

Committed to Excellence in Communicating Biblical Truth and Its Application

# Orcutt Christian Church

A Grace Driven Church for Grace Needing People!

"Come As You Are ... Leave Changed!"

## Burning Questions 11

### Where Do We Go When We Die?

Luke 16:19-31

Mar 19, 2017

Communion: Bill Decker

Care Calling: Robert Domingos

POTLUCK

Saturday 3/18 Clean Up: Roger Wagner

- 1 🎵 **How Majestic [DH 2238]**
- 2 🎵 **Soon and very soon [All 3] 757**
- 3 🎵 **O that will be the glory [All 3] 769**
- 4 🎵 **Doxology [DH 1981]**
- 5 🎵 **When we all get to heaven [v: 1,3] 772**
- 6 🎵 **When the roll is called up yonder [v: 1,3] 774**
- 7 🎵 **Family of God [DH 2357]**

#### Luke 16:19-31 (NASB)

"Now there was a rich man, and he habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, joyously living in splendor every day.

<sup>20</sup> "And a poor man named Lazarus was laid at his gate, covered with sores, <sup>21</sup> and longing to be fed with the *crumbs* which were falling from the rich man's table; besides, even the dogs were coming and licking his sores. <sup>22</sup> "Now the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to Abraham's bosom; and the rich man also died and was buried. <sup>23</sup> "In Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and \*saw Abraham far away and Lazarus in his bosom. <sup>24</sup> "And he cried out and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus so that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my

tongue, for I am in agony in this flame.' <sup>25</sup> "But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your life you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony. <sup>26</sup> 'And besides all this, between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, so that those who wish to come over from here to you will not be able, and *that* none may cross over from there to us.' <sup>27</sup> "And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, that you send him to my father's house— <sup>28</sup> for I have five brothers—in order that he may warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.' <sup>29</sup> "But Abraham \*said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.' <sup>30</sup> "But he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent!' <sup>31</sup> "But he said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead.'"

### **Resources:**

Randy Alcorn: Heaven

Alexander Campbell: The Millennial Harbinger, Volume 7, p. 171

Jack Cottrell: *The Faith Once for All* ♥🎵♥

R.C. Foster: Studies in the Life of Christ

Wayne Gruden: Systematic Theology

A number of you showed interest in what happens when we die. The Bible has a lot to say about what will happen to you after you die.

So, today we'll examine what the Bible has to say about the world after death.

I'm not interested in what speculations people have. However, I am highly interested in what the Bible teaches. Don't you want to know what happens when you die?

And, if you haven't committed your life to Jesus Christ, it is my prayer that you will wake up from indifference, and give your life to our Lord Jesus Christ.

It is ultimately important to you!

### **John 14:6 (NASB)**

**Jesus said... "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.**

From a biblical point of view, there is no other way to God.

As Dr. Foster says, "**Jesus is the only authority on what happens after death.**"

Of all the religious teachers in history, Jesus was the only one qualified to speak authoritatively about death and the afterlife.

He is the only one who claimed He would die and return from the dead, and then He did just that.

## **I. Why This Theme Is Crucial to Consider**

### **A. The Possibilities of Eternal Joy or Eternal Misery**

The possibilities for joy and misery after you die are trillions of times greater than in the few years on this earth before you die. The Bible compares this life to a vapor that appears as you breathe on a cold winter morning and then vanishes

#### **James 4:14 (NASB)**

**14 You are *just* a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away.**

The Bible describes the time after death as "ages of ages."

Not just one or two ages of thousands of years, but ages of ages; thousands and thousands of ages

#### **Revelation 14:11 (NASB)**

**11 "And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever; they have no rest day and night, those who worship the beast**

**and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name."**

It matters infinitely what happens to you after you die.

## **B. The Question of Authentic Faith**

This theme forces the question as to whether our faith is real, substantial, biblical faith in objective, external reality outside ourselves.

Namely, is our faith in God or is it a mere subjective experience of feelings and thoughts inside ourselves that function as an emotional cushion to soften the bumps of life and give us a network of friends?

Facing eternity has an amazing effect of sobering us out of religious delusions.

## **C. The Centrality of God**

Thinking about death and eternity helps keep God as the center of our lives by testing whether we are more in love with this world than we are in love with God himself.

Does the thought of dying give us more pain at losing what we love on earth than it gives us joy at gaining Christ?

## **D. The Call to Christian Courage**

When the biblical truth of this theme grips you, it frees you from fear and gives courage to live the most radical, self-sacrificing life of love.

### **Philippians 1:21 (NASB)**

**21 For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.**

The person who can truly say, "**To die is gain,**" will be able to say like no one else, "**To live is Christ**" (Phil 1:21)

But if you can't say, "To die is gain," then you will probably say, in one degree or another,

## **1 Corinthians 15:32 (NASB)**

**32 If the dead are not raised, LET US EAT AND DRINK, FOR TOMORROW WE DIE.**

Being sure of what happens when you die is indispensable as a believer in Christ for your daily courage and for not losing heart through the pain and the diminishing health of this life.

