



Alêtheia

CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP




Alêtheia
CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP

the gospel of
JOHN

ΕΝΑΡΧΗ Η ΝΟΛΟΓΟΣ ΚΑΙ Ο ΛΟΓΟΣ ΗΝ ΠΡΟΣ ΤΗΝ
ΘΗ ΚΑΙ ΘΕ ΤΗ ΝΟΛΟΓΟΣ ΕΣΤΟ Η ΝΕΝΑΡΧΗ ΤΙΡΟΣ
ΤΟΝ ΘΗ ΠΑΝΤΑ ΔΙΑ ΤΟΥ ΕΓΕΝΕΤΟ ΚΑΘΩΣ ΤΙΣ



Two weeks ago, I introduced a lengthy passage - the first 11 verses of John chapter 15 - and I asked you then to carefully consider what Jesus had to say in that place. I asked you to pay particular attention to the general sense or overall feeling that the passage evoked.

I told you that the typical reaction people have to those verses is negative. People usually apply the passage as a warning for Christians to perform, to produce, to get with the program, or else.



“The
Expulsion
of Adam
and Eve
from the
Garden of
Eden”

~ Benjamin
West, 1791

The focus is on the potential failure of a Christian to produce acceptable fruit and the resulting consequences of that failure. Where these ineffective Christians are cut off and burned up (presumably in the eternal Lake of Fire). So, Jesus' words here function as a harsh warning to produce proper fruit as a Christian or be condemned.

Then it is extended from a questionable tool of self-examination to a brutal weapon of judgment. Where the self-righteous types use it to control and denounce those who do not meet their standards of man-made legalistic piety.

I asked you to prayerfully meditate on the thrust of these verses and see the true nature of what Jesus was trying to convey to His closest disciples just hours before His torturous execution. To see that His main purpose was one of comfort and encouragement.



“BEHOLD!

I AM WITH YOU ALWAYS” ~ JESUS

While He was leaving them physically, He would never abandon them. In fact, only together with Him, spiritually connected by the Holy Spirit, would they be able to produce the fruit that the Father desired.

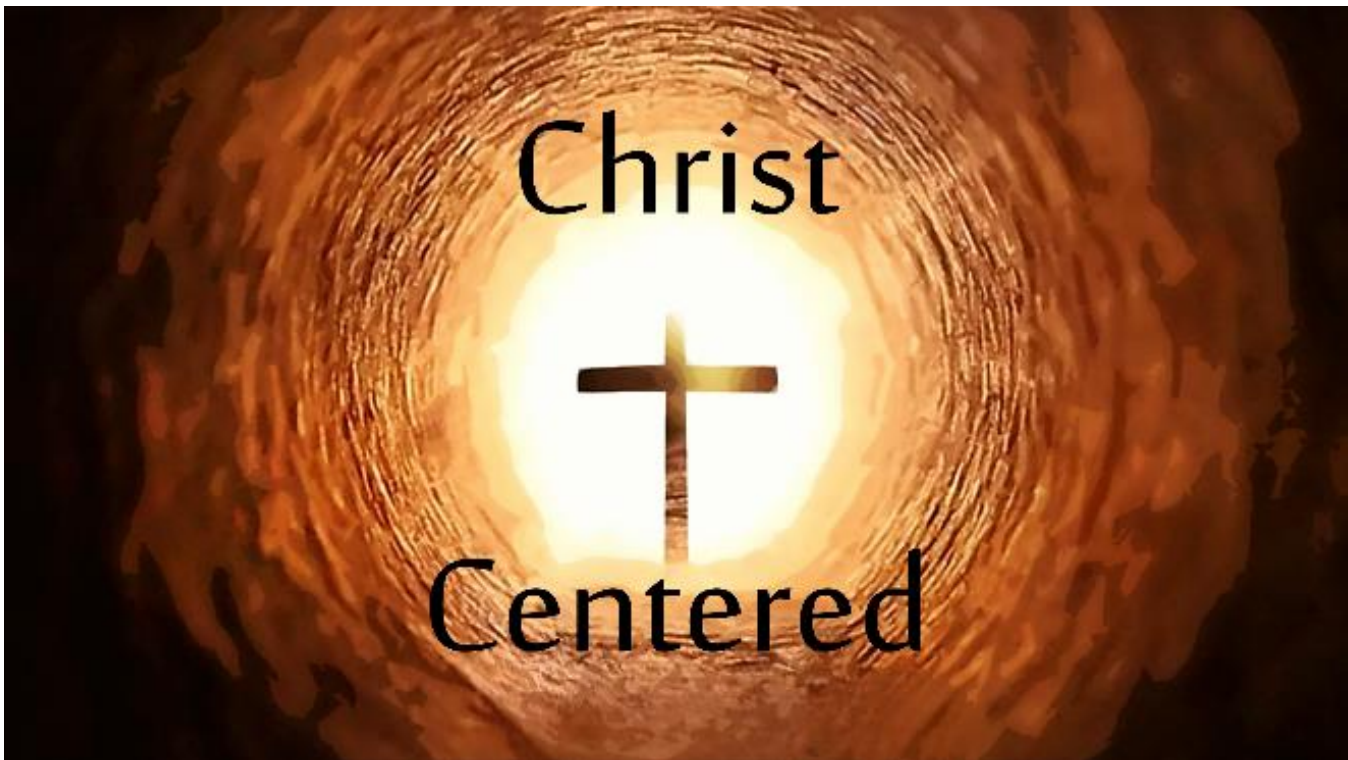
I was hoping that you would spend some time allowing the Holy Spirit to reorient you so that you would better approach God, His Scripture, and your Christian life with a Christ-centered, rather than man-centered mindset. When we examine the passage that I read

