

Bishop Julian Dobbs

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Preacher: Bishop Julian Dobbs

[0:00] Amen. And now in the name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

! Amen. Would you sit please? Well, we have before us this morning in our Gospel reading in John chapter 15, that great passage about spiritual productivity.

And I thought how appropriate as the blossoms are coming on the trees to think about productivity in our lives. Back in Virginia, the blossoms are all gone, so I feel like I have a second blessing this morning of being here in central New York to see the blossoms once again.

But John 15 contemplates only two kinds of believers. Two kinds of true believers. I wonder if you noticed this as the Reverend Mark Steele read to us earlier.

John 15 contemplates the productive Christian and the very productive Christian. That's all. Let's open our Bibles and have a look at our Gospel passage from the Bible this morning in John chapter 15.

[1:24] Look with me in verse 2. The Christian, verse 2, who is fruitful, and the one right at the very end of the verse who is even more fruitful. Do you see that?

Extraordinary, isn't it? Because Jesus, in a sense, hits us right between the eyes in verse 1 and verse 5 with this last of the great I am statements that John records of our Lord.

I am the vine. You are the branches. If a person remains in me and I in him or her, they will bear fruit.

In fact, he says, much fruit. And apart from me, he says, you can do nothing. And that message, for those of you who were in our Synod, was so underscored by our Synod speaker over the past few days.

Look with me again, John chapter 15, in that first opening passage, verses 1 to 5. The verses introduce to us the allegory of the vine. And many Christians know it so well.

[2:30] I am the true vine, says Jesus. My Father is the gardener. And you, verse 5, the church, are the branches. Or as Professor Don Carson would be right to argue, in the later passage, verses 9 to 17, gives us Jesus' own exposition of what is the vine and the branches.

So that in those paragraphs, for example, we read about remaining or abiding, verse 4. Abiding in me, verse 9.

Look, abiding in my love. And in both these paragraphs in this chapter, fruitfulness and productivity, not for ourselves, but for the kingdom of God, is the goal of every believer, you and me together.

Verse 5, it's there. We are to bear much fruit. Do you see verse 16? We are chosen to bear fruit, fruit that will last. And isn't it interesting that both tie fruitfulness to prayer.

Do you see that? Verse 7. Ask whatever you wish. That's about prayer. Verse 16. The Father, you are to ask him in my name, and he will give it to you.

[3:50] So can these extraordinary promises that Jesus makes here in John 15 about prayer be actually true? And what does remaining or abiding in Christ really mean?

And how is it that these branches, verse 2 and verse 6, are pruned? How can that be so if God is a God of love? In fact, Jesus uses an even harsher word.

He talks about them being burned. Burned and pruned. So what kind of fruit is it that we are expected to bear in this scenario? Well, let's go and have a look.

Jesus speaks here in John 15. On the eve of the crucifixion, at the end of chapter 14, Jesus is about to leave the upper room with the disciples.

Perhaps they're on their way to Gethsemane, to the garden. And something suggests that this powerful image to the Lord. We don't know what it is. Perhaps they had had wine at the supper.

[4:51] We read about that. Perhaps the emblem of his blood being shed. Was it the gigantic golden vine decorating the gates of the temple? Perhaps it was just a plant growing up on the wall

in the courtyard outside.

But above all, it was Jesus' own reflection of what? It was his reflection of the Old Testament, the people of Israel, spoken so often of as a vine.

A vine in the Old Testament, planted, in fact, and tended by God himself. Think for a moment, if you would, of Psalm 80.

You brought a vine, writes the psalmist, out of Egypt. You cleared the ground for it, and it took root. Or what of the prophet Hosea, who spoke in the Old Testament people as a luxuriating vine, and yet in so many of the Old Testament vine references, speak frankly of failure, and a lack of productivity.

And many of them have an extraordinary, disconcerting, contemporary ring about them. It is, of course, all linked somehow to lost privilege, to opportunity forfeited, to disobedience, to moral and spiritual degeneracy.

[6:14] For Jeremiah, the prophet, we read, Israel was a corrupt vine. For Isaiah, she yields sour grapes rather than good ones.

For Ezekiel, Israel is a useless vine. Even her wood was good for nothing. Only fit, writes Ezekiel, to be burned.

Realize this type of background, this picture of Israel, and Jesus' claim is even more startling, because suddenly, faithful, productive Israel is narrowed down to just one person, Jesus himself, who says, I am the vine.

I am the vine, and the ultimate reason Israel has grown so spiritually barren is because she has rejected me, says Jesus.

Here is the one, the one alone, who, look with me, chapter 14, verse 31, right at the very end of the previous chapter. Here is the one who alone perfectly kept his father's commandments.

[7:27] Here is the only true Israel, Israelite. Israel had traded on her spiritual past and was in desperate need of the work of a gardener. And Jesus is very blunt as he continues this discourse now in our chapter 15 and verse 2.

His father is the gardener, and look what he says, every branch that does not bear fruit, he prunes that it may bear more fruit.