## **II. Four un-Biblical Views of the Afterlife**

### **A. Reincarnation.**

Reincarnation is the belief you have lived many previous lives and after you die you will return in another life form.

If you have lived a good life, you come back as a higher life form, but if you haven't, you will be reborn as a bug or snake. Reincarnation is embraced by the Eastern Religions and the New Age Religion in America.

### **B. Annihilation.**

Annihilation is the belief you cease to exist when you die.

You are simply annihilated.

Death is the end of everything.

This is basically the belief held by atheists and agnostics. Sometimes this belief leads to the idea, "this life is all there is, so you might as well have as much fun as you can."

### **C. Universalism.**

Universalism is the belief that all people will be "universally restored" after they die.

In other words, it teaches that everyone, regardless of how they lived their lives on earth will eventually end up redeemed in heaven.

Universalism is embraced by some who call themselves Christians such as the Unity School of Christianity and the Unitarians.

#### **D. Purgatory.**

Purgatory has nothing to do with Hades.

Only the spirits of the lost go to Hades, and only the spirits of the saved go to purgatory.

All who are in purgatory will eventually be in heaven.

It is a step toward heaven, not hell.

It is an instrument of salvation, not condemnation.

The idea is simply this, that many if not most saved people when they die still have some remains of sin that have to be worked off or purged out of their system.

This may include some vestiges of sinfulness, or even some temporal penalties for minor sins that were not fully forgiven in this life.

Hence the need for a proportionate period of redemptive suffering to be endured before one is worthy of heaven.

This doctrine must be rejected as inconsistent with the biblical teaching on the intermediate state.

The main proof text for purgatory is not even in the canonical Bible; it is in the Apocryphal book of 2 Maccabees (12:42–45).

**2 Maccabees 12:42-45 (New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition NRSVCE)**

**42 and they turned to supplication, praying that the sin that had been committed might be wholly blotted out. The noble Judas exhorted the people to keep themselves free from sin, for they had seen with their own eyes what had happened as the result of the sin of those who had fallen. 43 He also took up a collection, man by man, to the amount of two thousand drachmas of silver, and sent it to Jerusalem to provide for a sin offering. In doing this he acted very well and honorably, taking account of the resurrection. 44 For if he were not expecting that those who had fallen would rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead. 45 But if he was looking to the splendid reward that is laid up for those who fall**

**asleep in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought. Therefore he made atonement for the dead, so that they might be delivered from their sin.**

Every canonical Scripture that pictures the state of believers in the afterlife portrays them as experiencing joy and bliss in the very presence of God or Christ.

There is no text whatsoever that depicts a period of suffering for the saved.

Also, no text suggests any kind of distinction among saved saints on the other side of death.

The Apostle Paul gives this picture of heaven:

**Hebrews 12:22-24 (NASB)**

**But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels,<sup>23</sup> to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of *the* righteous made perfect,<sup>24</sup> and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood**

Most significantly, though, the doctrine of purgatory must be rejected because it contradicts the biblical doctrine of grace, especially the doctrine of full forgiveness through the saving blood of Christ.

In Jesus, *all* penalty for *all* sins is forgiven;

**Romans 8:1-2 (NASB)**

**Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.<sup>2</sup> For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.**

Now, if the doctrine of Purgatory is not found in the Canonical Bible of the Jews, nor found in the Canonical Bible of the Protestants, then where did the concept come from?

The practice of praying for the dead did not descend from apostolic

times as Romanists claim, but was a pagan custom inherited from the contemporary heathen religions.

In fact, the belief in a place of purification after death is incredibly old.

The first news about it was found in India hundreds of years before the coming of Christ.

The Egyptian priests taught the theory of torments after death sixteen centuries B.C., and Babylonians, Persians, and Phoenicians believed the same.

Still now Buddhist priests in their liturgies and rituals have prayers for the souls suffering in fire that have been transmitted unto them through an unbroken succession of clergymen from time immemorial.

Even the great Greek philosophers, as Socrates and Plato, who lived in the fifth century B.C., fix up an amazing purgatory theory along the lines of earlier pagan mythologies.

Among the Greek and Roman gods Pluto was considered to be the god of hell and purgatory.

At least in ten writings of Virgil, the Latin poet, can be found a description of how dead sinners are "purged in fire."

With such precedents and environments it can be easily understood how some of the early fathers could introduce in the church a practice which was developed later on by Romanists into the Catholic dogma of purgatory.

These views are contrary to what the Bible teaches about the after-life.

Jesus Christ spoke many times about the afterlife, and He never suggested anything like reincarnation, annihilation, or universalism, or purgatory.

In **Luke 16:19-31**, He tells us exactly what happens when a person dies.

Most conservative biblical scholars don't consider this story to be a parable.

I believe He is recounting an actual event.

Two important clues reveal this is not merely a parable.

First, in His parables, Jesus never identified his characters.

In this account, we are introduced to two real people, and Lazarus is named.

The second clue eliminating this as a parable is that Jesus always stated a principle or lesson before or after a parable.

This account stands alone.

It is to be taken at face value.