and am about to reread with a completely Christ-centered focus, we see it for what it is... Jesus, our Lord and Savior, guaranteeing us that He will be with us always even to the end of the age.



John 15:1–11, 1“I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. 2Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit. 3You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. 4Remain in Me, and I in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit of itself but must remain in the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in Me. 5I am the vine, you are the branches; the one who remains in Me, and I in him bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. 6If anyone does not

remain in Me, he is thrown away like a branch and dries up; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned. 7If you remain in Me, and My words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples. 9Just as the Father has loved Me, I also have loved you; remain in My love. 10If you keep My commandments, you will remain in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and remain in His love. 11These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full.



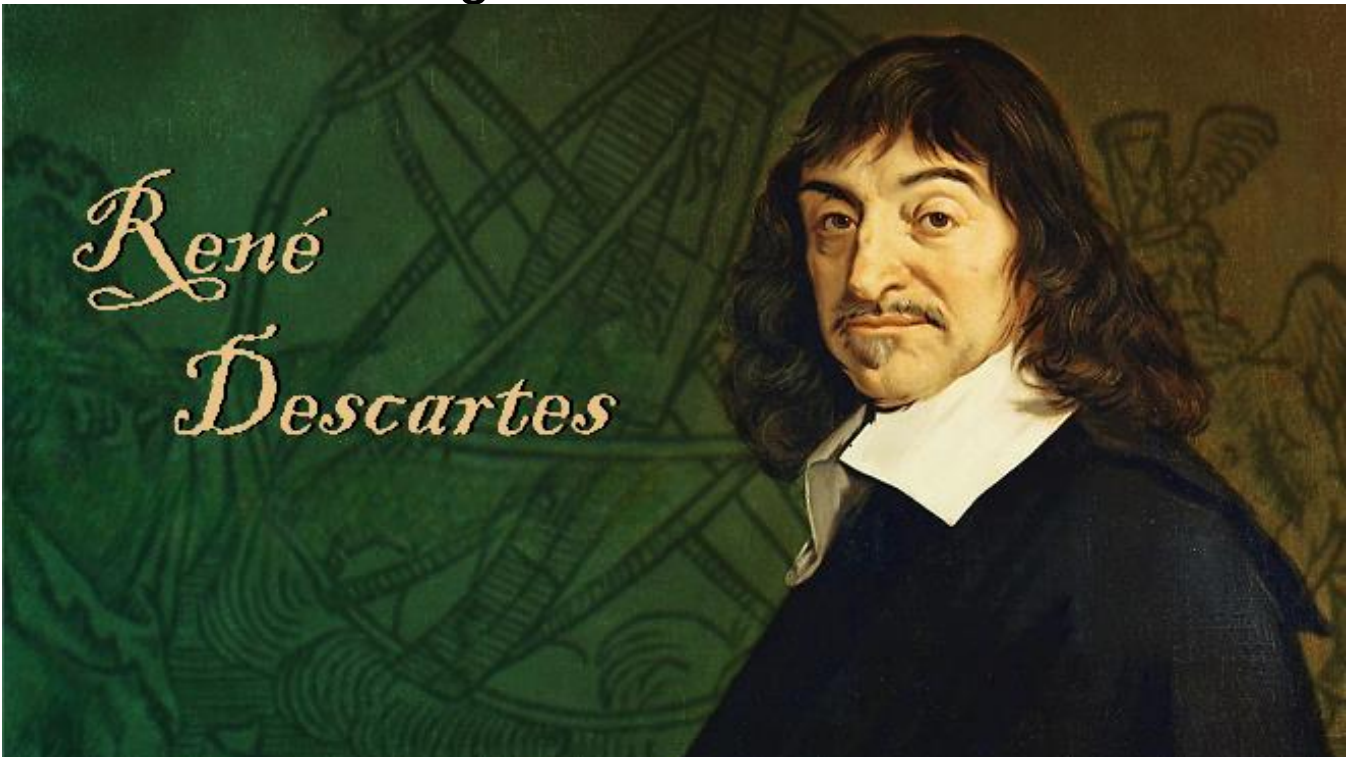
It changes the entire feeling, flow, and meaning, when we are oriented to a Christ-centered, rather than man-centered approach to the passage.

In that, we come upon an interesting and extremely useful reality that we can use as an easy litmus test for discerning man's ideas from God's Truth. God is so good to us... He has not left us without resources to aid our faith, to help us in our search for what is Truth, which is our quest to know God. He has given us tools. This is one of the finest tools in the entire chest and it is also one that the majority of Christians either don't know, or they don't use.



