

## Deeper Communion

*How do we really grow and change and flourish spiritually?* I read an odd story recently that relates to this. The author told how when he was 23 years old, he became a novice in the Franciscan order of the Roman Catholic Church. One of their practices during Lent was self-flagellation, which means to flog or whip yourself. On Friday evenings, all the novices would enter their little private cells or rooms with a 12-inch-long noose-shaped section of telephone wire. Then, one of the brothers would recite Psalm 51 King David's psalm of confession in Latin. Throughout the duration of the reciting of the Psalm, they would whip their backs with these telephone cords to "*extinguish the fires of lust*," as he put it. The man telling his story said he flailed away with such reckless abandon that he raised significant wounds on his back. The following day, this was reported to the master, who reprimanded him for his excessive zeal. He confessed that he was trying desperately to make himself pleasing to God. Duly reprimanded, he was concerned the next Friday when he heard the brother in the room beside him scourging himself so savagely that he feared for his brother's health and sanity and risked peeking through the cracked door to see what was happening. To his surprise, the brother was standing there with a bemused smile and a cigarette in his left hand while he was whacking the wall with the coiled telephone wire. His response was to pity his lukewarm brother and return to his cell with a sense of superiority. His point in sharing the story years later was that neither his approach of flogging himself nor his brother's approach, which seemed frivolous and flippant...neither led to any deeper, healthy spiritual growth, what our Scripture reading calls "fruit."

That somewhat extreme story pictures two very different but equally unhelpful yet common ways we sometimes approach spiritual growth. Sometimes we beat ourselves up. Maybe not literally, but we try to whip ourselves into shape. Isn't that an interesting turn of phrase? We accuse and assault ourselves harshly. That seems as if it ought to make a difference, but is it really fruitful in terms of what God wants for

us? Some people, or maybe sometimes, many of us, choose to opt out of the painful struggle. We settle for keeping up appearances, but that is about as far as we are going to take it.

This morning, in our series titled *Deeper*, we're looking at a passage in which Jesus calls us into a life of true spiritual growth and fruitfulness. It doesn't come to those who just want to keep up appearances, but neither does it come through beating yourself up. **Jesus says fruitful spiritual life comes through deeper communion with him.** We don't have to be perfect, and we don't have to be fake. You can start where you are and go deeper into a communion with Christ that will bear fruit in your life.

*In John 15, the foundational truth Jesus impresses upon us is this:*

### **I. AUTHENTIC CHRISTIAN LIVING COMES FROM A LIFE-GIVING UNION WITH CHRIST THAT BEARS FRUIT IN OUR LIVES.**

Look again at **John 15:1-5**, "*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. <sup>3</sup>Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup>Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the Vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. <sup>5</sup>I am the Vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me, you can do nothing.* Powerful words. Crucial words!

*What does Jesus mean when he talks about fruit?*

#### **A. Fruit is the manifestation of the spiritual life of Christ in and through the life of a Christian believer.**

**Galatians 5:22-23** helps us understand the kind of thing meant by "fruit." It says that *the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law.* In the Vine and the Branches teaching, Jesus tells us how those kinds of changes come about in our lives. When Jesus says, "*I am the true vine.*" He's saying, "*I'm the one*

*who indwells you to enable you to grow this kind of fruit in your life.”  
Apart from me, he adds, you can do nothing.*

*One thing we do have to humbly wrestle with is the fact that in this teaching, Jesus says...*

**B. The fruit of his gracious spiritual presence will be found in the life of every true Christian.**

Becoming a Christian involves a new birth. This is pictured in our baptism. The Bible says that until we come to receive Jesus as our Lord and Savior, no matter how active we may appear in this world, no matter how moral we may try to act, there is a spiritual deadness in us because we are estranged from God. When we come to Christ, we're admitting we not only need forgiveness we also need his presence to come into our lives, reconciling us, restoring us to God, and giving us new life and new birth. And God promises to do that through the gift of the Holy Spirit. In **2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 5:7**, we're told we become new creatures in Christ. That's a change too deep, too profound to take place without there being some evidence of it in your life.

