

John 15:1-17

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Date: 26 May 2024

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[0 : 0 0] Please turn back to John 15 and the passage that was read for us. Let's pray one more time as we come to God's word.

Our Father, in these moments we pray that you would speak! And that we would listen and that by your Holy Spirit you would do your work in us.

Because we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Rebecca Louise Law is an artist who creates amazing, detailed, intricate, colorful works with dried flowers. And a while back she had an installation in Kew Gardens that she titled Life in Death. And she talked about the exhibition. She said this, Every flower will be dried, preserved, and entwined with suspended copper wire, creating a physical journey through flowers beyond fresh and preserving life within death. It was so impressive and it looked beautiful. But there wasn't any real life.

Everything that was on show was actually dead. Of course, there's a real danger that something similar can be true when it comes to our lives.

They look good on the outside. They can even look beautiful and impressive. But actually, there's no life. On the inside, there's no power. There's no growth. There's no ability to change.

[1 : 3 3] Sometimes we wake up to this fact, and it feels to me that there's a lot of people at this particular moment in our culture that are looking around and are getting quite depressed about the way things are, and so beginning to look inside and waking up to the fact that their lives might look great on the outside according to whatever metric they were aiming for, but there's nothing going on in there.

It's like the lights are on, but there's nobody really home. No life. No power to grow. No change. And so then, there's a move to make lots of changes with their lives.

We introduce various disciplines. We get routines—reading, meditating, exercise, diet, sleep, hygiene, that's a thing—getting off our screens. All of those things, people are swearing by them at this particular cultural moment, and people are giving themselves wholly to them. They're good things to do, and they help us get ourselves together. But in the end, the truth is that they don't have any real vitality. They don't have the life, the power that we need to change on the inside in any lasting sense. They don't ultimately change our character, and they don't deliver that quality that always, always, always seems to elude us, no matter how hard we try. That quality—joy.

It is possible to have lives that look the part on the outside, but underneath that veneer, things are lifeless and fruitless and desperately lacking joy. And this is why what Jesus promises us in John 15 this morning is so wonderful. He says it is possible—there we are—he says it is possible to have a fruitful life. Do you notice as it was read? Bear fruit, bear fruit, bear fruit, bear much fruit. And then have a look at verse 11, John 15, verse 11, these things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. Fullness of joy. That's what's held out to us here. This is where Jesus goes next with His disciples in the upper room. He's looking ahead to His death. He says that a fruitful, joyful life is possible. This is what His hour will accomplish as He dies, rises, returns to the Father, and as we heard last time, sends His Spirit.

But it's not only possible. The fruitful life is not only possible. Jesus commands it of the disciples. Verse 16, have a look. You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit, that your fruit should abide. So the opposite of the life-in-death installation at Kew Gardens, Christians are to be fruitful. Churches are to be fruitful. And to be specific, since Jesus has just spoken about the Holy Spirit in chapter 14, I think what He's talking about here in terms of fruit is the fruit of God's Spirit. The fruit that the Apostle Paul outlines in Galatians chapter 5, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. A fruitful Christian, a fruitful church, is one that is obviously marked by those lovely qualities. And let's be honest, who among us doesn't want more of those things? Who among us doesn't want to embody those things

more and more? Love, joy, peace. Who among us doesn't want to be a kinder person, or more in control of our appetites? These are beautiful things. And the way that we get this, the way that this happens, is what Jesus explains here. And He uses His own horticultural metaphor. It's definitely not life and death. It is life in all its fullness. And this metaphor has a rich significance in the life of Israel. It is the vine metaphor. It comes from the Old Testament, particularly Psalm 80, that was used to describe Israel as the nation chosen by God to bear rich fruit, to be connected to God and to be obeying God, and therefore to live lives that displayed this. God was to be the source of their life, and His love and His power would be flowing through them and would show the surrounding nations what it looked like to flourish and what it looked like to be fruitful under the reign, under the rule of Yahweh, their God. And of course, to anyone from the other nations looking on, anyone who saw this fruitful life and wanted to be in on it, they too could come under His blessing. They would turn from their gods, submit themselves to the God of Israel, Yahweh, the one true and living God, and they'd be grafted in then to the vine of Israel. All of the blessing of God was found in relation to that special covenant people. And now here is Jesus telling these first century Jews that He is the true vine.

