

### **The Gospel of John (95) Jesus, the True Vine (3)**

Let us turn again to John 15. Today is the third occasion in which we will address this passage in which Jesus sets forth Himself as the True Vine. We had considered moving on past the passage of John 15:1-17, which sets forth our Lord Jesus as the source of life for His disciples, who are connected to Him through faith. But knowing that we had somewhat abbreviated time today and because I was encouraged to set forth this matter of the believer's friendship with Jesus Christ in some detail, we decided to continue to address the verses we read and addressed last time--John 15:9-17. Here Jesus was speaking to His apostles, saying to them,

“As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love. <sup>10</sup>If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love.

<sup>11</sup>“These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full. <sup>12</sup>This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. <sup>13</sup>Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends. <sup>14</sup>You are My friends if you do whatever I command you. <sup>15</sup>No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you. <sup>16</sup>You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you. <sup>17</sup>These things I command you, that you love one another.

We have already given our attention to the love that Jesus has for His disciples and our response to that love as set forth in verses 9 and 10. We then began to consider that Jesus directed His disciples to love one another in the same way that He had loved them, which is set forth in verses 11-17.

The Lord first declared to them His motivation for having spoken to them about these matters. **Verse 11** reads, “*These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full.*” Our Lord Jesus would have His disciples to have the fulness of joy in their souls. This joy flows from their knowledge of their relationship with Him and that He loves them with the same love that the Father has for Him. The Father loved His Son, who is altogether worthy of His love. And the Son loves His disciples with the same love, although they are altogether unworthy of His love. Our Lord would have us always know and experience the joy that flows forth from the knowledge of His love for us. We may experience this increasingly as we keep His commandments.

We then read of our Lord's command in **verse 12**, “*This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.*” All of our Lord's words in this passage have in view His impending death on His cross on their behalf. He was telling them that as He was laying down His life for them because He loved them, in the same way they should love one another, even being willing to lay down their lives for one another.

**Verses 13 and 14** make it clear that their love for one another should be sacrificial in nature. Jesus said, “*Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends. You are My friends if you do whatever I command you.*” The Lord was intimating His own sacrifice that would soon take place for His friends.<sup>1</sup> He then declared what identifies and distinguishes them as His “friends.” We read in **verse 15**, “*No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you.*”

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly the Greek word for the noun, “friends”, is φίλων (*philon*) which in its verbal form is the Greek word for “love.”

Here we read of the close relationship that the Lord Jesus has with His disciples. He regards and treats them as His friends. Knowledge of this relationship with our Savior is very assuring and comforting. It speaks of how the Christian does not rejoice principally in the things that God gives to him, but he delights foremost in knowing His Savior in the closest and most intimate way. The Christian delights in the fact that he can speak of Jesus, "He is my Friend."

Being a friend of Jesus Christ is just one way in which the Holy Scriptures depict what is commonly referred to as a "personal relationship with Jesus Christ." There are many metaphors that speak to how He relates to us and we with Him. And each of these address some need or benefit that we receive from our relationship with Him. And so every true Christian may think and respond in faith in the following ways:

Do I need guidance? He is my **Shepherd** who will lead me.

Do I need healing? He is my **Physician** who heals me.

Am I weary? He is my **Fountain** who refreshes me.

Am I hungry, physically or spiritually? He is my **Bread** who feeds me.

Am I enslaved to sin? He is my **Savior** and **Lord** who delivers me.

Am I ignorant? He is my **Prophet** who teaches me.

Am I sinful and undone? He is my **Priest** who cleanses me

Am I guilty and feel estranged from God? He is my **Lamb** who has atoned for me.

Am I alone and lonely? Do I need wisdom to know what God is doing through me and in the world about me? He is my **Friend** who accompanies me and converses with me. It is true of the true believer, "He walks with me and He talks with me and He tells me I am His own." No, He does not do so audibly, but He does give understanding and confidence of knowing His will that is set forth in His written Word, the Bible.

