

John: Friends

John 15:1–16:4

By [Dr. Derek Thomas](#)

April 27, 2003

Let's pray together.

Our Father in heaven, we pray now for the work of Your Spirit to come and illuminate the words of Scripture that words that are perhaps so familiar to us might come to life. Holy Spirit, pour light upon these words which you caused to be inspired and write them upon our hearts for Jesus' sake, Amen.

Turn with me now to the gospel of John chapter 15. This is the word of God.

I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit. You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned. If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples. Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love. 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. These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full. This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends. You are My friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you. You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and that your fruit would remain, so that whatever you ask of the Father in My name He may give

to you. "This I command you, that you love one another. If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also. "But all these things they will do to you for My name's sake, because they do not know the One who sent Me. If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin. He who hates Me hates My Father also. If I had not done among them the works which no one else did, they would not have sin; but now they have both seen and hated Me and My Father as well. But they have done this to fulfill the word that is written in their Law, ' THEY HATED ME WITHOUT A CAUSE.' When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, that is the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify about Me, and you will testify also, because you have been with Me from the beginning. These things I have spoken to you so that you may be kept from stumbling. They will make you outcasts from the synagogue, but an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God. These things they will do because they have not known the Father or Me. But these things I have spoken to you, so that when their hour comes, you may remember that I told you of them. These things I did not say to you at the beginning, because I was with you.

May God bless to us the reading of His holy and inerrant Word.

I've been contemplating much this week, so much in particular in the last twenty-four hours or so that I've lost my mind in thinking that I could preach the whole of John 15 in one sermon. It was initially meant to be two sermons; even that would be insufficient, so let me just say at the very outset that we are just going to fly across the surface of John 15 this evening. It is, perhaps, if you press me, and it depends on which day of the week it is, but if you press me, this is, perhaps, my favorite chapter in all of the Scriptures. And I suspect, it is for you too. Perhaps, because it speaks to issues and concerns that lie close to our very hearts.

The theme of this chapter is one of the great doctrines of Scripture, namely, by faith our union and communion with Jesus Christ. Sinclair Ferguson can say that union with Christ is the foundation of all our spiritual experience and all our spiritual blessings. And I'm sure that he's right. Our union with Christ is the foundation of all of our spiritual blessings. Jesus is employing here a figure of speech, an allegory if you wish, of the vine and branches and the vinedresser. Jesus is the vine, His people are the branches, His Father—our Father in heaven—is the vinedresser. And by using that figure of speech, that allegory if you wish, He wants to underline our closeness to Jesus—branches to the vine, Jesus'

closeness to us—our union with Jesus Christ. It was a theme that the apostle Paul would take to heart using that expression “in Christ” over and over 160 times in the course of his epistles.

I want us to see three particular things. First of all, the picture that Jesus uses or employs of this union; secondly, the progress which takes place in this union; and in the third place, the purpose of this union.

I. Jesus is the vine and we are the branches

Let's begin with the picture that Jesus employs of this union we enjoy with Jesus Christ. He's using this horticultural metaphor that you and I, by faith, are branches of the one true vine. In the history of the interpretation of John 15, there have been many attempts, perhaps, to go beyond the figure that Jesus intends here.

So let's ask ourselves, “What does He mean when He says that He is the vine and we are the branches?” We need to ask that question. We're Presbyterians; we know nothing about vines and grapes. What does Jesus mean when He says He is the vine and we are the branches? Of course, this is one of the great “I am” sayings, one of the seven sayings of Jesus in which He begins with those words, “*egw eimi*”—“I am.” And no doubt alluding to the great name of God in the Old Testament given in Exodus 3 and expounded in Exodus, chapter 6. It is an assertion of Jesus' deity. *He is* the great “I am”; He is the only God there is.

