

THE PARABLE OF THE VINE

John 15

It will be helpful in all classes to link this lesson with the miracle at Cana. Even the youngest classes can be told that we bear fruit when we do good. And all classes should get the lesson that all life and all goodness are from the Lord alone.

Doctrinal Points

All life and all goodness are from the Lord alone.

Only as we follow the Lord's example can we hope to produce "good fruit."

Notes for Parents

The twelve chosen disciples of the Lord had been with Him throughout His ministry, traveling about the country with Him, seeing all His miracles, and listening while He taught the people. He had also given them much special instruction. Several times we are told how, after the multitude dispersed, He took His disciples aside and explained to them more fully the meaning of what He had been saying. A good example of this is found in the story of the parable of the sower in Matthew 13:1-23. During the last few days of His earthly life—between Palm Sunday and the crucifixion—the Lord gave the disciples more direct and deep instruction than He had ever given before, much of which we find recorded only in the Gospel of John.

Our lesson today was spoken by the Lord in the upper room in Jerusalem after they had partaken of the Last Supper and after Judas had gone out to make his final arrangements for the betrayal of his Master.

All through the Word the church on earth is described by the symbol of a vineyard. Read Isaiah 5:1-7, where under the figure of a vineyard the prophet tells what the church had done to the

divine truth entrusted to it. The “wild grapes,” as we can easily see, were the false requirements which the scribes and Pharisees had substituted for the life of true charity commanded by the Scriptures.

Now, at the close of His life on earth, the Lord is charging His disciples not to repeat this sin as they go out to found a new church. He tells them that He is the true vine and that they cannot bear good fruit unless they are careful to remain true to His teachings. For, just as in the parable of the sower the seed represents the Word of God, so the Lord, who was the Word made flesh, is divine truth, the only source of our knowledge of the good or heavenly life. The grapes we are to bring forth are works of charity, but these must not be merely external benefactions, for such things may be done without any real thought of God in them. If we give ourselves credit for the good we do, it is not inwardly good at all. The Lord says to us, as He said to His disciples in that last solemn charge: “This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you.” To know just how the Lord loved us we must study His life and words, for only by trying to follow His example can we produce good fruit.



Primary

Talk about the vine and the grapes. The miracle at Cana may be recalled in some detail as a basis for showing that all life is from the Lord. This class can be given the idea of the difference between good done from self and good done from the Lord.

You have all eaten grapes. You know that they come in bunches and are very sweet and juicy and refreshing. Perhaps some of you have been in places where grapes are grown, and have seen the grape vines twining upon the trellises built to support them. We not only eat grapes, but their juice is used to make the wine which is served at the Lord’s table in the Holy Communion, which you will share when you are old enough to be confirmed.

Wine was served at the Passover feast when the Lord was on earth, and at other feasts, too.

Do you remember how the Lord turned water into wine at the wedding feast at Cana?

There were no grapes in that story, were there?

The Lord did not need the grapes in order to produce wine.

From our lesson today can you tell why?

All the power to produce anything comes from the Lord.

Without Him we can do nothing, just as verse 5 of our chapter says.

The “fruit” the Lord wants us to produce is good deeds.

But goodness can come only from Him.

If we praise ourselves instead of the Lord for our good deeds, they are not really good at all.

They are like artificial fruit, which looks pretty but cannot be eaten.

When we think our goodness is our own, we are cutting ourselves off from the vine.

We must learn what the Lord wants us to do, and ask Him to help us do it.

Every time you say the Lord’s Prayer remember that you are asking the Lord to help you to be His branches and to bring forth the good fruit which He expects of you.



Junior

The Juniors can understand a good deal of the correspondence of this lesson, and it offers a good opportunity to teach them the principle of correspondence and to familiarize them with the word “correspondence” as it is used in the New Church. The immediate practical lesson for them is suggested in the last paragraph of their notes.

Notice that in the Gospel of John there are five whole chapters between the account of the Lord’s entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and chapter 18, which tells of His betrayal by Judas on the Thursday night of that same week. This is because John gives us less about the external facts of the Lord’s life on earth and more of His teachings, and some of the deepest of these teachings were given to His disciples during the last week of His life. Our lesson for today is an example of this deeper instruction.

