

Jesus Juva

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CHRISTOLOGICAL TITLES
LESSON NINETEEN
THE VINE

“The Thirty-Five Hour Assignment”

Artificial Intelligence. The next and biggest accomplishment is when a computer can beat a person playing poker. The games that have already been conquered are chess, checkers and backgammon. In these games every contest starts the same way and follows a consistent set of rules. The game evolves through an enormous but finite number of possible moves. To win the computer builds a tree, with each branch representing every possible move in the game. As the game progresses, the computer selects the branch that has the best combination of moves attached to it. The power of mathematical computing allows the computer to trump its opponent. In poker Texas Hold'em is altogether different. The dealt cards provide a myriad of possible combinations. But what surpasses the skill of Artificial Intelligence is to comprehend how the holder of the hand will play the cards. A branch of established moves cannot be constructed. The Texas Hold'em program has been written, it will soon be challenged, but absent of the branch the outcome of man versus machine is undetermined, and may forever be.

Jesus said, “I am the true vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.” (Jn 15:5) Attached to Jesus we bear much fruit and are abundantly blest. Apart from Jesus we are gambling with our lives; our very souls have no more assurance than a person playing Texas Hold'em against a computer. As a branch, we need the spiritual nourishment of our Lord.

In the Old Testament we know that the vine is used repeatedly as a symbol of Israel. Its importance can be ascertained by the places in which it was engraved. The vine

appeared on Jewish coinage as the national emblem. For the carving over the main door of the synagogue the congregation would choose from one of several designs: the paschal lamb, the pot of manna, Aaron's rod, or the vine with grapes. On the great doors of the temple in Jerusalem was a golden vine, with its branches hanging down from a great height.

The prophets used the vine to symbolize the degeneracy of Israel. Ezekiel said the inhabitants of Jerusalem are like a vine out of whose wood nothing can be made, and the branches once cut can only be burned. "Therefore thus says the Lord God: Like the wood of the vine among the trees of the forest, which I have given to the fire for fuel, so will I give up the inhabitants of Jerusalem." (Ezek 15: 1-8) Ezekiel went on to say that once Israel was like a splendid vine, but now it is like a vine transplanted to the wilderness and fit for nothing but destruction. "Now it is transplanted into the wilderness, into a dry and thirsty land. And a fire has gone out from its stem, has consumed its branches and fruit, so that there remains no strong stem, no scepter for ruling." (Ezek 19:10-14)

Isaiah stated that Israel is the vineyard of the Lord who cared for it, but Israel offered nothing in return. Isaiah recounted from God, "When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?" He went on to report that God "expected justice, but saw bloodshed." (Isa 5:1-7) Jeremiah hears God accuse Israel, "Yet I planted you a choice vine, wholly of pure seed. How have you turned degenerate and become a wild vine?" (Jer 2:21) Hosea reports that Israel appears as a flourishing vine, but it has a false heart. "Israel is a luxuriant vine that yields its fruit. The more his fruit increased the more altars he built; as his country improved, he improved his pillars. Their heart is false; now they must bear their guilt. The Lord will break down their altars, and destroy their pillars." (Hos 10:1-2)

The vine was the symbol of Israel. The prophets bemoaned how the people had desecrated the vine. Jesus, when he spoke the words, "I am the true vine," made the claim that he is the Messiah and that in him the true destiny of Israel is fulfilled and consummated. That he is the one chosen of God in whom the new, the real, and the true Israel finds life.

In John's narrative this claim is made in the Upper Room, immediately after the Last Supper, which is the serving of the bread and wine. The wine, of course, had come

from the vines in the grape vineyards. It may even be that there was a vine trained to climb its way across the wall of the house where he fellowshiped that evening. Its tendrils were peeping round the window opening, giving Jesus exactly the picture he required. As Jesus was prone to impart a lesson when he could point to something to illustrate his point, one could assume the vine was nestled on the window sill.

When Jesus spoke these words, “apart from me you can do nothing,” to the disciples, and correspondingly to us this day, he was dictating that apart from him we are spiritually dead. Vine wood is good for nothing. Once the branch is separated from the vine the wood is worthless. It can only be gathered up and burned. So the Christian apart from Jesus has no life and no usefulness to him.

To be nourished in the Lord, John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, disciplined himself to read five hours daily. He did most of his reading on horseback, traveling from one preaching location to another. While others in his profession consider traveling as “time wasted,” Wesley employed it as an opportunity for spiritual nurturing. In 1770 he reflected on this practice in his Journal. “Near thirty years ago, I was thinking, ‘How is it that no horse ever stumbles while I am reading?’ (History, poetry and philosophy I commonly read on horseback, having other employment at other times.) No account can possibly be given but this: because I throw the reins on his neck....A slack reign will prevent stumbling.”

Thirty years ago, upon learning of Wesley’s dedication, I pledged to read five hours daily. The thirty-five hour weekly assignment is frequently accomplished on my part; but more importantly is the desire and attempt to do so that keeps me attached to the vine. We must not be useless wood, but daily seek to be nourished in Christ through study, meditation, and worship.

Soli Deo Gloria,

Ron Love