

The Fruitfulness of Christ's People

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[0 : 00] That's all our announcements for this morning, so now we're going to turn to our Bible reading. And Edward Lobb will be opening up the scriptures to us this morning, and he'll be opening up John chapter 15, verses 1 to 17.

John 15, 1 to 17. Jesus says, 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, 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.

[1 : 42] 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, but the servant does not know what his master is doing.

But I have called you friends. For all that I have heard from the 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, this is God's words. Well, good morning, friends.

[3 : 10] Good morning. That's better. Let's turn, if we may, to John's Gospel, chapter 15, and verses 1 to 17, which is our passage.

I want to concentrate particularly on verses 1 to 11. And my title for this morning is The Fruitfulness of Christ's People. Now, these verses come in the middle of an extended piece of teaching known as the Upper Room Discourse.

And Jesus was giving this teaching to the 11 apostles. 11, because if you look back to chapter 13 and verse 30, you'll see that Judas Iscariot has just departed into the night, so as to betray Jesus to the Jewish authorities.

Now, all this takes place on the Thursday evening before the Friday on which Jesus was put to death. He knows that he's going to be dead by the following evening.

But the 11 don't know that. They're confused. They're anxious. They're aware that something momentous is hanging in the air. But none of them quite knows what the next day is going to bring.

[4 : 26] But Jesus, knowing that the hour of his destiny has now arrived, knowing that the most important events in world history, his death and resurrection, are about to happen, he instructs his 11 apostles about their future.

And that's what these chapters 14 to 17 are all about. Their future. Their work. About how this little band of brothers, fearful, confused, not very bright, just like the rest of us, how they, through suffering and hard labor, are going to be filled with the Holy Spirit, and how they will take to the world a message which will turn the world upside down and will bring into being a body of people, ultimately numbering millions of people, billions of people, who will live for Jesus Christ and who will share the eternal benefits of his death and resurrection.

And that is the church. So if we want a glimpse of history in the making, we get it here in John 14 to 17. History in the making from the viewpoint of 31 AD.

This is the future. This is the church's marching orders. Jesus is telling his friends here about the hardships and the hatreds that they're going to have to endure, and also about the glorious joys and comforts that they will experience.

What a thing it is to be a Christian. Hardships and hatreds, joys and comforts. Now in this passage that we're looking at today, the main point that Jesus is making is that God the Father is cultivating a fruitful vine.

[6 : 10] The purpose of his care for the vine is to make it even more fruitful. And this vine is a picture of the people of God. In former times, this was Old Testament Israel.

But since the coming of Jesus, the vine is now Jesus' people. It's the Christian church. And this is a lovely picture for Jesus to use for the church, for his people.

If you've traveled on holidays to southern Europe, countries like Italy and Spain and Portugal, you'll have seen vineyards, lots of them. In the winter and the early spring, the vines are cut right down, almost brutally cut down.

But in late summer and early autumn, they're beautiful. They're covered with luscious fruit, ready for harvesting. Now look at Jesus' opening words in verse 1.

I am the true vine. This is one of Jesus' great I am sayings in John's gospel. I am is the name of God, revealed originally to Moses at the burning bush in the book of Exodus.

[7 : 14] So when Jesus says, I am, he's proclaiming his identity as God. But he's saying more than that as well. So in this verse, he is saying, I am God's vine.

I'm God's people. All God's people are going to find their identity from now on in belonging to me, in being the branches of the vine, in drawing their life and sap and strength from me.

But I am the true vine in a way that Old Testament Israel proved not to be. Old Testament Israel was a vine which in the end failed to bear good fruit.

There's a chilling passage in the book of Isaiah, chapter 5, where the prophet speaks of God as planting his vine in the fertile soil of the promised land.

The conditions were perfect for growing vines, but the vines dramatically failed to produce good fruit. And Isaiah says this, The vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting.

[8 : 22] And he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed. He looked for righteousness, but behold, an outcry. In other words, the good fruit that God was looking for was a nation characterized by righteousness, by wholesome, godly living, and justice, social justice, and good behavior, as well as justice in the law courts.

But all God found was a people crying out because society was full of violence and oppression and murder. Here is Jesus then, 700 years after the prophet Isaiah, and he says, I am the true vine.

I am the true Israel. The old Israel failed. But in my person, the false has now become true. The old is ended. The new has begun. And you, my apostles, and by implication, all who subsequently put their trust in me, you are the branches of the true vine.