When we had our lesson on the Lord’s first miracle at Cana, you may have wondered how the Lord could turn water into wine without any grapes. Here we have a clear answer. “I am the true

vine.” This has a deeper meaning which you will study when you are a little older, but you can see something about it now. The Lord is the creator of everything in the natural world, and it is His life flowing in which gives everything the power to continue to exist and to bear fruit. We must always try to remember this, for to us, while we live in this world, material things seem to exist of themselves. When the Lord was living in the world in a finite body, He could exercise His power directly and immediately, and this is the explanation of His many miracles.

Because the Lord has created everything, each thing in nature is an outward expression of something in the Lord. As the teachings of the New Church say, each thing in nature “corresponds” to something spiritual and divine which is its cause. As you grow older, you will learn more and more about these correspondences; you already know some of them, such as the correspondence of fire to love and of light to truth. Most of you know the parable of the sower. If you do not remember it, you will find it in Matthew 13:3-9. And in verses 18-23 of that chapter the Lord explains the parable to His disciples, showing us that seed corresponds to truth from the Word and the fruit which is produced from the seed to the good which is developed in our lives, as we obey what we learn of the truth.

In the vegetable kingdom there are three fruits which are mentioned again and again in the Word: the olive, the grape, and the fig. These three correspond to good in the three planes of our life: our will, our thoughts, and our acts. Now read Isaiah 5:1-7. This means that the Lord gave the Word of the Old Testament so that people might know the truth and do good in the world by means of it. But instead, this “vineyard” brought forth “wild grapes.” The scribes and Pharisees used the Scriptures to make themselves powerful instead of to help and guide those who wanted to know how to be good. They were branches that did not abide in the vine.

What does the Lord say happens to those who do *not* abide in Him?

How can we abide in Him?

What special commandment does the Lord give us in this chapter?

Read carefully verse 16. This shows us just what our lives are for. Sometimes people think they are better than others because they have joined the church and do things which their community recognizes as good. If they think in this way, they are not better—often they are worse—because they are taking credit to themselves for goodness instead of recognizing that all goodness is the Lord's. Did you ever try to bite into a piece of artificial fruit? No deeds of ours—however good they may appear to be—are really good unless the life of the Lord, life from the true vine, is in them. Try to learn never, even in your thoughts, to praise yourself for being good.



Intermediate

Use this lesson to lead the young people to a desire to serve as “branches” of the Lord in the world, and then stress the condition of such service and the importance of looking to the Word for guidance instead of to self or to one's associates.

Our lesson for today is part of the last instruction which the Lord gave to the apostles after they had partaken of the Passover feast on the night before His crucifixion. Judas had already gone out to arrange for his betrayal of the Lord. The eleven who remained were the ones who were to begin the work of founding the Christian Church.

In the Word the vine is mentioned many times. In its highest sense it represents the Lord as to divine truth. So He says, “I am the true vine.” In our lives it represents charity, which is what Swedenborg calls “the good of truth.” Charity, as we have learned before, is the heartfelt recognition that we of ourselves are neither good nor wise, that all goodness and wisdom are in the Lord, and that we can do good to our neighbor only as we try to learn from the Lord what is good and to obey His commandments. As we do this we serve as branches of the true vine and can produce genuine works of charity—represented by grapes.

From this you can see why there is so much in this chapter about abiding in the Lord and about obeying His commandments.

We should not, for instance, join the church and then think, “Now I am good; as long as I go to church sometimes and am kind to my neighbors and don’t do anything most people consider wrong, I don’t have to do any more studying or thinking about my religion.” You would be surprised to find how many people do think just that way. But one may do all these things and not really be a Christian at all. He may very soon have fallen into the state of those we learned about in our Palm Sunday lesson who “loved the praise of men more than the praise of God” (John 12:43). He may be looking to other people instead of to the Lord for guidance. So he becomes a branch that is cast off and is withered.

