

John 15:1-17

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Preacher: Stuart Cashman

[0 : 00] I've said something to you like, you're religious aren't you? You might like my friend over here or maybe you like this particular book or this television program. You're religious aren't you? How do you respond when someone says something like that? I confess I always find it quite difficult because I know when people use that word religious, there are all sorts of ideas in their minds. Often they're thinking that religion is really just kind of, it's your lifestyle choice. You like religion, I like sport.

You like going to church or watching the rugby matches in the Rugby World Cup or the football or whatever. But that's okay, it's harmless, that's your choice, this is my choice, we just like different things. And there's another assumption behind that I think. And that is that what you choose ultimately isn't important, just a matter of preference.

So, you know, I like sport, I like movies, you like religion, it's okay, it gives you pleasure, that's alright. It's just a lifestyle choice, it doesn't really matter. However, what I want us to see as we look at this last claim of Jesus.

Is that what we make of him, what we choose to make of him is not just a lifestyle choice. How we relate to Jesus will determine not just the course of our lives now, but the course of eternity. It will determine whether we have fruitful, joyful lives, even amidst the pain and pressures of this world now. Whether we'll live forever, or whether we'll face God's judgment.

[1 : 39] This is not about a lifestyle choice, it's about life. Now why am I saying this? Well, let me try and simplify things a little bit. In the passage I've just read, Jesus is using a metaphor, he's introducing a picture in verses 1 to 8.

And then in verses 9 to 17 he's unpacking that, explaining it a bit for us. He's explaining what it means when he says, I am the true vine.

Now, to understand this properly, we first need to think ourselves into the shoes or the sandals of those disciples who first heard Jesus say that. What does it mean for them when he says, I am the true vine?

Because I imagine to most of us, it doesn't really make much sense at all, right off the top of our heads. But to these disciples, brought up as they were in the Jewish synagogues, well versed in the Old Testament scriptures, this would have meant something.

See, throughout the Old Testament, God had referred to his people Israel as a vine. For example, in Jeremiah chapter 2 verse 21, he talked about planting a vine. Or in Psalm 80 verse 8, the psalm says, you brought a vine out of Egypt.

[2 : 47] You drove out the nations and planted it. But the vine or the vineyard is a picture in the Old Testament of God's people. Now, why does anyone plant a vine? I've never planted a vine myself, but I imagine if you plant a vine, you do it for grapes.

You do it for that lovely fruit we have over there. You want it to bear fruit, don't you? And yet, if you read through the Old Testament, you'll find the story of Israel is a story of a failure to produce fruit. They were a bad vine, a rotten vine, if you like. They never showed what the fruit should have been, a love for the God who saved them. It should have been obedience to the God who rescued them. It should have been shown in a moral life that reflected God's beauty and moral truth. But Israel failed. So now when Jesus says to these disciples, I am the true vine, he's making outstanding claim.

He's claiming, I am the reality of God's people. I have come to be the true Israel. I've come to be the one who did what Israel never did. I've come to be the one who is obedient, who does bear fruit.

[3 : 54] But not only that, he's going one stage further. He's saying, I'm the true vine. If you want real spiritual life, if you want real life, if you want real joy, you can have it in me.

You can have it through being connected to me. If you want to be part of God's people, it's now not about keeping religious rules, doing religious things. It's about being connected to me, being in me. And I think that's clear if you look at verse 4. It's really the central message of this whole section. What does Jesus say there? 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.

Now there is a vine on my journey to school with our children. I looked at it yesterday, there wasn't any fruit on it. I don't eat vines growing in my garden though. What I do have is a dreadful thorn bush.

It's down the bottom of the garden next to the shed where I keep my bike. My bike is the way I get around. So I hate this bush because it was often responsible for punctures in my bike tyres.

[5 : 02] So sporadically I get my shears out and chop things off it. But because it's got so many thorns on this bush, I don't always very successfully actually remove the branches I've cut off. But after a couple of weeks, it's quite clear which branches I've cut and which are still connected to the trunk of the tree.

Because of course the branches I've cut have withered. There's no life in them anymore. Whereas those that are still connected still have their green leaves, they still have their nasty sharp thorns. There's no ones that come off, I just get my gloves out and throw them, not in the fire so I can't burn things in my back garden.

But I put them in the Hounslow Council Garden Waste Recycling, which is the nearest we come to the fire. You see the image, don't you? It's the image Jesus is using. If branches are connected to the trunk, connected to the vine, they will be fruitful.