One of the deeper questions that I get often, is one that I was asked again a couple of days ago, it is "How can

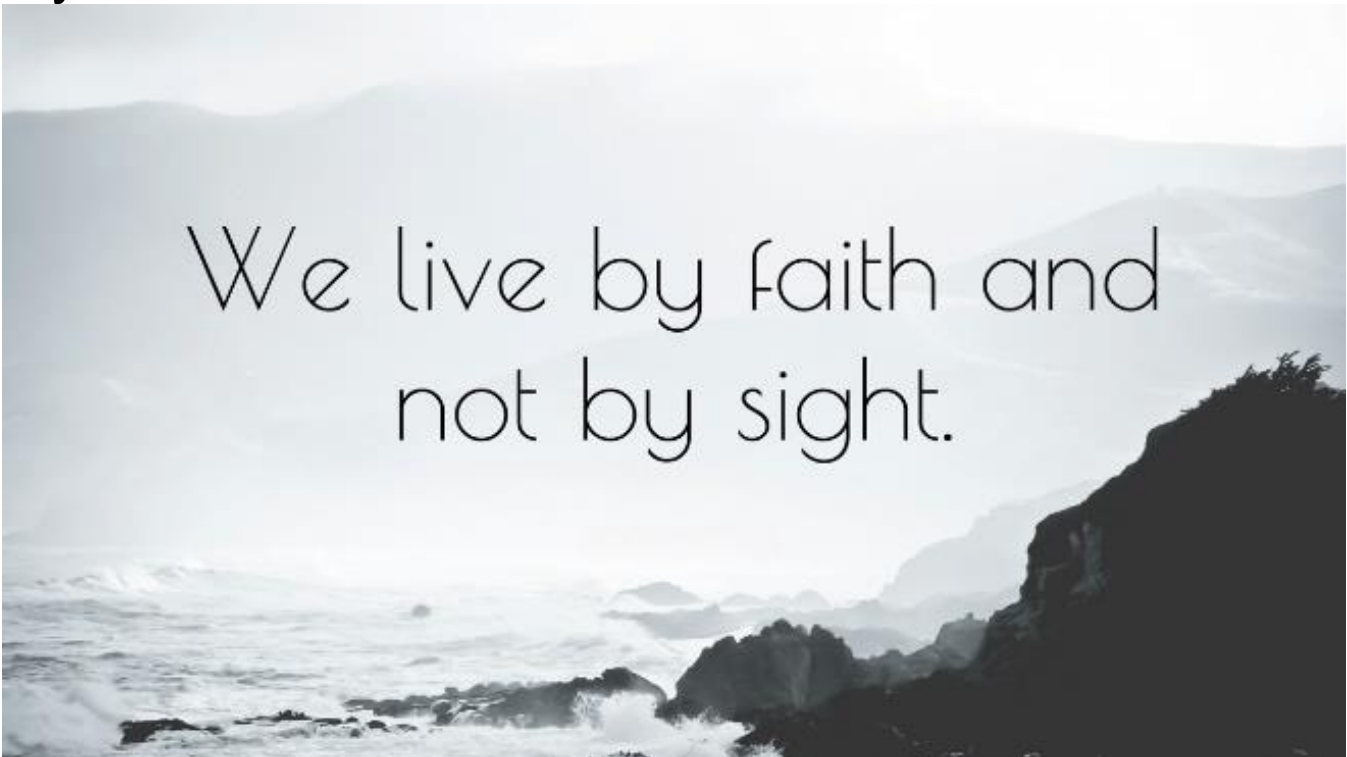
I know that my faith is right?" People who ask that question understand that faith, by definition, requires faith. They get that, but they want assurances that their faith is correct. Given the vast array of different ideas, faiths, and beliefs, they are hoping for some bit of evidence to distinguish between their faith and the faith of those who disagree.



The question goes all the way to the very heart of faith - to epistemology itself. Epistemology from the Greek means the study of what we can stand upon. It is the study of knowledge itself, what is knowable, and therefore the study of existence. René Descartes famously wrote, "Cogito, ergo sum" ("I think, therefore I am"). His contention was that since he was thinking there had to be a thinker. How can we know that

Descartes was right? How can we tell whether this is all a dream world, or the matrix, or some other deceptive unreality as opposed to a physical reality and what about a metaphysical reality beyond?

More to the point, how can we tell if God exists and if He does exist, that He cares, and that if He cares, what that means for you and me? How can we be sure that the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, but not the Catholic Catechism, or the Book of Mormon, is God's Word? Bottom line... How can I discern Truth so that my faith is less faith and more fact?



While God is certainly asking us to have faith, He's not asking us to have irrational faith. On the contrary, He's asking us to have our faith built stronger and stronger

in Him over time through actual interaction with Him. As I said, He's given us tools. Tools that include the Bible, which frankly, is the most remarkable document on planet earth, bar none. He has given us an actual experiential relationship with Him, through the power of His Holy Spirit, which includes an emotional, as well as an intellectual, connectedness with Him.

