

John 15:1-17 No Greater Love

Introduction

'I love you'- those are words spoken millions of times a day in our land, but with a multitude of meanings. A total stranger might walk up to you on the street and utter the words and then walk away into the crowd. You might feel dazed or confused by such a statement. However, if the individual speaking the words was your parent or your child or someone else in your circle of family and close friends then the meaning of them would be easy to put into context – and be deeply appreciated. The reason for it is that for words to have significance they have to be translated into action in everyday life. Anyone can say words, but only someone truly serious about living them will attempt to model them through life's ups and downs, through the easy times and the tough.

On Remembrance Sunday, we come with a particular sense of gratitude to men and women who through their gift of service to the nation in World War One onwards have enabled the rest of us to enjoy the incredibly precious gift of freedom. The memorials written on stone monuments; in stained glass windows and on communion tables are a powerful reminder of the trauma experienced by this nation in the 1914-1918 war. It was meant to be the war to end all wars, but there was too little effort to put in place an effective peace settlement that led ultimately to a second world war, after which at last a more effective peace settlement plan was formulated and executed. Yet wars have not ceased and conflicts have continued to the present day. How we view the world will be determined to a significant degree by how we view the future. Do we expect love to triumph over evil? Do we believe that good can come out of even the worst of circumstances? The secular individual who leaves God out of the picture might have a pretty hard time saying 'yes' to these questions. However, to a child of God who trusts our promise-keeping God there is a very different scenario unfolding over the canvas of history. What we believe is what Paul articulated in Romans 8:28-30: *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.*²⁹ *For those God foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.*³⁰ *And those He predestined, He also called; those He called, He also justified; those He justified, He also glorified.* In the light of such a theology we can understand the confidence of Jesus when He cried out: *Finished* (John 19:30) shortly before laying down His life on the cross. Jesus knew the long-term fruit of His labours. This passage of Scripture is a most helpful one to help us look at His life, but it is also a very challenging one to use as a mirror for reflecting on our own lives.

1. Our relationship with Jesus (John 15:1-11)

Jesus at the Last Supper had said: *I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom* (Matthew 26:29). This image was, therefore, very fresh in their minds and indeed very familiar to Jewish people of that day from teaching illustrations in the synagogue sermons to prophetic messages in the Jewish Bible, the Old Testament, to the literal physical vines many saw growing in their communities. However, the use of this image by Jesus was unique –no-one had even come close to anything like the point Jesus would make at the Last Supper. What Jesus says here is deeply challenging both to those of us who have already professed faith, and to those of us yet to take that step. Jesus declares that

the evidence of our claims to be Christians will be seen to some degree or other in our lives. By implication Jesus is saying that a person can use the vocabulary of Christian profession in their speech but if it has no impact on their character and conduct then its credibility is called into question. The apostle Paul will later explain what are the aspects of the fruit of the Spirit that should to some degree at least be visible (Galatians 5:22-23). It is a call to self-examination. What evidence is there that I am practicing what I claim to profess? In John 15:1-11 there are four elements to the picture.

