

## **Proving to Be His Disciples – John 15:1-17**

### Introduction

Please turn with me to the Gospel of John..... the book of John, chapter 15, verse 1

Assurance – everyone needs it from time-to-time. A small child needs to be assured all is well when hearing strange noises in the night, the teenager daughter needs to be assured by her father she is pretty, the young man needs to be sure assured he is pursuing the right career path, the young parents need to be assured they are raising their children correctly, and so on throughout all stages of life.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we also need regular assurance as well. We are weak and needy, our spiritual eyes are dim, and at times we can be overwhelmed by this world, its system, and its circumstances, by our aging bodies, and by the sadness of this life, a life filled with so many things that really ought not to be. Often when our faith is weak, we ask “Lord, are you really there?” and am “I really yours”. We know the end of the story but at times ask ourselves “What will become of me?” in this life. We look at our Christian life and wonder why we have not advanced in the faith further. It seems at times and for periods we are still stuck in neutral trying to finally learn the latest lesson the Lord has for us. Have you been there? Are you there today?

Now as we look into the final chapters of John, we find Jesus’ disciples in a similar situation. They needed much assurance for things were changing rapidly. The vast crowds along with many of the other disciples had ceased to follow Jesus, disillusioned by a Messiah who would not do their bidding and whose teaching was difficult and unacceptable. The Jewish religious leaders, having been confronted by the Lord repeatedly, had set out to kill Him. They had created a Gestapo-like environment that searched for Him and directed that Jesus’ whereabouts be reported immediately. And Jesus, in the disciple’s eyes, was not acting like “Messiah” either as he increasingly spoke of His departure and death. And although the twelve disciples remained, they were increasingly uneasy, fearful, confused, sorrowful, slow to understand, unbelieving, losing their joy, and as Matthew Henry said, “were tempted to return to Moses and to the Law.”

Now in the midst of this scene we see Jesus in John 13:1, “Now before the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end.” And He proceeds to wash the disciples’ feet thereby demonstrating to them and teaching them to love and serve One another as He their Lord and Teacher had done for them. He also tells them they are all clean except for one of them who would soon betray them. And then we see yet another defection from this small band (13:30) as Judas Iscariot vanishes into the physical and spiritual night to reveal his true character and allegiance.

Jesus gives them a new commandment to love one another and patiently answers their dull questions in a way that imparts even further spiritual truth. He reassures them that although He is going away, He is going away to prepare a place for them and promises to

send the Holy Spirit who will bring to remembrance all that He had taught them and in doing so, give them peace, hope, and joy. He further explains “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.”

One verse prior to John 15 we obtain the last piece of context. Jesus says “Rise, let us go from here”. He and his disciples are beginning to leave the Upper Room or are already walking through the dark night on their way to the garden of Gethsemane and then, for the Lord alone onto Calvary. Events were in motion toward the cross. It and the resurrection to follow were the culmination of the Father’s plan, a plan the Son followed in perfect obedience.

This is the setting as we peer into the midst of Jesus’ last and intimate instructions to His disciples before the cross. And every word of this instruction they would need for the days ahead. Instruction we especially need today as our own questions of life spring from our hearts and we seek to be reassured. Let’s pray....

We pick up at John 15:1 with the Lord’s words to the eleven. {15:1-11} *“I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch of mine that does not bear fruit He takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.” Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in Me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be My disciples. As the Father has loved Me, so have I 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. These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.”*

### A Vineyard (15:1-2)

In verse 1, we see the last of the last of seven “I Am” statements made by Jesus. And he presents it within an analogy – an analogy that portrays with profound clarity, the relationship between the Father, the Son, and God’s people. It involves a vinedresser and a vine with its connecting branches.

### *A Familiar Picture*

Now the language and imagery of vines and vineyards and fruit is not uncommon to the Scriptures. Vines and vineyards were often used to symbolize Israel and in most cases the image was always negative and pointed to the nation’s degeneration. In Isaiah 5:1-7, the

prophet writes of the Lord and His vineyard, Israel, and that despite His doing all that was necessary for a rich harvest He finds only wild grapes suitable for nothing. As a result, He tore it down. In Jeremiah 2:21, God tells Judah, “*Yet I had planted you a noble vine, wholly of pure seed. How then have you turned degenerate and become a wild vine.*”

Jesus himself used this imagery a number of times up to this point; good fruit versus bad and the shriveling of the fig tree scene. In Matthew 21, during one of the many confrontations with the Jewish religious leaders, He gave a parable of the master who built a vineyard. Having leased it unto some tenants, he went away. When it was time for the harvest fruit, he sent servants to collect but the tenants killed them. The same was done to subsequent servants and at last was done to his son. The parable gave the story of Israel to this point and Jesus ended the exchange with the leaders with these words, “Therefore, I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits.

