

John 15.1-17 Sermon / COB / 02.01.15

Introduction

- † **[Slide 1: Title]** Turn in your Bible to John 15.1. We have an interesting teaching from Jesus today. We have heard him call himself the Good Shepherd, the Light of the World, even the Son of God; today, he will call himself a grape vine. He also will tell us how we can be fruitful for God and how we can have his joy! Let's pray and then we will see what he has for us today...

[Slide 2: 15.1-2] John 15.1-2 NET: [Jesus still speaking to the eleven apostles] **"I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener. He takes away every branch that does not bear fruit in me. He prunes every branch that bears fruit so that it will bear more fruit."**

- † In the Jewish scriptures, which we call the Old Testament, God gave his prophets several metaphorical teachings about a grape vine. In each of those teachings, the vine was Israel, as the representative people of God under the Mosaic Covenant. In each of those teachings, the emphasis was that the vine had failed to produce good fruit for God, so God would bring judgment against it.
- † Jesus says he is the "true vine" in the sense that he is the "authentic vine." In contrast to Israel's failure to bear good fruit for God the Father, Jesus is the authentic vine, who will reflect God's character and represent God well, and thus fulfill mankind's, and Israel's, obligations to God.
- People who are faithful to God and who believe in Jesus as the Messiah-savior will become part of the true vine as the representative people of God under the New Covenant which replaced the Mosaic Covenant. Jesus will be fruitful for God the Father through us.
- † **[Slide 3: word play]** John or Jesus used a little word play here. Jesus says God will "αἶρει" branches that do not bear fruit and "καθαίρει" branches that do bear fruit. Apparently Jesus spoke in such a way in Aramaic that it gave John the chance to make a play on words in Greek.
- In Aramaic, Jesus might have used [רְעִין] for pruning and [רְעִק] for removing. [רְעִין] means to clean something for religious use, but I believe it could be used to refer to cleaning sheep for sacrifice, which would be sheering or pruning the sheep, and καθαίρει also could mean to clean.
 - Well, I just wanted to show you how witty John could be, and perhaps Jesus was in on it. We should focus on the real point: that both branches are cut, one to remove it and one to prune it.
- † **[Slide 4: remove]** Every major English translation says that God the Father "removes" or "takes away" every branch that does not bear fruit in Jesus. Some pastors, however, trying to avoid sounding harsh or negative, say that God lifts up those non-fruit bearing branches, that God tries to help them. αἶρει can mean "lift up," but it does not mean that here.
- What we have here are people who do not really believe in Jesus. Think of all the examples we have seen in this gospel, of people not really believing in Jesus, but following him around because they enjoyed his miracles and banter with the religious leaders. We have seen that most noticeably with Judas Iscariot, who remained with Jesus for several years even though he never came to saving faith. Such people are not drawing vibrant and vital life from the source of the vine, so they cannot bear fruit for God, and thus God removes them.

- Churches have people like that today. Now hear me, I am not talking about those of you who genuinely are here seeking to understand about Jesus. I pray God will show you the truth and you will become a fruit bearing branch. But in churches today, there are people who already call themselves Christians, but have not trusted in Christ, have not been reborn spiritually, and thus are not drawing vibrant and vital life from the source of the vine; thus they cannot bear fruit for God and so God will remove them from the vine.

† **[Slide 5: prune]** For those of us who do believe, God prunes every branch that is bearing fruit, so that it would bear more fruit. Does that sound like fun, getting pruned? No, not really.

- If you believe in Jesus, then you are drawing vibrant, vital, life from him, and you will see evidence of that, because you will bear fruit for God. But – as we discussed in a dozen sermons about spiritual growth last year – God’s goal for you is that you become like Christ. So God is going to be pruning you so that you become more fruitful.
- How might that look? If you willfully are sinning, God might let you crash so you turn and submit to him. If you are distracted from God by something in your life, God might take it away, even if it was a good thing. If you are prideful or independent, God might let life break you so he can build you back up. God has pruned me in all three of these ways!
- Even if you are spiritually healthy and living a godly lifestyle, God might let challenges and sufferings into your life so that you continue to grow in your faith and dependence on him, or so you gain experience that will help you minister to others who suffer in the same ways. It was about a year ago that I had to tell you that LeeAnn and I lost our pregnancy; that was the only baby we ever had. I don’t know why that happened, but maybe God allowed it so we could better minister to others who suffered the same pain. Pruning hurts.
- But it is part of healthy life on the vine, so we need to expect it and not get confused, lose faith, or turn against God when it happens. God is far more interested in your spiritual development than in your short-term happiness. So, application step: do some self-pruning; get your life right with God; even so, expect the master gardener to do some pruning too!

