

Welcome back to our continued study on the nature of the church. This evening we will be finishing our study on the Metaphors of the Church...the pictures of the Church that we find in God's Word. Over the last several weeks we have looked at the metaphor of the Church as a body with Christ as its head, and the metaphor of the Church as a flock of sheep with Jesus as its shepherd. This week we will be looking at a last few metaphors...the Church as branches and Jesus as the vine from which they grow, the Church as the bride and Jesus as the bridegroom, and the Church as a building with Jesus as its foundation and cornerstone.

All of these metaphors would be commonly understood by those hearing them as they are routinely found in the day to day life of the Jewish culture of the time. Israel was a country in which vineyards were commonplace and the proper tending of the grapevine and branches was well known and familiar. The marriage and betrothal customs were equally well known...I would imagine in all cultures the joining of bride and bridegroom is a cause for celebration and joy. And the Jewish hearers would have only to cast their eyes upon the great temple mount to reflect on the metaphor of the building, cornerstone, and foundation.

The metaphor of the vine and branches is found in John 15:5ff. Jesus is speaking to His disciples and says, **"I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. 2 Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit. 3 You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. 4 Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. 5 I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. 6 If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned. 7 If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8 My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples.**

I grew up in the Central Valley of California where vineyards were abundant. I would often see laborers, after the harvest, in the field pruning back the now barren branches. Branches that bore poorly or had died during the growing season would have already been removed so that more nutrients would have been available for fruitful branches. The remaining branches would be inspected for health and damage and only 2-4 branches would kept per vine...and these would be selected as the fruit bearing branches for next season. These would then be cut back so each branch would have an optimal number of buds to provide the ideal quality and quantity of bunches at the next harvest. These would be the same practices familiar to the people of Israel.

In addition, we see Old Testament metaphors comparing Israel with branches on a vine...In Jer 5:10 we have Jeremiah commanded to prophecy against the inhabitants of Jerusalem, saying, **"Go up through her vine rows and destroy, But do not execute a complete destruction; Strip away her branches, For they are not the LORD'S. 11 "For the house of Israel and the house of Judah Have dealt very treacherously with Me," declares the LORD. 12 They have lied about the LORD And said, "Not He; Misfortune will not come on us, And we will not see sword or famine. 13 "The prophets are as wind, And the word is not in them. Thus it will be done to them!"** So the words of Jesus in John 15 are not unfamiliar to the disciples...they can readily understand the analogy Jesus is making.

Jesus starts by identifying the characters in the metaphor...God the Father is the vinedresser; the shaper and caretaker of the vine and branches. Jesus is the vine, the source of life and nutrients for the branches. And the disciples...representing the church...are the branches. So the first truth we see is that God is responsible for the growth and fruitfulness of His church. He is the one tending it and shaping it. He is the one deciding where the branches will trail and which buds to select. He is the one determining the nature and quality of the fruit desired. This is the same truth found in Matt 16 where Jesus says **"I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will**

not overpower it.” It is not up to the branch to determine its shape and direction...that is prerogative of the vinedresser.

The second truth is that, in addition to being under the care and direction of the vinedresser, the branch has no source of life and fruit in itself. It is wholly dependent upon the vine for all its needs. That’s why Jesus says,

“Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. 5 I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.”

Beloved, the most we can do as a branch is to just joyfully yield to the care and direction of the Vinedresser and the life of the Vine... we are told to “abide” in Him as He abides in us. The idea of “abiding” is to take up residence to stay...much the same idea of Jesus being “at home in our hearts” from an earlier study. Our life is found in Him and His life is found in us. It is expressed in a slightly different way in verse 7, where we read, **“If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.** Here, we see that Christ abiding in us is the same as His Word abiding in us. We are to “let the Word of Christ richly dwell within” us, to quote Col 3:16. That is what it means when Jesus says, **“Abide in Me, and I in you”** Our lives are to be based upon His Word and Spirit which has taken up residence in our hearts...our thoughts and actions yielded to His Word and Spirit.

The third truth that we see in this passage is that there are false and true branches. Verses 2 and 6 read, **“ Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit... If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned.”** Just as there were false branches in the houses of Israel and Judah, there are false branches in the church...branches that are not truly connected to the life of the Vine. True branches are under the care of the vinedresser and bear much fruit...evidence of the manifestation of the indwelling Spirit of Christ and proof that they are disciples of Jesus. False branches, however, bear no true fruit because they have no true connection to the vine.

