

T. Austin-Sparks:**READING: John 15.**

Considering the subject of this part of our Lord's discourse on the way from the upper room to the Cross, we have to bring into the foreground the governing object of all these discourses, and indeed of all that is reported and recorded in this Gospel. It is an object that is seen in a peculiar way to govern the early part of this chapter - the discourse on the vine. Before we can understand all the rest - everything that the Lord is saying here - we must see the object for which the vine exists. That object is clearly shown to be nothing less than the glory, pleasure, and satisfaction of God.

We have previously defined the glory of God as being His Divine nature satisfied in seeing His purposes realized: His very nature in its peculiar requirements satisfied - satisfied in the realization of its objects. But we must not just take that as a definition or a statement in words; we must feel it. It is the very being of God - what He is in His nature - finding an answer in kind, as embodied in purposes of His heart. When there is a correspondence between God and the object - the sentient object - of His work, there is a sense of glory; it may express itself in worship, joy, rest, gratification, a burst of praise. But this is something rather to feel than to grasp mentally.

Thus, it is the glory or the glorifying of the Father for which the vine corporately exists. He is glorified in that which is the fruit or issue of the existence of the vine. So we let the glory of God interpret every statement of the Lord Jesus in this remarkable, wonderful discourse. We cannot just now go through the whole, sentence by sentence, statement by statement. But if we take this matter of God requiring to be satisfied in His nature, and bring it alongside of each utterance of the Lord Jesus throughout this discourse, it will explain everything. It will even solve some of those long-standing problems which this chapter holds. For the moment we must confine ourselves to the statement that the governing object of the existence of the vine is the glory, or the glorifying of God: that is to say, His satisfaction in the realization of His purposes.

Christ the True Vine

Having established that, we proceed to consider the way to that object, the way to the glorifying of God, as it is revealed in this chapter. As we should expect, right at the very beginning we are confronted with His Son, and the first thing we meet here is a statement which signifies the exclusiveness and uniqueness of the Son of the Father. In words of comparison and contrast, He begins, almost abruptly, it would seem: for, rising from the supper and the upper room, and saying, "Let us go hence," He just proceeds. It sounds almost an abrupt continuation. But there is no interruption; He just goes on talking. "I am the true vine." "I" and "true" are words of comparison and contrast. They follow in the line of many such things already said. "I am the good shepherd" (John 10:14); that is comparison and contrast. It is invidious. "My Father giveth you the true bread out of heaven" (John 6:32).

This comparison of the vine is, of course, with Israel who was the Lord's vine. He "brought a vine out of Egypt" (Psa. 80:8), but that vine failed to produce the fruit for the glory of God; that is, the satisfaction of God's nature in the realization of His purpose. It proved a false vine - false to the Father's nature, false to the Father's expectations, false to the Father's purposes; still remaining in the earth for the time, still in a way growing, developing, making a show, making a profession, but now set aside as a false thing, in no way corresponding to the intention of God in its existence.

The Son says: "I am the true vine." What He is saying is that everything now for God's satisfaction, for the satisfaction of the Father's nature in the realization of His purposes, is centered in the Father's Son; everything now is summed up in the Son. "I am." When we gather together all those "I am's" of this Gospel, how many there are of them, and how tremendously emphatic they are, even in the language itself. The "I" is emphatic. If we had heard the Lord say it, in familiarity with the language used, we should have heard the emphasis there: "I am the true vine." So, everywhere in this Gospel, He brings things away from all other connections, centers them in Himself, and says: "Everything now of God's expectation, God's purpose, God's satisfaction, and therefore God's glory, is centered in His Son." "I am." As I said just now, that is what we should expect, when we are looking for God's satisfaction and God's realization of heart-purpose. It is in His Son we know that so well.

The Branches

But then a wonderful thing about that - about the glory of God, the satisfaction of God in realized purposes - is carried by the next statement. "Ye are...." "I am the vine, ye are the branches" (vs. 5), and in between "my Father" (vs. 1). We must always keep the terms clearly before us: the husbandry is that of the Father; this has come as from a Father. It is something begotten of God, something born of God; something with which He, as Father, is bound up in a heart-relationship, for which He is jealous with the jealousy of a Father. This is not just a proprietor, an owner. This is something of an inward relatedness, not merely outward. The Father's heart is bound up with this. It is pre-eminently a matter of love.

Identity of Life

"Ye are the branches." In this statement there is at once struck the note which is fundamental to the whole New Testament revelation: the note of identity of life. What a dominant matter that is in the New Testament, as well as in our own experience! Of course, we are now able to read into this the so much greater revelation which came afterward as to its meaning, that of which this was but an illustration. We "know it all" now; it is one of the most familiar truths to us; and yet it is the matter upon which the Father is concentrating every day of our lives, and it is the matter which gives rise to by far the greater measure of our troubles and difficulties.

