

Women's Bible Study Spring
So That You May Believe: The Gospel of John (Chapters 15-17)
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Gretchen Steer



This week I have the joy of looking at three chapters of John's gospel – 15, 16 and 17. And, remarkably, they fall into three points. Who would ever have thought that three such different passages would sort themselves neatly into three headings? ☺ So let's start with John 15 by looking at:

I. Life in Jesus

This photo shows John standing in front of ripe vineyards in Spain. It is late October; the hills and forests are changing hue, and when we walked through the Rioja region on the Camino de Santiago we found masses of ripe grapes hanging ready to be picked. In fact plenty of our fellow pilgrims helped themselves as they walked by. I want you to have this picture of vineyards in your mind as we think about the first thing that Jesus desires for us in chapter 15, which is

A. Fruitfulness

Please turn to John chapter 15 verse 1:

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ²He 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. ³You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴Remain 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." (John 15:1-4)

First, here's the backstory. The metaphor of the vine was used by prophets in the Old Testament to refer to the nation of Israel. However, it was almost always negative, in that Israel had become a wild, untamed vine. But here Jesus states that **he**, not the nation of Israel, is the true vine, and that all of us who remain in him shall be fruitful.

Look at this picture of grapes. Vines, like all fruit and flower bearing plants, grow best when they are pruned regularly. You can see that there is one central trunk that supports the branches, not a lot of foliage, and heavy clusters of grapes. The vine didn't get that way by growing wild. It was planted, trained to grow along the trellis, and pruned to make sure that the plant didn't waste energy growing leaves, but rather concentrated on bearing fruit.

Every gardener here knows that pruning involves judicious cutting. If you don't prune a rosebush, for example, it grows in on itself, producing lots of leaves and puny flowers. We prune the parts of the rosebush that are growing inward and getting tangled up, and free the shoots that are growing outwards towards the light. Roses are pruned to help them become their true selves. Jesus tells us flatly that if we want to be productive, we have to submit to his pruning. Things will be cut out of our life, both internally and externally, which are painful to lose. Sometimes pruning comes with immense suffering. But it always has purpose and it always results in greater productivity.

Look at verse 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.” (John 15:5-8)

When I moved to Minnesota I was ecstatic to find out that regular homeowners can get a burn permit for just \$5 a year from the DNR. This may not sound like a big deal to you, but growing up in California, where the fire danger is so high that you can’t even have fireworks on the 4th of July, it was pretty great to discover I could make a bonfire anytime I wanted. We live in a forest and I have plenty of deadwood to get rid of.

I’m probably stating the obvious, but unless branches are connected to the main plant, they die. When I prune shrubs or cut branches off our trees, they remain green for a long time. But I toss them in my brush pile, and months later, they are brown, dry and ready to burn.

We can fake it for a while when we start to drift away from Jesus. We still look green, pretending that we are connected to the vine. But eventually the lack of nourishment takes its toll and we become withered branches, fit only to be burned. You see, fruitfulness is something that is so obvious we just can’t hide it, any more than a grapevine can conceal the fact that it has not produced grapes. Fruitfulness in our case means that we are doing the same works that Jesus came to do – telling the good news of the gospel, forgiving, loving, making disciples. And we will also have the fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, self-control. These things cannot be hidden. They also cannot be faked for very long. Eventually either the fruit appears or the branch withers. There’s not really any middle ground here. We are either connected to Jesus or we’re not.

Jesus tells us to remain in him. We do that by keeping a relationship with him, just as we do with spouses and children that we love. We stay close by talking to them, by sharing our lives with them. But Jesus also tells us to keep his words inside ourselves. And this means that we flourish more when we immerse ourselves in scripture, either on our own, in Bible study or in corporate worship. When we remain, we are fruitful.

So our life in Jesus is going to be characterized by fruitfulness, but also, by

B. Love

Look at verse 9 of chapter 15:

“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.” (John 15:9-14)

“Love each other as I have loved you.” That is a terrifyingly high standard, because Jesus’ love for us led him to the cross. A few of us will be called to lay down our physical lives as martyrs. But we are all commanded to lay down our lives for others in love, which means that we put them before ourselves. I don’t mean just serving people, but rather seeking their spiritual good above all things.

So, for example, seeking our children’s spiritual good might mean that we are willing to say No to something they want but which doesn’t further their spiritual good. Saying No might mean they don’t like us. But seeking their spiritual good means that we place boundaries around our children to keep them from evil. And that is not a popular thing for parents to do in any generation.

I cried angry tears at age 15 when my mother cut up my favorite pair of jeans shorts. She had told me not to wear them – they were immodestly short and had a hole in the pocket that revealed my underwear – and I ignored her. It had taken me years to get them looking just right, since Levis in those days didn’t come pre-worn and full of holes like they do now. But she was willing to risk my anger to hold me to an appropriate standard of modesty. So she cut them up. Sometimes laying down your life for the spiritual good of someone you love means holding them to a standard they don’t want but you know is best for them.