But in particular here, He is employing this horticultural metaphor. The vine, in the Old Testament, was a symbol for the people of God. It was employed in several important passages in the Old Testament, not least in Psalm 80 and Isaiah 5, and in Ezekiel 19. The people of God are regarded as the vine. That's why Jesus says, “I am the *true* vine,” because the people of God under the old covenant had proved to be a faithless vine. Jesus is the true vine, and it is clear in the context here of John chapter 15, that what Jesus wants to underline is the closeness, the intimacy that He and we enjoy in our relationship with Jesus Christ. John Owen, the Puritan, once said that “There were two great pastoral problems to deal with. One is convincing non-Christians that they are sinners, and the other is convincing true believers that they are no longer under the dominion of sin, but that they are in union and fellowship and communion with Jesus Christ.”

Jesus employs here, in verse 14 and again in verse 15, a truly mind-expanding picture that we are called not servants but friends. Jesus is our friend. So close, so intimate is our relationship with Jesus by faith, that He is our friend. “What a *friend* we have in Jesus.” I'm reminded of those final words of Jonathan Edwards when he lay dying. After greeting everyone present, you remember what he said? “Now, where *is* my true and faithful friend, Jesus Christ?” What glorious

words of assurance to depart from this life and enter into the life which is to come. "Where *is* my true and faithful friend, Jesus Christ?"

I was reminded as I was preparing this. A few weeks ago in England I met again a friend of mine—a red-headed Irishman from County Claire who told me that he had been reading Ligon's sermons on the web. And his question to me was, "How well do you know Ligon Duncan?" And I said without a pause, "He is one of my closest friends." And the look of awe on this man's face! All of that pales into insignificance, Ligon, at the knowledge that Jesus is our friend—our best friend—to whom we go at a moment's notice with all of our cares and woes and concerns. What a friend we have in Jesus.

But our Lord Jesus here in John 15 in implying this metaphor of the vine and the branches and the connection of the branches to the vine, a connection that He illustrates by saying that we are His friends. The burden of the chapter is to see the progress of this union with Christ. The whole passage assumes this reality of this union. You remember He has already said to Peter, Peter having refused the foot washing; "You are already clean." He repeats it here in verse 3. "You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you."

What is at stake is not the bringing in to union, but the growth of this union; the fruition of this union. And two things are emphasized here. One which God does, and the other which we are to do. The thing which God does is that He prunes. He is the vinedresser who comes with shears in hand and prunes the vine. He says in verse 2, "Every branch in Me which does not bear fruit, He takes away. He cuts it off, removing something that is dead and unwanted. Our Father in heaven has pruning shears in His hand and He cuts back those shrubs. Maybe some of you have just done it recently. There was no light coming into the kitchen. Something that you'd planted outside the kitchen window had grown to monstrous proportions, and you'd had to cut it back. It's staggering the extent to which you can cut something back.

Now, there are two issues here. One is the removal of dead wood that's cut off entirely. Look at verse 6. These verbs in verse 6 should make you tremble. "If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them and cast them into the fire and they are burned." My friend, doesn't that verse make you tremble a little? That the consequence of being dead wood, the consequence of being a nominal Christian only that isn't rooted in the vine itself, that isn't drawing life and energy and vitality from the vine, is that all that awaits you is a bonfire. It's like the Christmas tree. Once Christmas is gone the tree that once had baubles and lights and a little fairy on the top, and three or four days after Christmas, it's lying in a heap at the end of the driveway for the refuse truck to come by and take it away and destroy it. Listen, my friend, listen to the words of Jesus, that if you are not in union and communion with Jesus, our Father in heaven will come with a pruning shears in His hand, and He will take you away to be burned on a bonfire.

But Jesus is speaking primarily here to His disciples because there is another thing that the pruning shears are used for--living wood. In order for living wood to produce fruit, in order for a vine--and you understand I speak beyond my knowledge here--in order for a vine to produce a good crop of grapes, it *has* to be pruned. I don't know whether you've ever seen a vineyard in winter when it has been cut right back to what almost looks like dead wood, and then to see those shoots beginning to grow because it's on those new shoots that fruit is going to be born. Listen to some words of Amy Carmichael when she prays the prayer "Rid me, good Lord, of every diverting thing." This is what she wrote: "What prodigal waste it appears to be to see scattered on the floor the bright green leaves and the bare stem blessing in a hundred places from the sharp steel, but with a tried and trusted husbandman, there is not a random stroke in it all--nothing cut away which it would not have been loss to keep and gain to lose." And that's exactly what Jesus is saying here. He prunes in order that it will be even more fruitful.

