

The Fullness of Joy

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[0 : 00] But we're going to turn now to our reading for this evening, and Edward is continuing his series through John's Gospel. And we are in John chapter 15. If you're using one of the church visitor Bibles, you'll find them on page 901.

So John chapter 15, and we're beginning at verse 1. Jesus said, I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine dresser.

Every branch in me that does not bear fruit, he takes away. And every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.

Already you are clean because of the word that I've spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.

I am the vine. You are the branches. Whoever abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit.

[1 : 19] For apart from me, you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me, he is thrown away like a branch and withers. And the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this, my Father is glorified that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples.

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. 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.

These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. This is my commandment, that you love one another, as I have loved you.

Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends, if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing, but I have called you friends.

[2 : 37] For all that I have heard from my Father, I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you, and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you.

These things I command you, so that you will love one another. Well, amen.

May God bless his word to us. Well, good evening, friends. Very good to see you all here this evening.

Let's turn to John's Gospel, chapter 15. And if you have one of our church Bibles, read hardback, I think you'll find it on page 901. Good to see Harry Clark back here.

Welcome back, Harry. Haven't seen that face for a few months. Anyway, so John 15, 1 to 17. That's our passage for tonight. Now, the setting of this chapter is the upper room in Jerusalem, where Jesus has just finished the Passover meal, the Last Supper, which he's been celebrating with his apostles.

[3 : 59] 11 apostles, because at the end of chapter 13, Judas Iscariot has disappeared into the night to finalize his arrangements for Jesus to be arrested.

And Jesus does just about all the speaking from the end of chapter 13 to the end of chapter 16, largely uninterrupted. And this whole passage is known as the upper room discourse.

And in these chapters, Jesus is instructing his apostles so as to prepare them for their future role. Now, remember, these are very ordinary men.

They're not big brain intellectuals. Four of them, at least, have been commercial fishermen, like the boys who man the trawlers around the Scottish coasts. One of them has been a tax collector, like our friends who work for his majesty's revenue and customs.

These are ordinary men. But on this particular evening, they are weary and confused. They don't know what is about to knock them sideways on the following day, which is the day of Jesus's death. [5 : 04] But they're aware that Jesus is teaching them that he is very soon going to leave them. And that prospect is making them dismayed and bewildered.

How are they going to manage without their all reliable rock like leader? What does he mean when he says he's going away and then he's going to come back again?

Well, they're not able to take in very much on this gloomy, difficult Thursday evening. But the heart of what Jesus is teaching them is that when he goes away back to his father's house, they are not going to be left like orphans, hapless, helpless, clueless, because the father is going to send them the Holy Spirit.

And the Holy Spirit will not merely replace Jesus. He will do far more. He will live with and in the apostles and he will strengthen them immeasurably.

They will be hated and persecuted by Jews and Gentiles, but they will endure. They will stand firm and the Holy Spirit will enable them to bear witness to Jesus.

[6 : 14] In other words, to tell the world the truth about Jesus. And what was true of the apostles in the first century is equally true of Christians in every generation.

That the Holy Spirit takes up residence in every believing Christian and enables us to endure opposition and to bear witness about Jesus. Think of that word for a moment, to bear witness. It's as though each Christian is being asked to testify in a court of law. And we're on oath to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth about Jesus.

That is one of the prime responsibilities of the church, to tell the world the truth about Jesus. And that's what we do, not only by what we say, but also by how we live.

Now this evening we're picking up Jesus' instructions at roughly the halfway point in his discourse. Last week, if you were here, you'll remember that we focused on verse 27 in the previous chapter, chapter 14.

[7 : 17] Just look back to that, 1427, where Jesus says, peace I leave with you. In other words, I'm leaving it as a legacy for you to enjoy. It's my peace that I give to you, he says in that verse.

Now in tonight's passage, Jesus centers his teaching not on his peace, but on his joy. Look at chapter 15, verse 11. These things I've spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

These things, well, which things? He must mean the content of verses 1 to 10 here. So if we can grasp what Jesus is saying in verses 1 to 10, if we can grasp it and accept it and obey it, we'll find not just joy growing in our hearts, but his joy.