[Slide 6: 15.3-6] John 15.3-6: [Jesus speaking] **“You [apostles] are clean already because of the word that I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it remains in the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in me– and I in him– bears much fruit, because apart from me you can accomplish nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is thrown out like a branch, and dries up; and such branches are gathered up and thrown into the fire, and are burned up.”**

† **[Slide 7: clean]** V.3 has the second half of the word play. Jesus says God will καθαίρει fruitful branches and then he says the apostles are καθαροί, meaning clean or pure. He says they are clean or pure, because they have believed in his word, and thus his vital life is now in them, because they are connected to him as the vine. Even so, God will prune them.

- **[Slide 8: must]** Even so, in v. 4 Jesus says, they must remain in him and he in them, because they cannot bear fruit for God by themselves. English translations fail to bring out the full force of this command. Greek grammar scholar Daniel Wallace, of Dallas Theological Seminary, says the form of this verb implies urgency: they must remain in Christ. They must remain dependent on Christ, must remain trusting in Christ, must remain intimate with Christ, must remain submitted and walking in the light with Christ, or they will not be able to bear fruit for God.

- And Christ must remain in them. The NET inserts the verb “will remain” where there is no verb in the Greek. Jesus literally said, **“You must remain in me, and I in you.”** Under the New Covenant, God would cleanse his people, renew them with his vitality, and send his Holy Spirit to indwell them, so they could remain connected to him in faith and obedience. Only if we remain in Christ and Christ remains in us will we bear much fruit.

† If I disconnect this microphone and hand it to one of you, will it amplify your voice? No, because it is disconnected from the system that produces the sound. Apart from Christ, even the apostles could accomplish nothing for God.

- It does not matter how good a person you are, how nice a person you are, how many nice and good things you do, how recognized you are by your community – we could put up a statue to you in the town square and give honest speeches every year about how much you sacrificed for the good of others – none of that matters if you are not connected to Christ, because the only way you can be fruitful for God is if you are drawing life from Christ, so that you are doing his will, by his authority, under his direction, and for his glory.
- **[Slide 9: burn]** Now, what do you country folk do with dead branches? You cut them off, gather them up, and burn them. Self-professed Christians who do not really put their trust in Christ, do not remain intimately connected to Christ, are so worthless to God’s purposes, that he cuts them off, throws them away, and has them burned up in the fire.
- In prophecy, fire often represented God’s judgment, so probably this is a warning to Jesus’ contemporaries and ours today: the choice each of us has to make is to draw spiritual life from the vine of Christ or face eternal death and condemnation.
- Perhaps we can see a warning here also for those of us who do believe. We cannot lose our salvation to face death and condemnation, because Jesus paid the penalty for our sin and reconciled us with God forever. But any moment we are not depending on Christ and walking with Christ, we will not be bearing fruit for God, and then we become just like the worthless and dead branch that is cut off and burned. I have spent most of my life like a worthless branch.
- I doubt any of us want God or Jesus to look at us that way. So, application step: every moment, seek to remain dependent on Christ, intimate with Christ, and submitted to Christ; these are attitudes to cultivate, in other words, learn to be Christ’s representative, Christ’s person.

[Slide 10: 15.7-8] John 15.7-8: [Jesus still speaking] **“If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you want, and it will be done for you. My Father is honored by this, that you bear much fruit and show that you are my disciples.”**

† Let’s note the parallel ideas of Jesus remaining in us and his words remaining in us. The Greek word translated as “words” is the plural of *ῥῆμα*; *ῥῆμα* can mean word, but more often it means a saying, a teaching. And Jesus used a singular verb with the plural noun, so I think he is talking about his whole body of teaching remaining in us.

- The NET Bible notes say this refers to our obedience: that we so absorb the teachings of Christ that we do begin to live like he did.
- Do you remember how to absorb the teachings of Christ? listen to it, read it, memorize it, study it, reflect on it and apply it. These are the ways proven over many centuries of the church.