Do you note that He speaks here in the context in beginning at verse 18 and the verses that immediately follow? He talks here in the context of warning the disciples of impending persecution. In those three verses, 18, 19, and 20, He uses the word *hatred* three times and *persecution* twice. He's warning of the nature and form that this pruning may well come to them--in the form of persecution. In the opening verses of chapter 16, when He tells them why He's saying these things, in order that they might know in advance and not be caught off guard, He even speaks of their impending death, and I wonder if John, the writer of this gospel, was thinking as he recorded these words from his memory, of the death of James of Zebedee, his brother recorded for us in Acts, chapter 12. Who knows, my friends, what form those pruning shears will work in our lives?

I hope I'm not amiss in saying this. I was speaking to the Kipps on Friday afternoon across the road at Baptist Hospital amidst all of the trauma, the horrendous providence that came into their lives in the course of one week, unknown at this time last week, and saying to them because these words have been on my mind all week, saying to them, "I can't but believe that God has something enormously fruitful for Joshua. That the reason why the pruning shears have come so sharply into this young man's life is that God wants him to do something of extraordinary fruitfulness in His kingdom, and that, in the providence and wisdom of God, this was the way to bring that about." There is the pruning shears; that's what God does.

And maybe tonight, that's where you are, feeling the pinch of those pruning shears as it cuts into your flesh. And as you perhaps wince with pain, but see it, my dear Christian friend, see it as the hand of God that desires of you that you be even more fruitful.

There is that which God does, but there is that also in the progress of this union which we are to do. And Jesus employs here four or five times this word *abide*, or in some of your translations, *remain* in Me. Abide in Me. And again, we need to be careful here, because in the history of the interpretation of John 15, that little word *abide* has been employed so that it speaks of a spiritual experience that only *some* attain to--an experience of holiness and blessing and sanctification that is beyond the warfare and spiritual struggle where most of us are. And I have to say that that seems to be to me altogether misguided, because what Jesus is saying here is that we are *never*, in this world, *beyond* the struggle. We are always, as it were in Romans 7, "the good that we would, we do not, and the evil that we would not, that we find we do."

So what does Jesus mean when He says, "Abide in Me?" Let me quote J.C.Ryle, "Abide in Me, cling to Me, stick fast to Me, live the life of close and intimate communion with Me, get nearer and nearer to Me, roll every burden on Me, cast your whole weight on Me, never let go your hold on Me for a moment." But Jesus actually tells us what He means, because in verse 9, He tells us, "Abide in Me" means "Abide in My love." Never stray from the realization that Jesus loves you. I wish you all could have heard Ed's words just an hour ago. They were some of the most moving that I've ever heard. Abide in My love. "Oh, the deep, deep love of Jesus, vast unmeasured, boundless, free, rolling as a mighty ocean in its fullness over me. Underneath me, all around me, is the current of Thy love, leading onward, leading homeward, to my glorious rest above." "I found a friend, O such a friend, He loved me ere I knew Him. He drew me with the cords of love and thus He bound me to Him. And round my heart still closely twined, those ties that naught can sever, for I am His and He is mine, forever and forever." Abide in that love. "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

And then again in verse 7, abide in Jesus' words. "if you abide in Me, and My words abide in you." What does it mean to abide in Jesus? It means to abide in the word of Jesus. "Jesus, what do you mean when you say, 'Abide in Me?'" Answer. "Open your Bibles and start reading. Hide that word in your hearts, that you might not sin against Me."

There's an interesting thing that happens here and deserves much fuller explanation than I have time to deal with, but at the end of chapter 15, He is warning His disciples of the hatred and opposition of the world. Opposition, let it be said, not to Jesus saying, "I am the Savior," but opposition to Jesus saying, "I am the only Savior." It was opposition that was focused on the exclusivity of Jesus' proclamation of saviorhood that sparked the opposition and hatred and persecution of the world. Did any of you see John MacArthur on *Larry King Live* on CNN last week? He was marvelous. Sitting next to him was one of these experts in eastern spiritualism that must have been the most obnoxious person you've ever heard. And every time John MacArthur would defend the exclusivity of Jesus, this man would interrupt him--rudely, let it be said. He would interrupt

him and say, "You shut down the debate. There is no debating with you, John." And that's what gets the ire of the world.

