

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Equipped BY Jesus to Live FOR Jesus

(Studies in the Upper Room Discourse; John 13-17)

Sticking Close to Jesus

(John 15:1-17)

Study #4

Introduction: A change of scenery...

Right now, we are two weeks away from Easter Sunday and all the celebration that day will bring.

I'm looking forward to the bi-lingual Sunrise service, the food afterwards, great worship services where we'll sing great songs and will hear the amazing story of Jesus' resurrection, with baptisms between services. It's all going to be great!

This morning, we are mid-way through our exploration of Jesus' final words to His apostles, given in the upstairs room of a house in Jerusalem. As He speaks, Jesus is only hours away from His death.

Already, He has washed the apostles' feet. They have eaten the Passover meal together. Judas Iscariot has left.¹ Jesus has predicted Peter's denials and the arrival of the Holy Spirit.

It's late when Jesus called for a change in scenery. He told the group, **[John 14:31] "Arise, let us go from here."**

We don't know where the group was when Jesus spoke the words we read in John 15-17.

My assumption is that after going downstairs and leaving the house, they exited Jerusalem and stopped somewhere on the western side of the Kidron ravine.

I've read that vineyards lined the hillsides surrounding Jerusalem in the first century. So, as Jesus and His followers walked away from the city, they probably passed by these vineyards.²

And, since the Jewish Passover always falls during the time of a full moon, the vineyards would have been visible, even at night.

Passing the vineyards may explain why Jesus spoke as He did here.

Jesus Calls Disciples to "Remain" In Jesus (vv. 1-11)

The Vine and the Vinedresser (v. 1)

Jesus identified Himself as the true vine (v. 1a)

[1a] "I am the true vine..."

The grapevine was an important part of Jewish life. So, in Old Testament times, the fruit of the vine - wine - symbolized God's blessing. And, since wine was an important part of the Jews' diet, an abundant harvest of grapes was symbolic of prosperity, generally.

The grapevine was so central to Jewishness that the nation of Israel was sometimes referred to as God's vine, planted to harvest a great crop of worship and holiness.

The disciples, who were all familiar with the Old Testament, were used to hearing the grapevine used symbolically. But they would have been stunned to hear Jesus call Himself **"the true vine."**

His claim to be **"the true vine"** signified a fundamental change in God's work on earth. No longer will Israel be the primary vehicle through whom God works. Now, Jesus will be that primary vehicle.

¹ To give an idea as to the time, we know that it was dark by this time. (John 13:30)

² In the near east, grape producing season runs from July through October. Since the season at hand in John 15 was springtime, there would have been no grapes on the vines as Jesus spoke.

Having launched an illustration, the Lord kept it going.

Jesus identified His Father as the Master Gardener (v. 1b)

[1b] “...and My Father is the vinedresser.”

The vinedresser (farmer/gardener) works hard to ensure a rich harvest of grapes for eating, for juice and wine for drinking.

From what I’ve read, the vinedresser’s job is one of the most demanding in all of agriculture.

Me? I go for the quick and dirty crops. My garden is filled with lettuce, onions, beans, asparagus, tomatoes, and (soon) peppers. Some work is required, but these are not labor intensive crops.

But to successfully harvest grapes requires constant fiddling with the vines and lots of work.

As Jesus paints this word picture of life with Him, His Father is the Farmer who cares for and tends His Vine. Jesus is the vine.

As we continue in the passage, we will learn that we who believe in Jesus are the limbs branching out from the vine.

This teaching Jesus gives is essential equipping from Jesus for life with Jesus. What we are about to see is central to understanding what it is to walk through life with Him.

Here, He explains the Christian life in terms of the experience of the vine.

The Experiences of the Branches (vv. 2-6)

Pruning the branches “in [Jesus]” (vv. 2-3)

[2] “Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes³ it so that it may bear more fruit. [3] You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you.⁴

Observation is the first rule of Bible study. And the first thing we observe here is that Jesus is talking about a certain family of branches, branches that are, He says, “*in Me*.”