What I'm on about today is a rational proof of correct belief and so, by extension, an extremely useful tool in correcting and validating faith.



THE GROUP PHOTO

This passage brings to light that greatest of all natural tools... it is the simple fact that all people, in all places, at all times, are self-centered. I put up this picture of all of you taken a little while ago. When you realized what the picture was, the first thing that you did was to try to find yourself in the picture.

The first time you heard me read this passage, your first thought was about what the passage meant for you personally. You put yourself in the passage. I'm

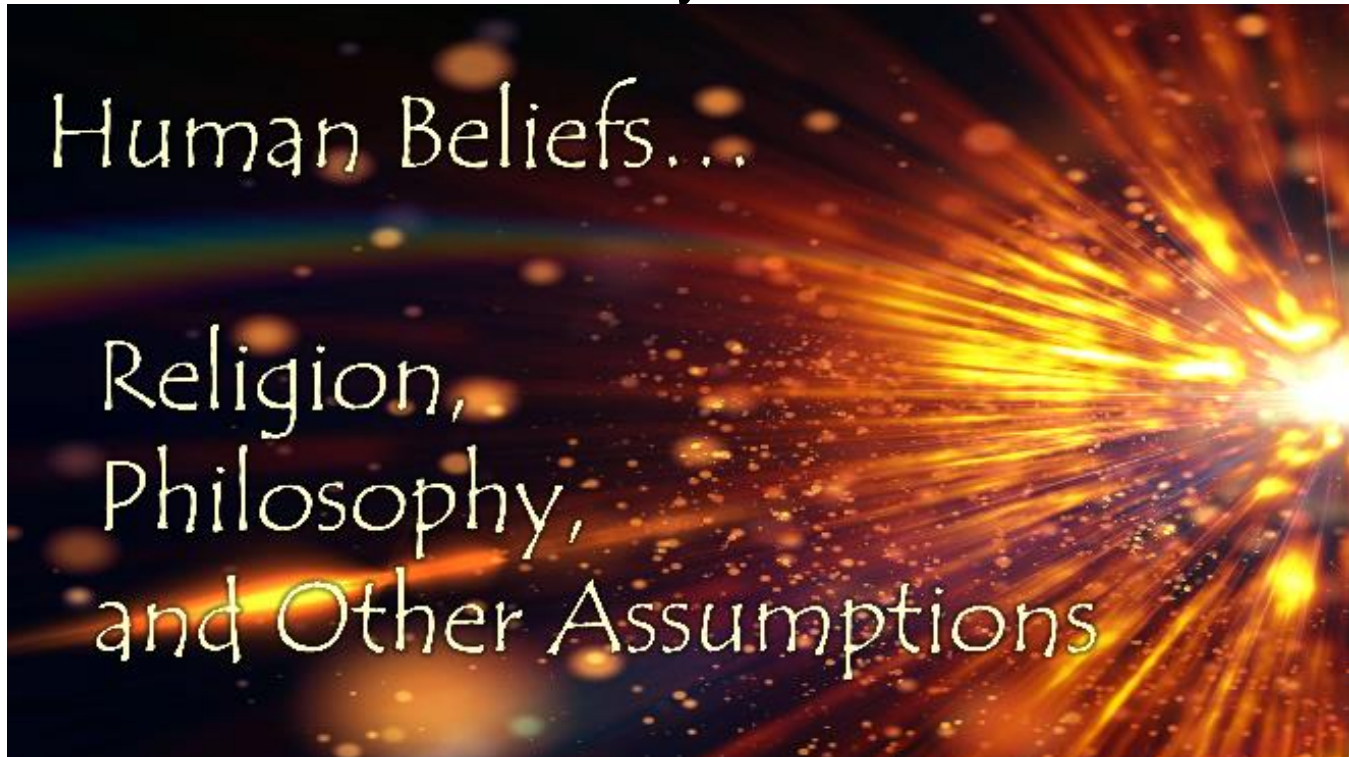
connected to the Branch, I should work on producing better fruit, I hope I don't get pruned too severely. Something like that.



Mariah and I weren't here last Sunday because the Rude Dude, Rudy the little man, our third grandchild, appeared early. He is an amazingly content baby - super easy - unbelievably so, really good. Yet the instant He becomes aware of any discomfort at all, He, in no uncertain terms, makes his problem everyone's problem. Too hot, too cold, too hungry, too full, and he will immediately demand action be taken on his behalf.

All humans are born this way and none of us ever change. We put on a veneer to make ourselves somewhat socially acceptable, but at our core, we

never change. Our first concern is ourselves. That's actually the reality that allows this tool that I'm talking about to work so flawlessly.



All people create systems that have man in the middle. Therefore, every religion from Zen Buddhism to Fundamentalist Mormonism and from Scientific Materialism to Atheistic Humanism and from Christian Nationalism to Islamic Jihadism, along with every other “ism” that should be a “was-im,” serves man.

Since I talked about that not too long ago, I won't say anymore, but the same phenomenon works at the micro-level of true Christian Faith. Whatever you think is a proper Christian tenent weigh it against this litmus test...