In these few verses that are before us we may read of three characteristics of friends of Jesus Christ. Jesus said,

### 1. Friends of Jesus love others as Christ has loved them. (15:13)

Jesus said, "Greater love has no one that this, than to lay down one's life for his friends." This statement of our Lord follows His command that His disciples love one another as He has loved them. To what degree did our Lord love His own? He gave Himself to die for them. From the disciples' vantage point, Jesus was presently teaching them the principle, and then He would shortly demonstrate this principle in the events that immediately follow in His arrest, trials, and death by crucifixion. From the vantage point of the readers of the Gospel, including us who are aware of its historical setting, we see immediately and clearly He is referencing His own death on the cross on behalf of His people.

By the way, in these words our Lord is teaching *limited atonement*, is He not? The often debated question is this: For whom did Jesus die? Whose debt for sin was paid for by the death of Jesus Christ? Did Jesus die making payment for the sins of the entire human race? Many wrongly believe so. Or did Jesus die specifically to pay for the sins of His people. The Scriptures are quite clear on the matter: **He died on behalf of His people, the elect of God, the redeemed of all ages; He died for His "friends."** This is taught in numerous places. It is taught here. Jesus said, "Greater love has no one that this, than to lay down one's life *for his friends.*"

Now when our Lord gave this statement, "Greater love has no one that this, than to lay down one's life for his friends", **He was giving a positive duty that He has imposed upon us His people.** We are to love other Christians; we are to love one another. And He has placed the highest standard upon us for this love: we are to love one another as He has loved us. We are not to love the brethren less than what is set forth. The standard has been established. As Christ Jesus has loved us, we are to love one another. We are to love all the brethren in this manner. Our love for one another is to be self-denying and self-sacrificing. We are to lay aside our own preferences and priorities, desiring to achieve the well-being and benefit of other brothers and sisters in Christ.

This commandment of our Lord condemns selfishness, the resistant insistence of having one's own way, the sinful resistance and resentment when *our* desires and *our* plans are thwarted. This condemns the spirit which refuses to grant forgiveness to others that is so freely granted to His people. **These kinds of things do**

*not characterize true Christians.* True Christians may fail (and do so) with respect to these things from time to time, but failure to love the Christian brethren is not the common action or reaction of the true child of God. Christians have been taught to love one another according to the love that their Lord manifested toward them. As Paul wrote of the Thessalonians, it may be said of all true Christians,

<sup>9</sup>But concerning brotherly love you have no need that I should write to you, *for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another*; <sup>10</sup>and indeed you do so toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, that you increase more and more... (1 Thess. 4:9-10)

We all need to increase more and more in this matter, but it is a matter of “increasing” what is already present. Paul intimates elsewhere that if one lacks this love, he is no Christian.

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become as sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. <sup>2</sup>And though I have the gift of prophesy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. <sup>3</sup>And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing. (1 Cor. 13:1-3)

Love is an essential grace from God that is present in every Christian. This is so much the case that failure in this matter is death to any hope of eternal life.

In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother. (1 John 3:10)

And,

We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death. (1 John 3:14)

**J. C. Ryle** gave a solemn warning in the light of these words of our Lord:

A precept like this should stir up in us great searching of heart. It condemns the selfish, ill-natured, jealous, ill-tempered spirit of many professing Christians, with a sweeping condemnation. Sound views of doctrine, and knowledge of controversy, will avail us nothing at last, if we have known nothing of love. Without charity we may pass muster very well as Churchmen; but without charity we are no better, says saint Paul, than “sounding brass and tinkling cymbal” (1 Cor. 13:1). Where there is no Christ-like love, there is no grace, no work of the Spirit, and no reality in our religion. Blessed are they that do not forget Christ’s commandment! They are those who shall “have right to the tree of life, and enter in through the gates into the city” (Rev. 22:14).

We next read a second characteristic of His friends:

## **2. Friends of Jesus Christ are ones who obey Him. (15:14)**

Jesus said, “*You are My friends if you do whatever I command you.*” The ones for whom Jesus died are His friends. His friends are ones who order their lives according to His commands. Jesus Christ is their friend, but He is also their Lord.

