

1. The vine and the branches

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[0:00] Well, let's turn together to John's Gospel, chapter 15, page 901. Now, we were studying chapter 14 of John's Gospel together a couple of months ago.

I think it was in March. And my plan, God willing, is to work through chapter 15 and chapter 16 over the next few weeks. I think between now and late July. I think I have seven sermon slots in the course of the next ten or eleven Sundays.

So it won't be quite every week, but I trust we'll be at the end of chapter 16 sometime in July. Now, this evening, I want to take just these first eleven verses of chapter 15. And if you're suffering at all this evening from the blues, from the glooms and depressions of life under the sun, usually it's under the rain in this part of the world, but it's not just at the moment.

But if you are suffering, I do trust that tonight's study will lift your heart. The reason I say that is because of what Jesus says in verse 11, at the end of our little chunk.

Look at verse 11. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

[1:18] Now, these things must refer to everything that he has just said in verses 1 to 10. So if my sermon tonight makes you miserable, or makes you burst into tears, you'll know that I've been misreading Jesus' words and giving you a false message.

These words clearly are designed to bring joy to the disciples of Jesus. So let's be assured from the start that we have in verses 1 to 10 a message intended for that purpose, to bring the joy of Jesus into the hearts of his followers.

Now, I realize that not every person here tonight will necessarily be a Christian. I'm not speaking on the assumption that everybody here is a Christian. If you're not, we are very delighted to have you here.

This is the place for you to be. We love to welcome those who are trying to find out about the faith and want to know more. And we want to encourage you to keep on coming week after week. All of us started that way as being not Christians.

And we heard the gospel, and eventually we came to Christ. So we're delighted to have you. But I'm not assuming that everybody here is a Christian, though I know that the great majority are. Now, the original hearers of these words were the 11 disciples.

[2:29] Judas Iscariot had just gone. But the 11 disciples had the blues at this stage, and very understandably. Because Jesus is telling them throughout chapters 14, 15 and 16 that he is about to leave them.

Now, that was enough to make them miserable. They didn't fully grasp the horror of what was about to happen to Jesus himself on the very next day, the Good Friday. But they were most uncomfortable.

And if you glance back to chapter 13, verse 33, that will give you a clue as to why. Look at 13, 33. He says to them, little children, yet a little while I am with you.

You will seek me. And just as I said to the Jews, so now I also say to you, where I am going, you cannot come. Well, that was enough to make them miserable. But that wasn't all.

Just look back to chapter 13, verse 21. Truly, truly, says Jesus, troubled in his spirit, truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me.

[3:32] So these 11 men are most unhappy on this Thursday evening. They don't see the full picture. But they understand enough to make them full of foreboding. And it's to these unhappy disciples that Jesus speaks these words, which he says will bring joy into their hearts.

Now, they were going to need his joy in the years ahead to sustain them through their future difficulties and persecutions as they took on the leadership of the early church. Now, of course,

these words, although addressed to them, are recorded for posterity, for believers of all generations.

So if we who are believers, if we want to have the joy of Jesus in our hearts, let's drink in these words and get them deep into our systems. I quite recently discovered a type of cake called lemon drizzle cake.

You ever come across that? The female elements in my family have been making lemon drizzle cake at home in the last few months. And what you do is you bake a very ordinary, dry-looking sort of cake.

You know, one of those rather unappetizing-looking yellow cakes. Not a sponge. One of those hard yellow cakes with a touch of lemon flavor in it. But you then make a rich, thick, lemon curdy kind of sauce.

[4 : 51] And then you make a lot of thin boreholes in the top of the crust of your cake. And then slowly and carefully you drizzle your rich, lemony mixture onto the top of your cake.

And you watch the mixture sink down through the boreholes until it permeates the whole cake. And believe me, friends, you then have a Rolls Royce of a cake.

Now, in a rather similar way, I know it's a trivial illustration, but in a similar way, the words of Jesus, in fact, any words from any part of the Bible, are meant to permeate our systems.

