John Chapter 15:1-17

Relationships and Responsibilities[1]

This is the seventh and last of the *"I AM"* statements of Christ recorded in the Gospel of John. However, Jesus did not stop with this image but went on to use the picture of "the friend." These two pictures of the believer—branches and friends—reveal both our privileges and our responsibilities. As *branches*, we have the privilege of sharing His life, and the responsibility of abiding. As *friends*, we have the privilege of knowing His will, and the responsibility of obeying.

I. Branches—We Must Abide (John 15:1–11 ***"[1] I am the true vine, and My Father is the vine-grower. [2] Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He cleans it so that it may bear more fruit. [3] You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. [4] Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit from itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. [5] 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. [6] 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. [7] If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. [8] My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples. [9] Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love. [10] 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. [11] These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete."***

The cultivation of vineyards was important to the life and economy of Israel. A golden vine adorned Herod's temple. When our Lord used this image, He was not introducing something new; it was familiar to every Jew. There are four elements in this allegory that we must understand to benefit from His teaching.

***1. The vine*. There are actually three different vines found in Scripture. The *past* vine was the nation of Israel (see Psalm 80:8–19; Isaiah 5:1–7; Jeremiah 2:21; Ezekiel 19:10–14; and Hosea 10:1). In an act of wonderful grace, God "transplanted" Israel into**

[1] Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible exposition commentary* (Vol. 1, pp. 354–361). Victor Books.

Canaan and gave the nation every possible benefit. "*What could have been done more to My vineyard, that I have not done in it?"* God asked (Isaiah 5:4). If ever a nation had everything it needed to succeed, it was Israel.

But the vine produced wild grapes! Instead of practicing justice, it practiced oppression; instead of producing righteousness, it produced unrighteousness and cries of distress from the victims. God had to deal with the nation, Israel, and chasten it, but even that did not produce lasting results. When God's own Son came to the vineyard, they cast Him out and killed Him (Matthew 21:33–46).

There is also a *future* vine, "*the vine of the earth*" described in Revelation 14:14–20. This is the Gentile world system ripening for God's judgment. Believers are branches in "*the vine of heaven*," but the unsaved are branches in "*the vine of the earth*." The unsaved depend on this world for their sustenance and satisfaction, while believers depend on Jesus Christ. The *"vine of the earth*" will be cut down and destroyed when Jesus Christ returns.

The *present* Vine is our Lord Jesus Christ, and, of course, the vine includes the branches. He is the *"true Vine*," that is, "*the original of which all other vines are a copy."* As Christians, we do not live on substitutes! The symbolism of the Vine and branches is similar to that of the Head and the body: we have a living relationship to Christ and belong to Him.

I have a small grape arbor on our backyard fence in New Braunfels, but what we grow is nothing like what is even today cultivated in the Holy Land—of course, our grapes produce jam, bot wine. Ours is a rather young plant with more leaves than fruit. The vines Ruth and I saw in the Holy Land were large and strong, and it would be very difficult to break off a mature branch *without injuring the vine itself*. Our union with Christ is a *living* union, so we may bear fruit; a *loving* union, so that we may enjoy Him; and a *lasting* union, so that we need not be afraid.

***2. The branches*. By itself, a branch is weak and useless. It is good for either bearing or burning, but certainly not for building (read Ezekiel 15). The branch cannot produce its own life; it must draw life from the vine. It is our communion with Christ through the Spirit that makes possible the bearing of fruit.**

Many of the images of Christ and the believer given in Scripture emphasize this important concept of *union and communion:* the body and its members (1 Corinthians 12), the bride and the Bridegroom (Ephesians 5:25–33), the sheep and the Shepherd

(John 10). A member of the body cut off from the body would die. The marriage creates the union, but it takes daily love and devotion to maintain the communion. The shepherd brings the sheep into the flock, but the sheep must follow the shepherd in order to have protection and provision.

The sooner we as believers discover that we are but branches, the better we relate to the Lord because then we realize our own weakness and confess our need for His strength.

The key word is *abide;* it is used eleven times in John 15:1–11 ("*continue*" in John 15:9 and "*remain*" in John 15:11). What does it mean to "abide"? It means to keep in fellowship with Christ so that His life can work in and through us to produce fruit. This certainly involves the Word of God and the confession of sin so that nothing hinders our communion with Him (John 15:3). It also involves obeying Him because we love Him (John 15:9–10).

How can we tell when we are "*abiding in Christ*?" Is there a special feeling? No, but there are certain evidences that appear and they are unmistakably clear. For one thing, when you are abiding in Christ, you produce fruit (John 15:2). What that "*fruit*" is, we discuss later. Also, you experience the Father's "*pruning*" so that you will bear more fruit (John 15:2). The believer who is abiding in Christ has his prayers answered (John 15:7) and experiences a deepening love for Christ and for other believers (John 15:9, 12–13). He also experiences joy (John 15:11).

