

Sunday School Lesson November 8, 2020

Good morning, I hope you are well and feel blessed.

Lesson for November 8, 2020, "Abiding Love"

Background Scripture from John 15:4-17.

Our lesson today speaks of a different type of connectedness, the one between Jesus and his followers. From the text lesson section, "Assurance and Challenge", it tells us that John Chapter 15 offers invaluable instructions to the early disciples (and to those of us who have come later) about the stakes of following Jesus. The blessing of a close relationship with Jesus and God is wonderful to contemplate, but it must be understood to be coupled with the clear and strong warnings of persecution that is likely to come.

Chapter 15 of John is at the center of the Farewell Discourse (John 13–17), a series of speeches and a prayer given by Jesus during the last supper. This section has material unique to John among the Gospels. The content makes up about 17 percent of the total text of John. Jesus builds his case for mutual love by using common observations from the vineyard. The vineyard was a staple of agriculture in the ancient world. In the Bible, Noah is the first recorded grape grower (Genesis 9:20). The fruit thereby produced became a source of sustenance year-round, with many of the harvested grapes being converted into raisins and wine for later consumption (see 2 Samuel 16:1).

One of the enticing descriptions of the promise land was its productive vineyards (Deuteronomy 6:10– 11; 8:7–10). Vineyards were a common sight throughout Galilee, Samaria, and Judea in Jesus' day. Besides today's text, he also used vineyard imagery in his parables of the workers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1–16), the two sons (21:28–32), the wicked tenants (21:33–39), and the barren fig tree (Luke 13:6–9). Common experiences regarding vineyards are also assumed in 1 Corinthians 9:7.

Grapevines would be pruned severely at a certain time of the year, leaving little more than a leafless, branchless stump that would be propped up with a rock or two. All the old branches would be cut off and carried away, providing valuable fuel for home fires. After new branches had grown, a second pruning would occur to remove the smaller branches. This allowed the larger branches to produce bigger clusters of larger grapes. Such pruning was part of cultivating the vines (Deuteronomy 28:39).

The Vine and the Branches (John 15:4–8). Connected and Fruitful (John 15:4–5) 4. “Remain in me, as I also remain in you.” No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. The same Greek word translated remain is translated many ways depending on context, including forms of stay, in John 11:54 and living in, in John 14:10. The same word appears in John 8:31 where Jesus proclaimed, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.” We remain in Jesus when we follow his word, his teachings, as a result of our relationship with him (John 6:56).

John’s first readers were little different from us when it comes to connecting with Jesus. They believed he rose from the dead and ascended to Heaven, as we do. But that happened 50 or 60 years earlier for John’s readers. John insisted that the command to remain in Christ was also for them. The vineyard metaphor reassures readers even today that we will see the fruit of our relationship with Jesus when we remain faithful to him, “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. Not all branches coming out of the vine are productive or even survive. Some branches are visibly damaged in various ways or even dead. Others simply have no fruit well into the growing season, thus becoming like parasites that suck life-giving water and nutrients from the vine and its roots.

To be thrown into the fire is a negative judgment on the faithless and disobedient (see Ezekiel 19:12; Matthew 13:42; Revelation 20:15). Verse 7 says, “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” Jesus began a more direct description of what it means to remain in him, tying it to having his words remain in a person. This means to have our ways of thinking and ways of acting guided by the teachings of Jesus. To live in Christ is to live with his commands and teachings as our chief influence (Colossians 3:16).

If we are abiding as he asks, we will not ask something that is clearly contrary to the will of our Lord (John 16:23–24). “This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.” Jesus summed this up in three ways. First, this faithful remaining and resulting obedience bring glory to the Father. Faithful, gracious actions bring God glory. Second, faithful remaining will bear much fruit. This might be evidence of a godly life, what Paul described as the “fruit of the Spirit” (Galatians 5:22–23). The third item in Jesus’ summary: doing this is the core of being a disciple of Christ. Jesus is the teacher from whom we learn. He is the teacher we never outgrow. We are Jesus’ disciples for life.

Jesus moved beyond the vine analogy to speak more directly about the relationship between his disciples and himself, and among the disciples themselves. He began with the most fundamental dynamic in the universe: God's love. Jesus testified to the Father's love for him throughout the book of John. This love is demonstrated by the authority the Father gave the Son (John 3:35) and the Father's revealing his plans to the Son (5:20). The Father also loves the Son for his willingness to give his life for sinners (10:17). The love of the Father for the Son has no starting date (John 17:24). This relationship of love for the Son by the Father is eternal. God's love never changes and never fails.