This is the critical clue for understanding what follows.

When Jesus says, “*in Me*,” He is using *code* to identify someone who has believed in Him. Someone who is “*in Him*” has received the gift of eternal life. The branches that are “*in Him*” are believers.

And what we read in verses 2 and 3 describes what every grape grower in the world has always done to produce a rich harvest. He prunes it. That’s the way it is with fruit bearing plants and trees.

Go up to Fredericksburg after the peach harvest some year and watch the peach farmers go to work on their trees. They take out their pruning shears and cut the trees back. Way back. Farther than I would dare prune.

To the untrained eye, it appears that they are killing their trees.

But these farmers understand that if they don’t lop off the “sucker limbs” and clean out the dead foliage, and even cut back the main branches, there will be a slim harvest next season.

Pruning is vital for a good peach crop.

³ The Greek word for “prune” is usually translated “to clean.” To “prune” a vine or a tree is to cleanse that living plant of the ever-present worthless dead limbs that must be removed to foster new growth.

⁴ Here, Jesus further identifies the branches He is talking about as “*in Him*.” If there was any doubt about the spiritual state of the eleven men to whom He was speaking, He clears up that confusion here. What He has said to this point and what He will go on to say, He aims at those who have trusted Him for salvation.

And, staying with this illustration in John 15, it is the pruning the Father does to the branches (believers) coming out of the Vine (Jesus) that makes for a bountiful harvest.

Pruning is not a punishment for bad believers any more than it is the fate of bad grapevines. It is what the Master Gardener / Father lovingly does with all believers - productive AND non-productive - so that they will have more capacity for producing fruit.

If grapevines had voices, they'd be screaming bloody murder during pruning season. Peach farmers in the Hill Country would never be allowed to get away with their work if we could hear the trees' response to the amputations.

And believers who are subjected to the Father's pruning shears know that pruning hurts. There's no way around it.

Pruning is, by definition, the cutting away of what is superfluous to leave room for the production of what is essential. And the Father can be a ruthless pruner.

- He allows His children to walk through the valley of the shadow of death, illness, and loss.
- He may bring into the life of His child someone who is hard to love.
- He will use financial and material limitations to teach us to trust.
- He may put us in situations that cause great discomfort.

It is tempting for Jesus' followers to think that the Father has pruned them to the nubbins. Like there is nothing else to prune.

But pruning is an on-going necessity for the Christian who would bear fruit. God prunes us so that we will have a greater capacity for bearing an abundant crop for Him.

From the pruning away of what is superfluous, God will produce the fruit of Christlikeness.

The list of the beautiful fruits of the Spirit - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control - grow in the pressure-cooker of God's pruning. (See Galatians 5)⁵

The crops of faith and hope, courage and perseverance, wisdom and stability grow through the pain of trials and losses and hardships, what Jesus calls here, "*pruning*."

And one more comment about fruit bearing might be in order.

We can expect the fruit from each branch, that is, the fruit that each Christian produces, to differ from the fruit of every other branch. In other words, Jesus is producing unique fruit in you, to complement your temperament, gifts, natural desires, abilities, and life context.

What is clear here is that the Father is passionate that His Son's followers bear fruit. So, what is the path to pursue if we long to bear fruit for Jesus? We must "***remain***" in Jesus.

The necessity of abiding / remaining / staying close (vv. 4-5)

[4] "Remain in Me, and I in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit of itself but must remain in the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in Me. [5] I am the vine, you are the branches; the one who remains in Me and I in him bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.

What it means to "remain / abide" (See Matthew 26:38)

The word that my translation of the Bible renders "***remain***" is the Greek word *meno*. In lots of other versions, it is translated "***abide***."

While an accurate translation, I don't find "***remain***" to be much of an improvement from "***abide***."

And I have always thought that "***abide***" (while accurate) is vague enough to leave us with questions about what Jesus means in the ten uses of *meno* in this one passage.

