

Brian Wilbur, January 17, 2010

A Call to Faithfulness in 2010: In Your Church Part 3

John 15:1-17 (Scripture quotations from the NIV unless otherwise noted.)

## I. Introduction

John 15:1-17 is manifestly about fruit. God's will for you is that you live a fruitful life: that you bear fruit, and not only that, but that you bear much fruit and lasting fruit, and that – over the course of time – you become ever more fruitful. We are not strangers to thinking about the Christian life in terms of fruitfulness. Many of us are familiar with Galatians 5:22-23, "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." We are also familiar with Psalm 1: the righteous man, who delights in the Lord's law and meditates on it continually, "is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither" (Psalm 1:3). Both of these other passages show us that spiritual fruit is not something we manufacture out of our own strength and wisdom. The fruit of the Spirit is the Holy Spirit's work in and through us; the righteous man is fruitful because God's Word is at work in his heart. We are fruitful when the Word of God and the Spirit of God are actively at work in our hearts, transforming us and producing a life that is worthy of the Lord. Jesus says the same thing in John 15:1-17 and shows us that he himself is the key to a fruitful life.

Notice, first of all, that you cannot bear fruit on your own. Jesus is the vine and you are a branch. Being a branch, you are not independently resourceful; you need the sap and strength of the vine. On your own you're useless. Listen to verses 4-5: "Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."

We do not have within ourselves the ability to bear fruit for the glory of God. We want to be fruitful. We want to be patient and kind when someone cuts us off in traffic. We want to give a soft answer in the midst of a heated disagreement. We want to receive criticism and correction with humility rather than with a defensive, self-protective spirit. We want to exercise self-control at all times, even when we are gathered around a chocolate fondue fountain. We want to have hearts that overflow with generosity in service to others. We want to reach out to people with needs in ways that are helpful – in ways that help them experience Christ's love. We want to speak the truth in love – to Christians and non-Christians alike; to have compassion and courage and conviction all held together in appropriate balance. We want our prayers to make a difference: we want hearts to change and unbelievers to be saved and believers to grow and marriages to endure and be strengthened and diseases to be healed, not to mention the fact that we want our own hearts to change and our own lives to be conformed to Christ. We want to redeem the time and make the most of every opportunity. We want our short, brief lives on earth to matter, to make a difference, to mean something; and we want our finite, weak selves to magnify Christ in the way that we live. But by ourselves, we can do nothing. We may be able to mimic productivity in our own strength – but to be authentically fruitful as a God-

glorifying, gospel-loving, self-emptying servants – servants of Christ – who make a profound, lasting difference in the lives of other people requires grace.

## II. The Vine Metaphor

So let's get the picture of this vine metaphor in our minds. The Father is the gardener or vinedresser. The Father is actively working in his garden in order to make his vine maximally fruitful. To this end he cuts off the fruitless branches and prunes the fruitful branches. The Father wants a fruitful vine. And the Father wants the branches in the vine to bear much fruit.

Jesus is the true vine. Jesus has within himself sap and strength, energy and life, nutrients and nourishment. The true vine is intimately and organically connected with the branches: the branches are in the vine and the vine is in the branches. In the same way, Jesus is intimately and organically connected with his people: they are in him and he is in them. Just as a vine supplies life to its branches, so Jesus supplies life to his people; Jesus gives his sap and strength, energy and life, nutrients and nourishment to his people. Moving beyond metaphor, Jesus gives his Word and his Spirit to his people.

The Father is the gardener. Jesus is the life-giving vine. We – those of us who have been grafted into the vine by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone – are the branches. Branches, apart from the vine and on their own, cannot bear fruit. Branches, apart from the vine and on their own, wither and die. Branches, apart from the vine and on their own, have nothing to look forward to except to be “picked up, thrown in the fire and burned.” But be assured: branches are not designed to be fruitless, wither and die; they are designed, rather, to be fruitful and ever more fruitful, and – side-by-side with their fellow branches, all in intimate connection with the vine – to display the glory of the gardener and the life of the vine in this world, that is, to display the glory of the Father and the life of the Son in this world.

As you come to service this evening, are you flourishing or withering? Flourishing doesn't mean life is difficulty-free, pain-free, and trial-free. Withering doesn't mean that life is full of bumps and bruises and hard knocks. Flourishing means, rather, that in the context of your everyday life – which includes difficulties and trials of various kinds – you are living in fellowship with Jesus and Jesus' life is flowing through you for the glory of God and the good of other people. Withering, on the other hand, means that in the context of your everyday life, your life is rooted in something other than Jesus (a person, a task, an idea) and, consequently, Jesus' life is not flowing through you. In brief: flourishing means bearing fruit for God's glory as a result of being connected to Jesus; withering means not bearing fruit for God's glory as a result of being disconnected from Jesus.