To get deep down inside us. These words were never intended, as it were, to sit on the top of our minds and to get no further. So let's allow them to percolate into our systems.

That's really what Jesus means in verse 7 here, when he speaks of his words abiding in his disciples. His words are to take up residence in our hearts and minds.

[5 : 48] And when they do, his joy will be in us and our joy will be full. All right, well, let's look at the passage. There is one central command in these 11 verses.

And everything in the passage helps us to understand that command and unfolds it and teaches us why it's so important. And that command comes in verse 4. Abide in me.

There it is. And it's repeated in a slightly different form in verse 9, where Jesus says, Abide in my love. Now, that's really the same command. But by adding the words, in my love, Jesus is giving us an even better view of what he means.

To abide in him is to abide in the very best place, which is in his love. So that is the command to obey if we are to know the joy of Jesus fully in us.

Now, at one level, that's rather an odd command for human beings to listen to and to come to terms with. If somebody asks you, where do you live or where do you stay, you're not likely to say, I stay in Christ, are you?

[6 : 57] You're much more likely to say, I stay in Shorelands or in Byers Road. We think of ourselves as the residents of a particular town or a particular street. And yet Jesus is also asking us to stay in him.

If you like, to be people of two addresses. I stay in Glasgow, but also I stay in Jesus. Glasgow is my home, but Jesus Christ also is my home.

So that's the command. Abide in me. That's the heart of the passage. And I'll try to draw out what Jesus means under three headings. First, let's relish the metaphor that he uses.

Jesus sets his teaching here in the form of a simple metaphor or picture. And that's the picture of a vine and its branches. So he says in verse 5, I am the vine, you are the branches.

In other words, I am the plant itself, and you, my disciples, who belong to me, are the branches. You're attached to me. You're joined to me. And if you are to be living and fruitful, you need to remain attached to me, part of me.

[8 : 07] Because if you're taken away from me, you will quickly wither and die. We don't need to have a diploma in horticulture to understand that fact. We all know that if a branch is taken away from the stem or the trunk, it will quickly die.

Now, Jesus chooses the vine for good reasons. I suppose he could have chosen the scotch thistle, couldn't he, or the English rose. But they wouldn't have served his purposes half so well.

He chooses the vine for two reasons. First, it was a common plant in ancient Israel. There were vines all over the place. And the vine is a fruitful and wonderful plant, and people knew all about it. But grapes are delicious, eaten fresh, and they make wine, which was an important part of Israeli life then, as it is today. So Jesus' disciples were very familiar with vines and their fruitfulness.

And most of his disciples as well would have been familiar with the way in which vines were cultivated. They would have seen the vines in the fruiting season covered with delicious bunches of grapes. And equally, they would have seen the vines directly after the harvest was taken, being cut right back, pruned hard, so as to make them fruitful for the following year.

[9 : 21] So it was an easy and familiar picture for them to understand. And that's one reason why Jesus chose this picture. But the second reason why Jesus chose the vine was because the vine was a great Old Testament symbol for the people of Israel.

If you're jotting down references, note down Isaiah 5. I read the first seven verses earlier. And also Psalm 80, which is an interesting psalm about the vine as well. And in both of those passages, the writers lament the fact that everything has gone wrong with God's vine.

So in Isaiah 5, which I read earlier, the prophet laments that God's vine is producing no decent fruit at all. All it's capable of producing is wild grapes or sour grapes.

And in Psalm 80, the psalmist laments that God's vineyard has been broken into. The wall has been broken down. Wild beasts from the forest have come in and they're ravaging it and tearing it apart. The wild boar is coming and grubbing it up and so on. So the people of Israel, who should have been a lovely, fruitful nation, producing the fruit of a life lived in joyful obedience to the law of Moses, were willfully misbehaving and were coming to all sorts of ruin.

[10 : 37] So to put it mildly, they were in a theological mess and an ethical mess. They were a blighted vine. So when Jesus says hundreds of years later, in John chapter 15, I am the true vine, people who knew their Old Testaments would have looked up at him with a sense of astonishment.

