



Catalog No. 1384

John 15:9-17

Forty-sixth Message

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September 23rd, 2007

FRUITFUL LIVING

In our studies in the gospel of John we have seen that Jesus is the true vine and that God's people are the branches. This metaphor, introduced at the beginning of chapter 15, illustrates and pictures the relationship that believers have with Jesus when they sign on to follow him.

Jesus is making it clear in the upper room discourse that he is leaving his disciples. He is going to his Father's house to prepare a room for them. They must remain to carry on Jesus' work. They must learn to live without his being visibly present. They must learn to live by faith and Spirit. They must begin a pilgrim journey that will end at the gates of the New Jerusalem, the heavenly Zion. Jesus will come again and receive them to himself (14:3). All believers are on the same faith journey as the first disciples.

But even though Jesus is leaving, the metaphor of the vine and the branches indicates that believers have a real, organic, living, intimate relationship with him. We are branches grafted into the vine. We are not connected by string, wire or tape. Supernaturally we have become a natural, living branch in the true vine. The vine is the source of life and nourishment for the branches; the branches are dependent on what the vine gives. Even though we are on a pilgrim journey, longing to arrive at our heavenly home, our time here is not void of purpose or meaning. On the contrary, God has something very specific for us to do, and that is to produce the fruit of the vine.

Jesus indicates that we are to live fruitfully for the glory of God. We saw that in our last study and we see it in our text this morning:

“My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples.” (15:8)

“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.” (15:16)

We are divinely chosen, selected to produce fruit. This is the goal of our spiritual life.

I love fruit. I love the sweet taste of pineapple, the tart taste of a crisp apple, the juice that runs down my chin from a peach or a pear or a melon. I love grapes and cherries, apricots and oranges, raspberries and strawberries, kiwis and bananas, figs and olives. Fruit hanging heavy on the vine or branch is such a pleasing and enjoyable sight. I love steak, too, although every bite tastes the same. But a fruit salad has a variety of flavors and colors that burst with delight. God's people are intended to be a fruit salad. Taken together, we are a marvelous garden of delight, the ultimate fruit smorgasbord.

Our text today continues to draw upon this metaphor of vine and branches and fruit. Verses 9 and 10 explain again how we can be fruitful as God's people.

“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. (John 15:9-10 NASB)

Bearing fruit is a matter of abiding and obeying; this is the nature of our relationship with Jesus. The reason we do this is because this characterizes Jesus' relationship with the Father. The Jesus/disciple relationship is a mirror of the Father/Son relationship. The relationship between Father and Son is a paradigm for the relationship between Jesus and the disciples.

The Father loves the Son, and the Son loves the disciples in the way he is loved by the Father. The Son abides in the Father's love; the disciples are to abide in Jesus' love. The Son obeys the Father and keeps his commandments, so the disciples are to obey the Son and keep his commandments. The concepts of abide, love and obey are not new in the discourse. The word “abide” links us to the previous verses; the words “love” and “keep My commandments” link us to Jesus' words in chapter 14. Here they all come together.

Abiding: We abide in Jesus' gracious, undeserved, sacrificial love. We become saturated, soaked with “My love,” not the world's love. If we do not know the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of Christ, as Paul prays in his letter to the Ephesians, we will have a hard time being fruitful.

Obeying: The love of Jesus so permeates our being that we listen to his voice and obey his word. Obedience is the result of abiding. In any relationship, genuine love results in doing things for the benefit of the one loved. Moment by moment we are obedient in the place and time where God has put us. If abiding does not result in obedience, we will have a hard time being fruitful.

The concept here is easy to grasp, but again I look for illustrations. In past messages I used marriage as an illustration of abiding. But I will come at this in a different way. What we love determines what we do and how we spend our time. Each of my children had different passions as they grew up. My oldest daughter loved swimming and water polo, so she spent a lot of time in the pool. My son loved football, so we threw the ball daily and I ran pass routes for him. My youngest daughter loved theatre and singing, so she soaked herself with the musical scores of her favorite shows and sang them around the house. But not only did they spend time doing what they loved, they sought out mentors and coaches who would help them improve and bear fruit in their passions. In other words, they were willing to obey

someone's commands, even though these were difficult and painful, to become what they wanted to be.