Because that's where their life, that's where the nutrients come from. As soon as that connection is cut, as soon as they're no longer connected, they're useless. There is no fire.

There is no fruit. There is no life. It's the ones that are connected to the trunk that have life. If they don't abide in the trunk, if they don't remain in the trunk, there is no life and they're worthless.

[6 : 16] But what does it actually mean to abide in Jesus, or remain in him, as other translations could it? Well, basically the heart of it is this.

The heart of it is to depend upon Jesus. Just as a branch depends on the trunk for life coming through it, coming to it. So the Christians, those who believe in Jesus, depend on him for life.

For spiritual life, for vitality, for fruit. The Christian life is not about doing things to look fruitful. It's about depending on Jesus. Just like the branches on my thorn tree need to be connected to the trunk if they're going to be alive.

So those who believe in Jesus, we need to be connected to him, remaining in him, abiding in him. To have his life flowing into us, causing fruitfulness. Now, what does it look like then, to depend on Jesus?

It's easy to say, isn't it? But what does that actually mean in practical terms? Well, it doesn't mean just, does it just mean going to church? Does it just mean praying?

[7 : 25] Does it just mean coming to lunchtime talks? And doing religious things? Now, as Jesus unpacks it here, he shows us it means something far deeper, far richer, far more liberating.

Really, three views he gives us on it. Three pictures he uses for what it means to depend on him. It means staying in his word, obeying his commandments, and praying in his name.

Staying, obeying, praying. Look at verse 7. Staying in his word, first of all. Look at verse 7, what he says. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you.

So remaining in Jesus, abiding in him, means having his words in us. Staying in his words. Now, some words get in our heads and affect us, don't they? I don't just mean those terrible jingles that you hear on the radio or on TV for adverts.

They just stick in your mind and can't shake them, much as you'd love to. But I mean, those words that people speak to us, that just get in our heads and our hearts and affect our lives.

[8 : 38] I have a very good friend who, when she was much younger, her mother, who's a very good loving mother, but in a moment of exasperation said to her, you are so difficult to love sometimes.

That one kind of throwaway comment has shaped her in many ways. She can't let go of it. See, words, when they remain in us, shape our whole lives, don't they?

Maybe some of us have got words like that in our heads. But Jesus says, if you're depending on me, then my words will remain in you. It means my words will shape you. They'll shape your view of

who you are, of what reality is, of who God is, who I am.

And Jesus' words are not harsh. Jesus' words, as you follow his teaching throughout his life, Jesus' words communicate to us that, yes, we are sinners in need of rescue.

For none of us live up to God's standards. And yet we are loved. The good shepherd, who looked at a few weeks ago, lays down his life for his sheep. He loves. Jesus' words teach us we're accepted by God, not because of what we've done, but because of what Jesus has done.

[9 : 50] Jesus' words tell us that whatever other people say, we can be loved, we can be accepted, we can have fullness and forgiveness and joy in this life, whatever has happened to us because of him.

So Jesus' words teach us who we are, who God is, and how we're to respond. But the trouble is sometimes hard to remain in Jesus' words, isn't it?

There are so many other words that we hear as we live our lives. And you may remember the days before we had digital radios. When you try and tune a radio in, you turn the dial.

And you'd be trying to listen to a station and then, especially if you're in a car, the reception would change, you'd have to turn the dial again. Because all these conflicting messages come across when you're trying to listen to the music or the program or whatever it is.

And that's kind of the story of the Christian life, isn't it? It's hard to remain in Jesus' words with all these other messages coming at us. Contrary messages. So our world will tell us, actually, you're basically a good person.

[10 : 49] You're basically nice. Don't be so hard on yourself talking about sin. Or other words will say, don't take this Christianity thing too seriously. You don't want to be a fundamentalist.

Religious fundamentalism is dreadful. Look at this world. Or maybe there are words from our past that shaped us. Like my friend I mentioned earlier. Maybe you have a word ringing in your head for a parent or a school teacher.

Say, you're not good enough. You're not worth it. You'll never make it. You will fail. So which words are we going to remain in? Which words are we going to abide in?

Is it going to be Jesus' words? Are we going to let them shape our lives? Or is it going to be other messages? So we can't claim to depend on Jesus, can we?

If we ignore his words. Depending on Jesus means staying in his words. But his words also tell us what to do. So secondly, depending on Jesus means obeying his commands.

