

John 15:1-6 - “I am the Vineyard”¹

Before the Lesson: Make copies of the handouts, “Two Translations of John 15:1-6” and “Distractions that Block Joy”.

Fellowship question: (Use *one* of these to break the ice, to begin some discussion, and to lead into the study):

1. Have you done a vineyard tour? Where?
2. If you have a garden, what is the best/worst thing about having a garden?

Information

The Translation

This new image of the vine “is placed exactly halfway through John 13-16, and, as Chrys Cargounis says, this ‘tends to confirm that the parable of the vineyard occupies the center of the last discourse both literally and theologically.’”²

“It is rare that a major, familiar New Testament text has to be rethought because it is discovered that key words have been mistranslated, but that has happened with the Greek words *ampelos*, translated by the NRSV [and other translations] as ‘vine,’ and *klema*, translated as ‘branch.’ There now seems to be overwhelming evidence that these words began by meaning what the NRSV says they do, but that they shifted their meanings over time.... ‘*Ampelos* was no longer the plant *vitis vinifera* but the plot of land on which the vines had been planted, the vineyard; and *klema* was no longer merely the branch or twig but the whole plant, the vine itself.’”³

- Distribute the handout of John 15:1-6 in two translations.
- Have a class member read John 15:1-6 in the CEV.
- Note the paragraph between the two translations.

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² David F. Ford, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 289. Quoting Chrys Cargounis, “‘Abide in Me’: The New Mode of Relationship between Jesus and His Followers as a Basis for Christian Ethics (John 15).” In *Rethinking the Ethics of John: “Implicit Ethics” in the Johannine Writings*, edited by Jan G. van der Watt and Ruben Zimmermann, Kontexte und Normen newtestamentlicher Ethik 3: Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 291. (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 251.

³ Ford, 291. Quoting Cargounis, 251.

- Have a class member read John 15:1-6 in The Second Testament Translation.
- Reflect on these questions:

Does the new translation contradict the old translation? Does it enrich it?
How might these translation changes offer fresh interpretations of Jesus' parable of the vine/vineyard?

The Vine

“John’s description of the vine[/vineyard] draws on depictions of Israel as a vine, or as a vineyard, in various passages of the Old Testament. Those Biblical passages often recount God’s care for the vine in the past while lamenting its desolation in the present... These various depictions of Israel as a vine highlight both the tenderness of God’s care for the vine and the dire consequences that result if God ceases to care for and protect it. Most typically, God allows the vine to be destroyed because it has not produced fruit. But that is not the whole story: the Scriptures also speak of the prophetic yearning for God’s restoration of his vineyard so that it might be the fruitful vine it was intended to be. In John, this vision comes to fruition in Jesus, who is the true vine; his disciples yield the fruit that comes from his life in them.”⁴

What “fruit” may we expect in our lives if we “abide in the vineyard”? (Fruit of the Spirit found in Galatians 5; a renewed mind found in Romans 12; greater trust in and dependence on Christ; wisdom; positive influence on younger believers; evangelistic converts, etc.)

“The culture of the vine was one of the common occupations of that day in Palestine. Vineyards were everywhere, and it may be that they passed several on the road from Jerusalem to Gethsemane. The vine was also known as an emblem of their own nation, just as the eagle is the emblem of the United States. Over the temple of Herod which was standing then was the symbolic decoration of a great golden vine... Jesus claimed to be the one true stock. Just as there must be an original vine from which all specimens of a given variety are taken, so He alone is the source of the heavenly life of the spiritual vine.”⁵

The word “Christian” means “little Christ.” How does abiding in the vineyard relate to being a little Christ?

⁴ Marianne Meye Thompson, *John: A Commentary*, The New Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 323f.

⁵ Merrill C. Tenney, *John: The Gospel of Belief: An Analytic Study of the Text* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1948), 226, 227.