- † **[Slide 11: if]** Intimately connected with that idea is the reiterated promise about answered prayer. This is a conditional promise: if they remained in him and his words remained in them, they would get what they asked for.
- Just as we said before, if believers really love Christ, then they will remain walking with Christ intimately in the light, which means his words will remain in them, they will be obedient to him, and if they are obedient and walking with Christ, then they will pursue his gospel mission and pray fervently for success in that mission, and whatever they need, it will happen for them.
- † **[Slide 12: glory]** Why would God or Jesus grant our prayer requests? We have heard Jesus say multiple times that he always is trying to bring glory to God the Father. Here he says that God is glorified or honored by believers proving they are Christ's disciples by bearing fruit for God. God the Father and Christ the Son want us to be fruitful in the ministry, in the gospel mission which is our purpose in this time period. When we are fruitful, it brings them glory!
- In part this is because it proves we are Christ's true disciples, his people. Just as Jesus obeyed the Father and did the works of the Father to prove his son-ship and love for the Father, so the people of Christ obey and do the works of Christ to show our discipleship and love for Christ. So, another application step: seek to obey Christ and pursue his mission.
- [Slide 13: 15.9-11]** **John 15.9-11:** [Jesus will now move away from the metaphor to explain the metaphor more fully; he says...] **"Just as the Father has loved me, I have also loved you; remain in my love. If you obey my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commandments and remain in his love. I have told you these things so that my joy may be in you, and your joy may be complete."**
- † Jesus has said before that believers show their love for him by obeying his commandments, and that they must remain in him. Now he says they must remain in his love, which they can do by obeying his commandments.
- Jesus said before that believers must learn to love each other as he loved us; now he says he has loved us as God the Father has loved him. And just as Jesus remains in the Father's love by obeying the Father, we remain in all this love by obeying Jesus.
- † As always in scripture, we are given the ultimate standard to follow. Jesus was absolutely sinless, which means he was absolutely, 100%, obedient to the will of God the Father, and thus proved his love for the Father was absolute as well.
- We will never attain that level, but we must strive for it; in baseball, you never can bat 1.000, but every at bat you try to get a hit; we must strive for Christ's perfection, knowing the Holy Spirit will empower us if we submit to Christ and yield to the Spirit moment by moment.
- † **[Slide 14: joy]** Now, if remaining connected to Christ's love and continuing to draw vital life from his source are not sufficient incentive for us, with our sin-addled brains, Jesus offers us another benefit: if we remain in him, in his love, through walking the top line in faith and obedience with him, then we will have his joy in us and our joy will be complete!
- If you are new to our church and have not heard about this concept of the top line, I have provided you with a handout you can read later. But the basic idea is that you always have a choice, to walk on the top line in faith and obedience to God's revelation, or to take the bottom line of living by the world's ways.

