

03/17/2019 - John 15

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[0 : 0 0] John chapter 15. I want to encourage you to read along with it. We're going to look at a few specific things as we move along through the passage. So let me pray for us and gather us together. Our Heavenly Father, we do pray that you would attend the reading and the hearing and the preaching and hearing of your word with your spirit. We need your spirit if we're going to know you. And we want to see Jesus in the fullness of life that he has prepared for us. So we pray that you would do that now. And we pray it in Christ's name and for his glory. Amen. I'm going to be reading from John chapter 15, continuing on in the sermon series that you have been looking at. We're just going to read the first half of John chapter 15. I'm reading from the ESV version. I am the true vine. This is Jesus speaking. I am the true vine and 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've spoken to you.

Abide in me and I in you. As a 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 that the branches and the branches are gathered and 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 I've loved you abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love just as I've kept my father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I've spoken to you that my joy may be in you and 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 then 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 in my name, in the ask the father in my name, he may give it to you. These things I command you so that you will love one another. Amen.

This is the word of the Lord. Amen. Please be seated. A couple of years ago, I was traveling and visited one of my good friends who lives in Mississippi and I hadn't been to his house in a couple of years and he had recently remarried and so his new wife and her whole family had moved into his house and so I was interested to see the changes that were going to be there with this new woman and family living there and when I got there, the thing that impressed me the most was her garden. It was, you know, one of these square foot gardens, but she had probably four or five little plots that she had made and it was this amazing garden and I'll tell you, I was completely jealous because I would love to be able to have a really good garden and I am an abject failure when it comes to gardening. One year, we just moved from Texas. One year, my garden got eaten by a bunch of deer that kept jumping the fence that I couldn't keep out.

One year, it was South Texas, so they just burned up. I mean, it just combusted into flames. One year, I just didn't do a very good job of keeping up with it and everything died.

[4 : 14] I have tried over and over to get a great garden. I just really want some tomatoes and some peppers. I mean, I want to make a good salsa. Is that too much to ask? And I go over to Brian's house and his wife, she started with just these little starter plants and it was this overflowing garden. She had some melons. She had squash. She had lettuce of all kinds of varieties. She had tomatoes and she had peppers. Lots of them. In fact, so many that she begged me to take a box of them home and I was jealous. It kind of killed something in me.

And I think about that feeling of wanting to have a garden, seeing a beautiful garden and of not seeing it in my own life, that gap. I think about that gap every time I read this passage.

Because Jesus is saying, here's what your life ought to look like. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit. Jesus is saying he intends the life of the Christian to be fruitful and abundant, full like an overflowing garden. Unfortunately, I doubt many of you would describe your life as being full and abundant, overflowing with God's life. In fact, most of the Christians that I talked to would not describe their life as overwhelmingly full, but would probably describe it as somewhat empty. There are lots of reasons why that kind of gap exists in our lives. You know, some of you have had tragic circumstances or there's been abuse and you are dealing with these deep seeded and horrible woundedness. I'm not talking about that this morning. I'm talking about what I think plagues more people and most Christians. And that is this sense that your lives, you don't experience a full and abundant life for reasons that you can't really put your finger on. You can't really define. Walker Percy likes to talk about what he calls the modern malaise. He's talking about, he's talking about, uh, educated middle, upper middle class American Christians that have everything that they could possibly need for themselves. And yet they still feel this sense of emptiness. If you resonate with that at all, or if you just feel like you'd like to have a spiritual life that has more fullness to it, more depth, more vitality, more fruitfulness.

Well, then this passage has something to teach you. It's got something for you. Jesus is giving this little mini sermon here in John chapter 17 as he is with his disciples on the last night of his life. He, they have just left, left the upper room. They've left supper. He's washed their feet.

He's talked to them. He's taught them. And now they're walking and they're on their way to the garden of Gethsemane to his betrayal and his arrest and his ultimate death. And he's trying to teach them. He's trying to solidify in his disciples mind, the central reality that only in a vital relationship with Jesus himself, can the disciples ever to hope to find an abundant and fruitful life.