That's the promise of verse 11, that my joy may be in you, which will lead to your joy being full. And that's why the title of my sermon this evening is The Fullness of Joy.

Now you probably know that in Galatians chapter 5, the Apostle Paul describes what he calls the fruit of the Spirit, by which he means the evidences of the Spirit's presence in the lives of Christians.

[8 : 36] And in that passage, Paul speaks of the Spirit's fruit as having nine elements. You may have learned these off by heart when you were young, but here they are again.

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Now the first three of those nine are love, joy, and peace.

Now look with me at chapter 15, verse 10. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love. Verse 11. These things I've spoken to you that my joy may be in you.

And back to chapter 14, verse 27. Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. And in each of these three verses, the word my is prominent.

It's my love, my joy, my peace. He's not talking about these things in an abstract philosophical way. What he says is intensely personal.

[9 : 39] It's all to do with him. My love, 1510, is something you will abide in. My joy, 1511, is something that will be in you and will fill you right up.

And my peace, 1427, is something that you will possess as a permanent ongoing legacy. So back to chapter 15, verse 11.

These things I've spoken to you that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full. So what are these things which will bring the joy of the Lord Jesus into our hearts?

I'll try and unpack the passage. In verses 1 to 10, Jesus introduces and develops a metaphor. He takes us in imagination to a vineyard and he pictures himself as a vine with spreading branches.

There is a vine dresser, his own father. Jesus is the central stem or trunk of the vine and the many branches are his people.

[10:45] You'll notice that the father is armed with pruning secateurs, as verse 2 explains. And there is a bonfire nearby, as verse 6 indicates.

And as Jesus develops his metaphor, it becomes very clear that the purpose of this vine is to be fruitful. Look at verse 8. That you bear much fruit.

And of course, fruitfulness is the purpose of any vineyard. Acres of vines can look very beautiful. But the purpose of planting them is to produce fruit.

I remember some years ago being on holiday in northern Spain with some friends. And one day we took a long walk of several miles through an area that was full of vines, long stretches of vineyard. It was October, but the fruit still hadn't been picked. And these vines were heavily covered with dark red grapes, luscious grapes. It was a scene of great beauty.

[11:44] But I was well aware that the vines were not being grown for their beauty, but for their fruit. Now, Jesus uses this vine metaphor because in his day there were many vineyards in Israel.

And his apostles would have been very familiar with them. They would often have seen the vine growers, the vine dressers, pruning the vines after the harvest was gathered. So Jesus was tapping into their local knowledge so as to teach them an important lesson about the meaning of discipleship.

But he was also tapping into their knowledge of the Old Testament. Because at several places in the Old Testament, God uses the picture of the vine to represent his own people.

For example, there's a telling passage in Isaiah chapter five, where the prophet Isaiah introduces a song. The prophet is like a singer songwriter.

And he starts like this, Isaiah five, verse one. Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard. That's a lovely start, isn't it?

[12:47] Gather round, you music lovers. I'm going to sing you a love song. Everybody loves a love song. But this love song has a sting in its tail. The prophet goes on like this.

My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones and planted it with choice vines. He built a watchtower in the midst of it and hewed out a wine vat in it.

And he looked for it to yield grapes. But it yielded wild grapes. Sour grapes. So he goes on. Men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard.

What more was there to do for my vineyard that I've not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? And the Lord goes on to say that he's going to destroy the vineyard and make it into a wasteland.

And then he explains what good grapes should look like and what he meant by wild grapes or sour grapes. He says, for the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel.

[13:55] And the men of Judah are his pleasant planting. And he looked for justice. But behold, bloodshed. He looked for righteousness. And behold, an outcry.

Outcry. It's a heartbreaking love song. The Lord expected the fruit of righteousness and justice to characterize the life of Israel. But all he saw was bloodshed and the outcry of poor downtrodden people whose life was being squeezed out of them by rich, often drunken landowners.

Now, there are other passages in the Psalms and the Old Testament prophets that picture God's people as a vine. But they make just the same point that the vine and the vineyard utterly failed to live up to the owner's expectations.

So when Jesus says in John chapter 15, verse one, I am the true vine. Well, he's taking the divine name on his lips.

That's for one thing. But he also means I am the true Israel. The old Israel failed to produce the fruit of righteous and holy living. But I'm the new Israel that replaces the old.