Obedience to God through Jesus Christ is the grand mark of the true Christian. It is the fruit of the new birth. When God causes one to be born from above, born of His Spirit, God imparts a new heart that longs to be fully obedient to God and His Son. **Arthur Pink** (1886-1952) described it this way:

Regeneration is that miracle of Divine grace wrought in the soul which enlists the affections Godward, which brings the human will into subjection to the Divine, and which produces a real and radical change in

the life. That change is from worldliness to godliness, from disobedience to obedience. At the new birth, the love of God is shed abroad in the heart by the Holy Spirit, and that love is manifested in a dominating longing and sincere purpose to *please in all things* the One who has plucked me as a brand from the burning. There is a greater difference between the genuine Christian and the deceived professing Christian than there is between a living man and a corpse. None need remain in doubt if they will *honestly measure themselves* by the Holy Word of God.

As soon as the light of God's salvation shone into Paul's heart, he asked the Lord, "Lord, what will You have me to do?" (Acts 9:6). This is the response of everyone who comes to saving faith in Jesus Christ. Obedience is the outworking of saving faith.

Now, when Jesus said, "You are My friends if you do whatever I command you", he was not stating *how* people become His friends. Rather, He was simply describing what His friends are like. They do order their lives according to His commandments. True Christians are obedient friends of Jesus Christ. Every true Christian is a true friend of Jesus Christ.

Obedience to God is one of the tests by which we may have *assurance* that we are true Christians.

By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments. For *this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments*. And His commandments are not burdensome. (1 John 5:2f)

Also,

*Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments*. He who says, "I know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But *whoever keeps His word*, truly the love of God is perfected in him. *By this we know that we are in Him*. (1 John 3:3-5)

The third quality of friendship with Jesus Christ is set forth in verse 15.

### **3. Jesus Christ reveals the will and purpose of God to His friends. (15:15)**

Jesus said, "No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you." This suggests several matters respecting our relationship with the Lord Jesus.

**(1) It depicts a closer relationship with God that Christians enjoyed than believers enjoyed before the coming of Christ.** Of John the Baptist Jesus once said, "For I say to you, among those born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist." But then He said, "but he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he" (Luke 7:28). The Reformation Study Bible has a good footnote to this verse:

Jesus praises John as the greatest of men, cast in the mold of the prophets of Israel and unmoved by expediency or luxury. Yet as a prophet he belonged to an era that was being withdrawn as the kingdom of God was introduced. In this sense he was less than those who were in the kingdom.<sup>2</sup>

In the Old Testament, only Abraham and Moses were referred to as friends of God. Under the new covenant Jesus regards all Christians as friends, yes, every Christian, as His friend. And so, let us consider these two Old Testament friends of God, Abraham and Moses. First, let us reflect on the friendship with God that Abraham experienced and enjoyed.

#### **[1] Abraham, the friend of God**

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<sup>2</sup> Sproul, R. C., gen. ed., *The Reformation Study Bible* (Reformation Trust, 2015), p. 1616.

Abraham is called “the friend of God” in **James 1:21-23**.

Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? <sup>22</sup>Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? <sup>23</sup>And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” *And he was called the friend of God.*

This verse speaks of Abraham’s relationship with God through His many years of faith. The quotation that James cited was from Genesis 15:6. This was an early declaration respecting Abraham that was said of him long before the birth of Isaac. Here is the passage in which this verse is found:

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward.”

<sup>2</sup>But Abram said, “Lord GOD, what will You give me, seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” <sup>3</sup>Then Abram said, “Look, You have given me no offspring; indeed one born in my house is my heir!”

<sup>4</sup>And behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, “This one shall not be your heir, but one who will come from your own body shall be your heir.” <sup>5</sup>Then He brought him outside and said, “Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them.” And He said to him, “So shall your descendants be.”

<sup>6</sup>And *he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.* (Gen. 15:1-6)

But the reference that James gives of Abraham offering his Isaac his son on the altar is an event that occurred decades after Abraham is identified as the friend of God. God had regarded Abraham as his friend throughout Abraham’s journey of faith.