- Obedience brought Jesus joy, because he was enjoying complete unity and intimacy with God the Father as he walked in the light. The same will be true for us. If we can learn to walk on the top line in faith and obedience, in the light, by dying to our self-interest and living for Christ, then we can experience unity with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we can experience intimacy with them, we can experience freedom from the power of sin, and all this will bring us joy.
 - This is more than happiness that comes from circumstances, more than any sinful pleasure we might attain through bottom line pursuits in disobedience, this is a joy that is sourced in Christ! a joy that is supernaturally transcendent through even our most difficult times in life. When tragedy struck us last year, I grieved, I mourned, I cried; but I still had a joy of being alive, a joy of knowing God, a joy of anticipating the fruitfulness he wants to bring through me in the ministry of this church! And Jesus promises we will have a complete joy, beyond what we thought was possible.
 - We talked last week about finding peace and hope through Christ, and that is related to what Jesus says here. Intimate connection to Christ through Spirit empowerment to obediently walk by faith in the light with Christ is the key to experiencing true joy, peace, and hope.
 - In contrast, if we detach from the vine, if we start to depend on ourselves or others instead of Christ, if we start to seek worldly ways of coping or worldly solutions to our problems, if we walk in doubt or disobedience, then our joy and peace and hope will diminish. Maybe we are seeing symptoms of that in ourselves these days... The key to all success is to remain in Christ, connected to the vine, drawing empowerment, identity, purpose, direction, and lifestyle from him, so that we bear fruit for God.
- † God designed a certain way of life for people and he designed us for a certain way of life. Jesus modelled and taught about the way of life that would bring us the most blessing. What we learn about it often seems counterintuitive to us, because it is countercultural, anti-worldly, anti-fleshly. So our impulse will always be to err on the side of our instincts, our upbringing, what we see work in the world – to take the bottom line route – but that impulse will be in error.
- How do we ensure we do not err? We immerse ourselves in prayer, scripture, and the ways of God, so we remain in Christ and we keep his words remaining in us. It seems like every week I talk with people inside or outside the church who tell me they have no joy or no peace; so I ask, “How is your quiet time?” “Oh no, I don’t really have quiet time regularly; I’m too busy for that.” I cannot help them. As your pastor, I am telling you, I cannot help you if you will not do the fundamental things to draw sustenance from the vine.
 - I know you don’t have thirty hours a week to spend in Bible study like I do. Thank you for paying me to do this, by the way. But I bet you could find thirty minutes a day for God. You don’t have to start there, you can start with five minutes, but I bet you could find thirty minutes a day for God. Will that hurt? Yes. You will have to do some self-pruning. You will have to give up something you like, maybe a TV show, time with your friends, time to study or work overtime to make extra money, which means you cannot buy something you want.
 - If you don’t do this, you are saying that time with God is not as important to you as whatever else it is that you are doing. Do you want to say that to God? Do you really want to do that to yourself? Pruning is painful, but it is less painful than continuing down the wrong path.

[Slide 15: 15.12-13] John 15.12-13: [Jesus speaking] “My commandment is this– to love one another just as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this– that one lays down his life for his friends.”

- † Jesus has said they must show him love by obeying his commandments. Now he summarizes those with the new commandment he had given them earlier in this conversation: they must love each other as he has loved them. This means they must learn to love one another humbly, sacrificially, and unconditionally.
 - And Jesus emphasizes that his love for them includes that he is about to go die for them. This is the depth of his love, that he would die for them and in that death take on all the condemnation they deserved from God the Father for their sins. He asks his followers to show such love for one another, that they would sacrifice anything, even their lives, for each other.
- † During his ministry, Jesus taught that two commands summarized all of the Old Testament commands: love God with all of yourself and love each other as yourself. The rest of the Old Testament ethical guidance shows us how to love God fully and how to love each other fully in the way that God defines love.
 - In the church age the same principles hold true. Here Jesus is assuming their love for God and himself: we heard him say last week that they must love him by obeying, and now he says they can obey by loving each other as he loved them.
 - We still need to learn the rest of what the Bible says about the Christian, godly, lifestyle, so we can know how God expects us to show him love and how God expects us to show each other love, because it is not the same as what we learn in the world about showing love.
 - But whenever we want to think concisely about what Christ wants from us, we can remember that greatest commandment, which Jesus slightly modified on this last night: we must seek to love God with all of ourselves and to love each other as Christ has loved us.

[Slide 16: 15.14-17] John 15.14-17: [Jesus still speaking] **“You are my friends if you do what I command you. I no longer call you slaves, because the slave does not understand what his master is doing. But I have called you friends, because I have revealed to you everything I heard from my Father. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that remains, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name he will give you. This I command you— to love one another.”**

- † Those who obey Jesus are friends who love him. The slave has to obey the master without understanding the reason for the commands, but the friend has a more intimate relationship with the master, the master reveals himself to the friend, and so the friend obeys not only out of a sense of obligation or under threat, but out of love for the master and understanding of the master’s will.
 - The apostles had a full revelation of Christ, so Jesus calls them friends. We have the revelation of Christ the apostles wrote for us in the New Testament and enlightenment about that scripture from the Holy Spirit, and as we come to love and obey Jesus, we too become friends who obey out of love and understanding.
 - This is an incredible privilege! God the Father, Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit care enough about us to choose us and reveal themselves to us, so we can sense their love and understand their character and will for us, so that we can obey out of love and understanding instead of by obligation or threat of judgment.
 - But never should we take this privilege for granted! A few times in scripture, certain people are called friends of God, but never is the Father, Son, or Holy Spirit called our friend. They always

are the master, the Lord, deserving of our utmost respect, reverence, and even healthy fear. They have chosen to grant us gifts of grace, and those gifts help us become people of God, but we never deserve them or earn them, and we never outgrow our legitimate place as slaves.