[15:07] The old Israel proved to be spurious, utterly corrupted and compromised. But the new people of God created to be truly fruitful are my people.

I am the source of their life and vitality. As the branches of a vine draw their sap and their strength from the central stem. So my people draw their life and their fruit bearing power from me.

Well, that's the metaphor. Jesus is the vine. The apostles are the branches. And by extension, every member of the Lord's church is a branch of this great vine whose branches spread now right across the world.

And keep being added to as new people come to Christ and put their trust in him. Now, the passage has much to say about the Christian life. So let me try and draw out some lessons.

First, we need to ask what Jesus means by the fruit. What does a fruitful Christian life look like?

Well, the passage from Isaiah chapter 5 helps us.

[16:12] God was looking for righteousness and justice in his people. In other words, godly living. A lifestyle that conformed to the Ten Commandments and all of the law of Moses.

Jesus' life on earth was exactly that. A life that fully conformed to God's law. So if we who are Christians are organically united to him, as the branches are to the stem of the vine, it means that his life, his lifestyle, and his values will flow like sap into our own systems.

And we will begin more and more to display his characteristics in the way we conduct our lives and our relationships. In short, the fruit that God is looking for is Christlikeness.

Just think again of Paul's ninefold fruit of the Spirit from Galatians 5. Because that's another way of describing the fruit of John chapter 15. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Christians sometimes think and sometimes teach that fruitfulness means success in winning people for Christ. Now, if the Lord helps us to win other people for Christ, helps us to be effective evangelists, that is wonderful.

[17:36] And let's pray and work to that end. But I don't think that's what Jesus has in mind here. When you think of that Old Testament background of God planting his vine in the promised land, and looking to it to yield the good grapes of justice and righteous living, I think we must conclude that righteous, true, holy living is what Jesus means by the fruitfulness of the people of God.

Well, now, secondly, if we're Christians, and if we want to have fruit-bearing lives, we must expect God the Father to prune us.

Just look at the middle part of verse 2. If our lives are beginning to show the fruit of godly and Christ-like features, the Father is not content to leave us as we are.

Out come the divine secateurs. But he knows how to use them so as to make us more fruitful. I personally am a very amateur gardener.

I'm keen, but largely clueless. I have some black currant bushes in our garden, which fruit quite heavily. And every year, after I've picked the currants, I do a kind of hack it and whack it job on the bushes.

[18:58] I've never learned how to prune them properly. But it's fairly effective because the bushes keep on producing every year. And I know that if I did nothing at all, they would grow into a kind of hopeless tangle.

And I'm quite certain that their productivity would plummet. Now, look again at verse 2. The Father is purposeful. When he sees a branch that is showing signs of usefulness, he sets about it, snipping and clipping.

And that pruning process is inevitably painful. To prune a branch is to reduce it. It's to reshape it. The bits that are taken off are the bits that are not capable of producing fruit.

So this means that the Lord engineers and shapes our circumstances. His concern is less for our comfort than for our fruitfulness.

So, for example, some of us will find that he reshapes our career plans. Others may find that he doesn't let us marry an unsuitable person, but makes us wait until a suitable one appears.

[20:06] He's interested in pruning away idols, things that absorb our interest and energy too much and push him out to the margins of our life. Sometimes these things simply have to go if we're to be useful Christians.

Ouch, we say. Ouch. And sometimes it is ouch, ouch and ouch. But the pruning is done by the one who knows what is best for us.

It's always for our benefit. The Lord's pruning is never destructive. It's always good for us. And it leads to verse 11. That the joy of Jesus will be in us and that our joy will be full.

Well, here's an idea. When this service is over a little bit later, if you're a young Christian or a youngish Christian, go to somebody who's a lot older than you are and ask that person what kind of pruning they have had to submit to and whether with hindsight it was good for them.

Come and ask me if you want to. I can certainly give you a few ouch stories from my life, which did me a lot of good. But let's welcome the divine secateurs. God's intention is that each one of us should live the kind of life that honors him.

[21 : 24] Look onto verse 8 here. By this my father is glorified that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. The fruitful Christian life brings glory to God and demonstrates that we are true disciples of Jesus, not fair weather followers who slink away when the going gets tough.