Israel, the vine brought out of Egypt, was unfruitful. And the prophecy of Isaiah 27:6 had not been fulfilled. It reads, “*In days to come Jacob shall take root, Israel shall blossom and put forth shoots and fill the whole world with fruit.*”

So in this vineyard, let’s look at who is involved:

#### *The Vine (15:1a)*

We first see the Son as the true vine – Jesus is the true vine, the authentic vine, the fulfillment of all promises, and ultimate reality. He is the vine that Israel was not and could not have been prior. He is not simply a vine but the only vine from which true life can be sourced. All others who have come before and after were false. As we have seen already, Israel was not this vine – they were only a symbol of the vine, not the true vine.

#### *The Vinedresser (15:1b)*

Next, we see the Father as the vinedresser or husbandman or the farmer or the gardener or the earth worker. He is the one who has invested in the resources, constructed the vineyard, and continues to provide its care for the purpose of producing healthy and abundant fruit.

#### *The Branches (15:2)*

Finally, we see branches associated with the vine; these are people - a mix of the fruitful branches, and the unfruitful ones. This, along with how the true fruit will be distinguished, is a key point of Jesus’ teaching in this passage.

Now as with any reading of a text containing an analogy or parable, remember not to read too much into it and its elements. Take the picture as whole and look at the simple message it is making. If we press it too hard, we can get into trouble and wrongly carry

the elements of the analogy into the rest of Scripture. The analogy is simply showing the Father, the Son, and the disciples to have the same relationship as do the vinedresser, the vine, and its branches. Look only at the relationship depicted among the Father, Son, and God's people. Do not get caught up in the Father being a vinedresser and Jesus as vine and build your knowledge of God upon it.

### The Activity of the Vineyard (15:2-11)

#### *Vinedresser's Care (15:2)*

Now there is activity in this vineyard. In verse 2 we see the diligent and careful activity of the vinedresser (the Father). It is twofold; one is to "take up" or remove the unfruitful branches. For if left in the vine, there can be disease, invading insects, and decay; all of which can impede the fruitful branches. The other activity is to carefully prune or "clean" the fruitful branches so even more fruit can be produced. Some branches grow too rapidly and need to be trimmed or cut back so they will not outgrow the rest of the branches and be exposed to strong winds which can damage and break them. Pruning is also needed for the "sucker shoots", those small branches which grow off the trunk which drain nutrients from the more fruitful branches. And sometimes it is necessary to even prune off some of the fruit so much more will be produced.

#### *Bearing or not Bearing Fruit (15:2-3, 5-6)*

Now you will notice that Jesus although using an analogy, is speaking plainly with His disciples (and us). It is not difficult to see how the branches refer to two types of people. There are fruitful people, those which are truly attached to the Vine, Jesus Christ and therefore, produce fruit. And there are unfruitful ones, who have only an outward and superficial attachment to Christ.

The unfruitful branches, those falsely attached, are simply taken and thrown away by the vinedresser and quickly wither. They are later gathered for burning. Such is the end for all who reject the Christ outwardly or even inwardly within their hearts while pretending to be attached to Him.

There has been some confusion over this text. Some think the taking away of the unfruitful branch refers to a lifting up of the branches in order to stimulate fruit production. However, this does not fit with the context and message of the passage. Jesus is clearly teaching that true attachment to the vine (Him) will produce fruit. Fruitless Christians are a contradiction. Also, the "take away" term means just that and is used in the same way in John 11 when Lazarus was raised... "take away" the stone.

