

Matthew, Mark and Luke only briefly mentioned me in their Gospels. John gave me a little more recognition. He talked about how I introduced Nathaniel to Jesus, and how we came to be followers of Jesus.¹ John wrote about my role in the feeding of the five thousand.² He also recognized that I tried to introduce a group of Greeks to Jesus, with that attempt resulting in an important speech by Jesus about his impending death.³ And, John recorded the few words I said on the night before Jesus died.

Yes. Okay. So, there were two men named Philip in the Bible. One was the man who taught the Ethiopian eunuch and lived in Caesarea. The book of *Acts* talks about him. That is not me. I am Philip the apostle.

We were in the Upper Room, Jesus had just finished telling Peter that he would soon deny Jesus three times. Jesus tried to console all of us by telling us he was going away to the Father, but he would be preparing a place for each of us, and he would come back and take us to be with him. We would have been more consoled *if* we had understood what he was talking about.

Thomas blurts out, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going; and how can we know the way?” Jesus reply? “I am the way, the truth, and the life: No one comes to the Father, except by me. If you had known me, you should have known my Father, too.” Rather than catching the insinuation that we had never really known Jesus, I triggered one of the most famous passages in the Bible by opening my mouth.

I said, “Lord, show us the Father and it is enough for us.” Jesus looked at me with a sad smile. In the softest voice, he said, “Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.”

I should have been embarrassed, but I was astounded. I got it. I finally got it. The Father was God. Jesus was God. They were the same! I got it! I got a glimpse of the truth! For the next twenty minutes, Jesus opened the flood gates of truth.

Jesus and the Father and the Spirit were all in each other. And we had the ability to be in them, too. Jesus was going away, but we were going to receive the Spirit and peace. Our heads

¹ John 1:43-48

² John 6:5-7

³ John 12:20-36

exploded. In a few sentences, mysteries... hidden for eons were revealed to us. How could we even begin to comprehend what Jesus was saying?

That dilemma was solved moments later. Jesus rose from the table, and told us to leave with him. After we left the room and started down the hill to the Kidron Valley, Jesus stopped...leaned down... picked up a branch from a grapevine by the path. And...he told us a story.

“I am the true vine and my Father is the vinekeeper. Every branch in me that doesn’t bear fruit, he takes away: and every branch that bears fruit gets pruned so that it bears more fruit. You are clean through the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. A branch can’t bear fruit by itself, it has to be attached to the vine. You can’t bear fruit unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. The one that abides is in me, and I in him, that’s the one who bears much fruit. For without me, you can do nothing!” Jesus kept talking, but ended the example with..., “By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you.”

We walked on to the Garden of Gethsemane, and Jesus continued to pour out his parting words of wisdom to us. Each sentence was worth an entire lifetime of study, but I could not get my mind off of the story of the vine and branches. For the next two thousand years, people would be interpreting it as best they could. Let me tell you how I thought of it that night.

In Israel during early September, you become accustomed to the sight of vineyards during harvest season. You see thick brown vines growing up about three or four feet from the ground. Each vine ends at a gnarl from which numerous branches grow along the different directions of the trellises. From the branches grow a lot of large leaves that vary from dark green to yellow, bright red even, depending on the exact time of the season. In fact, most of what you see is an abundance of leaves. Hidden among the leaves are clusters of dark purple or light green grapes hanging from the branches.

The branches not only bear fruit, but they bear leaves. Having the proper amount of leaves is critical to making the most and best fruit. The point of pruning and trimming is to end up with the right amount of branch that produces the right mixture of leaves to yield the right amount of fruit. The vinekeepers are never finished. Their lives are a continuum of planting, growing, pruning, and harvesting...planting, growing, pruning, and harvesting.

That night, I knew this story is all about God and his desires. God the Father is the vinekeeper, but he is also the creator and owner of the vineyard. So, it is only his desires that matter, and **his primary desire is to be glorified!** This premise is the basis for understanding the parable. The teaching is very clear that God is glorified when the branches bear much fruit and thereby prove themselves to be disciples.

Generally, we apostles knew that we glorified God by living a life of continual praise and worship, and by proclaiming and expanding his kingdom. This is exactly what Jesus did on Earth,

so at the end of his life he was able to tell the Father, “I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do.”⁴

The vinekeeper is responsible for the vine being the most fruitful by preparing the soil and the vines. He cuts off⁵ and burns branches that don’t bear fruit. A branch doesn’t bear fruit if it becomes disconnected from the vine, *or* if it is capable of bearing fruit, but chooses to be totally unproductive or to produce only leaves.

God trims and prunes fruitful branches from excess branch growth, twigs, and leaves so they will be even more fruitful. The pruning and trimming process will likely feel unpleasant to me and may possibly vary in the form of discipline that God provides because... he loves me. In my daily life, pruning and trimming probably require the elimination of activities, emotions, or thoughts which make me ineffective and unproductive.

Jesus said he is the true vine. However, it is critical to remember that just before telling the parable, Jesus had said that he, the Father, and the Holy Spirit, all are in each other. So, abiding in Jesus is equivalent to abiding in God.