Now, there is another way as well in which the father uses the divine secateurs. The fruitful branch he prunes. But, verse 2, every branch of mine that does not bear fruit he takes away.

Judas Iscariot must have been very much in his mind when he said that because Jesus could have been described as a branch of mine. He was, after all, one of Jesus' twelve picked men.

But he showed himself in his true colors when he betrayed Jesus. But it's not simply Judas that Jesus is thinking about here. Look onto verse 6.

If anyone, anyone at all, does not abide in me, he is thrown away like a branch and withers. And the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned.

[22 : 39] Notice that painful piling up of verbs. Thrown away, withers, gathered up, thrown into the fire, burned.

Friend, do not be a branch of that kind. It does happen. It's impossible to imagine how awful that would be. But it needn't happen to any of us.

And it won't happen to any of us if we abide in the Lord Jesus. That's what verse 6 is saying. It only happens to the one who does not abide in him. Well, a quick review of what we've looked at so far. First of all, the fruit that God looks for is Christ-likeness. And second, we must expect and welcome the purposeful pruning and reshaping of our lives by God the Father.

Well, now thirdly, we must ask, what does it mean to abide in the Lord Jesus? That, after all, is his central command in these verses.

[23 : 42] Look at verse 4. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.

And he says it again with a slightly different emphasis in verse 9. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love.

So in verse 4, abide in me. In verse 9, abide in my love. So what does he mean by these things? Well, let's start by remembering that the New Testament teaches in many places that a Christian, by definition, is in Christ.

In Christ. Now, certainly, to be a Christian involves believing the great doctrines of the Bible. It involves coming to church meetings regularly. It involves following the Bible's teaching about our ethical conduct.

All these things are important. But the essence of being a Christian is to be in Christ. To be personally, vitally, organically related to Jesus himself.

[24 : 50] To be in Christ does not mean to be inside him, but to be united to him. Rather in the way that a human limb, like your arm, is united to the whole body.

And it lives and works because it's part of the body. My arm is not inside me, but it's organically united to the rest of my body. So to be a Christian is to be already in Christ.

That's our starting point when we become believers. So the command to abide in him must mean to develop and deepen this already existing relationship.

To keep taking steps which will further and foster that relationship. But there's another aspect of this as well. Looking in at verse 4. Abide in me and I in you.

So it's a two-way residential. And that is such an encouragement to us. He is undertaking to abide in us as we take steps to abide in him.

[25 : 56] Look back for a moment to chapter 14 and verse 23. 14, 23. If anyone loves me, he will keep my word and my father will love him.

And we will come to him and make our home with him. So he has already promised to take up his residence in us. If you're a Christian, he is there.

He's with you and he is in you. So it's a two-way abiding relationship. Let's think about both sides of it. First, let's think of him indwelling us.

If he is abiding in us, we must welcome his indwelling and rejoice in it. He's more than a guest in the house that is me. He's the owner of the house.

He's the lord of the manor. So my part is to welcome him day after day to allow him to control me. My part is to say to him, your wish is my command.

[26 : 54] He's the source of my life. As he says back in chapter 14, verse 19, because I live, you also will live. The ongoing Christian life is entirely dependent on his life.

Our physical life is sustained by Lidl and Aldi, by the National Health Service, and hopefully by the Bank of Scotland.

But our real life stretching forward into eternity is sustained by his life as he abides in us. That's him in us. But the big command of the passage is for us to abide in him.

Well, to explain what this means, let me first read you some words from J.C. Ryle. Abide in me. Cling to me.

Stick fast to me. Live the life of close and intimate communion with me. Get nearer and nearer to me. Roll every burden on me. Cast your whole weight upon me.

[27 : 59] Never let go your hold on me for a moment. Now, of course, this command, abide in me, implies that we have a certain choice in the matter.

If abiding in him was automatic, we wouldn't need the command to abide. After all, we don't need anybody to command us to keep breathing, do we? We just do that automatically, without any thought at all.

But we need the command from Jesus to abide in him because there are certain times when we think it might suit us not to abide in him. For example, the devil pops up and says to us, ha, ha, ha, ha, here am I again.

