

Chapter 15

The Gospel of John

At the end of Chapter 14, after Jesus had set an example for his disciples for what it meant to be a servant, and after he had promised his return through the gift of the Spirit, he tells them it's time to leave for the events of his passion. One would therefore assume that chapter 15 would open in the Garden of Gethsemane. It doesn't. John had apparently decided to share more of what Jesus taught them.

And so, Chapter 15 opens with Jesus using another familiar image in order to describe God's, His, and our relationship to one another. The image is that of a vine (presumably grape), its branches, and the vine-grower. The vine carries the nutrients needed by the branches in order that they may bear fruit and be productive. The vine-grower prunes the branches in order that they might become more productive. If a branch is not at all productive, it is cut off the vine and used as fuel for the fire. And finally, it's important to understand the use of the word "abide." Abide means remaining with someone or some thing.

There are two dimensions of meaning in this discourse. The most important dimension has to do with the role of faith. Abiding with Jesus--being in relationship to Jesus on the basis of faith--this is what gives us the ability, as branches, to bear fruit. Just as the vine provides the life-giving nutrients the branch needs to bear fruit, so we need what Jesus gives us through faith if we are ever to be productive Christians. Were we separated from the vine or unable to receive what the vine was designed to give, we could bear no fruit whatsoever. We would be finished. Worthless. Food for the fire.

The second dimension of meaning has to do with the fruit itself. That is, while the nutrients we as branches need must come from the vine, nevertheless, we must bear fruit. We are not simple branches connected to the vine for our own sake. We are connected for the sake of bearing fruit.

This image is intended to provide a way of understanding the role of God, of Jesus, and of us when it comes to our work in the world. God cultivated this vineyard in order to produce fruit. He planted the vine—Jesus—so that he might abide with us, the branches, and thereby provide the spiritual nutrients we need to accomplish what he wants us to do.

God created us. God sends Jesus, and Jesus, in the power of the Spirit, abides with us through faith. Faith is active. Faith is not a matter of getting entirely lost in a mystical relationship with Christ as if we were not here to do things. Rather, our faith in Jesus, whereby we receive the spiritual blessings of life, hope, and love, enables us to be involved in Christian activity.

Jesus says that those who abide in him will bear much fruit. Someone might look at this and say, "I would like to bear much fruit, be active in the world, so let's do it! No. That's not it. What the image clearly teaches is that we must be connected to Jesus before we can do anything of value. Through faith in him, we receive all that we need to bear the fruit he wants us to bear. And what is the fruit he wants us to bear? "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."

In other words, what Jesus came to give us as our "vine" planted by the Father is divine love and life. Divine love heals our spiritual ills. It forgives our sins. It makes us "righteous" in the sight of God. And, having a source of love that is not of this world, it gives us the freedom we need—the freedom from being pressured to conform to the world in order to be considered acceptable. No one can threaten this source of love and life because it comes from God. God's love feeds our souls and hearts so that we needn't turn elsewhere to get this need met. Therefore, having been established in Christ through a bond of love that transforms us, we too can obey his commandment—to love as he loves.

Jesus also says that his Father will be glorified as we bear much fruit. This ability on our part to demonstrate what God's love looks like in our actions will inevitably give the glory and credit to God because it is God's love for us that makes it possible. In fact, if we abide in Jesus' love, we can ask whatever we wish and he will do it for us. That is, when we abide in Jesus' love, we abide in the Father's love. We worship him. We become entirely devoted to him. He is literally our life and well-being. This being the case, we will want what he wants. Our desires will be shaped by his love for us. So, this being the case, it is perfectly reasonable to expect that we will ask for things that are in accord with his love.

Jesus then says that these things were said so that their joy may be complete. That's what God's love does. Because we are given the very thing that brings new and divine life into our souls, and because this is what our hearts desire, we will be joyful indeed. There is no greater joy than being in possession of the eternal, life-giving love of God. This is what happens as we, over time, receive Christ into our hearts through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Then Jesus tells them that he chose them. They didn't choose him. Of course this is the case. Jesus is the One who gives us God's love. He has it. We don't. If we are ever going to have it, it will be because he chose to give it to us, just as he chose the people who would become his disciples.

The various Christian groups throughout history have become confused on this. Some believe that Christian faith is born when they choose to believe in Jesus, as if Jesus were out there on a street corner, and as if he had hired salesmen to try and get people to choose him. NOT! There is no human system by which we can get Jesus into the hearts of others. We have no control over him. The Spirit, who brings Christ to us, is like the wind. Sometimes it blows here. Sometimes it blows there. If it happens to come to you, it does so because it chose to do so.

We have no control over that. The best we can do, aside from seeking it out and receiving it whenever opportunity arises, is to gather around word and sacrament—the means the Spirit uses to convey the living Christ into our hearts. Again, spiritual practices are essential. Repentance and turning to the Lord has to be a daily affair. We cannot receive the love of Christ into our hearts complete and whole in one decision—assuming he had chosen us to receive it. It starts very small. But if you come to him day after day, it will grow very large. Therefore seek first the Kingdom of God.

How can a person know that Christ has chosen someone? By the fruit they bear. Luther said that faith is a busy, active thing. A person of faith cannot help but do good works. It becomes who we are. When filled with the love of Christ we will also be highly desirous of sharing that love.

In the last half of Chapter 15 Jesus warns his disciples that “the world” will hate them. Why? Because they don’t belong to the world, the values of the world, the pursuits, its way of doing things. Whenever a community comes together, they come together on the basis of values and ways of doing things. Christians who are motivated by God’s love will be offering an alternative. This alternative can look threatening to others because it represents a challenge to their values. And the reaction people get when they challenge the status quo is usually rejection. The problem here is that “the world” cannot possibly understand them. The world does not know God. They ignore God because they are too busy creating their own world.

For example, consider the tech world right now. New start-ups are cropping up every day and all in the hope of creating this vision of the future where technology will be able to create a brave new world. All the big endeavors in this world are racing to develop the next thing: robots, artificial intelligence, self-driving cars, drones that will deliver your packages, space flight, all-electric cars...it goes on and on. These folks believe they are building a new and better world, just as the scientists and the industrialists believed they were creating a new world back in the 19th century. Their vision for the future is based on god-like possibilities.

But is this really so? Will humanity become better when we have so mastered technology that old problems are no longer problems? The fact is, if human hearts don’t change, nothing will change. The best illustration of this is the science that led to the development of nuclear weapons. Science had progressed in a very impressive way. We understood things that former generations could only dream of. And yet, because humans hadn’t changed, that breakthrough was used to develop and use a weapon with far more deadly consequence.

Chapter 15 ends as Jesus once again promises to send the Holy Spirit. The Spirit will testify on his behalf because the things Jesus has taught have described what can happen when we receive the divine Spirit. The Spirit is the love of God. We are therefore renewed, transformed, and changed under the spirit’s influence in our hearts. He makes, as Paul said, “all things new.”

The disciples will be able to finally comprehend his testimony when they receive the Holy Spirit. While Jesus taught, the Holy Spirit changes us so that we can see the truth of what Jesus taught. The world could not see that. To the world, Jesus' teaching seemed outrageous. They could not comprehend it. And so, they rejected it.

This was not indicative that Jesus teaching was false. Rather, it was indicative of their failure to understand it and see it as true. For this to happen, we need the Holy Spirit. The Spirit enlightens us to God's love because the Spirit is God's love.