

## John 15:1-16

We are continuing this morning with our study of John's Gospel, starting at verse 1 of chapter 15 and working through to around verse 16. Those of you who have been with us for much of this series will hopefully, by now, have a handle on some of the basics of what this book of the Bible is all about.

But for those of you that are new to the Gospel of John, let me just say this: the main thing you need to know this morning is that this is a book that was written to introduce Jesus to people, in a very summary fashion, and with the hope that it would be used by God to see these same people come to place their faith and trust in Christ as their Savior.

Now when you begin to look more closely at this book, what you discover is that it can be broken up into a number of smaller sections. The division that makes the most sense to me sees the whole thing coming in 3 parts. Chapters 1-12 form the major biographical section as they cover the majority of Jesus time here on earth, his public life and ministry, leading up to his last few days. Now these opening chapters don't even come close to telling us everything we *might* be told about Jesus. But they show us enough to see that while he clearly was a human - like you and me - he was also clearly God - *unlike* you and me.

In the next five chapters (13-17) the "Jesus cam" goes into slow motion, and the angle tightens a bit as we see some of his private conversations and interactions with his closest disciples. In this section, John is giving his readers a glimpse of what aligning oneself with Jesus will mean for a person, should he/she respond to the Gospel and start down that path. It also shows very clearly the way that Jesus looks after and deeply cares for those that have become his followers. To put all this another way, it's an inviting portrait that gives people a taste of just what it is that they are signing up for. The final four chapters (18-21) describe the central event of Jesus' life - his death and resurrection and subsequent ascension by which he returned to the Father in heaven.

Now, according to that outline, we are in the middle chapter of the middle section of this book. At the beginning of this middle section - in chapter 13 - we saw Jesus enjoying a last private meal with his disciples, modeling great humility and a servant's heart in the midst of it. At the same time we saw him teaching them a number of last minute things, including reminding them of his impending departure - by means of the cross.

Then, in chapter 14, we watched and listened as Jesus sought to comfort his disciples who were struggling to accept that their Savior would soon be leaving them and that, as a result, they would very soon be on their own. The comfort provided in chapter 14 comes in a number of forms, but perhaps the most significant thing Jesus said to them at that time was that, although he WAS leaving them they would not, in fact, be alone but would have the Holy Spirit with them. Which then brings us up to chapter 15.

Now, Jesus has not said everything he is going to say about the Holy Spirit's ministry among them. There's more to come, and we'll hear it soon enough. But here at the beginning of Chapter 15 Jesus' comments to his disciples begins to shift a little bit such that, along with words of comfort, he begins to *commission* and even *challenge* his disciples for the task now before them.

Now, the imagery that Jesus employs to do that is the imagery of a vine and its branches which, if you know something about the Old Testament, is a familiar picture. You find it in places like Psalm 80, Jeremiah 2, Ezekiel 15 and Isaiah 5. And when it appears it is typically a metaphor that is used to represent God's people - Israel - and, just as typically, the picture painted is that of Israel being like a vine that rather useless. A vine that is either unfruitful or else one that produces poor fruit or bad fruit or even wild fruit. Listen to Isaiah 5,

*Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. <sup>2</sup> He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. <sup>3</sup> And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. <sup>4</sup> What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? <sup>5</sup> And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured;<sup>1</sup> I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. <sup>6</sup> I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and briers and thorns shall grow up; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. <sup>7</sup> For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting; and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed;<sup>1</sup> for righteousness, but behold, an outcry!<sup>2</sup>*

Now, you need to have this Old Testament background of Israel as a vineyard or a vine that was unfruitful or that produced useless grapes - you need to have that in your mind as you listen to Jesus describing himself as the "true vine". You need to see that when Jesus takes this well known imagery and applies it to himself he knows *exactly* what he is doing and what he is communicating.

To all those around him who would have understood the OT symbolism, Jesus was saying very clearly that he is the one who has come to take the place of Israel as the faithful Son who would be obedient in *all* things and who would produce the good fruit that faithless Israel failed to produce. Jesus is the new Israel of God and, as a result, the only way of being *rightly connected* to God NOW was by being connected to Jesus because now *he*, and not Israel, was God's chosen, true vine.

With that as a bit of background and introduction, let me pray and we'll then read the passage together....

