

Matthew 7:15–29 (NRSV)

¹⁵ “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶ You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Thus you will know them by their fruits.

²¹ “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. ²² On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?’ ²³ Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.’

²⁴ “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. ²⁵ The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. ²⁶ And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. ²⁷ The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!”

²⁸ Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, ²⁹ for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

John 15:1–8 (NRSV)

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. ² He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. ³ You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴ Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. 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. ⁶ Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷ If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.”

What will you leave behind? How do you want to be remembered?

In this final week of this series, *Solid Souls*, we turn to the question of what sort of legacy we will leave. Will it be a solid, Christ-filled, fruit-bearing legacy? We begin by turning to Paul’s associate Timothy, the recipient of such a legacy.

From grandmother and mother

I’d like to meet Lois and Eunice, the grandmother and mother respectively of a young man named Timothy who lived in the years when Christianity was beginning to spread around the Mediterranean. We know almost nothing about the two women, only what we can infer from Paul’s reference to them in a letter he sent Timothy (2 Timothy 1:5 above).

We know precious little about the facts of even Timothy’s life, but we do know that Paul understood how influential these two women had been in making Timothy into a passionate and powerful disciple of Jesus. I’m sure that Lois and Eunice were greatly pleased to see how God used their grandson and son in working alongside Paul and furthering his ministry of the good news. Timothy was their legacy of faith. As Lea and Griffin write,

Paul commended the spiritual heritage Timothy had received. This faith in the God of the Bible had first lived in his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice. Their faith was the expression of the faith of a “true” Jew (Rom 2:28–29) which found its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. The pair had a genuine expectant faith for the Messiah of the Old Testament. When they heard the gospel, they believed upon Jesus Christ as the Messiah for whom they had hoped. They passed their faith on to Timothy. Paul was tracing the faith of Timothy back to its roots.¹

And we can bet that many others also benefitted from the faithful legacy of these two women. They must have really known how to make disciples, as was Jesus’ charge to them and to all of those who profess to be part of his family (Matthew 28:19). Do we know how? Do we even know what Jesus meant by disciple?

What’s a disciple?

We toss the word “disciple” around a lot. Jesus charged his disciples with making more disciples. The stated mission of the UMC is “to make disciples of Jesus Christ.” But what does “disciple” really mean? To call someone a “follower” of Jesus doesn’t really get to the heart of it. Neither does the word “believer.”

“Disciple” translates the Greek word, *mathetes*, and it is all about learning. *Mathetes* might be translated “learner,” “pupil,” or “student.” Disciples sit at the feet of the teacher so that they can learn. What do they learn? They learn to be like the teacher, the master. I prefer the word “apprentice” as a synonym for “disciple.” “Apprentice” conveys the full sense of learning to become like our master, Jesus. Apprentice plumbers seek to become master plumbers by discipling themselves so that they might learn the master’s trade. Similarly, disciples of Jesus are apprentices seeking to become Christ-like.

Disciples of Jesus bear fruit of their faith and commitment, a fruitfulness that should grow evermore evident as we grow in our faith. Jesus speaks of this fruitfulness as he speaks to his closest disciples on the eve of his crucifixion.

The vineyard

Israel is a land of vineyards, thus we shouldn’t be surprised that it is a common biblical metaphor (see Isaiah 5:1-4, Psalm 80:8-9; Genesis 49:11-12,22 for example). The metaphor usually works like this. God plucked the people out of Egypt and planted them in Canaan. There, they, the vineyard, were to be fruitful and grow, but the vineyard had turned bad (as in today’s passage from Isaiah) and God will come to judge and destroy the vineyard. But, as always, there are images of restoration and blessing alongside the images of judgment and destruction. In these images, the fertile vineyard is the blessed and restored Israel (Jeremiah 31:5; Amos 9:14).

In his talk with his disciples, Jesus takes the vineyard imagery upon himself. He is the true vine. He is the true Israel, the fruitful vine that Israel had failed to be. He is the Israel that is able to keep its covenant with God to simply love God and love neighbor. He is the Israel through whom all the families of the earth would be blessed, thereby fulfilling the promise God made to Abraham long before (Genesis 12:3).

