

John 15:12-17

Introduction

Last week, we saw that we're all fruit-bearing branches in the vine, and so we're all called to bear much fruit, and always more fruit. Because of these things, we should always be asking that we might bear fruit, knowing that whatever we ask for, it will be done for us. We bear fruit by keeping Jesus' commandments. To keep Jesus' commandments is to walk in the way where He walks—even in the way that He *is*—and so to keep Jesus' commandments is to have fellowship with Him and to abide in His love.

These four themes of fruit-bearing, answered prayer, keeping Jesus' commandments, and the love of Jesus are all repeated in this next section. But as much as there's an obvious connection between verses 1-11 and our passage this morning, we're going to see that there are also important differences. Jesus says to His disciples in verse twelve:

I. John 15:12 — “This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have *loved* you.”

Why does Jesus re-introduce this specific commandment here? Just a little earlier in the evening—in John chapter thirteen—Jesus said to His disciples:

- John 13:34–35 — “A *new* commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”

We know that love was not, itself, a “new” commandment. When asked by one of the scribes which commandment was the foremost of all, Jesus answered:

- Mark 12:29–31 — “The foremost is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

Obviously, the newness of Jesus' love commandment is not found in being “greater” than the Old Testament love commandment.” So how is this “new commandment” new? We saw, first, that our obedience to the “old” love commandment is *motivated* now by the perfect revelation of that love in Jesus. The love that is commanded is the same “old” love, but the incarnation of that love in Jesus has made it “new.” We saw, second, that our love for one another is displayed in a new way because of a radically new kingdom context – a kingdom where the *definition* of “greatness” has been redefined because the eternal Son of God took to Himself the form and the station of a slave. The love that is commanded is the same “old” love, but the kingdom context for this love has made it “new.” We saw, third, that the particularity of Jesus' love for “*His own*” makes our love for one another—for all who are “His own”—the *defining mark* of this New Covenant community. No doubt, there was a special kind of love that existed among the *believing* remnant in Old Covenant Israel. But this special love couldn't be the defining mark of

the Old Covenant community because God's electing love under the Old Covenant was for an ethnic nation that included both the regenerate and the unregenerate. Once again, the love that Jesus commands is the same "old" love, but the context of the *regenerate* New Covenant community has made it "new." In these three ways—the incarnation of the love commandment in Jesus, the outworking of the love commandment in the kingdom, and the scope of the love commandment in the New Covenant community—in these three ways we see the redemptive-historical "newness" of this "old" commandment.

And now here in chapter fifteen, Jesus repeats this new commandment without calling it "new": "This is *My* commandment, that you love *one another, just as* I have loved you." It's important for us to understand that Jesus isn't just concerned that we be decent and kind to one another. He's calling us to live lives that are only possible when we truly *understand* the redemptive-historical summing up of all things in Christ (incarnation, kingdom, New Covenant). Therefore, He's calling us to live lives that are the announcement and the proclamation of the redemptive-historical summing up of all things in Christ. "By *this* all men will know," Jesus said just a little earlier, "that you are *My disciples*, if you have love for one another." Is our love for one another a constant announcement and proclamation to the world of the redemptive-historical summing up of all things in Christ? Jesus continues in verse thirteen:

II. John 15:13 — "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends."

Some people wonder if Jesus somewhat missed the mark here. Isn't love for an enemy greater than love for a friend? But Jesus isn't comparing love for friends with love for enemies, or even with love for acquaintances, or love for complete strangers. His point is simply this: "Greater love [*for a friend*] has no one than this, that one *lay down his life* for his friends."