A branch is an extension of the vine. The apostles were to carry out into the world the truth the Lord gave them. He was warning them never to substitute their own ideas for His truth. Read verse 16. This means that the Lord can be with us and make our efforts to do good successful only as we try to do His will and not our own. We must not think ourselves better than other people. The Lord wants each one of us to be an “apostle”—one sent out—one of His branches. He has put each one of us in a particular place and time in the world to do work for Him which no one else can do. If we faithfully keep on studying His Word and trying to understand it and to obey His commandments, His life and love can be in what we do and make it good fruit.

And He promises something to us, too. He says, “These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full.” Are you ever really happy when you are doing something you know is wrong? You may think you are having fun, but down underneath, you are uncomfortable. When we are young, being good looks hard because we haven’t tried being good long enough to find out how much happier it can make us than having our own way.

The Lord does not tell us that we shall have an easy time. He told His apostles that the world would hate them just as it had hated Him. We may often be made fun of by our associates when we stand up for our principles. But if we are doing what the Lord

tells us to do, He can give us courage and a happiness that is deep down inside, so that what other people say will not disturb us.

The lesson of our chapter for us is that, whatever other people may think or do, we know that the Lord is the only one who can really tell us what we ought to think and how we ought to feel and behave, the only one who can keep us from spiritual harm, enable us to do the things which will really be for the good of our neighbor, and bring us into heavenly happiness here and in the world to come.

Basic Correspondences

the vine = the Lord as to divine truth
grapes = works of charity

Senior

The quotation from the writings found at the end of this lesson leads easily into a discussion of the cause of the fall of each of the four churches which preceded the New Church, and makes the teaching of our chapter a very solemn charge to our young people just starting out in the church.

The passage quoted at the end of this lesson occurs in the writings in connection with the explanation of Genesis 9:20: “And Noah . . . planted a vineyard.” This is the first of a great number of passages in the Word in which the vineyard, the vine, and grapes figure. The Most Ancient Church, described by Adam and Eve and their descendants, was a “celestial” church; that is, in the beginning it was in love to the Lord, and the Lord could enlighten and direct its people by influx into their wills. But after the will of these people became selfish, the influx from the Lord was turned by their wills from truth into falsity, and the Most Ancient Church came to its end in a great flood of falsity and evil. Then the Lord separated the will and the understanding in men so that they no longer had to think just as they felt, and the Ancient Church, pictured by Noah, was raised up. This was a “spiritual” church, in which men first received the truth into their minds and then by obeying it could be given a new will. This is why it is said that

Noah planted a vineyard, for a vineyard represents the spiritual church, the vine being spiritual truth and the grapes spiritual good. But verse 21 of Genesis 9 tells us that Noah “drank of the wine, and was drunken,” which means that the people of that church soon began to use the wonderful truth that was given them to exalt themselves, and we remember that this tendency ended in the tower of Babel and the dispersion and vastation of the Ancient Church.

This story about Noah has a very close connection with our chapter for today. At the end of the Ancient Church the Lord had given a new Word to the world through the Israelitish nation, who through it became not a true church but the correspondential representative of a true spiritual church. This church again is pictured as a vineyard. Read Isaiah 5:1-7. The traditions with which the scribes and Pharisees had overlaid the Scriptures were the “wild grapes” which that church had produced instead of its true fruit.

Now the Israelitish Church was at its end and the Lord was providing for the beginning of a new spiritual church in the world through His apostles. The teaching of our chapter was given to the eleven after they had partaken of the Last Supper on the eve of the crucifixion—Judas had already gone out to arrange for the betrayal of the Lord. And what the Lord was really saying to the eleven was: “Do not do as the earlier churches did; do not pervert the truth I have given you by imagining it is produced by your own minds and mixing it with your own ideas.” Over and over again He said to them, “Abide in me.” The vine in its highest sense represents “the Lord as to Divine truth.” In the first chapter of John we learned that the Lord came into the world as the Word made flesh. And now in the same Gospel He says, “I am the true vine.” Unless we study what the Lord Himself tells us and look to Him alone for guidance, there is no life in any of the apparent good we do; we cannot bear fruit.