Laying down your life could mean giving up your kidney or part of your liver for someone else’s survival. Laying down your life could mean depriving yourself of something you enjoy in order to financially support missions. Laying down your life could mean asking strangers into your home to show them hospitality. If we are seeking the spiritual and physical well-being of those around us, if we want to lay down our lives like Jesus did, there will be sacrifice...just like him.

Jesus goes on in verse 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. ¹⁶You 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. ¹⁷This is my command: Love each other.” (John 15:15-17)

To us the idea of being a friend rather than a servant seems pretty natural. But the word “doulos” meaning “slave” or “servant” wasn’t a shameful title of bondage. Moses, Joshua and David were called the doulos of God, as a title of honor. But friendship to Jesus goes beyond simple loyalty. We share our hearts, fears, hopes, dreams with our friends. So to be friends with Jesus means that he has divulged his plans to us. He has chosen us to join him in his work, to bear fruit that will last. God is no longer a distant stranger but our friend.

So love gets a new purpose in this passage. Love is not just a warm feeling of friendship, but is laying down one’s life for others. Love is now a command rather than an option based on how we feel.

I personally find that kind of scary. How can you command love? But it’s possible if we understand love not as an emotion, but as an action coupled with an attitude. The action of love demonstrates itself through practical means. The attitude of love puts others’ welfare before our own. Thankfully, we don’t do this by ourselves. It’s a natural outgrowth of our relationship with Jesus. We start to view others as he views them, with compassion,

understanding and love. If we love each other, we will make disciples (bear fruit) and we will show to the world that Christians are characterized by one extraordinary thing – love.

That kind of love he's talking about has to transcend political, racial and cultural differences. This love welcomes strangers, feeds the hungry, seeks the spiritual good of everyone around us. This kind of love continues the work that Jesus did, the work the Father sent him to do.

So life in Jesus means fruitfulness and love. But he also has some words about what to expect in this life of faith. You see, the world hated him because Jesus stood against the prince of this world, Satan. And so anyone who allies themselves with Christ automatically gets dragged into the war. If they persecuted him, they will persecute us for acting like him. As Jesus points out, a servant is not greater than his master, so if it happened to him, it WILL happen to us. Look at verse 21:

“They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the one who sent me.” (John 15:21)

It all sounds pretty dire if we finished with the first 25 verses of chapter 15. But there is so much more. Imagine that you're a soldier in battle. Your squad is pinned down by sniper and cannon fire. You can't move and you certainly can't advance, and you don't think you can hold the ground you're on without dying.

But then air support comes in. And fresh soldiers. And medics to tend your wounds. Even though you're still in the same position, everything has changed, and you know that even if the battle is fierce, it will be won, because you have superior firepower.

That turn in the battle is what happens when Jesus introduces the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. So chapter 16 turns the topic from Life in Christ to

II. Life in the Spirit

Most of us find the Holy Spirit kind of hard to grasp. Is he a person? Is he subservient to Jesus and to God the Father? What does he do?

Jesus tells us that his first task is to reveal

A. Truth

Jesus is knuckling down to the hard task of telling his disciples that he is leaving. Not in a couple of years or a couple of weeks, but that very night. And like someone who knows they are dying, he says everything he needs to say. Look at John 15:26:

²⁶ “When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father—he will testify about me. ²⁷ And you also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning.” (John 15:26-27)

The Holy Spirit is synonymous with truth. Not only does he teach truth, but he reveals truth in situations where lies are being told. Sometimes this happens in a way we can't easily explain. For example, a prominent pastor once received an email which was not addressed to him, but which was from one staff member to another and revealed an extramarital affair. Nothing in the address of the email explained how the senior pastor got it. But it broke open a situation that needed to be dealt with in order for the church to

move ahead. We see this in scripture, when Ananias and Sapphira conspired together to lie about a gift they were giving. The Holy Spirit revealed to Peter the truth of the situation and the consequence of their behavior was death.

The Holy Spirit teaches us truth from scripture as we study it. He reveals our own motivations to us even when we try to delude ourselves. In a sense he brings Jesus Christ inside us by testifying to the truth of Jesus. His truth-telling role will become very important to the disciples, because all of them will be disheartened and grieving 24 hours later as they see the body of Christ taken down from the cross. It's the Holy Spirit who reveals the glorious truth about the crucifixion, that it is a time of triumph, not defeat.

