

Living On The Vine

New Castle Bible Church

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Text: John 15:1-11

INTRODUCTION

Hudson Taylor was a British missionary to China in the 1800s. Years into his ministry he visited Australia, and one of the ministers there would later write these words...

It impressed me profoundly. Here was a man almost sixty years of age, bearing tremendous burdens, yet absolutely calm and untroubled. Oh, the pile of letters! any one of which might contain news of death, of lack of funds, of riots or serious trouble. Yet all were opened, read and answered with the same tranquility — Christ his reason for peace, his power for calm. Dwelling in Christ, he drew upon His very being and resources. . . . And this he did by an attitude of faith as simple as it was continuous. Yet he was delightfully free and natural. I can find no words to describe it save the Scriptural expression “in God.” He was in God all the time and God in him. *It was that true “abiding” of John fifteen.*

This ability to be at peace when all around is not, to be content in every circumstance. I don't know what burdens you carry today or what most troubles your soul... but I do know that Jesus offers something in this text that calms the storm.

I'd like to take you to the final week of Jesus' earthly ministry.

He and His disciples had entered Jerusalem to mile after mile of palm branches waving. The people were shouting “Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!” Jerusalem was ablaze with patriotism. The King had come, the One who would free everyone from Rome. This, the dawn of a new age!

On Thursday of that week, He and the disciples gathered to celebrate the Passover meal. They were reclining around a U-shaped table as was custom, enjoying the meal together when Jesus began to wash feet. He began to speak and said He's leaving.

The room was filled with confusion: Lord, where are You going?
Why can't [we] follow?
What is the way to the Father?
Why won't you show Yourself to the world?

Jesus, we don't understand?! None of this makes any sense!

Like a king leaving on the eve of battle. The troops were ready, morale was high, and then the king left.

Three years of sacrifice, ministering all around Galilee and Judea, and this is how it all ends?

We believed in You, Jesus...

14:1—“Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in Me”

You’re leaving us, Jesus. False messiahs leave, but You?

14:18—“I will not leave you as orphans”

14:26—“I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, to be with you forever”

They were confused, possibly anxious and fearful... but “peace be still.”

14:27—“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled.”

Peace. The One who had calmed the sea with only a word, now calmed the hearts of His disciples. They knew about worldly peace, being Jewish they were forced to be at peace with the Romans.

Worldly peace is secured by force, such as the *Pax Romana*—a forced peace, a temporary peace, and definitely not a peace that the Jews enjoyed.

Jesus’ peace isn’t secured by force but by His love, not temporary but eternal... and this King lowers Himself to enjoy with us the peace that He provides.

These broken-hearted disciples had preached and ministered alongside Jesus for three years. And this isn’t how their story would end. Why? Because Jesus tells them in John 15 that...

God is still at work in you, still invites you to draw near to Him, and He still loves you.

Main Point: When your heart is troubled, experience life by drawing near to Jesus.

John 15:1-11 — “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. 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 have 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, 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.

John 15 is not an analysis of fruit-bearing or proofs of a true disciple. The tone is one of comfort, meant to encourage the disciples. In verses 1-3, our Lord assured them that God was still at work.

I. God is Still at Work in You (v. 1-3)

After the men finished the Passover meal, they walked outside of town to Gethsemane—a garden on the Mount of Olives. Jesus broke the silence when He said, “I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser.”

Seems like an odd thing to say, doesn't it? But He was recalling a picture of God's ongoing work. It was a reminder to the disciples that God isn't through with them. Let me explain the picture...

Vines and vineyards were to Jews what corn and beans are to us. Israel, particularly Galilee, was a land of well-maintained vineyards. It's been said that if France and Italy are the Old World of winemaking, Israel is the Ancient world. The Jews, during Jesus day, already had a knowledge of vineyards that was more than 3,000 years old.

So, as you might expect, this isn't the first time that the Bible mentions vineyards. Isaiah 5 is one vineyard metaphor—God is the vinedresser who is hard at work cultivating His vineyard, Israel.

And no matter how hard the God worked, Israel remained a wasteland of dead branches... dead branches as far as the eye could see.

Israel wasn't a life-giving vine that gave life to an abundance of branches producing an abundance of fruit. Israel was a wasteland.

But “I am the true Vine.”

Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the comforter who will be with you forever, I'm still with you.

The vine has all the nourishment and pushes its nourishment into the branches through an indivisible connection, a union that the two share.

This means that Jesus is not far off, He's right here. He is ever present, never leaving, always sustaining His people. If you are a believer, you are connected to Him today and forever.

“...and God the Father is the vinedresser.” What is the Father doing? Verse 2 explains...