The vine knows that it cannot be fruitful unless the branches are connected to it since it is the source of all important nutrients needed for life. Jesus had often talked about being the source of life, and that the connection came through belief in Him⁶.

Followers of Jesus are the branches. The purpose of each branch is to produce much fruit. In order to do that, the branch will have to optimize its input of nutrients from the vine, and optimize its output by properly allocating its resources between the two activities of making fruit and making leaves.

During this teaching, Jesus taught us that healthy branches trust God, know Jesus and the Father, have faith in Jesus, obey Jesus, have the Holy Spirit, love Jesus and are loved by Jesus and the Father, have peace, love each other, don’t belong to the world; and testify about Jesus to others.

If I am an unfruitful branch, God will either work in my life to help me become fruitful or will allow me to be cut off from the vine and destroyed. If I am a fruitful branch, God will prune me to make me more fruitful. Painful at first, these actions are necessary for my own benefit and for God’s glory.

⁴ John 17:4

⁵ Arden Autry, a Greek expert, says that “cut off” means “cut off.” However, the footnote in the NIV says “pruning” in 15:2 can also be translated as “cleaning”. I want to consider both meanings, but I tend to like “cleaning” better because that makes 15:3 make more sense.

⁶ e.g. John 6:29, 6:40

Abide means that the branches are connected in such a close way that they live inside the vine, and the vine lives inside them. Peter calls it, “participating in the divine nature”⁷. Paul phrases it as living by the Spirit and keeping in step with the Spirit.⁸ Jesus puts it simply, “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home⁹ with him.”¹⁰

My intimacy with Christ, my closeness to him, as with all relationships with God, is grace driven. His grace is not only the enabler of my salvation, but is the enabler for going deeper in my attachment to him, and for bearing fruit. It is His great love for me that disciplines me to remove shortcomings so that I can respond to His invitation to have a more intimate relationship and be further transformed into a Christ-like person who can demonstrate God’s love to the world. The path to this deeper intimacy is through a lifestyle of personal abandonment and absolute trust.¹¹

It is my option to abide in Jesus, but Jesus commands me to do so. Why? Because ***I cannot bear any fruit unless I abide in Him.***¹² By this He means that although I may produce some works, I can’t produce works or fruit of value. No fruit. Nada. None. Zip. Zero. I may think I am making fruit, but I am not unless I am abiding in Him. I am entirely useless and stand in danger of being destroyed.

We apostles had already heard a story from Jesus about people who thought they were being fruitful but were going to be destroyed because in reality they weren’t being fruitful¹³. It’s the secret sauce. Abiding is the “secret sauce” to making all good deeds fruitful. It is through abiding that I am transformed from “a worker who loves to a lover who works.”¹⁴

If abiding in Jesus is so important, how can I start doing a better job of doing that? Here are some things I’ve thought of: regularly praying and reading the Scriptures, forgiving anyone that I have not yet forgiven, and setting my heart and mind on heavenly things.

According to the parable, I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that I am abiding in Jesus if I am bearing much fruit. That is one reason why it is critical to be clear about the definition of “fruit.”

⁷ 2 Peter 1:4

⁸ Galatians 5:16, 25

⁹ Or “abode”. Abode is the noun and abide is the verb.

¹⁰ John 14:23

¹¹ This paragraph is taken from Page 78 of the Influencer’s “The Journey” participant manual

¹² Jesus was personally familiar with this concept. He said of Himself, “I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing.” (John 5:19) The apostle Paul reiterated the idea that sometimes I think I have something when I actually have nothing in 1 Cor. 13:1-3, “...and if I have a faith that can move mountains but have not love, I am nothing.”

¹³ Matthew 7:16-23

¹⁴ Bob Sorge, *Secrets of the Secret Place*

If I am mistaken about the definition of fruit, I may very likely expend many resources producing something that isn't fruit. Having a proper understanding of fruit is crucial to intentionally living a fruitful life.

According to the parable, fruit can be described as those things that cause God to be glorified. In the context of this parable, fruit seems primarily to mean the making of disciples by proclaiming and expanding of God's kingdom. As we apostles found, disciples are made through both sharing the Gospel and doing good works that bring glory to God.

You may have noticed that I have talked about leaves several times in this story, but Jesus did not mention them in the parable. I mention them because they are a critical aspect of how I apply this parable to my own life.

We did not understand the science of growing grapes, but we knew the practicalities of doing so. We knew you needed enough leaves on the branch to make good grapes, but not so many leaves that the grapes had too little nourishment. In my own life, the leaves stand for activities that consume my time and energy, but do not produce fruit for God. If I have too many outside activities, I cannot maximize the fruit I produce.

In my time, our outside activities were fairly limited because we were so poor. You are not so fortunate. You have an unlimited amount of diversions at your fingertips. Television, movies, sports, hobbies, computers, Internet, and a long list of other activities. Fatigue, overscheduling, sleep, drugs, alcohol. There is no doubt that you have to be dedicated to God to allocate your resources between making fruit or making leaves.

Jesus said, "This is to my Father's glory that you bear much fruit showing yourselves to be my disciples." Which will it be in your life...fruit, or leaves?