

John 15:1-17

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[0:00] That's John chapter 15, verses 1 through 17. I am the vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me 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.

[1:07] These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. 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. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Well, good morning.

It's good to see so many of you, even on the screen today. And I just want to welcome you. My name is David Helm, one of the pastors here at Christ Church.

[2:11] And we are continuing in our series through the Gospel of John. And just a prayer with me this morning. Our Heavenly Father, as we now look at your word, we pray that we would not only have understanding, but that we would have the ability and the heart to live under all that we do understand.

We pray this for the strengthening of our own church, for the welfare of your name, in whom we pray, amen. Well, it was the Roman philosopher, Sextus, who once said, always toward absent lovers, loves tide, stronger grows.

Centuries later, it would be another poet by the name of Thomas Haynes Bailey, who would put it more memorably, simply this way. Absence makes the heart grow fonder.

I don't know what's happening with you in the midst of COVID, but there is certainly a plethora, a ubiquitous nature of relational absence.

What are these writers getting at? Absence makes the heart grow fonder. It seems to me that they're trying to indicate that one's love for another, one's affections, one's feelings that one has toward another, can in fact increase in a season of absence.

[3:54] And I suppose then we would all take heart over these last few months. But full disclosure, absence does not always make the heart grow fonder, does it?

There are risks involved in not being in the presence of those that you love. And in this season, they have been muted risks, underserved risks in regard to the health of the church and the isolation that we have all been under.

It is simply this. The departing from the presence of one that you love can actually lead to a parting of ways.

There can be an increase of affection, but it's just as likely that you're at the risk of having those affections fade away.

You can have feelings for someone, but when separated from them, find all those feelings falling away.

[5 : 10] Now, this is the danger of the hour in which we presently live.

It seems to me that as Jesus was on the cusp of departure, let's call it the threshold of his impending absence, this theme of one's heartstrings remaining strong was on his mind.

It appears that his great concern was that while he was leaving the world, it might be an impetus for the disciples' love of him to fade away.

We know this because of what he's going to say, and I encourage you to look at your Bible right after the words of our text in our chapter. What does he say in chapter 16 in verse 1?

I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away. So the words of our text this morning come as his plan to hold those who would otherwise fall away given his departure from this earth.

[6 : 31] There's a danger in the air on the eve of his betrayal and on the day of his crucifixion. Let me put it to you as simply as I can.

What was their concern on that night? Their concern was him leaving. But what was his concern?

His concern was in light of that, whether or not they would be remaining. This is the simplest translation of that word abide, which appears in our reading today no fewer than 11 times.

You could simply read the text as through the lens of what it is to remain in the faith while he is absent from us in the world.

And so what we should expect then in these 17 verses is to see, in a sense, Jesus' plan, his plan for those who would otherwise fall away once he was taken from this earth.

[7 : 45] This is his remedy. You want to know what his remedy for your life is now in light of his presence in heaven? This is his remedy.

And it is so important. It is so important. As your pastor, I am week by week only increasing in the conviction that an extended season of life outside of the visible presence of one another does not necessarily pull us further together, but indeed for some it can be an impetus toward a gradual decline, a love for God's people fading, a love for Jesus as the result of that, and an exiting of the faith altogether.

Think of it in regard to the studies they do in sociology. Children who grow up in the church under the weekly hearing of the word of God and being brought into the physical presence of the family of God, when finding themselves absent from that condition, often find their own affection for Christ fading and their life working itself away.

So what does Jesus do? What is this plan that would be concerned with our ability to remain until he returns?

Look at it clearly. There's an analogy given, and then the analogy is applied. The form that he uses by way of an argument to fix their minds on the importance of remaining in him after he's gone is in the form of an analogy.

[9 : 38] Verses 1-8, an analogy. Verses 9-15, that analogy is applied.

Now what is the analogy? Here it is in verses 1-3. He introduces the analogy. I am the true vine. My father is the vine dresser.

Every branch in me 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.

It's the analogy taken from the agrarian field. It's an analogy from the field. You've got a vine.

You've got a vine dresser. And you have branches that are fruit-bearing branches. Now, why this word picture?