Love results in abiding, abiding in obedience, and obedience in fruit. We can apply this to most areas of life – career, marriage and relationships. What you love determines where you abide and what you obey, and that in turn determines the fruit of your efforts. This is what Jesus is getting at here. Do you want to have a fruitful life? Then focus on abiding and obeying. Abiding in Jesus' love is the wellspring of our obedience to him, and that obedience is the demonstration of the reality of our love for him. This in turn will lead to fruitful living. It is not automatic. We must return again and again, each day and each moment of the day, to abide in the love of Jesus as Jesus does in the love of the Father.

For me, abiding means hearing words that remind me that I am a beloved child of God, that I am accepted as I am, not for what I should be. I need this because my default mode is to feel failure and worthlessness. When I power up the computer every day, I wake up with the default settings. If I try to become fruitful without abiding, I am dead. So I need to abide. The question is whether we are abiding, whether we are saturated, drenched and motivated by Jesus' over-the-top, history-changing, unparalleled and unequalled sacrificial death to bring salvation and eternal life to us.

So the means to fruitfulness is abiding and obeying. But what is the fruit? We could begin by looking at the first three fruits of the Spirit mentioned by Jesus in his discourse: peace, joy, and love. First, we have the fruit of peace. We talked about this in chapter 14, but here it is again: "Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful" (14:27).

No matter what is going on, whether it's your fault, someone else's fault or no one's fault, an abiding relationship with Jesus produces the fruit of a peace that surpasses understanding. Jesus' peace is transcendent; it is not related to the life's circumstances. The world can't give this peace; it can't settle a fearful heart. But the peace that Jesus gives can. Jesus himself was in continual conflict with those who sought his life, yet he experienced God's peace by abiding in his Father's love. We too can experience that peace.

We come to the second fruit in verse 11:

"These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full. (15:11)

Abiding and obeying produces joy. The source of Jesus' joy is walking with the Father. The source of our joy is walking in step with the Son. Vines produce grapes and grapes produce wine. The "fruit of the vine" is celebrated in the Psalms as that which God has given to make "man's heart glad" (Ps 104:15). Wine was a symbol of joy in the OT. There is a connection between abiding, fruitfulness and joy.

When Jesus turned water to wine at the wedding at Cana, he transformed potential disaster into wedding joy. The miracle of Jesus is that as we abide in him he transforms the fruitless self-effort that eventually fails into the joy of the wine of the Spirit.

Like peace, Jesus' joy does not derive from circumstances. We become confused when we equate happiness with joy. Happiness comes from pleasant outcomes, from things going well. God doesn't promise us happiness, but joy. Jesus' joy is transcendent, something that is present despite what is or is not happening. The world cannot give Jesus' joy or make the heart glad, but Jesus can. Jesus himself had anything but a happy life. Every day he lived with the shadow of the cross hanging over him. But his joy was full because he was abiding in the Father. We can have that joy too. Though we face challenges, difficulties, obstacles and even death, we can be filled with joy. Joy is an indication that we are abiding in Jesus.

Third, I mention love primarily because of the threefold occurrence of the personal pronoun "My:" My peace, My love, My joy. Jesus' love is not dependent on what we do or how we measure up, what we achieve or accomplish. We experience a love that accepts us no matter where we are, no matter how we got there. We are loved as a child of God. The world cannot give this love, no matter how great our parents, siblings, friends or spouse. There is a place within us that only Jesus' love can satisfy and fill. This is why we abide in his love. His love has the power to break the mold, recast our identity and transform our heart. Jesus himself was not a loved man. He was hated and rejected, a man of sorrows acquainted with grief, yet his heart experienced the full love of the Father.