(a) **The Vine** Jesus said: *I am the true vine...* (John 15:1) In the Bible this imagery is used with reference to the past, present and future. (i) **The Past** The nation of Israel was described in this way. Isaiah 5:1-7, for example: *I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard: my loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. ² He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well. Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit. ³ Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. ⁴ What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it? When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad? ⁵ Now I will tell you what I am going to do to my vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it will be destroyed; I will break down its wall and it will be trampled. ⁶ I will make it a wasteland, neither pruned nor cultivated, and briers and thorns will grow there. I will command the clouds not to rain on it.* ⁷ **The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the nation of Israel, and the people of Judah are the vines He delighted in. And He looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.** The Old Testament people of God were His vineyard yet they repeatedly failed to bear the fruit expected of them. Psalm 80:14-18 took the imagery further with an appeal to God to have mercy on the vineyard He had planted and bring spiritual renewal into their midst: *Return to us, God Almighty! Look down from heaven and see! Watch over this vine, ¹⁵ the root Your right hand has planted, the son You have raised up for Yourself. ¹⁶ Your vine is cut down, it is burned with fire; at Your rebuke Your people perish. ¹⁷ Let Your hand rest on the man at Your right hand, the son of man You have raised up for Yourself. ¹⁸ Then we will not turn away from You; revive us, and we will call on Your name.* In this passage from Psalm 80 the *son of man* imagery is equivalent to ‘humanity’. It is not only used for one individual representative of humanity, in particular of the exalted figure in the vision of Daniel 7:13-14. Jesus and the audiences who listened to His messages were well aware that the vine was the symbol of their nation in the Maccabean era when Israel last experienced its independence as a nation. Yet that state fell apart. It was an unhealthy vine whose branches were malfunctioning and the Roman Empire swallowed it up. This pointer gives a big hint that the followers of Jesus will only be in a spiritually healthy place if we, both individually and collectively, are truly dependent on Him. (ii) **The Future** This use of vine imagery is less common in the Bible but speaks of the ungodly who will face the judgement of God because of their rejection of Him. Revelation 14:18-19: *Still another angel, who had charge of the fire, came from the altar and called in a loud voice to him who had the sharp sickle, ‘Take your sharp sickle and gather the clusters of grapes from the earth’s vine, because its grapes are ripe.’ ¹⁹ The angel swung his sickle on the earth, gathered its grapes and threw them into the great winepress of God’s wrath.* God will not be mocked all will be judged on the basis of our spiritual fruitfulness. (iii) **The Present** Jesus said in John 15:1: *‘I am the true vine, and My Father is the gardener.* Our spiritual fruitfulness depends exclusively on our relationship with Him who provides the resources we need to produce spiritual fruit. Have you put your faith and trust in Jesus? This is the place to start. However, we need daily to be dependent on Him –are you investing time in the key things the first followers of Jesus saw as the priorities? In Acts 2:42 it states: *They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and*

to prayer. If you or I were a representative Christian of this congregation- could these words accurately describe us? I hope so.

(b) **The Vinedresser** (John 15:1b-2) ...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. This is a specialist work. In many United States vineyards the pruners have a three-year apprenticeship in order to learn thoroughly when, where and how to cut the vines for the best effects, in order to gain the highest yields. How much more diligent and personal is the care of our heavenly Father who knows and cares for each one of us –better than we could know or care for ourselves. The vinedresser must carefully remove the dead wood each year in order to enable the healthier shoots to grow and produce fruit- sometimes also removing some living branches that assist with the vine’s overall vitality and fruitfulness. Pruning is not necessarily pleasant for the plant but is for its good. Sometimes the pruning of God’s discipline is necessary in our lives. Just as an earthly parent may prefer to avoid disciplining their child when they do wrong, but knows it must be done for the future good of the child, so the Lord will discipline His children in order to enable us to reveal more of character and fruitfulness He desires in us. God may work through circumstances as naturally as through a special intervention of some kind or other. The word translated *prune* in John 15:2 is translated as *clean* or *cleans* in John 13:10. In John 13:10 Jesus said: *And you are **clean**, though not every one of you.* Judas Iscariot outwardly was one of the twelve disciples, but inwardly he was lacking the spiritual cleansing and fruitfulness that is to be expected of a genuine follower of Jesus, then or now. This same truth was given by Paul in Ephesians 5:25b-27: *Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her ²⁶ to make her holy, **cleansing her** by the washing with water through the word, ²⁷ and to present her to Himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.* The skilled vinedresser will treat each vine individually to help it be the most fruitful it can be, likewise our heavenly Father will work personally in your life and mine to accomplish a similar but more important work.

(c) **The branches** (John 15:3-6) 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.* Ezekiel 15 is another of the Old Testament passages in which the nation of Israel is described as a vine. There is a stark reminder that vines have only two uses for fruit or fuel, that is they have but one purpose to be fruitful. It is essential that each branch has a healthy relationship with the vine in the same way that the Christian believer needs to remain united with Christ. It is worth pointing out that the different images of the Church in the New Testament make it clear that a solitary spiritual existence is not envisaged in the models presented to us: a body and its members (I Corinthians 12); the bridegroom and his bride (Ephesians 5); the shepherd and his sheep (John 10); Eleven times in this passage Jesus urges His followers to ‘remain’ or ‘continue’ or ‘abide’ in Him- depending on the particular Bible version. How dependent am I on Him? How much does it matter that my life is dependent on Him?