There is not an adhesion to Christ; there is not a "coming to" Him. There is a sense in which we come to Him, in the sense of His words "Come unto me" (Matt. 11:28); or else "ye will not come to me" (John 5:40); but no one would ever say, in the light of the New Testament, that coming to the Lord Jesus makes us an organic part of Him. We need all those other illustrations that are in the New Testament really to express this, e.g. "planted together," "born anew," "buried-raised with Christ," and so on. We do not just come as people, and range ourselves at the side of a certain One, and then go on together. That is not the teaching of the New Testament. We come to Him and then are plunged into His grave, and out of that grave we do not rise in our old life, separate and different. "I have been crucified with Christ; yet I live; and yet it is no longer I that live, but Christ liveth in me" (Gal. 2:20).

Now we are familiar with that truth, but that is what the Lord here lays down as the essential and indispensable basis of any satisfaction to the Father and realization of His purpose. It is basic to that; for only the Son can satisfy the Father, and only in the Son can the Father's purposes be realized. Therefore, if that is to be in any way fulfilled through a corporate instrument, there must be an absolute identity of life. We know now how that takes place: whatever there is going to be will not be from us - it will be from Him.

But I do want specially to underline that point, that it is not our coming unto Him that has this result; it is what arises from His life within. It is the rising out from, and not the coming unto, that makes all the difference. We can adhere, we can sponsor, we can attach, we can take up a position; we can "come just as we are" and go on just as we are. We can still be in a kind of relatedness to the Lord which does not bring with it any rising out from the Lord, and it makes all the difference to what kind of life ours is going to be in the matter of God's glory. That is what the Lord is saying here, in more words. He is pointing out that there can be a kind of relatedness to Himself which does not bear this fruit to the Father's satisfaction and glory; something somewhere is lacking. Whatever the function of the branches - and that function is to bear the fruit of the vine - they can do nothing in that matter apart from this identity of life. This is a deep inward oneness with the Lord, which is not two things, but is only one thing; and that one thing is the Lord Jesus as the life.

The whole teaching of the New Testament is that union with Christ implies the end of any separateness of existence as apart from or other than Christ Himself. It is existence now as from a birth, not from an attachment; from a life imparted which has never before been possessed. It is something quite new, quite fresh, quite other than there was hitherto. That is the uniqueness and exclusiveness of Christ. So the branches become a part of something unique, something different from all that we know of mankind and creation, something that has not been before.

The Purpose of the Vine's Existence

We come now to this matter of fruit, and we note that, so far as the glory of God is concerned, it is a governing matter. It is impressive that the Lord should have chosen the vine as the symbol of this means of reaching His end. You know so well that a vine has no other use in all the world but to bear fruit. It has no by-products. There are some things from which, if the main object is realized or even has failed, you can get other things, byproducts; there are secondary uses. But you cannot even make a walking-stick out of a vine. If it does not bear fruit, it is good for nothing. There is no other purpose to which you can turn a vine except to make a bonfire of it.

The whole object of the existence of Christ and His members is this matter of fruit. The Lord expresses Himself here in strong terms. If fruit is not forthcoming, He says, such branches are cast out, gathered, thrown on the fire, burned. Men do not say, Oh, well, it is not bearing any fruit, but we can turn it to this use and to that, we can make it serve some purpose. There is no alternative for a vine. And there is no alternative for your life and mine, in relation to Christ, but the glory of God. God has no secondary purposes for us, saying, Oh, well, they are not bearing any fruit - we will make some other use of them. No: the glory of God in satisfaction, in the realization of His purpose - His purpose - is the only justification for our existence in relation to Christ.

That is precisely the reason why Israel was cast off and burned. An old doctrinal or theological question arises here; but I am not going to follow that out. Is Israel in the fire? Have men cast Israel into the fire, since God cast Israel off? Well, we know the answer to that. But, leaving that aside for the moment, you see the point: it is that, with God, this vine is only justified in having an existence in the satisfaction of His nature and in the fulfillment of His purposes. "Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit."

Fruit the Evidence of Life

And it is the fruit which is the evidence of the life. That is what the Lord comes down upon. He does not say that branches and leaves justify the existence or prove anything. It is the fruit which proves everything and it is the fruit which proves the life. He fastens upon that: the fruit proves the life. And Christ's life is essentially fruitful. An unfruitful Christian is a contradiction of Christ, a contradiction of the life of Christ. Christ did not have to make efforts to be fruitful; there was no effort in His fruitfulness. It was spontaneous. The life itself is spontaneously, inevitably fruitful.

Was it not just there that Mr. Hudson Taylor came to his life crisis, when, after years, he was brought to a complete standstill on this question of fruitfulness? The whole crisis turned upon his struggling, his agonizing, his taking the strain and burden of this matter of fruitfulness, until he fretted himself into despair. And then he came upon this chapter of John's Gospel, and the Lord, so to speak, stood by him and opened it up to him, and showed him that He was the life of the vine, and the branches had to do nothing by way of struggle to bear fruit. All they had to do was to let the life have its way unhindered. It came as a revelation to him; you have it in that great chapter in his autobiography, "The Exchanged Life." If the life of the Lord is not frustrated, is not hindered, or, to use the Lord's word here and its reiteration, if we abide in Him, that is, keep on Christ's ground and do not take our own or any other ground, the life proves itself spontaneously in fruitfulness without any effort.