My life and power and vitality will be poured into you, enabling you to bear fruit, good fruit, much fruit, barrow loads of it. You'll see that phrase, much fruit, comes in verse 5, and again in verse 8.

So Jesus is not talking about a meager crop of undersized grapes. He's talking about a wonderful crop, basket loads, cart loads of good fruit.

[9 : 48] So Jesus is teaching us to think of the church like that. Not as a small, embattled, grim-faced group of people who are fighting their corner and fearing for their future, but rather as a vine full of beauty and vitality and fruitfulness.

Yes, of course, there will be battles to be fought, battles which require courage and resolve on our part. But the long-term future of the church is absolutely assured for us by the Lord Jesus.

Do you remember how he says to Peter in Matthew chapter 16, I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. He says, in this section of John's gospel at the end of chapter 16, in the world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.

The future of the Lord's church in the eternal kingdom is guaranteed for us by Jesus' promises. And this is why we are able, even in difficult times, to love the church, to rejoice in the church.

It is a glorious thing to be a Christian. So that even while we're fighting dogged battles with the world's agenda over various issues of truth and ethics, we know that the church's ultimate victory and vindication is assured.

[11 : 12] But before we reach that glorious final joy, the church is engaged in the production of fruit. God the Father's purpose, expressed in verse 2 here in our passage, is that every branch of the vine should bear fruit, more fruit, and that every branch should grow increasingly fruitful.

Now what is this fruit that each branch is intended to bear? Those verses I quoted from Isaiah chapter 5 help us to know what the fruit is. God came to the vineyard and he looked for justice and he looked for righteousness.

The good fruit that he expected his Old Testament people to produce was a godly life in private and in public. A society expressing love for neighbor, discipline in marriage and family life, honesty and truthfulness.

A society where people could trust each other. Jesus then is picking up this Old Testament teaching here in John 15. Paul the Apostle expresses it in Galatians chapter 5 where he speaks about the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

The fruit of the Spirit, he says, is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. So the fruitful church, the fruitful individual Christian life, also produces these beautiful characteristics.

[12 : 43] And Jesus has something else in mind. if you look on here to verse 16, chapter 15, verse 16, I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit.

And that word go suggests the sending out of the church on its gospel mission to make disciples of people of all nations. So he means evangelistic fruitfulness as well, bringing other people to the Lord's salvation, bringing others into the Lord's family.

So to look at a fruitful church or a fruitful individual Christian is to see the fruit of increasing godliness, love and joy and self-discipline, and new people coming to the Lord, rescued from the sorrows of unbelief and brought into the joys of forgiveness and salvation.

It's a beautiful picture of the Lord's people, this fruitful vine. It's a picture for us to enjoy and relish and pray that it will keep growing in our own church and in our own individual lives.

So, what is Jesus teaching here about this growth of fruitfulness? The first thing that he talks about is the Father's part, the part that God the Father has in making the vine fruitful.

[14 : 02] And then secondly, he teaches us about our response, the part that we play. And of course, that is always the order of things in the Bible. God's part comes first, our part follows in response.

First then, God's part. God is the pruner, the cultivator of the vine. Verse 1, I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine dresser.

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 is looking after the vine and pruning the vine because he loves it and he cares about it.

And he's determined that it should be increasingly fruitful. Verse 2 makes this point that he takes away the branches that are unfruitful. Every branch of mine that does not bear fruit, he takes away.

Think, for example, of Judas Iscariot. He had appeared to be a branch of Jesus, but he had to be removed. Verse 6 fills out this picture further.

[15 : 12] The unfruitful branches finally are thrown into the fire and burned. No worse fate could be decreed for them than that. But back to verse 2.

Every branch that does bear fruit, the Lord prunes so as to make it more fruitful. So what is involved in this pruning? Well, think of a vine plant itself.

You have a long, straggling branch where the vitality has diminished and the fruit has become small and scanty. But the expert pruner knows exactly where to make his cuts.

The pruning is not random. The pruner doesn't say, tally-ho, let's hack them and whack them without reason or without knowledge. Not at all. The pruner is skillful. He knows exactly what is needed for each branch.

And that is a great comfort for us. Because when the pruning comes, we know it's for our good as well as for our fruitfulness. It's designed to make us happy as well as productive.

[16 : 14] So what is it that gets cut off by the skillful divine secateurs? First of all, sinful practices. For example, if I'm engaged in hiding information from His Majesty's, Her Majesty's, Revenue and Customs, by sending in an incomplete tax return form, I must stop that and start being honest.

