

Historic Commentary

(Fifth Sunday of Easter - Year B)



The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on John 15:1-8 from Selected Church Fathers and John Calvin

[Thomas Aquinas' curated commentary on John 15](#), from a 13th century document called the [Catena Aurea](#) that contains compiled verse by verse commentary on the Gospels from the Patristics and others.

[Hilary of Poitiers](#): Jesus rises and hurries to complete the mystery of his bodily passion. But the next moment, he unfolds the mystery of his assumption of flesh. Through this assumption we are in him, as the branches are in the vine. And unless he had become the vine, we could have borne no good fruit. He encourages us to abide in him through faith in his assumed body, that, since the Word has been made flesh, we may be in the nature of his flesh, as the branches are in the vine. He separates the form of the Father's majesty from the humiliation of the assumed flesh by calling himself the vine, the course of unity for all the branches. He calls the Father the careful husbandman who prunes away its useless and barren branches to be burned in the fire.

[Ambrose](#): Jacob spoke of [our Lord as] a grape, because Christ hung on the wood like a grape. He is the vine; he is the grape. He is the vine because he cleaves to the wood and the grape because, when his side was opened by the soldier's lance, he sent forth water and blood... water for baptism, blood for redemption. The water washed us; the blood redeemed us.

[Augustine](#): When he says, "I am the true vine," it is no doubt to distinguish himself from that [vine] to which the words are addressed, "How are you turned into the degenerate plant of a strange vine to me?" For how could that be a true vine that was expected to bring forth grapes and brought forth thorns?

[Clement of Alexandria](#): The vine produces wine as the Word produces blood, and both are drunk for the health of men and women—wine for the body, blood for the spirit.

[Cyril of Alexandria](#): He wants to show us how important it is to love, to hold fast to our love toward him and how much we gain from our union with him. This is why he says that he is the vine, by way of illustration. Those united, anchored and rooted in him, who are already partakers in his nature through their participation in the Holy Spirit, are branches. For it is his Holy Spirit who has united us with the Savior Christ since connection with the vine produces a choice of those things that belong to it. And our connection with the vine

holds us fast. From a firm resolve in goodness we proceed onward by faith and we become his people, obtaining from him the dignity of sonship....He says that he is a vine, the mother and nourisher, as it were, of its branches. For we are begotten of him and in him, in the Spirit, to produce the fruits of life.

Augustine: Not only is the church a field, but God is the tiller of the field. Listen to the Lord himself: "I am the vine, you the twigs, and my Father is the vinedresser." Toiling in this field as a laborer and hoping for an eternal reward, the apostle claims no credit for himself, except a laborer's due. "I planted," he says, "Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. And so neither the one who plants is anything, nor the one who waters, but God who gives the increase."

Augustine: For we [through praise] cultivate God, and God cultivates us. But our cultivating of God does not make him better: our cultivating is that of adoration, not of plowing.... His cultivating of us makes us better.... His cultivating consists in getting rid of all the seeds of wickedness from our hearts, in opening our heart to the plow, as it were, of his word, in sowing in us the seeds of his commandments, and in waiting for the fruits of godliness.

Cyril of Alexandria: If we demonstrate what kind of union we have by only a mere barren confession of faith—without sealing the bond of our union by the good works that proceed from love—we will be branches indeed, but still dead and without fruit. Faith without works is dead, as the saint says. Accordingly, if the branch hangs fruitlessly, so to speak, from the trunk of the vine, know that such a person will encounter the pruning knife of the husbandman. He will entirely cut it off and burn it as worthless rubbish.

John Chrysostom: "And every branch that bears fruit, he purges," that is, "causes it to enjoy great care." Yet the root requires even more care than the branches. It needs to be dug around and cleared. And yet everything here is spoken about the branches. Jesus is saying then that he is sufficient unto himself but that the disciples need considerable help from the husbandman even though they are quite excellent already. Therefore he says, "that which bears fruit, he purges." The one branch, because it is fruitless, cannot even remain in the vine, but the other, because it bears fruit, he makes even more fruitful. This, some might assert, was said concerning the persecutions then coming upon them. For the purging is a type of pruning that makes the branch bear better. This implies that persecutions rather make people stronger. Then, in case they might ask about whom he said these things and become anxious again, he says, "Now you are clean through the word that I have spoken to you."