So I ask you again: are you flourishing or withering? Look at verse 2: “He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.” While it would be profitable to reflect on these fruitless branches (e.g., how is it that some of branches are in the vine but not bearing fruit?), I want

to focus my attention on the fruitful branches. Suffice it to say that if you examine your life, see no evidence of Jesus' life flowing through you, and see no evidence of fruit-bearing for God's glory, then you really need to take heed. In this case, you need to understand that you are in danger of being cut off and discarded. But it need not be so. God's Word to you is clear: turn from your fruitless ways and trust Jesus for his grace, and then prove your repentance by your deeds (Acts 26:20).

But, as I said, I want to focus my attention on the fruitful branches – on those of you who have been grafted into the vine and who know that Jesus is working in you through his Word and through his Spirit. Do not rest on your laurels. Do not be content with last season's harvest or yesterday's grace. Do not think that you have arrived. Moreover, do not even think that your current level of fruit production is optimal; it is not. God's will is for you to grow in grace and to thereby produce more-and-more fruit at ever-increasing productivity levels. If this sounds exhausting or guilt-inducing, you miss the point. The point is not to take the branch to the local gym in order to start an intense workout regimen. The point is not to make the branch busier. The point, rather, is to be a healthy branch, abiding in the vine and letting the vine's life flow through you. Then, over the course of time, as you go through various seasons of life, you find yourself increasingly transformed – increasingly resembling Christ – in the midst of everyday life, everyday relationships, everyday tasks. Then, more and more, you grace your home and your church and your neighborhood and your workplace with the aroma of Christ. So we want to come away from verse 2 hopeful: The Father is pruning us in order to make us more fruitful. The Father wants you to look more like Christ on January 17, 2011 than you do on January 17, 2010.

### III. The Pathway of Fruitfulness

Jesus gives us the clear pathway to fruitfulness in the passage before us. I want to make several observations from the text.

1. The Father is working to make us more fruitful.
2. Remaining (or abiding) in Christ is the key to bearing fruit. Notice two things about this. Firstly, it points up the fact that we must continually look to Christ for life and strength. There is call here to leaning on Jesus, putting our hope in Jesus, trusting in Jesus. We do not rely on our own resources or our own strength; we rely, rather, on Jesus and his grace. But secondly, notice that Jesus' word here is a command; he intends for us to obey it. This implies that remaining (or abiding) in Christ calls for our intentionality and effort. When we speak of effort, of course, we may rightly wonder how "grace" and "effort" can exist side-by-side. In this regard I think that Dallas Willard's counsel is spot on: grace is opposed to earning, it is not opposed to effort. If I expend effort with the heart attitude that my effort depends on me and the outcome depends on me, then I am opposing grace. But if I expend effort with the heart attitude that my effort depends on him and the outcome depends on him, then I am simply living according to grace. So recognize that in this life of remaining (or abiding) in Christ, you must be intentional and expend effort and give

conscious attention to Christ. This is even more apparent in other parts of this text, which we will get to momentarily. You must not be passive or simply coast along. You must continue to actively anchor your life in Christ and order your life around Christ. Abiding in Christ – knowing him and loving him – is the key to bearing fruit for the glory of God.

3. Remaining in Christ is related to three vital things. There is a certain abstraction to the words, “Remain in me, and I will remain in you.” It points, of course, to a relationship between persons. Concepts like “close fellowship” and “intimate relationship” and “organic connection” and “personal relationship” are helpful in thinking about what it means to abide in Christ. Abiding in Christ is something we are called to experience at the heart level; we in Christ and Christ in us is something that happens only through the ministry of the Holy Spirit; this metaphor of the vine reminds us that true, biblical spirituality is something that – to borrow language from the apostle Paul – “surpasses knowledge” (Ephesians 3:19) and “transcends all understanding” (Philippians 4:7). Even so, Jesus gives the metaphor concrete form. We are not left at a point of abstraction and mystery. There are at least three concrete components to abiding in Christ.

#### A. Treasuring the Words of Christ

Notice how central words are in this passage. First of all, to state the obvious, the passage itself is composed of words: Jesus is speaking intelligible words for our benefit and good. But within this composition of words, Jesus calls attention to the value of his words.

Notice:

- Verse 3: “You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.”
- Verse 7: “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.”
- Verse 10: “If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love.”
- Verse 11: “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you.”
- Verse 15: “I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything I learned from my Father I have made known to you.”

One essential component of abiding in Christ is knowing his words, pondering his words, and treasuring his words within our hearts, so much so that his words shape our hearts, our prayers, and our lives. Christ’s words ought to be central to our personal study as well as our conversation with one another. As Paul told the Colossians, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God” (Colossians 3:16). Are you carving out time and space to feed on the words of Christ? Are you taking initiative to speak Christ’s words to one another?

## B. Treasuring the Love of Christ

A second essential component of abiding in Christ is knowing and treasuring his love. Notice the train of thought in verses 9-13:

“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.”