When we are abiding and obeying, the fruit in our life becomes peace, joy and love. This is the fruit which the vine produces. It comes from within us, making us pleasant, attractive, winsome, content people.

The one thing I want to make very clear is that the fruit we enjoy as believers is not connected to worldly success, financial prosperity or pleasant circumstances. If that were true, then most of the great saints in church history failed miserably. When we think about the people whom we revere, read about, quote and want to emulate, most of them had very difficult lives. They faced persecution, rejection, poverty, illness and depression, yet we hold them up as models of godly people who experienced and manifested the fruit of Jesus through their abiding and obedient relationship with him. Anyone who would teach something different does not have it right.

It's tempting to think of love, joy, and peace as fruit we receive and experience as we abide in Jesus. But the internal fruit of love, joy and peace is not for our benefit only but for the benefit of others and the glory of God. Paul refers to this in the book of Romans when he says, "Therefore, my brethren, you also were made to die to the Law through the body of Christ, so that you might be joined to another, to Him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God" (7:4). And again, he says in Colossians, "the gospel ... is constantly bearing fruit and increasing" (1:5-6 NAS95S).

So it does not surprise us that in the very next verse Jesus speaks again of the new commandment mentioned in chapter 13:

"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.” (15:12-17)

Notice that the command to love one another frames this text in verses 12 and 17. Notice also that the “new” commandment from chapter 13 becomes “My” commandment.

We are branches abiding in the vine, abiding in Jesus’ love. As we are soaked with his love we obey his commands. The main command, under which all commands are placed (other than to love God with all our heart), is to love one another. The Father loved Jesus. Jesus loved the disciples in the way he was loved. Now the disciples are to love others in the way they are loved.

How did Jesus love his disciples? He voluntarily went to the cross and died in their place. Love is defined as self-sacrifice, laying down your life for your friends. This is how Jesus loved and how we are to love. He said in chapter 12, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (12:24). Jesus bore fruit through his death on the cross. We bear fruit by picking up our cross, by dying to self, sacrificing our life for the sake of others.

Carlo Carretto describes sacrificial love as if Jesus were speaking to us:

“Do as I did, love as I loved, and you will know what the beatitude means. Remember that one act of mercy is worth more than one act of cunning, and that the diplomacy you put into your relationships is straw thrown to the wind.

And do not forget that it is better to lose than to win, when to lose means to be humiliated before our brother.

Do you want the secret of running swiftly on the road of love, of enjoying a great peace of heart? Here it is.

- Seek the last place before him whom you love.
- Lower yourself voluntarily, as I lowered Myself, even though I was God. Concern yourselves with loving, not being loved.
- Do not look for human glory, but for the service of men.
- Do not go in for victimizing which eats your heart out, but be happy to be a joyous hidden victim.
- Do not believe in armed violence, not even the revolution; believe in the violence of love.
- Do not worry about converting the world; worry about converting yourselves.
- The smaller and poorer you are, the happier you will be.

When love crucifies you, remember I am near you.”¹

Jesus can command love because it is an act of our will, not our emotions. We make choices to lay down our life. When we abide in his love and are obedient to his command to love, we are revealed as his friends and are listed with Abraham (2 Chron 20:7;

Isa 41:8; Jas 2:23), and Moses (Ex 33:11). We don’t obey as slaves to an external law. We obey as friends to internal love, knowing our Master and his plans. The difference is revelation, and the fact that we are working together with our Master. The friend is a person who has been released from slavery, and the obedience is one of happy labor rather than slavish burden.

Jesus reminds his disciples and us that we didn’t sign up for this program to follow him and live sacrificially. He chose us. This truth prevents us from becoming prideful and arrogant, thinking that we are too good to love the people around us.