Augustine: "Now you are clean through the word that I have spoken to you." Why doesn't he say, You are clean through the baptism with which you have been washed, rather than "through the word that I have spoken to you," except for the fact that in the water also it is the word that cleanses? Take away the word, and the water is neither more nor less than water. The word is added to the element, and there results the sacrament, as if itself is also a kind of visible word. For he had said also the same thing when washing the disciples' feet: "He who is washed needs not to wash, except for his feet, but is altogether

clean.” And how does water have so great an efficacy, as in touching the body to cleanse the soul, if not by the operation of the word—and that not because it is uttered but because it is believed? For even in the word itself, the passing sound is one thing, the abiding efficacy another ... For Christ, who is the vine with us, and the husbandman with the Father, “loved the church and gave himself for it.” But read the apostle and see what he adds: “That he might sanctify it, cleansing it with the washing of water by the word. The cleansing, therefore, would on no account be attributed to the fleeting and perishable element were it not for what is added: “by the word.” This word of faith possesses such power in the church of God that through the medium of him who in faith presents and blesses and sprinkles it, he cleanses even the tiny infant, although itself unable as yet with the heart to believe unto righteousness and to make confession with the mouth unto salvation. All this is done by means of the word about which the Lord says, Now you are clean through the word that I have spoken to you.”

Ambrose: It seems clear, therefore, that the example of the vine is designed, as this passage indicates, for the instruction of our lives. It is observed to bud in the mild warmth of early spring, and next to produce fruit from the joints of the shoots from which a grape is formed. This gradually increases in size, but it still retains its bitter taste. When, however, it is ripened and mellowed by the sun, it acquires its sweetness. Meanwhile, the vine is decked in green leaves by which it is protected in no slight manner from frosts and other injuries and is defended from the sun’s heat. Is there any spectacle that is more pleasing or any fruit that is sweeter? What a joy to behold the rows of hanging grapes like so many jewels of a beautiful countryside, to pluck those grapes gleaming in colors of gold and purple!... Let them praise you who behold you, and let them admire the marshaled bands of the church like the serried rows of vine branches. Let everyone among the faithful gaze on the gems of the soul. Let them find delight in the maturity of prudence, in the splendor of faith, in the charm of Christian affirmation, in the beauty of justice, in the fecundity of pity, so that it may be said of you, “Your wife is a fruitful vine on the sides of your house,” because you imitate by the exercise of your abundant and generous giving the bountiful return of a fruit-bearing vine.

Cyril of Alexandria: Unless the branch is provided with the life-producing sap from its mother the vine, how will it bear grapes or what fruit will it bring forth—and from what source?... For no fruit of virtue will spring up anew in those of us who have fallen away from intimate union with Christ. To those, however, who are joined to the one who is able to strengthen them and who nourishes them in righteousness, the capacity to bear fruit will readily be added by the provision and grace of the Spirit, which is like a life-producing water.

Augustine: Jesus said, “Abide in me, and I in you.” They are not in him in the same kind of way that he is in them. And yet both ways tend to their advantage, not to his. For the relation of the branches to the vine is such that they contribute nothing to the vine but derive their own means of life from it, while that of the vine to the branches is such that it supplies their vital nourishment and receives nothing from them. And so their having Christ abiding in them and abiding themselves in Christ are in both respects advantageous not to Christ but to the disciples. For when the branch is cut off, another may spring up

from the living root. But that which is cut off cannot live apart from the root.

Ambrose: [The spreading vine of Naphtali] is a beautiful reference to a shoot clinging to a spiritual vine, of which we are the branch and can bear fruit if we remain on the vine. But otherwise we are cut off. The holy patriarch Naphtali was an abundant shoot. (Gen 49:21) This explains why Jacob had called him a spreading vine. That is, through the grace of faith he was stripped of the bonds of death, and the people of God are foreshadowed in him, called to the liberty of faith and to the fullness of grace and spread over the whole world. It clothes the crossbeam of Christ with good fruit and encompasses the wood of that true vine, that is, the mysteries of the Lord's cross. It does not fear the danger of acknowledging him, but rather, even amid persecutions, it glories in the name of Christ.

Mark the Hermit: When you have done something good, remember the words, "without me you can do nothing."

Clement of Alexandria: He who has the almighty God, the Word, lacks nothing and never is in dire straits for what he needs. For the Word is a possession that lacks nothing and is the cause of all abundance. If someone says that he has often seen the righteous person in need of food, this is rare, and it happens only where there is not another righteous person. Notwithstanding, let him read what follows: "For the righteous one shall not live by bread alone but by the word of the Lord," who is the true bread, the bread of the heavens. The good person, then, can never be in difficulties so long as he keeps intact his confession toward God. For it belongs to him to ask and to receive whatever he requires from the Father of all and to enjoy what is his own if he keeps the Son. And he also should feel that he lacks nothing. Christ.