## **II. Important lessons we can learn from this true account.**

### **A. Wealth Has Nothing To Do With Your Righteousness**

Jesus' warnings against the perils of riches had been an attack upon the entire philosophy of life which the Pharisees held.

They maintained that their wealth was their concrete proof of God's favor upon them.

This first lesson is about the rich man.

Jesus speaks about a man who was so wealthy he

**Luke 16:19 (RSV)**

**feasted sumptuously every day.**

That phrase meant he didn't have to work; he was one of the idle rich.

Then, like now as preached by the Health and Wealth gospel, people made the mistake of thinking wealth was connected to goodness.

Wealthy people were rich because they were good and poor people lived in poverty because they were bad.

When he died, I'm certain there was a huge funeral at which people spoke of his greatness and goodness.

However Jesus said he ended up in hell!

Jesus is saying your net worth has nothing to do with your standing before God.

There's nothing wrong with being wealthy as long as you acknowledge God as the source of your wealth.

But it's obvious this rich man was a self-centered person.

His sin was not in being wealthy, but in ignoring the needs of Lazarus who was begging for food at his doorstep every day.

The same is true today.

There are some wealthy people who love God, but there are many who don't even acknowledge Him.

In our culture the wealthiest people are the movie stars, rock stars, and sports stars.

And, many of them have excluded God from their lives.

Tiger Woods is worth millions and is one of the most recognizable sports heroes on the planet.

But sadly, he doesn't claim to have a belief in Jesus as the Son of God.

The world has one standard for greatness, and it is totally contrary to the way God sees greatness.

## **B. Having a Relationship With God Will Not Prevent Suffering**

The account opens with an extraordinary series of contrasts in which the ordinary elements of life are described:

rich man vs: beggar;

purple and clothed in fine linen vs the beggar laid at his gate (rags, dogs, sores);

faring sumptuously every day vs. desiring to be fed with the crumbs.

Lazarus was a man who had a relationship with God.

When he died he was escorted by the angels into the presence of Abraham.

But look at the condition of his life!

Jesus said he was a beggar.

He was carried to the door of the rich man's house every day to scrounge around for a few crumbs.

**Luke 16:20-21 (NASB)**

**"And a poor man named Lazarus was laid at his gate, covered with sores, <sup>21</sup> and longing to be fed with the *crumbs* which were falling from the rich man's table; besides, even the dogs were coming and licking his sores.**

Jesus said he was covered with sores.

He was so weak he couldn't stop the dogs from gathering and licking the sores.

Now, if you stood those two people side by side when they were alive and asked the question, "Which one is right with God?" Most of us would have picked the rich man who lived in luxury every day.

And we would have been wrong!

There are some who preach a health and wealth gospel that says if you are right with God, you will always prosper and always be healthy.

Apparently poor Lazarus never heard that kind of preaching. The truth is sometimes righteous people suffer a great deal in this life.

But thankfully, this life is not all there is!

We've known good people who loved Jesus who suffered greatly in this life.

And we need to keep in mind what this text teaches.

Tis life is not all there is.

**Joni Erickson Tada was a vibrant, strong teenager.**

**When she was 17, she dove into the water and broke her neck, and has been paralyzed since that day.**

**However, she isn't bitter.**

**In fact, she has commented many times she thanks God for her suffering because it has made her depend more on God.**

**As she refers to her wheelchair she says, "This is the prison where God set me free."**

**She says she is going to appreciate heaven much more than the rest of us.**

### **C. You Will Continue to Exist When Your Body dies**

The rich man and the poor man each lived totally different lives, but they had one thing in common with each other: they both died.

I think that's the main point Jesus is trying teach us, that we are all going to die, but that's not the end.

Death is no respecter of persons.

It doesn't limit itself to the homeless, or the poor.

Death knocks on the doors of the mansions as well as the shacks.

**There is an old Irish Proverb that says: "If the rich could hire the poor to die for them, the poor could make a good living."**

But you can't hire anyone to die for you; that's something you've got to do yourself.

A split second after the rich man died, he woke up in a terrifying place called hell.

Meanwhile, his family and friends were planning his funeral, but he wasn't even there.

He already arrived at his interim destination.

He didn't attend his own funeral.

Nobody does.

Lazarus died and it doesn't even say he was buried.  
His body might have been tossed into a paupers grave.  
But he wasn't there either.  
A split second after Lazarus died the angels escorted his soul into  
the presence of Abraham, a place of comfort and security.  
Nobody ever attends their own funeral.

**I remember sharing the story of the young Methodist preacher  
who was attending Chandler School of Theology in Atlanta.  
He was sent out to a rural church to fill in while the minister  
was on vacation.  
The local mortuary asked him to do a graveside service out in a  
rural cemetery.  
The mortuary said there would have a crew to bury the de-  
ceased.  
Well, he wasn't familiar with the country side, and got lost.  
He was driving furiously over those back Georgia roads, and  
was getting later and later.  
Finally, he saw a little church with a cemetery and he assumed  
it was the right place because he saw three guys leaning on  
their shovels next to a large pile of dirt near the back of the  
church.  
The hearse was nowhere in sight, so he figured they had given  
up on him and left.  
He quickly got out of his car and walked up to the grave.  
He said to the workmen, "I see you've already buried the vault,  
let's pause and let me say a few words and pray."  
The workmen removed their hats, and he began the service.  
Afterwards, one of the workmen smiled and said, "Preacher,  
that's the best funeral service for a septic tank I've ever  
heard!"**

We sometimes forget when we are having a funerals service the  
person who has died is not in the casket; it's just their body.  
Death is not the end.

