

## John 15:1-11

### Introduction

This morning we pick up again in the Gospel of John. When we left off we were in the middle of what has often been called Jesus’ “Farewell Discourse.” That’s because all of these words are spoken in the light of His soon departure and “going away.” But the emphasis isn’t on “goodbye” or “farewell.” The overwhelming emphasis is on Jesus’ promise of a coming reunion with His disciples, and then of His spiritual and powerful presence with His disciples—and with us—until He comes again and takes us to be with Him where He is forever. Jesus’ departure and “going away” is just the key to His presence with us. So we ended last time with these words of Jesus:

- John 14:30–31 — “I will not speak much more with you, for the ruler of the world is coming, and he has nothing in Me; but so that the world may know that I love the Father, I do exactly as the Father commanded Me. Get up, let us go from here.”

Jesus’ departure is imminent; but we also remember that Jesus just said:

- John 14:18–19 — “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. After a little while the world will no longer see Me, but you will see Me; because I live, you will live also.”

Jesus’ point is not, “I will come to you and stay with you forever,” but rather, “I will come to you and you will know then that I am alive forevermore – you will know then that I am not dead and that you will never be left as orphans. And so neither are *we* left as orphans.

- John 14:23 — Jesus... said to [Judas (not Iscariot)], “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, *and We will come to him and make Our dwelling with him.*”

Does this sound like your typical “farewell”? The whole theme of this “Farewell Discourse” is really the joy and peace of the risen Jesus’ unceasing presence with us and the fellowship that we have with Him through the Spirit who lives within us. So now we continue with Jesus’ words to His disciples in chapter fifteen:

**I. John 15:1–3** — “I am the true vine, and My Father is the vine-grower. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He cleans it so that it may bear more fruit. You are already clean because of the word [*logos*] which I have spoken to you.”

To us, this sudden imagery of a vine-grower, and a vine and branches might seem “innovative” and novel. But, in fact, this is imagery that’s deeply rooted in the Old Testament. It’s been around for a long time. God’s covenant people, Israel, were regularly compared to a vine that God had planted. So we read in Isaiah:

- Isaiah 5:1–7 — Let me sing now for my well-beloved a song of my beloved concerning His vineyard. My well-beloved had a vineyard on a fertile hill. He dug it all around, removed its stones, and planted it with the choicest vine. And He built a tower in the middle of it and also hewed out a wine vat in it; then He expected it to produce good grapes, but it produced only worthless ones. “And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between Me and My vineyard. What more was there to do for My vineyard that I have not done in it? Why, when I expected it to produce good grapes did it produce worthless ones? So now let Me tell you what I am going to do to My vineyard: I will remove its hedge and it will be consumed; I will break down its wall and it will become trampled ground. I will lay it waste; it will not be pruned or hoed, but briars and thorns will come up. I will also charge the clouds to rain no rain on it.” For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel and the men of Judah His delightful plant. Thus He looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, a cry of distress.

The main point of this vineyard imagery is that when God looked for His vineyard to *produce good grapes*, it produced only worthless ones. “He looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, a cry of distress.” The fault wasn’t in God, the vine-grower; the fault was in the people. (What more was there to do for His vineyard that He had not done in it?) So what does one do with a vineyard that doesn’t bear fruit? It’s like tasteless salt which is “no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men” (Mat. 5:13). What’s the use of a grape vine that doesn’t produce fruit? So we read in Ezekiel:

- Ezekiel 15:1–8 — Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying, “Son of man, how is the wood of the vine better than any wood of a branch which is among the trees of the forest? Can wood be taken from it to make anything, or can men take a peg from it on which to hang any vessel? If it has been put into the fire for fuel, and the fire has consumed both of its ends and its middle part has been charred, is it then useful for anything? Behold, while it is intact, it is not made into anything. How much less, when the fire has consumed it and it is charred, can it still be made into anything! Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD, ‘As the wood of the vine among the trees of the forest, which I have given to the fire for fuel, so have I given up the inhabitants of Jerusalem; and I set My face against them. Though they have come out of the fire, yet the fire will consume them. Then you will know that I am the LORD, when I set My face against them. Thus I will make the land desolate, because they have acted unfaithfully,’” declares the Lord GOD.