*Father in heaven, please come and attend to this reading of your Word so that the words that are spoken are in accordance with your revelation and so that your truth is received and applied in effective ways to each heart here so that we grow in our love for you and in our fitness and preparedness for the mission for which you have prepared us. This we pray in Jesus name.....*

*(Read John 15:1-16)*

There are two main things I want us to focus on from this passage - two out of any number of things that might be focused on. But at any rate the first thing I want you to see in these verses is that *Jesus' call to his disciples is a call to fruitfulness*. In no uncertain terms, Jesus makes very clear his expectation that those who are his, those who claim to belong to him *will be fruitful*, they *will be* productive - good things will come *from* and *through* their lives.

Now it's helpful, I think, to pay attention to *how* Jesus gets that point across here. In the first 8 verses of this chapter we are given the main thought, and then verses 9-16 function as a kind of running commentary or perhaps an expansion on the things said in verses 1-8. To put that more specifically, verses 1-8 talk about *abiding in Jesus* and the fruitfulness that will result from that. But they talk about it in a fairly non-specific, abstract sort of way. Verses 9-16, however, come along right behind and expand on this idea of *abiding* by talking about it in a rather more concrete fashion - what abiding means, what it looks like, etc. And in that expansion there is a definite path or progression that develops, which we'll look at a little more closely in just a moment.

But for now the thing I want you to notice in verses 1-8 is that Jesus' call to his disciples is a call to fruitfulness, to *bear fruit*. Jesus, without flinching, without hesitating, states that if a person claims to belong to him, then there will be - not *might be* - there WILL be evidence of that reality expressed in terms of *fruitfulness*.

Jesus doesn't say anything half-way here. He doesn't back off at all. He doesn't seem to leave open the possibility that there might be exceptions to this - that a person might be unfruitful, and yet still be regarded as one of his.

So what does this mean? What is this "fruitfulness" that is talked about? Is there anything we can learn from John's Gospel that helps us wrap our heads around this concept? Does he talk about fruit anywhere else and, if so, what is he saying about it? Well, thankfully, there are a several places we can go to get some clues.....

One of those places is John 4 - the story of the woman at the well. As you may or may not recall, at one point, after his disciples have returned from finding food in the nearby village, and after the woman has left him to go and tell the villagers about Jesus - but at that point in the story Jesus directs his disciples gaze to the horizon before them and - seeing the people of the village coming out toward him with their white robes flowing - Jesus tells his disciples that the fields are "white for harvest". And it is in the context of those things that Jesus talks about people who are "reaping wages" and "gathering fruit for eternal life". And so, in the context of John 4, it would seem to be clear that the word "fruit" refers to these people that are coming out to see Jesus. "Being fruitful", in that context, would involve being used by God as a part of this process that sees people responding to the Lord Jesus.

In another passage, John 12:24, Jesus, referring to his own death, talks about how a grain of wheat, in order for it to bear fruit, has to fall to the earth and "die" - so to speak - which, in our own terms today simply means that the seed goes into the ground, gets "buried" in the soil, and then germinates.

In keeping with that sort of imagery Jesus, in John 12, looks ahead to his coming death and crucifixion and sees this same principle at work. Jesus - the firstborn from among the dead who would, by his death, raise many sons to glory, and would bring life and light to all his people. In this context the "fruit" would be all those who benefitted from Jesus death and resurrection.

And then, later on in this very chapter, in vs 16 - Jesus talks about one of the purposes for which he chose them, namely that they should "*go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide*". Now, this whole idea of GOING and bearing fruit is - I think - telling because it speaks of *commissioning*. GOING brings to mind the idea of SENDING or being sent. And what was the primary thing that the disciples were sent to do? To preach the good news of the kingdom of God, to bring the Gospel message. In that light, we see once again that the "fruit" in view here, in context, would seem to be that which came as the result of evangelistic endeavour.

And so, just looking at these three places in John's Gospel, we see that when he talks about "fruit" what he seems to be referring to, typically, is people who have responded to, or are responding to, or perhaps even will respond to the call of the Gospel.

