

Committed to Christ's Word

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[0 : 00] If you would take up your Bibles and open to John 15 on page 104. We've had a bit of trouble with our microphones this morning, so if I say anything that is a little bit suspicious, it's probably Joss Stringhold pumping something through a satellite.

These are radio microphones. I use these in Australia. This has nothing to do with the sermon. In Australia, they have a different frequency. I was doing a wedding one day.

I might have told this story before. Through my microphone, we were just around a corner from a Safeway equivalent. Through my microphone and the amplification system in the church with the bride and the groom standing at the front of the church came an announcement that bananas were available at the back of the store for 99 cents a pound.

We lost half the congregation. John 15. This is one of the most remarkable passages in all the Bible.

Jesus tells us the story of the world. And if you've been watching any election coverage, you will know that we are utterly lost.

[1 : 21] And the reason we are lost is because we have lost the story of the world. The key to the chapter is verse 1. Everything else comes out of verse 1.

Jesus says, I am the true vine and my father is the vinedresser. He says, you want to know the truth about the world? God is a gardener and he has planted one genuine vine in the midst of the world and everything God does and everything God cares about happens around that vine and through that vine.

He wants it to grow. He wants it to bear fruit. He wants everyone to be connected to that vine until that vine covers the earth and the sea with fruit and life and joy.

And that Jesus says, I am and that is the true vine. Every other vine, every other offering of life and satisfaction and meaning is a deception.

So of course underneath all our desires and longings and our addictions and our restlessness is our hunger for this one true vine, this tree of life. I think one of the things that the election has revealed is that there's a mood in North America of weariness and skepticism.

[2 : 40] People are tired of words, so many words. And I think there's a disengagement from public life by many. And underneath that, I think there is a real desire for authenticity and for reality.

And it is a desire for this true vine, for the true life that comes from the true vine. I think that has some reason, some explanation explaining power for reality TV, which is a contradiction in terms really, looking for reality in images and virtual things.

Here Jesus says, God has planted one true vine. It is the person of Jesus Christ. He's the source of life, the tree of life, the center of life.

And one day this earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God. And all who wish to know the reality of God in all his truth and beauty must come to this vine for that life.

And I think that explains what it means to be a Christian. That's what Jesus does in the first third of this passage. He says, a Christian is someone who is connected to him, attached, fastened into Jesus as the true vine, like a branch, so that the life of Jesus flows through the person who is connected to him.

[4 : 04] That is what defines a person as a Christian. It's someone who has a living, organic, genuine connection with Jesus Christ. And we know that all our spiritual existence and life comes from abiding in him and remaining in him and being fastened to him and depending on him.

Our true life, our real life, is only in connection with him. So our first task as Christians is obviously to abide in Christ, to abide in the vine, because he is the tree of life, the true vine.

That's the point of verses 1 to 11. And then in the rest of the chapter, in the last two-thirds, Jesus speaks about two missions, two things he sends us to do.

And the first mission he sends us to our brothers and sisters in Christ. And that's verses 12 to 17. And the mission that he gives us to one another is simply that we love one another.

Simple. Not easy, but simple. And in verses 12 and 13, we are to love one another with the kind of love with which he loved us. The reason I mention this is I think the order of the chapter is very important.

[5 : 23] Before ever Jesus gets to speaking about our mission to the world, first he speaks about our relation to him, then about our relation to one another. You see, if he is the true vine, all truth and all who wish to come to the truth must come to him.

And if we are branches in the same vine, you and I are organically, spiritually linked with one another. And the same life that comes from that true vine flows through you and flows through one another.

And it shows itself in love. And that is the real life that our friends and those outside the church are hungry for. It is by the way in which we live, we point to whether we are abiding in the vine.

If we are not loving one another, we never begin to demonstrate Jesus Christ to others. I mean, how on earth can the world believe our claims? How can they believe that we are connected to what is true and real?

How can we begin to be the branches that are set for the healing of the nations unless we begin to love one another?

[6 : 37] And I think without this first mission, we really are just an extension of the world, just another organization. That if we abide in Jesus, it will inevitably show in the way we bear fruit, we cannot help that from happening.

But there is a second mission, not to Christ's people, but to Christ's world. And here there is a very big problem. Because it doesn't matter how loving and kind and generous we are, Jesus says, do not expect the world to like the fact that you are a Christian.

He says, in the way the world rejected me, it will reject you. And from verses 18 to 27, Jesus speaks about our relation with the world and he speaks about it from two perspectives.

First, how the world deals with us and second, how we will deal with the world. And I want to look at those two with you briefly. Firstly then, how does the world deal with us?

Well, look at verse 18. If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. Now, the reason the world hated Jesus is because we all want to plant our own vine.

