

## Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

### Sermon Series: Trustworthy

Equipped by Jesus to live for Jesus (John 13-17)

### Reflections from a Vineyard

(John 15:1-17)

Study #16

#### Introduction: Metaphorically speaking...

In His Gospel, the Apostle John recorded seven metaphors that Jesus used to describe Himself and His ministry. In the first five, Jesus said that He was the:

- **Bread of life.** (He offered Himself as sustenance for the world's spiritual hunger. 6:48, 51)
- **Light of the world.** (He shines God's light to the world. 8:12)
- **Door of the sheep.** (He protects the one who believes. 10:7)
- **Good Shepherd.** (He lays down His life for the sheep. 10:11)
- **Resurrection and the Life.** (He gives eternal life to the one who believes. 11:25)

These are all invitational metaphors. Jesus used them to help people see His trustworthiness and to invite them to believe in Him.

Jesus gave a sixth metaphor to tell His disciples that, as He was **The Way, The Truth, and The Life** (14:6), He was going to prepare a place for them in His Father's house.

John recorded one final metaphor that was different from the rest.

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<sup>1</sup> Since Judas had left by this time, we know that it was dark outside. (John 13:30)

Jesus provided this one to describe organic relationship that exists between Himself and the one who believes in Him, and to point the path forward for a growing intimacy in that relationship.

We're focusing on this seventh metaphor today.

*Setting the scene...*

So far, all that has happened on Jesus' last night with His disciples has happened in an upstairs room of a house in Jerusalem.

It was late when He said, **[John 14:31] "Get up, let's go from here."**<sup>1</sup> and called for a change in scenery.

They left the upstairs room, left the house, and left Jerusalem to go to the Garden of Gethsemane, where their time together would end.

As they walked, (assuming no clouds), they would have been able to see pretty well, since the Passover always occurs at full moon.

In that moonlight, they could have seen the vineyards planted on the slopes surrounding Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup> With that as background, Jesus used the metaphor of a vine to teach His disciples crucial truth about life with Him.

#### Jesus Calls Disciples to "Remain / Abide" (15:1-11)

##### **The Vine and the Vinedresser (15:1)**

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

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

The grapevine provided an important part of the Jewish diet (grapes and wine) and was an important part of Jewish life.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

The fruit of the vine - wine - symbolized God's blessing and an abundant grape harvest was symbolic of general prosperity.

The grapevine was so integral to Jewish life that Old Testament writers often referred to Israel as God's "*vine*." The disciples were used to hearing the grapevine used as a symbol.<sup>3</sup>

But they would have been stunned to hear Jesus call Himself "*the true vine*." His claim to be "*the true vine*" signified a sea change in God's work on earth.

No longer will the people of Israel be the primary vehicle through whom God works. Now, Jesus will take that role.

Having launched this metaphor, Jesus made it walk on all fours.

*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. And, from what I've read, the vinedresser's job is one of the most demanding in all of agriculture.

I go for the quick and easy crops. My garden is filled with onions, beans, asparagus, tomatoes, and 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 Gardener who cares for and tends the Vine. Jesus is the Vine.

And we, who believe in Jesus, are the limbs branching out from the vine. In this extended metaphor, Jesus explains the Christian life in terms of the experience of the grapevine.

### **The Experiences of the Branches (15:2-6)**

*Pruning the branches that are "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 prunes<sup>4</sup> it so that it may bear more fruit. [3] You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you."<sup>5</sup>**

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 talking about 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.

What we just read about - pruning - tells us 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 most fruit bearing plants.

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 looks like they are killing their trees.

<sup>3</sup> See Isaiah 5:1-7; Jeremiah 2:21; Ezekiel 15:1-8; Hosea 10:1.

<sup>4</sup> The Greek word for "*prune*" is usually translated in the New Testament "*to clean*." To "*prune*" a vine is to cleanse that plant of worthless "sucker" branches that must be removed to foster new growth that would produce fruit.

<sup>5</sup> If there was any doubt about the spiritual state of the eleven men to whom He was speaking, He clears up that confusion here. They were saved men.

But these farmers understand that if they don't lop off the "sucker limbs" and even cut back some of the main branches, there will be a slim harvest next season.

Pruning is vital for a good peach crop.

It is the pruning the Father does to the branches (believers) coming out of the Vine (Jesus) that makes for a bountiful harvest of "grapes" (spiritual fruit in our lives).

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 does with all believers to increase their capacity for fruit production.

But...if grapevines had voices, they'd be screaming bloody murder during pruning season. And believers who feel 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 give breathing room for the production of what is the point of the plant.

The Father is a ruthless pruner because He is passionate that His children bear fruit.