Now, interestingly enough, when I checked these things out with the commentators I noticed that they make a *number* of suggestions as to what the fruit talked about here might be. One commentator in particular, Carson, summarizes some of the suggestions of others saying that "fruit" could refer to things like: obedience, or new converts, or love or Christian character. He then says that, in his view, to isolate on *one* of these things as the fruit being talked about is *reductionistic* and suggests that there is a whole world of possibilities for what this might mean in practice - anything, he says, that is the product of prayer in Jesus' name and in pursuit of God's glory.

Now, while I have great respect for Carson, and I think he has a point, I also think that he downplays the significance of these other places in John's gospel that talk about FRUIT and, in particular, verse 16 when it talks about Jesus choosing his disciples *in order that they might GO and bear fruit*. To be sure, I do agree with Carson that when you look at the wider New Testament you do find that the imagery of "fruit" is used to refer to some of these other things - obedience, love and Christian character. But I would still say that the *primary* "fruit" in view, at least here in John's Gospel, seems to be people coming to Christ, people responding to the good news about Jesus. Having said that, I would readily admit that alongside that primary fruit it is certainly reasonable to expect that if *that* sort of fruit is present then these other kinds of "fruit" will also manifest themselves amongst God's people.

So that is what Jesus expects from his followers. He expects that they will be vehicles and messengers and ambassadors of his grace and mercy. He expects that they will show and tell others about God's goodness and kindness and what he has accomplished through his Son. And in the wake of all that showing and telling of the Gospel, he expects that there will be fruit. Real fruit. People responding to the *call* of the Gospel on their lives.

That is what HIS expectation was for THEM. Fruit. Fruitfulness. But there is more being said here than just that. Not only does Jesus talk about what he wants and expects to see in his followers (fruitfulness), he also tells them about what they can expect to see and experience in their own life, *as a consequence* of their fruitfulness - NAMELY, pruning, being cut back, diminished, experiencing loss, etc. - which, perhaps, is not what you might expect. But in God's economy, that is how it works. Fruitfulness is "rewarded" - if I can use that language - with *pruning*. Now that is not to say that pruning is the only thing that might ever come as a result of fruitfulness. But it is certainly ONE of the things that God promises to do in the wake of it. But why?

Well, as the passage says pretty plainly, the purpose of God's pruning and cutting back is so that the *fruitful* branch can be *even more* fruitful. That's really IT, in a nutshell. Pruning makes a productive branch, even more productive in the future.

As for what this "pruning" is - well - John doesn't exactly tell us. And I think that's because it can take a lot of specific forms. But if we think about what sort of "fruit" is being talked about in these verses - people responding to Jesus - then working backwards we can make an educated guess as to the sorts of things that might be in view here. "Pruning" might take the form of some personal hardship, or some kind of trial or difficulty. It might also be a kind of "fatherly discipline" along the lines talked about in Hebrews where it says that God disciplines those whom he loves. Or, if there is a connection between the word for "pruning" here and the idea of being made clean (vs 3?) then it may also be something that comes as the result of God's word having its way with us.

Whatever the case, it will be something that, as one of its consequences, results in greater fruitfulness in our lives, in terms of the Lord's work. And, if you think about it, pruning certainly can bring this sort of thing about in a number of ways. As we face challenges that are so huge they threaten to overwhelm us - we are thrown back on the Lord, forced to our knees, as it were, acknowledging our need and his provision, seeing afresh how utterly dependent we really are upon him, and how much we need Him to be present and how much we need His power.

Or perhaps the pruning comes in response to God's Word showing us our on-going need to repent and grow in holiness - this great un-finished project that is going on. As God, in his Fatherly way, addresses our sin - as he exposes vast regions of our heart that remain stubborn and rebellious - but as He does that, we see more and more how deeply sin runs within us, and as a result of that, we are more and more broken by that, and more and more astounded at his kindness and patience with us, and more and more impelled by the resulting love and gratitude and even AWE that wells up within us.

And so, however this pruning comes, whatever its source, one of its consequences is to move us out of ourselves and into the world - leaning harder on God than ever before. And what is the result? The result is that we are more and more amazed - truly amazed at His grace, which is increasingly the focal point of our words and deeds as we live before a watching world. So, for those that follow Jesus, what the FATHER expects is *fruitfulness*. What WE ought to expect is *pruning*.

Now, as these verses make clear, there is *another* kind of pruning, or cutting back that is far more severe and which does not come as a function of the Father's desire to make a person more fruitful but which will come - one day - as the Lord's *judgment*.