It's not like a period at the end of a sentence, it's only a comma. Like Lazarus and the rich man, there is an existence after death.

C.S. Lewis wrote that once he came across a tombstone with the epitaph: **“Here lies an atheist—all dressed up and no place to go!”**

The man who died left instructions for those words to be added to his tombstone because he thought it was funny.

Realizing there is a heaven and a hell, C.S. Lewis commented: **“I’ll bet now he wishes that were so.”**

The Bible teaches that each of us is a body and a soul or spirit.

With our body we relate to the physical world beneath us.

With our soul, or our personality, we relate to the human world around us.

With our spirit, we relate to the spiritual world above us.

At the point of physical death, the body ceases to function, but the soul or spirit continue to live on.

At death, the invisible part of who we really are moves out of the body and enters into a new existence.

Paul, the Apostle, says

**2 Corinthians 5:1 (NASB)**

**For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.**

A tent is for camping.

It is a temporary place we live in for about 70 years.

This tent gets old and we groan as we experience pain and suffering.

The longer we live, the more tattered and feeble the tent becomes.

But that's okay because for a Christian, we have a new existence to look forward to.

We read

**2 Corinthians 5:8 (NASB)**

**we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord.**

That's what happens at death: the body dies, but the soul and spirit live on.

If the Lord tarries, one day, my heart will stop pumping blood, my lungs will stop processing oxygen, and my brain synapses will stop firing.

Someone will examine my body and officially pronounce me dead. But please don't feel sorry for me, because I will be more alive than any of you.

I'll simply be absent from this old body, and I'll be present with the Lord!

**D. If You Don't Have a Relationship With Jesus You'll Go To Hell**

The rich man lived a life of ease and luxury, but he didn't have a personal relationship with God.

His soul left his body and arrived a split-second later in hell.

Now, I don't enjoy speaking on hell, but because I am committed to teaching God's word verse by verse, I'm not going to gloss over the fact that there IS a hell, and those who die without Jesus will spend eternity there.

What kind of minister would I be if I didn't warn you of the reality of hell?

**The 19th Century English preacher J.C. Ryle wrote:**

**“The watchman who keeps silent when he sees a fire is guilty of gross neglect. The doctor who tells us we are getting well when we are dying is a false friend. And the pastor who keeps back hell from his people in his sermons is neither a faithful nor a charitable man.”**

I know those kinds of words offend many folks in our enlightened generation.

I'm sure if they could, the U.S. Supreme Court would outlaw hell as cruel and unusual punishment.

**Dr. Quintin Morrow wrote:**

**Most churches stopped preaching about Hell years ago. Hell made people uncomfortable. The topic of Hell was bad for the bottom line—attendance and income. Hell damaged people's self-esteem. Hell has been retained in our modern lexicon as a convenient curse word, and as a metaphoric description of our worst experiences—as in “war is hell.” But we have papered over Hell to the detriment and peril of our souls. I can assure you, the Devil believes in a Hell. That's why he is working so tirelessly in our world before he is dumped there. The demons Jesus cast out of people believed in Hell and pleaded with Him not to send them there. Jesus certainly believed in a Hell. He spoke more about Hell than Heaven. His constant admonition to His hearers was this: Do whatever you must to avoid Hell.**

The Rev. Dr. Quintin Morrow, is rector of St. Andrews Episcopal Church, an affluent parish of 2,500 in Fort Worth, TX.

[www.st-andrew.com](http://www.st-andrew.com)

If you knew there was a bomb in my car waiting to explode when I turned the key, I know you would warn me to stay away from my car.

You would do everything possible to persuade me NOT to start my car.

If you didn't wouldn't you be guilty of negligent homicide.

I must warn you there IS a hell.

And if you don't know Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior, it will be your eternal destination.

It doesn't matter how much money you have, or how morally pure you are.

If you haven't committed your life to Jesus, you're headed there.

We expect wicked, evil people will be in hell, but there will be many good, religious people there as well.

I believe the rich man was terribly shocked to wake up and find himself in hell.

He was a religious man.

He even called Abraham his father.

If you had asked the rich man before he died if he was going to heaven, he would have said, "Sure! I have given lots of money to my local synagogue!"

But after he died, his religion or his money couldn't save him.

In hell, he even begged Abraham to send Lazarus with some water to alleviate his pain, but his cries were futile.

Once someone has died, there is no way to cross over from hell to heaven.

His next concern was for his brothers who were just like him, religious but lost.