[11 : 48] Look down to verse 10 for a moment. Jesus makes this very clear, doesn't he? If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love. So is Jesus saying, you need to obey me perfectly, or you're not abiding in me?

Pull your socks up, do better. No, he isn't saying that. He isn't saying that. He can tell that in this passage. He can tell that throughout the course of the Bible. For example, in John's first letter that he wrote.

The same gospel writer writes, If anyone says he is without sin, he deceives himself. But if we confess our sin, God is faithful and just and will forgive us. So obeying Jesus' commandments doesn't mean perfect obedience.

It doesn't mean we have to be perfect people. That's the first thing to say. But also, we need to notice where obedience comes from. We don't obey Jesus in order to earn his love.

We obey him because he loves us. Just look over the page for a moment. Over the column even. John chapter 14 verse 15. Jesus says this, just a little bit earlier.

[12 : 57] If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And we know that in life. If we love someone, we do what they want us to do, don't they? Why in the world would I ever have gone to watch a chick flick in the cinema if that wasn't what my wife wanted to do sometimes?

She does like other things as well, I should add. Why did she ever put up with watching thrillers and political dramas if it wasn't that she loves me? Poor girl. We do things for other people because we love them.

And it's important to get this clear. Yes, we obey Jesus because we love him. But we don't love him because we're really good and figure out how to love him. We don't love him in order that he'll love us.

Rather, the Bible is clear. We love him because he first loved us. So John, in his letter again, 1 John chapter 4 verse 10 says, In this is love, not that we love God, but that he loved us and sent his son to be the propitiation for our sins.

We can only love Jesus because he loved us first. He goes first. He goes first. But because we love him, because he's loved us first, we will want to do what he wants us to do.

[14:11] So abiding in Jesus, remaining in him, means staying in his words and obeying his commands. But how can we obey his commands?

I mean, look at his commands, for example. Verse 12. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. How did Jesus show his love for us?

He raised the agony of the cross for us. Utterly self-sacrificial, utterly empty in love. Now who of us wants to put a hand out and say, yeah, I love other people like this?

We don't, do we? We don't. So what does that cause us to do? It should cause us to pray, shouldn't it?

I have a four-year-old son, and the cry we often hear around our house these days is, can somebody help me put my shoes on? Can someone help me put my socks on?

[15:07] Can somebody help me, please? Why does Joel shout out like that? Because he knows he needs help to do things. He's dependent upon our help. Sometimes, of course, he tries to be completely independent, and things go quite horribly wrong.

But he cries out because he knows he's loved, and he knows he needs help. And that ultimately is what prayer is. It's a cry for help. And so that's why Jesus talks about prayer.

We cannot change ourselves. We cannot do something that is naturally impossible for us, and actually cause us to cry out and pray. Look at verse 7 for a second. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

You will pray. If you're remaining in me, if you're abiding in me, you will pray. But hang on, you may think. That's quite a big promise there, Stuart. Ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

I have a friend, Catherine, who is currently kind of wrestling with issues of faith. She grew up in a Catholic, very traditional Catholic background, at home in Ireland. And she often says to me, Stuart, you know, all through my life, I've prayed for things, and God has never answered.

[16:19] How can I know he's there? So I'll say to her, Catherine, what sort of things have you prayed for? I have prayed about my work. I've prayed about our daughter. You know, and just God doesn't seem to answer.

Maybe that's our experience as well. Maybe you read a verse like this, and think, well, is Jesus really speaking the truth here? My prayers never seem to be answered, at least certainly many of them aren't.

What's going on? Well, that of course is a big topic, and maybe it's something we need to go for a coffee to talk about at greater length. But I want us to notice first, if we look at verses 7 and 8, we get, if you like, a condition, and a purpose behind our prayers.

Do you notice the condition? If you abide in me, and my words abide in you. Now, that's not so much a condition to be fulfilled, but describing the conditions in which prayers are answered.

See, if we are truly abiding in Jesus, if Jesus' words are shaping us, if we're longing to obey him, and follow in his ways, then that will shape our hearts.

[17:24] It will shape what we want. To use a slightly silly example, I won't be asking for a nice new Ferrari, if Jesus' words are shaping me.

Or I won't necessarily be asking for a new job, where life will be easier. Or I may be, but I'll be content, if Jesus is shaping me, to understand that his answer to that may be no, for all sorts of good reasons.

But so is the condition, that we're actually abiding in Jesus, that he is the one shaping our lives, that we're seeking to obey his ways, and so praying to that end.