In the first six verses of chapter 16 Jesus explains that they need to know what will happen, because persecution is coming. With Jesus gone back to his Father, they might feel abandoned and helpless – but with the Holy Spirit they will know the truth. Now look at verse 7 of chapter 16:

⁷But very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. ⁸When he comes, he will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: ⁹about sin, because people do not believe in me; ¹⁰about righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; ¹¹and about judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned.

He isn't leaving them bereft. Jesus gives them an Advocate - a word that means someone who intercedes in a court of law for the defendant. The Holy Spirit will protect them by revealing the truth that the world doesn't want to hear. He will defend them by proving the world wrong. The world doesn't want to believe that there are consequences to sin; the Holy Spirit shows that there are. The world doesn't want to believe in judgment, but the Holy Spirit will show that the prince of this world, Satan, is defeated at the cross.

¹²“I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. ¹³But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. ¹⁴He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you. ¹⁵All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will receive from me what he will make known to you.” (John 16:7-14)

Notice here the relationship between the Spirit, the Son and the Father. They work in sync, because they are one person in three different aspects. While Jesus was on earth it was his privilege to glorify God the Father. When Jesus returned to heaven, the Spirit will continue to glorify both the Son and the Father in us, teaching us to give glory to the Godhead.

But truth is only one of the gifts he brings. The Holy Spirit also brings

B. Power

To explain the sort of power they will receive, Jesus starts with another metaphor – birth. Look at verse 20 of chapter 16:

²⁰Very truly I tell you, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. ²¹A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time

has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world.

In February we had a big news day. Our daughter Hannah got engaged to Blair Price, and on the same day Nick, Amy and Jennie announced to us on FaceTime that Jennie was getting a little brother or sister in early October. Now that is happy news any way you slice it, but the downside is that Amy suffers from severe morning sickness. With Jennie it lasted for the first 30 weeks. I hoped it would be different this time, but Amy's about 16 weeks and still vomiting regularly. I experienced this over the full length of four pregnancies, so I am deeply empathetic! But whether you suffer in pregnancy or not, most of us have anguish in labor, at least until we get that epidural. Yet it is amazing to see how mothers forget that pain with the joy of the child they receive. Jesus predicts that it will be the same for the disciples – their terrible grief will turn to joy in spite of the circumstances of Jesus' death.

Look at verse 22:

²² So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy. ²³ In that day you will no longer ask me anything. Very truly I tell you, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. ²⁴ Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.” (John 16:20-24)

You might have noticed that Jesus has now promised three times in this passage that the Father will give us whatever we ask in Jesus' name. Look back at 15:7, 15:16, and now 16:23.

Does that mean all we have to do is pray “In the name of Jesus” and it will happen? Jesus has just said that “in that day you will no longer ask me anything, but you will ask in my name.” This means that we now have a direct relationship with God the Father through Jesus Christ. The Father himself loves us because we love Jesus. How does that change our prayers? Now that we love Jesus, we will ask for what is already within his will. Our prayers change to conform to him, and the more we become like him the more powerful our prayers will become because we will be praying for what is already within his intention.

²⁶ In that day you will ask in my name. I am not saying that I will ask the Father on your behalf. ²⁷ No, the Father himself loves you because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God. ²⁸ I came from the Father and entered the world; now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father.” (John 16:26-28)

This description of prayer is mysterious, a concept that gives me shivers. Could it really be that we can ask for what our hearts most desire? All I can say is that when I've experienced truly powerful prayer, it has always been when my will and emotions are engaged, when the stakes were high, and when I prayed for someone other than myself. I hope to spend the rest of my life finding out more and more about intercessory prayer that aligns itself with the Father's will, praying in Jesus' name. Because when Jesus promises something, he delivers. And he has promised three times here that the Father will give us whatever we ask in his name.

These verses are followed by some comments from the disciples, who are relieved that Jesus is finally speaking plainly and not in parables. Jesus responds in verse 31:

³¹ “Do you now believe?” Jesus replied. ³² “A time is coming and in fact has come when you will be scattered, each to your own home. You will leave me all alone. Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me.

³³ “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” (John 16:31-33)

This is a lot to take on board. First they've been promised amazing power, and next the disciples are warned that they will be scattered and abandon Jesus. But in the end Jesus is warning them about the future so that they will have peace. Verse 33 is one of the great promises of scripture. “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” And he did.

You see, the cross looked like the greatest defeat in the world, but it was actually the greatest triumph. And it was also the moment of Satan's judgment, for at the moment Jesus died and rose again, Satan was done for. Colossians 2:15 tells us that Jesus “disarmed the powers and authorities and made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.” (Colossians 2:15) Every tool Satan had used to keep people in bondage – sin, doubt, fear of death – was now all an empty threat. Sin would still be in the world and it would still carry consequences, but it was no longer the death sentence it had been. And death itself, that terrible, fearful, unknown passage, would be transformed to just become a brief transition from life to real life in eternity. To say that Jesus has overcome the world is an understatement. The entire battlefield is now the stage for Jesus' victorious return and for our future eternal life. Take heart, my friends! Jesus has overcome the world.