*In the illustration Jesus shares of the Vine and the branches...*

**C. Fruitless branches are people who have a formal, external relationship with Christ but not a vital relationship with Him.**

This comes through from the context. This is part of what is called *The Upper Room Discourse*. It's one of the largest blocks of Jesus' concentrated teaching in all of scripture. It runs from **John 13** through **John 17**. Although all of it doesn't literally happen in the upper room, it all happens around the story of the Last Supper and Jesus going to the garden of Gethsemane on the night he was betrayed. This is Jesus' final teaching to his disciples, and he's trying to prepare them for things that haven't happened yet or are already in motion that they don't know about or fully understand. It's interesting that there is a parallel between what Jesus is saying in **John 15** and what happened a little earlier in the evening. In the course of the supper (**John 13:10**), Jesus said to the disciples, *“You are clean though not every one of you.”* Notice the parallel with **verse 3** of **John 15**: *You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.* Back in **John 13**, earlier in

the evening, who wasn't clean? Judas. Soon after Jesus made that statement, Judas left to betray Him.

**John 6:64** tells us that Jesus, speaking to his disciples, said: *Yet there are some of you who do not believe.*” John adds *For Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray him.* Notice Jesus doesn't say Judas was believing but just not believing enough or trying but not trying hard enough. He says he just didn't believe. So, as Jesus talks about fruitless branches being cut off, the scene in the background is that Judas has just left to betray Jesus. Judas never actually received Christ or trusted in Him as his Lord and Savior. His relationship to Christ was a formal and external relationship. It was not a life-giving, life-changing relationship.<sup>1</sup>

**D. Deeper communion with Christ requires a humble but well-founded confidence you have a life-giving relationship with him.** Please hear this clearly: Jesus does not raise the issue of fruitless believers to plant a seed of anxious insecurity into the hearts of struggling believers who are painfully aware of their shortcomings. Here in **John 15**, as Jesus looks at the eleven disciples who remain in the room, he's profoundly aware of how flawed they are. When he takes them to the garden of Gethsemane and asks his three closest disciples, Peter, James, and John, to watch and pray with him, they're all going to fall asleep instead! Peter, one of the most devoted of his disciples, will later in the same evening repeatedly deny him with oaths and curses. These disciples were, like all of us, real sinners who needed a Savior. Here's the question, in spite of their struggles and their sins, did their relationship with Jesus bear fruit in their lives? And the answer is “yes!” The remainder of the New Testament clearly affirms that truth.

Jesus, in the gospels and the apostles following his example, offer salvation, forgiveness, and eternal life immediately and assuredly to everyone who turns to Christ in repentance and faith and receives him as Savior and Lord. Listen to Jesus in **John 6:37-40** *All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out.* <sup>38</sup> *For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me.* <sup>39</sup> *And this is the will of him who sent*

*me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. <sup>40</sup> For this is the will of my Father that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.”*

*Fruit in your life is not a condition for receiving Christ but an inescapable, inherent result of receiving Christ. Do you think this can be true, and yet it also be true that Christians - all branches are not equally fruitful all the time? Can branches go through seasons in which they seem bare for a season? Can Christ tell us that every true branch with a living relationship with him *will bear some* fruit that reveals the reality of his presence and grace ... and yet at the same time, without wrecking our assurance of an authentic relationship with him, call us into a deeper communion, that will as **verse 8** stresses, bear *much fruit* and in doing so glorify God *and* prove the reality of our discipleship? The answer is, “yes!” Jesus doesn't want anyone to have a false confidence. If there's no evidence of a relationship with him, he wants you to come to him and receive him. He also doesn't want you to be satisfied if there's very little fruit in your life. In **verse 2**, he talks about *more fruit*, and in **verse 5** and again in **verse 8**, he talks about *much* fruit. That is what he wants. Do you want that! If so.... understand*

## **II. OUR UNDERLYING RESPONSIBILITY IN A FRUITFUL RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS IS TO ABIDE IN HIM.**

In **verse 4**, Jesus uses the word “abide” three times. He says: *Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the Vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me.* Think of it this way: what you need in a relationship with Jesus is both union and communion. Our union with Christ brings us into a saving relationship with him, and that link of union is so strong that the weight of the world cannot break it. But union with Christ makes possible a deepening communion with Christ. Communion is our moment-by-moment fellowship with him - the abiding in him Jesus is calling for in **John 15**.