Augustine: "If you abide in me," he says, "and my words abide in you, you shall ask what you will, and it shall be done unto you." For when someone abides in Christ in this way, is there anything he or she can wish for besides what will be agreeable to Christ? When they abide in the Savior in this way, can they wish for anything that is inconsistent with salvation? Some things, indeed, we wish for because we are in Christ, and other things we desire because we are still in this world. For at times, in connection with our present living quarters, we are inwardly prompted to ask what we know would not be expedient for us to receive. But God forbid that such a thing should be given to us if we abide in Christ, who, when we ask, only does what will be for our advantage. Abiding in him when his words abide in us, we shall ask what we will, and it shall be done unto us. For if we ask, and the doing does not follow, what we ask must not be connected with our abiding in him or with his words that abide in us. Instead they must be connected with that craving and infirmity of the flesh that are not in him and do not have his words abiding in them. For to his words, at all events, belongs that prayer that he taught and in which we say, "Our Father, who art in heaven." Let us only not fall away from the words and meaning of this prayer in our petitions, and whatever we ask shall be done unto us. For his words may only be said to abide in us when we do what he has commanded us and love what he has promised. But when his words abide only in the memory and have no place in your life, the branch is not in the vine because it does not draw its life from the root.

John Calvin:

Vs 1. I am the true Vine.

The general meaning of this comparison is, that we are, by nature, barren and dry, except in so far as we have been engrafted into Christ, and draw from him a power which is new, and which does not proceed from ourselves. I have followed other commentators in rendering ἄμπελος by vitis, (a vine,) and κλήματα by palmites, (branches.) Now, vitis (a vine) strictly denotes the plant itself, and not a field planted with vines, which the Latin writers call vinea, (a vineyard;) although it is sometimes taken for vinea a vineyard; as, for example, when Cicero mentions in the same breath, pauperum agellos et viticulas, the small fields and small vineyards of the poor Palmites (branches) are what may be called the arms of the tree, which it sends out above the ground. But as the Greek word κλῶμα sometimes denotes a vine, and ἄμπελος, a vineyard, I am more disposed to adopt the opinion, that Christ compares himself to a field planted with vines, and compares us to the plants themselves. On that point, however, I will not enter into a debate with any person; only I wish to remind the reader, that he ought to adopt that view which appears to him to derive greater probability from the context.

First, let him remember the rule which ought to be observed in all parables; that we ought not to examine minutely every property of the vine, but only to take a general view of the object to which Christ applies that comparison. Now, there are three principal parts; first, that we have no power of doing good but what comes from himself; secondly, that we, having a root in him, are dressed and pruned by the Father; thirdly, that he removes the unfruitful branches, that they may be thrown into the fire and burned.

There is scarcely any one who is ashamed to acknowledge that everything good which he possesses comes from God; but, after making this acknowledgment, they imagine that universal grace has been given to them, as if it had been implanted in them by nature. But Christ dwells principally on this, that the vital sap – that is, all life and strength – proceeds from himself alone. Hence it follows, that the nature of man is unfruitful and destitute of everything good; because no man has the nature of a vine, till he be implanted in him. But this is given to the elect alone by special grace. So then, the Father is the first Author of all blessings, who plants us with his hand; but the commencement of life is in Christ, since we begin to take root in him. When he calls himself the true vine the meaning is, I am truly the vine, and therefore men toil to no purpose in seeking strength anywhere else, for from none will useful fruit proceed but from the branches which shall be produced by me.

Vs 2. Every branch in me that beareth not fruit

As some men corrupt the grace of God, others suppress it maliciously, and others choke it by carelessness, Christ intends by these words to awaken anxious inquiry, by declaring that all the branches which shall be unfruitful will be cut off from the vine. But here comes a question. Can any one who is engrafted into Christ be without fruit? I answer, many are supposed to be in the vine, according to the opinion of men, who actually have no root in the vine. Thus, in the writings of the prophets, the Lord calls the people of Israel his vine, because, by outward profession, they had the name of The Church.

And every branch that beareth, fruit he pruneth. By these words, he shows that believers need incessant culture that they may be prevented from degenerating; and that they produce nothing good, unless God continually apply his hand; for it will not be enough to have been once made partakers of adoption, if God do not continue the work of his grace in us. He speaks of pruning or cleansing, because our flesh abounds in superfluities and destructive vices, and is too fertile in producing them, and because they grow and multiply without end, if we are not cleansed or pruned by the hand of God. When he says that vines are pruned, that they may yield more abundant fruit, he shows what ought to be the progress of believers in the course of true religion?

Vs 3. You are already clean, on account of the word.

He reminds them that they have already experienced in themselves what he had said; that they have been planted in him, and have also been cleansed or pruned. He points out the means of pruning, namely, doctrine; and there can be no doubt that he speaks of outward preaching, for he expressly mentions the word, which they had heard from his mouth. Not that the word proceeding from the mouth of a man has so great efficacy, but, so far as Christ works in the heart by the Spirit, the word itself is the instrument of cleansing. Yet Christ does not mean that the apostles are pure from all sin, but he holds out to them their experience, that they may learn from it that the continuance of grace is absolutely necessary. Besides, he commends to them the doctrine of the gospel from the fruit which it produces, that they may be more powerfully excited to meditate on it continually, since it resembles the vine-dresser's knife to take away what is useless.

