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as the Product of Abiding in Christ in John 15:1-17**

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The Gospel of John argues that Jesus lived a life that gave maximum glory to his Father (John 17:4). Therefore, it was only natural that Jesus would instruct his disciples on the way in which they would bring glory to the Father as they carried on his ministry: “By this my Father is glorified, *that you bear much fruit* and so prove to be my disciples” (John 15:8, emphasis added).¹ The significance that Jesus placed on believers bearing fruit cannot be overstated, but much remains to be understood about the nature of the fruitful life Jesus expounded.

The purpose of this paper is to uncover the meaning behind *karpō/j* in Jesus’ vine analogy in John 15:1-17. This essay will not seek for a comprehensive understanding of the use of fruit in the Bible, but only that which applies to the John 15 discourse. After briefly surveying the significance of the vine in Israel and in the Bible in general, the discussion will turn to an exegetical investigation of John 15. This analysis will provide the framework for understanding what a “fruitful” Christian life looks like in the context of Jesus’ explanation and mandate to abide in him.

Viticulture in Ancient Israel

When Jesus employed the imagery of the vine, he was pulling upon a thread that was intricately woven into the hearts and culture of his listeners. Viticulture (the cultivation of grapevines) holds a long and prominent history in Israel.² Numbers 13:23 records that when the spies returned from scouting out the land of Canaan, they came bearing evidence of the fruitfulness of the land, carrying a single cluster of grapes between two men. The natural contours in the hill country of Samaria and Judea have provided excellent terraces for growing grapevines for centuries.³

Starting a vineyard required selecting and cultivating hill slopes that would minimize erosion, loosening the soil and clearing it of stones, planting the vines, building a tower and walls for

¹ All Scripture quotations are taken from the *New American Standard Bible* (1995 update).

² For a comprehensive study of viticulture in ancient Israel and its role in Scripture, see Carey Walsh, *The Fruit of the Vine : Viticulture in Ancient Israel* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000).

³ Walsh, 27.

protection from animal depredations and trespassers, and constructing a winepress.⁴ Newly planted vines required three or four years of care before they began producing fruit.⁵ When the grapes ripened, they would need to be harvested within a mere few days, or else they would fall off the vine and rot.⁶ Hence, maintaining a vineyard was a massive undertaking, especially in comparison with the hardier olive tree.⁷ Even so, virtually every Judean farmer owned a vineyard, since vines contributed to their economic stability as one of the only plants that produced during the hot and arid summer months.⁸

More than just providing needed sustenance, the fruit of the vine captured the hearts and culture of Israel. The fruit harvest occurred during the fall in connection with the Feast of Tabernacles (Ex 23:16, 34:22, Lev 23:39), and was marked as a time of jubilation and celebration.⁹ By the time of Jesus, the vine was such an integral part of Jewish culture that its image was stamped on coins and architecture, including the very gates of the Temple.¹⁰

As a symbol that resonated with the descendants of Abraham, it is only natural that Yahweh and his messengers would employ the imagery of the vine in Scripture. In the Old Testament, the primary word for fruit, *פרי*, appears 119 times. Fruit often took on a literal meaning as the various products of agriculture, but frequently embodied a figurative sense, including the idea of abundance. Various passages speak of the fruit of the womb or the fruit of one's deeds.¹¹

Most significantly, Israel herself came to be identified with the vine, and Yahweh as the gardener (Ps 80:8-16, Isa 5:1-7, 27:2-6, Jer 2:21, Ezek 15:1-8, 19:10-14, Hos 10:1-2). When the prophets

⁴ Isaiah 5:1-2; Walsh, 90-98; Kirsten Nielsen, *There is Hope for a Tree : The Tree as Metaphor in Isaiah*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 65 [Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1989], 77.

⁵ Walsh, 99.

⁶ Walsh, 171.

⁷ Kirsten Nielsen, "Old Testament Imagery in John," *New Readings in John: Literary and Theological Perspectives*. Ed. by J. Nissen and S. Pedersen [Sheffield, Eng: Sheffield Academic, 1999], 72.

⁸ Walsh, 12, 32; Denis Baly, *The Geography of the Bible: A Study in Historical Geography* (New York: Harper, 1957), 100, 157.

⁹ Walsh, 179-83; Baly, 100; Nielsen, *Hope for a Tree*, 78; L. Turkowski, "Peasant Agriculture in the Judaeon Hills," *PEQ* 101 (1969): 27. The Old Testament associates the harvest with praise, joy, singing, shouting, and dancing: Judges 9:13,27, 21:21, Psalm 104:15, Isaiah 16:10, 62:9, Jeremiah 48:33, Joel 2:24-26. Entire towns lived in tents out in the fields while the grapes were harvested (Baly, 100). Barefooted men trampled the grapes in the winepress while shouting encouragement to one another (Isa 16:9, Jer 25:30, 48:33).

