

Clusters of Grapes **by John Roach Straton**

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman. “Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit.” “These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full.”—John 15:1, 2, 11. In these words, probably spoken while our Master was on His way to the Garden of Gethsemane, we have in brief but comprehensive fashion the fundamental truths connected with the creation, cultivation and culmination of the Christian life.

I. THE CREATION OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

First, the Christian life is a creation from God—divine and not human in its origin. God the Father is the Husbandman; He plants in the world the Vine Christ Jesus; Christian believers are branches of this Vine, who are to produce the fruit. This brings the entire system of Christian truth into right order. The text brings before us the tremendous truth that God is the Author, Promoter and Finisher of human salvation. This truth differentiates Christianity from all other religions. The other religions of mankind—the great historic ethnic faiths—all center in man reaching up to God. Such religions are founded on the idea that man has to struggle back to God. This is to be done either by the magical efficiency of ceremonies or by works of good or by the intervention of priesthoods or by the mortification of the flesh through asceticism and self-mutilation. Thus, it is hoped by the devotees of heathen and pagan religions that man can find his way back to God, win Heaven and enter into everlasting life. It is man reaching up to God. God Reaches Down to Us and to All Men

But Christianity is different in that it means not man reaching up to God, but God reaching down to man. Its great message is “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” And Jesus made it startlingly clear, “Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain: that whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in my name, he may give it you.”—John 15:16. Heaven and eternal life, then, are gifts from God. They come through heavenly grace and not by human merit. “By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast” (Eph. 2:8, 9). God knew that we poor humans are naturally a boastful race, and if Heaven could be won or attained by our own effort or merit, we would soon forget God and develop an overweening vanity and self-satisfaction because of our achievements.

Therefore, God strips us bare and leaves us without any human ground to stand upon. We are pensioners upon the divine bounty. God plants in our sin-cursed earth the Vine, Christ Jesus, and men are to blossom and bear fruit through Him.

He reaches down from Heaven to earth. In mercy and loving favor He descends to the children of men and follows after the prodigal race, yea, even to the very gates of Hell

itself, to surprise the guilty with forgiveness and the fallen with hope! Jonah saw it truly when, even from the “belly of hell,” he cried unto God for deliverance; and when the assurance of his redemption came, in devout rapture and gratitude he exclaimed, “Salvation is of the LORD.” “For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; “And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures.”—I Cor. 15:3, 4. We sorely need more emphasis upon this great fundamental truth in this time of human vanity, self-glorification and self-commendation; in this time when so many false prophets are arising and when multitudes are being taught that they can achieve their own salvation.

II. THE CULTIVATION OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

The principal emphasis, however, which Jesus puts in this striking and touching 15th chapter of John’s Gospel, is upon the cultivation of the Christian life. He sets before us two great truths— inexorable and yet most inspiring. The first inexorable truth is that “every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away.” Jesus makes very clear that good works are not the purchase price of salvation but are undoubtedly the proclaiming proof of salvation. He plainly teaches here, as elsewhere, that “many are called, but few are chosen.” He makes clear the arresting fact—just as He did in the parable of the sower and the seed—that some can make a start toward a semblance of the Christian life, but that they do not continue to the end, because they have not the reality in them.

He describes them here as withering branches. There are such things in both the natural and spiritual worlds. This does not mean that we can fall away from God’s grace and be finally lost, if we have been truly redeemed; but it does mean that a surface connection with Christ is possible that does not abide; that, because of self-limitation, unbelief and preoccupation with worldly things, goes only part of the way toward the reception of His divine love and, therefore, that the branch withers at last and “men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned.” I had an experience in one of my pastorates which brought this truth home to me in striking fashion. The church found it necessary to exclude one of its members. This man was prominent in the community, and the church bore long with his delinquencies and transgressions. He gave mental assent to the doctrines of the church and, by fits and starts, attended its services and participated in its activities; but then he would fall away sadly and bring reproach upon the cause. At last he demonstrated that all his religious experience was on the surface and that the divine life was not in him. Therefore, the church rightly excluded him. He was a withered branch and was cast into the fire and burned. The vital union of a living faith with the living Lord is indispensable for the development of the truly redeemed Christian life. Jesus said, “Without me ye can do nothing.”