In other words, there is coming a day when those branches - those people - who perhaps *formally* and *apparently* were connected to the vine, nevertheless did not produce any fruit, or at least were not fruitful in the way that God desired them to be - and so those people will not be merely cut back - they will be cut OFF. In the context of John's Gospel, you think of Judas, for example, as a good illustration of this sort of thing - or you think of the people who, in John 6, followed Jesus for a time but who eventually turned away when he began to say things they weren't prepared to accept.

So, Christ's call to his disciples is a call to fruitfulness. However, while it IS that, it is not JUST that. The call to fruitfulness is not a call to bare, self-generated productivity. It is not a call to busyness or to conjure up within oneself, and BY oneself, a beehive of activity out of one's own internal resources. It is a call to fruitfulness that comes as a *consequence* and outflow of one's *faithfulness*. Fruit that is a byproduct of abiding in Jesus and comes out of that, and not merely out of some personal resolve or, as I've said, self-generated reserves of productivity. Once again, what Jesus expects is *fruitfulness* that comes from an *abiding faithfulness*.

Now, let me just say very quickly, we don't have time this morning to examine the reality that any faithfulness on our part is, of course, always a function of God's PRIOR and CONTINUING faithfulness to us. His faithfulness always precedes our own. That is certainly true, but we are not going to spend any time on that this morning because it seems to me that the "abiding" and the "faithfulness" that is in view HERE is the "responsive" faithfulness on our part - as a result of God's prior faithfulness.

So, looking back at the passage, we see that in the first 8 verses of this chapter, Jesus makes a strong connection between fruitfulness and abiding in him. But what does that mean? What is this abiding about? Well, if we only had verses 1-8 we would be left with a lot more speculation in that regard. As it is, however, Jesus follows up verses 1-8 with verses 9-16 which, as we have already seen, serve as a kind of commentary that further develops the things talked about in verses 1-8 - especially this whole notion of *abiding in Jesus*. And so when you see verses 9-16 in this way, and when you start to look at these verses more closely, the connectedness and cohesiveness of these verses is pretty fascinating. Let me quickly walk you through it.

In verse 9 we see that *abiding in Jesus* means *abiding in His love*. Then, in verse 10, we see that abiding in his love, i.e., showing Jesus we love him means *keeping his commandments*. Jesus then says very clearly that the heart of his commandments is this: to love one another as Christ has loved you (v12). And then, in case we're not clear on what he means by love - he spells it out for us by saying that the greatest sort of love that exists is the love which enables you to freely lay down your life for your friends.

Now Jesus could have stopped there, but he goes on a little further. His use of the word "friend" might have raised a question in peoples' minds as to who he was referring to - so he tells them, re-iterating the fact that his "friends" are those that do what Jesus commands them. And then, in case someone might be sitting there thinking, "Well, that doesn't sound like a friend, that sounds like a *slave* or a *servant*." but in anticipation of that sort of possible response, Jesus says, in effect that this isn't the case with them.

Why? Because a servant is just someone you give an order to - and they go and do it. But Jesus has not treated his followers that way. He hasn't just issued commands and instructions, he has loved them, he has cared for them, he has *brought them near*, he has confided in them and revealed to them who He is and what He is doing and what the Father is doing through him. In other words, he has invited them into this sort of inner circle, he has let them "in" on what is happening and so has brought them alongside him, to co-labor with him, to partner with him in this thing that God is doing.

And then, and this is his pastoral side coming out again - but then, just in case they might be tempted to get the BIG HEAD about all of this, he very gently reminds them that *he chose them*. In other words, they must never lose sight of the fact that they are not where they are and who they are because of their own merits or because they were clever enough to see the wisdom of signing on with Jesus. That's not how it happened. They didn't choose him first. He chose THEM first. And he chose them that they might bear fruit that will last.

Can you see the whole sequence of thought that goes on there? It's very cool. And all of that stuff we've just seen in vs 9-16, all of that is an expansion of this whole notion of *abiding in Jesus*. An abiding that is not a rule-driven pursuit of morality for morality's sake but is, instead, a pursuit OF the loved BY the loved. It comes as a function of love for Christ - demonstrated by obedience - and further demonstrated by an accompanying love for Christ's followers. And the "love" that is talked about here is self-sacrificial in nature which, of course, was very much at the core of who Christ was and what he came to do. And that's what abiding is all about.

