

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (7-1-1979 Strandtown Baptist Church)

John 15:1-16

Introduction

This passage, often used at Harvest, is appropriate for every time of the year. It helps bring balance into our understanding of the Christian faith. It is easy to express the Christian life in terms of duties, and to neglect the fact of the means whereby duties are put into operation. People know the “what?”; the question is “how?”.

The distinctive glory of the Gospel is demonstrated here. Other teachers tell us how to live and give us laws, examples, reasons and motives. But the Gospel, in addition, provides life. What is the use of giving man something to copy if he cannot copy it? Morality stands over the cripple and says, “Look here, this is how you should walk.” But the cripple lies there, just as helpless after the demonstration as he was before. But the Gospel bends over the man, takes his hand, and says, “In the name of Jesus, Christ, rise up and walk”. Feet and anklebones receive strength.

The Gospel gives us commandments, motives, examples – and also power. So in John 15 is one of the clearest passages about power and how we may appropriate it. The Christian life and its fruitfulness are not about human achievement, but about abiding in Christ.

Jesus was about to leave His disciples. It was a hostile world, and they would face many weaknesses, pressures, and loneliness. He wanted them to go on in His service. He had great exploits in mind for them. Here was the secret of character, work and service. He took the vine and the branches. The vine was frequently used as a symbol of Israel in the Old Testament (Isaiah 5:1ff; Jeremiah 2:21; Psalm 80; Ezekiel 15; Hosea 10). A vine was engraved on the door of the Temple. Jewish coins in the Maccabean era had vines engraved on them. Everywhere the disciples went they would see vines.

Now Jesus tells them He is the real and genuine vine. **I am the true vine** (John 15:1). The nation of Israel was a degenerate vine, but He is the true one. It was not enough to be a Jew. These disciples had to be joined to Him for true spiritual life.

God’s purpose for our lives

Just as the branch is in the vine for the sake of the fruit, so we are placed in Christ for every good purpose. Conversion does not begin with us, but with Him. We did not choose Him; He chose us, that we will go and bring forth fruit. N.B. “Fruit”, “more fruitful” (v2), “much fruit” (v8), “fruit that will last” (v16). This is why we are in Christ and why we are in the world.

Tragic that many Christians drift through life without asking what they are here in the world for. What is Christian fruit for? It is for Christian life and character, and faithful effective service. Fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, goodness, meekness, faithfulness and self-control (Galatians 5:22,23). We were chosen for holiness of life, and to bear the likeness of Christ, to have God’s character in us. **For**

**He chose us in Him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight** (Ephesians 1:4). If all the energy and holy air and zeal exerted into debates about the mystery of election were put into producing fruit, the purpose of election, how different the church and the world would be.

**Watch out for false prophets.... By their fruits you will recognise them** (Matthew 7:16,20). **Produce fruit in keeping with repentance** (Matthew 3:8). God is looking for it. It is the only real evidence we are Christians. Not profession, going through the motions of religion, using evangelical clichés. The main issue is, are we like Christ, is our life given up to His service, do we bear the family likeness? No fruit – no life.

Are we bearing fruit? This is such an urgent matter. The false professor without fruit is to be taken away for destruction. Activity may be present, but if there is still barrenness without Christ, we are nothing. Can we by the grace of God say there is fruit? We may not be perfect, may not be all we ought to be, may not have arrived – yet there has been a change, we are not the person we once were, we are moving in a God-ward direction, facing towards Zion, and ever seeking to bear more and much fruit.

#### The means whereby fruit is borne

First of all, the branch has to be in the vine, linked with Him, “in Christ”. We must begin on the right and only foundation. Be genuine, not pretending to be. The word “abide” or “remain” is used 10 times in v1-10. Mutual indwelling – we are in Him, and He is in us. An active, unbroken and close relationship. Putting whole weight on and fully committed to Him. Resting in Him, getting ever nearer to Him. Clinging, placing every burden on Him. Depending utterly on Him, in constant contact, as with a best friend. Keeping hold of Him. Drawing all we need from Him. Allowing Him to direct our thoughts and love. Continual submission of our will to His will. Reference to Him of daily life, duties and concerns. Not intermittently, but constantly. Not “in Christ” on a Sunday and “in the world” the rest of the week.