[7 : 37] And think about it. They're going to need this reality seared into their minds in only a couple of hours, because in a couple of hours, Jesus is gone. He's gone from them. And Jesus desperately wants them to know that in connected, connectedness to him, they will be able to find life.

So he's, Jesus is using two metaphors here. He's talking about the vine, the image of the vine. And then he's talking about the image of abiding. And so I just want to look at those two images, two images, and then we'll apply it a little bit and see what God has for us this morning. So starting with the vine image, let's just begin with Jesus's famous line. I am the vine, you are the branches. What does that mean? Well, this would have been a very common image. In fact, archaeologists have discovered coins that were minted just a little bit after this time period, around AD 70. And on those coins, there was a picture of a vine. Why? Well, because the vine in this culture represented life, it represented vitality and joy. It represented care and concern. It even represented stability and history. I mean, think about it. You would have had families that would have tended the exact same vine and vineyard for generations, every year producing wine from that vineyard, the same one that their grandparents and great-grandparents had. It's a similar kind of thing to the way that we look at trees now. You know, if you look around, if you're watching for tree logos, you'll see them everywhere. In fact, for Grace and Peace Church, our church, which there's a number of our folks here who are in the back over there, you can welcome them. When I sent to a designer the first round of logo ideas, one of them was a tree. And I thought of this passage, because in our culture, trees seem to show life and vitality and history. They've been there a long time, especially old ones. And Jesus is probably, they were so ubiquitous that the disciples might have been walking right next to a vineyard as Jesus was talking to them. And he's saying, hey, look, guys, that what you see right there is exactly the kind of relationship that I'm going to have with you, that I am central to your spiritual life. You are going to derive your entire spiritual life from me. There's an organic connection, isn't there, between the vine and the branches. Nutrients in the life are stored in the roots and the trunk and are sent out to the branches. For fruitfulness to be on the branches, there has to be a radical health in the root and in the trunk. So the question that this passage begs for each one of us at this point, we can stop and ask it, is from where do you derive spiritual life?

Is it from Jesus or is it from something else? Funny example this week, or maybe not funny, but an example this week of deriving life from something else. I'm sure you saw all the news coverage of the wealthy and elite parents who paid, bribed, test takers and elite universities to get their underqualified children into schools. I think there's a part of us that thinks that's hilarious because we like to make fun of the wealthy and the elite, and we see the numbers that were being thrown around, and it's, you know, it's amazing.

The problem is, is that while that's happening on this kind of spectacular scale, you and I both know that that impulse of pulling strings is resonant within every single neighborhood. We just moved from Texas, and at my youngest son's elementary school, there was this thing that would happen every August. They would send a letter out to all the children and tell the children who their teacher was going to be, and there was this one mom that every year would start. As soon as that letter hit the mailboxes, she was texting all the other mothers, and within hours, she would have a class roster for all of the kids in her grade, and then the jockeying began. Principals were called, teachers were called, because all of these parents had to get their children into with the right teacher, with the right other kids in their class. Why? Why was there such a desperation to, to, you know, puppet master what was going on behind the scenes of an elementary school classroom? Well, of course, because there was a fear that if my child didn't have the right circumstances, my child's, my child's future success and opportunities might be in jeopardy. Well, why would that be? Well, well, because if my child doesn't succeed in elementary school, then my child's future prospects might be in danger. My child needs me to intervene in their world in order for them to be successful and find life and vitality. That's the logic at its most base.