You know me, don't you? Your helpful, providential, caring advisor. I have a program of delights for you to enjoy. Come hither with me. And you are sorely tempted.

The devil has power, and you know it. So when the temptation arises, you have to make a decision. Will I abide in Christ?

[29 : 00] Or will I keel over and submit to the devil? Temptation comes to us in a thousand different forms. But if we cling to the Lord Jesus as the limpet clings to the rock, we shall be safe.

Learning to abide in him involves developing a number of habits. First, there is no substitute for regular personal Bible reading and prayer.

As you sit down with your own Bible at home and you read it, he speaks to you from his words and you respond by speaking to him. It's a two-way conversation.

Try and do that every day if you can. It guards the soul and keeps us abiding. Secondly, do be at church as much as you possibly can on Sundays and midweek meetings.

Because in a wonderful way, our presence with each other drives us again and again to our Lord Jesus. Our hearts become rewarmed. You might just have felt a little bit sluggish and reluctant when you left your cozy home this afternoon.

[30 : 05] And your television set showing Wimbledon. But when you stepped up the church steps and came in through the big doors and you were greeted by a smiling face, the icicles in your heart began to melt.

And you remember that one of the greatest reasons for coming to church was to help you to abide in Jesus. Thirdly, let's often have brief moments of conversation with the Lord Jesus during the course of every day.

Talk to him when you get out of bed in the morning. That can be a bad moment, can't it? But it's a good time to have a quick prayer. Talk to him as you go to work.

Maybe you get out at a certain bus stop or a train station and you have to walk for a few hundred yards. Why not make that every day a time of prayer, talking to things over with him?

Talk to him as you wash the dishes, as you walk the dog, as you clean out the rabbit hutch. Look again at verse five. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit.

[31 : 10] Abiding in our Lord Jesus is indispensable to living a godly life, a fruit bearing life. Let me read to you from one of my commentaries.

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.

The holiness of some professing Christians is Christmas tree holiness. It is a purely artificial decoration and external conformity to Christian standards.

Authentic Christian holiness is a visible manifestation of the invisible Christ life within. As the fruit ripens naturally when the branch is abiding in the vine, so Christian character develops naturally when the Christian is abiding in Christ.

Isn't that a great incentive to abide in him? I guess we've all done a bit of Christmas tree holiness. I'm sure I have. But the real thing is what we need. But we can't produce this lovely fruit by ourselves.

[32 : 23] If we try to, it will be Christmas tree decoration. Look at the end of verse five. It's the one who abides in me that bears much fruit for apart from me, you can do nothing.

He means nothing of lasting value in the sight of God. Of course, there are things we can do apart from Christ. We can earn a living. We can put bread on the table. We can grow cauliflowers in the back garden, but nothing that pleases our Lord and brings honor to him.

When I was at the theological college in England, all the students in our college were given working placements. We were all attached to some local church where we could practice things and develop experience.

And in my very first term at college, I was attached to a little parish church in the depths of the English countryside, a place of woods and fields and babbling brooks.

Now, the vicar there had been a missionary in the Far East, and he'd had to return home because of health problems. He was small, thin, kind, gently spoken, and his name was Mr. Atkins.

[33 : 34] And I had to preach the sermon at this little parish church on this particular Sunday morning. It was the first sermon I ever preached, and Mr. Atkins led the service. I think I was 22 years old.

Anyway, at the end of the service, I said to Mr. Atkins, you've been a minister for a long time. Is there any one tip you can pass on to a beginner like me? Well, he paused for a moment, and then he said, he said, yes.

John 15, 5. Apart from me, you can do nothing. That was a very wise word to pass on to a giddy youth.

And as you can see, I haven't forgotten it. It's still there in my memory. We can't produce the fruit of Christlikeness by our own efforts. But as we learn to abide in him, there will be fruit, and certain other things will follow.

For example, first, our prayers will be answered. Look at verse 7 here. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

[34 : 39] So if his words abide in us, our prayers will be fashioned according to his will expressed in his words. So we shan't be asking him for things to tickle our own vanity.

Things like absurd fancy cars, or wins on the lottery, or perhaps have a pet cheetah to walk with around Bella Houston Park. No, we'll be asking for things which the Lord values.