What else is the wood of the vine good for if not for producing fruit? It’s good for nothing else but to be burned in the fire. This is why God uses the imagery of the vine and the vineyard – because it demonstrates the justice of His judgements. What is this fruit that God expected His people to produce? It’s anything and everything that reflects the perfections of His own character – of His love and kindness, of His mercy and grace, of His faithfulness, of His righteousness and justice. *Why* did God plant Israel like a vine in Canaan? So that Israel would produce fruit to His glory. So what should God do when the people He planted in Canaan produce only bad fruit?

In the Old Testament, in every place except one that we see this imagery of the vine, the message is negative — it’s the failure of Israel to produce fruit (Jer. 2:21; 12:10; Ezek. 17:1-10; 19:10-14; Hos. 10:1). So listen to this prayer that the psalmist prays in Psalm 80:

- Psalm 80:8–15 — You removed a vine from Egypt; You drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground before it, and it took deep root and filled the land. The mountains were covered with its shadow, and the cedars of God with its boughs. It was sending out its branches to the sea and its shoots to the River. Why have You broken down its hedges, so that all who pass that way pick its fruit? A boar from the forest eats it away and whatever moves in the field feeds on it. O God of hosts, turn again now, we beseech You; look down from heaven and see, and take care of this vine, even the shoot which Your right hand has planted, and on the son whom You have strengthened for Yourself.

What just happened here? How can the psalmist move so suddenly from the imagery of a vine to the imagery of sonship? The covenant nation of Israel (God’s vine) was also God’s son (Exod. 4:23; Hos. 11:1). Even more specifically, Israel’s king—*as the one who represented and stood for the people*—was God’s royal son (Ps. 2; 1 Chron. 17:10-14). To pray that God would take care of the vine which His right hand had planted was ultimately to pray that God would restore David’s throne. The faithful in Israel understood that the fruitfulness of the people was finally dependent upon a righteous son of David sitting upon David’s throne. So they all lamented and prayed with the psalmist:

- Psalm 80:16–19 — [Your vine] is burned with fire, it is cut down; they perish at the rebuke of Your countenance. Let Your hand be upon the man of Your right hand, upon the son of man [Israel; Israel represented in the Davidic king] whom You made strong for Yourself. Then we shall not turn back from You; revive us, and we will call upon Your name. O LORD God of hosts, restore us; cause Your face to shine upon us, and we will be saved.

Do you see how salvation and fruitfulness go together? The psalmist says, “Then we shall not turn back from You; revive us, and we will call upon Your name.” The whole point of salvation is fruitfulness, because the whole point of salvation is to reveal the glory of God, and in turn—as we have the privilege of showing forth His perfections—to fill our own hearts with joy. It’s simple: The glory of God and the joy of His people requires fruit-bearing; and so the wonderful thing about God’s salvation is that it carries within itself the promise and even the guarantee of bringing forth much fruit. The prophet Isaiah looked ahead to this day of salvation:

- Isaiah 27:2–6 — In that day, “A vineyard of wine, sing of it! I, the LORD, am its keeper; I water it every moment. So that no one will damage it, I guard it night and day. I have no wrath. Should someone give Me briars and thorns in battle, then I would step on them, I would burn them completely. Or let him rely on My protection, let him make peace with Me, let him make peace with Me.” In the days to come Jacob will take root, Israel will blossom and sprout, and they will fill the whole world with fruit.

The true believers in Israel could only partly understand these things. They knew that whenever a righteous king was sitting on David’s throne, the *nation as a whole* brought forth the fruits of righteousness and justice. But this was what we call a typological picture pointing toward a day of salvation when every single individual in God’s covenant people would bring forth the fruit that could only be the result of changed hearts. In the Old Covenant, the nation of Israel *as a whole* was *the vine*. It was the nation of Israel *as a whole* that brought forth the fruits of justice

and righteousness whenever a righteous king was sitting on David's throne. That's the picture. That's the type. But how would God bring about that *new* day when each individual in God's covenant people was, himself (or herself), a fruit-bearing branch on the vine? What kind of righteous king would need to be sitting on David's throne in order for this to happen? Jesus said to His disciples:

“*I am the true vine*, and My Father is the vine-grower. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He cleans it so that it may bear more fruit. You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you.”