Jesus wasn't the only teacher to say this. This was a common-place among ancient writers. So is Jesus just reminding His disciples of something that was already obvious to everyone? The key, here, is to see that the emphasis is not on the fact that this is how the disciples should love one another (as true as that may be), but on the fact that this is how *Jesus* has loved *them*. What did Jesus just say?—"This is My commandment, that you love one another, *just as I have loved you*." When Jesus continues, "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends," He's inviting His disciples to understand something that was *not at all* obvious to them – that *He* had laid down His life—and was even then in the very act of laying down His life—*for them*. It's one thing for the disciples to be *always* laying down their lives—*as it were*—for each other (cf. 1 Jn. 3:16-18; 3 Jn. 15) as an expression of their love for one another, but what Jesus is inviting them to understand, ultimately, is the nature of His own love for them as He *literally* lays down His life for them *once for all*. Only when we understand the nature of Christ's love for us will our love for one another be the announcement and the proclamation to the world of the redemptive-historical summing up of all things in Christ. Only then will our love for one another be the true "living out" of Jesus' new commandment. This is why Jesus goes on to say to the disciples:

III. John 15:14 — “You are My friends if you do what I command you.”

Jesus isn't saying that we will be His friends if, and only if, we first do what He commands us. He's not making His love for us dependent upon our obedience. He's showing how our love for one another, and the redemptive-historical summing up of all things in Him as the one who lays down His life for us are two sides of the same coin. They're inseparably joined together. You can't pick up the one side of the coin without also picking up the other side. “You *are* My friends [you *are* the ones whom I love and for whom I lay down My life] if you [are doing] what I command you [if you are loving one another].” Loving one another, in other words, is not the *condition* of Jesus laying down His life for us, but rather the *evidence* that He has, in fact, laid down His life for us and that we are, in fact, His friends.

What we should be able to see by now is that the point, here, isn't “just” love, it's revelation. The point isn't just doing what Jesus commands; the point is comprehending and then living out this great redemptive-historical fact of the summing up of all things in Jesus who laid down His life for us. So Jesus goes on to say in verse fifteen:

IV. John 15:15 — “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.”

We think of friends as equals. We think of friends as those who have been brought together by a mutual affinity for each other. So the fact that Jesus calls us “friends” has caused some people to speak of Jesus in inappropriately familiar ways. One of the political candidates during the recent primary came to our door and in the course of conversation said that He was on “team Jesus.” Today, someone might say that Jesus is his or her “friend” – or even “best friend.” But when it comes to our relationship with Jesus, there isn't any mutually reciprocal friendship. Jesus said, “You are my friends if you do what I *command* you.” We can't turn that around and say to Jesus, “You are my friend if You do what I command You.” We don't address Jesus as, “friend,” or say to others, “Jesus is my friend.” Nowhere is Jesus—not to mention God—ever called someone's friend. But we *can* know that He is a friend *to* us (“What a friend we *have* in Jesus”). It's not we who presume to *call* Jesus “friend,” but Jesus who *calls* us “friends” (“I have called you friends”), and so it's Jesus who is a friend *to us* as we are the ones doing what He *commands*. We're still His slaves (cf. v. 20), but now Jesus calls His slaves, His friends!

This is what helps us to understand how Jesus can say (in so many words) that He lays down His life for His friends. Isn't it for those who are His enemies that Jesus lays down His life (cf. Rom. 5:6-10)? How can Jesus say that He lays down His life for His friends? Because His friends are those that He has “called” His friends; because His friends are those that He has chosen and those to whom He has granted this honored title. Jesus can say that He lays down His life for His friends because this is to say that He lays down His life for those upon whom He has set His underserved and unconditional love (cf. Jn. 10:11, 14-15, 17-18). Let us be content, then, that Jesus has called *us* friends—let us be filled with wonder and awe that Jesus has called us friends and that He is a friend to us.

So far, we've been applying these verses just as much to ourselves as to the eleven disciples who were there with Jesus. But there are times when the primary application of Jesus' words is narrowed, so that it no longer encompasses us in the same way that it encompassed those eleven disciples to whom Jesus was speaking. Jesus said to the disciples:

- 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 did not come to us, and so we did not see Him.

- John 15:26-27 — “When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, that is the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify about Me, and **you will testify also, because you have been with Me from the beginning.**”

Since we were not with Jesus from the beginning, therefore our testimony will not be the same as those first disciples.

