Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

In 1983, a theologian named F. F. Bruce published a book called ‘*Hard Sayings of Jesus*.’ The idea behind the book was to try and explain in simple language the words of Jesus that can be a little hard to understand at first. And so, for example, there are chapters on ‘you must eat my flesh and drink my blood,’ and ‘it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.’ And then, in 1991, the next book in the series, ‘*More Hard Sayings of the New Testament*,’ was published. It does the same thing as the first one but not just from the Gospels.

And these books recognize the fact that there are some hard to understand things in the Bible. John 15:6 is not in either book, but it could have been, for this verse has been the subject of a lot of debate and discussion. The passage we read earlier in Hebrews 6 is in this book and it is a kind of parallel passage to John 15:6, for they both raise a theological question that is worthy of our careful consideration. And I say ‘worthy’ not in the sense of intellectually satisfying but in terms of Gospel challenge and Gospel comfort.

But before we dive into this theological question, when we looked at vv1-5, we saw that Jesus is the vine and that Father is the vinedresser.

* We saw that the fruit is good works or obedience to the commands of God.
* We saw that branches are people who claim to have a connection with Jesus, but some do *not* produce fruit and are taken away, while others *do* produce fruit.
* And we saw that the secret of fruitfulness is abiding in Jesus, which is about an *inward* spiritual relationship with Jesus.

And in terms of the context of this passage, here is a question for you: **Who was Jesus speaking to when He said what He says in ch. 15?** The eleven, remaining disciples. Judas Iscariot had just left the room because He had rejected Jesus as the Messiah and was going to betray Him to the Jewish authorities. So this was Jesus’ last opportunity to warn the 11 disciples not to be like Judas. So let’s keep that in mind as we continue.

And we will begin with the **theological question** that John 15:6 raises so that we are well placed to see the **gospel challenge and the gospel comfort** that arise from this verse.

1. We begin then with **the Theological question**:
   1. In v6 we read, “*If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned*.”And v6kind ofbuilds on v2 where Jesus said that “*every branch in [Him] that does not bear fruit [the Father] takes away*.”
      1. If you have been here for this Gospel of John sermon series, you will know that we have repeatedly spoken about what are called the doctrines of grace or ‘Calvinism,’ which are summarized by the acronym T.U.L.I.P. And so, for example, when we worked our way through ch. 10:22-42, we took note of how that passage reveals Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace, and the Perseverance of the Saints – T.U.L.I.P.
      2. And the last of these, **the Perseverance of the Saints**, is the teaching of the Bible that God causes all those He has chosen to salvation in Christ to persevere in faith. Another way to put it is that true believers cannot lose their salvation. In its shortest form, it is **Once saved always saved**. And if you are a member of a Reformed Church, and it is the same with some other denominations as well, this is what you believe – once saved always saved. This is the doctrinal position of our confessions.
      3. So, **can you see the theological question that v6 raises?** v6 says that there are some branches who are in Christ but they do not abide or remain in Him, and so they are thrown away and they wither, and they are gathered, and thrown into the fire, and burned. So can you be in Christ at one time but end up in the fire of hell? Can lose your salvation? Could it be that once saved always saved is not true?
      4. So our theological question is: **Does v6 teach that believers can lose their salvation**?
   2. Well, there are some who say that the Bible cannot be trusted because you can get it to say whatever you want it to say. Have you heard that said before? But congregation, what is the Bible? It is the Word of God. So knowing God, as you do, do you think that He has a variety of opinions about a range of things that we are free to choose from? Of course not! He has *one* truth or *one* will that He has revealed in His word. So it would be offensive to Him if we read into His Word or took out of His Word what He never intended it to say. Hence, our duty in Bible study is to humbly approach the Bible to seek God’s truth. And there are some **very helpful principles of interpretation** that will help us with Bible study (link to article in bulletin – Ligonier – principles of bible interpretation). And we are going to look at two major ones today:
      1. The first of them is that **Context is King**. You have probably heard it said in relation to buying a house that three things are very important – location, location, location. Well, whatever verse or passage of the Bible you are studying is your text. And three things are important to help you understand your text – context, context, context. And the context is the words and the events and the people and the situation in and around your text.
         1. And we have already spoken about this in the sermon introduction. Jesus spoke the words of ch. 15 to the 11 remaining disciples just after Judas Iscariot had left to betray Him. So the most natural and obvious examples of branches that did not abide in Jesus and were taken away and branches that did abide in Jesus are Judas and the 11 disciples.
            1. And Judas and the 11 disciples are very typical of what we have seen throughout John, which is that whenever a group of people hear Jesus, some reject Him and some believe.
            2. And you may remember from last week that we referred to **the Parable of the Sower**, which reveals that while some people reject Jesus immediately, others appear to believe for a time but eventually reject Him for various reasons.
         2. So turn with me to **John 6:5*9ff*** where we see an example of this and some words of Jesus about Judas that are very relevant to our question**.** 
            1. Wesee in v59 that Jesus was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum. And vv60-66 reveal that there was a group of disciples much larger than just the twelve, for we read, “*When many of His disciples heard it, they said, "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?" 61 But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, said to them, "Do you take offense at this? 62 Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? 63 It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is of no avail. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. 64 But there are some of you who do not believe." (For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him.) 65 And he said, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father." After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with Him*.”

