

The One True Vine and the Fruitful Heart

Paul Tripp has written a helpful book called *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands*. It's about helping ourselves and others to change and grow. In it the author talks about what he calls "fruit stapling."

Let's say I have a grapevine in my backyard. Each year its grapes are scarce, and the ones that do appear are mushy and bitter. After a while my wife says, "It doesn't make much sense to have this grapevine sprawling all over the yard and never be able to enjoy the grapes. Can't you do something?"

So one day she looks out and sees me carrying a staple gun and a couple of baskets of grapes from the grocery store. I start stapling beautiful clusters of grapes onto the branches of the vine. From a distance the vine starts to look great. But what do you think my wife would be thinking? We all know that kind of fruit may look good for the moment, but it won't last. It will rot, and then I'll have the same problem all over again. I've got to get to the heart of the problem if I want better fruit . (You will find this illustration in Paul David Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands*, p. 63).

Sometimes when we try to grow or change, we just try to get by with an approach to life that is little more than fruit stapling. We often place all our effort and attention on our outward behavior rather than on our hearts. Throughout His ministry Jesus taught us differently. He told us that change that ignores the heart will never transform our lives.

One of the ways Jesus stresses our heart's response to Him is by revealing a series of seven statements, all recorded in the gospel of John and all beginning with the words "I am."

1. John 6:35, "I am the bread of life."
2. John 8:12, "I am the light of the world."
3. John 10:7, "I am the gate for the sheep."
4. John 10:11, "I am the good shepherd."
5. John 11:25, "I am the resurrection and the life."
6. John 14:6, "I am the way the truth and the life."
7. John 15:1, "I am the true vine."

These statements are one reason we can never say Jesus was just a good teacher or a good man. He made such outrageous statements that we either have to believe in Him as Lord or reject Him as crazy.

But notice also that these statements point us to who Christ is, not only Himself but also in relationship to us. The implied question with each of these statements is, "Is He this for you?" Is He the bread of life for you? Is He your light, gate, shepherd, resurrection and life, way and truth and life? Finally, the seventh "I am" statement raises the question, Is Christ the true vine for you? All of these questions have to do with one's heart response to Him.

Remaining in Christ Is an Issue of the Heart

In John 15 Jesus says He is the vine, and we are the branches.

In another place He uses a similar analogy that sheds some light on this passage. In Luke 6:43-45 He says, "No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thornbushes, or grapes from briars. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks."

In this comparison the fruit is our character and behavior including our words, but what's at the root of it all? What determines the quality of the fruit is what takes place in the heart. In the Bible the heart is not just the emotions but the center of the emotions, mind, and will. At the end of verse 45 when Jesus talks about words, He says, "For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks." The mouth overflows with what is stored up in the heart. The emotions reveal what the heart loves or at least longs for. The body follows where the heart leads. Everything begins with the heart.

When Jesus Says to Remain in Him, He Is Telling Us to Continually Make Him Our Source of Life and Love

The Bible stresses the importance of this by saying that when we fail to do this we are actually committing idolatry in our hearts. Even in the ancient world, when physical idols were common, the Bible spoke about an inward idolatry. The prophet Ezekiel wrote about people who set up idols in their hearts.

Idolatry can be a sin of the heart that lies at the root of other more obvious sins. Colossians 3:5 says, "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry." The word "greed" simply means "a desire to have more." It can describe financial greed, material greed, sexual greed, approval greed, or control greed. It's the ravenous hunger of a heart that refuses to be satisfied with God but can never be satisfied with anything else.

This is everyone's struggle. There is nothing new here. Stephen Charnock, one of the Reformed theologians of the 1600s, wrote in his book *Existence and Attributes of God*:

[Each person] acts as if God could not make him happy without the addition of something else All men worship some golden calf, set up by education, custom, natural inclination and the like This [the main idol] is the great stream, and other sins but rivulets, which bring supply . . . this is the strongest chain wherein the devil holds the man, the main fort.

The book of 1 John contains 105 verses about living in fellowship with Christ. All 105 verses talk about various sins and temptations that break our fellowship with Him, things such as love for this world, pride, lust, and hate. First John also talks about the importance of faith and love for God and for people, but it never uses the word *idol* or *idolatry* until the very end of the book.

