

Title: "Real Life and Real Change In the Real World"

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Real Life and Real Change in the Real World

Jesus spoke the words of John 15 after He and His disciples had shared their last supper. They left the upper room and were going to the Garden of Gethsemane. It's possible that on the way they passed through ancient vineyards planted in terraces on the hillsides. It's easy to imagine Jesus stopping, surrounded by grapevines, and the disciples gathering around Him. They lean close as He lifts a vine and a cluster of grapes up into the torchlight and says, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener."

We don't know all the details. We do know that Jesus wanted to leave the disciples and us not with just a rulebook but with a metaphor, a picture of life. Symbols and metaphors are the language of the heart. Jesus wants to make an impression on us about real life and real change in the real world today.

What does He mean when He talks about fruit and fruitfulness? When the Bible talks about fruit, it is referring to deep, positive change in one's life. In some places it also suggests deep and positive influence on others for Christ. The best way to see this is to look at another passage, Galatians 5:22-23: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law." In the vine and the branches metaphor, Jesus gives us an image to tell us how those kinds of changes can come about in our lives.

How does a weak whiny, person become a person with peace, strength, and love for others? How does an angry, bitter cynical, pessimist become a person of hope and happiness? How does a person who is unsure of himself find peace, direction, and confidence that isn't arrogant but humble? When Jesus says, "I am the true vine," He's saying, "I'm the one who produces in you that kind of change, that kind of fruit ."

Nothing is more important or relevant for any of us than that. We need true, deep, spiritual, and personal growth. Our culture wants it and wants to see it in us in order to believe us. We want and need change, and the world wants to see change, but it has to be real.

This week I read a couple of interviews with James Mercer, lead singer in a popular rock music group. He said, "As a generation we're struggling with wanting to feel authentic. We want to be real people, we feel fake" (*Crutch*, Feb. 4, 2004). He also said, "Growing up in the age of Wal-mart and 7-Eleven-- which was the landscape of my youth--I'm craving authenticity" (*Rolling Stone*, January 2007).

What's so powerful and relevant about this image of the vine and the branches and the fruit of Christ in our lives is that Jesus is talking about something that is truly authentic and incredibly appealing. The image of the vine and the branches and the fruit is a way of saying that the change He produces in us is a natural outgrowth of deep change in our heart. What Christ wants is not just outward conformity to the expectations of the church or outward compliance with the rules of a religion but a connection with Him that changes the heart so that outward changes are the authentic outgrowth of an inward change and connection to Him.

The Deepest Changes in Life Come Through the Health of One's Relationship with Christ

Notice the Scripture again. John 15:1-4: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me."

There are three elements in this picture.

Jesus is the vine. Unless you grew up around grapevines, you might think of a small, snaky plant like a honeysuckle vine. But that's not what this means. The vine is actually the thick, woody trunk of the plant. It's like the trunk of a small tree. Vineyard keepers traditionally keep them about three to four feet high. The vine ends in a large gnarl from which the branches grow, usually on a trellis.

God the Father is the gardener. His purpose is to make the plant healthy and fruitful.

The branches are people. Jesus says, “I am the vine, you are the branches.” The branches are the focus of the vinedresser’s artistry. The life of the vine flows into the branches, and the result is fruit.

Now one thing this teaches is that . . .

If the Life of Christ Is in You, It Will Change You

That’s the implication when Jesus says the branches that bear no fruit are cut off and cleared away. Later He says that such fruitless branches are cast into the fire--a picture of judgment. True believers will bear fruit.

To be a true Christian is not to turn over a new leaf. It is to experience a spiritual rebirth that bears fruit in the life. One doesn’t become a Christian by reforming. Can you see how that would never work in this analogy? That would be like saying a dead branch has to first get some fruit growing and then maybe the vine will offer a relationship. No! That’s impossible. *Fruit in your life is not a condition for receiving Christ but a consequence of receiving Christ.*

When you receive Christ you are no longer the person you used to be. Second Corinthians 5:7 says that you are a “new creature.” Jesus says you must be “born again.” That’s a change too profound to take place without there being *some* evidence of its reality. All branches are not equally fruitful. Most branches go through seasons, as in winter or a time of drought, in which they are bare. But no true branch in the vine fails to bear *some* fruit. It’s also important to understand that you don’t have to be flawless to have fruit!

I recently read of a believer who is a recovering alcoholic. He said he heard a preacher say, “If you still crave alcohol, you aren’t saved.” He said that made him angry because he does still crave alcohol. But for him the evidence of his relationship with Christ is that he hates that he craves it, and he’s fighting that craving, as they say, “One day at a time.”

When I came to Christ as a young man, one of the first things I noticed as the fruit of Christ’s presence in me was not complete exemption from all the old temptations but a new anger at the temptations I used to welcome and a new willingness to fight against them. The Scriptures tell us that true believers have a vital connection to Christ that bears the fruit of change in their lives.

So who are these fruitless branches? Fruitless branches picture people who have a formal relationship with Christ but not a vital relationship.