John 15:2 — “Every branch in me that does not bear fruit [the Father] takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.”

A good vineyard consisted of a thousand vines that would grow along the ground or up the hedges. Each March, the vinedresser would do the first pruning. He could see clusters of grapes forming here and there. What did he do as he walked through the vines? Two things...

Cut off the branches that had no fruit and pruned the branches that do. Branches without fruit weren't diseased or struggling—they were dead branches just hanging onto the vine. The fruitful branches were alive but they produced a lot of foliage.

The disciples that they were “already clean/pruned” because of Jesus’ word (v. 15:3). They had received His teaching. They had been connected to Him, like branches are to a vine. His Word had taught, trained, corrected, and rebuked them—and the Father used the Word in conjunction with the Spirit to forge these men into future apostles.

I’m leaving, but God’s work through you isn’t even close to being done. This is a new beginning!

Pruning is God removing the foliage from our lives. It is God disciplining His people, taking them through trials. As Hebrew 12:7 says, discipline is “God treating you as sons.” It isn’t a sign that God is against you, has abandoned or left you. Trials are proof of His love and ongoing work in your life.

William Cowper, one of the hymn writers who wrestled with depression said, “Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust Him for His grace; Behind a frowning providence He hides a smiling face.”

However things may seem, know that God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are at work in your life.

But one of the disciples didn’t hear any of this. While the others walked to Gethsemane, Judas stayed behind. Judas had ministered alongside the others, and they trusted him as their treasurer. Never once did they think that their treasurer might be a traitor.

Judas was an opportunist who believed if he attached himself to Jesus, the one who would overthrow Rome, this might be a very lucrative gig. There were others like him though...

John 2:24 mentions a crowd who believed in Jesus but John says that Jesus didn’t “believe” in them. He could see right through their phony belief.

John 8 focuses on another crowd that believed in Jesus... and then tried to stone Him when He stepped on their toes.

John 12 recounts Jesus entry into Jerusalem as the people waved palm branches. Many who sang “Hosanna” on Sunday shouted “Crucify” on Friday.

The Gospels are littered with people who were pro-Jesus and nothing more, men and women who liked Him but didn’t love Him. Dead branches, eventually cut off, and as 15:6 says, “gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.”

As opposed to Judas branches, the other disciples had been “cleaned”—they were part of Jesus and He was a part of them. No matter how dark and hopeless things may seem at times... what has happened in your life, whatever you are going through, know that if you are connected to Jesus: *God is still at work in you.* He isn’t finished with you.

He’s still at work—now draw near. Draw near. Verses 4-6 of our passage invite us to draw near to God.

II. God Invites You to Draw Near (v. 4-6)

“Abide in me, and I in you.” “Abide” isn’t a unique word in any way, but “abide” or “remain” is a word that John uses throughout this Gospel and his three epistles. You often see this word describe a relationship like what’s seen here—abide in Me, and I in you.

*Though I’m departing, keep the warmth in our relationship.
Continue to cultivate your relationship with Me. Draw near.*

Abiding in Christ is more than sentiment or feeling.

John 8:31 — “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples.”

John 15:7 — “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you.”

1 John 3:24 — “Whoever keeps His commandments abides in God, and God in him.”

Abiding in Jesus involves knowing His Word and obeying Him. Abiding describes the life of a disciple. Discipleship was a well-known concept, primarily due to the philosophers.

Seneca wrote in the first century that a disciple of Plato or Aristotle did more than “merely [listen] to lectures; he also shared in the [teacher’s] life.” A disciple was a learner who took on the thinking and ways of his master. Usually a teacher had a group of disciples, a school with each disciple striving to become like their master.

That’s exactly what Jesus calls us to do with Him.

A disciple takes on a certain way of life. That’s not a matter of walking an aisle or reciting a prayer. To be a Christian is to be a disciple.

It is to say that I want the Master’s words to characterize My life. I want to study Jesus, know Jesus, observe Jesus, serve Jesus... I want to become in every way like Jesus, my Master.

Keep cultivating your relationship with Jesus. Keep progressing as a disciple. Keep growing and drawing near to Jesus.

Though I’m leaving, the training isn’t over.

*Let My Word pulsate throughout your mind, will, and affections.
Draw near to Me!*

When Socrates died, Plato did a great deal apart from him.

And when Plato died, Aristotle did a great deal apart from him.

But Jesus towered above them all when He said “apart from Me, you can do nothing.”

Only those who abide in Jesus bear fruit. We come to Jesus, sit as His feet, and grow... but never does a disciple of Jesus go beyond Jesus. Apart from the Spirit pushing the life of God through us, we don’t bear fruit.