*How do we abide in him or deepen our communion with Christ? There are several themes intertwined in this passage. First,*

### **A. Cultivate the companionship of Christ.**

The Greek word translated as "abide" means "to stay in a certain place and be at home there." When Christ says, "abide in me," He is saying: "I want you to find, in me, a home for your heart, a source of strength for your life. I am with you as a constant companion as close as your deepest thoughts. I gave myself for you on the cross to be your Savior and rose again as your Lord. I want you to find your inspiration and peace in me by trusting in my love, practicing my presence."

Picture a grapevine with a branch coming out of the Vine and a cluster of grapes growing off of the branch. If you walk through you don't hear the vines groaning as they whip themselves trying to make grapes. The fruit develops when the healthy life of the vine flows into the branches. So if Christ is the vine and you are the branches and apart from him you can do nothing, you can't just focus on the fruit you are trying to produce. Your underlying focus has to be on Him and your communion with Him who alone can produce his fruit in you. That does *not* mean that, as Christians, you have no responsibility, but it does mean that your most essential responsibility is to deepen your communion with Christ and to draw your very life from Him.

*What can help us do that? Well, we can....*

### **B. Treasure the words of Christ.**

Look at **verse 7**: *If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.* **Colossians 3:16** says: *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.* When we welcome Christ into our lives, we receive him not as a silent guest but as a living, speaking presence who communicates through Holy Scripture and the Holy Spirit. Unless our hearts are filled with the corrective, healthy, and transforming words of Christ, all kinds of falsehood, foolishness, and deception will flood in. To let the words of Christ dwell in you means they find a home in your heart and come to live within you.

*So this leads directly to a third thing.*

### **C. Pray boldly for the fruit that glorifies God.**

Look at **verse 7**: *If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.*

Contrary to some teaching, Jesus was not saying you can go to God with your misguided wish list to satisfy your desires and expect him to comply. The assurance he's giving us is powerful, but it's given in a particular context. This promise needs to be understood in the context of a teaching focused on bearing fruit for God. Imagine a commanding officer sending a soldier on a mission to rescue some people. And he says this mission is important. I have all the resources you could possibly need to complete it, and I am committed to supporting you in it. So whatever you want, just ask for it. In that context, it is understood the commander isn't offering him a vacation home or a large-screen TV if he just puts in a request. He's saying, I want you to listen to what I'm telling you. I want you to understand the mission, embrace the objectives, make this mission your mission (let my words abide in you), and then I want you to know that I'm there to support you, so ask for whatever help you need as you go.

When you understand this promise in this context, it serves as a powerful corrective for the cynical and flippant Christian. Some people have given up thinking there can be deep fruitful changes in their lives. Some of you are perhaps believing Christ can get you home to heaven in the end but there is stuff in your life you're just trying to manage - you have little faith in his power to change you. Let the words of Jesus live and find a home in your heart. Listen to what he says a little later in **John 15:16**. Jesus says if you belong to Him, it is because *he chose you*. Not just so you can be "saved" instead of "lost" but so you can bear fruit, *much* fruit to the glory of God! Jesus is talking about incredible hope for real change in real people. Believe him and pray boldly. *"Lord, I want to deepen my communion with Christ and bear the fruit for which you choose me.* Pray boldly for fruitful growth and change and pray believing in his promises!

*As you pray that way...*

#### **D. Abide in his love.**

In **verse 9**, Jesus says: *"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love."* So let those words dwell in you richly; Jesus says the measure of his love for you is the measure of God the

Father's love for him. This love is a gift of grace. It is not earned or deserved. It is simply received through faith in Christ. He died and rose again to pay for our sins and to offer us new life through faith in him. He loves you in Christ whether you like it or not. He loves you with a gracious and godly love, whether others like it or not. Abide in his love.