[6 : 38] Verse 1, I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. The place of blessing, the place of joy and fruitfulness is no longer found in old covenant Israel, the temple and the priests and the sacrifices.

It is found in Jesus. He is the way and the truth and the life, as we heard last time. And the way to the Father is not through the old covenant structures, but through the one to whom those structures pointed.

Life in all its fullness isn't found in a particular religious or national identity. It is found in relationship with Him, being connected to Him, grafted into, united to the Lord Jesus Christ.

He is the true vine. His followers are the branches that flow from Him, bearing the lasting fruit of His Spirit. And Jesus is clear that this fruitfulness is the essence of plain, ordinary discipleship. You talk about these things, and it could sound like this is where we need to get to. There's a level that we need to get to. Super Christian, they are the ones that bear this fruit. No, that's not the case at all. Jesus is clear. This fruitfulness is the essence of plain, ordinary discipleship. There aren't fruitful Christians and then the rest of us. Having His life at work in you is how you show that you belong to Him. Verse 8, 15 verse 8, By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples. If you're a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ, you are to be fruitful.

They go together. What we do in order to bear this fruit is the main concern of this section. That's what I want to focus on. So, the fruitful life, this beautiful, fruitful life that honors God, that is true human flourishing. What do we do? First of all, we abide in Jesus. 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. Verse 5, Whoever abides in me, and I in him. He it is that bears much fruit. There are some ten references to abiding in Jesus in verses 4 to 11. Abiding isn't a word that we use too much today, but it simply means to stay, to remain. If the disciples will persevere, they must remain connected to Jesus. Abide in Jesus.

[9 : 17] Stay with Him. Don't look anywhere else. There are plenty of alternative vines around that promise us their own versions of fruitfulness. In the context in which Jesus is speaking, religion would have been one of the vines that would have turned the heads of His disciples. The idea that if they went that way, away from Him, they didn't stay with Him, but they went that way with the religious order of things, the ones that were claiming to be the real people of God, well, that's where life would be found, and it's no different today. There are all kinds of religions that hold out their promises.

Spirituality is big in our day, but it could be anything. It could be wellness. That's a vine that's drawing people after it. Money is very common, but as I say, it could be anything. Marriage, family, or maybe for you teenagers, popularity. That's a big vine. That's something that's holding out a promise of life and fullness. If you could be popular, we think to ourselves, if I give myself to these things, if I abide in these things, their power will flood my life and the fruit that I want will show up. But they never deliver because they can't. Only God can bring life and joy to the human soul. Only the one who made us can do that. Of course, for a time, these vines can look a bit like Christmas trees do in mid-December. They look green and sappy and nicely decorated on the outside. But mid-January always rolls around. The tree is dry and sparse by then. The moment that that tree is cut, it is dying, it is dying. And it is the same for us when we are not connected to the true vine.

It doesn't matter what decorations we can cover ourselves with. The truth is, apart from the true vine, we're always dying. Mid-January will always roll around. So, we must resist the lure of these other vines, these other visions of the good life that are held out to us in order to abide in Jesus. He must be our priority. Now, we need to admit our frustration with this. The fruitful life comes through closeness to Jesus, and you can't get that by pressing a button. You can't get that by downloading an app. It's a posture into which you lean for your whole life.

[11 : 54] You lean your whole life into it for your whole life. And that's frustrating, especially in a culture where everything is so quick and instant. And we're promised five quick steps, and this will transform your life. It doesn't work that way. Abiding in Jesus is a slow, long-term commitment. And some people reject Jesus completely because following Him is too hard. Following Him, it seems, is inconvenient.