¹⁰ Josephus reported that there was a great golden vine that hung above the gates of the Temple with grape clusters that were the size of a man (*Jewish War*, 5.210-212). For the coins, see Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 668 and Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 450.

¹¹ Representative passages include Deuteronomy 28:11, Proverbs 1:31, 18:20, and Hosea 10:13.

employed this imagery, one of the striking features is the fruit that Israel produced. Yahweh expected good fruit from his people, but instead they only produced bad fruit through their wicked deeds (Isa 5:2). Since luscious fruit was the prize of a vineyard, the Jews would have understood the appalling nature of Yahweh finding rotting fruit on the vine of Israel.

The New Testament picks up the imagery of fruit mainly in the word *karpō/j*, which appears 66 times. Its literal and figurative usages are parallel with those of the OT. In its most basic sense, fruit is generally a product or outcome that portrays evidence of the nature of the person or thing that produced it.¹² This is the way that Jesus employed the fruit imagery when he said that people are known by the good or bad fruits that their lives produce (Matt 7:15-20, 12:33-37). Similarly, Paul referenced “fruit of the Spirit” as the outcome and evidence of a believer walking in step with the indwelling Spirit (Gal 5:22-25).

Perhaps the most significant passage on fruit is Jesus’ conversation on the fruit of the vine in John 15:1-17. The discussion now turns to unraveling one of Jesus’ finest illustrations on the believer’s life in him.

Exegetical Background to John 15:1-17

Before analyzing the nature of fruit in John 15, a word of caution is in order on interpreting imagery in the Bible. Two general principles on deciphering parables apply.¹³ First, the emphasis must remain upon determining the general meaning of Jesus’ discourse, and not necessarily upon finding meaning in every detail of the imagery. The purpose of an image is to illustrate a point, not to provide a one-to-one correspondence with reality in every detail.

Second, an image may take on various definitions, and the meaning in a specific passage must be determined by context. The fact that John did not explicitly define the fruit in Jesus’ teaching does not grant liberty to apply any and all NT meanings to the fruit, as some have done in their commentaries.¹⁴ Since reducing fruit to a single definition is equally problematic due to Jesus’ ambiguity on the matter, recent commentators have wisely tended toward a more holistic understanding of the fruit in John 15.¹⁵ However, in so broadening the scope of meaning, there is

¹² J. Robertson McQuilkin, *Life in the Spirit* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 153-54; cf. BDAG, 509-10; *TDNT*, 3:615.

¹³ For further elaboration on interpreting parables, see R. T. Kendall, *The Complete Guide to the Parables* (Grand Rapids: Chosen Books, 2004), 17. For general principles on hermeneutics and interpreting Scripture, see Robertson McQuilkin, *Understanding and Applying the Bible*, Rev Ed (Chicago: Moody, 1992) and Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 3rd Ed (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003).

¹⁴ Both MacArthur and Rosscup list six varied definitions for the fruit in John 15 (John MacArthur, *Abiding in Christ* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1986], 39-45; James E. Rosscup, “Fruit in the New Testament,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 125, no. 497 [1968]: 56-66). Rosscup goes so far to say that fruit “can appear in aspects and forms with as many reference points as life itself” (62).

¹⁵ Cf. Carson’s warning against reductionism: *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity, 1991), 517. Köstenberger sees fruit as “an all-encompassing reference to the manifold evidences of growth and its results in the lives of believers,” including love, Christian character, and outreach (454). G. R. Beasley-Christian Literature and Living www.christianliteratureandliving.com 5 : 8 November 2009

danger of neglecting explicit details surrounding fruit in Jesus' vine analogy. The purpose here is to restore salient contextual details that provide boundaries and guidelines for defining the fruit in John 15.

Beginning with the larger context of the book, John wrote his Gospel for the purpose of recording selective events in Jesus' life in order to convince his readers to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God—and through their belief to find life in his name (John 20:30-31). Persuading people of Jesus' identity as Messiah and God is central to all that John selected to record. "Believing" in John's Gospel is more than an intellectual assent to faith. Jesus said that his disciples are those who continue in his word (8:31). Thus, belief in its fullest sense involves sustained entrustment of one's life to Jesus and the whole of his teaching.¹⁶

The central motif of belief comes out in each of the three passages in John that mention *karpō/j*, which are 4:31-42, 12:20-26, and 15:1-17. Although only chapter 15 pictures the fruit of a vine specifically, Jesus' usage of *karpō/j* in the other two passages perhaps can shed light on the general meaning behind the term in John's selective work.