Does it have Christ at the center or mankind? Does it serve God, His glory, His purposes, His Kingdom built, or does it serve me? Examples are in order. We tell people to accept Christ and be Saved so that they can go to Heaven. Who is at the center of that notion? Who does that notion serve? In other words, who is in the spotlight and who is the beneficiary? Now we could do the same thing properly by telling people that they should accept Christ and be Saved because He paid it all even though they in no way deserve anything. That as a Saved person they can enter into Heaven now since Heaven is where God's Will, rather than their own will, is done. The focus is then Christ-centered, and God is the one served. Apply that to everything from your reading of the Bible to your attendance at church. Oftentimes it's merely reorienting reason, focus, and purpose of things.



Active, reliable, church participation is another great example. You can be like most churchgoers and think in terms of being spiritually fed, having vibrant church fellowship, an exciting youth program for your teens or an entertaining children's ministry for your younger people. In other words, you can be like the normal man-centered person and attend church for what you can get out of it, or you can attend in order to allow God to love His children through you in tangible acts of service.

Another example is divorce. Christians constantly say things like, "I know that God loves me and wants me to be happy." Or "it must be God's Will because it feels so right, how could it be wrong when it feels so right? Or

“God has given me permission to divorce because I’m so stressed in this marriage, I’m not able to produce fruit for Him, but once divorced, I’ll be able to serve Him wholeheartedly and produce good fruit for Him.

Let’s not kid ourselves, the only reason a person wants a divorce is for themselves. We’ll rationalize that it’s better for the children, or for the other person, or for God, or for whatever, but the bottom line is we divorce for us. Own that fact and then you’ll be in a position to assess whether or not divorce is the reasonable thing to do in your particular situation. Sometimes it is, but don’t pretend that it’s about God.

Not everything has to be a holy thing. Exercise, eating, and entertainment, are all necessary to your health and welfare and none of them is Christ-centered. That’s okay but know the difference. The Prosperity Gospel is clearly a teaching from the pits of man-made religion because whatever the veneer, however it’s justified, whatever the smoke and mirrors, it’s always man in the middle trying to get God to serve him.



The God Who literally speaks galaxies into existence by the Word of His power and by the breath of His mouth (Psalm 33:6), wants to show little ole you, through intimate relational unity, His unimpeachable faithfulness. The way He does that is by conforming your will to His, primarily through prayer as we will shortly see again.

We talked about it before and so I won't belabor the point, but I thought it was very interesting that a new study suggests that the primary reason that children raised in so called Christian homes abandon their faith as adults is the disconnect, they have personally experienced in unanswered prayer. The hypocrisy of adults, especially their parents, is the leading cause of

doubt, but the nail in the coffin of faith is unanswered prayers.

By the time they are adults these people have prayed countless times for particular results with extremely limited success. Is there really a loving God out there Who hears? Considering all of the unanswered prayers, probably not. To combat the problem, Christians say that God answers, it's just that sometimes His answer is no.

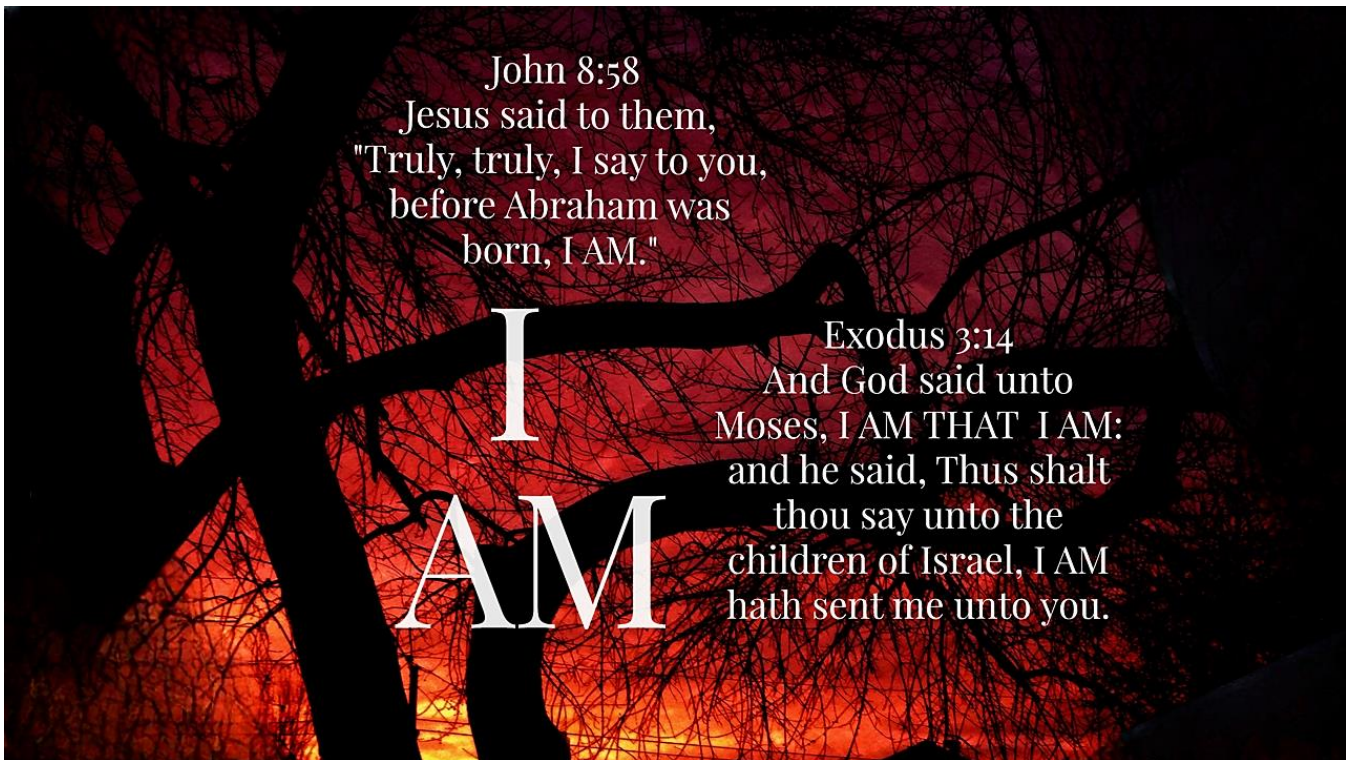
Well, my friends, if young people were taught the true Biblical purpose of prayer, then even if they reached the ripe old age of 110, they could honestly say that every prayer that they ever prayed was answered with a resounding and immediate YES!