And we're led to think that the life transformation we want must be more enjoyable or easier to find elsewhere. Those five easy steps are very attractive to us. But it doesn't. Just look around. If you think this promise of a fruitful life that's held out by abiding in the true vine who is Jesus, if you think that that just sounds too long and slow and boring and difficult, when you look at the fruit of the alternatives, what do those alternatives deliver? We don't look or feel much like a culture, do we? Despite all the resources at our disposal, we don't look like a culture that is able to grow in love and joy and peace. We don't look like a culture that is getting its appetites more under control.

Goodness doesn't seem to be a quality that is in rich supply in our day.

The fruitfulness that we want is only found in Jesus. So let me ask you this morning, have you connected your life to the true vine?

Have you turned from your sin? Have you given your life to Jesus, the only one in whom there is life that is truly life? And if you have done that, as I suspect most of us here this morning have, can I ask you, is Jesus your priority?

Is He your priority? This connection is how these first disciples will persevere. This connection to Jesus. It is how we keep going. It is how we remain fruitful. Apart from Him, look at verse 5, apart from Him, we can do nothing. Now, that doesn't mean, of course, we can do nothing whatsoever.

[14 : 11] It means nothing of any lasting fruitfulness. Whether we're individuals or churches, we cannot be fruitful if we're not remaining in the One who is the source of that fruit.

Fruitfulness, first of all, requires us to abide in Jesus. Then secondly, it requires us, verse 2, to accept the Father's pruning. To accept the Father's pruning. 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.

But, Louisa, my wife, she likes gardening. Me, not so much. But I do know this. I know that pruning the shrubs and the bushes at the right time is an essential part of encouraging them to grow. It's exactly the same in the Christian life. Fruitless branches get cut off and thrown away, but the fruitful ones, the ones that are bearing fruit, they get pruned. It's literally, they get clean in order that they would grow and bear more fruit. Do you notice that it's not the ones that aren't bearing fruit that get pruned. They're dead. It is the ones that are fruitful that get pruned in order that more fruit will grow. The cold, hard truth of the matter is that it is the pruning that leads to the fruitfulness. The painful cutting back, removing things from our lives, is the means by which God creates the fruit. So, we should accept that. We should lean into that.

Some of you are questioning what is going on in your life, the struggles that you have, the difficulties that you face, the painful experience that you're enduring, and you resent that. Why did this relationship get derailed? Why did I lose my job? Why this? Why that?

[16 : 15] What is God doing? What is He doing? What are you doing in my life? I know some of you feel like crying that out. Some of you do that. In all that's going on, whether it's something good that has been taken away from you or something that you've enjoyed, but it wasn't good for you, and so the Lord took it away, what is going on is the Father is pruning you. And He's pruning you because He has more and better spiritual fruit that He wants to bear out of your life. In all of this, don't ignore verse 9.

Whatever you are struggling with, don't ignore verse 9. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you.

The Lord Jesus loves you. The Lord loves you. The Lord loves you. The Lord loves you. The Lord loves us. We think that He's punishing us. We think that He doesn't care. We think that He's hurting us in some way. He's not being kind. He doesn't love us. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you.

The Lord Jesus loves you the way the Father loves the Son. Whatever you are experiencing, however you feel tempted to think that God is not being good to you, it simply cannot be the case. In His love and care for you, He is pruning you in order that you would be more fruitful. When you think about it like that, doesn't that completely reframe those trials?

[17 : 53] In fact, it covers those trials with hope. Abiding in Jesus brings about the Father's work in our lives, and the pruning is designed to make us more fruitful.

Stop to think about it for a moment. It's astonishing. Can you believe that the God of all the earth, the God who breathed the cosmos into being with a Word, is involved in your life, growing you. He's pruning away all that's not His will for your life, or all that isn't bearing good fruit. That pruning is undoubtedly painful, but what's left when He cuts those things away is more Christ-like, and therefore it's more human, and it's more beautiful.

It's the better version of you. If your circumstances are difficult and not changing, God is allowing this in order to change you, rather than change your circumstances.

So often, when things are difficult, we want the circumstances to change, and that's totally understandable. But what happens when the circumstances don't change? Well, what's happening there is that God is working to change you, rather than your circumstances, because He wants fruit that lasts, and that takes time.