The apostles were faithful to the Lord’s charge, but we know that afterward the first Christian Church, like all that had preceded it, began to pervert and confuse the Lord’s teachings—to separate

itself from the vine. The Lord foresaw that this would happen and described it for us in the visions given to John at Patmos. As you go out into the world and attend other churches besides the New Church, you will find that some base their preaching and teaching for the most part upon what Paul and later men said rather than upon what the Lord Himself said. Their basic doctrines stem from the decisions made by men at the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325.

The Lord has had to come again to clear away these traditions and restore to us divine truth, enabling us to read the Word with understanding. You may know the motto of the New Church: “Nunc licet”—“now it is permitted” to enter intellectually into the mysteries of faith. [See TCR 508³.] But this does not mean that we may now twist divine truth this way and that to suit our convenience. The Lord says to us today, as He said to the eleven at the Last Supper: “If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered.” And He says to us also: “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. It is divine providence which has cast your lot in the New Church. The Lord has a work for you to do which no one else can do. But if you do not abide in Him, your fruit will not remain. And He says, “If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love.”

Adult

In preparation for this lesson the teacher should read carefully the Senior as well as the Adult notes, as his particular class may be much interested in a discussion of the departure from the Lord’s teaching and the turning to human intelligence instead which has caused the downfall of each succeeding church on earth, including the first Christian Church.

Recall the Lord’s miracle at Cana, when He turned water into wine. There the wine, in contrast to the water, signified spiritual truth, truth about the Lord and our relation to Him, truth effective for our regeneration, the rebirth of which the Lord told Nicodemus. Now the Lord calls Himself the true vine, the source of all spiritual truth, apart from which we can do no genuine good.

In discussing the meaning of the vineyard and the vine Swedenborg tells us that we cannot understand it unless we know that there is a celestial church and a spiritual church, the one made up of those who receive the Lord primarily in their wills, and the other of those who receive Him primarily in their understandings; the olive yard is the symbol of the one, the vineyard of the other. The Most Ancient Church was of the celestial type and the Ancient Church of the spiritual. That is why it is said that Noah, the symbolic founder of the Ancient Church, “planted a vineyard” (Genesis 9:20). We remember also that *Israel*, the name given to Jacob after he returned to the Holy Land from Haran, is used in the Word to signify the spiritual church, of which the Jewish Church was representative. So throughout the Old Testament the vineyard and the vine are mentioned in connection with the name *Israel* (Jeremiah 2:14, 21; Hosea 10:1). The Lord came as the truth, “a light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel” (Luke 2:32). He came to restore to the world knowledge of spiritual truth, because Israel had become indeed an “empty vine.” The perversion of the truth which had been entrusted to them is described in Isaiah 5:1-7 under the symbolism of a carefully prepared and planted vineyard which brought forth wild grapes instead of its intended fruit, and the character of those who were responsible for this perversion is pictured in verses 20 to 23 of the same chapter. In Psalm 80 the figure of a vineyard is again used to describe the state of the good and innocent and their need of a savior.

So the Word made flesh, divine truth clothed in a form adapted to the comprehension of men, is indeed the true vine. The New Testament treats of the spiritual church in the beautiful parables of the vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16, 21:33-45; Mark 12:1-12; Luke 20:9-16), as well as in Revelation 14:17-20, where judgment is described as the harvesting of the fruit of the vine. The vineyard, the vine, the grapes, the wine are so frequently mentioned throughout the Word that there are many references to them in the writings (see particularly AC 1069, 5113, and 9139). In our lesson the Lord

speaks of Himself as the vine and of the Father as the husbandman. It is “the Father,” divine love, which plants, sustains, and tends the vineyard, but “the Son,” divine truth, is the vine by whose means the grapes and wine are produced. If we are to produce any good fruit we must be branches of this vine, we must draw spiritual truth from the life and teaching of the Lord, our minds must be formed according to the truth which He gives us—not according to any ideas of our own or of other men.

