

Bearing Fruit - Kevin Miller, 30 minutes, **John 15:1-17** (#500)

Introduction: One of the rites of passage that I got to “enjoy” when I became a pastor was to sign up for health insurance. Pastors – like about 50% of our population – shop for individual health insurance rather than being part of a group plan like many large employers offer. In my case, Farm Bureau was my ticket to health care. I have always found that ironic, since I’ve never lived on a farm and – other than driving a combine once and a bit of gardening – I really have very little experience with being a farmer.

So imagine my confusion when the Farm Bureau newspaper began to come in the mail. What was I to do with this? The sale price of certain crops. Ads for how to increase your yields. Notifications about the newest and greatest GPS guided planting systems. Then, one day I realized that this was a goldmine of useful information: now I was on the inside, I knew the lingo, and I could have conversations with my father-in-law that I never could have before. It was great! It was my entry into a world that had, largely, been hidden from me. Suddenly things like crop yields and the new John Deere models mattered.

And that’s where we’re going today. Not with Farm Bureau or John Deere, but in John’s Gospel; and our yields won’t be about selling prices, but about bearing fruit for Christ and His kingdom. What does that mean? Why does it matter? And how – when all is said and done – do you and I bear fruit in the Christian life anyways? We don’t need to sign up with an organization to answer those questions, no, we simply need to look to God’s Word. Join me in **John 15...**

15:1-6 This is one of those passages that most of us are generally aware of, and yet – when we dig deeper – we’ll find that there is a whole lot going on here that we might really struggle to understand. Two things to keep in mind as we proceed: first, the context – Jesus has been teaching the disciples about obedience. As well, He taught them that they would be equipped and enabled by the Holy Spirit. And then, of course, He has spent a great deal of time encouraging them towards this faithfulness that they are called to. Which brings up the second

thing to realize: the picture before us in these verses is all about mission. That's a big contrast from how these words are usually quoted, but I think you'll see that Jesus is speaking about His mission and our mission in the verses ahead and that's where our focus needs to be. So, rather than pulling at every thread, for our purposes this morning I want us to see three strands in this passage that will connect to and bring together everything Jesus has been teaching on over the past couple of chapters. This first truth I would simply title "Remain in Christ."

Where am I getting that from? In **verse 4**, the ESV speaks of "abiding" in Christ. So does the NASB and the NKJV. While "abide" is a good translation, it isn't a word that you and I use very often, so we're still left with the question of "what exactly is Jesus getting at here?" Answer: the word is synonymous with "remain," which is how the NIV translates it. Thus Jesus' command: abide in Him. Remain in Him. Fruit comes not from any other source, but instead only from Him.

The picture here is a striking one. In Christ's imagery, the Father is the vinedresser – the farmer, as it were. Jesus is the vine itself. And everyone who claims to follow Jesus are the branches. Thus, we have our gardening metaphor. What do we need to see from it?

First, **verse 2**: the Father is at work. He does two things primarily – He prunes and He takes away. On what basis does the Father do this work? On the basis of bearing fruit. Let's define what we mean here, because that will help us to make the most sense of the rest of the passage: in the metaphor, fruit is the result of our obedience in Christ. We've already seen Jesus talk about obedience in the previous chapters, now we'll see why that obedience matters in the coming verses.

Second, what are the two works that the Father is doing? First, we read that He takes away. Those who claim Jesus and yet do not obey Him; those who seem good and religious but don't actually trust Him as their Savior – they shall be cut off. Just like dead branches need to be removed from a tree, so it is here. This shouldn't surprise us: think of Judas, or of Ananias and Saphira in **Acts 5**. Though

our current culture can be pretty squishy when it comes to those who have faith and those who do not, God is not that way. People who call themselves Christians and yet do not bear fruit – who refuse to bear spiritual fruit – are not actually Christians and are not remaining in Christ. That isn't to say that the branches that remain don't sin – of course they do – but it is to say that there is a radical difference between not bearing fruit and not being as fruitful as you are called to be. This is a difference as wide as Judas' condemnation and Peter's restoration. Let's never forget that faith is both belief and practice – not just one or the other.

On the other side, the Father prunes the branches that remain. So, those branches that hold firmly to Jesus will go through trial and hardship, just as **James** has promised us in his book. But those trials and hardships aren't merely the results of living in a sinful world – no, God is far more sovereign than that – instead, all that we go through is providentially given by God to grow us, to change us, to mold us and make us fit for the mission of being disciples who take the Good News of Christ into the world.

How do we apply these truths?

The first is simple, yet soul-searching: are you remaining in Christ? Do you obey Him? Do you hold to His teachings? When you fail, when you sin, when you don't add up, do you look to Him for forgiveness? As you look in the mirror, can you see how Christ has changed you? The fruit may be small – it may not be as abundant as you would hope – but if you can see fruit, then you should be encouraged. If you don't, then you need to be honest with yourself and get serious about following Christ. Signing some sort of pledge won't save you, neither will walking an aisle, joining the church, or being baptized. Remember, Judas did ministry right along with the other disciples, yet he proved to not remain in Christ. If that is you, then heed the Lord's wakeup call from these verses today – trust Jesus, repent of your sins, and walk in His commandments.