Nor does this "take away" refer to a true Christian losing his or her salvation. We know this not to be true since it runs counter to numerous references in Scripture and also ignores the fact that the saving work of our Lord is effective and certain. Jesus said earlier in John 10 that no one could snatch them out of His hand. The interpretation also ignores the context of the passage. Judas had just left the room and entered into the

darkness. The Lord is showing us a case in point. Judas was a tragic example of someone who had tasted and seen that the Lord was good. He had experienced and witnessed all that the other eleven had seen and heard and gave every appearance that he too was a follower of Jesus Christ. Even the disciples were misled and at this moment did not understand that Judas was the one who would lift his heel against the Christ. Judas never did belong to the Lord Jesus Christ. John would later write in 1 John 2:19, *“They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.”*

To the fruit bearing (the eleven), Jesus assures them in v3 as He did in 13:10 that they are already clean and only need regular cleansing and pruning. This cleansing has come and will continue to come by His word. God’s word and specifically the gospel cleanses us entirely at salvation and then repeatedly washes our feet as we walk around and pick up the defiling mud and muck of this world. Until our salvation is realized we will sin yet by His grace He cleanses us and sends us back out again. John would write in his first epistle, *“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”* (1 John 1:9). The Holy Spirit working in us brings us to remembrance His Word and convicts us, we acknowledge the truth of the situation, confess and repent of it, and start all over again. And that, is a good thing!

The Father then prunes us through trials, showing us our weaknesses, removing things from our lives that sap or limit our spiritual life. Have you been pruned? Are you being pruned with the trials of life right now? As we face trials we must not be surprised or bewildered or think there must be some mistake. No, our Lord is carefully pruning us so that we might be even more fruitful and become the people He wants us to be. And as a good vinedresser will do...more fruit, more pruning. This is how the process of our Christian life works.

#### *Giving Life (15:4-6)*

In verses 4-6 we see the critical activity of the Vine which is to give life. It is central to the fruit production of the vineyard. Apart from the Vine (the Lord Jesus Christ), no fruit will be produced in the branches. Oh, the Vine will still be the Vine. The attachment or non-attachment of the branches make it no more or less of a vine. The quality and quantity of life emanating from Jesus Christ is not diminished to any degree by what we do. His teaching here is for us; *“Apart from Me you can do nothing”*. We must stay attached or abide in Him

#### *Abiding in the Vine (15:4-6, 7a, 9-10)*

##### *“Abide in Me” (15:4, 9-10)*

Jesus says in v.4 to *“Abide in Me, and I in you.”* The word abide is one we do not use or hear much of in our language and culture. It means “to remain” or “to continue” or “to endure” or “to stay fixed”. Abiding in Christ refers to keeping in fellowship with Him in a permanent and lasting way. “OK, remain, stay constant, stay fixed in Christ....what

does this mean?" He explains in verses 9-10, "abide in My love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in My love". Abiding in Christ is to love Him and we love Him by keeping His commandments. Abiding in Him and His love is not merely an emotion, a feeling (although these things follow) but an act of the will to obey His commands! As Pastor Russ often says, "believe in an obeying way". Jesus gives the example in verse 10, "just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love", we are to keep Jesus' commands and abide in His love.

So we abide in Christ when we obey His Word and all that comes with it; we pray, we confess our sins, we worship together and fellowship with one another, etc.

"And I in you" (15:4, 7a)

And the "I in you" part of v.4 we have already touched upon. He explains more in v.7, "*If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you*" Christ' word must actively dwell in us. We cannot obey His commands if we do not know them and are not continually immersed in His word. So Jesus abiding in us is for His word to remain in us.

Now we know from the picture of the vine and the branches that a branch cannot survive at all much less produce fruit when it does not remain in the vine. If you have ever trimmed a bush or tree, you will notice how quickly the unattached branch will shrivel and die. It has no life source – there are no nutrients flowing through the stem and to the leaves. {Playground example} The same is true for the believer in Christ. We must abide in Him by obeying Him and He in us by regularly taking in His Word.

Evidence of Abiding (15:5, 7-8, 11)

Now if we abide in Christ, the Vine, and He in us, there will be certain evidence.

Fruit (15:5) - The objective of the vinedresser's investment and labor is fruit. At the end of the day, there should be fruit. And it goes without saying, it must be good fruit. Who wants poor tasting, smelly, and rotting fruit?

But what is this fruit borne by our abiding in Christ? Jesus does not give a specific list in this passage. But it is first and foremost Christ-likeness. This is the vinedresser's aim for us; conformance to the image of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is pleasing to the Father and He wants those who bear His name to be the same.