The incident recorded in John 4:31-42 took place after Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well of Sychar, while the town was coming out to meet Jesus (v.30). As they were coming, Jesus told his disciples to look out on the fields of people who were ripe for harvest. Following his harvest analogy, he told them, "Already he who reaps is receiving wages and is gathering fruit for life eternal; so that he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together" (v.36). John recorded that the result of Jesus' visit to Sychar was that many of the Samaritans believed in him because of the woman's testimony (v.39), and that many more believed that Jesus was the Savior of the world after hearing Jesus' own words (vv.41-42). In this context, the "fruit" in verse 36 clearly refers to the Samaritan people who believed in Jesus and gained eternal life. Commentators generally agree with this interpretation.¹⁷

The setting for John 12:20-26 is Jerusalem during the week leading up to the Passover feast and Jesus' death and resurrection. Some God-fearing Greeks asked to see Jesus, but the disciples were not certain Jesus would want to meet them, since his ministry up to that point had been directed toward the Jews (vv.20-22; Matt 10:6, 15:24). When the disciples inquired of Jesus, he replied that the hour had come for the Son of Man to be glorified (v.23). Up to this point in his

Murray takes fruit as "every demonstration of vitality of faith," emphasizing reciprocal love and apostolic preaching (*John*, 2nd Ed, Word Biblical Commentary 36 [Waco, TX: Word, 1999], 273). Colin G. Kruse similarly suggests that fruit refers to "the entire life and ministry of those who follow Jesus' teaching and experience his presence in their lives through the Spirit" (*The Gospel According to John*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, Vol. 4 [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004], 318).

¹⁶ Carson, 90; Kruse, 21-22; cf. BDAG, 817, def. 2.

¹⁷ Cf. C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John*, 2nd Ed (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 242; Beasley-Murray, 63; F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 114; Carson, 230; Morris, 280.

ministry, Jesus had always said his hour had not yet come (2:4, 7:6,8,30, 8:20). The hour had now come for Jesus' death, through which all people would gain access to him: including the Greeks who were then in question (v.32). Jesus used the analogy of a grain of wheat to explain: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (v.24). In this context, the fruit must once again refer to people who believed in Jesus.

John 15:1-17 contains the remaining eight usages of *karpō/j*. These are not as easily identifiable in meaning as the fruit in John 4:36 and 12:24, but this brief summary of context has shown that *karpō/j* is connected with the theme of belief in John's Gospel.

Exegesis of John 15:1-17

It is beyond the scope of this essay to conduct a full exegesis of John 15.¹⁸ The focus of the following analysis is upon identifying the nature of the fruit mentioned throughout the passage, and each element of Jesus' imagery and teaching will be analyzed according to that purpose.

Focusing on the interpretation of the fruit in John 15 can in fact help unravel the meaning of the entire passage. Fruit is arguably the central theme in Jesus' discourse, even as fruit is the purpose and valuable prize of any vineyard.¹⁹ The following analysis will show how the actions of each of the characters in the vine analogy revolve around producing fruit. Bearing fruit is even the purpose of the central command in the passage to abide in Christ (vv.4-5).

The following analysis will attempt to show that the fruit in John 15 is the outward evidence of Christ's life that God produces through a believer for the purpose of bringing himself greater glory—especially through people becoming believers and growing as disciples of Christ.

The Setting

The geographical setting of John 15 is unknown. If the Upper Room Discourse in chapters 13-17 is chronological, then Jesus departed with his disciples from the Upper Room prior to offering his vine analogy (14:31). Perhaps Jesus taught his disciples while passing through a grape field en route to Gethsemane via the Kidron Valley (18:1). He may have also impressed his message

¹⁸ See the Bibliography for a list of commentaries and articles that provide a fuller exegesis of John 15. For a strong literary analysis of the text, see Fernando F. Segovia, *The Farewell of the Word : The Johannine Call to Abide* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 123-67. Jesus' parables involving vineyards do not have a direct bearing upon the present discussion (Matt 20:1-16, 21:23-46, Luke 13:6-9), although P. Richard Choi points out some similar themes ("I Am the Vine: An Investigation of the Relations between John 15:1-6 and some Parables of the Synoptic Gospels," *Biblical Research* 45 [2000]: 51-75). Less likely is Richard Bauckham's hypothesis that the Gospel of Thomas contains an authentic parable of Jesus that stands behind his explanation in John 15 ("The Parable of the Vine : Rediscovering a Lost Parable of Jesus," *New Testament Studies* 33, no. 1 [1987]: 84-101).

¹⁹ Nielsen, *Hope for a Tree*, 77; Bruce Wilkinson and David Kopp, *Secrets of the Vine : Breaking through to Abundance* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2001), 20. Köstenberger sees the bearing of fruit as "God's primary creative (Gen. 1:11-12, 22, 28) and redemptive purpose (cf. John 15:8, 16). The OT prophets envisioned a time when Israel would 'bud and blossom and fill all the world with fruit' (Isa. 27:6; cf. Hos. 14:4-8)" (452).

on the disciples in the Temple courtyard, with the golden vine on the gate glinting in the Passover moon.²⁰ Regardless of the setting, Jesus' vine imagery would have easily resounded with the disciples due to its importance in Israelite culture.