But you notice how Jesus deals with the ire of the world? He says, in verse 25, "That the word may be fulfilled that is written in their law: they hated Me without a cause." What does it mean to abide in Jesus? It means to do what Jesus is doing here, quoting Scripture. When the world is arrayed against Him, what does He do? Psalm 69 comes into His head, and He quotes it, just as He had done in those encounters with the devil at the beginning of His ministry, quoting from Deuteronomy 6 and 8. Abide in Jesus' love and abide in Jesus' words. One of the less than orthodox, it has to be said, theologians of the 20th century, I believe in New York, was once asked the question, "What was the most profound thought that he had ever had?" And his answer, on this occasion a good one, "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so." Abide in Jesus' love, abide in Jesus' words.

II. The product of union with Jesus.

What is the product of this union with Jesus? First, in verses 2, and 4, and 5, "That you bear fruit." And notice in verse 5, "That you bear *much* fruit," *polycarpas*. From this text Polycarp the early Church father was named, meaning much fruit. And let me ask you, dear Christian, are you satisfied with just a little fruit? Are you satisfied with the attainment that you have made, the progress in your union and communion with Jesus? Because Jesus wants from you not just little fruit, but He wants much fruit. Secondly, in verse 10 and the verses that follow, a love for believers modeled on Jesus' love for His people and the Father's love for Jesus. Thirdly, in verse 7 and again in verse 16, if you abide in the love of Jesus, if you abide in the word of Jesus, answered prayer. Jesus says, "You ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you." So, you want a BMW? Oh, let's get serious here. You want a BMW. Is that what Jesus means? You ask for a BMW and so long as you're abiding in Jesus and His Word abiding in you - there's one shaking his head—I've got one. Listen to John Calvin for a moment. "When He promises to grant whatever we wish, He does not permit an undisciplined asking." Oh, my friends, there's three hours of theology in that. "He does not permit an undisciplined asking." Do you see what He is saying? If you are truly in love with Jesus, and if His Word is dwelling in your hearts, the last thing that would be on your mind is a BMW. When His Word dwells in your heart, and when you see the beauty of Jesus' face, there will be more important things and lasting things and kingdom issues on your mind and in your heart. And when you ask *those* things, they will be granted to you.

Joy, joy, in verse 11, "These things I have spoken to you that *My* joy may be in you." Ask yourself tonight, "What kind of joy was there in Jesus' heart?" I can't even begin to imagine the unmitigated joy in Jesus' heart. Actually, it's not as simple as that, because does John mean here, joy in the subjective or joy in the

objective, and maybe he means both? Maybe he means both because when you abide in Jesus, you bring joy in His heart. That *My* joy may be in you. Maybe that's what John means. Maybe He means both. Christ's joy restored to us, Christ's joy brought to Him as we abide in Him.

A bold and effective witness. Look at verses 26 and 27. "When the Helper comes, whom I will send you from the Father, that is the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will bear witness of Me." And then in verse 27, "And you will bear witness also." When the Holy Spirit comes, He will bear witness of Me, but you also will bear witness of Me. When you abide in Jesus and His word abides in you, you will bear witness to Him. And the question, I think, that we have to ask ourselves tonight is, "Are we bearing witness to Jesus?" In a hostile world, are we bearing witness to Jesus? It may be too trite to ask the question, "When did you last bring someone to Christ?" Maybe that is too trite a question to ask, but I don't think it's too trite to ask the question, "When did you last *try*?"

Suffering and persecution. When you abide, stick close to a crucified Jesus, don't be surprised if you get crucified in the process. God has so ordered the Church from the very beginning that death is the way to life, and the cross the way to victory.

And finally, verse 8. "By this My Father is glorified." When you abide in Jesus' word, His word abides in you. You bring glory to God. May God so grant it and enable it in our lives. Let's pray together.