**I remember Dwight Moody saying what motivated him to become focused on personal evangelism was a murderer in a London prison, who said to him: "If I believed what you just preached, I would walk on broken glass to carry that message of salvation to the lost."**

If we could hear the voices of hell, they would be begging for someone to go warn their loved ones not to come to hell.

The Bible teaches many religious people will be surprised on Judgement Day.

These are people who go to church, give their money, and speak the right religious jargon.

Some of the most staggering words to ever proceed from the lips of Jesus are found in

**Matthew 7:23 (NASB)**

**"And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.'**

If you stood before Jesus Christ right now, could He say, "I know you?"

Do you have a personal relationship with Him, or do you just have an occasional habit of being religious?

### **E. If You Have A Relationship With Jesus You'll Spend Eternity With Him**

Lazarus' eternal destination was different.

Although he suffered in his life on earth, he had a personal relationship with God.

So when he died, the angels escorted his soul to be in presence of those who are righteous in God's eyes.

I believe when we enter Abraham's Bosom, we'll be shocked to see who's there—and who is not!

In this invisible world of the dead, not only will we see Lazarus there, we'll see a man who lied and deceived and stole something that wasn't his: Jacob.

We'll see a man who committed both adultery and murder: David. We'll even meet a man who lived a life of crime, and was saved a few minutes before he died.

On the day Jesus was nailed to the cross to take the punishment for our sins upon Himself, there were two thieves crucified with him. One of the thieves looked at the bleeding, dying Savior and only saw a man.

He said, "If you are the Son of God, save yourself—and us, too!"  
But the other thief looked at Jesus and saw more than a man, he saw a King.  
He made a profession of faith.  
He said, "Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

He had enough faith to believe Jesus was a king, and He was going to have a future in which He could remember him.

Jesus answered the thief:

**Luke 23:43 (NASB)**

**And He said to him, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise."**

What was the difference between the two thieves?

What was the difference between Lazarus and the rich man?

What is the difference between some people who go to heaven and those who go to hell?

Two important words: FAITH and FORGIVENESS.

These people didn't just believe in God, they believed God, they committed their lives to Him.

Jesus said

**John 14:15 (KJV)**

**If ye love me, keep my commandments.**

Jesus has made it crystal clear what He expect us to do.

Have you made a decision to comply with Jesus terms of pardon?

Have you made a decision to think and act differently?

Have you made a public declaration of your faith that Jesus is the Son of God, and your Savior?

Have you been immersed into the Name of the Father, the Son, and The Holy Spirit for the forgiveness of your sins?

Have you made the decision to follow Jesus on a day by day basis?

Right now He is saying to you - "Someday you will be with me in paradise."

Do you have that assurance?

If you do, you don't have to be afraid of death.

**Like many of you, I have been blessed through the years by the wonderful singing of Ethel Waters.**

**Few people realize the terrible beginning she experienced in her life.**

**She was born as the result of incest; she started her career in vaudeville, and appeared in 13 movies.**

**During that time, she lived a godless life, but in the late 1950s she met Jesus.**

**After that, she began to sing for Him.**

**For many years, she sang at the Billy Graham Crusades.**

**Her trademark song was, "Why should I feel discouraged, why should the shadows fall?...His eye is on the sparrow and I know He watches over me."**

**Before she died in 1977, she was asked about dying in an interview.**

**Ethel said: "I'm not afraid to die. I'm kinda' looking forward to it. I know the Lord has His arms around this big, fat, sparrow!"**

What's going to happen to you after you die?

You'll never be good enough to EARN God's mercy and forgiveness.

You must turn from your sins and place your faith in Jesus and make Him the Lord of your life.

## **Prayer and Invitation**

## March 19 Lesson 3 **Matchless Love**

Devotional Reading: [1 John 4:16b-21](#)

Background Scripture: [John 15:1-17](#)

### JOHN 15:1-17

**1** “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. **2** He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. **3** You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. **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. **5** “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. **6** 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. **7** If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. **8** This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. **9** “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. **10** If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love. **11** I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. **12** My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. **13** Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. **14** You are my friends if you do what I command. **15** 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. **16** 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. **17** This is my command: Love each other.”

### KEY VERSE

*My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. [John 15:12](#)*

## Introduction

### A. Thinning the Peaches

My brother used to work in a peach orchard. There, he and his fellow workers would climb ladders to remove enough tiny peaches so that the remaining ones were spaced every eight inches or so on the branch. This time-consuming task would eliminate more than half the peaches on some trees!

The rationale for this practice recognizes that a peach tree has access to a limited amount of nutrients. If the peaches are not thinned out, they will end up small and hard. If thinned, however, the peaches that remain will be robust and profitable.

Today's lesson involves an illustration of a different fruit-bearing flora: the grapevine. Orchard and vineyard are similar in at least one way: as peach trees need to have their produce thinned, grapevines need to be pruned in order to produce optimal fruit. But the pruning of which Jesus spoke has a different basis, as we shall see.

### B. Lesson Background

The vineyard was a staple of agriculture in the ancient world. 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 (compare 2 Samuel 16:1). One of the enticing descriptions of the promised land was its productive vineyards (Deuteronomy 6:10, 11; 8:7-10). Indeed, a physical sign brought back by the ill-fated spying expedition into the promised land was a massive cluster of grapes (Numbers 13:23).