Jesus as the Vine (v.1)

Jesus began by saying, "I am the true vine" (v.1). This is the last of Jesus' "I am" statements in the book.²¹ His background for this declaration is almost certainly the OT, since John's Gospel frequently refers to OT allusions and quotations.²² It has already been noted that Israel as Yahweh's vine failed to produce the kind of fruit God was looking for. By saying that he was the "true vine," Jesus was suggesting he would succeed where Israel failed, and that he would produce the good fruit through God's people that God was looking for (cf. Isa 5:4).

All of the nutrients for bearing fruit flow through the vine, which is the trunk of the plant from which branches grow.²³ Jesus as the true vine reveals that the fruit is something that Israel failed to produce, but which Jesus himself gives life to.

The Father as the Vinedresser & Believers as Branches (vv.1-3,6)

The fruit not only depends upon Jesus' life, but also the actions of the Father, who is identified as the Vinedresser. A vinedresser (*gewrgo/j*) is one who tends and cultivates grapevines.²⁴ The nature of the vinedresser's job revolves around producing the best and most plentiful fruit possible.²⁵

²⁰ Kruse, 314.

²¹ Jesus' "I am" statements include: 1. I am the bread of life (6:25); 2. I am the light of the world (8:12, 9:5); 3. I am the gate for the sheep (10:7,9); 4. I am the good shepherd (10:11,14); 5. I am the resurrection and the life (11:25); 6. I am the way and the truth and the life (14:6); and 7. I am the true vine (15:1,5). In John 8:58, Jesus said that "before Abraham was born, I am." This was enough for the Jews to try to stone Jesus (v.59), since he was clearly associating himself with the name that God revealed to Moses in Exodus 3:14: "I Am that I Am." Jesus' "I Am" statements associated him with Deity. This means that his relationship as the Vine to the Vinedresser is radically different than Israel's relationship as the vine to the Vinedresser.

²² Carson, 513. In Jewish Intertestamental literature, the vine became a symbol for the dominion of the Messiah (2 Bar 39:7). Cf. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, eds, *Commentary on the New Testament use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 491-93.

²³ Walsh, 99.

²⁴ *gewrgo/j* may refer generally to a gardener or farmer, as well as someone who does agricultural work on a contractual basis (James 5:7, Matt 21:33; cf. BDAG, 196).

²⁵ This fact is reflected in one of Jesus' parables, where he related how a landowner rented his vineyard out to vine-growers (*gewrgo/j*) while he went on a journey. When the landowner returned from his journey, he expected to receive produce from them (Matt 21:33-34, Mark 12:1-2, Luke 20:9-10).

James related the importance of the crop to a farmer: “The farmer (gewrgo/j) waits for the precious produce of the soil, being patient about it, until it gets the early and late rains” (5:7). Here James described the crop as something “precious” to the farmer: the same word that Peter used to articulate Jesus’ “precious blood” (1 Pet 1:19) and God’s “precious and magnificent promises” (2 Pet 1:4). Even as nothing could be more valuable to a farmer than the crop, so nothing holds greater value for a vinedresser than the grape produce. All of his patient labor is directed toward the fruit.

Fruit is so important to the vinedresser that he must deal intentionally with any branch that fails to bear fruit (John 15:2). Much debate surrounds the interpretation of the verb aiãrei in verse 2, and it is beyond the scope of this essay to solve the problem.²⁶ However, each interpretation essentially reaches the same conclusion: a fruitless branch cannot remain in that condition without divine action. A Christian who does not bear fruit is quite literally an oxymoron.²⁷

As if to reassure his disciples that they were not among the fruitless branches, Jesus declared that they were already “clean” because of the word which he had spoken to them (v.3). The Greek kaqaro/j is perhaps a wordplay for “prunes” in verse 2 (kaqai/rw). The eleven disciples present with Jesus were among those who continued in his word and were cleansed by his teaching (John 8:31-32). They were fruit-bearing branches, and the action of the Vinedresser toward them was pruning.

Vinedressers are not only discontent with producing no fruit—they are also discontent with producing anything but the most fruit possible. The purpose of pruning is to increase fruitfulness by cutting off unnecessary wood growth in the branch so that more nutrients from the vine may be applied to producing grapes.²⁸ According to this analogy, Jesus is saying God works to

²⁶ Commentators generally hold one of two interpretations:

1. The unfruitful branches are not true believers, since true believers will definitely bear fruit and will not lose their salvation (John 6:39, 10:27-28). Like Judas Iscariot, they may have professed to be disciples, but they are not among those who are “clean” (cp. 13:10-11 with 15:3), and will thus be cut off from Christ. The language in verse 6 is similar to that of other judgment passages (Ezek 15:1-8, Matt 7:19-20). Proponents of this viewpoint include Carson, 518; Köstenberger, 452-55; Carl J. Laney (“Abiding is Believing : The Analogy of the Vine in John 15:1-6,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 146, no. 581 [1989]: 57-62); and Rosscup (*Abiding in Christ: Studies in John 15* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973], 243-44).