And then look at the purpose for which prayers will be answered. At the end of verse 7, Ask whatever you wish, and it will be done before you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples.

So the goal of this prayer, is that we will be fruitful, in our lives. Now that doesn't mean fruitful, in terms of business success, or material prosperity, or having a large family, or any of those things necessarily.

[18:35] It means fruitful, in terms of the character, God wants for us. Fruitful in terms of, being able to love other people, as Jesus has loved us. Fruitful in terms of, being able to share the good news of Jesus, with other people.

That's what Jesus refers to, down in verse 16. He says, 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. The fruit there, seems to be the fruit of other people, coming to know the Lord Jesus, and having a true life, that is only available in him. It describes the mission. So you see the purpose, and the condition?

The condition is, if Jesus, if we're abiding in Jesus, if he's shaping our goals, and our attitudes, by his words, then our prayers for fruitfulness, will be answered.

And that's the purpose. The ultimate purpose being, that God will be glorified, through that. Do you know what? That is the actual purpose, for which you and I were created. That we might glorify God.

[19 : 41] It's astounding, isn't it? Little people like us, little lumps of clay, molded together, can somehow bring glory, to the God who created the universe.

And you'll answer those prayers. Because we are that significant to him. So, Jesus isn't giving us a blank check here. He's not saying, wish for whatever you like, and I'll give it to you.

It's not a blank check. It's for those who are trusting in him, remaining in him, depending upon him. And I see that, as I look around people I know. Think about my daughter's swimming coach, whose two-year-old daughter, has been going through cancer treatment, for about the last ten months. She's coming to the end of it, in Great Ormond Street Hospital. And how in the world, is Jose persevering as a believer? Remember this? Because God is at work in his life.

To God be the glory. Think of another friend of mine, let's call him Bob for the sake of argument. Suffering chronic pain all the time. Yet still smiling. Still hopeful.

[20 : 43] Still honest. Not naive. How in the world is that possible? I couldn't be like that. That's because he's abiding in Jesus, and God is answering those prayers.

To God be the glory. Or I think of a friend of mine, he started with more or less nothing. More or less no people. And now, four years later, has quite a thriving church in West London.

Many of them people who've come to the Lord over the last few years. How is that possible?

Because God is at work. To God be the glory. See, this is what it means to abide in Jesus.

It means to depend upon him every day. Being shaped by his word. Staying in his word. Obeying his commands. And praying in his name. It means knowing that without him, we can do nothing. Like the branch of the tree, that if it's not connected to the trunk, it is useless. It is useless. That leads us to two very quick questions. So what?

[21 : 47] Well, that's one question. So what? So what if I don't abide in Jesus? Does it really matter? And so what if I do? So what if I don't? See, Jesus is telling us that believing in him is not a lifestyle choice.

It's not a matter of personal preference. But it's deadly serious. Can you look back to verse 6 for a moment? 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. That is a sobering picture of God's judgment. It's a terrible thing, isn't it?

We can look from the outside, a bit like the branches on the form bush that I cut off but hadn't removed. Like we're actually still part of it. We can be at church, we can be doing religious things, yet ultimately not have a living connection with Jesus.

Not actually depending on it. And the result is horrible. It's to face God's judgment. Judgment is real.

[22 : 53] The flip side of it is if we are abiding in Jesus, what does he give us? Fruitfulness. It says that in verse 5, Without me you can do nothing. With me you can bear fruit.

Fruit is beautiful, isn't it? What would you prefer to look at? An apple tree in full blossom, or not blossom, because that's where fruit comes from, but in laden down with apples, there's some trees for it there. Fruitfulness is beautiful, isn't it?

It's what we want. He also promises fullness of joy. Look at verse 11. These things I've spoken to you that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete. Yes, life can be hard.

Life will involve suffering, and yet we can have fullness of joy connected with Jesus. Finally, fruitfulness, fullness, also friendship. Look at verse 15.

No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing. I've called you friends, for all I've heard from my Father, I've made known to you. We all want friends, don't we?

[23 : 55] We all need friends. You know what Jesus offers us? The friendship. We can be friends with the living God. Fruitfulness, fullness of joy, friendship.

So are you religious? I hope your answer is not a simple yes, no. I hope your answer is not, we're not doing religious things for Jesus, but we're depending on Jesus, and so being transformed. So our lives bear fruit, fullness of joy, and our friendship with God. Let me pray for us.