True belief is about God, not me, and so the purpose of true prayer must also be about God, not me. When my prayer is, let my will be conformed to Your Will, and let Your Will be done in my life on this earth, just exactly as it is done in Heaven, then my faith never wavers regardless of the physical results.

It's about trust - trust in the One Who sees all, knows all, understands all and works all to the good even

though it oftentimes doesn't seem so to us. You want a blind and simple faith that makes you feel better about yourself? It will be tested beyond the breaking point. At the breaking point, you'll either struggle to develop a deeper, truer faith, or your faith will be revealed as false. Far better to work diligently now to build a deeper, truer faith that will stand up to the test. That can only be done through conformity to Him.

Resist the subtle self-serving rationalizing of your ideas as being His Truth. Genuinely examine whether a belief, a doctrine, or a course of action, is Christ-centered and serves to advance God's perfect Will or whether it is covered with human fingerprints. That's the difference between Christianity and religion. That's how you know that a thing is God's Truth as opposed to man's ideas.



We talked about Jesus' seventh, and final, formal "I AM" statement - technically statements because it's a double here in verse 1 and again in verse 5. There is no real difference between "I AM the true vine," which means "I AM the true Israel of God," and His previous declarations of divinity coupled with a predicate. He boldly claimed, "I AM the Bread of Life," "I AM the Light of the World," "I AM the Door," "I AM the Good Shepherd," "I AM the Resurrection and the Life," and "I AM the Way, and the Truth, and the Life" (John 6:35, 8:12, 10:7, 10:11, 11:25, 14:6). They each have their nuance, but they all mean that God Himself came down to earth and took on flesh as one of us in order to love us in the most amazing way conceivable.

The Word of God took on humanity, so that He could take on our sins - the totality of our rebellion against God - and He paid for it all with His perfect, holy, life.

There is only one Way to right relationship with Almighty God and that is by means of His provision in Christ Jesus the Lord and only Savior. If you find that offensive it is because your will is not aligned to His Will and your focus is still human-centered, rather than Christ-centered.



Jesus went on to give us a litmus test to give us encouragement and assurance. He said in these verses that it was impossible for anyone to produce fruit apart from connection in Him. Therefore, anyone producing fruit has confirmation that they are His, that


they are participants in building the Kingdom of God, and that they are eternally secure in Him.

Instead of a warning, it is a guarantee. Instead of focusing on a failure to produce fruit, focus on allowing God to use you to produce fruit and thereby confirming that you are in Christ.



How can I possibly arrive at the conclusion that Jesus was saying that those people who are in Him will be secure in Him when in verse 2 He said, “Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away”? Takes away? Takes away to where and for what purpose? Well, verse 6 of course, where Jesus said, “If anyone does not remain in Me, he is thrown away like a branch and dries up; and they gather them and throw them

into the fire, and they are burned.” For the Arminianist who believes that a genuine Christian can lose their Salvation, that clearly means that you can be fully integrated into the True Vine, in the True Body of Christ, “in Him” (Jesus), and fail to produce fruit. For such a complacent Christian branch, the Great Vinedresser, the Heavenly Father, will come and cut you off, throw you to the ground where you will wither and die, and then cast you into the eternal flames of perdition.



Humble yourselves before the Lord,
and he will lift you up.

- James 4:10 (NIV)

If, on the other hand, you're a “Once Saved, always saved,” eternal security type you will note that the underlying word translated as “takes away” can also mean, “lift up.” Jesus was saying that the person who is “in Him,” but is not producing fruit, will be “lifted up,”

not taken away, by the Vinedresser, so that they can produce good fruit.