So we see that many of those who had been following Jesus for some time now rejected Him and left Him. In other words, they did not abide in or remain with Jesus.

And look at v64. There we have the perspective of Jesus. These disciples would have thought of themselves as believers this whole time, but Jesus said, “*There are some of you who do not believe*.” In other words, they only appeared to be believers.

* + - * 1. And as we continue with v67, the focus narrows in on the twelve: “*So Jesus said to the Twelve, "Do you want to go away as well?" Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God."*” So Peter was including Judas when he said, “*we have believed*”, because at that time Judas appeared to be a genuine disciple of Jesus.
        2. But look what Jesus said next: “*Jesus answered them, "Did I not choose you, the Twelve? And yet one of you is a devil." 71 He spoke of Judas the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the Twelve, was going to betray Him*.” So even though at this time it looked to the other 11 disciples that Judas was one of them, and even though Judas Himself would have claimed to be a disciple of Jesus at that time, in actual fact, he was “a devil.” He was not a genuine believer.
        3. Now, flick ahead to **John 13:10-11**. Jesus was washing the feet of all twelve disciples and Peter asked Him for a full bath. But look at what Jesus said about Judas in His reply: “*"The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean, but not every one of you." For he knew who was to betray him; that was why he said, "Not all of you are clean*."”So the 11 disciples were clean but Judas was not. And in **v17**, Jesus continued, “*If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them. I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen*.” And He then went on to tell the disciples that Judas would betray Him before telling Judas to go and do what he was going to do.
        4. So, come back to **our text in ch. 15** where these terms are repeated: In v3, Jesus calls the 11 remaining disciples “clean,” and in v16, He speaks about the 11 as those He “chose” that they should bear fruit.
        5. And later on in **ch. 17**, Jesus says that He guarded the eleven so that not one of them was lost and calls Judas “*the one doomed to destruction*.”
      1. Do you see then how helpful context is with Bible study? The context helps us to see that Judas never *truly* abided in Christ; he was always an unclean, un-chosen, devil, who was doomed to destruction; he was only ever one who **outwardly appeared** to be a disciple of Jesus. So just the context is already revealing that this verse is not about genuine believers but about those who only appear to be genuine believers.
    1. But there are other principles of Bible interpretation that help us also. One is that **we are to interpret Scripture according to Scripture**. Because the Bible is God’s Word; His revelation of truth, He has designed it so that the average person can understand it without needing an interpreter. And there are two very practical and logical rules for how Scripture interprets Scripture: They are to let what is implicit be interpreted by what is explicit and let what is obscure be interpreted by what is plain. Let me explain these principles:
       1. First, **let what is implicit be interpreted by what is explicit**.
          1. If we just looked at the example of **Abraham and Jacob and David and Solomon**, how many wives might a man have? Many. That would be an implication of our study of A, J, D, and S. But what do we see in those parts of the Bible that explicitly teach about marriage? One wife/husband.
          2. Another example is **John 3:16**. “*For God so loved … that whoever believes*…” So an implication of John 3:16 is that everyone can believe in Jesus, which is why many today reject the doctrine of election. But God consistently and explicitly, even elsewhere in John’s Gospel, states that we are spiritually dead and unable to come to Jesus unless the Father draws us to Him.
          3. So we must let what is implicit be interpreted by what is explicit. And **the question we are considering today is an implication of John 15:6**. John 15 is a call to abide in Christ and to bear the fruit of obedience; it was not written as a comprehensive theology of salvation. So if there are places in the Bible that are explicit about whether or not a believer can lose his or her salvation, they interpret John 15:6, not the other way around. And we will consider some explicit passages shortly.
       2. But the second rule for Scripture interpreting Scripture is that we must **let what is obscure be interpreted by what is plain**.
          1. Boys and girls, if there are three of you brothers and sisters in your family and the youngest goes to bed at 7:30 and the middle one at 8 and the oldest one at 8:30, every night, then the bedtime rule in your house is very plain. But if Mum and Dad are going out for the night and they tell the babysitter that you all need to go to bed between 7:30 and 8:30, hmmm, that is obscure, that is vague, that is open to interpretation. So if you all went to bed at 8:30, which is probably what all children would do in that situation, right? ☺ you know that your parents would not be happy when they found out. They would be disappointed that you went for the obscure when you knew full well that what they meant was Y-7:30, M-8, and O-8:30. The plain should interpret the obscure, not the other way around.
          2. Well, John 15:6 fits into the category of the obscure. **John 15 is an allegory or a word picture**. And the allegories or parables in the Bible usually have one, main point. It is typically dangerous to take one part of a word picture and build a theology out of it. The word picture of the vine was not given to us as a theology of how salvation works; it was given to encourage believers to persevere in faith and to obey God. So if we want to know about how salvation works, look for the passages of Scripture that speak plainly about how salvation works *to help us with John 15:6*, not the other way around.
       3. And these two rules help us also with the passage we read earlier in **Heb. 6**. We won’t read it again but you will recall that its basic message is that it is impossible to restore to repentance those who have walked away from, and then it gives that list of things that sure sound like the experience of genuine life in Christ.
          1. And we simply don’t have time today to look at this passage in detail. But again, the context is helpful because the basic message of Hebrews is the same as John 15:6 – believer, you must persevere in faith, you must keep focusing on Jesus, and you must obey God’s commands.
          2. And a repeated point of Hebrews is one we see elsewhere in the NT, which is that among the nation of Israel there were unbelieving Jews who came under God’s judgment. And so, there can be unbelievers among those who claim to be believers. And their judgment will be worse than for OT unbelievers because they know who Jesus is and what He came to do, and they have experienced life in the church of Christ.
          3. But again, Hebrews 6 was not given as a theology of how salvation works. It also falls into the category of the obscure or the implicit when it comes to the question of whether a genuine believer can lose his or her salvation.
       4. So what we must do now is to look to the explicit and plain passages in the Bible that help us with our question:
          1. Please turn to **John 10:28-29**: Jesus is talking about His sheep who are all the people that the Father has given to Him, in other words, the elect ones. He says, “*I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand*.” Now those words are explicit and plain! Those words powerfully help us to see that true believers cannot lose their salvation.
          2. And turn back a few pages to **John 6:39**: Jesus said, “*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*.” Not one of those the Father has given to the Son will be lost!
          3. And turn next to **Romans 8:28-39** (p. 944),