For two reasons. First, he is taking the very name of God, the I am, onto his lips and he's claiming it for his own proper title.

That's a claim to deity. That was an astonishing thing. But secondly, he's telling his friends that he is the true Israel. He is the very embodiment of Israel.

He's really saying, I am Israel. I am the people of God. And when you belong to me and are united to me, you truly belong to God's people. Abide in me therefore and I will abide in you.

If you will remain part of me, then you will belong to the true people of God and you will belong forever. So let's relish this metaphor of the vine and the branches.

[11 : 46] It's a lovely picture. It's intended to be pleasing to our minds. And if you should get the happy opportunity to travel down into the southern parts of Europe, into the Mediterranean sometime this year, do look out for vineyards.

You won't find too many vineyards in Dumbartonshire. But you'll find plenty of them down in southern Europe, in Portugal and Spain and Italy and so forth. And if you get a chance, have a look at them.

See how they're cultivated. Have a look at the pruning especially. It will help you to understand this passage. Drink a little glass of orange juice as you inspect them as well.

Or something else for your stomach's sake. Now to be part of the vine, to be part of the vine is to be part of Jesus. Think of that. It is to belong to him. To belong to his people.

Now that's a very precious thing. So many people these days feel very detached and isolated. As though they hardly belong anywhere.

[12 : 46] Hardly even in their own families. But when you become a Christian, you become part of Jesus and his people. And the longer you live and grow as a Christian, the more wonderful you realize it is to belong to the Lord and his folk.

In fact, eventually, your identity in the church becomes more important than your identity in your own family. So there's the first thing.

We're to relish this metaphor, these words of Jesus. Because they're part of the joy of knowing him. Now second, we're to understand the purpose.

Understand the purpose of belonging to the true vine. And that purpose is fruitfulness. Just look at verse 5 here.

I'll pick it up part way through. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit. For apart from me, you can do nothing. Or look at verse 8.

[13 : 51] By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples. Look on to verse 16. We'll be there next week, but let's have a preview.

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. And then look back to verse 2. Every branch of mine that does not bear

fruit, God the Father takes away.

It's useless. And every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Now you'll see from verse 1 that Jesus explains that God the Father is the vine dresser, the gardener, if you like.

He's the one who does the cultivating and the pruning. And his purpose is that Jesus' disciples should bear fruit. And if that's the case, we can be quite sure that the Father keeps a loving eye on every one of the branches of the vine, because his concern is with our fruitfulness.

Now isn't that something to make the disciples of Jesus joyful? God the Father is not indifferent to the way that we live. He regards every Christian in terms of our potential fruitfulness.

[15:08] In fact, Jesus tells us in verse 9 that fruitfulness in our lives is evidence that we're disciples in the first place. The fruitfulness demonstrates, proves, the discipleship.

Now, we'll ask what exactly this fruitfulness is in just a moment. But let's first notice the simple fact that fruitfulness depends upon our union with Jesus.

The fruitfulness of the branches comes from the power and life of the vine itself. So when you think of a Christian that you know who is a mature and ripe and fruitful Christian, what do you say about that person?

Do you say, what a fine man he is? Or what a fine Christian woman she is? Well, yes, it's not inappropriate to speak like that as long as we remember that it's the power and life of Christ that has transformed that life and has made it beautiful and useful.

If your life is bearing fruit, it's because you're part of the vine. It's because of your union with the Lord Jesus himself and the power of his life coming up into your life.

[16:18] So, what is this fruit? It's interesting that Jesus doesn't actually define it in this passage. But a little thought will quickly put us on the right track. Just think again of the metaphor, the picture.

The vine is Jesus and his disciples, many of them, are the branches. The life and power that they receive comes from him. It's his power, his vitality that flows into them causing them to blossom and fruit.

So, in a real sense, the fruit is not theirs, it's his fruit. It's the expression of his characteristics. It's an outward, visible demonstration of his own qualities, his mind, the mind of Christ, our Savior, his values.

So, I think we can say confidently and yet very simply that this fruit is Christ-likeness. to grow as a Christian is to grow more and more like Jesus.