⁵ Other texts with this emphasis include Ephesians 5:9, Philippians 1:11, Colossians 1:10, Hebrews 12:11, and James 3:18.

So, let's look at a scene where the word is used in a way that makes abundantly clear what is the real sense of the word.

Shortly after Jesus finished speaking with all of His disciples (after John 17), they all crossed the Kidron ravine and made their way go to the Garden of Gethsemane. There, Jesus told the whole group to take a seat while He went a short distance away to pray.

Then, He took Peter, James, and John with Him to the spot He had chosen for prayer and told them, **[Matthew 26:38] "My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death; 'meno' here and keep watch with Me."**⁶

The rendering "**remain**" certainly works. But it doesn't capture the intensity of what Jesus is urging Peter, James, and John to do.

His message to them is, "Stick with me guys!" - "Stay close to Me!" - "Be vigilant!" - "Stay awake!" - "Stay alert!"

This urgent warning to "Stay alert!," this insistent invitation to "Stick close!" is what I think is behind every occurrence of the Greek word *meno* here in John 15, a word we normally translate "**abide**" or "**remain**."

Jesus never stops staying close to us. There is no question that He will stay close to us. What is at issue is whether or not we, who believe in Him, will stay close to Him. Will we stick with Him?⁷

It is altogether possible that a believer might NOT stay close to Jesus. And it is tragic whenever that happens. To highlight how tragic it is, Jesus tells them and us, **[5] "apart from Me, you can do nothing."**

Fruit-bearing is dependent on sticking close to Jesus

No, Jesus didn't mean that in the absolute sense.

⁶ The same thought is present in the account in Mark at 13:34.

⁷ **[John 15:4] "Remain in Me, and I in you.** The second phrase is a statement of fact - "**I [remain] in you.**" The first phrase "**Remain in Me**" is a command. This is very much the same thought we find in James, where we read, **[James 4:8] Come close to God and He will come close to you.**

Apart from Jesus and while not "*sticking close to Him*" we and other people can do lots of things.

People aren't amorphous blobs just because they are not abiding in Christ.

But what is Jesus talking about here? Spiritual fruit bearing. And His point is that if we don't stick with Him, then we will not bear spiritual fruit. It's just not going to happen.

Look back to the passage. Jesus has sobering stuff to say about the branch that does not bear fruit.

The sobering results of NOT abiding (v. 6)

[6] "If anyone does not remain in Me, he is thrown away like a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and throw them into the fire, and they are burned."

What Jesus is NOT saying

It is important to know that when we read about fire and burning in the New Testament, every reference is not to hell.

So, don't automatically think that here, Jesus is saying that believers who don't "*stick with Jesus!*" are condemned [to hell]. He is not saying that.

Remember. Jesus is talking to and about believers. He has just told these men that He is leaving this life to prepare a place for them in the next life. And He has affirmed that they are "**all clean**" (saved!) because of the word which He has spoken to them.⁸

Here's how I understand what Jesus is saying.

Everybody in Israel in those days knew exactly what you did with the limbs that didn't bear fruit on a grapevine. You burned them because they were useless.

⁸ And besides, if these folks were never actually "*in Him*" there would be no "*throwing away*" involved, anyway.

Jesus' point here is that fruitless Christians are as worthless for the purpose for which they were saved as are grapeless grapevines.⁹

Jesus' "point" is the point of sticking close.

If we went out to the vineyards of west and central Texas, we would easily find branches on those vines that weren't producing fruit. So, what could we do with those fruitless vines?

Unlike mesquite, we couldn't make fenceposts out of them. Unlike oak, we couldn't make fine furniture. Unlike pine, we couldn't cut and plane planks to build a house.

Apart from the grapes that a grapevine produces, they are worthless.

The Christian who doesn't produce observable fruit doesn't cease to be a Christian. But the fruitless Christian is worthless for the purposes of the kingdom of God.

The sad reality is that some Christians may not bear much tasty, delicious, beautiful spiritual fruit.