When Jesus says that He is the “true” vine, He's not saying that Israel was a fake vine or a counterfeit vine. When Jesus says that He is the “true” vine, what He means is that He is the fulfillment of Israel. Israel was the shadow—the typological vine—pointing ahead to the substance—the “true” vine—that is Jesus – the one who would succeed where Israel failed. But if Jesus is now the true vine, and if there can only be one “true” vine, then what are all of us? We are now, all of us, fruit-bearing branches in Jesus—the true vine!

When Jesus says that He is the vine and His Father is the “vine-grower” we see His subordination to His Father as a real and true human being made like us. In other words, He is a true Son of David who can sit on David's throne. And so now it's through our union with Him as the life-giving vine, that we—the branches—can fill the whole world with fruit.

But what does Jesus mean when He says, “Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, [the Father] takes away”? In the first place, how can a branch that is truly “*in Jesus*,” in the fullest sense of those words, fail to produce fruit? That would be a reflection not just on us, but on Jesus as the “*true vine*” and on His Father as the vine-grower. I think Jesus means for us to feel immediately the total incompatibility of these two ideas (of a branch *in Him* that fails to produce fruit). Jesus can say to the disciples in the room with Him: “every branch [in Me] that bears fruit, [My Father] cleans it so that it may bear more fruit. You are *already clean* because of the word which I have spoken to you.” If the disciples are “already clean,” then it's clearly not possible that they should ever be “taken away” for failure to produce fruit. Instead, Jesus promises that His Father will continue cleaning—or pruning—them (cf. Jn. 13:5-11), so that they will bear “*more fruit*”! Jesus can say this because Judas (Iscariot) has already left the room. Judas shared in Jesus in many ways, but He wasn't “already clean” because He had never savingly believed the word that Jesus spoke. From a human perspective, and using the vine imagery, Judas was a branch in Jesus that failed to produce fruit. But any branch “in Jesus” that fails to produce fruit only proves that he is not “in Jesus” in the true and full sense of those words (cf. 6:39; 10:27-30). This is simply a biblical tension that we have to live with. In the end, the true state of that branch will be exposed (as happened with Judas), when it is “taken away” by the vine-grower.

There's both a warning and a promise in these words. It's impossible that those who are “already clean”—who are truly “in Jesus,” partaking of the life-giving nourishment of the vine—it's impossible that they should fail to produce fruit. That's the power and the promise of God's salvation. On the other hand, those who to all outward appearances are “in Jesus,” but who fail to produce the fruit that can only come from a life-giving union with Him will be “taken away” to be burned. That's the warning. But it's *only* those who fail to produce fruit who will ever be

taken away. Therefore, we who are already clean and who have truly been united with Jesus by faith in His Word—we can know that we will never, ever be “taken away.” It’s in the full light of this promise that Jesus goes on to say:

**II. John 15:4–5** — “Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit from itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.”

How much can we do apart from Jesus? Literally, nothing. How much fruit can the branch produce from itself, apart from the life of the vine flowing through it? The point, here, isn’t just that we need Jesus’ help. The point is that without His resurrection life living and working in us, we can do—literally—nothing.

So what does this tell us about the “fruit” of those who are “taken away”? It tells us that none of it was true fruit because—contrary to all outward appearances—none of it was the fruit that can *only* come from a life-giving union with Jesus. Even though Judas likely cast out demons in Jesus’ name and in Jesus’ name performed miracles (Mat. 7:22-23; 10:1-8), we can be sure that he never brought forth any real, genuine “fruit.” If he had, rather than being taken away, we know that he would have been “cleaned”—or pruned—so that he would bear *more* fruit. Are we seeing, then, the *absolute necessity* of abiding in Jesus? Can we *see* that any life lived that isn’t the fruit of abiding in Jesus is of no lasting value and is therefore fit only to be cast into the fire? So Jesus says in verse 16:

**III. John 15:6** — “If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned.”

This is universally true, but it’s especially a warning to those who confess the name of Jesus and have a form of godliness, but who deny its power (2 Tim. 3:5); it’s a warning to those who are not in a true, living union with Jesus through faith in His name, and who therefore have never in their lives brought forth any true fruit.