Well, there's a great deal more that could be said - as usual - but our time is almost gone so let me quickly try and highlight for you some of the implications that I think would be the most important ones for us to focus on today.....

For starters, it would be easy to mis-read and, as a result, *mis-respond* to these verses. And so we need to be careful. The POINT of reading these things is not that we go out and make a list of 10 ways that we can be more fruitful in 2009.

That sort of approach would be wrong-headed and misguided and ultimately woefully inadequate. Why? Because that kind of response would betray a serious misunderstanding of the dynamics of what Jesus is saying here. We don't go out and pursue "mere fruitfulness" like it is some sort of requirement that we have to fulfill in order to show that we are connected to the "vine" that is Jesus. That's backwards.

Instead, we need to understand that it is because we are staying connected to the vine, because we are abiding in Jesus - that fruitfulness will come. It will be one of the results that comes as Christ's life pulses through our own.

So, if you're sitting there feeling that your life is rather fruitless, then the first place to go is not to your calendar to start planning, but to your knees to start praying - asking God to show you how and why these things are so, asking God to show you where the blockage is, to reveal to you what is going on, to show you how you are disconnected and dis-engaged from Christ's Word, how his truth is not impacting you and flowing *through* you. Ask yourself some hard questions. Ask God to show you the ways you are short-circuiting any sort of fruitfulness that might come because of your ignoring Christ's commands or because of your lack of love for your brother or sister in Christ, because you are living self-indulgently, rather than self-sacrificially, because you are harboring some secret resentment or bitterness..... Ask God to show you where the blockage is - and when he does - ask him to cut it out and remove it from your life. Ask God to pull out the pruning shears.

Another implication that follows from that, and which is perhaps too obvious, but I will say it any way - but if it is our sincere desire to be used by God, if it is our hope that God would make us fruitful for his sake, then we need to remember and understand that the request to be used by God IS ALSO and ALWAYS simultaneously a request for pruning. And, as such, we should not be surprised or resistant or resentful when God gives us what we ask for. God's most fruitful saints, are often his most wounded.

Still another implication that I don't want you to miss is how the manner in which Jesus talks about abiding here removes it from the realm of the merely subjective. In some older works of Christian devotion the whole idea of abiding in Jesus is sometimes treated in a fairly mystical fashion as if it is all about this mysterious connection that I have with the Lord Jesus that tends to evoke certain feelings and lead to certain experiences. But Jesus is pretty concrete here. Abiding in him is about abiding in his love and in his word and living in alignment with those realities. It is about obeying his commandments. Even more tellingly, it is about loving your brother or sister in Christ in the ways that you respond to them.

And that aspect of abiding in Jesus is, I think, often overlooked. Jesus' words here clearly move the concept of abiding in him not only out of the realm of the *subjective*, but also out of the realm of the merely *individual*. In other words, our abiding in Jesus has a very corporate dimension to it. It is communal in nature. Jesus teaching here does not leave me the option of defining abiding faithfulness in individualistic terms. It does not let me separate my "abiding in him" from my life in the Body of Christ. It means that no matter how committed I am to a personal, devotional connection to Jesus - if that commitment is unaccompanied by an equally committed devotion to demonstrating love to the community of faith - then I cannot for a moment imagine that God would be pleased with such a self-centered understanding of what abiding in him is all about. Abiding in Jesus cannot be simply a "me and Jesus" thing. When I am serving a brother or sister, or grieving for him or her, or with him or her, when I am encouraging a brother or sister - and even when I am rebuking a brother or sister - all of these things are the outworking and demonstration of what "abiding" in Jesus is all about.

Final, please don't miss the encouraging truth that, in fact, we are not just servants of the Lord Jesus. To be sure, we DO serve him and his kingdom. But there is more to it than that. We serve him AS his friends, as those who have been privileged to have been brought near, as those to whom the most precious things that can ever be known have been revealed, as those who have been invited to partner with the Lord Jesus and to come along side him and pursue the furthering of his kingdom together.

That is a very great privilege. And Jesus, our friend and our Redeemer, invites us to join with him, and continue with him, in that endeavour.....