[7 : 49] We all want to create our own tree of life and we do not like someone coming from outside our world and saying, I am the true vine. The world has no place for a saviour who comes from the outside and says something like this, and I quote, John chapter 8, you are from below, I am from above, you are of this world, I am not of this world.

What do you do with someone like that? What do you do with someone who says, I am the light of the world, I am the resurrection and the life, I am the true vine, who claims to be sent by God, who claims to be the one through whom all things were created, who stands at the end of the world and holds our lives and destiny in our hands, who offers us eternal life.

I mean, you can't just place that person in a temple alongside other religious leaders. There is only one place to put that person, that is on a cross, and the sooner the better.

The reason is, the world is trying to invent its own story. See, we don't mind one another telling our stories so long as we don't claim our story is true or any more authoritative than yours.

We are deeply suspicious of anyone who claims to be objective or claims to speak with authority or claims to tell the truth. We say, now, truth claims are just an exercise of power.

[9 : 10] We have deconstructed truth in terms of power. And into this world comes one who claims to be from outside our world and tells a different story. And the world cannot tolerate any authoritative telling of the story which claims to be true, specifically which claims to come from God.

I read this quote this week. It's from Franklin Harrell. He's an international biochemist, a book on the cell, and he says this, I quote, The greatest scientific advance of the last 1,000 years was providing the evidence to prove that human beings are independent agents whose lives on Earth are neither conferred nor controlled by celestial forces.

Although it may be more conventional to measure scientific progress in terms of specific technological developments, nothing was more important than providing the means to release men

and women from the hegemony of the supernatural.

You like that quote? Put your finger in John 15, turn back to John 7 for just a moment. Jesus is speaking to his human brothers.

In chapter 7, verse 7, he says to them, The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify of it that its works are evil.

[10:32] As St. Augustine said, our problem is our desires are disordered. We set our desires on the wrong things, things that don't work, and we try to find real life everywhere but in the tree of life.

And Jesus says, the reason people do not believe the gospel is not because science has come up with some big knockdown argument for the truth of the resurrection. The reason is because our works are evil.

We do not believe Jesus' words because we do not want them to be true. As Nietzsche said, what is decisive against Christianity is our taste, not our reasons.

Now when Jesus speaks of the world in this way, he's not speaking of the physical creation, beautiful creation. He's speaking of the whole created moral order which is in active rebellion against him and against God.

And Jesus says, the basic attitude of the world towards me is one of prejudice because we hate someone telling us that we are wrong. The very fact that he comes as saviour is a massive blow and insult to our arrogance.

[11:46] We take this idea of self-sacrificial love that he speaks about in 12 to 17. I mean, that's an intolerable kind of lifestyle in this world. Doesn't fullness of life come from grasping, from self-assertion, not self-denial?

Come from pleasing myself, not from pleasing others. That's why the world had to crucify Jesus. It's because in his perfection and his purity and love, he is a living testimony that our works are evil.

And if we had known God, we would have recognised the revelation of God in the face of Jesus Christ. We would have bowed before him and worshipped him. But for all our brilliance and all our sophistication, we are spiritually entirely in the dark apart from him.

This is the spiritual prejudice of the world. We want to grow our own vine, we want to plant our own tree of life and we deeply resent anyone coming in and saying, I am the true life.

And what that means, my friends, sorry this is negative news to us, but it means we will be resented as well. Very simple equation Jesus makes in verse 20.

[12:58] Remember the word I said to you, he said a servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you. If they kept my word, they will keep yours also.

The infallible evidence that the world hates God is that it hates Jesus. And the infallible evidence that it hates Jesus is that it hates those who follow Jesus. I say again, you can be the most gracious, loving, and gentle person in the world.

But if you abide in this vine, you're making a statement about the world and its emptiness. When you look to Jesus for true life, you are saying that this world has no ultimate reference point in it and all the good things that this life offers will not in the end ultimately give me life.

And that is saying much more than to each his own. There's a wonderful picture in the last book of the Bible in Revelation chapter 11. It's a picture of the witnessing church.

There are two, there are these two characters who represent the church and they preach throughout the world and the world hates it. And then they die and the world leaves their bodies in the street and throws a party.

[14:12] And we read this, those who dwell on the earth will rejoice over them and make merry and exchange presents because these two prophets have been a torment to all who dwell on the earth.

I don't know if you have thought of yourself as a torment to the world. In fact, the more we abide and the more we love like Jesus Christ, the more we torment the world. And there's only going to be joy when we're silenced.

And the irony, of course, is that it is the very thing that the world hates which is the salvation of the world. Do you not know that to be true in your own life? Even though the gospel remains a torment to many and it will until Christ comes again, it is also love and life and salvation to many.

And how it works in our lives today, Jesus tells us in verse 19. He says, if you are of the world, the world would love its own.