“In many places and in various ways St. John tries to express the joy of the eschatological⁶ Messianic age. Especially is this the case in the story of the marriage at Cana of Galilee and in the account of the miracle of the Feeding of the Five Thousand. It is, therefore, not unreasonable to suspect that the same Messianic joy is discernible in Jesus’ reference to himself as the True Vine. Since the vine is the symbol of the joyful marriage feast, it therefore points to the joyful covenant which Christ has established with his Church - a covenant foreshadowed, indeed, in the Old Dispensation[/Testament] but fulfilled now in the Eucharist. This joy of the new covenant is vividly expressed in the words ‘...that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full’ (v. 11).”⁷

Transformational Exercise

- Distribute the handout “Distractions that Block Joy.” Invite class members to read the page and then list items that may distract or block them from receiving the “complete joy” that Jesus offers. If there is time and group trust, ask if anyone has an item they would like to share. You may want to share an item in your personal experience first.

Close in a prayer something like this: *Holy farmer, We thank you that you include us in your vineyard. We pray you will give us your complete joy. Fertilize us, weed us, prune us, so we can be who you want us to be. Amen.*

⁶ Relating to death, judgment, and the final destiny of the soul and of humankind.

⁷ Alf Corell, *Consummatum Est: Eschatology and Church in the Gospel of John* (London:SPCK, 1958), 29.

Two Translations of John 15:1-6

Contemporary English Version:

Jesus said to his disciples: I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts away every branch of mine that doesn't produce fruit. But he trims clean every branch that does produce fruit, so that it will produce even more fruit. You are already clean because of what I have said to you.

Stay joined to me, and I will stay joined to you. Just as a branch cannot produce fruit unless it stays joined to the vine, you cannot produce fruit unless you stay joined to me. I am the vine, and you are the branches. If you stay joined to me, and I stay joined to you, then you will produce lots of fruit. But you cannot do anything without me. If you don't stay joined to me, you will be thrown away. You will be like dry branches that are gathered up and burned in a fire.⁸

“Traditionally, translations of this passage speak of a vine and its branches rather than of a vineyard and its vines. By the time John wrote, however, the words for a vine and its branches had come also and commonly to mean a vineyard and its vines. And since ‘cleans’ means ‘prunes,’ it makes better viticultural sense to settle for a vineyard and its vines. For you prune a vine by cutting off its nonbearing branches. You don’t prune branches by cutting off their twigs.”⁹

The Second Testament Translation:

I am the true vineyard and my Father is the farmer. Every vine in me not carrying fruit, he lifts it. Every [vine] carrying fruit, he cleans it so it may carry more fruit. You are already clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.

Remain in me, and I in you. Just as the vine isn’t able to carry fruit from itself unless it remains in the vineyard, so neither [are] you unless you remain in me. I am the vineyard, you are the vines. The one remaining in me and I in the person, this person carries much fruit, because apart from me you aren’t able to do anything. If someone doesn’t remain in me, [that person] is tossed outside as the vine and is stiffened and they assemble them and toss into the fire and is enflamed.¹⁰

⁸ Contemporary English Version Translation

⁹ Robert H. Gundry, *Commentary on the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010). Accessed online at <https://www.westmont.edu/true-vineyard> on 9/28/2024.

¹⁰ Scot McKnight, *The Second Testament: A New Translation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2023).

Distractions that Block Joy

“What are the things that need pruning? Sometimes they are serious forms of disobedience or blindness - desires, orientations, or behaviors that radically hinder love of God and of one another. But there are also things that distract from our core vocation of love, that fill hearts, minds, and lives with lesser things that squeeze out greater things. *Often the need is to prune lesser joys that distract from ‘my joy.’*”¹¹

Pray that God will reveal anything that distracts you - good or bad - from receiving the joy that Jesus offers. “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.” (John 14:11)

Remembering that some items may be obviously bad (such as sin, violence, obsessions, etc.) while others may be “neutral” until they become distractions (promotion, entertainment, social media, etc.), list some things that may distract *you* from having the joy that Jesus offers: As you consider this list, what blocks Christ’s joy from growing in you? What takes joy away? What can be pruned so there is space and energy for more joy to grow in your life?

¹¹ Ford, 296f. Author’s italics.