[19 : 14] And even though it is painful, the result will be worth it. It's always worth it. And the fruitful life comes through accepting and not resisting and not resenting the Father's pruning.

Abide in Jesus. Accept the Father's pruning. And then thirdly, fruitful life, we must also heed Jesus' words. Heed Jesus' words.

Verse 7, if you abide in Me and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish. Verse 10, if you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love. Verse 14, you are My friends if you do what I command you.

Jesus' word is the entry point of the Christian life. We are joined to the vine and cleansed through hearing the gospel word. Through hearing that Jesus is God's King, who has come to deal with your sin in His death and resurrection.

If you have ears to hear that word, and you understand that you have lived on your terms in God's world, and Jesus is your only hope, and if you turn to Him and put your sin behind you, turn to Him and put your faith in Him, then you are clean.

[20 : 25] Clean is the word that Jesus pronounces over you. Sins forgiven, conscience cleansed, guilt removed. That is the wonderful news of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

That is what Jesus offers our dried up life and death world. And if you haven't received this salvation for yourself, don't wait another moment.

Please, let me encourage you, do not wait another moment longer. Call on Christ's name and He will save you. He will clean you. Sins forgiven, conscience cleansed, guilt removed.

We don't just come to Christ by His word. We go on in Christ the same way. Verse 7, verse 7, the connection between remaining in Jesus and having His word remain in us is synonymous.

We remain in Jesus by having His word remain in us. It's the same in verses 9 and 10. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you.

[21 : 29] Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love. How do we abide in His love? We do it by keeping His commandments.

Remaining in the love of God is not some mystical feeling. It comes through hearing God's word and responding in obedience to what it says. Hearing it and doing it.

God always initiates. And that initiative comes through His word. But we must respond. So there are two aspects to this. God speaking and us responding.

So can I start by asking you. Are you listening to God's voice? This is assumed here, but it is worth making clear. In any relationship, if we are not hearing the other party speak, we can't know what they want.

We can't really even say that we know them. If you are not listening to somebody else in a relationship, you can't say that you know them. You can't really say that that relationship is meaningful in any way if there is no listening to the communication.

[22 : 33] Abiding in Jesus means opening our Bibles and listening to what He says. On our own, leading our wives, round the family table, in small groups, listening to God's word.

That is implicit in what is said here. The second aspect is explicit. Hearing the word isn't sufficient. We must also heed it. We must also respond in obedience to what it says.

If you keep my commandments, Jesus says. And it's ongoing, the sense that if you go on keeping my commandments, go on doing these things.

We will never be fruitful if we merely hear God's word. James' epistle, James' epistle told us that last term.

Bible knowledge should never be an end in itself. If you love the Bible like we do here at this church, you can easily think that this is the case. That Bible knowledge is an end in itself.

[23 : 33] We can think to ourselves, well, if we just get more of the right information, that will then make us more godly. But God's word is given to us so that in the power of the Holy Spirit, we live out the truth that we learn.

You have never been able to access more Bible content than you can today. The vast majority of people that God has used through the history of His church, your spiritual heroes in the past, the vast majority of them had a fraction of the content that we can access.

The Reformers didn't have access to Bible software. Calvin could only have imagined what sort of scholarship is available to you in a device in your pocket. But are we more godly for that privilege? I don't think so. Because the goal of godliness isn't accumulating more information. It is to heed it and to apply it to your life and then live it out.

The person who flourishes, the one who is fruitful and who knows the joy of the Lord, 15 verse 11, isn't the person that's simply binging on theology, but the person who abiding in Jesus allows His words to take hold of their heart and take root in their life.

[24 : 55] And you know when this happens because you can see it. So, Jesus' word, if you're a Christian, Jesus' word to you is that you are clean and you are loved.

You are cleansed from all of your sin and that He loves you. Now, if you merely hear that word, your life will be marked by the anxiety and striving to prove yourself and all of the insecurity that comes with that that we see in our culture.