Then, in 1 John 5:21, the very last verse, as if to sum up the main issue, the underlying concern through all of this teaching on all of these different topics, it says, "Dear children, keep yourselves from idols." In other words, even though John hasn't mentioned idolatry in the entire book, when he gets to the end he suggests that the underlying sin in all of these issues and areas of life is really idolatry. So we can sum up the thrust of 105 verses about vital fellowship with Christ by simply saying this : *Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.*

One of the most ancient Christian leaders was Tertullian. He was a lawyer in Rome who became a Christian in the year 193 (1,814 years ago!). In his writings, *On Idolatry*, Tertullian says in the opening words:

The principal crime of the human race . . . is idolatry. For although each individual sin retains its own proper feature,

although it is destined to judgment under its own proper name also, yet they all fall under the general heading of idolatry. . . . Murder and adultery, for example, are idolatry, for they arise because something is loved more than God.

Here, then, is what it comes down to:

The Heart Issue for Remaining in Christ Is Getting Rid of Heart Idols in Order to Love Him and Find Life in Him

What would you think of a man who married a woman and promised her his lifelong love but, after they were married, was continually pursuing and falling in love with other women? Just suppose he would never cross the line into physical adultery and sexual intimacy. But he would be head over heels emotionally wrapped up in and preoccupied with one woman after another. Certainly his physical restraint would mean something, but it wouldn't be good enough to make up for his roving affections and unfaithful emotions. Nor would it be enough to make the marriage anything like the marriage could have been or to make his relationship with his wife the sweet and strong relationship it should be.

So good for you if you don't have a statue to some false god in your backyard, but the absence of outward idols means little if God is not first in the affections of your heart.

Sometimes you will hear a person talk about someone he has had a relationship with and say, "I just don't think she's into me anymore." Often that means she still comes around and they do things, but the heart's not in it. She's just not "into him" anymore. It's interesting how that thought echoes the idea of Jesus here in John 15. He says, "Remain in me." We can't remain in Christ if we aren't really "into" Him. He can't change our life, and we will not be fruitful, if we aren't into Him. What are you into? Are you into Christ? Does Christ know you are into Him?

Because Remaining in Christ Is a Heart Issue, We Must Look Beneath the Surface

We can't just staple some good stuff onto the outside of our lives. We need to be willing to take a deeper look. And there are lots of reasons people choose not to look inside their hearts.

Sometimes we don't look deeply and honestly at our hearts because we don't really believe God is able to change us at that level. But He is. It's only from that level that He ever really does change us. Second Corinthians 4:6 says that God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ." When you receive Christ, God shines His light into your heart, and that's where He wants to do His work, beneath the surface and at the root.

Sometimes we don't look deeply and honestly at our hearts because we find it all confusing and uncertain. "The purposes of a man's heart are deep waters, but a man of understanding draws them out (Proverbs 20:5). Yes, there are "deep waters," but we have to be people of understanding, drawing out the purposes of the heart.

Psalm 139:2-24 says, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." The prayer for God to search us and know our heart implies the need for His help so that we can understand our heart and turn to God.

Sometimes we don't look deeply and honestly at our hearts because we are afraid of what we will discover. The writer C.S. Lewis said that when he honestly looked into his heart he was appalled by what he saw. He found, "A zoo of lusts, a bedlam of ambitions, a nursery of fears, a harem of fondled hatreds." But it was that honest look inside that led him to deeper faith in Christ. As Proverbs 28:13 says, "He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy."

Sometimes it is not our own sins that we are unwilling to face but sins that have been sinned against us. Sometimes it's scary to face the painful ways people from whom we thought we could have expected better have betrayed or hurt us. But God's healing grace works most deeply not when bad things are kept hidden but when they are exposed to the light of His truth and immersed in the depths of His love. Then we can begin to not only receive forgiveness but also give forgiveness.

Sometimes, I'm afraid, we just don't care to look deeply at our hearts because we've carved out a happy compromise with numbness or distraction or self-pity or criticism of others. We're addicted to some cancerous attitudes or anesthetized by various distractions that keep

us from having to look inward. The promise Christ gives is that we can be fruitful if we remain in him. But remaining in Him is a matter of the heart. So we have to look at our heart so that we can know where we are.

Jesus said, "Woe to you, hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean (Matthew 23:25-26). How can we clean the inside of our lives, if we are not willing to look inside with God's help and bring it all into the cleansing presence of Christ's truth and love?"

Jack Miller was a pastor who has had a big influence on me. I read many of his books. One of them, titled "*Come Back Barbara*," is the story of his daughter who, as a young adult rejected everything her parents stood for. This pastor's daughter became the girlfriend of a drug kingpin. She was running around town in mink coats and green jaguars. What she was doing was not only dangerous to her but was incredibly humiliating and embarrassing for her mother and her father, the pastor. Their daughter caused them so much pain it was hard for them to go on bearing the good fruit of love, joy, peace, and forgiveness while she was wounding them so deeply.