Verse 10 says, "If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love." Jesus pushed the connection between command-keeping and love-remaining beyond his relationship with his disciples to the ultimate paradigm: his relationship with his Father. Jesus asked them to consider that he always kept his Father's commands and never departed from his deep, abiding relationship with his Father. We should remember that in our relationship with God, there is not a progression from command-keeping to being loved. We are not loved because we are obedient; we are loved because we are God's creatures. We cannot earn God's love. The relationship begins with the eternal love of the Father for us, just as the Father's love for the Son has no beginning or end. We are obedient because we are loved and return that love through keeping the Father's commands. That is how we remain in the Father's love.

Verse 12 says, "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you" This command is found in many places in the New Testament. In John's Gospel, it is first introduced in 13:34. Paul also taught this command for believers (Romans 12:10; 13:8; 1 Thessalonians 4:9), as did Peter (1 Peter 1:22). Neither of these apostles learned this new commandment by reading John. Instead, the command was learned from Jesus himself, just as John records. A non-Christian may indeed be a loving person, but it is difficult to understand how a Christian could be an unloving person. When asked whom we must love, Jesus told a story of actively loving one's enemies (Luke 10:25-37). If we love our enemies, who are we entitled not to love?

Verse 13 says, "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends." Jesus taught that this was to be the ultimate sign of discipleship, a demonstration that would mark Christians as different to those outside the fellowship (John 13:35). He clarified that this love has no limitations. We should love one another even to the point of dying for one another. This is a very tall order indeed. John, the author of this book, would be the only disciple present to die of natural causes. According to church history and tradition, all the others in the room would give their lives for

Jesus and the church. John remembered that Jesus loved his disciples to the end (John 13:1), but they would love him to their ends too. There is no greater love, than this.

Verse 14 says, "You are my friends if you do what I command." Jesus circled back to the expression of our love for him: doing his commands. When we accept that the Father has great love for us, we will love him in return. We will express our love for him by obedience, not rebellion or apathy. As this love-and obey pattern gains strength in our lives, we will find joy that comes from God. We are Jesus' friends, motivated out of love to do what God requires of us.

In John 15:15-27 Jesus says: "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you." A servant ultimately obeys out of fear. Servants were not confidantes of their masters. Their job was to obey without knowledge or comment. His disciples are not servants but friends. They were not acquaintances or business associates; a friend is one for whom a person feels deep affection and demonstrates loyalty. Jesus disclosed that friendship is the relationship he has been working toward throughout his three-year ministry with the disciples. Their knowledge has grown because of Jesus' many revelations of the nature of the Father and of the plans he and the Father have for the future. The disciples are "insiders," friends considered worthy of receiving everything Jesus has learned from his Father.

Verse 16 says, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you." The disciples were Jesus' friends-with-purpose, and that purpose is to produce fruit. This is to be fruit that will last, a reference not to grapes but to new disciples, new friends-with-purpose. The disciples were reminded that God will give them resources in this work. After Jesus had gone, the Father would continue to be with them, giving what they asked for. These plans and promises are for us also, still the disciples of Jesus. We are expected to bear fruit. The vine of Jesus continues to produce the fruit of new disciples and spiritual growth even today and will do so in the future. Though this does require effort on our part, everything we need for our work comes from Jesus, not from our own power. Verse 17 says, "This is my command: Love each other." Jesus ended this section by restating the great command. There is no expiration date on this directive. It overrides all things that confront us in the Christian life. Jesus' disciples will have disagreements. Conflicts will be inevitable. But there is never an excuse for not loving our brothers and sisters in the Jesus Christ.

Please review and read the section from the text on, Stepping into the World, on page 39 in the lesson booklet. It contains many good points about growing good fruit as Christians.

Remaining, obeying, and loving: these are the central elements of discipleship. The love of Jesus exemplifies all of these. He remains with the Father in a relationship so intimate, it is beyond our understanding. He always obeys the Father and his great love for the Father overflows to his chosen disciples. In the Gospel of John, the last supper finds Jesus teaching about these things. The arrest, trials, and crucifixion find him acting out these things. The resurrection shows the Father approving of these things for Jesus: his teachings and his actions. The disciples of Jesus have been motivated ever since to follow him unselfishly with the purposes of being obedient disciples themselves and of producing new disciples in every generation.

Closing: For the love that casts out fear, the faith that sustains and the hope that never perishes, be with us now and forever more. Amen. God watch over us and take care of us.

Next week's lesson November 15, 2020, "Confident Love"

Background Scripture 1st John 3:11-24, 2nd John 4-11, 3rd John 5-8.

Sources for this lesson: The Bible, International Sunday School Lesson and Commentary, Dr. Craig Rikard, Lesson on Abiding Love, from South Georgia Advocate, David Cook, with Standard Publishing Lesson on Abiding Love, Halley's Bible Handbook and The Present Word Adult Bible Lessons.