Because you're not of the world, I chose you out of the world. Therefore, the world hates you. The way prejudice against Jesus works in our lives is by conformity.

[15:18] The world loves its own. Can't tolerate us if we step out of line and conform to God and his will. Because when we do that, it is a reminder of what we all know deep down and that is that there is a God and we know him.

And I say to us, brothers and sisters, this is very difficult, isn't it? This is the way spiritual prejudice works. It doesn't work so much by open persecution and hostility, but by socially contagious suspicion.

And the rejection of Jesus isn't spread so much by rational argument, but by social pressure. We want to be admired. We want to be applauded. But what we believe, if we believe Jesus is the true vine, is a challenge to the spiritual foundation of unbelief.

I'm hearing a song and these things I'm saying we need to hear. One of the things I find is when you're in a conversation with someone, if you mention Jesus Christ, you don't get a rational response, you often get an emotional response.

And I think that's the way it works. The fact is that if you've placed your faith in Jesus Christ, at the deepest possible level, you and I do not belong to this world.

[16:42] But here's the thing, it is our very non-belonging to this world that is the greatest gift to the world. It's the thing that the world hates most, that it needs most, and that we are to bear testimony to, so that we'd be like Jesus Christ even though we'd be misunderstood.

It ought to alarm us, I think, if we're not experiencing rejection. And Jesus says wonderfully in these verses when he's speaking about how the world treats us, he just says, look, don't take it personally.

The prejudice against you has nothing really to do with you whatsoever. It is on my account. It is because of me. And you cannot fix it by being lovely or saying all the right words.

This is a deep spiritual prejudice, as deep as our DNA. That is how the world will deal with you, he says. Well then, secondly, how should we deal with the world?

Let's look down the end to verse 26 and 27. When the counsellor comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, even the Spirit of Truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness to me.

[17:52] And you also are witnesses because you've been with me from the beginning. Do you remember the most famous verse in John's Gospel? God so loved the world, this very same world that he gave his only Son.

That's God's attitude and that is to be ours as well. He has placed us in this world as extensions of the true vine and I need to say it again, he has set us up here to spread his life to others.

And Jesus is calling us to be profoundly and deeply engaged in this world, sent into this world, to be engaged with this culture.

And the very antagonism of the world makes our engagement much more vital. Jesus sends us into the world that hates him but which he loves so that all who believe in him may not perish but have eternal life.

And he doesn't leave us to face the world alone but he sends his Spirit and the work of the Spirit is to bear witness to Jesus Christ to penetrate the darkness of ignorance and unbelief with the light of the glory of Jesus Christ.

[19:09] And now that Jesus has gone back to heaven, the prejudice of the world continues. He is still an offense but it is the ministry of the Holy Spirit that breaks through that prejudice and by his witness he accompanies our witness to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Incidentally, you see here one of the clearest statements in all the Bible of the ministry of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not primarily there to give us great feelings or to give us guidance or to make life easy but to bear witness to Jesus.

And how desperately we need the ministry of the Holy Spirit. You can have a flawless witness, you can use flawless arguments, it won't make any difference unless the Holy Spirit is witnessing alongside you.

And the way that the Holy Spirit works is through the witness of the Christian community. As we live our life before others, we pray that they may see our good works and give glory to God who is in heaven.

Through our prayers and through our love and through our spoken word, the Holy Spirit confronts men and women and boys and girls and calls them back to join him and so to live.

[20 : 22] I told this story this week at Nicholas Wilson Memorial Service. it's a true story of a young woman named Christina who was born outside the city of Rio de Janeiro in Brazil.

She longed for the bright lights and the party and one day she packed up a bag secretly and left. Her mother was terrified of what might become of her daughter so she travelled to the city and went to all the sleaziest establishments looking for her daughter, couldn't find her.

And in every establishment she pinned on the wall a photograph of herself with a little, a few words, a simple message written to her daughter. Couldn't find her, went home.

Eventually Christina ended up employed in a brothel and one morning she stumbled down the stairs and she saw on the wall a picture, a photograph of her mother. She took it off the wall, turned it over and there on the back it read, whatever you have done, whatever you have become, please come home and she did.

And Jesus has left countless photos of himself in the world. Everyone who is joined to him, if you flip them over, what our lives ought to say is, whatever you have done, whatever you have become, please come home or perhaps even better, we are a photograph of someone else saying those words.

[21 : 50] Promoting the gospel is much more than a rescue mission. It is a reality mission. There's only one true vine and all people in all the world owe their allegiance.

That's the story of the world. And we bear witness to that one true vine not so that people will be happier or fulfilled but because he is the tree of life and our friends and our family belong to him just as every person belongs to him.

If he is the true vine, abide in him. Love one another. Bear witness to him and pray that the Holy Spirit may bear witness to Christ that he is the vine bringing the true life into this world.

Amen. . . .

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