This abiding relationship is natural to the branch and the vine, but it must be cultivated in the Christian life. It is not automatic. Abiding in Christ demands worship, meditation on God's Word, prayer, sacrifice, and service—but what a joyful experience it is! Once you have begun to cultivate this deeper communion with Christ, you have no desire to return to the shallow life of the careless Christian.

***3. The vinedresser*. The vinedresser is in charge of caring for the vines, and Jesus said that this is the work of His Father. It is He who "purges" or prunes the branches so they will produce more fruit. Note the progression here: no fruit (John 15:2), fruit, more fruit, much fruit (John 15:5, 8). Many Christians pray that God will make them more fruitful, but they do not enjoy the pruning process that follows!**

The vinedresser prunes the branches in two ways: he cuts away dead wood that can breed disease and insects, and he cuts away living tissue so that the life of the vine will not be so dissipated that the quality of the crop will be jeopardized. In fact, the

vinedresser will even cut away whole bunches of grapes so that the rest of the crop will be of higher quality. God wants both quantity and quality.

This pruning process is the most important part of the whole enterprise, and the people who do it must be carefully trained, or they can destroy an entire crop. Some vineyards invest two or three years in training the "pruners" so they know where to cut, how much to cut, and even at what angle to make the cut.

The greatest judgment God could bring to a believer would be to let him alone, let him have his own way. Because God loves us, He "*prunes*" us and encourages us to bear more fruit for His glory. If the branches could speak, they would confess that the pruning process hurts; but they would also rejoice that they will be able to produce more and better fruit.

Your Heavenly Father is never nearer to you than when He is pruning you. Sometimes He cuts away the dead wood that might cause trouble; but often He cuts off the living tissue that is robbing you of spiritual vigor. Pruning does not simply mean spiritual surgery that removes what is bad. It can also mean cutting away the good and the better so that we might enjoy the best. Pruning hurts, but it helps. We may not enjoy it, but we need it.

How does the Father prune us? Sometimes He simply uses the Word to convict and cleanse us. (The word translated "*purge*" in John 15:2 is the same as "*clean*" in John 13:10. See Ephesians 5:26–27.) Sometimes He must chasten us (Hebrews 12:1–11). At the time, it hurts when He removes something precious from us; but as the "*spiritual crop*" is produced, we see that the Father know what He is doing.

The more we abide in Christ, the more fruit we bear; and the more fruit we bear, the more the Father has to prune us so that the quality keeps up with the quantity. Left to itself, the branch might produce many clusters, but they will be inferior in quality. God is glorified by a bigger crop that is also a *better* crop.

***4. The fruit*. The word *results* is often heard in conversations among Christian workers, but this is not actually a Bible concept. A machine can produce results, and so can a robot, but it takes *a living organism* to produce fruit. It takes time and cultivation to produce fruit; a good crop does not come overnight.**

We must remember that the branches do not eat the fruit: others do. We are not producing fruit to please ourselves but to serve others. We should be the kind of

people who "*feed*" others by our words and our works. "*The lips of the righteous feed many*" (Proverbs 10:21).

Several different kinds of spiritual fruit are named in the Bible. We bear fruit when we win others to Christ (Romans 1:13). We are a part of the harvest (John 4:35–38). As we grow in holiness and obedience, we are bearing fruit (Romans 6:22). Paul considered Christian giving to be fruit from a dedicated life (Romans 15:28). "*The fruit of the Spirit*" (Galatians 5:22–23) is the kind of Christian character that glorifies God and makes Christ real to others. Even our good works, our service, grow out of our abiding life (Colossians 1:10). The praise that comes from our hearts and lips is actually fruit to the glory of God (Hebrews 13:15).

Many of these things could be counterfeited by the flesh, but the deception would eventually be detected, for real spiritual fruit has in it *the seeds for more fruit*. Man-made results are dead and cannot reproduce themselves, but Spirit-produced fruit will go on reproducing from one life to another. There will be fruit—more fruit—much fruit.

A true branch, united with the vine, will always bear fruit. Not every branch bears a bumper crop, just as not every field has a bumper harvest (Matthew 13:8, 23), but there is always fruit where there is life. If there is no fruit, the branch is worthless and it is cast away and burned. Jesus is not teaching that true believers can lose their salvation, for this would contradict what He taught in John 6:37 and 10:27–30. It is unwise to build a theological doctrine on a parable or allegory. Jesus was teaching one main truth—the fruitful life of the believer—and we must not press the details too much. Just as an unfruitful branch is useless, so an unfruitful believer is useless; and both must be dealt with. It is a tragic thing for a once-fruitful believer to backslide and lose his privilege of fellowship and service. If anything, John 15:6 describes divine discipline rather than eternal destiny. "*There is [for believers] a sin unto death*" (1 John 5:16).

