that prayer of praise and the Holy Spirit’s fruit of joy will cluster all around you.

Joy

“These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.” (John 15:11, ESV)

I was fascinated to learn that old vines are notorious for producing much more concentrated fruit than younger vines. Grapes on younger vines are more likely to produce unripe, astringent grapes. Not so with older vines: ripeness isn’t a problem. Their fruit is full and ripe for harvest.

Such is the joy of abiding in Christ. These prayers are not magic, far from it. This way of abiding is Christ actually depends on slow growth like an old vine. *Much is happening when you think or feel that nothing is happening.* The Holy Spirit is producing a concentration of joy that only comes from slow, steady growth over many years. G.K. Chesterton said, “Joy is the gigantic secret of the Christian.” His harvest of joy is coming.

St. Seraphim of Sarov, a saint of unceasing prayer and devotion, discovered the gigantic secret of joy abiding in Christ. St. Seraphim often received visitors seeking his counsel. He greeted all his guests saying: “My joy, Christ is risen.” It is a greeting and a declaration all in one. Here is my joy: Christ is risen.

You can’t fake that joy. But you can *train* your heart in that joy. So I suppose there’s a fourth simple sentence prayer to abide in Christ: “My joy, Christ is risen.” Concentrate that prayer, ripen that prayer in my heart until my joy is full in You alone, Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.