The Lord says, thou shalt not steal. Or if I'm planning to engage in marital infidelity, I must ditch my plans. The Lord says, thou shalt not commit adultery.

Or if I'm thinking of gaining promotion at work by lying about myself or about other people, I must change course because the Lord says, thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.

But the parts of our lives that may need to be pruned away may be practices which are not sinful at all in themselves, may be very wholesome in themselves, but are nevertheless hindering us from being fruitful Christians.

The Lord, in His kindness to us, will sometimes cut more deeply than we might wish. the pruning knife may be very painful. Things good in themselves may begin to dominate our lives and become idols.

[17 : 33] So, for example, climbing Monroe's is a good, healthy thing to do. But if you're away every other weekend climbing a Monroe, your service towards the Lord's people may become thin and unwillingly given.

The idol can begin to grip the heart and the needs of the Lord's people can drop down the list of one's priorities. Any hobby can become like that.

When I was about 22, I belonged to a high-powered choir down in England and I loved singing with this choir. It gave me a very considerable buzz. But I was training to be a Bible teacher and a pastor and I realized that my involvement with the Lord's work and people was being compromised by my involvement in this choir.

So I stepped down from the choir. That was a very painful parting for me. But it set a precedent in my life. These precedents are important.

I realize that the way we behave today shapes the way that we behave tomorrow. To submit to the Lord's pruning today will make it much easier to submit to his pruning tomorrow.

[18 : 43] We become less fearful of the secateurs. We know that they're being used for our good. and we discover that the Lord's purposes for our fruitfulness, although perhaps initially painful, bring great joys in the end.

The Father knows what he's doing as he prunes away at the things that hinder our fruitfulness. It's a gracious pruning. It's full of love for us and it's full of love for the church.

So God's part is to prune. But what is our part? How does Jesus teach us to respond to God's pruning? The answer is he teaches us to abide in him.

Jesus uses that phrase several times here. First of all in verse 4 abide in me and I in you. So it's a two way thing.

It's a mutual abiding. We in him but equally he in us. The phrase comes again and again. Look at verse 5. Whoever abides in me and I in him he it is that bears much fruit for apart from me you can do nothing.

[19 : 58] So our fruitfulness depends upon our abiding in him. The phrase comes again in verse 7 and in verse 9 where it's expanded just a little bit he says abide in my love.

And again in verse 10 if you keep my commandments you will abide in my love. So this teaching about abiding is the dominant thought throughout these verses.

Abide in me abide in my love and if there's no abiding your life will become totally ineffective. Why? Look at verse 5. For apart from me you can do nothing.

No fruit. No effectiveness. So what does he mean when he instructs us to abide in him? The famous FA Cup final hymn brings in a slightly different preposition.

Abide with me. Abide with me. Fast falls the even tide. It's a good prayer to make isn't it? It's a good request to make. The hymn is quite a good one. It's a trifle lugubrious isn't it?

[21 : 06] But there's a different preposition there. Jesus does not say abide with me. He says abide in me. In him. What can it mean for us to abide in him?

Well it means that in a wonderful way we take up our residence in him and he takes up his residence in us. Look back to chapter 14 verse 23 14 23 which helps us to understand this.

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.

Both father and son and the Holy Spirit too come to live within us. So how do we understand this? It's a strange metaphor to use isn't it? I've been racking my brains for some days now to try and find some way of illustrating this amazing truth but perhaps it helps us to think about a good marriage when you first get married you and your spouse begin to inhabit a house or a flat together but as the years go on and you get to know each other better and better it's almost as though you inhabit each other you come to inhabit each other's heads you come to inhabit each other's pasts the kind of family history hinterland of your spouse you get to know well the in-laws the outlaws the angels and the rogues in the family you inhabit each other's work it becomes part of your life doesn't it I'm married to a doctor and I'm amazed at how much medicine I know now without ever having read a medical textbook friends bring your complaints to me at the end of the service