Conclusion: fruitfulness

† **[Slide 17: fruit]** One more question... what is fruit? Or what does fruitfulness look like? I have not define this yet, so your brains could be processing it...

- We could consider that at the beginning of our passage today, Jesus was contrasting himself with Israel, who did not bear good fruit for God the Father. Jesus is the authentic vine, who reflects God's character and represents God well, and thus fulfills mankind's, and Israel's, obligations to God. This would be bearing fruit.
- **[Slide 18: reflect]** To reflect God's character, we share his values, ethics, and priorities. To represent God, we live like Christ, including ministering to others inside and outside the church in God's name. To fulfill our obligations, we obey the commands God gave us through Christ.
- This means we will be involved in the gospel mission of sharing the truth with non-believers to lead them to faith in Christ, and working together in community with fellow believers to raise each other up to spiritual maturity and truly love one another as Christ loved us.

† **[Slide 19: Jesus]** Broadening our perspective, we could look at this whole dialogue. Judas Iscariot left the building in John 13.30; then Jesus began to teach the apostles what they needed to know.

- Jesus said he was coming into his glory and bringing glory to the Father by his crucifixion and resurrection. This would reflect his perfect obedience and thus perfect love for the Father, and further the gospel mission by making provision for salvation and defeating the plans of evil.
- To bear fruit, for Jesus, was to bring glory to God through perfect love which led to perfect obedience which led to loving others sacrificially and living sacrificially for the gospel mission, to the point that he would be willing to die for others and the mission.

† **[Slide 20: believe]** Jesus told the apostles they must have faith in him just like they had faith in the Father. This is the only route to salvation and cleansing. This salvation connects us to the vine and leads to the Holy Spirit indwelling us, and thus empowering us in multiple ways.

- The Holy Spirit will empower us to love Christ and thus obey Christ's commandments. Jesus connected love for him, obedience to him, and bearing fruit for God. So our love for the Father and the Son, and our obedience, are either forms of fruitfulness or the path to fruitfulness.
- The Holy Spirit will empower us to obey the summarizing commandment, to love one another as Christ loves us, which Jesus said will prove we are his disciples, which brings God the Father glory. In our passage today, Jesus said being fruitful would prove we are his disciples and thus bring the Father glory, so one form of fruitfulness is to love one another as Christ loves us.
- The Holy Spirit will empower us to further the gospel mission in even greater ways than Jesus did while he was here. Later, Jesus will tell the apostles they will testify for him. As the apostles and we pursue this mission, we will learn to pray in Christ's name, and Christ will grant those prayers, bringing us success, which he says brings glory to God, and thus is fruitfulness.

† **[Slide 21: title]** So we might say to be fruitful is to bring God glory in three ways:

- We are to love God with all of ourselves, which leads to obedience, which leads to sacrificially loving and serving, which brings God glory.
 - We are to love one another as Christ loves us, which leads to sacrificially loving and serving, which brings God glory.
 - We are to pursue the gospel mission and pray for success in Christ's name, which will bring ministry success, which brings God glory.
 - You know what we have here? The great commandment and the great commission, the two guiding commands for the church in this dispensation, this time period between when Christ was here and when he returns.
- † If we have spiritual life, we will bear fruit. If we have spiritual life, we will experience transformation so that we come to love Christ and seek to become like him and obey his commands, and thus we will learn to love one another with God's kind of love and be involved in the gospel mission, and be praying fervently for help in being fruitful in that regard for God's glory, and then our prayers will be answered with fruitfulness that will both prove our relationship with Christ and bring glory to God, and this will lead to greater intimacy with Christ and to our own joy and peace.
- † I am speaking with the force of my convictions today, but I am not judging anyone. I struggle with these things too. But it breaks my heart to know that Christ has made provision all the promises in scripture – for not just life, but abundant life! – and that Christ has made provision for our success in walking by faith and obedience. So our failure to be intimate with Christ and to experience his joy and peace are due to our own obstinacy to continue going down the wrong path.

[slide 22 is for communion] [transition to communion]