2. The unfruitful branches must be believers because they are said to be “in” Christ (v.2): terminology that explicitly refers to believers. The verb aiãrw naturally means “lift up” in addition to “take away.” The Vinedresser “lifts up” unfruitful branches by disciplining them so that they may begin bearing fruit (cf. Heb 12:4-11). It is true that real life vinedressers will lift up and tend to damaged vines to help them heal (although they will also take away dead branches as needed.) The judgment language in verse 6 encompasses works that are burned up (cf. 1 Cor 3:13-15). Proponents stem from A. W. Pink (*Exposition of the Gospel of John*, 3 vols [Ohio: Cleveland Bible Truth Depot, 1929], 3:337) and include James Montgomery Boice (*The Gospel of John : An Expository Commentary*, 5 vols [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999], 4:1161-62,69); Joseph C. Dillow (“Abiding is Remaining in Fellowship : Another Look at John 15:1-6,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 147, no. 585 [1990]: 51); and Wilkinson, 33-35.

²⁷ Cf. Matthew 7:15-18, where Jesus indicated that it is impossible for a good tree not to bear good fruit.

²⁸ Walsh, 119, 122. Apparently pruning could be quite extensive, reducing branches over eight feet long to mere inches (Andrew Murray, *The True Vine* [Chicago: Moody, n.d.], 28).

remove parts of believers' lives that prevent them from devoting themselves to the all-important goal of fruit-bearing.

Thus far in the narrative, Jesus has related that fruit production is completely dependent upon the Vinedresser and the Vine. He went on to explain the primary responsibility of the branches in the matter of bearing fruit.

Fruit and Abiding in Christ (vv.4-5)

Jesus related the role of his disciples through an imperative: the branches must abide in the vine in order to produce fruit (vv.4-5).²⁹ The role of the branches is simply to stay in intimate fellowship with Christ.³⁰ Although only the Vinedresser and the Vine are able to produce the fruit, the branch may hinder their work by failing to obey Jesus' command to abide in him.

The importance of abiding in Christ—and Christ abiding in the believer—is apparent both in John's Gospel and in his letters (John 6:56, 14:17, 15:4-10; 1 John 2:6,10,14,24,28, 3:6,9,24, 4:12-16). The precedent for this abiding relationship is Jesus' own relationship with his Father.³¹ Jesus made this clear in two "just as" statements in John 15: "*Just as* the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love. If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; *just as* I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in his love" (vv.9-10, emphasis added).

Love and obedience to God's word are associated with abiding throughout John's writings (John 5:38, 8:31, 15:7-10; 1 John 2:14,24,27, 3:14-17, 3:24, 4:12-16; 2 Jn 1:9). A paradox emerges from these verses: Believers are "abiding" in Christ when they are keeping his commandments, and especially his command to love one another. Yet the power to love and obey can only come

²⁹ According to Daniel Wallace, the force of the aorist imperative *mei/nate* is on urgency and priority, so that Jesus is commanding his disciples to make abiding in him their top priority (*Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics - Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* [Zondervan Publishing House and Galaxie Software, 1999; 2002], 720-21). For a comprehensive study of the imperative *me/nein*, see Linda L. Oyer, "Continuing in Covenant : A Proposed Background of the Johannine Usage of *Menein*," Master's thesis, Columbia Graduate School of Bible and Missions (Columbia, SC, 1983).

³⁰ Oyer sees abiding as remaining in the New Covenant, which is the Person of Christ. As the Vinedresser in Isaiah 5 expected fruit from Israel after all that he had done for them, so the Vinedresser in John 15 expects fruit from believers after all that Christ has done for them: the fruit of faithful obedience to Christ's commandments (79-82).

³¹ Jesus declared that "the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner" (John 5:19). Jesus did nothing on his own initiative, but only what his Father taught him (8:28, 42). Not only did the Father send Jesus, but Jesus lived because of the Father (6:57). Their relationship was so close that Jesus could say that anyone who knew him also knew his Father (8:19, 14:7). The Father was in Jesus, even as Jesus was in the Father (10:38, 14:10-11, 17:21). Indeed, Jesus declared that he and the Father were one (10:30).

through the indwelling Spirit. Abiding is truly a reciprocal affair, as Jesus himself indicated: “Abide in Me, and I in you” (v.4).³² As a result, the meaning of abiding moves away from doing things for God, and toward being in relationship with him (cf. v.15).³³

This naturally leads to the question of whether love and obedience *are* the fruit of John 15. While these are undeniably products or fruits of abiding in Christ, Jesus indicated that an abiding relationship of love and obedience is also a prerequisite for bearing fruit (vv.5,7-8). The general fruits of Christian character and good deeds are not ends in themselves, but they help to bring about the kind of fruit the Vinedresser is looking for.