Jack and his wife tried to get over what was happening but couldn't until they took an honest look into their own hearts. When they did, Jack said he had to face something that surprised him. His daughter's rebellion, which was understandably sad, had an effect far beyond sadness. What Barbara did tore the roots out of what had really been the source of his happiness. He had to admit that his perception of himself as a good pastor, his reputation in the community, and his relationship with his daughter, which he thought was good, were the things that nourished his life.

You may say, "Well, of course those things mattered to him," but he came to see that those things didn't *just* matter. That would have been fine. But those things had become the measure of his life and a means of happiness for him, more dear than God. So he had to come back to Christ and say, in effect, "Lord, I'm sorry I've let good things become the main thing in my life instead of You. Let me place You back at the center of my heart and find in You my source of life."

It was only when he brought his heart back to devotion and dependence on Christ that was he able to truly love and forgive his

daughter. And then, although the hurt was still there, real love and peace and forgiveness was able to take root and bear fruit. It changed their relationship, and in the end, by God's grace, Barbara did come back, and they wrote the book.

Something interesting happened after the book was written. Jack Miller said people would often read the book and then come to him and say, "Your book was interesting, but it didn't help me. I'm in the same situation, and I've tried to forgive my child, but I can't."

Jack said that as he talked to these people he discovered what most often was the problem was that they got the *idea* that they needed to forgive, but they didn't pay attention to, or tried to just skip, the part about taking an honest look into their own heart and coming back to Christ in an honest and radical way.

They didn't understand that the irony and mystery of real love is that you can't love anyone well unless you love God best and rely on him most. In some rings, a large diamond is placed in the center with smaller stones all around it. The result is that the center stone makes the little stones shine with greater luster and beauty. That's the way it is to be with us and our love for Christ. When He is the largest love, at the center, all other legitimate loves are enriched and enhanced by our love for Him. When something else, no matter how legitimate in itself, takes His place as the center diamond, we are no longer remaining in Him.

Your problem may not be a heartbreaking relationship or a ruined reputation, but the principle is the same for all of us.

How Can We Know When and in What Area Our Heart Is No Longer Remaining in Christ?

Look at your emotions and look at your temptations. Look at what is in your life and trace it to its roots. "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23).

Look at your emotions. The Bible doesn't tell us to repress all emotion as if denial or numbness is better than deep feeling. Sometimes we feel deeply because things are wrong with the world. But, having said that, emotions can also show us where our hearts are not finding life in Christ. We feel most strongly about the things we care

about the most.

Let us look within and ask, “*Why* do I feel so strongly about the things I feel strongly about? *Why* is it that I'm so angry or worried or depressed? *What* is it I think I must have in order to be satisfied and joyful about life? What is it that has become so important to me that the fear of not achieving it or keeping it makes so angry, fearful, worried, or depressed?” Let us push past the answers that focus only on the outward circumstances and let the emotion point us to deeper issues.

Look at your temptations. Temptations work like emotions to indicate deeper issues. First Timothy 6:10 says, “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.” Notice that Timothy says the love of money is a *root* and all kinds of evil are the *fruit*. Underneath many outward sins is an underlying root of love for something that is greater than our love for God. Let your temptations point you to what's going on in your heart.

It's so easy not to look deeply at all of this, isn't it? It's easy to choose to just go on and get by. Christ wants more from us than that. And He promises us so much. He says, “Get down into the level of your heart, get your heart into Me, and keep continually working to keep that kind of heart-deep connection to Me, and you will be very fruitful.”

Christ died for our sins and rose again so that even those who have foolishly worshiped themselves and a hundred other gods of their own making can come to Him and live in a relationship of love and trust with Him. He offers us His perfect love. We don't have to earn it. We can't. We have to receive it by turning to Him as our Savior and trusting in Him as our Lord.

Because of what He has done for us, we can trust Him, love Him, and live for Him. Do it. Don't cling to your idols. Let go of them. Turn to Christ and remain in Him

Back in the twelfth century, a monk named Bernard of Clairvaux wrote a hymn titled “Jesus Thou Joy of Loving Hearts,” which has lasted for eight centuries. One of the verses in this hymn says:

*Jesus thou Joy of loving hearts,
True source of life and light of men
From the best bliss that earth imparts,*

We turn unfilled to thee again