But Jesus isn't finished. Because in chapter 17, we see

III. Life in the Father

At this moment Jesus probably stood and assumed the traditional Jewish posture for prayer, standing with hands raised. Such a prayer would have been prayed out loud so that not only God would hear it but the disciples around him. Now remember, this has all been going on in the Upper Room and Judas has stepped out to complete his wicked betrayal. So the 11 disciples left are the ones who hear this glorious, high priestly prayer that Jesus gives, and John records it so that all Christians might know how Jesus prays for us in the hour of his death.

First, Jesus asks that God glorify him, that he may glorify God. He asks God the Father to return to him the glory that they shared in heaven before the incarnation. It's been a remarkable interlude, for God the Son to assume human flesh and human limitations here on earth, but it is coming to an end. He is returning to heaven. There is a lot in this prayer, but I want to emphasize two things. The first is:

A. Protection

Earlier this spring I visited my sister's hobby farm in California along with our grandchildren Charlie and Pippa. There is a lovely fenced duck pond on the property – a beautiful, peaceful place that remains cool even under the hot California sun.

Unfortunately, the ducks weren't the only inhabitants of the pond. There was also a VERY realistic plastic alligator head. I think it was put there to scare off duck predators, but it looked horribly real as it bobbed around the pond. And when 3 year old Charlie laid eyes

on it he just about went airborne in terror. Uncle Mike kindly chucked it into the bushes and I thought we'd seen the last of it, but the next day my sister came upon it and said, "What's the alligator doing over here?" Charlie took one look and began screaming with terror. So we had an elaborate ceremony in which the alligator head was imprisoned in a locked shed.

Like Charlie, we are so very liable to fear, even when we know it is our imagination rather than reality that is making us afraid. Jesus knows that, and is concerned that his physical absence will make the disciples vulnerable, so he prays for God's protection on them. Look at verse 11:

¹¹ I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of ^a your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one. ¹² While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by ^b that name you gave me. None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled.

¹³ "I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. ¹⁴ I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. ¹⁵ My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. ¹⁶ They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. ¹⁷ Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸ As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. ¹⁹ For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified." (John 17:11-19)

This explains everything. Jesus prayed, not that we would be taken out of the world, but that we would be protected from the evil one while we are in the world doing God's work. And by the Holy Spirit's ministry of truth and the word of scripture that would come to us, we are sanctified – set apart and made holy – so that we are fit to do that work.

But protection is not the only thing Jesus asks for us. He prays for

B. Unity

You see, it wasn't persecution from the outside that would kill churches and destroy believers. Rather, disunity would blunt the message of the gospel. Because when the church descends to infighting, we totally destroy what makes us unique in this world. Remember that Christ promised us fruitfulness and love? Love was to be the defining characteristic, and the one aspect of Christianity that would draw in others. But without love there's no unity, and without unity, we're just like any other faction in a secular setting.

So Jesus prayed not only for his disciples and the embryonic church he was leaving, but in verse 20 he prays for you and me:

²⁰ "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, ²¹ that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one— ²³ I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

²⁴ “Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world. (John 17:20-24)

We need to have unity because our unity mirrors the union of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Christian unity is to be a picture of the relationship between the three members of the Godhead, just as marriage is to be a picture of Christ and the church.

If we had to do it on our own we never could. But the Holy Spirit comes alongside to foster unity – not by just papering over differences, but by encouraging us to set our mind on Christ so that we all seek a common goal - the glory of God.

Then Jesus ends by reminding his hearers that they now know God because they know Jesus:

²⁵ “Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. ²⁶I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.” (John 17:25-26)

That is a lot to take in. In Jesus Christ we have both fruitfulness and love. In the Spirit we have truth, in knowing how to follow Christ, and the power to carry it out. And in God the Father we have both protection and unity.

Let's go back to the alligator in the shed for a moment. Although we kept telling Charlie it wasn't real, the fact that it turned up twice when he wasn't expecting made it haunt his dreams. And now, three months later, he will often matter of factly tell me the alligator story, so it's still on his mind. But he always assures me “It can't get out.”

It can't get out. Like the alligator, Satan has been bound by Jesus' death on the cross. His eventual destruction is coming, but in the meantime, he can't get out to do what he wants. He would destroy us, but we are under the protection of God the Spirit, God the Son and God the Father. And so we are safe, forever.

**WBS is a ministry of Autumn Ridge Church – Rochester, MN 55902
Questions: ouren.jennifer@autumnridgechurch.org
www.autumnridgechurch.org**