Before we further substantiate this view, Jesus’ final statement in verse 5 deserves attention: “apart from Me you can do nothing.” One might argue that a believer *can* do some things apart from Christ. A believer certainly may sin, or perhaps even go through the motions of religious duty without drawing from Christ’s life. What a believer absolutely cannot do apart from Christ is to bear abiding fruit (v.16)—even as a real branch cannot bear fruit if it is not attached to a vine. In that respect, the fruit of a believer’s life may be regarded as something entirely supernatural. Fruit that is impossible for a person to produce apart from Christ is the fruit that brings God the most glory (v.8), for the branch cannot take any credit for it. Thus, Jesus’ analogy does not allow his disciples to base their personal worth on their fruit production, since only the Vine can determine the kind and quantity of fruit produced.³⁴

Fruit and Answered Prayer (v.7)

³² Commentators disagree over the meaning of “(ka)gwÜ e)n u(mi)ñ.” While Jesus may have given a promise or a simple declaration that he would abide in the believer, those views lose the force of the imperative. The conditional interpretation is most likely: “Abide in me, and I will abide in you” (Christopher David Bass, “A Johannine Perspective of the Human Responsibility to Persevere in the Faith through the use of MenΩ and Other Related Motifs,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 69, no. 2 [2007], 313; cf. Boice, 4:1163).

Andrew Murray illustrated how the twofold process in verse 4 is true of real grafts placed in a vine: “The graft shoots its little roots and fibers down into the stem, and the stem grows up into the graft, and what has been called the structural union is effected. The graft abides and becomes one with the vine, and even though the vine were to die, would still be one wood with it. Then there is the second process, in which the sap of the vine enters the new structure, and uses it as a passage through which sap can flow up to show itself in young shoots and leaves and fruit” (*Abide in Christ : Thoughts on the Blessed Life of Fellowship with the Son of God* [Chicago; New York: Revell, c.1920], 140).

³³ Real vines illustrate the idea that being comes before doing, since they do not produce fruit immediately. Instead, newly planted vines must grow for at least three years while the vinedresser cultivates and prunes them to prepare for fruit-bearing (Boice, 4:1163). Andrew Murray emphasized the difference in the Christian life between work and fruit in this manner: “A machine can do work: only life can bear fruit. A law can compel work: only love can spontaneously bring forth fruit. Work implies effort and labor: the essential idea of fruit is that it is the silent natural restful produce of our inner life” (*The True Vine*, 50-51).

³⁴ Perhaps no one has expressed the heart of Jesus’ branch analogy better than Andrew Murray: “*You are the branch.*—You need be *nothing more*. You need not for one single moment of the day take upon you the responsibility of the Vine. You need not leave the place of entire dependence and unbounded confidence. You need, least of all, to be anxious as to how you are to understand the mystery, or fulfill its conditions, or work out its blessed aim. The Vine will give all and work all” (*The True Vine*, 47-48).

Following his command to abide, Jesus connected abiding in his word with answered prayer.

His language in 15:7-8 bears resemblance to his teaching in 14:13-14: “Whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it.” To pray in Jesus’ name means to pray in accordance with his character and work. Jesus was suggesting that when believers abide in Christ, they will pray according to Christ’s character and will, and may thus have the assurance that God will answer their prayers.

Prayer with confidence that God will answer is a significant theme in Jesus’ teaching and elsewhere in the NT (Matt 7:7, 18:19, 21:22, John 14:13-14, 15:7,16, 16:23-24, James 1:5-8, 4:2-3, 5:16, 1 John 3:22, 5:14-15). Believers must pray because they are in need of God’s provision—in this case, the provision of fruit. When God answers these prayers, then he receives glory (v.8).

Jesus mentioned prayer a second time in verse 16, where he gave answered prayer as the result of bearing fruit. Although fruit may be an answer to prayer, the result of bearing fruit is more answered prayer. Thus, fruit is not an end in itself, but a means by which God may produce more fruit for the glory of his name.

Fruit and The Father’s Glory (v.8)

In verse 8, Jesus described how God’s reputation and praise will be enhanced: through disciples bearing much fruit. If the purpose of believers’ lives is to give glory to God, then the purpose of their lives is to bear fruit, since that is the means by which Jesus said they would give glory to God.³⁵ One may even identify the fruit in John 15 by asking, “How does God receive the most glory through believers?”

Jesus helped to answer this question by identifying believers’ fruit as the proof of their discipleship (v.8).³⁶ A “proof” only has significance if it serves as evidence to help somebody else arrive at a certain persuasion. In this case, Jesus suggested that the fruits or proofs of a believer’s life serve to persuade others to give glory to the one true God. One of the ways people most glorify God is by believing in him and becoming his disciples (cf. John 12:27-32).

³⁵ John suggested that as God was glorified through the work of his Son (13:31-32), so would he be glorified through his Son’s disciples, who would not only do what Jesus had been doing, but would even do greater works through the power of the Spirit (14:12). In the Gospel accounts, when Jesus performed miracles, people frequently were filled with awe and praised God (Matt 9:8, 15:31, Luke 7:16, 13:13, 17:15, 23:47). In the same way, when the early church carried on Jesus’ ministry and performed miracles and good works in his name, the result was that both believers and unbelievers gave glory to God (Acts 4:21, 11:18, 21:20).