*There is one more thing –as you abide in his love.*

### **E. Keep his commandments**

**Verses 10-11:** *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.* Jesus doesn't begin his teaching on deeper communion with him by talking about obedience, but he doesn't end it without going there. If you deepen your communion with him, you will want to do what he says. And as you seek, in dependence upon him to do what he says, you will deepen your communion with him and, with that, your joy in him. Deeper communion and joyful obedience go together. He clearly says that is what he wants for us.

### **Conclusion**

I came across this story of a mother – years ago - who, the day before Christmas, was busy wrapping packages, and she asked her little boy to clean up a pair of shoes she wanted to wear because she had very little time and a lot to do. With the proud smile that only a 7-year-old can muster, he presented the shoes for inspection after he cleaned them up. His mother was so pleased she gave him a quarter. The next morning, as she slipped her shoes on to go to church, she noticed a lump in one shoe. She took it off and found a quarter wrapped in paper. Written on the paper in her child's scrawl were the words, *"I done it for love."* This is what Christ wants from us. This is what God wants from us. That out of our deep communion with Christ would come the fruit of a joyful obedience that pleases him.

**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. Knowing I desperately need him, I turn to him and trust in him as my Lord and Savior. Without him, I would be lifeless and fruitless, lost in my sins and my emptiness. I need grace: undeserved mercy and love. 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! Nourish and strengthen my life through my union with you. Pour life-giving grace into my entire life through your Holy Spirit. Teach and enable me to abide in Christ, treasure his words in my heart, pray in bold faith for fruitfulness, rely on and draw strength from your steadfast love, and keep your commandments. Deepen my communion with Christ in whose name I pray. Amen.

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1 D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Intervarsity Press, 1991, Page, 515

Carson's commentary on the gospel of John is excellent. In this section he says,

The phrase *in me* has prompted considerable speculation as to whether John is thinking of Jews who were once in God's vine but who have now been cast off, or apostate Christians. The former does not easily suit *in me*: it's hard to see in what sense Jews who never put their trust in Jesus were once *in him*, even if they once belonged to the vine of Israel before it was superseded by Jesus. But the latter view, that these dead branches are apostate Christians must confront the strong evidence within John that true disciples are preserved to the end (E. G. Notes on 6: 37 through 40; 10: 28). It is more of satisfactory to recognize that asking the *in me* language to settle such disputes is to push the vine imagery too far. The transparent purpose of the verse is to insist that there are no true Christians without some measure of fruit. Fruitfulness is an infallible mark of true Christianity; The alternative is deadwood and the exigencies of the vine metaphor make it necessary to speak of such wood as being connected to the vine. (Dead branches from some other tree lying around in the vineyard dirt could scarcely make the point.) These have no life in them; They've never borne fruit or else they would have been pruned not cut off. Because Jesus is the *true* vine in contradistinction to the vine of Israel that bore either no fruit or rotten fruit, it's impossible to think that the branch that bears *no* fruit can long be considered part of him: his own credentials as the true vine would be called into question as fundamentally as the credentials of Israel. *Cf.* Further on verse 6. If we must think of 'branches' with some real contact with Jesus, we need go no further than Judas Iscariot (*Cf* notes on 6:70-71 and 13:10 indeed there is a persistent strand of New Testament witness that depicts men and women with some degree of connection with

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Jesus or with the Christian Church who nevertheless by failing to display the grace of perseverance finally testified that the transforming life of Christ has never pulsated within them. (see Matthew 13:18 through 23; 24:12; John 8:31ff.; Hebrews 3:14 -19; 1 John 2:19; 2 John 9.)

The Greek displays a play on words that's hard to render in English the father cuts off (*airei*) every dead branch he trims (*kathairei*) every fruit-bearing branch; indeed the disciples listening to Jesus are already clean (*katharoi*, v.3) because of the word Jesus has spoken to them.