Abraham as the friend of God is also mentioned by the Chronicler<sup>3</sup> in recording the words of King Jehoshaphat of Judah. Jehoshaphat offered a prayer to God in which he identified Abraham as God’s friend. Here is **2 Chronicles 20:5-7**:

<sup>5</sup>Then Jehoshaphat stood in the assembly of Judah and Jerusalem, in the house of the LORD, before the new court, <sup>6</sup>and said: “O LORD God of our fathers, are You not God in heaven, and do You not rule over all the kingdoms of the nations, and in Your hand is there not power and might, so that no one is able to withstand You? <sup>7</sup>*Are You not our God, who drove out the inhabitants of this land before Your people Israel, and gave it to the descendants of Abraham Your friend forever?*

God gives good things to his friends. And God gives good gifts to those who are related to His friends.

God Himself identified Abraham as his friend in Isaiah 41, in which He was addressing Israel, assuring them of His love and commitment to care and provide for them. Here is **Isaiah 41:8-10**.

“But you, Israel, are My servant,  
Jacob whom I have chosen,  
The descendants of *Abraham My friend*.

<sup>9</sup>You whom I have taken from the ends of the earth,  
And called from its farthest regions,  
And said to you,

‘You are My servant,  
I have chosen you and have not cast you away:

<sup>10</sup>Fear not, for I am with you;  
Be not dismayed, for I am your God.  
I will strengthen you,  
Yes, I will help you,

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<sup>3</sup> The chronicler was the writer of Chronicles, and probably Ezra and Nehemiah. The chronicler was probably Ezra.

I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.’

Because the people of Israel were descendants of God’s friend, Abraham, God regarded them and purposed to bless them for Abraham’s sake. In a similar way because we are disciples of Jesus Christ whom He regards as His friends, God His Father has regard for us and has purposed to bless us for Christ’s sake.

Now we had said that one important aspect of one’s friendship with Jesus Christ is that He reveals the will and purpose of God to His friends (cf. 15:15). This was true of God’s friendship with Abraham in the Old Testament. Because God regarded Abraham as His friend, He disclosed to Abraham what He was about to do and then in response Abraham engaged in conversation and direct involvement in the accomplishing of God’s will. We read of this in Genesis 18 in the account of God visiting Sodom with view to destroy it.

God had come to the tent of Abraham with two of His angels. After having enjoyed a fellowship meal together at which God had revealed His purpose to fulfil His promise to Abraham that He would father a son through Sarah, God arose to head toward Sodom. Then we have this interchange take place:

<sup>16</sup>Then the men rose from there and looked toward Sodom, and Abraham went with them to send them on the way. <sup>17</sup>**And the LORD said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am doing,** <sup>18</sup>since Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? <sup>19</sup>For I have known him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the LORD, to do righteousness and justice, that the LORD may bring to Abraham what He has spoken to him.” <sup>20</sup>And the LORD said, “Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grave, <sup>21</sup>I will go down now and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry against it that has come to Me; and if not, I will know.”

<sup>22</sup>Then the men turned away from there and went toward Sodom, but Abraham still stood before the LORD. <sup>23</sup>And Abraham came near and said, “Would You also destroy the righteous with the wicked? <sup>24</sup>Suppose there were fifty righteous within the city; would You also destroy the place and not spare *it* for the fifty righteous that were in it? <sup>25</sup>Far be it from You to do such a thing as this, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous should be as the wicked; far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?”

<sup>26</sup>So the LORD said, “If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare all the place for their sakes.”

<sup>27</sup>Then Abraham answered and said, “Indeed now, I who *am but* dust and ashes have taken it upon myself to speak to the Lord: <sup>28</sup>Suppose there were five less than the fifty righteous; would You destroy all of the city for *lack of five*?”

So He said, “If I find there forty-five, I will not destroy *it*.”

<sup>29</sup>And he spoke to Him yet again and said, “Suppose there should be forty found there?”

So He said, “I will not do *it* for the sake of forty.”

<sup>30</sup>Then he said, “Let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak: Suppose thirty should be found there?”

So He said, “I will not do *it* if I find thirty there.”

<sup>31</sup>And he said, “Indeed now, I have taken it upon myself to speak to the Lord: Suppose twenty should be found there?”

So He said, “I will not destroy *it* for the sake of twenty.”

<sup>32</sup>Then he said, “Let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak but once more: Suppose ten should be found there?”