Let me explain this a bit...

Jesus said He would leave the disciples His peace (v. 14:26).
He encouraged them in 15:10 to abide in His love
and in 15:11, He says He wants His disciples to experience joy.

Love, joy, peace—that's not all the fruit of being Jesus' disciple, but some of it. And we are helpless to produce any of this on our own. *Apart from Me you can do nothing.*

Judas did all the same things as the other disciples. He preached and ministered right alongside them. Had we been there, we might have said, "Wow! Judas has such a successful ministry!" Judas proves it's possible to serve others without actually loving them.

What characterized Judas wasn't love, joy, peace, or any other fruit of the Spirit's work. He was a man of greed and selfish pursuit.

So, you teach classes in the church—do you actually love the people?
You spent an hour in prayer yesterday—did it bring you joy?
You read three chapters a day in the Bible—did it contribute to your peace?

You and I have the strength to produce an appearance, but we are powerless to produce fruit.

I can't make myself joyful, like turning on a light switch.
I can't make you love one another from the heart.
I can't force my children to be kind and gentle.
I can't produce peace in my own life.

I'm powerless apart from Christ. I don't have the strength to produce fruit in me, in you, or in anyone at all... and neither did Jesus' disciples.

Do you feel weak today? Draw near to Jesus, sit at His feet like a disciple, grow in Him, and find strength.

III. God Loves You as Much as His Own Son (v. 7-11)

In verses 7-11, we find something to remember in the midst of a trial. It is that God loves you as much as His own Son. I believe verse 9 is the central thought of these verses,

John 15:9 — "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love."

Love loves to give for another's good. This is the nature of love.

Verses 9-11 encourages our hearts that God delights to answer our prayers, produce fruit through our lives, and gives joy. If you abide, drawing near to Jesus like a disciple... these blessings are yours in abundance, and "My Father is glorified" to give them to you.

First John 4:16 tells us that “God is love.” This means that God’s nature isn’t to withhold but to give. If God was one Person—only the Father, no Son or Holy Spirit in eternity past. If God was one Person, then no one would have existed in eternity past for Him to love.

But God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three Persons distinct and equally God. These three Persons have been in perfect delight and fellowship with each other—the Father giving to the Son, the Son to the Father back and forth before there ever was.

And then the Father willed to create, the Son ordered creation, and the Spirit brought it forth. This perfect fellowship that God experienced within Himself, He extended outward. God invited others into His fellowship that they may participate in His love.

The opening of First John attests to this: “That which was from the beginning... was made manifest [to us]... and we proclaim also to you”

Why? “so that you may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.”

Circles of fellowship that begin with God who desired others to enjoy in fellowship with Him. Circles of fellowship rippling outward from the first light of creation as God invites sinners to enjoy His fellowship.

God is not withholding joy, disinterested in you, or finding reasons to turn you away. He delights to give and to give and to give. That is why Jesus could say, “ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.”

The way that the Son relates to the Father is such that the desires of one perfectly mirrors the desires of the other. The Son delights in the Father, and the Father delights in the Son. Their wills are one and the same, because they delight in each other.

Psalm 34:7 — “Delight yourself in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart.” Abide in Christ, drawing near to Him like a disciple, and your heart will begin to mirror God’s heart. We become like Him when we draw near, and His will becomes ours.

“By this My Father is glorified.”

Your good and God’s glory are not two parallel lines that never meet. Some things are good for me, and other things glorify God. No, they are one and the same.

I don’t know your experiences in life. Perhaps you had a father who pushed you away, wasn’t interested in you, rejected you, or even abandoned you. But that’s not the nature of God. For, “As the Father has loved Me, so have I loved you.”

However much the Father loves the Son is how much He loves you. However much love exists within the Trinity from eternity to eternity, that’s the love that you’ve been invited to enjoy in God’s family.

If ever God loves you, He loves you forever.

Because as the Father loves the Son, so through the Son, you are loved... and in Christ, you always will be.

When so much comfort and encouragement is offered to us, how can we absorb these truths and walk away yawning?

EXHORTATION

Main Point: When your heart is troubled, experience life by drawing near to Jesus.

Jesus' men were "troubled" to know that He's leaving, but this trial wasn't the end of all things. In many ways, it was a new beginning. He wanted them to know as He wants us to know today that:

God is still at work in you, still invites you to draw near to Him, and He still loves you.

Jesus is the physician who can heal our diseases, the manna that sustains our soul, the rock of living water. Draw near to Jesus! Experience life wherever you are today.