For example, you might say, Lord, I'm 20 years old. Look at me, I'm young. I might live to be 95. Please use me for all those years to the full.

Please take hold of all my abilities, however small they are, and use me to extend your kingdom. That's a pretty good prayer to pray, isn't it? Not just when you're 20.

Then a second consequence of our bearing fruit is that God the Father will be glorified. Look at verse 8. By this my Father is glorified that you bear much fruit.

[35 : 37] So people will look at you and they will say, how wonderful God is. He has taken hold of that very ordinary young man, that ordinary girl, and has shaped them into something extraordinary.

Praise God for his kindly work. A third consequence is at the end of verse 8. That you bear fruit and so prove to be my disciples.

The bearing of good fruit demonstrates that a person is truly a disciple of Jesus. That is something to covet. And a fourth consequence is there in verse 11.

These things, especially my commandment to abide in me. These things I've spoken to you, that your joy may be full, because my joy will be in you.

Well, we'll turn more briefly now to another commandment, which like the commandment, abide in me, will also bring joy to us. It's expressed in verse 12.

[36 : 37] And you'll see it's repeated in verse 17. So verse 12, this is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. And if you glance back to chapter 13, verse 34, you'll see that he says just the same thing there.

And he defines this as his new commandment. A commandment which is not found in the Old Testament, but which is of the essence of the Christian church. Love one another just as I have loved you.

Now we're bound to ask, why do we need to be commanded to love one another in the church? And command, after all, is a very strong word, isn't it? And Jesus uses that word command or commandment in verse 12 and in verse 17 and in chapter 13, verse 34.

So why the command to love? Are we not all obviously lovable? The answer is, no, we are not. And we need to have a realistic view of ourselves.

Very occasionally, you do meet a person who is very sweet nature, don't you? All sunshine, no thunderclouds. But my guess is that 99% of, over 99% of us are not like that.

[37 : 54] There's a shocking verse that comes in Titus chapter 3, where Paul is reminding Titus of what people are like before they come to Christ. He writes, Is Paul exaggerating when he says that?

I don't think he is. He's not suggesting that everybody who is not a Christian is incapable of acts of kindness.

But Paul is uncovering the deep toxicity that lurks in human nature. Think of Paul himself. He had been a religious terrorist, hounding Christians to prison, in some cases, persecuting them to their deaths.

We're all capable of developing strong hostilities towards other people, even towards other Christians sometimes. Which is why Jesus commands us to love one another.

He's countering something deep in our natures, and he is commanding us to turn away from it.

Behind the commandment to love one another is the assumption that Christians spend a lot of time together.

[39 : 11] We don't live in a commune. We have our own homes to go to and our own tables to put bread on. But Jesus assumes that we do spend considerable parts of our lives together.

When we put our trust in Christ, we become part of a body of people who have a responsibility to relate to each other well. You don't hear this said much these days, but when I was young, you would sometimes hear people saying, Of course, you don't have to go to church to be a Christian. Christianity is a private affair. I can spend my Sunday in my greenhouse with my tomato plants and be a very good Christian. No, Colonel Fotherington, you can't. It tended to be retired colonels with stiff upper lips and bristly mustaches who said that kind of thing.

But they were clueless about apostolic Christianity. To become a Christian is to be immediately placed in the church. As we say here at the Tron, you step on board and you quickly learn to be a crew member and not a passenger.

And it's a lovely thing. Now, of course, it makes demands on our time and our energy, and so it should. But it also tests our characters. Because as we give ourselves to serving others and working together with others, the problem spots in our characters get exposed.

[40 : 33] We might find ourselves being impatient or short-tempered with others, envious of their abilities, even greedy when the plate of biscuits gets passed around and you fail to get the most chocolatey one yourself.

Coming to terms with our natural lack of love can be humbling, but it's very necessary. Paul says bluntly to the Roman Christians in Romans 12, I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment.

In other words, it's best not to think of oneself as a swan when one is really a farmyard duck. So what do we learn from Jesus' commandment to us to love each other?

First, it's obligatory. It's not an option. He's commanding it. He's not suggesting it. We might think, but how can I love everyone in this church?

Especially that rat who said that nasty thing to me the other day. Well, Jesus' reply would be, he may have said something nasty to you, but he's not a rat.