Second: the picture here is one that is especially timely, because it is all about our identity. That is a word that our world often connects to things like race and

gender, but that's no reason to shy away from it. In fact, I'd say that we Christians have a deeper claim on that word than anyone else, because in Christ, we have a new identity. The call here is for our actions to reflect that identity. Therefore, if you are in Christ, all the demographics of the world need to fade away. We are not hyphenated Christians, as if we are a Christian-man or a Christian-woman. We are not white-Christians or black-Christians. We are not married-Christians or single-Christians. No: our identity, our spiritual passport, lists being in Christ alone. We are in Him. Just as the rest of the world claims loud and clear that their identities matter and drive who they are, we Christians all the more must make clear that we understand – and that our identity is found in Christ alone.

Point number one, then: remain in Christ. Mission starts with our Commander. We must be connected to Him to not only know what we are doing, but to have the power to do anything in the first place. But what does that look like? We'll see the answer to that next: keep Christ's commandments...

15:7-11 Do you want to bear fruit? Do you want to remain in Christ? Do you want to be found useful for Him? Then the answer is simple: look to Jesus. But how? This passage answers with our marching orders, and the first is: prayer.

Verse 7 is one of those verses that folks love to quote – the sort of thing that might make it on to an Instagram feed or be sent as a text. But we seem to forget the first words: Jesus isn't teaching "ask whatever you want..." no, there are words before that: "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you..." Which is to say: if you are holding to His teachings and commandments, then your prayers will follow Christ-like patterns. Said another way: if you are in Christ, then your heart will be changed to want what He wants, and you'll pray for the sorts of things that Christ Himself cares most for.

I think it is no accident that **verse 8** returns to the topic of bearing fruit – that gives us the context of what it means to follow Christ and pray according to His will. Our prayers should be part and parcel of bearing spiritual fruit. They aren't just for ourselves, or our wants and desires – they must be for the things that

Jesus wants. This is why the Lord's Prayer – Christ's very example given to us – speaks of God's will being done rather than our own.

The picture that Jesus teaches here is that there are certain parallels between His connection to His Father, and between our connection to Him. There are differences, of course, since you and I aren't God; but the similarities are important: the Father loves Jesus, and Jesus loves the disciples. Just as Jesus has been obedient to the Father and kept His commandments, you and I are called to be obedient to Jesus and keep all that He has taught. When we do so, the Bible calls that "abiding in" Christ's love.

Now, this might seem dry – almost legalistic. Many in our world would sure think so. But that's not what Jesus is after at all. In fact, in **verse 11**, He tells us that He is teaching these things not to depress or discourage us, but instead to give us joy.

Before we move on to the next part of how Jesus will equip the disciples – and us – for the mission, let's highlight something very important here that we might be prone to missing: obedience brings joy. I wish I could put that truth on repeat for all of us to hear each moment as we go throughout our week, because the world around us is transmitting the opposite message just that often. It is constant and relentless. We are told again and again that obedience is slavery, that it is something bad. We are told and shown that joy actually comes from being your own master, from doing whatever feels good in the moment. But that is wrong.

One of the best ways to combat that sort of thinking, is simply to ask yourself: "ok, how's that working out?" Look at your own life, look at the lives of your friends or coworkers. When they follow the world's plan rather than Christ's, do they actually have joy? I'm sure not seeing it. Certainly not long term. No... the picture that Jesus gives here is that you and I can have the greatest, most perfect, never-ending joy not from doing whatever is right in our own eyes, but instead by being connected to Him, obeying what He has said, trusting that Jesus knows best. I assure you, take this to heart and Christ will never let you down. You will have hardships in the moment – though, again, even non-Christians have those –

but your hardships will matter, they will produce fruit if you look to Christ in them. And then, something that only a Christian can say: you'll have joy in eternity. This is what Christ promises. This is why remaining in Him matters. And this is what we are aiming to show and tell others about with our lives and words.

Remain in Christ, keep His commandments. And now, the third link in our chain: love one another...

15:12-17 Jesus has already called the disciples to love each other, but He elaborates here: the love Christ Himself gives to His disciples is His own life. Jesus gave us the ultimate service, and so all who remain in Him have everything they need to serve one another, to love each other, and to take that message to the watching world.

The change in wording – moving from “servants” in **John 13**, to “friends” here is significant. It doesn't mean that we aren't still servants of Christ – after all, Paul will use this language often. But it shows us that the point of being a friend of Jesus means that we have been given understanding. It's not a license to disobey, but instead a display of His love for us, and an example of how we are to love one another. It's an expression – as Bruce Milne – puts it, of how we have been “so generously provided for.”

Remain in Christ, keep Christ's commandments, love one another. Three essentials to mission. Let's close with one more, which we see in **verses 16-17...**

The point of this passage is not how great you and I are. No, it is all about how great Jesus is. We didn't choose Him, He chose us – that's grace! So when He calls us to the mission, it is because He loves us, has equipped us, and sends us as specially chosen ones. Bruce Milne, again: “We go, not because we are worthy, or equipped, or attractive, or skilled, or experienced, or in any way suitable and appropriate. We go because we have been summoned and sent.” Amen! Let's act as those who have been specially chosen, equipped, and loved by Jesus. Let's show that to a world who needs His grace...