The key to identifying the fruitless branch is found in the background to this story. Something significant happened during the supper Jesus and the disciples had just shared. During the supper Jesus said to them, "You are clean though not every one of you" (John 13:10). Now that is different from what He says here in John 15:3. Here He just says, "You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you."

Who was it who wasn't clean during the supper and also wasn't present when Jesus said, "Now you are clean"? It was Judas. After Jesus said at the supper that they were not all clean, Judas slipped away to betray him.

Had Judas ever sincerely trusted in Christ as his Lord and Savior? No, he hadn't. John 6:64 tell us that Jesus, speaking to His disciples, said, "Yet there are some of you who do not believe." John adds, "For Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray him." So as Jesus talks about fruitless branches, the scene in the background is that Judas has just left to betray Him. There was no faith present, and his relationship to Christ was a formal relationship, not a vital, life-giving relationship. Some people claim to be Christians when they really aren't, and there is no fruit because there is no life. If the life of Christ is in you, it *will* change you.

Now that's important, but it's not the main point of the passage. The main point is this:

If Your Relationship with Christ Is Healthy, the Change in Your Life Will Be Profound

That point is made over and over in the passage. In John 15:2 Jesus talks about being *even more fruitful*. In verse 8 He talks about *bearing much fruit*. In John 15:16 He says, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit--*fruit that will last.*"

The goal is not to have just enough fruit to convince yourself that Christ is at work in your life, but to have more fruit and much fruit.

Don't ever think that deep inward change in your life or the lives of others is implausible or unlikely. Some of you perhaps have come to Christ and are believing in Him to get you home to heaven. But there is stuff in your life that bothers you and bothers other people, and you're just trying to manage that stuff to keep it under control.

Maybe you are are whiney and full of blame for others. Maybe you are angry or anxious or lustful and dishonest. Maybe you struggle with addictions and compulsions and fears and insecurities, and you are pessimistic about experiencing change that is authentic and not fake. Stop and look and listen to what Jesus is saying here. Jesus says if you belong to Him, it is because *He chose you*. And what did He choose you for? Not just so you can be “in” instead of “out” or “saved” instead of “lost” but so that you can bear fruit, *much* fruit, to the glory of God! Jesus is talking about incredible hope for real change in real people. Give up small expectations, and believe in Him.

Take a good, honest look at your life and your attitude right now. Are you truly committed to continually growing and changing and becoming more spiritually fruitful? Take time to make a very significant adjustment in your heart and say, “Lord, I want to grow. I want to sink the roots of my heart into Christ and bear the fruit for which You chose me. Take the pruning shears to My life if need be. I want real life and real change in the real world.”

If that's your prayer, then know that the deepest changes in life come through the health of your relationship with Christ.

The Most Essential Issue in Life Is the Health of Our Relationship with Christ

In verse 4 Jesus uses the word “remain” four times. “Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.” Jesus is saying that the way authentic change comes is through a relationship with Him that is alive.

We Need to Make Our Relationship to Christ Our Priority

Picture a grapevine with a branch coming from the vine and a cluster of grapes growing on the branch. But if you walk through a vineyard full of grapes, you don't hear the vines struggling and

groaning to make grapes. The grapes grow naturally when the life of the vine is flowing into the branches. So if Christ is the vine, and you are the branches, and the fruit is the life that He alone can enable you to live, your primary focus has to be not on the fruit you are trying to produce but on Him and your connection to Him who alone can produce the fruit in you.

That does not mean we have no responsibility, but it does mean that our primary responsibility is remain connected to Christ, drawing our very life from Him. The image Jesus gives of the vine and the branches does not tell us that our priority is to get busy with His work. It tells us our priority is to keep connected to Him.

A few years ago there lived an influential Christian youth pastor who has since passed away. His name was Mike Yaconelli. He was a busy and successful author and conference speaker. But at one point in his life he said that in all his busyness he had lost his soul somewhere. He said:

In the busyness and clutter of my life, as I traveled all over the world serving God, I thought my soul was just fine, thank you. But my soul wasn't just fine. I was stumbling around and bumping into the symptoms of my soullessness--I was busy, superficial, friendless, afraid, and cynical--but I didn't know where all these negative parts of my life were coming from. (Mike Yaconelli, *Lost and Found: My Soul.*)

Here was a man who was a true believer. He was busy doing things, good things, speaking and writing and serving, and yet something was missing. This is what Jesus is warning us about.

If we neglect this issue of the heart's relationship to Christ that lets His life flow into our heart, the result will be behavior management and busywork but little real fruit. And do you know what is going to happen if we live like that? We are going to find that we aren't changing much. We are not changing deeply. We are going to find that, after several years of being a Christian, we aren't much more loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, or humble. We are really no better at loving people who are challenging than we ever were. We are no better at staying happy in tough times and staying strong in difficulties than we ever were. We are no better at taking criticism, are still easily hurt and easily tempted, aren't overcoming bad habits. We shall have slipped into trying to manage sin but not really growing or bearing fruit for God.