Jesus had spoken about peace (John 14:27); now He mentions love and joy (John 15:9–11). Love, joy, and peace are the first three "*fruit of the Spirit*" named in Galatians 5:22–23. Our abiding in Christ certainly ought to produce His love, joy, and peace in our hearts. Because we love Him, we keep His commandments; and, as we keep His commandments, we abide in His love and experience it in a deeper way.

Several times in John's Gospel you will find Jesus speaking about the Father's love for Him. We so emphasize God's love for the world and the church that we forget that the Father loves the Son. Because the Father does love the Son, He has put all things into the Son's hand (John 3:35) and revealed all things to the Son (John 5:20). The Father loved the Son before the foundation of the world (John 17:24); He loved the Son when the Son died on the cross (John 10:17). The amazing thing is that we believers today can experience personally that same love! Jesus prayed "*that the love with which Thou hast loved Me may be in them [the disciples and believers today*]" (John 17:26).

As branches in the Vine, we have the privilege of abiding and the responsibility of bearing fruit. Now we turn to the second picture, that of *friends*.

II. Friends—We Must Obey (John 15:12–17 ***" 12 This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. 13 Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends. 14 You are My friends if you do what I command you. 15 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. 16 You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and that your fruit would abide, so that whatever you ask of the Father in My name He may give to you. 17 This I command you, that you love one another."***

Typically, we have many acquaintances but very few friends, and even some of our friends may prove unfriendly or even unfaithful. What about Judas? "*Yes, mine own familiar friend, in whom I trusted, which did eat of my bread, hath lifted up his heel against me*" (Psalm 41:9). Even a devoted friend may fail us when we need him most. Peter, James, and John went to sleep in the Garden when they should have been praying; and Peter even denied the Lord three times. Our friendship with each other and with the Lord is not perfect, but His friendship to us is perfect.

However, we must not interpret this word *friend* in a limited way, because the Greek word means "*a friend at court*." It describes that "inner circle" around a king or emperor. (In John 3:29, it refers to the "best man" at a wedding.) The "friends of the king" would be close to him and know his secrets, but they would also be subject to him and have to obey his commands. There is thus no conflict between being a friend and being a servant.

The perfect illustration of this in Scripture is Abraham, "*the friend of God*" (2 Chronicles 20:7; Isaiah 41:8; James 2:23), who was also the servant of God (Genesis 26:24). In Genesis 18, our Lord and two angels came to visit Abraham as they were on their way to investigate the sin of Sodom. Even though Abraham was nearly 100 years old, he interrupted his noonday rest, greeted the visitors, saw to their comfort, and fed them a lovely meal. In the first fifteen verses of this chapter, Abraham is on the move; and twice he refers to himself as a servant (Genesis 18:3, 5). Note that this old man "hastened" and "ran" and encouraged others to perform their work quickly, a perfect example of a servant. Nor did Abraham sit and eat with them. Like a true servant, he stood nearby, ready to do their bidding.

In the last half of the chapter, the atmosphere changes, and Abraham is quietly standing still, communing with the Lord. He is still a servant, but now he is being a friend. "*Shall I hide from Abraham that which I do*?" the Lord asked. As a friend of God, Abraham shared God's secrets.

It is this kind of a relationship that Jesus described when He called His disciples "*friends*." It was certainly a relationship of *love*, both for Him and for each other. The "friends of the King" could not compete with each other for attention or promotion. They were a part of the "inner circle," not to promote themselves, but to serve their King. What a rebuke this must have been to the selfish disciples who often argued over who was the greatest!

How is it possible for Jesus to *command* us to love one another? Can true love be commanded? You must keep in mind that Christian love is not basically a "feeling"; it is a decision—an act of the will. The proof of our love is not in our feelings but in our actions, even to the extent of laying down our lives for Christ and for one another (1 John 3:16). Jesus laid down His life for both His friends and His enemies! (Romans 5:10) While the emotions are certainly involved, real Christian love is a decisive act of the will. It means treating others the way God treats us.

So, our friendship with Christ involves love and obedience. But it also involves knowledge: He "lets us in on" His plans. Indeed, He is our Master (John 13:13, 16), but He does not treat us as servants. He treats us as friends, *if* we do what He commands. Abraham was God's friend because he obeyed God (Genesis 18:19). If we have friendship with the world, we then experience enmity with God (James 4:1–4). Lot in Sodom was not called God's friend, even though Lot was a saved man (2 Peter 2:7).

God told Abraham what He planned to do to the cities of the plain, and Abraham was able to intercede for Lot and his family.