Yet the Scriptures go further and explicitly mention several types of fruit produced in the life of a Christian. The most familiar is the fruit of the Spirit described in Galatians 5:22-23, "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control." These are the Spirit producing qualities in the life of a Christian. Are you seeing these characteristics being produced more and more in your life?

Philippians 1:11 speaks of us being “filled with fruit of righteousness to the glory and praise of God.” And Hebrews 12:11, in the context of God the Father’s discipline, says “later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.” Ephesians 5:8-9 says “*for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true).*”

Philippians 4:17 speaks of the fruit of ministering to the saints in giving and meeting basic earthly needs.

There is also the “fruit of lips that acknowledge His name” and give a continual offering of praise to God. {Heb 13:15}

Earlier in John 4:36, Jesus teaches of the harvest of souls – the fruit of evangelism. The fields are white for harvest; there is sowing and reaping going on. Leading a lost sinner to Christ is fruit. Paul writes to the church in Rome in this regard (Rom 1:13) “*that I may reap some harvest among you.*”

Well, how much fruit should we bear? Jesus says “much” fruit. The amount of fruit borne in us is proportional to our faithfulness and obedience in appropriating the resources He has given us. Are you getting lost in Christ or are you being distracted and entangled by the world and your own desires which keep you from bearing much fruit? Abide in Christ continually and you will bear much fruit. Remember, apart from Him you can do nothing.

Effective Prayer (15:7) – Abiding in Christ also gains and maintains access to the Father. Our prayers are effective and we can be confident He hears. However, there are conditions. One is that our prayers must be lifted up in His name and be consistent with His will and His person. Also we must abide in Him. And His word must abide in us. We must be walking according to His word. James 4:3 tells us we “*do not receive*” because we ask wrongly. Are you asking rightly? If so, you can be assured your prayers are heard and are effective.

Glorifying the Father (15:8a) Bearing spiritual fruit by abiding in the vine (Christ) fulfills our highest calling and that is to glorify God for which there is no more worthy activity.

Authentication (15:8b) – Abiding in Christ cannot help but bear fruit, much fruit. And this fruit proves we are Christ’s disciples. Do you need assurance that you are His? Jesus said you shall know them by their fruit. Look for the fruit in your life.

Joy (15:11) - And abiding in Christ brings joy – a joy that cannot be permanently experienced by any substitute. Become unattached from the vine and there will be no real and lasting joy. For those of us who have come to Christ, we know all too well. So do not go back there in areas of your life – real joy does not exist there. Abide in Christ and therefore in His joy.

Is there joy in your day-to-day life? If not, are you in obedience to Him?

### Friendship with Jesus (15:12-17)

There is one other evidence or outcome of abiding in Christ. Jesus goes on to say in 15:12-17; *“This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you. You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in My name, He may give it to you. These things I command you, so that you will love one another.”*

As believers we are not only joined with Christ but we enjoy intimate communion and fellowship with Him when we abide in Him and His Word abides in us and controls us. The level of fellowship is one where He calls us friend. This friendship is characterized by:

It’s Obedience (15:12, 14) – Again, true abiding in Him means we obey His commands and specifically in 15:12 that we love one another.

It’s Radical Extent (15:13) – The extent of this love is total in v.13. Jesus was about to demonstrate the extent of His love for the disciples and us on Calvary’s cross. And some of the disciples would give their lives in coming years in proclaiming the gospel. Although few if any of us will have to physically die for one another in this life, this is what the Lord calls us to do if required. However, we are all in positions in our lives where we can and must prefer others around us. Given our natural bent towards selfishness, dying might be easier after all!

It’s Breathtaking Privilege (15:14-15) – If we abide in Him and believe Him in an obeying way, He calls us “friend”. The term “friend” refers to “a friend at court”, one that is part of the inner court around the king. A king’s friend is close enough to the king to know the king’s secrets but also subject to him and obligated to obey his every command. And such are we; friends and servants to the “King”.