- John 16:2 — “**They will make you outcasts from the synagogue,** but an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God.”

We have never been made outcasts from the synagogue because we were never in the synagogue.

- John 16:4 — “These things I have spoken to you, so that when their hour comes, **you may remember that I told you of them.** These things I did not say to you at the beginning, **because I was with you.**”

We cannot remember what Jesus told us because Jesus has never spoken to us and was never with us.

- John 16:32 — “Behold, an hour is coming, and has already come, **for you to be scattered, each to his own home, and to leave Me alone;** and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with Me.”

We did not scatter and leave Jesus alone because we were not among His disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane. So now, when Jesus says to His eleven disciples, “I have called you friends,” we need to see that the primary application of these words has been narrowed, so that it no longer encompasses us *in all the same ways* that it encompassed them. Listen again to what Jesus says: “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.**” Did Jesus make known to *us* everything that He heard from His Father? There's a sense in which we can say that He *has*, indirectly, through the Apostles' teaching (Acts 2:42; Col. 1:25-26; Rom. 16:25-26). But the emphasis here is on the privileged position of those first disciples as the recipients of Jesus' direct revelatory word during the days of His flesh and immediately following His resurrection (cf. Acts 1:1-3), and even immediately following His ascension into heaven. We see this theme in other places as well:

- John 14:25–26 — “These things I have spoken **to you while abiding with you**. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, **He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you.**”

Jesus cannot bring back to our remembrance all that He said to us while abiding with us because He never did abide with us or say anything to us. Therefore, Jesus was not promising that the Holy Spirit would teach *us* all things, but that the Holy Spirit would teach the disciples/Apostles all things.

- John 16:12–14 — “**I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now**. But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, **He will guide you into all the truth**; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and **He will disclose to you what is to come**. He will glorify Me, for **He will take of Mine and will disclose it to you**.”

If it wasn't for the exclusive application of these words to Jesus' first disciples, then we, today, could not know anything, much less “all things” (cf. Acts 2:42; Eph. 3:1-9; 2:19-20; 2 Pet. 3:1-2)! In the Old Testament, God called Abraham “My friend” (Isa. 41:8); and we're told of Moses: “Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, just as a man speaks to his friend” (Exod. 33:11). Abraham and Moses were both the recipients of extraordinary covenantal and redemptive revelation from God at specific moments in the progress of redemptive history. So now when Jesus says that He calls the disciples His “friends,” He's signaling the culmination of redemptive history—and so also the culmination of redemptive revelation—in Him. He's saying that the disciples are now the recipients of all the fullness of revelation that He has brought from His own Father — and the fullness of revelation *is* the fullness of redemption. So now listen again to these amazing and wonderful words that Jesus spoke not to us but only to the disciples: “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.***”

And what was Jesus' purpose in making “all things” known to His disciples?

V. John 15:16 — “You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and that your fruit would abide, [and] that whatever you ask of the Father in My name He would give to you.”

The themes of fruit-bearing and answered prayer are themes that we also saw last week (1-11), but now the primary application of these words has been narrowed, so that they're no longer encompassing us in all the same ways that they encompass the eleven disciples. When Jesus says, “You did not choose Me but I chose you,” this choice is rooted in God's sovereign election of these disciples to salvation before the foundation of the world. In this sense, Jesus could say the same thing of us. We did not choose Jesus but Jesus chose us. But Jesus is thinking more specifically of His historical choice of these eleven men (cf. Jn. 6:70; 13:18; Mk. 3:13-19). The *reason* Jesus chose these eleven men and the *reason* He makes known to them all things that He has heard from His Father is because He has also appointed them to *go* and bear fruit as they preach in all the world what they have heard from Jesus and what the Holy Spirit has disclosed to

them (cf. Eph. 3:8). What is this fruit that they have been appointed to bear and that will abide forever? It's you and me; it's "this" – the church! John Calvin writes:

“As the doctrine of the Gospel obtains souls to Christ for eternal salvation [cf. Jn. 4:36; Rom. 1:13; Col. 1:3-6], many think that this is the perpetuity of the fruit. But I extend the statement [even] farther, as meaning that the Church will last to the very end of the world [cf. Mat. 16:18]; for the labor of the apostles yields fruit even in the present day.”