It is interesting to note that, in John's Gospel, it was the servants who knew what was going on! The servants at the wedding feast in Cana knew where the wine came from (John 2:9), and the nobleman's servants knew when the son was healed (John 4:51–53).

One of the greatest privileges we have as His friends is that of learning to know God better and "getting in on" God's secrets. Quoting Dr. Oswald Sanders as he spoke to the Back to the Bible staff, "Each of us is as close to God as we choose to be." We are His friends, and we ought to be near the throne, listening to His Word, enjoying His intimacy, and obeying His commandments.

One day while he was a fugitive, David was near Bethlehem, his home city, and he longed for a drink of water from the well by the gate. Three of his mighty men were close enough to David to hear his sigh, and they risked their lives to bring their king the water that he wanted (2 Samuel 23:15–17). That is what it means to be a friend of the king.

In John 14:16, Jesus reminded the men that they had this privileged position only because of His grace. They did not choose Him; He chose them! He chose them out of the world (John 14:19) and ordained them to do His will. Again, we find this important word *fruit*. As branches, we share His life and bear fruit; and as friends, we share His love and bear fruit. As branches, we are pruned by the Father; as friends, we are instructed by the Son, and His Word controls our lives.

The word *ordained* simply means "appointed." It refers to the act of setting someone apart for special service. We have graciously been chosen and set apart by the Lord in order to go into the world and bear fruit. He has sent us into the world (John 17:18) as His personal ambassadors to tell others about the King and His great salvation. When we witness to others and see then trust Jesus as Lord, we are bringing forth fruit to the glory of God.

As mentioned before, the evidence of true sonship, discipleship (John 15:8), and friendship (John 15:15) is *fruit*. "By their fruits you shall know them" (Matthew 7:20). Where there is true fruit, it remains; man-made "results" eventually disappear. Fruit has in it the seed for more fruit, so the process continues. Whatever is born of the Spirit of God has the mark of eternity on it, and it will last.

Once again, Jesus brought up the privilege of prayer. The friends of the king certainly speak to their sovereign and share their burdens and needs with him. In the days of monarchies, it was considered a very special honor to be invited to speak to the king or queen; yet the friends of Jesus Christ can speak to Him at any time. The throne of grace is always available to us.

John 15:15–16 summarize for us what it means to be a friend of the King of kings. It is a humbling experience, for He chose us and we did not choose Him. We must keep this in mind lest we become proud and presumptuous. It means that we keep our ears open and listen to what He says to us. "*Have you heard the secret of God*?" (Job 15:8) "*The secret of the Lord is with them that fear Him; and He will show them His covenant*" (Psalm 25:14). We must be attentive and alert.

But the purpose for all of this is that we might obey Him and get His work done. The King has tasks that must be performed; and if we love Him, we will obey His commands. We will seek to bear fruit that will please Him and glorify the Father. Our joy should be to please Him.

Jesus closed this part of His message by reminding them (and us) of the most important commandment of all: *love one another*. There are dozens of "one another" statements in the New Testament, but all of them are summarized in "love one another." Jesus had already given this commandment to the Eleven (John 13:34–35), and now He has repeated it twice (John 15:12, 17). It will be stated in one way or another many more times in the New Testament letters, especially by John in his first epistle. The friends of the King must not only love Him, but also one another. What joy it brings to His heart when He sees His friends loving one another and working together to obey His commands.

This study began in the vineyard and ended in the throne room! The next study will take us to the battlefield where we experience the hatred of the lost world. If we are not abiding as branches and obeying as friends, we will never be able to face the opposition of the world. If we do not love one another, how can we ever hope to love lost men and women in the world? If we are not marching together as the friends of the King, we will never present a united front to the enemy.

***"Without Me, you can do nothing"* (John 15:5). We are not simply handicapped or hindered. We are hopelessly paralyzed! We can do *nothing!* But if we abide in Him, if we stay close to the throne, we can do *anything* that He commands us to do!**

What a privilege—and what a responsibility!

Questions for Reflection and Group Discussion

1. **What does it take for someone to be your friend?**

2. **Read John 15:1–17. What is significant about Jesus' use of the vine and branches to teach about a believer's relationship with Him?**

3. **What does (or should) abiding in Christ involve for you—practically speaking, on a typical day?**

4. **When is it hard for you to abide in Jesus? Why?**

5. **How does God prune us? Why? **

6. **When have you experienced God pruning you? How did you respond?**

7. **What fruit does God want us to produce? How do we do that?**

8. **What does friendship with Jesus involve? Give an example from your life.**

9. **How did Jesus demonstrate His friendship with the disciples?**

10. **What privileges do we have as Jesus' friends?**

11. **What can you do this week to abide in Jesus?**