We must have not only the beginning with Christ, but we must “abide.” There must be the continuing union through mind and heart in order that His divine life may flow into us, even as the sap passes from the vine into the branch and thus gives it continuous vitality and fruitfulness. Many who go through the forms of religion, and even give mental assent to sound doctrine, are not really redeemed. They have not been born again.

“Christ in you, the hope of glory” is the true way; halfway discipleship is not acceptable unto our God. This is true because the very honor and glory of God are involved in these issues. As a faithful and wise husbandman, God cannot rest satisfied with a paltry product and with results so flabby and poor that they reflect upon His wisdom, power and love. Not only is it true that there are certain disintegrating tendencies that may come in that finally cause the branch to wither so that it must be at last cast off, but there are certain deadly things that actually destroy the possibility of becoming a Christian: the worm of covetousness, the blight of worldliness or the admission of known sin that poisons and utterly destroys the branch. But we are also taught that the branch can be made more fruitful and that the divine Husbandman, when He finds a branch that is bearing fruit, “purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit.”

There is possible progress upward in our usefulness as children of God. There is need, then, not only of protection against the sins that utterly destroy, but also need of cultivation through the elimination of useless things that cumber and hold back the productive branch from its greatest possible fruitfulness. There are indulgences which in themselves may be entirely innocent and harmless, yet these things may so take up the time, strength and thought of the child of God as to reduce his fruitfulness to the vanishing point. So Jesus gives us here three degrees in fruit bearing. He speaks in verse 2 merely of bearing “fruit”; again in verse 2 of “more fruit,” then in the 8th verse He says that it is expected that we bear “much fruit.” Our Heavenly Father has a right to insist that we grow in grace and in the knowledge of God that we shall bear at last such beautiful clusters of spiritual fruits as are mentioned in Galatians 5:22, 23: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, Meekness, temperance.” And, as before remarked, God not only has the right to expect such reasonable results from the cultivation which He gives to His vineyard, but His very honor and glory as a wise Husbandman are involved. So Jesus said, “Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples” (John 15:8). And again: “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven” (Matt. 5:16). The Pruning

This leads us, then, to the other great truth in connection with the culture of the Christian life, namely, that there is a necessary pruning or purging that it may bear much fruit. May I illustrate this from my personal experience? There came a time, after I had been in the pastorate for some years, when through overwork I was forced to relinquish the pastorate and, on the doctor’s orders, remove for a season to the country. I secured a farm, worked in the open, slept at night in a tent and thus regained my health. During these days, I had many profitable experiences and learned many valuable lessons. On the farm was a vineyard; and at the time that I took the farm over I expected that by cutting out the weeds and bushes, which had grown up about the grapevines, I would have a bountiful harvest. But I was soon to learn better. I had helping me in the farming undertaking an old man of wide experience and long service. Uncle Dave had come through from the slavery times, and when I told him my hopes about the vineyard on the place, he said, “No sir, boss, you are not going to get any grapes from these vines— that is, not to amount to anything.” “But,” I said, “Uncle Dave, just look what rich, strong vines they are. Just see how luxuriant the leaves are.” He said, “Yes sir, but that’s just

the trouble! It's all leaf and wood, and what you have to do here is to cut those vines back." I, at last, bowed to his superior knowledge and wisdom and watched—with some pain—the pruning of those vines. Uncle Dave waded right into it with energy, and seemingly without any remorse. I would say to him, "Uncle Dave, can't you leave these long, beautiful ones alone?" And he would say, "No sir, boss, they've got to be cut off." Well, when he had finished, there seemed to be more leaves and branches on the ground than were left on the vines. But then I watched with ever-growing interest the results that came through this merciless pruning. In due season there appeared the delicate little blossoms, all hidden away under the leaves; for it is a striking fact that grape blossoms, like Christian works of good, do not parade and flaunt themselves but hide modestly away out of sight! Then came little clusters of green grapes all over the branches, and these grew and swelled as the rich sap flowed into them from the vine through the branches. I observed, too, that every cluster was attached to a branch, and none of them directly to the vine. Thus they enlarged and grew under the benediction of the showers and blushed purple beneath the kisses of the sun, until they were fully matured—a delight to the eye and a joy to the palate of man! Uncle Dave and I strolled out one morning again and with great satisfaction looked over the vineyard.