The Bearing of Fruit Is Service

And inasmuch as this fruit-bearing is the service which is rendered to God and includes all that is meant by Christian service, the service of the Lord; inasmuch as the fruitbearing is the service of the believer and the Church: then it is quite clear here that service and union with Christ the right kind of union with Christ, the kind that we have mentioned are the same thing. It is a union that means identity of life through losing our own and having His yielding up our apartness, our independent life, and taking His. That union is spontaneously service.

We have thought of the service of God as a matter of preaching and teaching and doing a multitude of things for the Lord. They may only be the framework; they may only be the outer casing, like the bark of a tree. The Lord may pour His life through such methods and means, or He may not let us do any preaching or teaching. In the case of some, He may have the greatest measure of fruit without ever any preaching being done at all. Fruit is the spontaneous expression of a deep-rooted oneness with Christ, and there may be very much satisfaction and glory to God through people who are never allowed to preach or teach or do any of those things which we call Christian work. But to express Christ, to live Christ, to manifest Christ, to let everything around feel Christ and be touched by Christ through our presence - that certainly is to the glory of God and the satisfaction of His heart, and that is service.

For what is this fruit? It is the life of Christ manifested, and God help both the preachers and the teachers and the workers, and those to whom they preach, if there is not a manifestation of Christ coming through what they are saying and doing. The real heart of it is this deep union of life with the Lord, and it is this kind of service which satisfies God.

The Pruning Knife

"Every branch that beareth fruit, he cleanseth it," or "purgeth it": by which we understand Him to mean that He is pruning, and there are one or two things which we must conclude from this procedure of the Lord. He does

not say that if a branch bears no fruit, He prunes it to bear fruit - no, He cuts that off; but if it bears some fruit, He "cleanseth it, that it may bear more fruit." The point here is that, for the Father's full satisfaction, it is not merely size that weighs with Him, it is not just bigness, it is not the expansiveness of the branches. The thing which counts with the Father ultimately is the quality and amount of fruit - in other words, the measure of Christ, the essential qualities of Christ. Other metaphors or figures the "Body of Christ" pre-eminently - will be used in the later New Testament to set forth this principle, but here it is the measure of Christ that the Father is seeking.

We can press that even more closely. Even in that which comes from the Lord - for the fruit comes from the Lord; it is the expression of His life - even in that very vine, the Lord takes measures of curtailment in order to get intrinsic values. Paul and the churches might well have thought that it would be of far more value to God if he had been kept at liberty, kept free to travel about over the world and meet the saints; but God's pruning knife decided that it would be of greater intrinsic value if Paul's liberty were curtailed and he were put in prison. We know the wisdom of God in that now. Thank God for what came out of that prison in those letters - intrinsic value indeed! Sometimes the wisdom and the love of God operate in what looks like limitation, in certain ways and certain directions, in order to get intrinsic value. A seed-plot is an intensive thing, not necessarily an expansive thing; but it may be that presently the whole world will be sown from that seed-plot: that plant or that crop will be reproduced everywhere. And the Lord is saying here, "I am not first of all interested in how big and expansive you are, in what you are doing, even though it may be for Me, and even though it may be, in measure, by the life which I have given you. What I am primarily concerned about is the richness of the fruit, the quality of the fruit and the real measure of intrinsic value." You can have grapes and grapes, and the Lord is after the first quality. It means that there is a good deal of saying "No" when that life is at work. Here are these branches spreading, and the knife says, "No, not that, not that, not that." The pruning knife is a great instrument for God's "No" - but it is governed by God's "Yes." The "Yes" lies hidden behind. The "Yes" relates to the quality and the intrinsic value of the fruit, the measure of Divine satisfaction, and it is that which governs the "No," which lops off.

The Object of the Pruning

Finally, the work of the Husbandman, the Father, with His pruning knife, has as its object the preserving of true character. That is true in all pruning, as you know. You go along the path there in the garden. You will see some grafted rose bushes which once bore beautiful roses. They were not pruned. Now they have run wild: the wild stocks have been allowed to supplant the beautiful grafted forms, and they are only bearing what we call dog-roses. They may be pretty, but we know that the plant has run wild for want of the knife. The result is not the real thing - it is a wild thing; it is something inferior, it is not what it might have been. It is so easy for us, if the Lord spares the knife and leaves us alone, to lose distinctive character. Just let us get out of the Lord and run free, take our own way for a bit, and we lose distinctiveness of character. There is a wildness, a foreign element that comes in, and the real pleasure of the Lord is lost. It is not until that knife comes back and does some pretty hard work, saying, "No, no, not that way, not that way," that the Lord recovers the thing which He first intended as His own satisfaction. But what is the result? "These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full." We have to admit, after all, that it was not in that independent way that we really found our joy; our joy is being in the way of the Lord's first appointment and choice, and our joy is restored very often by the knife. "That my joy may be in you."

If you go to Hebrews 12, you will see the fuller interpretation and explanation. It is the Father's hand that is upon us to get that which, firstly, justifies our existence - the satisfaction of His nature, the fulfillment of His purpose - and in so doing brings His joy into our hearts. It is not our joy in the first place, but His. Then our joy is His joy - and our joy is fulfilled.