(d) **The Fruit** (John 15:7-11) 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.*

What kind of fruit should be sought on these branches? In verse 7 there is a pointer to earnestness in prayer, both seeking and receiving some answers to prayer; such a person will naturally have regular times of personal prayer but will want where possible to join in corporate prayer with other believers as well. In verse 9 there is a reference to a love for God's people. Do you increasingly take pleasure in the successes of fellow believers in your local Christian family? In the same way do you feel sadness when you hear of their struggles and difficulties in life- if you have a genuine love and concern for them then you will. There will always be people in our families or close friends for whom we have the strongest affections, but belonging to a church family will be something that enriches our lives and the secular world outside us can test our genuineness by our love for one another. John 13:34-35: *'A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.'*³⁵ *By this everyone will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another.'* Our growth in maturity as believers will demonstrate greater graciousness in the words we choose to use concerning one another, especially when we disagree over something; or in our attitudes towards one another. In other references in the New Testament we have spiritual fruitfulness outlined in several ways. (i) **Seeing people come to faith** Paul in Romans 1:13 reminded them that the main purpose of his visiting them one day was: *in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles.* (ii) **Looking for opportunities for mission and evangelism**. In John 4:34-35 Jesus spoke these words to His disciples: *Don't you have a saying, "It's still four months until harvest"? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest.*³⁶ *Even now the one who reaps draws a wage and harvests a crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together.* The disciples saw a people who were different to them and whom they might normally avoid contact. Jesus spotted a people hungry for God and looked for opportunities to share His love and the good news of the Gospel with them. A fruitful Christian will be praying for opportunities to communicate our faith in a variety of practical ways that may include words as we desire others to know our Saviour too. (iii) **Growth in Holiness** Romans 6:22 *But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit [fruit] you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life.* A spiritually growing Christian senses their attitudes and values change over time as we grow in our faith –because God's Spirit is at work in us. (iv) **In financial giving** (Romans 15:27b-28) *For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings.*²⁸ *So after I have completed this task and have made sure that they have received this contribution [literally fruit], I will go to Spain and visit you on the way.* In the context it was an aid appeal. Our first obligations are to our physical families and church family, but our generosity need not stop there. It is no accident that the first aid appeals for needy people overseas in the modern era arose in Britain at the height of the strength of Evangelical Christianity. Timothy Richard, a Welsh Baptist minister serving with the Baptist Missionary Society in China, was the pioneer in this field in the 1870s, in the context of a famine in China. The Gospel that is fruitful touches wallets and purses as well as hearts! (v) **In character development** Galatians 5:22-23: *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,*²³ *gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.* (vi) **In praise to God** Hebrews 13:15: *Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise – the fruit of lips that openly profess His name.* A Christian in a right and healthy relationship with God will naturally want to have healthy relationships with other Christians as well.

2. Our relationship with other Christians (John 15:12-17)

What does a fruitful Christian life look like in the local community of believers we call the local church? In John 15:12-17 there are four pointers to aid our thinking and reflection.

(a) **The command of Jesus** (John 15:12, 17) ¹² *My command is this: love each other as I have loved you...* ¹⁷ *This is My command: love each other.* No one can command someone else to have particular feelings about another person because it doesn't work like that! But what Jesus commands here is our practical attitude or disposition towards fellow believers. The vocabulary Jesus uses has a strong sense of intentionality and planning. I will make every effort to create the conditions so that I can behave in this way that I might actually find very difficult for a whole variety of reasons. When someone has hurt us in the past by their words or actions our natural response is to be defensive and protect ourselves from being placed in that position again, but the 'hedgehog' pose in the face of danger does not resolve issues as we know from the many dead hedgehogs besides public roads. Curling up into a ball might protect them from some foxes, but not from cars and lorries on the highway. There are Christians who create defensive mechanisms to prevent future pain, but who are unable or unwilling to seek the transformation of their situation. The guidance of Jesus here is that the people who are identified with Him and indwelt by His Spirit can overcome their fears and begin to develop or to strengthen constructive relationships even with people we naturally find it difficult to relate to. There will always be some people we find it easier to get on with than others, our personalities and interests ensure that this will always be the case. The question for us to answer is this: Who might the Holy Spirit be prompting me today to consider as someone with whom I ought intentionally to try harder in the coming weeks to get on with? We then need God's wisdom as to how we ought to go about it- sometimes we need the assistance of a good friend or more mature Christian to assist us take such a step. Because this is a command of Jesus not an option, we have to take it very seriously indeed. We cannot declare that loving Jesus is enough without also wanting to love other people that He loves as well!