But there is more to abiding in the vine than merely to know the Lord’s teachings. In verse 10 the Lord tells us what it is to abide in Him: “If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love.” Swedenborg explains the “mechanics” of this statement in TCR 70, as follows: “From the Divine omnipresence man is in God to the extent that he lives in accordance with order, for the reason that God is omnipresent; and where God is in His Divine order, there He is in Himself, because He is order, as has been shown above. Since, then, man was created a form of Divine order, God is in him—fully in him to the extent that he is living in accordance with Divine order. Nevertheless, God is in him if he is not living in accordance with Divine order, but only in the highest regions in him, thereby giving him the ability to understand what is true and to will what is good; that is, giving him the faculty of understanding and the inclination to love. But so far as man lives contrary to order he shuts up the lower regions of his mind or spirit, and thus prevents God’s descending and filling those lower regions with His presence; consequently, while God is in him, he is not in God.” So the Lord says, “He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit.” No matter how much we may know of the Lord’s teachings, if we do not live according to them, we are spiritually barren branches, our souls wither, and our evils cut us off from the Lord and consume us. “If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned.” It is only when we act according to the truth which we receive from the Lord that we bring forth spiritual fruit. And this bearing of fruit

is the whole purpose of our life in this world: “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.”

However, as we have noticed in other lessons, the Lord does not permit us to imagine that a mere external keeping of the law is sufficient. He says, “This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you.” “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.” The Lord literally laid down His life for us at the crucifixion, but this was only the symbol of the work which He had been doing all along, laying down every selfish impulse and thought day by day: “Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he [the Father, divine love] taketh away; and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit.” When He tells us to love one another as He loved us, He is telling us to lay down our life, our selfish desires and ambitions, day by day. So we become His friends by understanding His loving ways, instead of servants who merely obey from fear or from a sense of duty. It is by obeying His commandments inwardly as well as outwardly that we can overcome the world, even as He overcame it. He does not tell us that our way will be easy, but that the victory is sure. “In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.”

The lesson should be emphasized that nothing is genuinely good which does not include recognition of the Lord and obedience to Him within it. We are to abide in the vine. It is the Lord’s truth we are to seek, the Lord’s commandments we are to follow, not the standards of the world or our own ideas of what is right. We hear people praising themselves for their kindness to others; we all do it inwardly at least part of the time; and when we do, we may be sure that our kindness is to some extent inwardly selfish and not done from the Lord. Even charity done in the name of the church is not free from this taint. The Lord says: “Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many won-

derful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.” How can one who goes to church, keeps the laws, is honest and industrious, and kind and generous to his neighbors “work iniquity”? He may be doing all these things for the sake of self, for his reputation and his self-satisfaction. Good works must be inwardly good. In DP 215 Swedenborg compares good works done for worldly ends with the same works done from love to the Lord and the neighbor: “One is like artificial fruit, which in external form appears like fruit from a tree, although it is colored wax containing within it dust or bitumen; while the other is like excellent fruit, pleasing in taste and smell, and containing seeds within.”

From the Writings of Swedenborg

Arcana Coelestia, n. 1069⁵: “Since the ‘vine’ signifies the spiritual church, and the primary thing of the spiritual church is charity, in which the Lord is present, and by means of which He conjoins Himself with man, and Himself alone works every good, therefore the Lord compares Himself to a vine, and describes the man of the church, or the spiritual church, in these words in John . . . (15:1-5, 12); from these words it is evident what the spiritual church is.”

Suggested Questions on the Lesson

- J. When did the Lord give His disciples the teaching of our lesson for today?
the night before the crucifixion
- P. What does He call Himself in this chapter? *the vine*
- P. What does He call His disciples? *branches*
- P. What does He say they must do in order to bring forth fruit? *abide in Him*
- P. What happens to those who do not abide in the Lord? *cast out*
- J. How do men abide in the Lord? *obey Him*
- J. Why does the Lord say He tells us these things? *so we may share His joy*
- P. What does He say in His commandment? *love one another*
- J. Does He promise His disciples an easy life in this world? *no*
- J. What does He promise them? *to be hated and persecuted by the world*
- I. What does the vine represent? *divine truth*
- S. What do the grapes represent? *spiritual goodness*