We learn his mind. We learn to love the things that he loves. We learn to hate the things that he hates. He is the perfect man. He's what human beings were always intended to be.

[17:28] He is, indeed, what Christian human beings one day will actually be because the promise is that we shall be like him. And if we belong to him now and abide in him, his likeness will more and more be reproduced in the actual way in which we live our lives.

Let me quote a lovely comment here from John Stott. John Stott writes, The Christian is likened to a fruit tree, not a Christmas tree. For the fruit grows on a fruit tree, whereas the decorations are only tied onto a Christmas tree.

You see the point of that? The fruitfulness really is produced by the Christian because he is united to Christ. We don't tie on the fruits of love and kindness and patience and joy like Christmas tree decorations.

The fruit genuinely begins to grow out of our hearts and minds. So the Christian is not some kind of con man or hypocrite who puts on a pretense of godly qualities so as to impress other people for a short time.

No, these qualities are the genuine expression of the life and power of Jesus within. So what kind of qualities are an expression of Christ-likeness?

[18:48] The more we study the Bible, the more we come to see how detailed and diverse are the characteristics that are valued and approved by God.

You quite often hear people today saying that the only thing that's really important is love. Love for God and love for other people. Now friends, that simply won't do.

The Bible forces us to be much more thoughtful and careful and detailed. Let me try to list just a small number of the qualities that characterize the Lord Jesus. You could name hundreds, I'm sure. Let me just list a few of them. a passionate concern for those who are lost and who need to hear the Gospel. A readiness to pray to the Father and really to trust Him.

A willingness to suffer for the sake of the Gospel. A willingness to be put to public shame if necessary for the sake of the truth.

[19 : 50] A longing for the Kingdom of God to come and to be fully revealed. A joy in God and His truth and His kindly power.

A delight in those who love God and belong to Him. A willingness to give things up, to live a sacrificial life, to give up comforts and money and privileges for the sake of the Gospel.

A willingness to speak out, to be unashamed of the Gospel. A quick readiness to be forgiving and to be merciful.

And then there's that quality in the Lord Jesus that hates sin. There's His resolute antagonism towards everything that opposes God and stifles human life and happiness.

His hatred, therefore, of idolatry and greed and sexual immorality. In fact, anything that undermines marriage. His hatred of falsehood and stealing and hypocrisy and everything that misrepresents God and speaks untruth about Him.

[20 : 56] His hatred of everything that degrades and demeans human life and threatens to deface and destroy the image of God in human beings. Now those are just a few aspects of the character of Christ.

Are those things beginning to grow and develop in our characters? If they are, we are beginning to bear fruit. We are proving to be His disciples.

Now let's notice an important element in this fruitfulness. And that is the pruning carried out by the Father. Here's verse 2 again. Every branch of mine that does not bear fruit He takes away.

And every branch that does bear fruit He prunes that it may bear more fruit. So God the Father lovingly inspects every branch of the vine.

Some, He notices, are entirely fruitless and He takes them away. Now these must be people who profess to belong to Jesus but have never really been His at all.

[22 : 00] Judas Iscariot would be a prime example of this. A man who was close to Jesus, very much involved in Jesus' own band of followers and the work but who in the end showed that he was Jesus' enemy.

Now there will be people like that who show an interest in Jesus for a while perhaps even to the point of professing to be Christians but who in the end prove to have no desire to serve Him or to belong to Him.

Well verse 2 tells us that the Father will remove them. They've borne no fruit and verse 8 tells us that fruitfulness is the demonstration of real discipleship.

Now what about the branches that do bear fruit? Well verse 2 tells us that the Father prunes them so that they will bear even more fruit. Now if you're a well-travelled European traveller and you've been down to southern Europe you'll have perhaps noticed what the vineyards look like either before pruning or afterwards and you will have seen just how much they're reduced by pruning. It's not just a snip here and there. They're cut right back hard to the point where most of the growth is taken away. The fruiting vine in the summer when it grows up it's several feet high covered in grapes but after pruning it's not much more than a stump.