Remaining in Christ means remaining in Christ’s love. Remaining in Christ’s love includes knowing and valuing Christ’s love. Before I can love others Christianly, I must grasp Christ’s love for me. Before you can love others Christianly, you must grasp Christ’s love for you. Christ’s love manifests itself in myriad ways in the Gospels and in our own lives. But it is impossible to miss the central and chief expression of Christ’s love: the cross. He laid down his life for us. He took responsibility for our sin. *We owed a debt we could not pay; he paid a debt he did not owe.* Why? For the love of the Father’s glory, most of all, but then also for the love of unworthy sinners. It would be enough if us unworthy sinners were called only servants. The prodigal son knew he was an unworthy sinner and he would have been happy to have been welcomed home as a servant. But the father’s love overflowed and the father called him “son.” We know we are unworthy sinners; but Jesus chooses to call us friends. Knowing and treasuring the love of Christ is absolutely essential to abiding in him and bearing fruit for God. On May 15, 2009 I posted a quote from Don Carson on BridgeWay’s blog: “There is no deep and stable spirituality that does not acknowledge what an utterly profound privilege it is to know God and be reconciled to him by the crucified Messiah.”<sup>1</sup>

## C. Obeying the Commands of Christ

Treasuring both Christ’s words and Christ’s love are essential components of abiding in Christ. There is a third: obeying the commands of Christ. Jesus highlights the vital significance of obedience in verses 9-17. It cannot be otherwise. How can you treasure Christ’s words but not obey them? How can you treasure Christ’s love but not let it shape your love for others?

Do you want to remain in Christ’s love? Jesus tells you how: “If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love.” “You are my friends,” says Jesus, “if you do what I command.” Beware of any portrayal of Christian spirituality that doesn’t include the priority of obedience as a major feature. We can read Scripture and sing songs and attend worship services and participate in discipleship classes and go on retreats and have emotional experiences and do good

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<sup>1</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry: Leadership Lessons from 1 Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004: p. 52.

things and, tragically, fail to obey him. What is more, according to Matthew 7:21-23, we can even prophesy in Jesus' name and drive out demons in his name and perform many miracles, all the while failing to know him and do his will. In Luke 6:46 Jesus asked, "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?" Jeffery O'Hara has said it well:

"You call me the way and walk me not. You call me the life and live me not. You call me master and obey me not. If I condemn you, blame me not. You call me bread and eat me not. You call me truth and believe me not. You call me Lord and serve me not. If I condemn you, blame me not."

Jesus' commands are many, but in this text he clearly emphasizes one particular command: "Love each other." He says it twice: once in verse 12 and again in verse 17. This is our calling, to treasure his love in such a way that it transforms our heart and empowers us to love each other. Bear with one another. Enter into each other's lives in thoughtful, helpful ways. Offer comfort and encouragement. Refresh the weary. Practice hospitality. Look for ways to bless one another. Meet each other's needs. Put others first. Forgive grievances. Lay down your life for each other. Let your life bear fruit for the good of other people.

#### IV. Closing Thoughts

A. We could say much more about this passage. Notice that Christ's words are central to a fruitful prayer life: "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you." What is the key to a fruitful prayer life? The words of Christ: knowing them and treasuring them and praying them. Letting Christ's words shape our prayers is the key to faithful, fruitful praying for the glory of God. Notice also that Christ's words – knowing them and treasuring them and obeying them – are central to joy: "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete." If you think about it, John 15:1-17 presents us with a nearly comprehensive picture of faithful biblical living.

B. Finally, let's think about the intersection of John 15:1-17 and everyday life. Everyday life includes difficulties, trials and pressure points. Your calling is to bear fruit for God in the context of these difficulties, trials and pressure points; your calling is to be fruitful amid everyday relationships and everyday tasks. Take a moment and identify two or three difficulties or trials that you are currently facing. Then choose one of these difficulties or trials and apply John 15:1-17 to yourself and your situation by asking these questions:

1. Is my heart attitude that my heavenly Father is pruning me (refining me) in the midst of this trial? (John 15:2)
2. Is my heart's desire to be in fellowship with Jesus and for his life to flow through me in the midst of this trial? (John 15:4-5)
3. Am I remembering that Christ's love for me is essential to my stability in the midst of trials? (John 15:12-13)

4. Am I giving attention to Christ's words in the midst of this trial? Are Christ's words shaping my perspectives and values? (John 15:3, 7, 10-11, 15)

5. Am I letting Christ's words shape my prayers related to this trial? Am I praying in accordance with Christ's priorities and purposes? (John 15:7)

6. Will I obey Christ in the midst of this trial? In particular, will I love others in the midst of this trial – including those who may be a part of the difficult situation? (John 15:9-10, 12-17)

7. Finally, realizing that I am not the only one going through trials, will I encourage my fellow Christians to live in response to John 15:1-17 in the midst of their trials? And will I humbly receive encouragement from others when they remind me to faithfully follow Christ?

May the Lord's grace be with you.