And He said, “I will not destroy *it* for the sake of ten.” <sup>33</sup>So the LORD went His way as soon as He had finished speaking with Abraham; and Abraham returned to his place. (Gen. 18:16-33)

Because God regarded Abraham as His friend, He desired to inform Abraham of His will, what He was about to do. He said, “**“Shall I hide from Abraham what I am doing”?** But then interestingly Abraham entered into conversation and even appealing to God regarding His actions. As a result of Abraham’s interaction with God His friend, God proceeded to Sodom with what appears to have been a different intention

than what He had before He met and engaged conversation with His friend.<sup>4</sup> In the same way, the Lord Jesus declared to His disciples that they were His friends “for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you” (John 15:15). We may see, therefore, that being a friend of Jesus Christ is to be informed by Him as to what His purposes and plans are that He intends to accomplish and then His friends’ response in working with Him, striving to bring to pass His will.

## [2] Moses, the friend of God

Moses had a special relationship with God that was not enjoyed by the other Israelites. Moses conversed with God. We read on this in **Exodus 33:7-11**.

<sup>7</sup>Moses took his tent and pitched it outside the camp, far from the camp, and called it the tabernacle of meeting. And it came to pass that everyone who sought the LORD went out to the tabernacle of meeting which was outside the camp. <sup>8</sup>So it was, whenever Moses went out to the tabernacle, that all the people rose, and each man stood at his tent door and watched Moses until he had gone into the tabernacle. <sup>9</sup>And it came to pass, when Moses entered the tabernacle, that the pillar of cloud descended and stood at the door of the tabernacle, and the LORD talked with Moses. <sup>10</sup>All the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the tabernacle door, and all the people rose and worshiped, each man in his tent door. <sup>11</sup>*So the LORD spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend.* And he would return to the camp, but his servant Joshua the son of Nun, a young man, did not depart from the tabernacle.

King David alluded to the special relationship that Moses had with God in Psalm 103. We read in verse 7: “He made known His ways to Moses, His acts to the children of Israel.” Although the children of Israel witnessed all of the great works of God in their exodus from Egypt and of God’s protection and provision through the wilderness, God revealed to Moses greater quality and degree of information to him as His friend. The children of Israel had indeed seen God’s works, but to Moses, God revealed His ways. Apparently God revealed to Moses not only what He was doing or about to do, He revealed to Moses His designs and purposes that He would effect through those deeds.

We may read of specific instances in which this friendship between God and Moses was manifested. For example, on one occasion God’s anger against Israel was so great that He threatened to destroy it and raise up another nation from Moses who would live before Him. But then Moses engaged in conversation, in what appears to be Moses appealing and persuading God not to take that action, for the result would be God’s own reputation becoming damaged in the opinion of the surrounding nations. God responded to Moses’ intercession with Him by not destroying the nation.<sup>5</sup> We read of this interchange in **Numbers 14:11-23**.

Then the LORD said to Moses: “How long will these people reject Me? And how long will they not believe Me, with all the signs which I have performed among them? <sup>12</sup>I will strike them with the pestilence and disinherit them, and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they.”

<sup>13</sup>And Moses said to the LORD: “Then the Egyptians will hear it, for by Your might You brought these people up from among them, <sup>14</sup>and they will tell it to the inhabitants of this land. They have heard that You, LORD, are among these people; that You, LORD, are seen face to face and Your cloud stands above them, and You go before them in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night. <sup>15</sup>Now if You kill these people as one man, then the nations which have heard of Your fame will speak, saying, <sup>16</sup>‘Because the LORD was not able to bring this people to the land which He swore to give them, therefore He killed them in the wilderness.’ <sup>17</sup>And now, I pray, let the power of my Lord be great, just as You have spoken, saying, <sup>18</sup>‘The LORD is longsuffering and abundant in mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression; but He by no means clears the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and

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<sup>4</sup> Obviously God’s will of decree had not changed, for God had decreed from eternity the conversation and its outcome. All that occurred in God’s conversation with Abraham was according to God’s unchangeable providence to fulfill His decree.