What we you need to do? Try harder? No.

We Need to Cultivate the Companionship of Christ

One of the basic meanings of the Greek word translated “remain” is “to stay in a certain place and be at home there.” When Christ says, “Remain in me,” He is saying, “I want you to find in Me a home for your heart, a source of strength for your life. I want you to live in Me. I am with you as a constant companion, as close as your deepest thoughts and feeling. I gave Myself for you on the cross to be your Savior. I rose again, and I am your Lord. I want you to find your inspiration and peace in Me by trusting in My love and practicing My presence.”

You can go into any bookstore and find tons of books on how to improve your life. You'll find a several different approaches. Some have a *mechanical* approach to change: you figure out some modern technique for modifying behavior; you practice the technique, and you effect change. Others take a *magical* approach to change: you tap into the power of some elemental force or New Age spirituality, and you change magically. Another approach is traditional *morality*. This is what often passes for true Christianity but isn't. Traditional morality says here are the rules; just obey them.

But none of that brings life and real change in the real world! What Jesus is showing us in the picture of the vine and the branches is that real life and real change in the real world is different from all of that. It's not mechanical, it's not magical, and it's not just traditional moral codes enforced by threat and punishments. It transcends all of that. It's relational and spiritual.

It is interesting that one of Shin's songs, “*So Says I*,” says that, in spite of rules, maps, and guns, we still cannot behave ourselves. For that's quite similar to what the apostle Paul says about the law of God. It is good, it can teach you, but it can't change you. The rules, the laws, are like a sheep dog. But you have to know the difference between the sheep dog and the Good Shepherd. The sheep dog barks and nips at your heels and drives you from danger back to the Shepherd, but only the Shepherd can love and lead the sheep to the green pastures and still waters that restore the soul.

If you want real life and real change, cultivate the companionship of Christ. That's the message of the vine and the branches.

Hebrews 10:22 says, “Draw near to God.” A man I know jotted down notes and thoughts when he read the Bible. At the top of the page he printed, “Discipline yourself for godliness.” That's a Scripture from 1 Timothy. But over time he noticed that his spiritual life was very dry, unsatisfying, and unfruitful. So he changed his attitude toward reading the Bible. He printed out a new sheet to use, and at the top he printed Hebrews 10:22, “Draw near to God.”

For him those two verses represented two very different attitudes. “Discipline yourself for godliness” suggested that he was going to conform to certain disciplines in order to change his behavior. “Draw near to God” suggested that he was going to cultivate the companionship of God in order to be changed through that relationship.

Of course there is a biblical and proper role of discipline in the Christian life. It's scriptural. But the only discipline that bears fruit is the discipline that is deeply grafted into a life-giving relationship with Christ. When that relationship to Jesus slips out of the center of our actions, disciplines, and ministries, they cease to be fruitful.

What Can We Do to Strengthen Our Relationship to Christ?

Three very practical things are suggested in this passage. Let's look at them quickly.

Delight in His words. Look at **verse 7**. “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.” Remember, one meaning of the Greek word translated “remain” is “to stay in a certain place and be at home there.” Christ says, “If you are going to remain in Me and draw life from Me, then My words must find a home in your heart.”

Colossians 3:16 counsels, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.” When we welcome Christ into our lives, we receive Him not as a silent guest but as a living, speaking presence who comes to communicate with us continually. He communicates through the Holy Scripture and the Holy Spirit.

Every one of our hearts and minds is filled with ideas expressed in words. What thoughts and ideas are at home in your mind and

heart? Unless our minds and hearts are filled with the thoughts and truths and words of Christ--unless His cleansing, comforting, corrective, healthy, living, and transforming words are at home there--all kinds of falsehood, foolishness, delusion, and deception will flood in. To let the words of Christ dwell in us means that they find a home in us and they affect us. So there is a spiritual discipline, but it's all about building a relationship with Christ.

Depend on His love. In verse 9 Jesus says, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love."

Remember Mike Yaconelli, the pastor who was so busy but so empty? In the article he wrote, he said, "It only took being alone for a short period of time for me to discover that I wasn't alone."

When he finally started listening to God, he said, he felt God was saying to him,

"Michael, I am here. I have been calling you. I have been loving you, but you haven't been listening. You have been so busy trying to prove to yourself that you are loved that you have not heard me" (*Lost and Found: My Soul*.)

Delight in His words, depend on His love, and . . .

Do as He says. "If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete" (verses 10-11). □

Jesus doesn't begin His teaching on remaining in Him by talking about obedience, but He doesn't end it without obedience. If we *delight* in His words and *depend* on His love, we will want to *do* what He says. We do what He says because we are responding to Him out of our relationship with Him. And we shall need to do what He says, because when we *delight* in His words, and *depend* on His love, and *do* what He says, that's when His life flows into our life most fully and bears the most fruit.

And that's how you get real life and real change in the real world.