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). Some students consider today's text also to be a parable, but it's better thought of as an illustrative comparison or an extended metaphor without a plot. Everything depends on the definition of *parable*. 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 the process known as cultivating the vines (Deuteronomy 28:39).

## I. The True Vine

(John 15:1-7)

Today's lesson is from a section in the Gospel of John known as the farewell discourses or the upper room discourses (John 13-17). These consist of Jesus' teachings on the night before his crucifixion as he spent time with his disciples. It was a time of solemn Passover observance with friends; the result was a rich deposit of Jesus' teachings that is invaluable for our spiritual health today.

The *King James Version* of Mark 14:15 and Luke 22:12 is the source of the designation "upper room." Most of Jesus' teaching in this location is found only in John's Gospel.

### A. Branches Bearing Fruit (vv. 1-3)

#### 1a "I am the true vine,

Jesus uses imagery of a vineyard as a familiar context for the vital teaching he is offering. From the outset, there is no doubt regarding whom the imagery represents. In referring to himself as *the true vine*, Jesus affirms that he is the one chosen by God for the task set forth in John 3:16.

God's covenant people of the Old Testament era are also pictured as a vine or vineyard (examples: Psalm 80:8; Isaiah 5:1, 2; Jeremiah 2:21). The Israelites failed to live up to the covenant, however (see Isaiah 5:7; Hosea 10:1). Therefore a new vine, one that is the ultimate true vine, is needed—Jesus.

How to Say It

---

Canaan *Kay*-nun.

Deuteronomy Due-ter-*ahn*-uh-me.

Galilee *Gal-uh-lee*.  
Judea *Joo-dee-uh*.  
Samaria *Suh-mare-ee-uh*.

**1b “and my Father is the gardener.**

The second phrase at the beginning of this illustration is equally clear regarding identification. *Gardener* is a general word for “farmer.” As such, it is not narrowly focused on someone who tends only vineyards. We can see the distinction in 2 Kings 25:12; Jeremiah 52:16; etc. Even so, the task of a vineyard worker can certainly be part of a gardener’s capabilities.

**2, 3. “He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.**

The identification that should be obvious in these two verses will be explicitly clear in verse 5 (below): Jesus’ disciples are the branches in this illustration. Lifeless branches need to be removed from the vine to allow for new growth. Regarding the disposition of unproductive branches that *he cuts off*, see verse 6 (below). The fruit-bearing branches are the new ones, budding off the vine in later spring. A bit later, these new branches will themselves receive the gardener’s attention so they might be in the best possible state to produce robust fruit.

The action *he prunes* has the specific intent and result of the disciples’ being *clean*. This is true of the 11 disciples who remain at this Passover celebration, the one “unclean” disciple already having departed (John 13:10, 11, 21-30). In the original language, the word behind the translation *prunes* is the verb form of the noun translated *clean*. The figurative pruning hook is *the word* of Jesus’ teachings.

As vines are prepared for the final part of the growing season by a second pruning, so Jesus’ disciples are prepared for their future ministry after he leaves them (John 16:5). This preparation will strengthen them to persist when persecution comes (16:1-4).

Unlike the opening illustration in this lesson regarding peach trees,

the pruning of which Jesus speaks is not because the vines have access only to a limited amount of nutrients. God's resources are unlimited! The danger, rather, lies in worldly distractions and hindrances to the disciples' mission (compare Matthew 13:22). Another kind of distraction may be ministry opportunities that are valid in and of themselves, but siphon time away from a disciple's calling (example: Acts 6:2).

### *NOW OR LATER?*

I once met a man who loved to grow pumpkins. The pumpkins he grew were BIG, weighing hundreds of pounds each. Two such pumpkins would fill the bed of a pickup truck! His secret was to pull off every blossom on the pumpkin vine except the one at the end. He did this successfully year after year. You might say that his success resulted from having clean vines. Jesus' disciples were clean because of what he had taught them. This fact should cause us to put ourselves in the spotlight of God's Word to reveal the deadwood in our own lives, deadwood that impedes our service to him. Which is better: to cut away the deadwood now at our own initiative or to wait until God does it himself?—J. B. N.

#### *What Do You Think?*

How do you know whether a season of personal distress or retrenchment is to be interpreted as God's pruning?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Considering positive fruit-imagery in Scripture (Matthew 3:8; Romans 7:4; Galatians 5:22, 23; Ephesians 5:9; etc.)

Considering negative fruit-imagery in Scripture (Luke 13:6-9; Romans 7:5; Galatians 5:19-21; Ephesians 5:11; Jude 12; etc.)

#### **B. Believers Abiding in Jesus (vv. 4-7)**

**4, 5. "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.**

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. To *remain* can imply clinging to someone or something (see John 8:31, where the same word is translated “hold to”). In the context of the vine analogy, a branch that remains is one that is still attached to the main trunk of the vine.

Such is the relationship between Jesus (the main vine) and his disciples (the branches). If there is a strong, living connection, the disciples will *bear much fruit*. Detached branches are not capable of producing fruit.