<sup>5</sup> Here again, of course, God’s will of decree had not changed through Moses’ intercession, for God had decreed from eternity the conversation and its outcome. All that occurred in God’s conversation with Moses was according to God’s unchangeable providence to fulfill His decree.

fourth generation.’ <sup>19</sup>Pardon the iniquity of this people, I pray, according to the greatness of Your mercy, just as You have forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now.”

<sup>20</sup>Then the LORD said: “I have pardoned, according to your word; <sup>21</sup>but truly, as I live, all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD— <sup>22</sup>because all these men who have seen My glory and the signs which I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and have put Me to the test now these ten times, and have not heeded My voice, <sup>23</sup>they certainly shall not see the land of which I swore to their fathers, nor shall any of those who rejected Me see it.

Once again we may note that the Lord Jesus declared to His disciples that this is what characterized them as His friends. Although many in Israel had witnessed firsthand His acts, to His disciples He had revealed His purposes and what His Father was accomplishing through Him.

By the way, just as the friendship of Moses with God was shown forth in his prayer to God to change His stated intention to bring His judgment, so our friendship with Jesus Christ is also to be manifest in our praying, even struggling with God, in order to achieve His will. In this way as His friends with our knowledge of His intention to greatly expand His kingdom throughout the world we engage in prayer, working along with Him to see His desires and purposes come to pass. This is what a friend does for his friend. He knows his friend’s desires and designs, and he encourages and perhaps assists him in accomplishing them.

**(2) Our friendship with Christ suggests that one of the central aspects of the Christian life is learning more fully God’s purposes in Christ.**

True friendship can only exist when there is an understanding of a friend’s desires and concerns, and there is an accompanied willingness and commitment to help your friend to achieve his desires. Our Lord Himself told His disciples that this is what differentiated them from others. They knew who He was and what God had intended to do through Him. Again, Jesus said,

“You are my friends, if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you.”

The first statement identifies who His true friends are--they ones who obey Him. If one does not order his life according to teachings of Christ, that one is no friend of Christ, regardless of what is claimed. He is no Christian who is no friend of Jesus. The second statement states the reason they are His friends--they have become aware of what God was doing through Him. And so, at the heart of a vital and growing relationship with Jesus Christ, I would assert, is the understanding of God as to who He is and what He is like, but further, to understand what He is doing in history through Jesus Christ. Just as God chose to reveal to Abraham and Moses what He was intending to do, therefore they were friends of God, so the Lord Jesus reveals to His disciples His will and His purposes that He intends to accomplish.

If you desire to grow spiritually, if you want to grow in your personal relationship with God the Father and His Son, if you want the Spirit of God to be your Comforter and Enabler, filling you with power in day to day life, you must understand what it is God is doing and how He is going about it, and then, upon that understanding, purpose as He enables you, to assist or serve Him in that task.

Friendship with Jesus Christ, the essence of being a true Christian, is seeking to further His will through one’s life in His world. Since this is the case, let us consider several matters. *First*, do you see how shallow and short-sighted it is to package the gospel solely to appeal to non-Christian people for what benefit they are going to derive from the gospel? People generally are uninterested and unconcerned to know what the will and purpose of God is, they know what their will is and what they want is to be shown how they can use God to further their desires. But this is not the way of the Christian. The Christian is to lay down His life for His friend, Jesus Christ, and He does so because He loves His Lord and desires that His purposes are furthered in the world.

*Second*, do you see the importance of being a student of biblical doctrine (teaching)? The Bible is God’s book that reveals to us who our God is and what He is doing in history. It is not to be reduced to simply a book of commandments which responds to a reader’s quest, “God just tell me what you want me to do.” It is

a book that reveals to us the nature of God and the mind of God. It reveals to us what He is doing in history. It reveals to us how we can be fellow workers with God in His work in history. This is what it is to be a Christian, a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Much of our Christian life should be given to this pursuit of growing in our knowledge of our God and His Son Jesus Christ. This is the way of growth, the way of peace, the way of intimacy with God, the way of usefulness in His kingdom. This is why **Paul** prayed for new Christians the way he did.

Therefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, do not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers: that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation *in the knowledge of Him*... (Eph. 1:15)

And **Peter** wrote to Christians just before he was martyred,

Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord, as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, *through the knowledge of Him* who called us by glory and virtue... (2 Peter 1:3f)

The highest calling and the most glorious task for the Christian is to attain to this knowledge. The Christian is to pursue this knowledge so that he comes to think God's thoughts and to assume God's goals, and to pursue God's work to bring them about. Those ones who attain to a great degree these aims are the ones closest to Christ, they are His closest friends.

He will *call them His friends*; He will not only love them, but will let them know it; for *in His tongue is the law of kindness*. After His resurrection He seems to speak with more affectionate tenderness of and to His disciples than before. *Go to my brethren* (ch. 20:17). *Children, have you any meat?* (ch. 21:5). But observe, though Christ called *them His friends*, they called themselves *His servants*: Peter, *a servant of Christ* (1 Pet. 1:1), and so James (James 1:1). The more honour Christ puts upon us, the more honour we should study to do Him; the higher in His eyes, the lower in our own. (Matthew Henry)

This is also the great calling and task of the church. We are to seek to know Him and His ways. We are to seek after and acquire this knowledge of Him and then proclaim that knowledge to the world in which God has placed us. It was **Herman Bavinck** (1854-1921) who wrote of this knowledge, using an older term, "dogma", to describe doctrinal teachings of the church:

This means that the church of Christ therefore has a certain task to fulfill with respect to dogma. To preserve, explain, understand, and defend the truth of God entrusted to her, the church is called to appropriate mentally, to assimilate internally, and to profess it in the midst of the world as the truth of God.<sup>6</sup>

He went on to say rightly,

A religion without dogma, however vague and general it may be, without, say, faith in divine power, does not exist, and a nondogmatic Christianity, in the strictest sense of the word, is an illusion and void of meaning.

#### **4. Jesus Christ had chosen them to serve Him (15:16)**

Jesus said to His disciples "*You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you*" (v. 16). Of course commonly when the Scriptures speak of God choosing people for His purposes,

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<sup>6</sup> From Herman Bavinck, **Reformed Dogmatics**, vol. 1 (Baker Academic, 2003)

the matter of God's election is being addressed. Here the Lord Jesus told His disciples that they had been the object of His choice of them to receive the privileges and benefits of their relationship with Him.

Now most often when we speak of election, we do so with view to God's election of sinners unto salvation. Before God had created this universe and this world and everything in it, He foresaw and chose a great number of souls to be the objects of His favor and recipients of His saving grace in history. Most often when we speak of God's election of the sinners unto salvation, the Scriptures speak of God the Father as the person of the holy Trinity that elects sinners. The Father chose us. The Son redeemed us. The Holy Spirit applies salvation to us. But here Jesus declared, "You did not choose me, but I chose you." This leads some to conclude that Jesus is not referring here to God's election unto salvation, but of Christ's election and calling of these men for their apostolic office. This was the view of **F. F. Bruce** (1910-1990), who wrote:

Jesus now harks back for a moment to the figure of the vine and its fruit. On the day that He first met His disciples and conscripted them into this service with the command 'Follow Me!' He chose them that they might share His ministry. The fruit produced by the branches is the fruit of the vine itself.<sup>7</sup>

Others, however, prefer to apply this matter of Christ's election both to their election unto salvation and their election unto their apostolic office. This was the opinion of **John Gill** (1697-1771).

This may be understood both of election to salvation, and of choice to the office of apostleship; in both which Christ was first, or chose them before they chose him, that good part, which shall never be taken away; for as they were chosen in him, so by him, before the foundation of the world; being as early loved by him, as by his Father; and in consequence thereof, were chosen by him, for his people and peculiar treasure; he first chose and called them to be his disciples and apostles, to follow him, preach his Gospel, and become fishers of men; and clothed them with full power and authority to exercise their high office.<sup>8</sup>

But our Lord declared more than He had chosen them. We also read that He had "appointed" them that they would serve Him. We read again verse 16: "You did not choose Me, but I chose you *and appointed you* that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you." As one wrote,

In their ordination: *I have ordained you;—“I have put you into the ministry (1 Tim. 1:12), put you into commission.”* By this it appeared that He took them for His friends when He crowned their heads with such an honour, and filled their hands with such a trust. It was a mighty confidence He reposed in them, when He made them His ambassadors to negotiate the affairs of His kingdom in this lower world, and the prime ministers of state in the administration of it. The treasure of the gospel was committed to them... They were ordained, not to sit still, but to go about, to be diligent in their work, and to lay out themselves unweariedly in doing good. They were ordained, not to beat the air, but to be instrumental in God's hand for the bringing of nations into obedience to Christ (Rom. 1:13).