[10 : 41] Of all the things that Jesus could bring forward on the night of his departure from this earth, why root himself, pun intended, in this field of a vine and a vine dresser and a branch?

I think for those of you who are not familiar with the completeness of the Scriptures, it would be good just to know today that often God is referred to in the Scriptures as a vine dresser, as a farmer.

This is no more clearly seen in this respect than in Psalm 80, where you actually read the psalmist writing in verse 8 and 9.

You brought, that is you, God, brought a vine out of Egypt. You drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it.

It took deep root and filled the land. The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches. It sent out its branches to the sea and its shoots to the river.

[12:00] So God is imaged analogously like a vine dresser. And you'll find the same thing then in regard to Israel being a vine.

Israel being the vine. You can think of Hosea in chapter 10 and verse 1, where you'll see Israel was a luxuriant vine.

And the branches then would have been completely all the descendants of Israel as God's family. Now what's interesting then is he draws upon this Old Testament image of God and of Israel.

But notice, in our text he says, I am the true vine. Why this self-referential comparison?

This sense that Jesus wants to say he is true by implication, contrasting himself with Israel of old.

[13:21] He is the true vine. In other words, what he is saying here on the eve of his departure is that the relationship God had up until this point with Israel, he now has truly, completely with Jesus.

Jesus is God's luxuriant, faithful, true vine.

In other words, Jesus is God's son. Do you remember when they took Israel out of Egypt? That is when they called for the first time Israel was to be God's son.

Jesus is the one in whom all the promises of redemption are coming through him into the world.

And so this analogy then has been introduced in verses 1 to 3. In light of his departure, in light of his knowledge that they will need to remain, he says, remain, abide in me.

[14:37] I am what God plants in the world, the bearer of all his fruitful promises.

What's interesting there, though, is after introducing it, he goes immediately into talking to them about how important this will be in light of his absence.

I mean, look at verses 4 and 5. How important is remaining in faith to Jesus while he's gone? Well, it's this important, verses 4 and 5.

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 remains in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit. For apart from me, you can do nothing. Two times over. You cannot do anything in the world for the welfare of Christ or his kingdom without remaining in Jesus.

[15:48] He is that important. In other words, you have no life. We have no life as a church outside of the sap, which is our Savior.

And if we detach ourselves from Jesus, we are absolutely fruitless.

Having introduced it, having talked about the importance of it, you're now thinking he's going to begin to indicate, well, how do I do it? But he doesn't.

He moves immediately into an image of negative consequence for the church after his departure if they should leave him.

When the church leaves Jesus, verse 6 is the effect. If anyone does not abide in me, he is thrown away like a branch and withers, and the branches are gathered and thrown into the fire and burned.

[16:49] Obviously, and if we had time, it would be interesting for you later this afternoon to just go back and read Ezekiel 15, 1-7, where you are hearing a prophetic discourse on the uselessness of a vine to even fasten anything to the wall with, and the burning of the vine for its faithlessness to the Lord.

You could go to Isaiah 5, verses 1-8, and read there that God planted Israel as a vineyard, and he came looking for the fruit of justice and righteousness, but found it not, and therefore made all of the vineyard a wasteland.

And this is the image here. He is now saying, not only do I have a relationship with God that is like what Israel had in the Old Testament, vine to vine dresser, but I am distinct from Israel in that I have been faithful in all I have done.

And if anyone would be faithless, they will come under God's judgment. And notice then the introduction of the analogy, the importance of the analogy, an image if you don't keep to the analogy, and then this wonderful word of access for those who do.

Verses 7 and 8, If you abide in me, literally, if you remain in me, even when I'm not here, and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

[18 : 42] By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples. You see, this notion of the questions that the disciples had been asking, where are you going?

How do I know the way? In what measure will you make the Father manifest to us? He is saying, remain in me, even though I'm not with you.

Draw all your life source from me. And as you do that, you have access through me to your Father who is in heaven.

There's a word for Father's Day. Happy Father's Day, church, family. You have access to your heavenly Father in the sense of his absolute concern would be for whatever you would bring before him.