The lives of some Christians won't display the character of Jesus. And if, for any Christian, this is the case, it will be because they don't "*stick close to Jesus / abide / remain.*"

So, "*Sticking close to Jesus*" is crucial. We must do that if we want to bear fruit. Now let's get painfully specific. What does it mean to "*stick close to Jesus*"?

Listen.

Jesus' Love for Us...Our Love for Him (vv. 9-10)

Jesus loves me, this I know (v. 9a)

⁹ Jesus made the exact same point in Luke 14:34-35 about disciples who have lost their saltiness. They are as worthless for Jesus' sake as salt is for the purposes for which it is put to use.

[9] "Just as the Father has loved Me, I also have loved you."

That is comforting, soul-consoling truth. To the degree that the Father loves the Son, to that same degree the Son loved those men in the Upper Room and loves us who believe in Him.

So, why give this reassuring affirmation of His love, right before explaining what abiding / remaining / sticking close to Him means?

He assures of His love because staying close to Jesus is no easy assignment. It is so challenging that if we're going to stay close to Him, we need the certainty of His love for us.

Here's what it means to stick close to Jesus.

My love for Jesus = obeying (vv. 9b-10)

[9b]... "remain in My love. [10] "If you keep My commandments, you will remain in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and remain in His love."¹⁰

Note the "***If...***"

Some believers will and some believers may not stick close to Jesus. And what makes the difference is obedience to His commands.

For Jesus, obedience to the Father meant offering Himself up on the altar of self-sacrifice. For us, obedience to the commands of Jesus will also mean sacrifice, maybe even to the same extent.

That's a tall order. But that is the high and holy task to which Jesus calls us.

To embark on the pilgrimage of obedience is to travel a difficult and dangerous road.

¹⁰ In the original Greek, John wrote this verse in the grammatical form of a Third class conditional statement. The sense is, "*If you do such and such (and it is by no means clear that you will), then such and such will happen.*"

But obedience defines what it means to “*stick close to Jesus*.” “*Sticking close to Jesus*” is the only path that leads to fruit-bearing for Jesus.

Let me review: The only way anyone ever receives eternal life is by faith alone in the Lord Jesus alone.

And once we are saved, we can never be unsaved. We are eternally secure. Jesus said that He holds us in His mighty hand and the Father holds Him and us in His mighty hand. (John 10:27-30). Nobody and nothing can break that double vice-grip.

However, after being saved, fruit-bearing will vary from believer to believer.

Jesus and the Father are passionate that each of us bear fruit - in fact, that we bear **[8] much fruit**. But not all believers will produce an abundant crop of Christlikeness and the fruit of the Spirit.

And if our lives don't produce that fruit, it'll be because we haven't been sticking close to Jesus, meaning that we haven't obeyed His commands. And the command at issue is spelled out in Jesus' next words.

Jesus Calls Disciples to Love One Another (vv. 12, 17)

[12] “This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you....[17] This I command you, that you love one another.”

Jesus showed His love to His followers every day He was with them for three solid years. He taught them, rebuked them when that was needed, encouraged them, and showed them what God was like.

And we, who know the rest of the story, know that above and beyond the day to day experience of Jesus' love, they would soon see the ultimate display of that love when He died on a cross for their sins.

That death was an unrepeatable act of unconditional sacrifice. He suffered the most horrible form of mistreatment man could dream up - for them, for us. He endured the physical, emotional, mental, and

spiritual trauma of the cross, willingly, to bring us life, eternal and abundant.

And Jesus says here that our love for each other is to look just like His love for us.

That love is to be played out in the concrete realities of what goes on at 8900 Guilbeau Road, at 15315 Grey Fox Terrace - and at your address.

We are each to offer that love to each other, as we put each other first, look out for each other's' best interests, and as we lay down our lives for each other in practical, sacrificial ways.¹¹

Conclusion:

This morning, Jesus has given us tremendous insight into what is involved in walking through life with Him. Here is a summary of His message.