He said, "Boss, just look at them! Aren't they pretty?" He put his rugged hand under a cluster that was covered with silver down encrusting the purple and that was sparkling with morning dew and said, "You never would have had such grapes as these if we hadn't cut those vines back so that all the life, instead of just going into wood and leaves, could go into the grapes themselves." And I learned the lesson that our Heavenly Father, the divine Husbandman, would purge and prune us and take from us the things that hinder in order that we may come into our best of usefulness and service. Yes, the child of God may not do things which are indulged in by the children of the world and which may even be in themselves harmless. 'Whether we eat or whether we drink, or whatsoever we do, let us do all for the glory of God.' This is a high standard, but it is necessary to the fruit-bearing life. A pack of cards is in itself an innocent thing. But when this universal instrument of gambling fans into flame the fires of the gambling fever, it becomes obvious that the child of God should have no part with such things. I well remember one painful incident in connection with a lady, a member of my church. I had observed that, as a Sunday school teacher, she did not bear fruit. No conversions among her students—and in other church activities, she did not amount to very much. One day I found the key to the trouble. I inadvertently heard her say to the president of the Women's Missionary Society, "I am so sorry that I missed the last meeting of the Society." Then she gave a characteristic little laugh and said, "I will just have to be honest and admit it. I had engagements for card parties five afternoons that week, and I completely overlooked the missionary meeting."

I understood then. While I made a faithful effort to lead her into a rich and fruit-bearing life for the Master, I had but little hope and was not surprised when later she dropped entirely out of the active work. We cannot be filled with the sap of the world and be filled at the same time with the fruit-producing life of the divine Christ! Since the theater today has become an increasingly God-defying, woman-dishonoring, mammon-worshipping institution, how is it possible for the Christian to support it, and at the same

time expect to have a fruitful spiritual life? And the dances of today—increasingly sensuous and silly, taking their names and movements from the lower animals, and in many, many cases, as the sad statistics show, utterly wrecking and ruining the weak and the innocent—how can the child of God, who expects to have a fruitful life, participate in them? Dear friends, we need a full commitment to our Master. We need the vital union of a living faith with Him and contentment with the joys of fellowship and service which He gives, as the all-sufficient portion of our lives, if we are to bear “much fruit” for Him! The child of God must choose between fruitfulness to the Master and self-indulgence in the vainglory of life and the things of the flesh! The great need of this hour is Christian lives so filled with the joy of salvation, the blessedness of service, the satisfactions of fellowship with our Lord and the sheer delight of knowing the inflowing of His divine life, that we will not want the paltry things of this world that perish with the using. The church in the beginning was fruitful, was miraculous. It flooded even the selfish, sensuous Roman world with blessedness and beauty, because there was separation, consecration and sanctification by the indwelling power of our God. The Christian church in its early years at least approximated the ideals of Jesus. Cyprian, in the third century A.D., used the following words in writing to his friend Donatus: This is a cheerful world as I see it from my garden, under the shadow of my vines. But if I could ascend some high mountain and look out, I should see armies fighting, cities burning, men murdered to please applauding crowds, selfishness, cruelty, misery and despair under all roofs. It is a bad world, Donatus, an incredibly bad world.

But I have discovered in the midst of it a quiet and holy people who have learned a great secret. They have found a joy, which is a thousand times better than any of the pleasures of our sinful life. They are despised and persecuted, but they care not. They are masters of their souls. They have overcome the world. These people, Donatus, are the Christians—and I am one of them. Ah, dear friends, we need to come back today to these early glories. It isn't that the Master desires to strip from us anything that either adorns our character or truly blesses our lives or promotes our happiness, but He would take from us the things that hinder and hurt. Just as the grapevine must be pruned and just as other plants which are cultivated for human use must have what are called suckers” plucked from them, so the Christian must suffer the divine Husbandman to purge out that which hinders as well as that which harms. The key to it all is Paul's magnificent word: “The love of Christ constraineth us.” Thus, of free choice, we take the higher things and leave off the lower. We seek to possess the greater and are gladly willing to forego the less. That our lives may be fruitful, we lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and...run with patience the race that is set before us.”