- He allows His children to walk through the valley of the shadow of death, illness, and loss **to produce the fruit of faith.**
- He will allow to come into the life of His child someone who is hard to love, **to produce the fruit of love.**
- He will allow financial and material limitations **to produce contentment.**
- He will put us in situations that cause great discomfort **to produce perseverance.**

It is tempting for us to think that the Father has pruned us to the nubbins. Like there is nothing else to prune. But pruning is an on-going necessity for the Christian who would bear fruit.

By pruning away what doesn't produce fruit, God will produce the fruit of Christlikeness.

The Apostle Paul lists the beautiful fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. (Galatians 5:22-23) These grow, thanks to God's pruning.<sup>6</sup>

The fruit of faith and hope, perseverance, wisdom, and stability grow because of God's pruning.

One more comment about fruit bearing. We should expect that, just as different grapevines produce different flavors of grapes, the fruit produced by THIS Christian will differ from the fruit produced by THAT Christian.

By the Father's wise pruning, He is producing unique fruit through you, fruit that grows out of your gifts, desires, and abilities.

So, our spiritual life comes from Jesus, the Vine. The Father is the Vinedresser who prunes us. And what part do we are to play if we long to bear fruit for Jesus?

We are to "**remain / abide**" 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.**"

<sup>6</sup> Other texts with this emphasis include Ephesians 5:9, Philippians 1:11, Colossians 1:10, Hebrews 12:11, and James 3:18.

I think that **“abide”** captures the sense of Jesus’ thought here, so I’ll use the term **“abide”** as we walk through the rest of the passage.

But what does Jesus mean by **“abide”**?

We find help by looking at another scene where Jesus used the word in a way that clarifies what He means here.

Shortly after Jesus finished speaking with the whole group of the eleven disciples (after John 17), they all crossed the Kidron ravine and made their way to the Garden of Gethsemane.

There, Jesus told them to take a seat while He went a short distance away to pray.

Matthew’s Gospel tells us that Jesus took Peter, James, and John with Him to the spot He had chosen for prayer. He told them, **[Matthew 26:38] “My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death; ‘meno’ here and keep watch with Me.”**<sup>7</sup>

He didn’t mean by **“meno”** that they were to simply **“sit still.”** That doesn’t capture what Jesus was urging these three men to do.

While Jesus was away from them, praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, pouring out His heart to the Father, He wanted Peter, James, and John to be vigilant, awake, alert.

He was saying, **“Pay attention. Be aware. Focus on Me. I’m just going just a little ways away, but stick with Me. Stay close to Me!”**

And what did they do? They fell asleep.

And with that, we get a graphic picture of what **“abiding”** doesn’t look like (being inattentive, unaware, unfocused, missing in action, sleepy) AND what Jesus had in mind when He urged them to **“abide”** here in our passage - be alert, vigilant. Stay close to Jesus!

Jesus never stops staying close to us. There is no question about that. What is at issue is whether or not we, who believe in Him, will stay close to Him. Will we stick with Him?<sup>8</sup>

It is as possible that you and I might not stick close to Jesus / pay attention to Jesus / stay alert and awake for Jesus as it was possible for Peter, James, and John to fall asleep when He told them to **“watch and pray”** on that night. (Matthew 26:41)

And it is tragic whenever a believer falls asleep at the wheel.

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. Apart from Jesus we and other people can do lots of things.

But what is Jesus talking about here? Bearing fruit for God. Jesus says that if we don’t stick with Him, stay close to Him, then we will not bear fruit for God. It’s just not going to happen.

Now we look back to the passage and see that Jesus has sobering things to say about the branch that does not bear fruit.

*The sobering results of NOT abiding (v. 6)*

**[6] “If anyone does not abide 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 was NOT saying

It is important to note that NOT every reference to **“fire”** and to **“burning”** in the New Testament is a reference to hell.

<sup>7</sup> The same thought is present in the account in Mark at 13:34.

<sup>8</sup> In John 15:4, the first phrase is a command: **“Remain in Me.”** The second phrase is a statement of fact: **“I [remain] in you.”**

So, don't automatically think that here, Jesus is saying that believers who don't "*Stay close to Jesus!*" and are "alert" are condemned. He was not saying that.

Remember.

Jesus is talking to and about those who have believed in Him. He has just told these men that He is leaving this life to prepare a place for them in the next life in His Father's house.

And He has affirmed that they are "***all clean***" (v. 3) because of the word which He has spoken to them.<sup>9</sup> They are saved.

So, what does He mean? Here's how I understand what Jesus is saying.

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

Jesus' point here is that fruitless Christians are as worthless for the purpose for which they were saved as are grapeless grapevines.<sup>10</sup>

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

If we went out to any vineyard in central Texas, we would find branches on those vines that weren't producing fruit. What could we do with those fruitless vines?