He cares for you in that intimate way because you have remained in Christ. The analogy, 1 through 8.

[19 : 56] What I found interesting this week as I was studying this was I got to the end of the analogy and I was longing for more answers to questions the analogy hadn't provided.

Well, first of all, how does one abide? He said nothing yet about how you remain. And what is the fruit that you are expecting and anticipating from the church while you're away?

And then I looked at verses 9 to 15 and saw that a shift had taken place and he moved from the analogy to the application.

He moved from word pictures to real relationships. Let me show you. In the word picture, it was I am the true vine, my father the vine dresser, and those others who are branches.

But look at verse 9. He's moved from vine and farmer to son and father. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you.

[21 : 09] Abide in my love. Do you remember? The word picture was abide in me, verse 4, namely the vine. But here it's abide in my love.

And it's a love that he shared with the Father from all eternity. That is what we are to do. We are moving then at verse 9 from an analogy that's taken from the field to the application of it which brings you into God's family and into union with the Father and the Son.

And if you wonder, as I did, looking the verses over, well, how does one abide? The answer is now clearly given.

Take a look. Verse 10 and following. 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. What is the way of abiding?

[22 : 25] It's through the keeping of his commandments. Well, what commandments? This is where the text is wonderfully clear.

When Isaiah picked up the fruit God came looking for in chapter 5, it was the obedience that lent its language in the terms of justice and righteousness.

To obey the commandments was to be living justly and righteously. In Ezekiel, the abiding or the fidelity that they would have had rather than faithlessness was idolatry.

And any of these things could be rightly considered to be his commandments and his fruit. What does a fruitful life look like?

It looks like someone who gives themselves to justice, righteousness, to fidelity to the Lord, to holiness. But none of those things are picked up here. This, to me, is the wonderful surprise of our text.

[23 : 38] He highlights one particular aspect that relates to the commandment and is a demonstration of the fruit.

Verse 12, this is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you. And notice the bookend, verse 17, these things I command you so that you will love one another.

This is the commandment that you are to keep until he returns. And notice this, not just love your neighbor as yourself. The disciples are called on to love one another.

How do you remain until he returns? What will keep you from falling away? How are your affections guarded from fading?

Interestingly, as and only as, in this text, you give yourself to a tangible, practical manifestation of love toward those for whom Christ died.

[24 : 58] Now, this is the danger of COVID. It is the potential killer of the church. For rather than our absence from one another, making our affections toward one another grow stronger, they simply fade from view out of sight, out of mind, and out of mind, out of heart, and out of heart, lack of love for Christ.

Let me put this as clearly as I can. Let me put this as I can. Let me put this as I can. Let me put this as I can. Our love for Jesus, who sits enthroned in heaven, will be known on earth insofar as we express a tangible love toward one another.

And the lack of a love toward one another will put us in danger of falling away in regard to our love for him.

This is why there are three things that must be said from this text about love. What must this love look like? What is the plan that will keep you from falling away?

How will you finish rather than merely start as a Christian? Well, notice, first of all, there's going to be an aspect of this love that is by way of imitation.

[26 : 39] It's imitatio. Look at verses 12 and 13. This is my commandment that you love one another. Here it is.

As I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.

This ought to be one of the hallmarks of Christ's church. And it is all the more difficult in this season. A self-sacrificial love that is tangibly known as we die to ourself and extend ourselves to others.

If anything should begin to pull you from your home with all the measures of masks and distancing in play, it is the crossing of your threshold to be in the presence of a believer in the church for the purpose of expressing tangibly an act of love.

And without it, not only are we further weakened as a church, but our love for Christ will ultimately be at risk and diminished.

[28 : 13] We are to love one another as he loved us. Now, on many fronts, I'm seeing our congregation bubble with tangible expressions of love.

But I want you to see this morning how essential that is. How critical it is to look one another in the eye and love.

This is going to require self-sacrifice. This is going to require particularity. This is going to require what all good gift givers already know.

Who are the best givers of gifts come holiday time in your family? I'll tell you who they are. They're the ones who think long and hard about the particularities of the ones to whom they are going to give a gift.