What's interesting is that behind all of that is the parent's belief that they have actually possess the ability to provide real and fruitful and abundant lives for their children, and probably behind all of that is they think they can do that for themselves. You know, look, if you want to see and discern where it is you functionally look for life, just look at the places that you feel compelled to intervene that are not your responsibility. You know, maybe it's as parents intervening in your children's school or your children's sports or your children's social lives, or maybe it's in your workplace where you intervene with your peers or your employees because you think that what they do might reflect poorly on you. Or maybe it's the way that you intervene online to make sure that you present the perfect image or you make sure that you get the last word in whatever argument so that you look good. Or maybe it's with friendships that you desperately want to make sure that that people are not critical of you. I think for you high school and middle school students, this is particularly relevant. How many high school and middle schoolers, how many of you feel this desperate need to avoid embarrassment or to avoid being misunderstood and the links that you might go through social media and your friends to make sure that you're not misunderstood? It happens in middle school and it happens all the way till we go to the nursing homes. T.S. Eliot was quoted as saying that most of the trouble in the world is caused by people wanting to be important. I think that's right. Eugene Peterson says that that this impulse at the core of our being is a denial of God's grace given to us in Christ.

[14 : 54] It's this functional belief system that tells us that we actually possess the ability and then have the right and the priority to try to create as much fruitfulness for ourselves as we can.

We could call that a self-salvation strategy. We could call that image manipulation. We could call it just simply unbelief. We could just simply call it sin. And you won't ever be able to produce fruit in your life that way. Why? Because you are detached from the vine that is Christ. What Jesus is saying is anytime that you try to create life in and of your own efforts, in and of your own gumption, your own talents, you are not going to find the life that you seek.

That's the vine image. Okay? Then there's this abiding image. Abide in me. What does that mean? That's kind of a funny uncommon word. We don't really use that anymore. I think the best translation is something like finding your home with Jesus. When Jesus says abide in me, what he means is come home to me. Live with me. Stay with me. There's a paradox here between these two images, right? On the one hand, Jesus is saying, look, I'm giving life to you. I'm the vine. You're the branches. I'm providing for you.

I'm giving you everything you need. I've got life and vitality and fruitfulness for you. But on the other hand, you have to participate in that life with me. You've got to sit and come home and live in my vineness, which isn't a word I know. You've got to make your home with me.

One commentator is a guy named Leslie Newbigin, who's a theologian that I love. And he says this, that abiding is a continually renewed action of the will.

[17 : 03] Continually renewed action of the will. It is continually deciding to hold on to the truth of who Jesus is and to all of God's promises. Or maybe more particularly, it is continually making the decision to be held by Jesus and by God's promises.

I think it's probably something like what a cancer patient feels when they make the decision to go into treatment. You know, when they go to the hospital, they can leave anytime they want.

They're not compelled to be there. They can get up and walk out of that hospital room because it gets really hard. And it's really painful. And it's not fun. There's nothing that anybody who is going through a cancer treatment likes about that, except for the fact that there is no life to be found outside of that hospital room.

And so they make the decision to stay and to submit and to be a part of it. And what Jesus is saying is, look, I'm the only place that you'll find life. And you have to continually, every day, every moment, make the decision that you are going to stay in this spot and receive the life that I have for you.

And so as we do that, as we abide with Jesus, as we make that decision over and over to turn away from our self-salvation and turn to Him, what begins to happen is fruit begins to get born in us.

[18 : 34] And it's fruit. It begins to... It's the fruit that Jesus has. It begins to... Our lives begin to look like Jesus' life. That's what's really interesting about this passage. Let's just walk through this, if you've got your Bibles or your phones out.

I want to walk through this and show you what this looks like. Start at verse 7. If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you.

This is prayer, right? When we pray, praying is not just trotting out our desires to God. Prayer is submitting our priorities to God's priorities.

What Jesus is saying here is that one of the fruits of the vine that is Jesus in your life is that your priorities will align with God's priorities.

You're going to begin to want what God wants for you. That's one of the fruits. Okay? Verse 8. Just walk through this. By this my Father is glorified that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.

[19 : 44] That my Father is glorified. What does that mean? It means that God himself is seen for who he is and what he's like. It means that your life will begin to reflect the truths of who God is to everyone around you.

Your life is going to look like God's life. Verse 9. As the Father has loved me, so I love you. There's love. There's intimacy between God and us.