Which is right? What did Jesus intend His analogy to mean? The first problem is there is a play on words that we miss in English. In verse 2 of the NASB translation we have “takes away” for the branch not producing and then we have “prunes” for the branch that does produce. He “prunes” it so that it will produce even better fruit. It is αἴρω (ī-rō) and καθαίρω (kăth-ī-rō). The basic meaning of the verb αἴρω is “to lift up.” That’s really it, but, as with nearly all words, it has a derived range of meanings. To lift something up is to simultaneously remove it from where it was and so, there is the sense of taking it away. Which meaning is appropriate, the primary meaning of lifting up, or the secondary meaning of taking away?



When translators choose a meaning, they use context to help. In the context of the illustration, we have a Vinedresser cultivating His Vine and we know from thousands of years of practical horticulture that Vinedressers cut off non-producing branches and trim back those that do produce in order to get them to produce more. Voilà, we go with “takes away.” But Jesus didn’t say that the branch was dead, just that it wasn’t producing. Do Vinedressers cut off living branches? Don’t vinedressers sometimes lift up and support a sagging branch to get it to produce? Well, we’re back to square one.

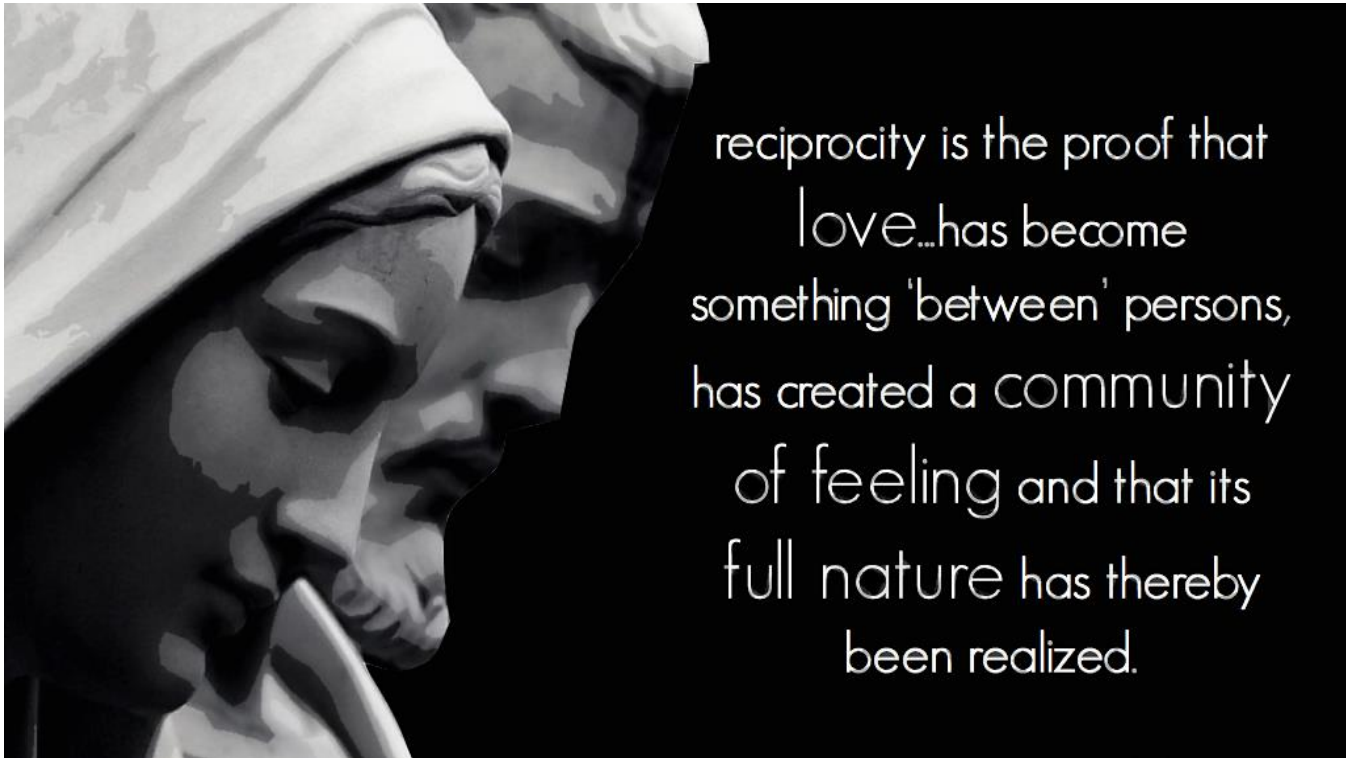
Here's the first real step in figuring this out. The word καθαίρω for pruning is the not the usual word for

pruning although it is a reasonable substitution for a farmer to trim back or prune plants including vine branches in order to improve production. The word αἶρω for “takes away,” is never, to my knowledge, used in a viticultural, horticultural, farmer, gardener, sense as it is here. It is a surprisingly unusual word for the word picture Jesus was presenting and so He very obviously chose these two words intentionally as a play on words, rather than because they were the correct words.

In the illustration, the word αἶρω would have initially been out of place and would have called attention to itself, until the use of its sister word καθαίρω and then it would have made sense. They would have been slightly confused and then said, oh, I see what You’ve done there Jesus - very clever!