Why did the Lord Jesus speak to His disciples in this manner? It probably helped them not to become too puffed up in their own estimation. It was by His grace that they were so wonderfully blessed and privileged. This seems to have been a common characteristic conveyed in John's Gospel.

As so often in this Gospel, where there is the slightest danger that the disciples will puff themselves up because of the privileges they enjoy, Jesus immediately forestalls any pretensions they might have. In the final analysis, His followers are privy to such revelations not because they are wiser or better and consequently made the right choices, but because Christ chose them.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> F. F. Bruce, **The Gospel of John** (William B. Eerdmans, 1983), p. 300.

<sup>8</sup> In John Gill's commentary of the Gospel of John.

<sup>9</sup> Donald Carson, **The Gospel According to John** (William B. Eerdmans, 1991), p. 523.

A biblical understanding of God’s election should always result in a humble wonder and appreciation for God’s grace, and never resulting in becoming puffed up or arrogant respecting one’s own ability or value. The biblical doctrine of election always produces godliness and thankfulness on the part of His people who have come to understand and embrace it.

But our Lord’s words to His disciples in these few words are calling attention to the fact that He had chosen and called them to the work of evangelism and mission. Here again are the words of **D. A. Carson** (b. 1947):

The best Greek texts record that Jesus chose them and *set them apart* that they might go and bear fruit. This verb also occurs in v. 13: Jesus ‘sets apart’ or ‘sets aside’ (NIV ‘lays down’) His life for others. The verb commonly occurs, with a personal object, in contexts where people are being ‘set apart’ for particular ministry (e.g. Acts 13:47 [citing Isa. 49:6]; 1 Tim. 1:12). This fact, and the emphasis on *going* and bearing fruit, have suggested to many commentators, probably rightly, that the fruit primarily in view in this verse is the fruit that emerges from mission, from specific ministry to which the disciples have been sent. The fruit, in short, is new converts. One purpose of election, then, is that the disciples who have been so blessed with revelation and understanding, should win others to the faith—*fruit that will last* (cf. 8:31). With these references to fruit and to its enduring quality (the verb again is *meno*, ‘to remain’), it becomes clear that these closing allusions to the vine imagery ensure that, however comprehensive the nature of the fruit that Christians bear, the focus on evangelism and mission is truly central. As in John’s day, so now: this is simultaneously a mandate to Christ’s followers and a summons to those who do not yet know Him. That is why the union of love that joins believers with Jesus can never become a comfortable, exclusivistic huddle that only they can share. Doubtless it is a unique union, an extension of the union of the Godhead; but by its very nature, it is a union, an intimacy, which, by the necessity of its own constitution, seeks to bring other into its orb.<sup>10</sup>

Our Lord’s statement of verse 16 ends with word about prayer. Jesus said to His disciples “You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, ***that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you.***” Our Lord was making it clear to them that their fruitful ministry would be conducted primarily through prayer unto the Father that He would bless their witness and give them fruit for their labors.

Our Lord then concluded this passage with **verse 17**, “***These things I command you, that you love one another.***” They are to be working together, striving for the furtherance of the gospel to which they had been called and appointed. It is a corporate work to be accomplished through working together, maintaining and exhibiting a loving relationship with one another in doing so.

May the Lord help each of us long for and attain to a greater knowledge of our God and His Son. May He give us clarity of understanding of His purposes in His world in history, so that we might be used by Him to further those purposes. In this way we may manifest our love for Him. In this way we may show that we are indeed His friends.

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“The LORD bless you and keep you;  
The LORD make His face shine upon you,  
And be gracious to you;  
The LORD lift up His countenance upon you,  
And give you peace.” (Numb. 6:24-27)

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, pp. 522f.