[23 : 18] The pruning is really very hard and it has to be very hard if there's to be a good crop the following year. Now think of this in terms of the Christian's life. If you're somebody who's been a Christian for some years maybe many years you will know that the divine secateurs have been strongly applied to your life.

You'll know that the Lord has cut away aspects of your life which would hinder your fruitfulness and some of these prunings may have been very painful.

You know that. If you don't mind me speaking rather personally for a moment I'd like to illustrate this from my own early life as an example of the Lord's purposeful pruning in a young Christian's life.

This may be particularly helpful for the younger people here this evening. I was pruned in two particular ways and both of them were very painful. The first concerned a girlfriend.

I was a university student at the time and I was madly in love with a girl whom I'd known since I was 13. And she was fond of me too.

[24 : 28] There was a certain reciprocal affection you might say. And she and I saw a lot of each other. She was great fun to be with. She was pretty and vivacious and her parents were very nice people and they seemed pretty happy that I was courting their daughter.

But she wasn't a Christian and I was. And I knew that if I married her I could not be a fruitful Christian.

So I broke the relationship off. It was exquisitely painful. I did it on my 20th birthday. It was the worst birthday I've ever had.

But that was a formative decision. And some years later the Lord provided me with a delightful Christian girl whom I could marry. And indeed I did marry her.

The second pruning happened soon afterwards. I think I was 22 or 23. By this stage I was no longer an undergraduate. I was a student in training for the ministry. Now at that stage I belonged to a very good small choir.

[25 : 40] And this small choir regularly put on concerts, made recordings with the BBC cut discs and so on. And singing with this choir for me was a profoundly delightful and stirring experience.

But the choir rehearsed on Saturday evenings. And Saturday evenings was when the University Christian Union met for its Bible teaching evening.

And as a young minister in training, and I was a year or two older than the undergraduates, I needed to be there to encourage them, spur on certain individuals that I was looking after and praying for.

So I had to make a decision. Which was going to come first? My own musical pleasure and delight? Or the work of building up the Lord's Church?

So again, I took an exquisitely painful decision and I stepped down from the choir. Now, those two decisions, although they happened in my life a very long time ago, they remain to this day the two most difficult moral decisions that I have ever made.

[26 : 49] In both cases, I knew that I was standing at a crossroads. And as I look back, I'm so glad that the Lord gave me the strength to decide as I did.

They were painful prunings. In both cases, I lost something that I valued greatly. But that pruning enabled me to reset my understanding of what was really valuable.

If something was lost, in the end, very much more was gained. Now, friends, we must learn to welcome the pruning secateurs, the divine secateurs, because our Father, the vine dresser, is more concerned with our fruitfulness than with our comfort.

We need to understand the purpose of belonging to this vine. And that purpose is to bear fruit. And if we're to bear fruit, then pruning will be necessary.

Now, third, let us obey the command. And the command is, abide in me. Now, it's really very striking that this comes to us as a command, as an imperative.

[28 : 11] Because you might expect Jesus to say, you're a Christian, are you? In that case, you are abiding in me. Fact. There's nothing further that you need to do.

But that's not the way he puts it. Instead, what he's saying is, you're a Christian, are you? You're a branch of the true vine. In that case, stay with me.

Now, why should he need to express it as a command? The answer is that he knows that sometimes we will be tempted to drift away from him. For example, it may well be that there are folk here.

I haven't got x-ray eyes, so I can't see the inside of your heads. But there may well be folk here this very night who are tempted at this very moment in their lives to drift away from him. And that's you might even be saying in your own heart, I'm finding the Christian life very tough.

It seems so painful and unrewarding. I'm a bit depressed by it. So I'm tempted to go out through that door tonight and never come back. That's why you need to hear that Jesus is commanding you to stay with him.

[29 : 22] Abide in me, he says. Stay with me. Don't even think about deserting. The final end of deserting is to be cast away. Now all of us will be tempted to leave him when the road gets rocky.

