Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

Ch’s 13-17 of John’s Gospel are usually referred to as the ‘Upper Room discourse.’ Jesus was with the disciples in an upstairs room in Jerusalem where He enjoyed the Last Supper with them, washed their feet, and spoke to them to try and prepare them for what was about to happen. And then later that same night He was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane.

There are a variety of opinions, though, about when it was that Jesus and the disciples left that room and headed out through the city to the Garden. For if you look at the last verse of ch. 14, you will see that Jesus says, “*Rise, let us go from here*.” But in ch. 15 He continues to talk, and in ch. 16, and then He prays in ch. 17. And if you turn over to ch. 18, it begins with: “*When Jesus had spoken these words, He went out with His disciples across the Kidron Valley, where there was a garden, which He and His disciples entered*.”

So there are some Bible critics who call this **the ‘double leaving’ of John’s Gospel**. They say that Jesus and the disciples leaving the Upper Room twice is a mistake in the Gospel.

But I want you to see that there are at least two very reasonable explanations for this:

1. The first is that what is written in ch’s 15-17 takes just under 10 minutes to read. And boys and girls, if you are visiting another family and Mum or Dad says, ‘I think it might be time to leave, honey,’ that usually means it will be anything from 10-20 minutes before you have tidied up, found your lost socks, hugged everyone, said, “Thank you, for having us,” and actually walked out the door! Right? So a perfectly reasonable explanation for the apparent ‘double-leaving’ is just that Jesus said what we read in ch’s 15-17 *as He and the disciples prepared to leave the Upper Room*.
2. But another explanation is that the “*let us go from here*” of ch. 14 refers to when they left the Upper Room and the “*He went out with His disciples across the Kidron Valley*” of ch.18 refers to them exiting the City of Jerusalem. It would have taken time for them to get from wherever the Upper room was to one of the city gates. So Jesus may well have spoken the words of ch’s 15-17 as they walked through Jerusalem.

And why I have even brought this matter to your attention is **the vine imagery** that Jesus uses in our text. You see, we know from Jewish historians of this time that at the entrance to the Holy Place of the temple, there was a linen curtain. And above the curtain there was a gigantic grapevine of pure gold, representing Israel. Wealthy citizens would bring gifts to add to the vine, and these would be added by metalworkers to the ever-growing vine. It is recorded that some of the grape clusters of that vine were the height of a man! So you can imagine that as Jesus walked through the city for the last time as a free man that the temple and the vine would have provided the perfect backdrop for what He said in ch. 15.

Now, I recognize that all of this is speculation. W*here Jesus was exactly sitting or standing when He spoke these words* is not super critical. If it was, John would have made that crystal clear. What is super critical is *what Jesus said*. But I thought it would be helpful to see that there are perfectly reasonable explanations for what some people wrongly say is a mistake in the Bible. So let’s turn our attention to what Jesus said here as we see that **the fruitful life utterly depends on Christ**. That is our sermon theme today (repeat theme). And to understand what this means, we have to unpack the imagery that Jesus uses in these verses. So we will simply consider the **vine**, the **vinedresser**, the **branches**, and the **secret of fruitfulness**.