Sacrificial loving is what bears fruit for God. This is how we follow Jesus. His way becomes our way. His calling becomes our calling. The word “appointed” is the same word as “lay down.” We are set aside from the world to set our lives aside for others. The fruit that is produced remains; it is eternal. Sacrificial love changes human hearts; it is the only power capable of doing so. The laws in antiquity were already quite good, but they couldn’t change the heart. So Jesus gives a new commandment, his commandment. When we are Jesus’ friends, laying down our lives, bearing eternal fruit, we can ask the Father for anything in the name of Jesus, he will be with us.

The early church did as Jesus commanded and it revolutionized the world. This was a new way of living that was not reflected in pagan gods. They did not love their people, nor was it a virtue to love others.

Rodney Stark describes this in *The Rise of Christianity*:

The Christian teaching that God loves those who love him was alien to pagan beliefs.... Equally alien to paganism was the notion that because God loves humanity, Christians cannot please God unless they love one another. Indeed, as God demonstrates his love through sacrifice, humans must demonstrate their love through sacrifice on behalf of one another. Moreover, such responsibilities were to be extended beyond the bonds of family and tribe, indeed to ‘all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (1 Cor 1:2). These were revolutionary ideas.²

Our singles group has been praying for a young man who has a tumor on his pituitary gland. Last week he told the group that the tumor was gone. It was such wonderful news, but what he said next really got my attention: “I couldn’t have made it without the love and support of community.” His words reminded me that in order to love people sacrificially we have to be in a small enough community where we can be part of one another’s lives. How can we follow Jesus’ command if we are not sharing our lives with others?

As I studied this text I heard an echo of the word of God to Adam and Eve: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth” (Gen 1:28 NAS95S). As God’s new creation, Jesus says the same thing to us: Be fruitful and multiply.

I heard an echo from Deuteronomy. God chose Israel to be his people not because of anything they had done. He delivered them from slavery and brought them to a promised land. He told his people to love him with all their heart, i.e., to abide in love, and keep the commandments. If they did so, the land would be fruitful and their nation would be a blessing to other nations. The

land is a picture of our life in Christ. We are chosen, delivered to abide, obey and be fruitful. It is the same plan. But the commandment is new because Jesus lays down his life and transforms our hearts through a new covenant. Now we can love from our heart, organically, like a branch connected to a vine.

But we also hear a future echo from the book of Revelation:

“Then he showed me a river of the water of life, clear as crystal, coming from the throne of God and of the Lamb, in the middle of its street. On either side of the river was the tree of life, bearing twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit every month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations” (22:1-2 NAS95S).

All throughout Scripture from beginning to end we hear the theme of fruitfulness.

Jesus has chosen us to bear fruit by abiding, obeying and loving sacrificially. What will it cost us to live this way? Everything. We must die to self-interest, declare ourselves “dead to the glories and attractions of this world, and be prepared for suffering, even the most ignominious suffering.”³ What will we gain? Everything. We will gain life, love, peace, joy and the fulfillment for which we were created. The alternative is to never find oneself, never be fulfilled, never realize potential, never be at rest – in short, to forfeit one’s soul.

We face difficult choices every day. It’s hard to lay down our lives. It’s risky to open our hearts to others. We fear being hurt and taken advantage of. But when we consider the alternative it helps us to follow Jesus. C. S. Lewis points this out in a very stark way:

To love at all is to be vulnerable ... If you want to make sure of keeping [your heart] intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket of your selfishness. But in that casket – safe, dark, motionless, airless – it will change. It will not be broken – it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable... The only place outside of Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from the danger of love is Hell.⁴

Jesus has chosen us to be fruitful. Fruitful living comes from abiding in his love and then, out of that love, obeying his command to sacrifice our lives for one another. I pray that it might be love, not programs, gimmicks or exciting meetings, that would revolutionize our life at PBCC and bear fruit that remains.

¹ Carlo Carretto, *The God Who Comes* (New York: Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 1974), 203.

² Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (Princeton UP, 1996; HarperSan-Francisco, 1997).

³ D. A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 1990), 75.

⁴ C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt, 1960), 169.