I got cures for all of these things but seriously a husband and wife somehow come to inhabit each other's worlds and after years they grow together like two old gnarled trees in the forest intertwined in each other now to abide in Jesus is similar but it's deeper it's more important even than a human marriage we learn to abide in him in so many ways we abide also in his past the hinterland of history we learn all about the roots of his identity in the old testament and we abide in everything that the new testament shows him to be let me give one or two examples he is the bread of life who nourishes us and sustains us all the way to eternity he's the lamb of god who takes away our sin he's the resurrection and the life promising us that as he was raised to life immortal himself so shall we be he is the light of the world illuminating our moral pathway so that we can make wise and godly decisions when we reach various crossroads in life so much more could be said about him but time forbids it but this needs to be said that to abide in him means that we are becoming more and more like him he's doing more than simply to influence us he's transforming us in paul the apostle's words in romans 8 those whom god foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his son that is what god is doing in us and for us as we abide in Jesus he's making us like him conforming us to his image and because Jesus is the perfect man the perfection of humanity to be conformed to his image is to grow up into our humanity to become more truly human ourselves now think of this also we can't abide in him unless we also abide in the church think again of the vine with its many branches Jesus is the vine stock he's the central stem and all the branches are organically united to each other as well as to him and it must be so if a branch is severed from the other branches it is also severed from the stem we can't abide in him unless we remain united so if you're ever tempted to think for whatever reason church is not for me or

[25 : 45] I'm dropping out of church don't think it that way lies ruin look again at verse six if anyone does not abide in me he's thrown away like a branch and withers and the branches are gathered thrown into the fire and burned that is one of the most solemn warnings in the Bible but it's by one of the greatest promises in the Bible verse five whoever abides in me and I in him he it is that bears much fruit now which would you rather be a verse five branch bearing much fruit or a verse six branch that ends up as a smoldering ruin a pile of ash there are more incentives to abide in him as we look through the passage look at verse seven if you abide in me and my words abide in you ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you now that verse helps us to see what it means for

Jesus to abide in us his words they take up residence deep inside us our heads and our hearts get filled with his words and his words radically reshape our thinking and our values so let's get his words which of course means not just the words that he is recorded as saying himself it means the whole bible let's get his words deeply into our heads there are some words that abide in my head and have lived inside me since I was a little child which don't affect me at all or change me in any way for example nursery rhymes cry when all the boys came out to play Georgie Porgie ran away I've got a feeling that was written about one of the kings of England whose name was George now that rhyme it's been in my head for I don't know how many years but it hasn't affected my intellectual or my emotional life at all but the words of

Jesus look at verse 7 if my words abide in you ask whatever you will and it will be done for you so if his words are deep in our systems we're going to be asking for things in prayer which accord with his words and his values so for example we won't ask God for an expensive sports car in the name of one whose only transport was a borrowed donkey or his bare feet verse 7 doesn't give us license to ask for silly selfish things to bring us trivial pleasures it teaches us to pray in line with the will of Jesus but it's a great incentive to us to pray here's another incentive in verse 8 by this my father is glorified that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples our lives will bring glory to God as they bear the lovely fruit people will look at us and they will say how wonderful

God is to have transformed that man's life like that God will be honored by the fruit of Christ likeness being produced in our characters and as verse 8 tells us this fruit will prove will demonstrate that we really are the disciples of Jesus there's another incentive for us to abide in him in verse 9 as the father has loved me so have I loved you abide in my love as the father has loved me with the same kind of love with which the father has loved me I have loved you well how much has the father loved the Lord Jesus is it measurable is it imaginable can we imagine how great that love is think for a moment of the kind of conversation that might have taken place in heaven back in eternity where the father says to the son my son will you leave the beauty and the bliss of our heavenly home will you leave for a while this wonderful place where you're honored as the prince of heaven and will you go to a place where you'll be dishonored the world and rescue the rebel race of men and women who have despised my love and have turned to their own devices and have decided for self rule my anger is set against them they're children of wrath they deserve to be forever excluded from our grace and from our presence but will you go to them will you die for them will you bear in their place the just penalty for their sins will you be their

Passover lamb crucified dead buried and then raised will you lay down your life for them and then take it up again yes father I will do it for my will is to do your will go then my son I love you I entrust with you this great and demanding commission the father loves the son now verse nine as the father has loved me Jesus says in the same way I have loved you who would not wish to abide in a love as great as that his love for us is of a quality altogether different from the love that we're able to offer to each other Paul prayed for the Ephesian Christians in Ephesians chapter three that they might have the strength to comprehend what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of

[31 : 48] Christ that surpasses knowledge that they might be filled with the fullness of God to know this love and yet it surpasses knowledge that's the way Paul puts it and he prays that the Ephesians will know that this love is immeasurable as Jesus says to us here in verse nine greatly as the father has loved Jesus so greatly has Jesus loved each one of his people there's another incentive in verse 11 where Jesus tells the apostles and us why he is saying all these things to them these things I've spoken to you that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full so in this verse 11 Jesus is telling the apostles why he's giving them this teaching of verses 1 to 10 he wants them to be full of joy but not full of any old joy it's his own joy that he wants them to be full of these things