1. And we begin with the **Vine**.
   1. Now, because Jesus spoke these words, when He says, “*I am the true vine*,” He is plainly speaking about Himself. This is the last of the seven great *I am* declarations of Jesus in John’s Gospel. We have already heard Him say, I am the bread of life, the light, the door, the shepherd, the resurrection, and the way, the truth, and the life. And each of these declarations has been wonderfully revealing. So what did Jesus reveal about Himself when He said, “I am the true vine”? Well, an important word in this declaration is the word “**true**.”
      1. Earlier in the service, we read portions of **Psalm 80** and **Isaiah 5**. And those passages are among several Old Testament (OT) passages that explain that the people of Israel were God’s OT vine, which He ‘planted’ in the Promised Land. **Isaiah 5:7** says, “*For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting*.” But in all the passages that speak about Israel as God’s vine, the people are being told off by the Lord because they were unfruitful and wicked. Isaiah 5:7 again, God “*looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, an outcry*!” And so, in every one of those passages, God promised the judgment of exile.
      2. So by calling Himself the *true* vine, Jesus is revealing Himself to be the true Israel.
         1. You see, when the nation of Israel was formed, God called on the people to be a holy nation. If the people lived holy lives, other nations would be drawn to worship the Lord. And there were many faithful Israelites in OT times. But if you read through the prophets, are they usually celebrating Israel’s holiness or condemning her idolatry, immorality, and injustice? It’s the later, isn’t it. So clearly, Israel as a nation could not be how God would save the nations of the world, because she was an unfruitful, false vine.
         2. Nevertheless, many aspects of Israel, such as her prophets, priests, and kings, her sacrifices and ceremonies, and the promises of a Messiah, all pointed forward to a salvation that would come out of Israel. And that salvation had now come in the person and work of Jesus; He came to be the fulfillment of everything that Israel was supposed to be; He came to be the true vine.
         3. So from this time forward, the true Israel would not be those born to Jewish parents but those united to Jesus by faith alone, whether they be Jew or Gentile. This is what Jesus meant when He said, “I am the true vine.”
2. And that brings us, secondly, to the **Vinedresser**.
   1. And this will surely be our shortest sermon point ever because there is nothing for us to work out here; Jesus very plainly tells us that the “**Father is the vinedresser**.” So we have a beautiful picture here of the unity between the Father who looks after vine and the Son who is the vine.
3. So let us move straight on to the third part of this image, which is the **branches**.
   1. Verse 2 talks about fruitless branches that are taken away and fruitful branches that are pruned in order to bear more fruit. And what all that is about we will consider next time, but what is immediately plain is that **a branch is a person who claims a connection with the Vine – Lord Jesus**. And yet, it is also clear that among this group there are false branches and true branches.
      1. And an example of false branches is many of the Jews of Jesus’ day. As circumcised Jews, they were outwardly a part of God’s covenant people – the OT vine. And they would have claimed to be waiting for Messiah. And yet, in less than 24 hours they would be crying out for Jesus to be crucified, revealing that they were not true branches.
      2. Another example is Judas Iscariot, who for many months had been among those recognized as a disciple of Jesus. And Judas himself would have claimed to be a disciple of Jesus that whole time. But ch. 13 tells us that just a few minutes before Jesus said these words in ch. 15, Judas had decided to betray Jesus, revealing himself to not be a true branch.
      3. Do you boys and girls remember **the parable of the Sower**? Jesus told of a Sower who scattered his seed, which is a picture of the preaching of the gospel. Some seed fell on the path and was trampled under foot and some seed was devoured by the birds of the air. But some seeds sprouted and started growing only to whither because they had no moisture or because they were choked by the thorns. And Jesus explained that there are some people who receive the word with joy and believe for a while but they give it up after a time of testing, and others “*are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life,* and their fruit does not mature.” So there will be people in churches who have professed faith who one day reject Jesus and reveal themselves to not be true branches. In other words, there are hypocrites in churches; there are those who appear to be true branches but are not.
      4. And according to vv2&5 of our text, the difference between a true branch and a false branch is that a true branch “*bears fruit.*”
      5. Now, we won’t have said all that needs to be said about true branches until we complete our next point, which is the secret of fruitfulness. So keep that in mind as we continue. But we simply cannot minimize or skip over the plain implications of what Jesus says here, which is that those who are truly connected to Him will produce fruit, which means do good works or obey God’s commands or live holy lives.