Vs 4. Abide in me.

He again exhorts them to be earnest and careful in keeping the grace which they had received, for the carelessness of the flesh can never be sufficiently aroused. And, indeed, Christ has no other object in view than to keep us "as a hen keepeth her chickens under her wings," (Matthew 23:37) lest our indifference should carry us away, and make us fly to our destruction. In order to prove that he did not begin the work of our salvation for the purpose of leaving it imperfect in the middle of the course, he promises that his Spirit will always be efficacious in us, if we do not prevent him. Abide in me, says he; for I am ready to abide in you. And again, He who abideth in me beareth much fruit. By these words he declares that all who have a living root in him are fruit-bearing branches.

Vs 5. Without me you can do nothing.

This is the conclusion and application of the whole parable. So long as we are separate from him, we bear no fruit that is good and acceptable to God, for we are unable to do anything good. The Papists not only extenuate this statement, but destroy its substance, and, indeed, they altogether evade it; for, though in words they acknowledge that we can do nothing without Christ, yet they foolishly imagine that they possess some power, which is not sufficient in itself, but, being aided by the grace of God, co-operates (as they say,) that is, works along with it; for they cannot endure that man should be so much annihilated as to do nothing of himself. But these words of Christ are too plain to be evaded so easily as they suppose. The doctrine invented by the Papists is, that we can do nothing without Christ, but that, aided by him, we have something of ourselves in addition to his grace. But Christ, on the other hand, declares that we can do nothing of ourselves.

The branch, he says, beareth not fruit of itself; and, therefore, he not only extols the aid of his co-operating grace, but deprives us entirely of all power but what he imparts to us. Accordingly, this phrase, without me, must be explained as meaning, except from me. Next follows another sophism; for they allege that the branch has something from nature, for if another branch, which is not fruit-bearing, be engrafted in the vine, it will produce nothing. But this is easily answered; for Christ does not explain what the branch has naturally, before it become united to the vine, but rather means that we begin to become branches at the time when we are united to him. And, indeed, Scripture elsewhere shows that, before we are in him, we are dry and useless wood.

Vs 6. If any one abide not in me.

He again lays before them the punishment of ingratitude, and, by doing so, excites and urges them to perseverance. It is indeed the gift of God, but the exhortation to fear is not uncalled for, lest our flesh, through too great indulgence, should root us out.

He is cast out, and withered, like a branch.

Those who are cut off from Christ are said to wither like a dead branch; because, as the commencement of strength is from him, so also is its uninterrupted continuance. Not that it ever happens that any one of the elect is dried up, but because there are many hypocrites who, in outward appearance, flourish and are green for a time, but who afterwards, when they ought to yield fruit, show the very opposite of that which the Lord expects and demands from his people.

Vs 7. If you abide in me.

Believers often feel that they are starved, and are very far from that rich fatness which is necessary for yielding abundant fruit. For this reason it is expressly added, whatever those who are in Christ may need, there is a remedy provided for their poverty, as soon as they ask it from God. This is a very useful admonition; for the Lord often suffers us to hunger, in order to train us to earnestness in prayer. But if we fly to him, we shall never want what we ask, but, out of his inexhaustible abundance, he will supply us with every thing that we need, (1 Corinthians 1:5.)

If my words abide in you.

He means that we take root in him by faith; for as soon as we have departed from the doctrine of the Gospel, we seek Christ separately from himself. When he promises that he will grant whatever we wish, he does not give us leave to form wishes according to our own fancy. God would do what was ill fitted to promote our welfare, if he were so indulgent and so ready to yield to us; for we know well that men often indulge in foolish and extravagant desires. But here he limits the wishes of his people to the rule of praying in a right manner, and that rule subjects, to the good pleasure of God, all our affections. This is confirmed by the connection in which the words stand; for he means that his people will or desire not riches, or honors, or any thing of that nature, which the flesh foolishly desires, but the vital sap of the Holy Spirit, Which enables them to bear fruit.

Vs 8. In this my Father is glorified

This is a confirmation of the former statement; for he shows that we ought not to doubt that God will listen to the prayers of his people, when they desire to be rendered fruitful; for this contributes very greatly to his glory. But by this end or effect he likewise kindles in them the desire of doing good; for there is nothing which we ought to value more highly than that the name of God may be glorified by us. To the same effect is the latter clause, that you may become my disciples; for he declares that he has no one in his flock who does not bear fruit to the glory of God.