

Title: "Deeper Communion"  
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Text: John 15:1-16  
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## Deeper Obedience

Sometimes, we're tempted to think the pressing demands of everyday life keep us from developing or even having time for a deeper experiential relationship with Christ. The opposite could be the case.

I remembered this week the example of a missionary named Frank Laubach. He went to the island of Mindanao in the Philippines in the early 1900s and worked with the Muslim Moro people. They were hostile. He was in constant danger and experienced dismal failure for a long time. While struggling with his sense of failure and loneliness, he spent time each evening in prayer and contemplation of scripture and felt that he met with God and experienced his presence in a profound way. Out of those times alone with God, he felt like God led him to two convictions. One was that he did not really love the people he was trying to reach with the love of Christ, and he needed to do that, but the other was that he wasn't really living daily, moment-by-moment in the presence of Christ, and he needed to do that as well. He sensed he would only be effective for Christ if he loved people with the love of Christ, and he would only be able to do as he himself lived in the presence of the Christ who loved him.

The reason I share the story is that Frank Laubach became a truly and remarkably productive man and because he kept a journal of his spiritual life, we know that he believed there was a profound relationship between the depth of his communion with Christ and his success and the productivity of his work in the world. There were many wonderful answers to prayer to prayer in his life. One of which was that he began to reach the Muslim community by teaching literacy. He developed an alphabet and taught them how to read and write their own language. It's estimated that through his educational efforts, he was responsible for teaching 1/2 of the 90,000 people in that area to read and write. He also developed a method for teaching literacy that has been used to teach thousands of people all over the world to read. The success of his educational efforts changed many Muslim Moros'

attitudes toward Christianity, resulting in an incredible harvest of conversions. Multitudes of Muslims were baptized and became believers in and followers of Jesus. He successfully planted churches and started a theological seminary.

He managed a demanding workload and accomplished many complex and highly practical tasks, all the while living a life focused on practicing the presence of Christ. The thing that made me think of him in the context of today's message is that at the center of his life was a profound commitment to, in the words of **John 15**, *abide in Christ*.

He kept a journal. Listen to just a few of the things that he wrote.

Oh, this thing of keeping in constant touch with God, making him the object of my thought and the companion of my conversations, is the most amazing thing I've ever run across.

To his disciples, he said come with me, walk with me, talk and listen to me, work and rest with me, eat and sleep with me 24 hours a day. He chose them, the Bible says, that they might be with him. All who have tried that kind of abiding know the power of it...from center to circumference, it changes every person who does it. We make him our inseparable friend. We do not need to forget other things or stop our work, but we invite him to share everything we do or say. 1

It shouldn't surprise us that someone who has taken seriously the words of Jesus to abide in him discovers that doing so isn't just a personal sentimental spiritual exercise but a life-changing spiritual practice that has a positive impact on all of life.

Last week, we saw how, through faith in Jesus, we have a union with him, but what he's calling us to, in **John 15**, is deeper communion with him. The last two verses we looked at last week were **verses 10-11**. In them, Jesus says, *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> These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.* Then, when we go on to **verse 12**, we read, *"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have*

*loved you.* This morning we're looking at how a deeper communion with Christ is deeply connected to a deeper obedience to Christ.

*So, first, ask the question...*

## **I. WHAT CONSTITUTES A DEEPER OBEDIENCE?**

Here in **John 15:10-12**, three keywords stand out because they are words we do not often connect: 1.) commandments, 2.) love, and 3.) joy. Deeper obedience is *obedience to the commandments of Christ carried out in love with joy.* What Christ wants for us is not simply the management or control of our outward conduct. He wants us to go deeper so that we actually become more and more like him because he's the vine, and we're the branches.

### **A. Deeper obedience means an obedience that is deeper than outward actions and outward appearances.**

Paul Tripp wrote a book called *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands*. In it, the author talks about what he calls "fruit stapling." He writes,

Let's say I have a grapevine in my backyard. Each year, its grapes are scarce, and the ones that do appear are mushy and bitter. After a while, my wife says, "It doesn't make much sense to have this grapevine sprawling all over the yard and never be able to enjoy the grapes. Can't you do something?"