[41 : 41] He's your brother. And I died for him because I love him. You mustn't be resentful of somebody for whom I laid down my life. Paul says beautifully to the Colossian Christians, You must bear with one another.

A great verb, isn't it? You must bear with one another. And if one has a complaint against another, forgive each other. As the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

Must forgive. Otherwise, we'll allow resentments to build up in our hearts. We all need to be forgiven from time to time. And the Christian learns to be quick to forgive.

A quick forgiver. Now, when Jesus commands us to love each other, he's not issuing a command which is impossible to obey. We need to decide to be active, proactive in loving each other with practical service, praying for each other, seeking each other's welfare.

Loving one another is an obligation. Then secondly, loving one another involves self-sacrifice.

There it is in verse 12.

[42 : 53] This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you. And he's saying that just what he said back in chapter 13, verse 34. The new commandment is new because you are to love one another as I have loved you.

That's the new thing. That's a higher standard of love than even the second great commandment of the law, Moses. The second great commandment says you're to love your neighbor as yourself. But to love one another as Jesus has loved us involves a searching level of self-sacrifice, even to the point of being willing to die for one another, literally die for one another.

And that's what Jesus goes on to explain in verse 13. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends. And that, of course, is what Jesus did for us.

And that's what he's saying we are to be willing to do for each other. Nothing is more radical. During the Second World War, in one of the Nazi concentration camps, a number of prisoners were rounded up one day from whom a selection was to be made for execution.

[44 : 06] Some were to be selected to be killed. Others were going to be spared. When the Nazi guard pointed to one man and said, you are selected, the man cried out, please spare me.

I'm a married man. I have a young family. And at that moment, a Polish priest named Maximilian Kolbe, also a prisoner, calmly said to the guard, select me, please, instead of this man.

I'm willing to die. And the guard did as he asked and spared the married man. Maximilian Kolbe was locked up in a solitary cell without food or water, and he died some days later.

Now, that's the pattern that Jesus has set for us. He laid down his life to save many lives. So in that famous verse 13, he's telling his own story.

It's the ultimate expression of love. And he commands us to follow his example of self-sacrifice. And this is what he calls real friendship, to lay down one's life for one's friends.

[45 : 14] And he says in verse 14, you are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing.

But I have called you friends for all that I have heard from my father. I have made known to you. In other words, you are so much more than servants.

In the old fashioned big house in Scotland or in England, the butler and the scullery maid hadn't a clue what his lordship and her ladyship are thinking and planning.

They're merely servants. They're below stairs. But Jesus says to his apostles, you are my friends because, verse 15, I'm telling you everything that my father has told me.

I'm holding nothing back from you. Now, of course, we're still his servants. We're not his friends in the sense that it's a mutually equal friendship. He remains our lord and we remain his servants.

[46 : 15] Even the apostles like Paul and James and Jude all called themselves bond servants of Christ. But he doesn't leave us in the dark about his father's plans and purposes.

He shares wonderful truth from heaven with us, especially the gospel, the astonishing revelation that sinners who deserve nothing but the judgment of God can be forgiven and accepted by God because Jesus laid down his life so that ours might be spared.

Well, we must end where we began with verse 11. These things I've spoken to you that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full.

These verses that we've been studying this evening hinge upon two great commands of Jesus.

Look back for a moment to chapter 14 and verse 15, 14, 15.

If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And the two great commandments of chapter 15, verses 1 to 17 are first, abide in me.

[47 : 22] And second, love one another. If we're reluctant to obey either of these commandments, our life as Christians is begun is bound to become lean and thin.

But if we abide in Christ, pressing on day by day to abide in him ever more closely. And if we learn to love each other with self-sacrificial love, we will certainly discover that his joy will be in us and that our joy will be full.

Well, let's bow our heads and we'll pray. A new commandment I give to you that you love one another just as I have loved you.

Our dear Lord Jesus, you have loved us with such love. We can never comprehend it fully, but help us to grasp it more deeply.

We are weak and we need your help every day. But help us, we pray, to abide in you and in your love and to learn to love each other so that your joy may be in us and that our joy may be full.

[48 : 49] And we ask it for the sake of your name and your glory. Amen. Amen. Amen.