Do you notice that? Every branch in me that bears no fruit, verse 6, the branch not remaining in Jesus is picked up and ultimately burned.

And here, surely, brothers and sisters, surely, is the heart of the problem in so much of the contemporary church in our country. It's not a reference to what we sometimes call nominal Christianity, people going through the motions, people for whom Christianity is at best a hobby or at worst a habit.

Jesus is very solemn here. You can profess to be the people of God. Israel did. You can seem to be a member of the inner circle with Jesus all the time Judas was.

[8:46] You can be from a Christian family. You can have a good church like Holy Trinity and be a good church attender, whatever that means.

You can be in a dozen committees and be your delegate to our diocesan city of Binghamton. Either way, there is only one infallible mark of the true Christian according to Jesus and what is it? fruitfulness or productivity for the kingdom. Fruit is the evidence of a repented life and where there is no fruit we are right to deduce that there is in fact no life.

Now I'm sure these verses about cutting off and throwing away are not signalling for a moment that any true believer will be rejected by Christ on the last day.

that would conflict wouldn't it with so many other passages that would conflict with what John says himself in his own gospel just a few chapters earlier in chapter 10 where Jesus himself reassures people that no one no one could be snatched no true sheep could be snatched out of the shepherd's hand.

[10:06] But merely being in the church church and merely being around Jesus and around good people my brother like you even doing these things for Jesus does not make us his.

So look with me only one thing verse 8 shows real discipleship and here it is again verse 8 it's fruitfulness reality is seen by evidence and not just by claims.

Genuine conversion is not measured by a hasty decision that we may have made sometime in the past. Surely genuine conversion is demonstrated by long term fruitfulness.

And what is the fruit that Jesus is speaking about? Well some argue that it's success in winning people for Christ being fruitful in our evangelism.

And John certainly spoken of that back in chapter 4 in verse 35 where he talks about the fields being ripe unto harvest and perhaps there is in chapter 15 in verse 16 in that reference to our being chosen to go and bear fruit that will last some missionary element and a hint of the great commission that is still to come in this gospel.

[11:31] Of course we want to be good witnesses for Christ. And we've heard much about that at our diocesan synod. But I think this is more likely surely to be a bigger, wider, touching aspect of every part of our lives.

Disciples of Jesus yes are to show fruit in their missionary endeavours yes, but they are to show the world the life and character and beauty of what it means to follow Jesus Christ.

Fruitfulness surely means Christ likeness. Fruit is everything done in our lives verse 8 to the Father's glory.

It is evidenced in everything done and conforming to the will of the Lord Jesus. Not least the praying according to his will and the loving of one another which so emerges in Jesus' own explanation of the vine and we'll look at it in a moment.

So how then are we to produce this fruit? Well I'm so pleased you asked. Because Jesus gives us the answer. And surely then this is the desire of every Christian heart.

[12:47] The thing that we want most in life is how can we bear such fruit for the kingdom of God. And the key is there in verse 4. Look at it with me. Jesus says abide in me.

If you grew up on another translation of the Bible you'll remember NIV and others used to say remain in me. But when you said the word abide Jesus says abide in me and I will abide in you. And if you've got a moment after the service, not while the bishop is preaching but I'll never know if you do this. count how many times Jesus says that in these verses. I'll give you the answer so you don't have to do it.

He says it 11 times. 11 times. That phrase abide in me appears the unavoidable point that Jesus is wanting to make.

Our intimate personal relationship with him. It seems so simple in a way isn't it? And yet there are so many parts of our lives in the church that seem to have lost confidence in abiding in him and as we will see particularly abiding in his word.

[13:59] They seem to have grown embarrassed or a little self-conscious in saying it or teaching it or implying it or thinking that there is some other route to affect the fruitful discipleship.

Raymond and I were talking earlier just speaking out about our diocese and synod about how sometimes I'm under pressure as the bishop to bring in the latest church growth guru to teach the church about church growth.

But those things according to John 15 do not make us fruitful for the kingdom. Look with me abiding in Christ firstly means taking his word the bible seriously.

Seriously. we see that in Jesus discourse in the previous passage as well and he continues it here in John chapter 15. It is his word that affects the initial change which makes productivity possible. Look in verse 3. Already you are clean because of what? The word. Fancy that. The bible. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.

[15:09] And then it's again look verse 7. Our Lord's words have a continuing life transforming role. Look if my words abide in you he says and then in verse 10 he spells it out even more clearly.

Look if you keep my commandments if you keep them you will abide in my love just as I have kept my father's commandments and abide in his love.

Do you see this is about the bible? Say yes bishop. It's about the bible. It's about the word of God dwelling in us richly.

And here's how this works. Jesus abides in us when we let his word abide in us.

And letting the words of Jesus abide in us means letting Jesus abide in us. that's why we need to make room for Jesus and his words not as a silent guest but as an authoritative guest in our lives.

