

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN - PART XVIII

THE ANALOGY OF THE VINE, THE COMMANDMENT OF LOVE,

THE OPPOSITION OF THE WORLD AND THE SENDING OF THE SPIRIT

I. As the Last Supper discourse continues, Jesus draws the analogy of Himself as the vine and the disciples as the branches, with the Father as the vine-dresser.

A. Jesus is picking up on a common Old Testament theme of Israel as the vineyard of the Lord, which the Lord has carefully tended. However, that imagery of the prophets presents Israel as failing to produce fruit for God. See Is. 5:1-7, Ezek. 17:5-10; Hos. 10:1. The restored Israel to come was compared to a fruitful vine. See Hos. 14:8, Amos 13:15. The implication is that now at last with Jesus as the source of goodness, the vineyard can prosper.

- Likewise, Jesus had warned that Israel was like the vineyard with tenants who refused to pay rent and in fact killed the messengers and then the son who was sent to collect it. See Matt. 21:33-46; Mark 12:1-12; Luke 20:1-8.

- In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus also warned that His disciples must bear good fruit. See Matt. 7:16-20. The idea here is that they can only do so by remaining with Him.

B. Psalm 80 presents Israel as the Lord's vine, but this time in the context of praying for deliverance from enemies who are destroying it. The Psalm calls for one at the lord's right hand, the chosen one to deliver Israel. See also Dan. 7, Ps. 110:1. Jesus is presenting Himself as the fulfillment of this psalm.

C. Jesus is also tapping into the image of Wisdom as a vine that produces sweet wine to no end. See Sir. 24:17-21. This imagery is that the life of faith will, at the deepest level be sweet even though it involves suffering as well, and make the disciples a more pleasing person, at least to those willing to follow Christ.

- Likewise, a faithful wife, and by implication a faith-filled family, is compared to a fruitful vine in Psalm 128.

D. The prophets had spoken of an era in which grapes and wine would be in abundance, indicating prosperity. See, e.g., Is.

62:9; Joel 4:18; Amos 9:13-15. The imagery could also mean the fruitfulness of good works.

E. The Temple gate, plated with gold, was also covered with images of the vine and branches, representing the fruitfulness of worship and of the Messianic promises. Jesus may have also been indicating once again He (and by extension His disciples) is the door to the true worship and promises of heaven.

F. The implication of the analogy is that one who breaks from Christ will eventually wither and become useless. This image would apply not only to those who formally break from Christ, but perhaps even more to those who say they are with Him, but are not really trying to be faithful or bear fruit in good works. The prophecies of Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Hosea emphasize this warning.

G. But Jesus adds that even the good branches must be pruned or cleaned ("kathizo" in Greek.) Before Judas left, Jesus said they were clean, but not all. Now He says that His word does clean them.

- The word of God, and especially the word of Christ, is effective in itself, cleansing, healing, and making fruitful. See, e.g., Is. 55:10-11; Eph. 4:17; Heb. 4:12-13. The word itself brings life. See 1 John 1:1. And Jesus generally performed miracles by commanding them.

- The pruning, or cleansing, may be painful and seem to prevent good works, but in the long run, makes one even more fruitful. There is a warning here against judging things by mere efficiency.

II. Jesus then goes to a related topic, the receipt of His love and the showing forth of that love to others.

A. The verses 7 to 17 seem to have a chiasmic structure, that is, a set of themes going in one direction, concluding with the central message, and then the same themes presented in reverse order.

1. The first half goes through the themes: (1) of the efficacy of prayer if one remains in Christ (verse 7); (2) the bearing of great fruit as disciples of Christ (verse 8); (3) Jesus loving His disciples as the Father loves Him (verse 9); and (4) remaining in Christ by keeping His commandments as He has kept the Father's commandments (verse 10.) The central idea here is the fruitfulness that comes from imitating Jesus and His obedience to the father.

2. The central theme of the central section (verses 11 and 12) is the joy of Christ in His disciples, the fullness of this joy, and the love they show to each other. According to St. Thomas Aquinas, joy is the overflowing of love. See Summa Theologica II-II question 28 art. 1.