The “I am” statements in John’s gospel can be seen as not-so-subtle hints to Jesus’ divinity or, at least, his identity with the Father. Based on that, we’d expect to find Jesus as the vinegrower in this passage – for it is God who is the vinegrower in the OT passages. However, Jesus makes himself the vine in the metaphor; the grower is the Father. This “I am” statement identifies Jesus with Israel, the people of God. He is a Jew. He is human. He is one of us. Moreover, Jesus, as the true vine, the true Israel,

¹ Lea, T. D., & Griffin, H. P. (1992). *1, 2 Timothy, Titus* (Vol. 34, p. 185). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

exists in enduring relationship with both the Father, who is the vinegrower, and with his disciples, who are the vine's branches.

It's helpful to step back from Jesus' words for a moment and picture a grapevine, all twisted and turning upon itself. It is hard to tell vine from branch or branch from branch. It is a whole, a unity, a community of sorts. It takes all three – the vinegrower, the vine, and the branches – to produce abundant fruit. The vinegrower continually prunes and shapes the vine, getting rid of dead branches and shaping the branches so they can bear more fruit. Because grapevines will tend to grow lots of leaves and shoots that dissipate the vine's energy and suppress the production of fruit, the vinegrower is always busy making sure that the vine is producing fruit and not just a pretty show of green leaves.²

Jesus' meaning seems clear. When the branches remain part of the vine, the branches can grow and thrive. If the branches are cut off from the vine, the branches wither and die. Likewise, we are to abide in Christ, just as he abides in us. It is only in Christ that we can find the life that we seek. As the vine gives life to the branches, Jesus is the giver of life to us. After all, he is the Bread of Life! So the question is always, will we remain in the vine or will we go our own way? Will we seek the independence and self-sufficiency that the world values and offers? Or will we remain connected to the vine; remain in Christ, entangled with and dependent upon not only Jesus, but the rest of the branches, the entire community of believers?

It is important for us to realize that abiding in Jesus means much more than just believing or even trusting Christ. It is about remaining in union with Christ, in a deep and enduring relationship. This is how we are to *be*. Our very *being* is to be grounded in this oneness with Jesus. In Peterson's paraphrase of John, Jesus says, "Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you." First *being*, then *doing*.

Producing fruit

Finally, we the branches are to bear fruit. That is what we are here for. There can be no excuses. We are to allow God to prune us and shape us so that we have the strength and vitality to love and to love well.

Yes, we can all bear fruit, but only by remaining in Christ. It is this deep union with our Lord that enables us to do what God would have us do. Without this deep and enduring relationship, we can do none of what God desires from us.

But we shouldn't think that Jesus' way is some sort of gray, joyless obedience. Instead, Jesus assures us that he has said all this so that our "joy may be complete" (15:10). Joy, according to Merriam-Webster, is "the emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune, or by the prospect of possessing what one desires: DELIGHT." As Don Carson writes, the love of God is the love for which we were created. When we live within that love, rather than try to run from it, we discover a joy deeper and more lasting than any of the temporary joys that the world offers. So the questions are simple: Will we remain in the vine? Will we strive to bear fruit? Will our discipleship be such that we leave a lasting legacy – today, right now? St. Andrew is a wonderful place to live out our life in Christ. Here, our fruit will be multiplied like those loaves of bread on a Galilean hillside.

Too often we think of this inheritance in terms of money or property – things that will not endure. But we are called by Christ to do all we can to foster faithful discipleship in all those we can possibly reach.

It is easy to look at our beautiful campus and conclude that St. Andrew is a building, but, instead, we are a fellowship formed by the Holy Spirit. It is this faithful fellowship

²John uses a wordplay here that the English translations can't really capture. In the Greek, prune (v. 2) and cleanse (v. 3) are the same Greek root. The point is not vine growth, but fruit production. A big showy vine that produces no fruit is not God's intention. Metaphors can be very thought-provoking!

of disciples that is enduring. It is this fellowship that is the most important inheritance any of us will leave for those who come after us.

What effect will we have had on those we lived and worked among? Our families and friends? Our co-workers and neighbors? What will we have done to help them hear well the Good News of grace, to change hearts and minds, to show others the shape of a genuinely Spirit-filled life? What sort of inheritance will we leave? Will we be solid souls with a solid legacy that endures, as did that of Lois and Eunice?

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

We've just begun a study: *Paul's Letters to the Next Generation: 1 & Timothy and Titus*.

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We've just begun a study of John's Gospel

Meeting on-line at 12:00 noon Tuesday on Scott's Facebook ministry page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC".

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Both classes are now recorded and are available each week in my podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by "Scott Engle Bible Studies".

Scott's Sunday Class

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

This week: We conclude two weeks of preparation for the upcoming 9-month journey through the Bible in worship and in classes, titled *God-is*.

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel. Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.