“*And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.*” To lose your salvation is not good! This promise would be meaningless if genuine believers could lose their salvation.

*“For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.”* You would expect glorified to be in the future tense – He will one day glorify. It is in the past tense in Greek because it is certain!

vv38-39“*[Nothing] will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus*.” If a genuine believer can lose his or her salvation then there is something that can separate them from the love of God in Christ Jesus – themselves and their decision to reject Christ!

* + - * 1. And finally, turn also to **1 Peter 1:3-5** (p. 1014): “*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, He has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is (look at these next words!) imperishable, undefiled, and unfading* (they are not temporary words, they are permanent words!)*, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time*.” God’s power is not much if it cannot guard the faith of His chosen ones!
        2. All of these passages are about how salvation works. And they are plain and explicit that true believers cannot lose their salvation!

1. So now, brothers and sisters, young people, and boys and girls, we are ready to end with just a few words about the Gospel ***Challenge*** and the Gospel ***Comfort*** that flow out of everything we have seen in relation to this theological question.
   1. First of all, the Gospel Challenge:
      1. **The warning of John 15:6 is do not be like** **Judas**. Judas walked and talked with Jesus for around three years. He saw Jesus perform His miracles and he heard all Jesus’ sermons. But He rejected Jesus as His Saviour and Lord.
      2. And heed the warning of **Hebrews 6**. If you have professed faith and have been baptized and attended the Lord’s Supper and experienced Christian fellowship, but you one day reject Jesus, it will be worse for you than it was for the Israelites who passed through the Red Sea and ate Manna and drank water from the rock but who perished in unbelief.
      3. Throughout the history of the church there have been those in the pew and in the pulpit who have walked away from Jesus. Don’t be like them, my friends. **Article 5.12 of the Canons of Dort** says that the certainty of perseverance is “so far from making true believers proud and complacent, is rather the true root of humility, childlike reverence, genuine godliness, endurance in every struggle, fervent prayers, constancy in suffering and in the confession of the truth, and lasting joy in God. Further, the consideration of this benefit is for them an incentive to the serious and constant practice of gratitude and good works.”
      4. Are you striving for and pursuing the serious and constant practice of gratitude and good works? We have seen that it is possible for a person to do every church activity and not be a true believer. But everything we have seen also suggests that it is not a good sign when someone who professes to be a believer does the bare minimum of church activities. By God’s design, abiding in Christ requires a solid diet of public worship, regular Bible study, fellowship, and service. And this is because Christ is worth it and we need it!
   2. But secondly and lastly, the Gospel Comfort:
      1. Because God is sovereign and unchanging, all He has chosen to salvation in Christ, He has given to Christ who died for their sins, and He will preserve them in faith to the end. True believers cannot lose their salvation.
      2. **It is why Paul could pray this about the Philippians:** “*And I am sure of this, that He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ* (Phil. 1:6).”
      3. And yes, you have a duty to abide in Christ. You must be an actively participating member of a church and you must read the Bible and pray, and you must do good works. That is why **Philippians 2:12** says, “*Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling*. “ But listen to how that verse continues: “*for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure*.” Your salvation is ultimately not about you and your work but God who is at work in you!
      4. So when you are weak and feeling guilty and full of doubt, look to Christ; look to His finished work on the cross! Believer, God wants you to be certain that you are one of His chosen children. That is why He has given you this plain and explicit verse in **1 John 5:13**: “*I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life*.”

Isn’t God wonderful? Praise God for His amazing grace and His wonderful word! And all God’s people said, Amen!