There can be no doubt about the fruit that these disciples will bear. This is because they did not choose Jesus, but rather Jesus chose them and appointed them (*tithemi*; cf. Acts 13:46–47; 20:28; 1 Cor. 12:28; 1 Tim. 1:12; 2:7; 2 Tim. 1:11; Heb. 1:2) to go and bear fruit. This is because Jesus chose them and appointed them, that the Father would give to them whatever they ask in His name — even more specifically, whatever they ask in accordance with their calling and appointment as Apostles.

There can be no doubt about the lasting and permanent nature of the fruit that these disciples will bear. Once again, this is because they did not choose Jesus, but rather Jesus chose them and appointed them, that their fruit would abide forever. J.C. Ryle gives the sense of Jesus' words to His disciples like this:

“I chose and set you apart for this great purpose, that you should go into all the world preaching the Gospel, and gathering in the harvest and fruit of saved souls; and that this work begun by you [should] remain and continue [even] after your deaths... take comfort in the thought that I chose you as my friends for this great purpose, to go and preach [what I have made known to you], to reap an abundant harvest of souls, to do lasting work, and to obtain a constant supply of grace and help, by prayer.”

On the one hand, if it wasn't for the exclusive application of these words to those first disciples, we wouldn't be here today. We see in "this" and in our presence here the lasting fruit that Jesus promised His disciples would bear. On the other hand, there's also a broader application of these things to all of us. Even though we're not Apostles, we've still been entrusted with the Apostolic message. We've still been entrusted with the "all things" that Jesus heard from His Father and that He made known to His disciples. In short, even though we're not Apostles, we've still been entrusted with the revelation of the redemptive-historical summing up of all things in Jesus. And if we've been entrusted with this climactic fullness of revelation, then this must be because we, too, have been appointed to "go" and bear fruit wherever God has placed us—each of us according to the measure of faith and grace that God has assigned (Rom. 12:3; Eph. 4:7), and that our fruit should abide forever; indeed, that whatever we ask of the Father in Jesus' name, He would give it to us. On the one hand, we've been given a stewardship, and this stewardship means a sobering responsibility. On the other hand, these things should always be encouraging us and filling us with confidence and hope. Jesus said to the eleven disciples after His resurrection:

- Matthew 28:18–20a (cf. Acts 1:8) — “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the

Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you...”

We should be able to see that there’s a special and exclusive application of these words to those eleven disciples. On the other hand, we know that these words also reach out to encompass all of us when Jesus concludes:

➤ Matthew 28:20b — “...and behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

Are we bearing fruit in the places where God has put us—each of us according to the measure of faith and grace that God has assigned—fruit that abides forever? Are we asking the Father in Jesus’ name that we would always be bearing fruit in the lives of those around us? And now we’re brought back again to where we started:

VI. John 15:17 — “These things I command you, that you love one another.” (See Lenski)

Do we understand, now, why Jesus says this? Intimately bound up with the fullness of *revelation* that has been entrusted to us and with our *mission* in the world is *love* for one another. When Jesus says that we’re to *love* one another, He’s calling us to live lives that are only possible when we’ve truly understood the redemptive-historical summing up of all things in Him (*revelation*). Therefore, He’s calling us to live lives that are, themselves, the announcement and the proclamation of the redemptive-historical summing up of all things in Christ (*mission*). “By *this* all men will know,” Jesus said just a little earlier, “that you are *My disciples*, if you have love for one another.”

Is our love for one another a constant announcement and proclamation to the world of the redemptive-historical summing up of all things in Christ? Are we bearing fruit in the places where God has put us—each of us according to the measure of faith and grace that God has assigned—fruit that abides forever?