³⁶ The verb that describes the believers’ fruit as proof is *gi/nomai*, which can have the sense of “to prove to be” (S. Lewis. Johnson, “Abiding in Christ : An Exposition of John 15:1-17,” *Emmaus Journal Winter 1995* [04/02; 1995], 149; BDAG, 199, def. 7). Although less likely in this passage, *gi/nomai* may also have the sense of “coming into being,” suggesting that Christians are becoming disciples through the act of fruit-bearing (Dillow, “Abiding is Remaining,” 52).

A believer's "proof" to the world must include good works and Godly character, but these only fulfill the role of fruit in John 15 when they serve to bring God glory.³⁷ Jesus commanded his disciples, "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven" (Matt 5:16).³⁸ Believers' love and obedience serve as proof to the world of the living Christ (John 13:35; cf. 14:31). Jesus elaborated on these qualities in the following verses.

Fruit and Love & Obedience (vv.9-15,17)

The preceding discussion has suggested that Jesus' fruit in John 15 must serve as outward proofs and not just inward qualities. Nevertheless, Jesus discussed two inward qualities in his explanation in verses 9-17 that Paul termed as "fruit of the Spirit": love and joy.³⁹

Jesus commanded his disciples to love others in the same manner that he loved them (v.12). This is the primary commandment associated with fruit-bearing, and Jesus modeled the kind of love he was talking about by laying down his life for his friends (v.13).⁴⁰ The only way a believer may exercise this kind of radical, supernatural love is by first experiencing God's love and continuing in a love relationship with him. Thus, Jesus commanded his disciples specifically to abide in his love (v.9). When they do so, then God's transforming love will spill out of their lives, so that the world will come to know God's love through the love that believers share (13:35, 17:23). For Jesus, love is so central to the concept of fruit that one might even define the fruit in John 15 as the evidence of the supernatural love of God working in and through a believer that leads others to personally know God's love.

In Jesus' mind, love and obedience go together.⁴¹ When believers keep Christ's commandments—of which the primary commandment is to love (vv.12,17)—then they will be able to continue in a love relationship with Christ, and so continue bearing fruit for him (v.10).

³⁷ Wilkinson draws a distinction between inner and outward fruit. Inner fruits are Christ-like qualities like the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23), but it is the outward fruits of visible good works and sharing the Gospel that bring God glory (21-22). Others show a similar distinction between inner and outer fruits in their definitions: Boice 4:1172; Köstenberger, 454; MacArthur, 39-45; Rosscup 62-66.

³⁸ Fruit and good works are often interchangeable in the NT: Luke 3:8-14, Gal 6:9, Eph 5:9-11, Col 1:10, Titus 3:14.

³⁹ Carson may be correct in seeing vv.9-16 as the interpretation of the vine imagery in vv.1-8 (511).

⁴⁰ Here Jesus referred back to his Good Shepherd metaphor (John 10:11-18). Nielsen suggests that the vine and shepherd metaphors complement each other in their focus on intimate fellowship, as best expressed in the Eucharist: the blood of the Good Shepherd offered in the form of the fruit of the vine ("OT Imagery in John," 82). Though Nielsen's point on fellowship is well taken, incorporating the Eucharist into John 15 appears beyond the scope of Jesus' meaning.

⁴¹ In John's understanding of discipleship, believers who truly love Christ will obey his teaching (14:15,21,23). They will live out their lives in the same manner as Jesus lived out his life (1 Jn 2:5-6).

Though obedience is essential, Jesus removed the idea that fruit-bearing is burdensome law-keeping by telling his disciples that the result of his teaching is fullness of joy (v.11; cf. 1 John 5:3). John the Baptist's joy was made full when he became less important while Christ took center stage (John 3:29-30). Similarly, Jesus' words in vv.1-11 suggest that believers will have the greatest joy when God receives glory through the fruit that he produces in their lives.

In verses 14-15, Jesus expressed an abiding relationship with Christ as an intimate friendship. He does not treat his disciples as slaves, but takes them into close confidence so that they may understand their Master's heart and exercise His purposes. In saying this, Jesus suggested that rote obedience to religious duties without an intimate connection with God cannot produce the kind of fruit that God desires.

Abiding Fruit (v.16)

Having shared his heart with his disciples, Jesus concluded his lesson on the fruit of the Vine with these words: "You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and that your fruit would remain (me/nw), so that whatever you ask of the Father in My name He may give to you" (v.16).

For a final time, Jesus emphasized that fruit-bearing depends upon God's calling and choosing.⁴² Thus, the success of fruit-bearing rests on God's initiative. It is significant to note that Jesus saw fruit production—not the believer's personal benefit—as the purpose for God's choosing.

