

MPW Candidates and Credentials Committee

Exegesis Paper for Preaching Exam

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Introduction

This is an informal exegesis to preaching paper. The goal of this paper is to demonstrate how I approach a text and prepare for preaching.¹ The assigned passage is John 15:1-10.

Structure and Context

The assigned passage is drawn from the private teachings (John 13:1-20:31)² following Jesus' celebration of the Passover meal (John 13:1-30).³ The stated purpose of the Fourth Gospel appears in John 20:31: "But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name."⁴ Belief and life in Jesus is depicted in John 15:1-10 via agricultural imagery of "branches" abiding in the "true vine" (John 15:1, 5).

This passage contains the last of the Fourth Gospel's seven "I am" sayings with an explicit predicate.⁵ The "I am" sayings "describe the role of Jesus in bringing salvation to

¹ Before I can ask questions about the author's intended meaning I need to familiarize myself with the text. To familiarize myself with a text for New Testament preaching, usually I start simultaneously with English versions (this has changed over the years but currently KJV, NRSV, and NET Bible) and Greek text (Nestle-Aland 28). I consult the NA28 apparatus and NET Bible for variants, translation notes, and identify (if any) exegetical difficulties. I write out by hand the Greek text interspersed with a *very* rough translation and quasi structural analysis/sentence flow (sometimes I will consult Randy A. Leedy's *New Testament Greek Sentence Diagrams*). After this initial spadework and prayer, I usually have a tentative "sermon use list" and main points I want to communicate. Then I review the *English Annotations* (1645), check to see if the passage is a proof-text(s) for the Westminster Standards, and consult commentaries and other relevant reference materials as I construct the sermon outline.

² "It is generally recognized that there are four clearly defined sections in the Gospel: 1. 1:1 – 18 Prologue; 2. 1:19 – 12:50 (that illustrates 1:11); 3. 13:1 – 20:31 (that illustrates 1:12); 4. 21:1-25 Epilogue" (Murray Harris, *Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament: John* [Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2015], 11).

³ John 15:1-10 can be understood as an auxiliary teaching to New Covenant sacramental practice and piety.

⁴ All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

⁵ The seven "I am" (ἐγώ εἰμι) sayings with an explicit predicate: John 6:35 & 51 "I am bread of life/living bread"; John 8:12 & 9:5 "I am the light of the world"; John 10:7 & 9 "I am the gate"; John 10:11 & 14 "I am the good shepherd"; John 11:25 "I am the resurrection and the life"; John 14:6 "I am the way, the truth, and the life"; John 15:1 & 5 "I am the (true) vine."

humans.”⁶ In John 15:1-10, Jesus brings salvation through love for those who abide in his love, e.g., in John 15:9-10, Jesus explains that he is the recipient of the Father’s love and that he has “kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love,” and draws a correlation between his love for the disciples and he tells them that, as recipients of his love, “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love.” Related to the purpose stated in John 20:31, belief and life in Jesus is depicted in John 15:1-10 via agricultural imagery of abiding in the “true vine” (John 15:1, 5), which is manifested and actualized in the disciples keeping Jesus’ commandments and abiding in his love (John 15:10).

Text and Background

The assigned passage is John 15:1-10 and it is a subsection of a pericope extending to John 15:16.⁷ In John 15:1, the agricultural imagery begins with Jesus the “true vine” (ἡ ἄμπελος ἡ ἀληθινή) and “my Father” the “vinegrower” (ὁ γεωργός). The imagery concludes with the disciples, earlier called “branches” (ὕμεις τὰ κλήματα in John 15:5), “appointed . . . to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last” (John 15:16). The focal point of John 15:1-10 is verse 5: “I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.”

Jesus’ (and the Fourth Gospel’s author’s) intended meaning was drawn from and dependent upon the prominence of, and the original audience’s familiarity with, viticulture.⁸

⁶ Murray Harris, *Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament: John*, 13.

⁷ Every English version I consulted has a paragraph division at John 15:17. However, paragraph divisions informed by early manuscripts are John 15:1-3, 15:4-10, 15:11-15, and 15:16 (see *Greek New Testament Produced at Tyndale House* [Wheaton: Crossway, 2017]). The assigned passage (John 15:1-10) corresponds to paragraph divisions of early manuscripts.

⁸ “Viticulture has always been prominent in the hill country of Samaria and Judea where the natural contours provide excellent terraces (cf. Isa. 5:1f) . . . Constant care was necessary to ensure a fruitful vine . . . As in other plants, the quality of the fruit was safeguarded by the pruning of the branches . . . Dead branches were pruned in the spring (Lev. 25:3f.; Isa. 5:6) and were gathered for burning (Jn. 15:6)” (“Vine” by R. K. Harrison in *The*

“Ancient viticultural practices also provide important background information. Two processes were involved, the training of the vines and the pruning of the branches.”⁹

Additionally, another factor of historical context for intended meaning and the original audience, in the Old Testament disobedient Israel was repeatedly depicted as a vine.¹⁰ Jesus’ claims – “I am the true vine” (John 15:1) and “I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love” (John 15:10) – is simultaneously a contrast with historical Israel and condemnation of “his own people” who “did not accept him” (John 1:11; e.g., John 8:31-47; 10:31-32).¹¹

John 15:1-3

John 15:1 presents parallel claims that frame the following unit of thought: Claim 1 – “I am the true vine” - καὶ [and] – Claim 2 “my Father is the vinegrower.”