So, one day, she looks out and sees me carrying a staple gun and a couple of baskets of grapes from the grocery store. I start stapling beautiful clusters of grapes onto the branches of the vine. From a distance, the vine starts to look great. But what do you think my wife would be thinking? We all know that kind of fruit may look good for the moment, but it won't last. I've got to get to the heart of the problem if I want better fruit. 2

Sometimes, we try to get by with an approach to life that is little more than fruit stapling. We focus more on outward behavior and conduct and appearances than we do on true heart-deep transformation. Jesus admonished the very religiously conservative Pharisees in his day for

being like whitewashed tombs. They looked good on the outside, but there was rot on the inside. The importance of deeper obedience is all through the Scriptures. In **Romans 6:17**, we read, *But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed.* **1 Peter 1:22** says, *Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart.* So, in many different ways, the Bible talks about this issue of deeper obedience and its importance for us and for God.

**B. To face the call for a deeper obedience can be convicting, but if we understand it rightly, it can be clarifying and liberating.**

*And this is true in two key dimensions, if you will.*

**1. First, it clarifies the true basis of our eternal salvation.** Do not ever, even for a second, imagine that you can earn or deserve or contribute to or sustain your salvation through the quality of your obedience to God. That is not the point of this teaching ever. God's standard for obedience is too high! It is that you keep all of the commandments from the heart in love, with joy towards all people. No one other than Jesus has ever or can ever do that. This is why the Bible clearly says *by grace you are saved through faith and that not of yourselves it's the gift of God not of works lest any man should boast* (Ephesians 2:8-9). Your best efforts on your best day are imperfectly motivated and inadequately performed. They don't earn or even contribute in any way to your salvation. Our imperfect obedience can demonstrate that faith is at work in us and God is at work in us but it does not earn God's favor. Salvation comes through Christ alone, by grace alone, through faith alone.

That's humbling, but liberating. It frees you from the foolishness of thinking your salvation depends upon the quality of your obedience. It's also liberating because it frees you from being dominated by the fear factor - if your primary motivation is that of avoiding judgment from God, then *self-protection* and *self-preservation* are your primary motivation. How can you ever be free to keep his commandments with love and joy for *his* sake? Christ sets us free from the demands of his

law as a means of earning our salvation, not so that we can live our lives more loosely but so that we can live our lives more deeply.

*And so this issue of a deeper obedience clarifies our profound need for saving grace, but then, when we are clear about that...*

**2. Secondly, it clarifies the profound nature of spiritual growth.**

Healthy spiritual growth can never simply be outward. It also has to be inward. **Hebrews 4:12** *For the word of God is living and active.*

*Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.* I've known Christians who have acted as if it were a waste of time, if not a sign of weakness, to look within, to discern their thoughts and attitudes, motives and intentions, and seek to bring one's inward life into harmony with Christ. But it is not weakness. It's wisdom, and it is necessary for deeper obedience.

The paradoxical power and even the uniqueness of the Christian faith is that when you come to Christ just as you are, you are given the assurance of his love and grace and forgiveness, and you can never lose that, and that becomes the basis not for indifference and complacency but when your union with Christ is real that becomes the impetus for deeper obedience.

What constitutes deeper obedience? Deeper obedience is *obedience to the commandments of Christ carried out in love with joy. If that is what constitutes a deeper obedience then...*

## **II. WHAT CULTIVATES A DEEPER OBEDIENCE?**

Look at how Jesus began in **John 15:1-2**: *"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. <sup>2</sup> Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit."*

### **A. The fruit of Christ is cultivated through the pruning work of the Father.**

I've heard that if you go into a vineyard right after the pruning and look at those vines with an untrained eye, you're shocked. You look at the

poor vine. So much has been cut back, and the vine looks devastated. But it isn't. The skillful eye knows there was not a single random stroke. Every cut was carefully chosen to develop the vine and to make it's fruit better, stronger, sweeter. When a good gardener is done with the pruning the vine may look all cut up but the truth is nothing -- nothing has been cut away if it would have been better to have kept it and nothing has been left if it would have been better to have cut it away. **John 15:2**, Jesus says: *Every branch that bears fruit, he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.* There are times in our lives when God takes His pruning knife to us and cuts away things that are so important to us. We stand there feeling like we're devastated, but we aren't. The Father works to make you more fruitful. You have to trust in Him. There are many things the Father cuts away that seem to you, like the hurtful denials of legitimate dreams and wishes, but Jesus here tells you that the Father is at work to bring forth more fruit.

Not every loss in life can be traced to the pruning of God the Father to bring about more fruitfulness in our lives. We live in a fallen world, and we are not exempt from the common sufferings of the human condition. But when the Father is working to cut away the things that hinder your fruitfulness for Him, you can be sure that He is working with love and skill for His greater glory and your joy in fruitfulness. Instead of reacting with resentment, rebellion, anger, or disillusionment, we can trust his wisdom, submit to his discipline, and pursue his purposes in faith.