3. The second half of the chiasm then goes through the themes in opposite order: (1) the central commandment is to love each other as Christ has loved them, laying down His life for them as His friends (verses 12-13); (2) Christ loving His disciples as friends and revealing to them all that He has (in His human nature) learned from His Father (verse 15); (3) the fact that Christ first chose the disciples to bear great fruit for Him (Verse 16); and (4) the fruitfulness of prayer if they keep the command to love each other. The emphasis here is developing the theme of imitating Christ and keeping His commandments by emphasizing the central aspects of being friends of Christ and of each other and showing forth that love to each other.

- The love of friendship is, in itself, less than the perfect love (agape) that Christ has for them and that they are called to show forth. However, one does not jump to that perfect love at once. One must build upon the friendship within the Christian community.

B. Jesus has earlier described in the Bread of Life discourse that He would abide in His disciples by giving them Himself to eat. See John 6:56. The First Letter of John would also develop the theme that we know that the eternal life of Christ abides in us if we have love for others, shown in action, and if the Spirit remains in us. See 1 John 3:13-24. The letter to the Galatians indicates what fruits the Spirit will bear if He is really abiding in a person. See Gal. 5:22-23.

C. Jesus' promise that they would be His friends is new, at least as phrased in that fashion, although He has already indicated that they would be children of God. See, e.g., Matt. 12:46-49. In the Old Testament, only Abraham had been called a friend of God. See 2 Chron. 20:7, Is. 41:8; James 2:23. In addition, Adam and Eve apparently conversed with God, Enoch and Noah "walked with God," see Gen. 5:24, 6:9, and Moses spoke to God "face to face," see Ex. 33:1, Deut. 34:10. But here the offer is made to all of those who do the will of God. See also Matt. 12:46-49. Jesus is thus fulfilling the role of Wisdom, who can do "anything," including making people holy and friends of God. See Wis. 7:27. The condition is that one carry out the commandments of Christ. Thus, the commandments are here presented, not as merely a set of rules to gain a reward or avoid punishment, but as a way of building friendships with God and His disciples that would otherwise be impossible.

- Both aspects, the need to obey God's commandments as absolute and the dignity we have as family members and friends of God, are both necessary elements.

III. Jesus then describes His disciples as in the world, but not of the world.

A. The world strangely hates those sent to save it. The world is seen in different lights even within the Gospel according to John. God sent His son to save the world, for it is created good. See John 1:29; 3:16-17. However, the world (meaning those dominated by a desire for the things of the world) hate the very ones sent to save them, for they do not wish for someone to "impose values" on them, or remind them of the need to repent of any real sins. See John 1:10; 3:19, 7:7; 8:23-24.

- There was an early analogy among the Fathers of Christians in the world as the soul in the body. The soul give life to the body, but the body (meaning desires) war against the discipline the soul tries to impose. See John 3:19-20, 7:7.

B. Jesus reminds them of earlier warnings of a persecution. The synoptic Gospels record some of these warnings. See Matt. 10:22, 24:9; Mark 13:13; Luke 6:22. This message especially parallels Jesus' "sheep among wolves" discourse in Matthew chapter 10. However, the disciples at that time were near the beginning of Jesus' public ministry and, at that time, met with great success. Now He is warning them that the opposition will be in full force.

- Earlier, Jesus gave a similar message regarding not being greater than one's master in the context of mutual service and humility. See John 13:16.

- Here, there is also a sense that even the upcoming persecutions are predicted by Christ and show forth the fact that His disciples are truly following Him. There is not an idyllic picture of the future. Rather there is an image of continued struggle to force the world to completion, whether its people want it or not. See 1 John 5:1-5.

C. Jesus does not hold blameless those who persecute His followers, for they have heard and seen Christ Himself.

1. There is again a clear choice that must be made when Christ Himself comes. Innocent ignorance is no longer an option. What is more, one cannot separate Christ from His Father.

2. Jesus then quotes from Psalm 69, verse 5. The Psalm is a lament of one who is being unjustly persecuted. It ends,

however, with a note of triumph that the Lord will hear the poor, and restore Israel. The Book of Revelation also refers several times to this Psalm. See Rev. 3:5, 13:8, 16:1, 17:8.

D. Then, as if to indicate how God will restore Israel, Jesus promises the Paraclete, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father and is sent by the Son. The Holy Spirit would come to the Apostles and other disciples at Pentecost, manifesting before the world the new Israel, i.e., the Church. See Acts 2. They would, at that time, bear great fruit, gaining numerous converts, show forth fraternal charity in common life, and be able to exercise great power in prayer, for example, by curing the crippled beggar.