Before we talk about how that word play changes things, we need to add the two most significant points of all. We’ve already touched on both, so this will be easy. The first one is the overall intention of Jesus in using this illustration. He was encouraging His guys who were being forced to go forward without Him physically leading them, not giving them a cryptic

Theology lesson about eternal security or loss of Salvation.



The second thing is the plain fact that this passage and the illustration it contains was never about individual Christians, but about the Body of Christ as a whole. That is made crystal clear in verse 1. Jesus is the Vine, the Heavenly Father is the Vinedresser, and the church universal are the branches.

It is only our intense self-focus that causes us to erroneously apply these verses to individuals. With all of that in mind, what Jesus was trying to illustrate was that going forward after His sacrificial death there would be a new dynamic - a kind of reciprocal interaction between God and man.

God would produce fruit at the behest, Will and pleasure of the Father through Christ Jesus by way of human beings connected to Christ by the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit. God would not produce fruit on earth apart from His children and His children would not produce fruit apart from connection to Him.

We Christians are to be vessels through whom Almighty God works in this physical reality to build His Kingdom which accomplishes His Will done on earth, and which ultimately brings Him glory.

Notice the subject of the verbs is the Vinedresser, not the branches. This has everything to do with the Father ensuring that His Kingdom is built physically through His Son as the active Agent and now, finally, after thousands of years of progressive revelation, The final revelation is His Son now able to work physically directly through His church. Through His disciples. Through those who are connected to Him.

What we seem to miss is the simple fact that a branch never produces fruit apart from the vine, but neither does the vine produce fruit apart from its branches. The vine and the branches are one plant. The vine

produces fruit through its branches and the vinedresser ensures that the production is the best it can be.



In the ancient world the quality of the fruit was a direct reflection on the vinedresser. The point is that if the vinedresser is responsible for cultivating the branches and the vine is responsible for nourishing the branches then both the vinedresser and the vine are glorified by good fruit. Likewise, if the fruit is subpar, it is the vinedresser and the vine as much as it is the branches. Is the Vinedresser and the vine unable to produce fruit through the branches?

The entire thrust here is that God will do everything in His power to ensure a good crop and the only thing that the branches must do is remain. The fruit that a

branch remaining in the vine produces is ultimately the responsibility of the vinedresser.

The Vinedresser is faithful, and He has always maintained His true Vine and His true branches just as He has for the last 20 centuries with the church. It's easy to be dismissive of the church as being as big a failure as the ancient Jewish nation, but the Truth is that God has transformed the world through the church.



Absent the Judeo-Christian ethic, there is no freedom, there are no human rights, there is no sympathy, empathy, or compassion, and most importantly there are no Saved souls.

Sure, aspects of what has passed for Christianity over the last two millennia is a nightmare, but on the other hand, millions upon millions of human souls have been eternally Saved. I have no idea what percentage of those people claiming to be the Body of Christ actually are “in Him,” as the Body of Christ, but there are 2.3 billion of us making that claim today. It started with 11 dudes in an upper room.

Verse 3 confirms what I’ve been trying to convey... “You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you.” Clean is the same basic word as prune. Because we believe the Word, the Logos, the Message, which is the Gospel of Jesus Christ, we are once and for all, forever clean in Him.

And that’s the key. Verse 4, Jesus commanded “Remain in Me.” What interesting is that the command is the verb remain and it is just as applicable to Jesus. In other words, we only have the one verb here and it is in the imperative meaning that it is an order, and the full command is “Remain in Me, and I in you.” Jesus wasn’t saying if you remain in Me then I will also likewise remain in you, He was saying remaining in Him was identical to Him remaining in us. You cannot be “in Him,” and He not being simultaneously in you -

there is only one plant! If you're connected to it, it is connected to you - that's the encouraging guarantee from the Lord. Be connected - remain - abide.

Jesus then reiterated and clarified and as He did, He mentioned that there is no church that is not connected to Him. That's the meaning of verse 6. Not that individual Christians will be hacked off for their inadequate performance and cast into the Lake of Fire, but that it is impossible to be the church apart from connection with its Head.

Verse 7 is vital. The way it all works is through prayer. Our prayer that His Will be done is the way that the Holy Spirit helps conform our will to His. When we are on the same sheet of music, trusting in the plans and purposes of God then He is glorified, and we produce fruit. Well, what is the fruit? After all of this talk about fruit what is it?

Many people have many ideas and most of them are subsumed in the real answer which we find right here in the Passage. The fruit is the Agapê love of Almighty God shared through His church. God touches human beings through human beings yielding to His ministry through them.

Verse 10, “If you keep My commandments, you will remain in My love.” What did Christ command in the last chapter? Well, if you have a short memory fear not because He will repeat His commandment in two more verses.

Now, my friends, knowing with every fiber of your being that you are in the middle of God’s perfect Will is pure, unadulterated, Biblical Fruit of the Holy Spirit, joy. Pray for His Will in everything trust that He knows what He’s doing, allow Him to use you to love others both inside and outside of the church and you will have unspeakable joy. That’s verse 11.