Unlike branches from a mesquite, we couldn't make fenceposts.  
Unlike branches from an oak, we couldn't make fine furniture.  
Unlike branches from a pine tree, we couldn't cut planks to build a house.

Apart from the grapes that a grapevine produces, a grapevine's branch is worthless.

Just so, while the Christian who doesn't produce fruit doesn't cease to be a Christian, that fruitless Christian is worthless...for Jesus' purposes.

And 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 is because they don't "*Stay close to Jesus! / abide.*"

Abiding is that important. THAT is what we must do if we want to bear fruit. Now let's get painfully specific. What does it mean to abide?

Listen.

### **Jesus' Love for Us...Our Love for Him (15:9-10)**

*Foundational truth: Jesus loves me, this I know (v. 9a)*

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

That - Jesus loves you - is a crucial, centering, grounding truth.

To the degree that the Father loves the Son, to that degree the Son loved those men AND to that degree He loves us who believe in Him.

So, why give this reassuring affirmation of His love, right before explaining what abiding in Him means?

He assures of His love, first, because abiding in Jesus is no easy assignment. It is so challenging that if we're going to stay close to Him, we need the rock-solid conviction that He loves us.

<sup>9</sup> And besides, if these folks were never actually "***in Him***" there would be no "***throwing away***" involved, anyway.

<sup>10</sup> 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.

So, here it is. This is what it means to abide in Jesus.

*My fitting response: Love (that is, obey) Jesus (vv. 9-10)*

**[9] “Just as the Father has loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love. [10] “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>**

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 death on a cross. For us, too, obedience to the commands of Jesus will mean sacrifice.

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

But obedience defines what it means to abide. The path of obedience is the path that leads to fruit-bearing for Jesus.

Let’s 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 Jesus 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 *“much fruit”* - 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 abiding, meaning that we haven’t been *“Staying close to Jesus!”* - and that means that we haven’t obeyed His commands.

Then Jesus identified the one commandment He had in mind.

### **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.”**

Every day that He was with them, for three solid years, Jesus showed His followers how and how much He loved them.

He taught them and rebuked them and encouraged them. He provided for them and protected them.

And above and beyond the day-to-day experience of Jesus’ love, they would soon see the ultimate display of that love when He died for their sins on the cross.

Jesus endured the trauma of the cross, willingly, to rescue them - and us - from spiritual death and to deliver us into spiritual life.

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 on Sunday mornings, and at 15315 Grey Fox Terrace at all hours of the day and night - and at your address, too.

<sup>11</sup> 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.”*

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.<sup>12</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

This morning, Jesus has pulled back the curtain and shown us so much about what is involved in walking through life with Him.

- 1 - God's heart is that we would each bear much fruit for Jesus.
- 2 - That fruitfulness is about character transformation, becoming like Jesus. It is about exhibiting the fruit of the Spirit.
- 3 - The key to bearing that fruit is abiding in Jesus.
- 4 - This means that we give ourselves to obeying His commandments.
- 5 - And the chief commandment in view is that we love one another.

You may have noticed that as we walked through John 15, I skipped over some of Jesus' remarks. That was on purpose.

The statements of Jesus I skipped were those statements where He spoke of the results of "**abiding**" in Him. Let's backtrack now and see what comes our way when we abide.

*Confidence in prayer (v. 7, also v. 16)*

**[7] "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for 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 in Him, we'll pray in greater alignment with His purposes than if we were not.
- By abiding in Him and staying alert and awake to His words, we'll pray with more sensitivity to His kingdom priorities when we pray.

- By abiding in Him - which means 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. He also says that He has said all that He has said to increase our joy.

*Joy (v. 11)*

**[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 accused Him of excessive partying, and He quoted them as saying, **[Matthew 11:19] "Behold a gluttonous man and a heavy drinker...!"**

Jesus 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!"*

The reality was that Jesus was joyful 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.

<sup>12</sup> We can dream about how differently church history would read if Jesus' words here had been obeyed. But we can do more than dream. We can give our all to love each other.

I have in no way “arrived” in this, but my testimony is 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 abide in Him.

*Friendship with Jesus (v. 14)*

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

When we believe in Jesus we are transferred from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of God’s beloved Son. (Colossians 1:13)

That person becomes a child 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 here, Jesus invites us into an even more intimate circle. The circle of friendship.<sup>13</sup>

Of course, He took the first step toward friendship with us. 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 Jesus’ friends by -  
 bearing fruit for Him  
 which can only be done by abiding and sticking close to Him  
 which means obeying His commandments  
 which means embracing the way of love.

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<sup>13</sup> The author of the letter to the Hebrews used a different term to indicate the same thought that Jesus makes when He calls us “friends.” Hebrews speaks of “partners” or “companions.” (Greek: *metaxoi*) See Hebrews 1:9, 3:1, 14; 6:4; 12:8.