         1. In the same way that we expect a biological child to look like and talk like and behave like his or her parents, so children of a *holy* God who have the *Holy* Spirit living within them will pursue *holy* living.
         2. **Ephesians 2** is the chapter that celebrates salvation by grace and not as a result of works. And we all say, praise God and Amen to that! But that section ends with these words: “*For we are [God’s] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works … that we should walk in them*.” We were saved *in order to do good works*.
         3. A central point of these chapters is that the work of Jesus will continue in His disciples and with all who are His followers. And Jesus’ chief work was to do or obey His Father’s will. That is why Jesus said, in **14:15**, “*If you love me, you will keep my commandments*.” Brothers and Sisters, young people and boys and girls, you must love God’s commandments and be eager to obey them. Holy living must be something you strive to do.
         4. Shortly we will gather around **the Lord’s Supper table**. What a blessing it is that we can remember and believe that all our sins are forgiven in Christ. But last week when we read the preparatory form, we were urged to examine our consciences “to be sure that we resolve to live in faith and obedience before our Lord.” Have you taken time to do that? Are you coming to the table today convinced that you are resolved to live in faith and obedience before your Lord? Or could it be that you have not given this a moment’s thought during the week and you will just walk up out of habit or custom, perhaps?
         5. Just like any earthly vinedresser then, God desires fruit from the branches on His vine. Do you *love* God’s law and do you *pursue* obedience and good works?
4. Well, as I said a moment ago, there is more that needs to be said about true branches, which is why we turn, fourthly and lastly, to **The Secret of Fruitfulness**.
   1. According to my research, it takes at least three years for a vine to produce useful fruit. In fact, for the first two years, the vinedresser will trim those places on the branch that might have produced fruit so that in the third year you get really good fruit. And even a mature vine benefits from a serious prune every now and then, which can mean little or no fruit for a season or two, but big, juicy fruit, eventually. And I am sure I don’t need to tell you that there can be times in a believer’s life when there seems to be little or no fruit.
      1. Even someone as godly as **the Apostle Paul** spoke about this in Romans 7 where he lamented that what he wanted to do he did not do and what he did was not what he wanted to do. Do you know what Paul was describing? So often it seems much easier to disobey God and not keep His commandments than it is to obey Him.
      2. But do you remember **how Paul ended Romans 7**? He cried out: “*Wretched man that I am. Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*” And then he began ch. 8 with these words, “*There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*.” So Paul’s comfort was not in his own obedience but the fact that he was in Christ.
      3. And that is the main emphasis of our text also. While we have been right to speak about the need for every believer to pursue holiness, the emphasis in our text is **abiding in Christ**. The secret to fruitfulness is being connected to or abiding in Christ. True branches are those who love and serve Christ; whose lives are utterly dependant on Christ; who have an interior spiritual life with Jesus.
         1. Look at v3 with me: What is it that made the disciples clean? Was it them producing fruit? No. It was the word that Jesus spoke to them.
         2. Look at v4: Just as a branch cannot produce fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, so we cannot obey God *unless we abide in Jesus*.
         3. And look at v5: Who is it that bears much fruit? The one who *abides in Jesus*. In fact, “*Apart from [Jesus] [we] can do nothing*.” So fruit comes as a *result* of abiding in Christ, not the other way around.
      4. So the secret to fruitfulness is abiding in Jesus. The true branches of Christ abide in Him by faith and seek to do His will, and He nourishes them by the Spirit to pray that His will be done.
         1. So in terms of the Lord’s Supper, the forms we read to prepare us for coming to the table remind us that

*the Supper is not for those who are free of sin. On the contrary, we come as guilty sinners. We confess that we are dependent for pardon on the sacrifice of Christ and base our hope for eternal life on His perfect obedience and righteousness.*

*So do not allow the weakness of your faith or your failures in the Christian life to keep you from this table, for it is given to us because of our weakness and because of our failures – in order to increase our faith by feeding us with the body and blood of Christ.*

So if we have repented of our sins and we trust in Christ alone, then coming to the table is how we abide in Christ.

* + - 1. And to those of you who look at yourself and see little or no fruit at present, remember that your salvation is about Jesus’ finished work on the cross. And His promise to you is that there will be fruit in due time if you keep seeking Him through prayer and preaching and Bible study, which is how we abide in Christ.

May the Spirit of Christ help us to abide in Christ and may we be those who bear much fruit. Amen.