III. THE CULMINATION OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

And this leads us to the surprising and delightful climax of the entire matter. Jesus says, “These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full” (John 15:11). What “joy”? Joy through renunciation? Joy in being stripped of the things that I thought would produce satisfaction and pleasure in my life? Joy through making sacrifices? Joy in carrying a cross? Joy in denying myself, and suffering even, that others may be pleased? Ah, yes, dear friends, joy in all of these things! For

this is the paradox of Christianity: that we get by giving, that we increase by diminishing, that we multiply by dividing and that we live by dying! Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed and when in the very shadow of the cross, could stand up and say, 'My joy I give unto you; My peace I leave with you.' And I say it boldly, after many years of personal experience with my own poor life and of observation of other lives as a pastor, that have never seen nor found any true and abiding joy save that which the divine Christ and our Heavenly Father and the blessed Holy Spirit give to those who truly serve God and bear much fruit for the glory of His name! This is the peace that passeth all understanding. This is the joy that the world cannot give and that the world, thank God, can never take away! And whether in the hovel of the poorest saint or in the mansions of the mighty and the rich, this is the joy that abides. There is more satisfaction in the consciousness that we have been used of God for the salvation of even one soul, than can be found in all the self-indulgent pleasure that this world can offer. The fruitful life is the blessed life. The useful Christian is the only truly joyful soul! During one of my pastorates in a great American city, when I was just about to close the Sunday morning service following a sermon on consecration to Christ, a young man arose unexpectedly in the congregation and asked to be heard. He stood up and said, "Dr. Straton, may I say something?" It was quite an unusual occurrence in the morning service, but rejoicing in the freedom of the Spirit, I said, "By all means, say on."

Then he turned to the congregation and said: My dear friends, you all know me, and I have something on my heart that I must say to you. You know that years ago when I was a little lad I united with this church, but I stand now to confess that I have not been living as a Christian man should live. There have been indulgences and habits in my personal and family life which are not to the glory of Jesus Christ and which I believe hold me back from both real fruitfulness and genuine joy. I wish, therefore, to make this public confession of these wrong things and to express my purpose and determination, by the help of our Heavenly Father, to purge out these things that hinder and to give myself more fully to the service of my God. There was a little rustle of surprise, and in some pews almost a gasp of amazement, for this young man was the son of one of the great and honored men of the church and was known as a very successful and popular young businessman in the city. After the service he came and asked for a talk with me. He requested, on the ground that he felt he hadn't been regenerated when he joined the church as a lad, that I baptize him again, which I gladly did. Then I had the satisfaction of seeing that splendid young man go out into real fruit bearing for Jesus Christ. I learned sometime after his rebaptism of an incident that occurred in connection with a banquet of his business associates. It was the annual banquet of all who were engaged in that branch of business in the entire city, and it was always an occasion of note. Instead of delivering the address that had been prepared, he laid it aside and said, "Gentlemen, since we gathered last in our annual banquet, a great and wonderful thing has occurred to me, and a glorious blessing has come to my life. I have truly found Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, and I have experienced the full joy of His salvation and the satisfaction of serving Him." Then he went on in burning sentences to bear a personal testimony to the grace and goodness of the Lord Jesus and to His saving, keeping and sanctifying influence in a human life. So touched and moved were his business associates by that eloquent testimony that when he had finished his simple but earnest and powerful tribute to Jesus

as Savior and Lord, they burst out spontaneously singing “All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name.” Dear friends, is that not just as it should have been? Why should we think of such an incident as extraordinary or remarkable? Many such instances ought to be occurring constantly in the lives of Christians, just as they did occur in that glad day when there was a pure church in the world and when the followers of Jesus were known by their fellowmen to be different from the sinners on every side and when those who were redeemed found a sufficient joy in following and serving Jesus Christ. There is at last no other joy worth the having, for this is a foretaste of the joy of Heaven itself. The climax of the Christian life will be an eternity of joy through serving the living God, of satisfaction with being with those whom God has used us to reach and redeem, and of fellowship forever with the spirits of just men made perfect.