Jesus "appointing" (ti/qhmi) believers means that he assigns to them a task or function.⁴³ Paul said that he was appointed as a preacher and apostle and teacher (1 Tim 2:7, 2 Tim 1:11; cf. Acts 13:47). All believers are appointed with the task of "going" (u(pa/gw) for the purpose of bearing fruit. The wording is reminiscent of Jesus' language in Luke 10:3 when he sent out seventy disciples to preach the Gospel; and the language also may hint at the Great Commission, although the Greek words are not identical (John 20:21, Matt 28:19).⁴⁴

⁴² Jesus choosing his own disciples stands in sharp contrast to the practice of his day, when disciples normally chose the particular rabbi to whom they wished to be attached (Köstenberger, 459). According to Paul, believers may rest in the knowledge that God chose them before the foundation of the world (Eph 1:4), and has prepared them for good works so that they will walk in them (Eph 2:10).

⁴³ Cf. BDAG, 1004, def. 3.

⁴⁴ Many commentators see evangelistic mission and conversions in Jesus' language in 15:16: Barrett, 478; Beasley-Murray, 275; Carson, 523-24; Köstenberger, 460; Morris, 676; Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Gospel according to John*, Trans. by J. Vriend (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 522; and Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John*, Trans. by C. Hastings et al, 3 vols, (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 3:110-112. Even though Boice sees fruit as Christian character, he also doesn't deny the need for fruit as conversions, but emphasizes that the heart of the Christian's witness is divine character (4:1172). Ridderbos similarly sees fruit-bearing as the disciples' love for one another, but also doesn't deny a place for the proclamation of the Gospel (521-22). Segovia, on the other hand, argues against the missionary viewpoint and emphasizes the role of the disciples as a whole (160).

The language of “appointing” and “going” in 15:16 cannot conclusively prove that Jesus had missionary activity in mind. The destination for the disciples’ “going” is indefinite, which may suggest that disciples are called to bear fruit for God in whatever context they find themselves in. Although “abiding” fruit may refer to reproduction of the Christian faith in new believers, this is also uncertain.⁴⁵

Nevertheless, it is difficult to dismiss the idea that Jesus was telling believers to go and make disciples. That most nearly fits the sense that Jesus gave to fruit in 4:36 and 12:24. Also, Jesus’ imagery in John 15 suggests that the believer’s entire life revolves around producing fruit, since a branch exists for no other purpose. Jesus’ last words to his disciples before he ascended to heaven also expressed what their purpose on earth would be: to make disciples of all nations (Matt 28:19, Acts 1:8). Therefore, the life purpose in John 15 most likely ties into the life purpose expressed in the Great Commission.

If disciple-making is a primary focus in fruit-bearing, as may well be the case in John’s Gospel, that does not change anything in the role of believers as branches. Nowhere did Jesus suggest that fruit is dependent upon making converts, as if effectiveness in evangelism is the measure of a Christian’s fruitfulness. The branch can do nothing to produce fruit (v.5); and God is the Lord of the harvest (Luke 10:2). Jesus himself indicated that believers have different roles in evangelism: some sow while others reap (John 4:37). Paul also sized up the matter well in 1 Corinthians 3:6-7: “I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth.”

The Nature of Fruit in John 15

Putting together all of the data, the fruit in John 15 is the outward evidence of Christ’s life that God produces through a believer for the purpose of bringing himself greater glory—especially through people becoming believers and growing as disciples of Christ. This definition highlights the supreme role of the Vinedresser and the Vine in producing the fruit. Additionally, the definition hones in on Jesus’ purpose statements in verses 8 and 16, namely to give God glory through making disciples.

⁴⁵ Barrett compares abiding fruit with the fruit of 4:36 that is gathered for eternal life, commenting that the fruits of the apostolic mission will be gathered in and not be lost (478). Abiding fruit may be deposits in heaven for various deeds, since John indicated in Revelation 14:13 that the good works of believers follow them into the next life (MacArthur, 66; Wilkinson, 22). John Calvin saw the meaning to be that the Church will last to the end of the world, since each generation of the Church since the Apostles continues to bear fruit to the present day through their preaching (*Calvin’s Commentaries: The Gospel according to St John 11-21 and the First Epistle of John*, Eds. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, Trans. T. H. L. Parker [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959], 103).

In any case, the fact that fruit “remains” is evidence that fruit is not merely an internal quality, but something that can exist entirely outside of the believer who produces it through Christ. In horticulture, vinedressers reproduce vines through a kind of rudimentary cloning, cutting off vine shoots and planting them in new soil (Walsh, 100-101, 251). Similarly, disciple-making involves believers reproducing themselves in other believers.

Jesus' assertion that he will produce the fruit allows his disciples to relinquish the burden of fruit-bearing and accept their role as branches. When they abide in the Vine, they have Jesus' assurance that they will be the Vinedresser's instruments to produce the fruit that he prizes. As God receives glory through their lives, then truly their joy will be full (John 15:11).

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Colophon:

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