I've spoken to you that my joy may be in you my joy what kind of joy can have been in Jesus heart on that Thursday evening he knew exactly what the next day was going to bring to him he knew that he would have to suffer the unbearable pain of crucifixion even deadlier and more unbearable weight of carrying the sins of the world and he knew that before the crucifixion actually took place he would be beaten scourged with whips mocked buffeted by the chief priests of Judaism then later that Thursday evening an hour or two after this upper room discourse he would be in the garden of Gethsemane in mental agony his sweat falling to the ground like great goutts of blood what kind of joy can have been in him surely this the joy of knowing that he was doing and fulfilling and completing his father's will pleasing his father by accepting this dreadful task that was laid upon him and the joy also of knowing that after the pain after the awfulness after the dying he would be raised to life having completed his commission as

Paul puts it Christ being raised from the dead will never die again death has no more dominion over him Jesus knew that the author of Hebrews calls it the joy that was set before him he endured the cross so Jesus is joy is the joy of loving and fully obeying God the father in the teeth of pressure and pain and for Christians it's going to be the same if his joy is to be in us it will be the same kind of joy joy in the midst of pressure and difficulty his joy sets the pattern for our joy just look on to verse 18 chapter 15 verse 18 if the world hates you know that it has hated me first or look on to chapter 16 verse 2 16 2 the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he's offering service to God that's the

Christian life that many of our brothers and sisters are experiencing today under real persecution so Jesus is joy is not the joy of eating a shish kebab under a palm tree on a Mediterranean beach it's joy in the midst of great pressure even at times hatred it's the joy of knowing that all is well eternally between the believer and God the father and that the father's glorious home is our final dwelling place to live with him and with the Lord Jesus now interestingly there's a trio of Jesus his own personal characteristics in this discourse three of them look back to chapter 14 verse 27 14 27 peace I leave with you my peace I give to you my peace chapter 15 verse 9 abide in my love and then 15 11 that my joy may be in you my peace my love my joy that's what we receive as we abide in him even when the world is launching its missiles against us but there is one more indispensable requirement for our fruitfulness let's pick it up again at the end of verse 9 abide in my love now verse 10 which shows exactly how we abide in his love he says 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 and notice the parallel there the relationship between Jesus and his father sets the pattern for the relationship between us and Jesus he abides in his father's love by keeping his father's commandments the father commanded him to do the unspeakably difficult thing to come to the world to suffer to die so that we should be forgiven Jesus did it and by doing it he remained in his father's love in sweet and unbroken fellowship he kept his father's commandments and that's the pattern for us Jesus his commandments to us are far less difficult than the father's commandment to him the father's commandment to Jesus was unbearable and yet he bore it his commandments Jesus his commandments to us are far easier they're far less burdensome they somehow get woven into our systems as we allow his words to abide in us but friends every now and again we will find that we are strongly tempted to disobey one of his commandments for some reason a temptation to disobey will come to us which may at the time seem almost irresistible now it's then that obedience counts that's when it matters most if we will keep his commandments at those sharpest moments of temptation we will abide in his love and be filled with his joy and his love will be sweet and precious to us but if we give way at that point of sharp temptation we risk becoming a branch that is taken away and discarded verse 10 is so clear if if if you keep my commandments you will abide in my love the if is crucial obedience to him is the test of our love for him well friends let's aim to be and pray to be a fruitful church and let's aim to be and pray to be fruitful individual

[39 : 20] Christians if in the words of verse 8 we bear much fruit we will prove to be his disciples real disciples that is a wonderful prospect for us a wonderful vision a wonderful incentive the fruit is godly wholesome living and it will come in ever greater quantity if we follow the teaching of the Lord Jesus here it's a great incentive and his teaching I think can be summed up like this he's saying to us all I want you to be fruitful indeed I command you to be fruitful your fruitfulness depends on your abiding in me and your abiding in me depends upon your keeping of my commandments and that is the road to joy for my joy to be in you and for your joy to be full well let's bow our heads and we'll pray together our dear

Lord Jesus we thank you very much for this teaching we picture the fruitful beautiful vine we think of yourself as the main stem and ourselves every one of your people as the branches that draw their life and joy vitality from you and we pray that you will help us so to love you so to be willing to obey your commandments especially when it's tough and difficult for us that our lives prove to be truly and wonderfully fruitful so that the father also is glorified by our lives so we commit ourselves afresh to you and we thank you and ask that your joy your wonderful joy may be in us and that our joy will be full as we abide and we ask it for your dear name's sake amen