Now it might be easy to gloss over this verse but let us stop for a minute. The Lord of the universe, Creator and Maker of all things, the One who holds all things together by the Word of His power, the One who’s appearance in Revelation 1:17 caused the Apostle John to fall at His feet as a dead man, and One utterly rejected and rebelled against by the very people He made, foul and stiff necked sinners calls us “Friend”? He had every right to pour down every last ounce of His holy wrath upon us. Instead the Son would go to the cross the next day and take that very wrath upon Himself. Now OK.... would it not been more than enough for Him to save us and call us slave or servant and show us some mercy? Would it not have been enough to save us and leave us near or by the door of the palace, perhaps getting a glimpse of the King from time to time? If He had stopped there, would we not have had enough reason to praise Him for eternity? But no, the Master also



calls us “friend” beckoning us to come close and tell us what He is doing. We have been given His Word and His Spirit to indwell us. And we are called to enjoy the same relationship with Jesus as He has with the Father. “O How Deep the Father’s Love is for us, how vast beyond all measure!”

Do you remember when Jesus Christ came for you and called you friend? I hope you have never recovered from it. I pray this gospel never becomes blasé’ and stale to you. If it has, acknowledge it, repent of it, and start over. Drink in the glory of such a wonderful truth.

It’s Initiation and Purpose (15:16-17) – Now lest the disciples begin thinking that what Christ produces in them is their own doing, He tells them clearly that He chose them and they played no role whatsoever in choosing Him. He sought them fully and appointed them or set them apart for service. And in that service we are to “go and bear fruit”. A summons from the King!

Notice we are to bear fruit and not produce it. Our connection to the life giving vine, Jesus Christ will bring it about. All good things come from Him. Note that our fruit must abide – it must last. This proves we belong to Him. Also, this refers to our fruit lasting beyond our lives and for it to multiply. The fruit borne by us can have impact for generations.

The Lord did not just save us to keep us from hell and to give us heaven. He did not just save us to give us an earthly life of joy and peace. He saved us to accomplish things in this life, to grow in Him, and to bear the types of fruit mentioned earlier. Now you might say “I cannot do this in my own power and strength!” And you are correct. However, He has given us the power (His power). He has given us His Word which imparts the knowledge of Him to us and as a result we have all that pertains to life and godliness. He has given us His Spirit to teach us, to gift us, to guide us, and to convict us when we “blow it”. He has given us each other so that we might help each other along, sharpening one another, one redeemed servant helping another. So do not forsake assembling together. We need one another to live out our lives before one another which brings encouragement, a learning from one another, a suffering together, and a rejoicing together. It is the Lord’s will and design for us in this life. So although the Lord initiated the choosing and equipped us with all spiritual resources needed, we have a responsibility to use the empowerment He has given us to bear fruit.

Jesus’ words in John 15 are not the first time we hear them from God. In fact, we can turn all the way back to Genesis 1:22, 28 to see it. Do you recall what the first command and blessing God gives first to all living creatures and then to man? He tells Adam, “*Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.*” Yes, the immediate context is man’s primary purpose in creation. But in what are we to be fruitful? With what is good, in what God deems to be good. So we are to be fruitful in redemption as well. We are a new creation, set apart for His will and purposes, to be those holy vessels the New Testament describes.

God's will for us is to be fruitful, bearing fruit that will endure to the end. And what is our role in all of this? We are to obey His commands and not the least being "that you will love one another" in v.17. By His grace and His Spirit working in and through us, we will bear fruit. It is certain there will be evidence in our lives of which will last until we go home to be with Him. His purposes are sure – what the Lord sets out to do, He will do it. If these words are resonating in your hearts and they increase a desire in you to obey, then praise Him. You have full assurance that you are His.

### Closing Thoughts

Let's end our time together with these closing thoughts:

- 1) God's will for His people is to produce spiritual fruit – baskets of it to overflowing!
- 2) True believers of Jesus Christ will produce fruit and will abide in Him to the end – do not be deceived
- 3) Godly fruit can only be borne by us if we abide in Christ – obey His commandments and let His Word dwell richly in you
- 4) The Father continually "prunes" His people so they will be even more fruitful. At times, it will be painful but it is OK – our Father is the perfect vinedresser.
- 5) Do you see good and godly fruit in your life? Are you abiding in the true vine, the Lord Jesus Christ?

So a simple picture.....one of a vineyard with many branches attached to the life giving Vine, blown by the winds of this life's storms but holding on. Branches that want to be like the Vine, Jesus Christ. And they will if they remain in Him and subject themselves to the careful and skillful pruning of the Father. Look around at one another.....

This is who we are, branches completely dependent upon the Vine, Jesus Christ, the King of kings and Lord of lords who calls us "friend". It is a beautiful picture – one that if we embrace it, gives us ultimate assurance and proves we are His disciples.

Let's pray....