[16:17] And so we come to the bible not just to read it not just to meditate on it but to connect it and receive it as the authoritative word of God just as much it was to the disciples on the eve of the crucifixion in this chapter as it is for us this morning.

Those of us who have been at synod over the past few days have spent much time reflecting on the theological position of Archbishop Thomas Cramner the English reformer who gave his life to

opening up the bible and its word who became the first reformed Anglican bishop of the reformation this is what he says I quote him directly about God's word martyred for his faith in 1556 he said let us night and day muse meditate and contemplate the scriptures let us ruminate and as it were chew the cud he says that we may have the sweet juice the spiritual effect honey kernel taste comfort and consolation of the word of God oh oh if we could only have an

Archbishop of Canterbury who would say such a thing today but that is not in my notes but I know it's been recorded so verse 10 look with me Jesus says it's so important if you keep my commandments what will happen you will abide in my love and this is my commandment that you love one another also the word of God in our hearts is linked to how we love one another and the same John suggests that to us in his epistle which we also heard read today where he underscores even more succinctly why we must love one another even at Holy Trinity Syracuse when the person sitting us next in the pew might be unlovable or have really ticked us off there's no getting around this brothers and sisters there's no hoping for an alternative

Jesus clearly says here this is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you and how is it that he demonstrated his love for us by going to the cross and giving of himself is the model by which we must love one another even the most irritating person love one another for by doing so we will find an abiding joy in our relationship in Christ it's also a message for marriage isn't it loving your spouse loving one another secondly the second mark of remaining or abiding in Christ it's here too it's depending on him for everything fruitful Christians acknowledge that they cannot begin to be effective or even understand his words or obey his commands without his help without his help and Jesus shows us the way he's the model and the way is to pray it's extraordinary isn't it he wanted us to pray he longed to pray he wanted to pray prayer is one of the great emphasis of these chapters and this is so precious in John's mind it's there look in verse 7 it's there again in verse 16 extraordinary promises that remind us that prayer and fruit bearing are inextricably linked let's quickly look at verse 16 do you see those two little words tucked into verse 16 look at in there if you've got your own Bible you can underline them if you want to underline the

Bible you have to talk to your rector first but look at verse 16 do you see two little words so that so that you did not choose me but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and fruit and that your fruit should abide so that whatever you ask the Father in my name he may give it to you so remaining or abiding in Christ first means taking God's word seriously secondly it means depending on him for everything so that whatever you ask the Father in my name he may give it to you and thirdly abiding in him remaining in him means resting in his love look verse 9 it stops us in our tracks verse 9 as we reflect on it as the

[21:48] Father has loved me so have I loved you to be told that Jesus loves us with the same love by which the Father loves him is astounding and this is why Jesus so emphasized how we must love one another here is the vine imagery it is the thought that believers enjoy something of the intimacy which Jesus enjoys with the Father the gardener who cherishes the vine the love of the Father the reality of that relationship so finally dear brothers and sisters if remaining or abiding is the first major dimension it would be wrong of me not to tell you the other if remaining or abiding is the first major dimension

Jesus equally underscores that trimming or pruning is in fact the other you see every gardener knows and this is where I need to be a little careful because Brenda knows I go overboard on pruning in the garden and if you're with us for synod and you've been to Binghamton before you may have noticed that there were two very large trees missing from outside of Church of the Good Shepherd and the problem was the vestry agreed to take down one of them so the men of the! you know what happens when men have a chainsaw? They took down one and they decided there on the moment that while they had the machines they should just take down the other it was a severe pruning so said the women when they came out to look at what was being undertaken in the church grounds the bishop happens to think it was a good job abiding and pruning Jesus says there must also be a knife in the Christian experience it's there in verse 2 quickly look with me do you see it even the fruitful barns is trimmed even the fruitful one to make it more fruitful the gardener is ambitious for Christian productivity and it's because there is something worth developing in the life of the Christian and preserving that the gardener wields the knife at all so don't be discouraged if you feel under the knife from God and your

Christian life Hebrews chapter 12 says discipline is never pleasant at the time painful experiences may just be God's way of getting rid of some of the dead would have pride and independence and

selfishness and self-centeredness and impatience and all the other things that need to be cut away from our lives if we are to become more Christ-like so God's purpose is not to wound in this pruning but to bless it's not to deny us anything good but to bring us a greater good more fruitfulness my prayer for you my prayer for myself for this congregation for our diocese for his church is that God would make all of us in the church fruitful branches passionate about Jesus the true vine remaining in him taking his word seriously through obedience depending on him for everything and through prayer resting in his love and accepting the father's pruning in all of our sufferings and then and then may we be effective to the world for the father's glory let us pray lord christ you promised that when we ask it will be given to us and the prayer of each of us now as we ruminate on this gospel is that we may abide in the lord jesus christ with every fiber of our beings remaining in him in his indwelling power remaining in us that we might be people in the world who are effective christ people where we are living for the father's glory in your name lord jesus we pray amen