We learn from this metaphor...the metaphor of the vine and branches...that our life is wholly dependent upon the work of God within us and through us. We learn that God as the vinedresser wants to shape and prune us so that we are ever increasing in our fruitfulness. We learn that we are connected to the vine in order to bear fruit...to manifest the very character of God and participate in building His kingdom. And we learn that the building of that kingdom is under His authority and control, not our own.

The next metaphor we want to look at this evening is the metaphor of the Church as the bride and Jesus as the bridegroom. As with the metaphor of the vine and branches, this metaphor can be found in Old Testament writings as well, in reference to the people of God. In Jer 2:2, Jeremiah is commanded by God to proclaim to Jerusalem, **“I remember concerning you the devotion of your youth, The love of your betrothals, Your following after Me in the wilderness”.** Here, God calls to their attention the way they once loved Him, and followed after Him, as a bride toward the bridegroom.

Paul uses the same imagery in 2 Cor 11:2, where he says to the Corinthian church, **“For I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy; for I betrothed you to one husband, so that to Christ I might present you as a pure virgin. 3 But I am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds will be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ.”**

As Jeremiah called Jerusalem to remember their earlier devotion to God so does Paul call the Corinthians to remember their earlier devotion to Christ in the same way. The picture is that of the desire and devotion of a new bride for the husband she loves. It is beautifully pictured in the Song of Solomon...in chapter 2, verse 3ff.

“Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest, So is my beloved among the young men. In his shade I took great delight and sat down, And his fruit was sweet to my taste. 4 “He has brought me to his banquet hall, And his banner over me is love. 5 “Sustain me with raisin cakes, Refresh me with apples, Because I am lovesick. 6 “Let his left hand be under my head And his right hand embrace me.”

It speaks of the euphoria and excitement of new love...that longing to be close and find safety and delight in the arms of the bridegroom. Beloved, do you remember that moment when you first fell in love with Jesus? When all things became new and you realized His deep love for you? It is to this love that the metaphor of the bride and bridegroom seeks to draw us. We are to be drawn back to our first love...to long for intimacy and closeness with our Lord...to find joy in His presence and rest in His grace.

The final metaphor we will look at in our study is the Church as a building...the dwelling place of God. In this metaphor, Christ serves as the foundation and cornerstone. In Eph 2:19ff we read, “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God’s household, 20 having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, 21 in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, 22 in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit. And in 1 Cor 3:11, Pau says, “According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building on it. But each man must be careful how he builds on it. 11 For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.”

This metaphor, too, has its roots in Old Testament writings. Peter, quoting OT passages, writes in 1 Pet 2:4ff, “And coming to Him as to a living stone which has been rejected by men, but is choice and precious in the sight of God, 5 you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 6 For this is contained in Scripture: “BEHOLD, I LAY IN ZION A CHOICE STONE, A PRECIOUS CORNER stone, AND HE WHO BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED.” 7 This precious value, then, is for you who believe; but for those who disbelieve, “THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS REJECTED, THIS BECAME THE VERY CORNER stone,” 8 and, “A STONE OF STUMBLING AND A ROCK OF OFFENSE”; for they stumble because they are disobedient to the word, and to this doom they were also appointed.

Like the metaphor of the Body, we are all being “fitted together” by God as His dwelling place. Jesus is identified as both the foundation and the cornerstone of the building...the holy temple...being built. The cornerstone is considered the most important stone of a building. It is the stone from which all measurements are derived. It serves as an essential part of the foundation...the support structure of the entire building. It is a fitting description of our Lord as He is essential to our support and in keeping us “in line” and “on track”. It is through His Word and Spirit that we are able to discern the direction and dimensions of our lives and ministry. And no successful building can occur except upon the foundation of His atoning sacrifice and sustaining power.

So, what have we discovered in our study of the metaphors of the Church? We see that we have been established in unity...as one entity under His lordship. We see that we are deliberately created to be unique and important to the health and success of His Church and mission. We see His great love and care for us, as He prepares a way for us in this world and the next. We see the intimacy He desires to have with us...the closeness and kinship of newlyweds, longing for each other’s presence and touch. We see our absolute dependency on His life in us...that apart from Him we can do nothing of value. And we see that, in crafting His kingdom and domain, we are blessed to be an integral part of that process and work.

Is that not sufficient reason to be thankful? To give Him glory? To yield to His love? To honor Him with our love and obedience?

Let us pray.