But the Son of God is commanding us to stay with him. Now you might want to say to me, come on Edward, are you not a Calvinist?

Do you not believe that those who belong to Christ will abide in him come what may? Well yes, I am a Calvinist and I do believe that those who belong to him will stay with him. But that fact doesn't in the least bit take away from the sharp edge of this commandment.

He is commanding his people to abide in him. He is not saying there, there, you will always remain in me, so relax. He is saying you make sure that you do remain in me.

In other words, those who will remain must also take steps to remain. So let's notice the incentives that he gives us to abide in him.

[30 : 23] There are great incentives here. Let me name three very briefly. First, if we don't abide in him, our lives will come to nothing. Look at verse five.

Whoever abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. Separated from him, our lives can only be fruitless.

So without him, we might live comfortably, we might make money, we might raise families, we might do well at work, but our lives will be wasted as far as the kingdom of God is concerned.

Then secondly, to abide in him is to abide in his love. Look on to verse nine here. As the father has loved me, so have I loved you.

Abide in my love. love. And verse ten, 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.

[31 : 32] Now do you see how those two verses hang together? Jesus is drawing a parallel between our relationship with him and his relationship with the father. The father, he says, loves him hugely, with all the capacity of the creator of heaven and earth.

And Jesus has loved his disciples in just the same way, with that same depth of love. Verse nine, as the father has loved me with all that greatness, so I have loved you.

So if we're Christians, we are loved, loved, loved. So stay in that love, he's saying. Don't imagine that life outside my love is worth living. So this means, friends, that we can rejoice every day in the reality of his love.

love, we can depend every day on the support of his love, we do nothing to grieve his love, and we learn to do the things that delight him and please him because he is the one who loves us so much. And what will all that mean? It will mean, thirdly, here's our third incentive, that we keep his commandments. We learn obedience. There it is in verse ten.

[32 : 41] If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love. That's the way to abide in his love, to keep his commandments. So abiding in Jesus and in his love means learning obedience to him.

Now that's a lifetime's job. We don't learn it all overnight. But as we learn obedience, we discover what it is to abide in his love. So we'll end now where we started in verse eleven.

Why has Jesus said all these things to his disciples? All these things about abiding in him, about the divine secateurs to prune us, about fruitfulness and obedience.

Well let's listen again to verse eleven. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

So friends, the message is simple and straightforward. And I want you to watch my lips for it. If you're chewing gum at this very moment, let your jaw be still just for a moment.

[33 : 43] If you're hungry and your mind is beginning to wander across to the blue lagoon, bring it back to John 15, 10 and 11. Or if you're dreaming about Celtic or about rangers or about partic thistle even, leave the sacred turf in your mind and bring your mind back to John 15, verses 10 and 11.

The message is this. If we will live our lives in obedience to the Lord Jesus, we will be filled with his joy. Disobey him and we will be miserable.

I can promise you. But learn obedience and we will be filled with his joy. Now, of course we will suffer. It's part of the package. It's part of what it means to be a Christian.

We'll suffer taunts and persecutions and traumatic, painful setbacks, bereavements, illnesses, unemployment, unfulfilled dreams on the human level.

all that. But if we obey the Lord Jesus, we will abide in his love. That's his promise. And our hearts will be filled with his joy.

[34 : 51] He promises these things. He means it. And he will do it. Let's bow our heads and we'll pray.

Let's bow our heads and we'll pray. Our dear Lord Jesus, you know our hearts so well.

You know that we need to hear this command to abide in you, to stick with you, to stay in you. And we thank you so much, dear Lord, for this great incentive that as we do this and learn obedience, your joy will be in us and our joy will be full of we thank you for the Christian life.

We thank you for all that it means and the delight and security and pleasure that it brings to your people. So our dear Lord Jesus, fix our minds we pray upon you, fix our hearts upon you afresh in

trust and obedience and help us even in these coming days this week, even in the midst of difficulties and traumas, to experience the joy of knowing you and of being part of the wonderful vine that is you.
We pray it for your dear name's sake. Amen. Amen.