Verse 10. 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. You're going to begin to obey.

The fruit of God's life in you is obedience. Most Christians I know don't see as much obedience in their life as they want. And they're weighed down by their sin and their failure.

And all of that, I know you don't obey. I don't obey either. But what God's telling you is, or what Jesus is saying here is, In my life there will become a fruit of my life will be obedience to God's commands.

[20 : 57] Verse 11. These things that I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full. That there will be joy and delight and fullness that will be born in your life.

Verse 12. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. That your life will be characterized by being a part of communities of love and concern for other people.

Verse 13. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. That that love will take a self-sacrificial tone.

You will begin to be able to sacrifice for the good of other people. Verse 14. You are my friends. You're my friends.

He says in the next verse that I'm not going to call you slaves anymore because you're my friends. Friendship with God. This intimacy that we can have.

[22 : 00] Verse 16. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and you should bear fruit.

You are chosen. You are beloved. One of the fruits of God's life in you is the certainty of your relationship with God that he has come and has overwhelmingly given you that which you could never get on your own.

He has poured out upon you grace upon grace in a way that you could never achieve by yourself. That by your best efforts and your best ingenuity, you could never have come up with a way of saying, I am chosen by God.

He's saying, I have done that for you and you'll see it as a fruit of my life in you. It's incredible. It really is what Jesus is talking about here.

You see, and this fruit is so much better than anything that you can create on your own. Everything that you're trying to create pales in comparison to this.

[23 : 15] Children who are successful and untroubled by difficulties or failures. Material abundance. This is better than safety from tragedies.

It's better than comfort instead of struggle. It's better than being well loved by everyone. It's better than never having to show that you are weak and vulnerable. You see, the more you confuse the life that you want, all of these things that you want, with the life that Jesus is really being born, that Jesus is describing here, the more that you confuse those things, the more you will be frustrated and disappointed and feel empty.

The more gaps you'll see in your own life between that which you are and that which you want to be. But it doesn't have to be that way. What Jesus is saying is, it doesn't have to be that way.

Instead, you can abide. You can continually make the decision to come home to Jesus. I want to read the end of that quote that I started from Leslie Newbigin.

He says, it's the continually renewed decision of the will that what has been done once for all by the action of Jesus shall be the basis and the starting point and the context for all of my thinking and deciding and doing.

[24 : 45] That what has been done by Jesus is the foundation of my life. That everything he has accomplished for me now becomes the basis of my accomplishments.

His death has become my death. His new life and resurrection is my life. His obedience is my obedience. His glory is my glory. His kingdom is my home. Isn't this exactly what the prodigal son experienced?

When he finally made the decision, I'm turning away from my self-salvation and I'm coming home. That continually renewed action of the will to come home and abide with his father, what became true of him?

He became the son again. He became the favored one. He became the heir again. He became the one who was in right relationship with his father.

He became beloved in a way that he could never achieve on his own. If you want to experience the fullness of spiritual life that Jesus is talking about right here, that movement has to be part of your story.

[26 : 00] You have to stop. Take some time. Figure out what it is that you are seeking after to provide life for you.

The reason why you're making a mess of relationships is probably because you're seeking for those relationships to provide you life. Stop. Repent.

Turn from them. Name them for what they are. That they're a self-salvation strategy in turn. And make the continually renewed action of the will to abide in Christ.

That's the movement of grace. That's the movement of salvation. That's the movement that Jesus is laying out for his disciples. That's the movement for each one of us.

In fact, that's the movement that we're preparing to do as we come to his table and as we come towards confessing our sins together. So I'm going to transition us into that part of the service.

[27 : 06] But I want to pray for us. So that we can begin to think about and identify those places in our own lives. So let me pray. Our Father, we have all kinds of things that we think will produce life for us and they do not.

And they never can. They never will. And we need you to step in and to give us the wisdom and the grace to see those areas and to turn away from them.

And to abide in you. Help us to do that, Lord. For we need you to do that. For the glory of Christ. Amen.