Jesus does not pause to define the fruit of the Spirit; the apostle Paul will do so in Galatians 5:22, 23. Rather, Jesus seems intent on keeping the disciples focused on the vital importance of remaining with him. What Jesus has to say in this regard applies not only to those gathered with him in the upper room, but to all Christians.

**6. “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.**

If a branch is detached (*thrown away*) for any reason, it immediately begins to die. Its leaves wither. Any fruit that happens to be on it begins to rot (compare Matthew 7:15-20). Unless there is hope of being grafted back in (Romans 11:17-24), detached branches are used for fuel (compare Ezekiel 15).

Note that the act of detaching by “the gardener” (vv. 1, 2, above) happens because of a disciple’s failure to *remain* in Christ. To withdraw from the Lord is to make oneself fit only for *the fire* of judgment and destruction (see Luke 3:8, 9).

*What Do You Think?*

What are signs a person is about to “get burned” in this life because he or she is not attached to the true vine?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Regarding causes/results of “burnout”

Regarding causes/results of “burning bridges”

Regarding causes/results of “burning with passion”

**7. “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask**

**whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.**

This verse clarifies how Jesus lives in us: it is due to the fact that his *words remain in* our hearts and minds. We have listened to his teachings and are following them.

This is a two-way relationship, however. For just as branches do not produce fruit without nutrients from the vine, so Jesus does not expect fruit from his disciples without his help. This he promises to give when asked (compare Mark 11:24; John 14:13; 16:23). The fact that his words abide in us helps ensure that we will pray in ways that are pointed toward producing fruit. When we do so, our thoughts will be aligned with the intentions of the one who will answer prayer: God.

## II. The True Friend

(John 15:8-17)

Verse 8 marks a transition as Jesus leaves the vineyard analogy behind in order to speak of the dynamics of friendship and love.

### A. Disciples Glorifying God (vv. 8-11)

**8. “This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.**

The fruit-producing life of a sincere disciple brings glory to the Father (compare Matthew 5:16). To give God *glory* means for him to be honored appropriately.

**9, 10. “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love.**

The Father’s love for his Son, Jesus, is a marvel to consider (see John 3:35; 10:17); it is eternal, existing “before the creation of the world” (17:24). Also a marvel to consider is the fact that Jesus compares this eternal love of *the Father* for him with his (Jesus’) love for the disciples!

An important distinction between the two loving relationships is that the first is unconditional while the second is conditional. The condition is clear: *If you keep my commands, you will remain in*

*my love*. The disciples should follow Jesus' example. As he has shown love for the Father by keeping the *Father's commands*, so too the disciples can show their love for Jesus by keeping his *commands* (John 14:15; 1 John 2:5; 5:3).

**11. "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.**

The time in the upper room—a time of confusion and uncertainty (John 13:22, 36, 37; 14:5, 22; 16:18)—is soon to give way to a time of great sorrow. That sorrow will result from the traumatic events of Jesus' arrest, trials, torture, crucifixion, and death, which are but a few hours away. But on the other side of this great sorrow will be *joy* (compare 16:22). Jesus promises joy that is *complete* and lasting (also 17:13). With our advantage of 20/20 hindsight today, how can it be otherwise?

*What Do You Think?*

What should others see in us that indicates the fullness of our joy in the Lord?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

In times of want (Habakkuk 3:17, 18; 2 Corinthians 8:1-5; etc.)

In times of persecution (Acts 5:41; 1 Peter 1:3-9; etc.)

In times of blessing (Deuteronomy 16:15; Matthew 5:11, 12; etc.)

Other

**B. Servants Becoming Friends (vv. 12-15)**

**12. "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.**

Jesus has just stressed the importance of keeping his commandments, but he does not state specifics such as what, when, where, etc. He has given the disciples no list like the Ten Commandments, no manual of discipline, no employee handbook. The reason why is clearer now in the fact that Jesus has in mind one central *command*, that they *love each other*. This is the "new command" Jesus introduced earlier in the evening (John 13:34). John, the author of this Gospel, never forgets this imperative. He

surely preaches it continually as the decades roll by, because he eventually refers to it as not new; it is one he has had “from the beginning” (1 John 3:11, 23; 2 John 5).

The disciples do not pick the type or intensity of the love they are to exhibit; those are established by Jesus as he teaches that their mutual love is to be on the order of how he has loved them.

### **13. “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.**

The significance of the qualifier “as I have loved you” in verse 12 is intensified yet cloaked by the prophetic word we see here. This is foreshadowing, a hint of what lies ahead (compare John 10:15). The greatest gift Jesus grants his friends is eternal life. That comes about through Jesus’ death on the cross, which becomes reality in just a few hours from when Jesus speaks. What is cloaked in the upper room will remain so until understanding comes (Luke 9:44, 45; 24:25; John 20:9; etc.).

#### ***LAY DOWN YOUR TIME?***

Years ago, a friend proposed that we demonstrate John 15:13 love when we invest our time in others. That seems to minimize Jesus’ intent or even miss it altogether. As valuable as spending time with others can be, doing so doesn’t match the severity of the text’s “lay down one’s life.”