The result – His grace, love, power, joy in the soul. He is in us, pouring His Holy Spirit into us. The vine is the secret of the branches, leaves, buds, blossom and fruit. Likewise, Christ is the secret of the Christian’s life, vigour, etc. Life in Him can be communicated to the weakest believer. He can become strong and adequate. Christ is offering to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Our individual personality remains, but Christ joins Himself to us, in deepest possible union.

Severed from Him, the branch is useless. The branch has no life of its own. Its sap and juice come from the vine. Too much lip service to this, but little reality. Just orthodox clichés. We only truly believe this when we believe **apart from me you can do nothing** (John 15:5). We must have a sense of utter helplessness apart from Christ. From the depths of our soul, and because of bitter experience, we confess this - “I cannot”. Absolute self-despair. Dry, rotten, fruitless and useless branch.

Do you sometimes feel this about your Christian service? Remember the power lies with the master and not the servant. The might is in the hand, not in the weapon. Do you believe that? Does your prayer life show that you believe that? Are you convinced in your inmost soul? We do not really believe it until we do so in our

inmost soul and out of deep personal conviction. We are such proud, self-sufficient creatures that we would get on without Him if we could. The secret is to expect nothing from self, and find all in Him.

Another means whereby we bear fruit is having His words abiding in us (v7). Do we read the Bible with the purpose of knowing His will? Do we allow His teaching to mould our whole outlook and conduct? If so, it will lead to deepening relationship and intelligent prayer life. Deepening contact with Him.

To bear fruit also requires submitting to His pruning. **Every branch that does bear fruit He prunes so that it will be even more fruitful** (John 15:2). This makes sense to gardeners. Pruning to remove dead wood, trim back live wood so that life of vine flows into fruit and not wood. Thus new and better growth. Our pruning – trials, tribulations, problems, suffering, upsets, trouble, disappointments.

Too often we moan and complain, “why is this happening to me?” The reason is to prune us. If we pray for growth in grace, for faith, courage and love, then when we are in an awkward spot, when difficult people cross our path and trouble comes, the virtues we ask for can grow. Trials, weaned from the world, drive us to Christ and His word in humility. He who suffers the most is the most fruitful.

We also have to abide in His love. **Now remain in my love** (John 15:9). Place our worries and problems at His feet, put all that concerns us in His hands. The result is fruit-bearing. This is not an easy matter. We live in a day when we want instant results. But there is no such a thing as instant holiness. No short cuts, no painless maturity, no speedy means to fruit-bearing. It takes a lifetime of walking with God and cultivating a relationship. And at the end our fruit-bearing and service will not be perfection.

#### Other results of fruit-bearing

Success in prayer. **Ask whatever you wish and it will be given you** (John 15:7). We have our answers to prayer, response from God, providing we are abiding and praying in God’s will and with the right motives. Mary Queen of Scots feared John Knox’s prayers more than an army of 20,000. He had learned to abide in Christ, and Christ’s words abode in him.

Do we have success in prayer and expect and receive answers? The secret to power in prayer is that we desire and ask what pleases Him, and that He will give us.

Another result is that we glorify God and have great assurance for our souls. **This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples** (John 15:8). The name of God is honoured, and we have assurance of salvation, which is a great privilege God wants us to enjoy. To be always doubting and fearing makes the Christian life a miserable existence. But when we bear fruit, we feel the witness of the Spirit and know we are living branches of the vine.

We also receive joy. **My joy may be in you and your joy may be complete** (John 15:11). Christ has called us to joy, not to a lame, insipid, colourless, cheerless existence. This is for those who remain in Him. Christ’s joy is not the effervescent

kind. It is much deeper than this, more satisfying and more profound. We need to believe that Christ's purpose with us is always joy, because the Devil is out to convince us otherwise. The Devil would try to persuade us that Christ wants to cramp and impoverish our lives. What a lie! Christ aims to bring us joy which is real and deep and lasting. Joy and peace in believing is the Christian's experience. No joy for the inconsistent life or for those who are not abiding in Him. But it is ours if we walk with God and abide in His Son. Inspiring thought that Jesus calls His followers into joy.

### Conclusion

The real issue is our relationship with the Lord. Either we are in Christ, and are alive and fruitful, or we are out of Christ, and are destined to destruction. Not mere natural association with the church, but living supernatural union with Christ is required.