So how do we know that we aren’t empty confessors? There’s no room here for presumption; and there’s certainly no room for any of our own fleshly efforts. Jesus continues in verses 7-8:

**IV. John 15:7–8** — “If you abide in Me, and My words [*rhema*] abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples.”

Fruit-bearing, for the Christian, isn’t about producing just enough fruit to avoid being burned. That’s an entirely incoherent concept. Fruit-bearing, for the Christian is about bearing “*much* fruit,” and always “*more* fruit.” Why is this? Because it’s by this fruit-bearing that the Father is glorified, and because it’s by this fruit-bearing that we are continuously showing to ourselves and to those around us that we are, in truth, Jesus’ disciples. Why is this? Because this fruit-bearing is what we were saved for, and what our salvation has, itself, promised and guaranteed.

This is why we should always be *asking* that we might bear much fruit. This is why we should always be knowing that when we ask for this in faith, “it *will* be done for us” (cf. James 1:5-8).

Already, we should be able to see that for the Christian there’s a built-in, super-abounding joy in the bearing of fruit. So Jesus goes on to say in verses 9-10:

**V. John 15:9–10** — “Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love. 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.”

Why does Jesus emphasize, “*just as* the Father has loved *Me*,” and, “*just as I* have kept My Father’s commandments and abide in His love”? Jesus is emphasizing His own subordination to His Father as a true human being made like us. On the one hand, He is the true and only-begotten eternal Son of God. On the other hand, He is a true son of David who sits, now, on David’s throne so that through our union with Him as branches in the true vine, we might bear much fruit.

When Jesus says, “If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love,” He’s not saying that His love is waiting for our obedience (“I’ll love you *if* you first obey My commandments) any more than He’s saying that the Father’s love for Him waited for His obedience. What did Jesus say?—“Just as the Father *has loved Me*, I *have* also *loved* you.” We can rest in the wonder, and the comfort, and the security, and the joy of being loved—*already*—by Jesus. But *how* do we rest in His love? By keeping His commandments. To remain in Jesus’ love and to know His love experientially *is* to keep His commandments. “If you keep My commandments, you will abide [or: you will be abiding] in My love.” We saw in chapter fourteen that the *way* of fellowship with Jesus is the *way* of walking in His commandments because this is the way in which Jesus walks (Jn. 14:15). So also, the way of abiding in Jesus is walking in the path, or the “way,” that He Himself *is* (Jn. 14:6).

To abide in Jesus and He in us is to enjoy a relational intimacy and communion with Jesus that can’t be captured in any words. But this isn’t something purely “mystical.” It’s the way of fruit-bearing – as branches in the vine. It’s impossible to be truly keeping Jesus’ commandments (bearing fruit) and not abiding in His love. It’s impossible to be abiding in Jesus’ love and not be truly keeping His commandments (bearing fruit).

Therefore, let us abide in His love, keeping His commandments. Therefore, if we abide in Him, and His words abide in us, let us *ask* for whatever we wish and know that it *will* be done for us. And so in this way we will bear “*much* fruit” and always “*more* fruit” — the fruit that can *only* be the result of a living, life-giving union with Jesus. And what will the result of all this fruit-bearing be? What is the result of bringing the Father glory and abiding in Jesus’ love? The result is always, by the very nature of the case, a deep-down, super-abounding joy. So Jesus says in verse 11:

**VI. John 15:11** — “These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you [so that you may share in the same joy that I have], and that your joy may be complete.”

The day of salvation that the psalmist prayed for and the prophet Isaiah foretold is here. The day of fruit-bearing is here. May our joy, then, be always more and more complete until that day when we are made to stand in the presence of His glory *blameless* with *great joy* (Jude 24).