And they will tell you that 90% of their shopping takes place in the mind as they consider the wants, the desires, the needs, the glories of the one who they will love.

[29 : 29] Jesus knew you that way. And we must know one another that way. Let me give it to you differently. It's not only by way of imitation, it's by way of real intimacy.

It's not abstract. Look at verses 14 through 16a. 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've 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.

Notice the intimacy of this love, not merely the imitation of Christ's love. But the intimacy is that of friends. And even further, if he speaks of God as his Father and he is God's true Son, then where are you and I in the game?

This is so much better than just the word picture of a branch. You are a branch, but in real terms, you are his friend.

[30 : 45] You are attached to him. You are united to him. You draw your life from him. You and I as Christ's church.

And this is a gathering this morning as Christ's church. As we gather, we gather as friends who have been invited into God's family, sitting at his table, not as servants, but as those who he has invited to be hosted.

I mean, the intimacy of this is so wonderful. And this is why you and I have to grow in our knowledge of one another, our awareness of one another's hurts.

Think of it on the lines of the opportunity that's before us as we commence our lives together in a new building in the midst of this city and all the heartache of all of the tensions that have wrought havoc upon our city and this country over centuries.

And you and I will sit at the same table as friends. As friends.

[32 : 16] As friends of the groom. We are with one another. And that can't happen.

That can't happen if our life source is anything other than what Christ has done for us. This unity that we desire in Christ's church that would flourish as a micro expression of multi-ethnic beauty is not the end.

It is a unity of friendship in Christ for the purpose of bearing more fruit for Christ.

It's unity and friendship for the purpose of mission. It's not that the mission is simply the gathering together in some approximate semblance of unity.

And you can't do that unless you're friends. We won't do that unless we're friends. And so I challenge us today in the midst of this horrific hour of isolation to find our way across the threshold of our door to imitate the love of Christ in a meaningful and safe way.

[33 : 41] But I also call us right now to grow the intimacy of friendship. Because we are at the table of our Lord.

One last thing and then we'll finish for the day. What does this love look like? Well, it's a love of imitation. It's a love of deep intimacy.

But it's also a love that will express itself through intercession and access. Notice how he finishes in 16b and following.

That your fruit should abide so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. This access to the Father is yours. And this is what our love has.

Our love not only means that we are enjoying the fellowship of one another, but we have fellowship with one another because we have fellowship with Christ. And if we have fellowship with Christ and one another, our fellowship is also with the Father.

[34 : 50] And we have access. And he hears you. And he hears us. You know, there are things I'm praying. I can't even verbalize them to you this morning.

Things that are so audacious that I'm asking my Father for. I'm fearful of voicing them in the presence of others.

Lest some might think he would presume this upon God. Or he has this kind of expectation of God. Or he has some kind of anticipatory sense of what God will do. And for all of those reasons, I pray quietly, on my own, in my closet.

But we all need to be doing that. You have access to the Father. This church has access to the Father. And as we have a love that is expressed through intercession in the presence of the Father, we have a Son who hears.

[36 : 01] We have a Spirit who groans. We have a Lord who expects fruit. So, may we abide.

Let me tell you, I'm not a believer that absence always makes the heart grow fonder. I've been in ministry too long.

I've seen those who neglect the gathering together only end in their drifting away. And all the women who are studying Hebrews right now know exactly what I'm talking about.

The great concern of the book that you as a body of women are looking at on Tuesday night talks about the danger of drifting from our faith in an hour where we cannot see Him face to face. May God protect us. May this analogy from the field find its way into application in our family in ways that we remain and bear the fruit that He intends.

[37 : 17] Our Heavenly Father, we come to you today tired of the seclusion that definitely has negative consequences for the health of the church.

Help us to labor through this season of separation but help us to fight against it in ways where we find the capacity the ability to imitate the love of Christ to nurture the intimacy that we have in Christ and to bring ourselves before you interceding for all the things that you would have us do in the name of Christ.

Make us a fruitful vine branches that is in your vineyard in Christ's name Amen. Amen.

Thank you.