If you simply hear that, it won't have any lasting change on your heart. And your life will show the fruit of that. If you heed it, your life will be marked by peace and the sort of joy that comes even through trials and hard times from abiding in Jesus.

More explicit than that, look at verse 12. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. You can see when someone heeds Jesus' words because they reflect His love for others.

In the economy of the gospel, life is gained by giving it away. Real life comes to us through serving.

[26 : 25] As it was for Christ, so it is for His followers. Now, if you just hear that word, you'll be able to talk about it, but your life will look like those around you as you pursue the good life according to how London defines the good life.

And your Christianity will be squeezed in around the edges. If you heed that word, you'll die to yourself and you'll give your life in love for the sake of others. And you can see that.

But of course, here's the thing. Here's the thing. You can't simply think yourself into that state. You can't grit your teeth and try really hard to keep Jesus' commandments.

So, what we have to do is go back to verse 9 and get what it says there into our bloodstream. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you.

Abide in my love. So, how has the Father loved the Son? What is the love of the Holy Trinity like? Perfect.

[27 : 32] Full. Overflowing. Well, Jesus says that it is that love that flows down to the Christian. It is that love that defines who you are.

So, when He says, abide in my love, that's the love that He's saying to abide in. He's not saying, it's not a, alright, got to try really hard to abide in His love here.

Going to have to grit my teeth to really abide. I'm going to have to really try hard to stay in that love. No. It's, really, I get to rest in the abundance of this love.

I get to identify, according to that verdict on my life, clean, loved. Yes, you do.

In fact, Jesus pushes the point a step further. Look down at 15. No longer do I call you servants. Because this love has flown down to the believer.

[28 : 40] No longer do I call you servants. For the servant does not know what his master is doing. But I have called you friends. Jesus considers you one of His friends. And the word is a strong word

that might describe a really, really, really close friend.

When I was growing up in our house, we had a main front door that was, for the most part, open during the day. And then there was a second door, and it was open as well.

And so the main door was kind of pushed ajar. And when people would arrive, they'd knock the inside door. But it wasn't locked. So if somebody wanted to come and visit, they would press the bell or they would knock, and we would let them in.

But good friends knew that the door was open. And so they would come in and let themselves in. And they would be welcomed with open arms.

That is how Jesus treats us when we abide in Him. He welcomes us. The door is open. That is the love that we're called to abide in.

[29 : 49] That is the love that we're called to remain in and be defined by. I think a failure at this point is the reason that we're drawn to the other vines that we're drawn to.

We don't genuinely believe that God likes us. We don't genuinely believe Jesus when He says that we're His friends and that we're welcome and that He loves us with a love that is perfect and overflowing.

And so we look elsewhere for our acceptance. We think somewhere else will be the place where we'll get joy and satisfaction rather than the source of this beautiful and unshakable love.

All of the other vines that we go after in our culture, all of the other things that draw us to them, they do that because they promise us something. And for the most part, if you're to dig down, if you're to dig down beneath the promises that are on the surface, they promise us love and acceptance.

They promise us belonging. If we have this thing, we'll be part of this group. If we have this level of popularity, we'll be accepted over here. It's all about love and acceptance in the end.

[30 : 58] Well, look at John 15. You're not a hired hand. You have that love and acceptance.

You're not a hired hand who doesn't know what the boss wants and just waits around to be kind of given instructions.

Go and do this. Go and do that. God has drawn you into fellowship with Him and He wants you to abide in His love and know that you are His friend. He wants you to enjoy friendship with Him.

And it is as we grow in our awareness of that that we will abide in that love more and more. We will abide in it because we know that we're welcome there and we know that it's good for us.

And we'll embrace the pruning for our good because we know it's going to bear more fruit in the long run. And we'll heed and we'll go on heeding Christ's words.

And then we'll have the fruitful life that God desires for us. Go to Jesus. Stay in Him. Accept what the Father is doing in your life, however painful it might be.

[31 : 58] Know that He's going to cultivate more fruit. And listen to Jesus' word. Do what it says.

That's where joy is. That's where fruitfulness is. Let's pray together.