John 15:2 describes the twofold agency of the Father with wordplay: On the one hand, “He removes” (ἀρᾶι) every fruitless branch, but, on the other hand, “he prunes” (καθαίρει) every fruitful branch to make it more fruitful.

John 15:3 is addressed to the original audience (disciples) and is a claim about their being sanctified: “You have already been cleansed (καθαροί) by the word that I have spoken to you.” This verse is an allusion (and contrast) to John 13:10-11: “‘And you [plural] are clean (καθαροί), though not all of you.’ For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, ‘Not all of

International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Vol. 4, Q-Z, gen. ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley [Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988], 986).

⁹ Colin F. Kruse, *John: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC 4 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 310.

¹⁰ Psalm 80:8-16; Isaiah 5:1-7; Ezekiel 15:1-8; 17:5-10; 19:10-14.

¹¹ “The imagery [John 15:6 “such branches are gathered, and thrown into the fire, and burned”] is that of eschatological judgment, recalling some of the OT vine imagery which involves divine rejection and judgment of disobedient Israel (Ezek. 15:4-6, 19:12)” (Footnote for John 15:6 in *The NET Bible* [Dallas: NET Bible Press, 2003]).

you are clean (καθαροί).” Also, the “word” of Jesus is the tool the Father (“vinedresser”) uses to “remove” fruitless branches and “prune” fruitful branches.

John 15:4-10

This section is dominated by the motif “abide” (vv. 5, 6, 7, 9, 10). As branches must abide (“remain” NET Bible) in a vine for vitality and fruitfulness, likewise Jesus’ disciples must remain in the “true vine.”

In John 15:5, “The vine and the branches together form one plant that has a single common life.”¹² Severed from Christ growth is impossible. Severed from Christ fruit is impossible. Severed from Christ productiveness is impossible. “. . . because apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5b).

In John 15:6, the imagery is of judgment. It is a warning. “Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away . . . thrown into the fire, and burned” (John 15:6).¹³

In John 15:7, “The threat of v. 6 (in the 3rd pers.) is followed by a promise (in the 2nd pers.).”¹⁴ The promise: “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you want, and it will be done for you.” Commensurate with abiding in Jesus is Jesus’ “words” (ῥήματα) abiding in the disciples. The “words” given to the disciples were first given to Jesus by the Father (John 17:8). This is an explication and elaboration on John 15:3: “You have already been cleansed by the word (τὸν λόγον) that I have spoken to you.”¹⁵ Again, the “word”/“words” of Jesus is the tool the “vinedresser” uses to sanctify and lead disciples. Also, integral to abiding

¹² Murray Harris, *Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament: John*, 268.

¹³ See comments above under “Text and Background” and footnote 11.

¹⁴ Murray Harris, *Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament: John*, 269.

¹⁵ “Ῥήματα are individual words, whereas λόγος (v. 3) refers to all of Jesus’ teaching, his message” (Murray Harris, *Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament: John*, 269).

in Christ is to “ask” – i.e., prayer.

In John 15:8, Jesus shifts their focus on the “vinedresser” (Father). Abiding in Christ (i.e., “become my disciples”) and bearing fruit glorifies the Father. Abiding in Christ (become a true branch) and bearing fruit is one in the same, and this glorifies the Father.

In John 15:9-10, the “abide” motif transitions from agricultural imagery of vine and branches (Jesus and true disciples) to paradigmatic love of Father and Jesus: “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love.”¹⁶

¹⁶ **Preaching Outline**

Introduction for Main Point to Proclaim

“Apart from [Christ] you can do nothing” (John 15:5). Therefore, “abide” in Christ.

Instruction and Warning of John 15:1-10

Fruitless branches are removed & fruitful branches are pruned (John 15:1-3).

1. True Vine = Jesus; Vinedresser = Father (John 15:1). “Removes” fruitless branches (not true disciples); “Prunes” fruitful branches (true disciples) (John 15:2).
2. “Prunes” branches by “word” (John 15:3); “word” of Jesus the tool of “vinedresser” (Father) to sanctify (“prunes” and “cleanse”) true disciples.

Explication and Elaboration on Vine and Branches (John 15:4-10)

1. Fruitful branches abide in Christ and bear fruit (John 15:4-5).
2. Fruitless branches thrown out and burned (John 15:6).
3. Fruitful branches have a promise – “ask” (John 15:7).
4. “My Father is glorified by this . . .” (John 15:8).
5. The conclusion of the matter: “abide in my love” (John 15:9-10).

Response

WCF 16. 3 – Our ability to do good works . . . wholly from Christ; don’t be negligent; be diligent stir up grace in us.