*Spiritual fruit is cultivated through the pruning work of God the Father, but then there's also this.*

**B. Spiritual fruit is cultivated as we commit to actually doing what Christ says we are to do.**

In **John 15:10** Jesus says, *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.* In **verse 12-13** he says, *"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. <sup>13</sup> Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. <sup>14</sup> You are my friends if you do what I command you.* The Bible is full of explicit commands. In it, Jesus speaks to us about sexual purity, the

sanctity of marriage, receiving forgiveness, granting forgiveness, renouncing greed and living generously, resisting temptation, and praying boldly. The promise of forgiveness frees us to follow Christ without the fear that we will be rejected when we fail or falter. It invites us to trust him to confess our sins honestly and to persevere imperfectly but faithfully.

In **verse 12** he told us to keep his *commandments* plural. In **verse 12** he says this is my commandment singular, *that you love one another as I have loved you*. All the different things that Jesus tells us about how we're to live in relationship with people and to God, are the specific concrete expressions of what love looks like in the reality of daily life. But the underlying principle for how we are to live with deeper obedience is love.

### **C. Spiritual fruit is cultivated through a deep friendship with Jesus Christ.**

In **John 15:15** Jesus says an amazing thing. He says he wants us to think of our relationship with him in terms of friendship. Yes, of course, he wants us to know him as Savior and as Lord as well. But by using the term *friend*, he's saying *I want my relationship with you to move beyond that of Master and slave or Savior and sinner or teacher and student or creator and creation; I want there to be between us a friendship*. The truth is if we do not move into this experience of an ongoing friendship with Christ, in which we are abiding in his love, and drawing strength from our relationship with him, and doing what he says, and living the Christian life out of relational fellowship with Jesus, we will not be the fruitful people that he wants us to become.

Friendship, when it's healthy, can be such a powerful thing. Here, Jesus tells us that he wants us to go after deeper obedience to him as an expression of true friendship with him. I know a man whose girlfriend once told him maybe we should just be friends. And he said to her as Christians don't you think we should be the very best friends we can be? And she said yeah that makes sense. And so they became very good friends and have now been married going on 49 years. It's a

wonderful thing isn't it that God in Christ would say to people like the deeply flawed but believing disciples then and to you and me today *I call you my friends.*

## Conclusion

Frank Laubach the man who managed such a demanding and productive life while going so deep with Christ wrote in his journal that when we abide in Christ... *we make him our inseparable friend. We do not need to forget other things or stop our work but we invite him to share everything we do or say.*

I wonder if, for some of you, it's hard to believe you could live in deep friendship with Christ. The reason it's hard is because you're so aware of your own shortcomings. Jesus says *come to me now, follow me, abide in me.* Let his word abide in you, abide in his love, believe and accept that He wants to be for you a Savior of boundless compassion, infinite patience, unimaginable forgiveness, and steadfast love. *Don't project onto Christ your feelings about yourself when you are displeased or even disgusted with your shortcomings.* He knows it all. He went to the cross to demonstrate God's love to bring forgiveness and in that to offer his friendship. His resurrection confirms his promise that he will be present with us and never leave us.

Look at what he says in **verse 16**, *You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you.* Come as you are. Start where you are but go deeper.

**Amen.**



## **A Prayer Expressing Faith in Christ**

Almighty God, I believe Jesus Christ is the faithful Lord and Savior who died and rose again to save his people from their sins. I have not kept your commandments. I do not deserve and cannot merit your saving grace so I turn to Christ and trust in him as my Lord and Savior. Without him, I would be lost in my sins and my emptiness. So I come to Christ and receive and rest on him for the grace and the life he alone can give me. Amen

## **A Prayer for Spiritual Renewal**

Lord Jesus, apart from you, I can do nothing! Heavenly Father, nourish and strengthen my life through my union with Christ. Pour life-giving grace into my entire life through your Holy Spirit. Teach and enable me to abide in Christ, treasure his words, pray in bold faith for fruitfulness, rely on and draw strength from his love, keep his commandments and experience his friendship. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

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1 These quotes are compiled from *The Game with Minutes*, (<https://levaire.com/game-with-minutes-free-pdf/> ) and *Classics of Spiritual Devotion*, pp. 119 ff

2 You will find this illustration in Paul David Tripp's *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands*, p. 63.