- 1 - God's heart is that we would each bear fruit - MUCH fruit! - for Jesus.
- 2 - That fruitfulness is all about character transformation, becoming like Jesus. It is about exhibiting the fruit of the Spirit.
- 3 - The key to bearing fruit is abiding / remaining / sticking close to Jesus.
- 4 - What all of that means is that we take care to obey His commandments.
- 5 - And the chief commandment in view is that we love one another.

You may have noticed that I glossed over a few of Jesus' statements as we've made our way through John 15 this morning. I glossed over them on purpose.

¹¹ We can only dream about how differently Church history would read if verses 12 and 17 had been obeyed. Ugly splits and schisms and fights and hatreds would have never occurred had Christ's followers seriously taken to heart the priority of love between believers. What a powerful testimony to the world it would have been had Christians loved each other as Jesus tells us to do here. But we can dream - and do more than dream! - as we give our all to love each other.

The statements of Jesus I skipped were those statements where He spoke of the results of living according to the pattern He lays out here. Here are the key results of that kind of living.

Confidence in prayer (vv. 7, 16)

[7] If you remain in Me, and My words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

[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 remain, so that whatever you ask of the Father in My name He may give to you.

God wants us to pray, and He wants us to ask Him for things that He is eager to say "Yes!" to.

- By abiding / remaining in Him, we'll pray in greater alignment with His purposes than if we were not.
- By sticking close to Him and staying alert and awake to His words, we'll pray with more sensitivity to kingdom priorities than we would if we were living independently.
- And if we are focusing on obeying His commandments - especially His commandment that we love each other! - we won't pray selfishly but will pray for the deepest needs of others.

Jesus says here that God loves to say "Yes!" to the prayers we pray when we are spiritually aligned, sensitive to kingdom of God priorities, and giving ourselves to love.

So, we can have great confidence in prayer when we stick close to Jesus. We will also find joy in the journey as we stick close.

Joy (v. 11)

Jesus also says that everything He has said in this address is said to increase our joy. Following Him takes us on the path to joy.

[11] "These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full."

The Gospels record several times when Jesus mentioned His joy. One time, in particular, His enemies slandered Him for the joyful life He led.

They said, **[Matthew 11:19] "...Behold a gluttonous man and a heavy drinker, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!"**

He certainly wasn't guilty of gluttony or drunkenness. But because of the company He kept, His opponents accused Him.

"That Jesus. He's always partying and laughing and having a good time. He must not be from God!"

No. Jesus experienced joy and led a joyful life precisely because He was perfectly fulfilling His Father's purpose for Him.

There was joy in that for Jesus and there is joy in that for us, too.

And I can say by way of testimony that the most joyful moments of my life and the most joy-filled seasons of my life have been those times when I have been sticking close to Jesus and obeying His command to love.

Finally, there will be a certain quality to our relationship with Jesus as we stick close to Him.

Friendship with Jesus (v. 14)

[13] Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends. [14] You are My friends if you do what I command you. [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.

The one who believes in Jesus is transferred from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of God's beloved Son. (Colossians 1:13)

That person becomes a son or a daughter of God. And it is a crazy honor to be God's adopted child. We are in God's forever family and God is our Father. Too good to be true - and it's true!

But in what we've heard today, Jesus invites us into an even more intimate circle. The circle of friendship.¹²

Of course, He took the first step toward friendship with us. In the Jewish world of the first century, students chose their own rabbis. Not so with Jesus.

He proved to be the best Friend we could ever have by laying down His life for us! (John 10:11, 15, 17)

Now, let's prove to be friends to Jesus by -
 bearing fruit for Him
 which can only be done by sticking close to Him
 which means obeying His commandments
 which means embracing the way of love.

¹² The book of Hebrews uses a different term to indicate the same thought as friend. The author speaks of “partners/partakers” or “companions.” (Greek: metaxoi) See Hebrews 1:9, 3:1, 14; 6:4; 12:8.