Our Father in heaven, we thank You for this magnificent word that is so vast the sea seems to have no bottom to it. We pray, Lord, that you would now write it upon our hearts and bless it to us, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

A Guide to the Evening Service

The Themes of the Service

Tonight's passage in the Gospel of John continues in the Upper Room. It focuses on two very special ideas: that every believer is united to Christ and that Jesus calls the disciples His "friends"! Imagine it: the Lord of Glory, who in chapter 14 had mentioned in passing that "he was in the Father and that the Father was in him" – something which gave to the doctrine of *perichoresis* as we mentioned last week – tells the disciples that they are His *friends*! What a *friend* we have in Jesus!

The Hymns

Jesus Thou Joy of Loving Hearts

A moving hymn of delight in Christ, written by Luther's "favorite monk" – Bernard of Clairvaux.

I've Found a Friend, O Such a Friend

Ira Sankey recounts two interesting stories in connection with this hymn. "On one occasion when Mr. Moorehouse and I were holding meetings at Scarborough, in the north of England, the services were attended by a number of Quaker ladies, among them a cousin of John Bright, the great English statesman. Wishing to have this hymn sung at one of the meetings, this lady wrote out the following hymn request: 'Will Mr. Sankey please repeat the hymn "I've Found a Friend," in his usual way?' In thus wording her note she avoided asking me to sing, which is against the custom of the Society of Friends." Quakers, in days of yore, apparently went out of their ways to avoid asking someone to sing a hymn! The next story is heartening. 'We were holding a cottage prayer-meeting in a lodging house,' says a minister of Nottinghamshire, England, 'when a young man lodging there came in to the meeting in fun-seeking manner. We sang, prayed and read a chapter out of God's Word, and then the young man asked if we would sing a hymn for him. He chose "I've Found a Friend, oh, such a Friend." When we had sung one verse he began to shed tears, and I am glad to say that he gave his heart to God through the singing of that beautiful hymn. The next morning, he left the place, but before leaving he wrote me a letter, of which I give these extracts: "I asked you sing that hymn because it was a favorite of my darling sister, who is waiting for me at the gates in heaven. I have now promised to meet her there. By God's help, if we do not meet again on earth, I promise to meet you in heaven. You will always think of me when you sing, "I've Found a Friend."'"

What a Friend we Have in Jesus

This hymn piles up encouragements and motivations for the burdened saint to go to the Lord in prayer. "Scriven wrote this hymn to comfort his mother, who was across the sea from him in Ireland. It was originally published anonymously, and Scriven did not receive full credit for almost 30 years." We sing it in preparation for the hearing of God's word tonight.

The Sermon

Jesus is the Vine and we are the branches. The metaphor speaks of the believer's *union* with Christ. And this is accomplished by the Holy Spirit (which we saw promised at the close of chapter 14). The central role of the Spirit is to reveal Christ and to unite us to Him. The indwelling of Jesus Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit are two aspects of the same reality. It was something particularly special to Paul (who uses the phrase "in Christ" over 160 times). He was first made aware of it on the Damascus Road when, consenting to the death of Stephen he heard a voice which said, "Saul, why are you persecuting *me*?" In

persecuting Stephen, he was, in fact, persecuting Jesus Christ! Calvin was to write some of his most eloquent words on this very theme:

We must now examine this question. How do we receive those benefits which the Father bestowed on His only-begotten Son – not for Christ's own private use, but that He might enrich poor and needy men? First, we must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from Him, all that He has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us. Therefore, to share with us what He has received from the Father, He had to become ours and to dwell within us. For this reason, He is called “our Head” (Ephesians 4:15), and “the first-born among many brethren” (Romans 8:29). We also, in turn, are said to be “engrafted into him” (Romans 11:17), and to “put on Christ” (Galatians 3:27); for, as I have said, all that He possesses is nothing to us until we grow into one body with Him. It is true that we obtain this by faith. Yet since we see that not all indiscriminately embrace that communion with Christ which is offered through the gospel, reason itself teaches us to climb higher and to examine into the secret energy of the Spirit, by which we come to enjoy Christ and all His benefits. (*Institutes of the Christian Religion* 3.1.1)

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