Jesus was emphasizing the need to love as he loves us. He demonstrated at the cross what he meant. The self-sacrifice on behalf of sinners of one who had no sin is the greatest example of love that can be imagined! The spirit and attitude of such willingness is what Jesus asks us to emulate. See 1 John 3:16.—J. B. N.

#### *What Do You Think?*

What are some ways to emulate Jesus’ self-sacrificial spirit?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

When among fellow believers

When among unbelievers

**14, 15. “You are my friends if you do what I command. 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 result of obeying Jesus’ directive to love one another is that the disciples have a new status: they are no longer called Jesus’ *servants* but his *friends*. The word translated *servant* refers to a slave. The one-sided nature of the slave-master relationship is seen in Jesus’ statement *a servant does not know his master’s business*. The master never feels obligated to discuss his dealings with his slave.

In Jewish culture of Jesus’ day, a disciple’s status parallels that of a servant: “The student is not above the teacher, nor a servant above his master” (Matthew 10:24). But now Jesus frees his disciples from this model. The proof of their new status is Jesus’ statement *everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you*. Those gathered with Jesus in the upper room are, and will continue to be, privileged to have more information about God’s plans than any believer prior to that time (John 14:26; 16:12-15; 1 Peter 1:10-12).

### **C. Jesus Charging Workers (vv. 16, 17)**

**16a “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you**

The fact that Jesus has chosen those now gathered with him in the upper room (rather than the reverse) is documented in Matthew 4:18-22; Mark 1:16-20; 3:13-16; Luke 5:1-11; 6:13-16; John 1:35-51; 6:70. *Appointed* means Jesus has placed them in positions of authority, power, and purpose. The Gospels reveal the extraordinary nature of the authority and power Jesus grants his apostles (see Matthew 16:19; Luke 9:1; 10:19; John 20:23). They play a unique role in the founding of the church (Ephesians 2:19, 20; Revelation 21:14).

**16b “so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—** Jesus qualifies his “bear much fruit” desire from verse 8, saying the fruit *will last* (a form of the word *remain*). Believers exhibiting

fruit of the Spirit produce enduring fruit in the form of new disciples. Evangelism becomes the primary fruit-bearing task (see Matthew 28:19, 20).

**16c “and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you.**

We are considering verse 16 in three segments for convenience, but this third part must not be divorced from the other two in application. It is important that we understand that the *whatever* does not mean that Jesus is promising that any and all prayer requests will be granted. The larger context is that of fruit-bearing, and the construction of verse 16c is linked to that.

The wording and context of John 14:13, 14 are similar: Jesus’ promise to do “whatever you ask” is tied to his statements regarding “the works” he has been doing and prophecy of the “greater things” to be manifested by “whoever believes in me” (14:12). The greater results to be achieved by Jesus’ followers point to the expansion of Christianity, as growth in the number of converts accelerates after Jesus’ ascension.

But what about all the other prayer concerns we may have? The author of this Gospel notes in one of his letters that “if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us” (1 John 5:14). The power behind prayer is also noted in the statement “the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up” (James 5:15). We like to claim this power, but all Christians have experiences when earnest, specific prayers are not answered in the way desired. We should never give up on prayer (Luke 18:1-8), but if our faith is based on an absolute reading of John 15:16 for us personally, we are in a danger zone.

*What Do You Think?*

How do we ensure that “in Jesus’ name” is more than words merely tacked on ritually to the end of our prayers?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Cautions to be drawn from Exodus 20:7

Cautions to be drawn from Matthew 6:9

Cautions to be drawn from Acts 19:13-16

Cautions to be drawn from James 5:14, 15

Other

### **17. “This is my command: Love each other.”**

Yet again Jesus stresses the imperative to *love each other* (see John 13:34, 35; 15:12). To what extent should we take this? How far does this go? Remember that Jesus defined the greatest love for others as a willingness to die for them (John 15:13). This is a high standard, and frankly, we have a long way to go!

## **Conclusion**

### **A. Limits on Love?**

A common theme in advice about relationships is the need to set boundaries. Ministers, for whom demands on their time seem endless, are advised to learn how to say “no.” Having been to Burnout Land more than once in my four decades of ministry, I realize the dangers of overwork. But a friend recently advised me to learn how to say “yes.” Find ways to help; don’t be quick to limit your willingness to lend a hand.

This will work only if motivated by love. We must not serve others out of obligation or expectation, but out of love. This is particularly difficult for ministers who feel they are being paid to serve the members. In such cases, ministry becomes something like paying a plumber to fix a leaking pipe. But when love becomes our motive in serving, we may notice others following our example. Their love-motivated service will make our own burden of service lighter.

### **B. Prayer**

Heavenly Father, may we produce fruit for you, fruit that is lasting, as we spread the message of your Son to the unbelieving world. We pray this in the name of the true vine, Jesus. Amen.

### **C. Thought to Remember**

Love one another!

Standard Lesson Commentary 2016-2017 (NIV)