(b) **The illustration of Jesus** (John 15:13) *Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.* Obeying the command of Jesus we may feel is hard enough without taking into account His illustration of love! But Jesus knows our thoughts and feelings and challenges us all to raise the bar of the standards we set for ourselves in this matter. We on Remembrance Sunday rightly acknowledge the people who gave their lives for their country in these major wars that we commemorate, often in the hope that their sacrifice might permit a valued colleague or friend standing alongside them to survive. Only Monday 2 November 2015 in Liverpool, a large crowd of people gathered at the Anglican Cathedral for the funeral of PC Dave Phillips, who was killed while on active service on 5 October this year in that city. I know nothing about this man of whom so many lovely tributes were paid, but one thing I noted that stood out was the fact that he had downloaded the hymn 'The Lord's My Shepherd' onto his phone so that if he died on active service his family would know an appropriate song to choose to sing at his funeral [BBC News website 2.11.2015]. I sincerely hope that none of us has to be in a position of literally laying down our lives for family members or colleagues in coming days, but this certainly will be the experience of a small minority of people in our land. However, we will all certainly be given the opportunity by God to demonstrate practical Christian love in difficult circumstances in a variety of possible settings. Sometimes it might be easier to contemplate doing the bigger heroic action rather than acknowledge our need to step out in faith and do the right thing in a smaller but still

challenging situation in everyday life. Maybe we need to ask the Lord: Is there some practical action You would like me to take this week to demonstrate my love for You Lord and its outworking in love for other people? It is a dangerous prayer to pray, because God might take us up on it!

(c) **The demonstration of love** (John 15:14-15) 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.* Talking the talk in the abstract is so much easier than walking the walk in the real world! The Lord knows how we feel and He would at times on earth have been tempted to take the easier option and avoid the difficult situations He experienced, especially the suffering He endured on the cross. We need to reflect on Luke 22:39-44, which states: *Jesus went out as usual to the Mount of Olives, and His disciples followed Him.* ⁴⁰ *On reaching the place, He said to them, 'Pray that you will not fall into temptation.'* ⁴¹ *He withdrew about a stone's throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed,* ⁴² *'Father, if You are willing, take this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Yours be done.'* ⁴³ *An angel from heaven appeared to Him and strengthened Him.* ⁴⁴ *And being in anguish, He prayed more earnestly, and His sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.* Jesus does not ask you or me to do anything He would not have been willing to do while on earth. He modelled a pathway for us follow, not as servants who can be given orders which they have no choice to follow, but as friends; as people whom He is advising to live in a particular way. For love's sake and for His sake we are called to make choices that reflect something of the likeness of Jesus in particular situations. There is some good psychology at work here in the stance of Jesus. He is saying to us –I trust you to do the right thing and to think carefully about how you speak to one another because you value My friendship. Will you and I honour the trust He has placed in us? What might demonstrating our friendship with Jesus look like in the particular contexts we might find ourselves in over the next few days?

(d) **The planning of love** (John 15:16) *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.* Life does not consist of luck or chance but of circumstances that come to pass under the overarching providence of God. Human beings may and do have the ability to make good or bad choices which impact for better or for worse on other people's lives, but may we never forget the sovereignty of our Saviour over our lives. Our lives do have a plan and a purpose –even if at times we are quite unclear about our current sense of direction as Christians. God chose you! Let those words sink in. Your life is not an accident. God has a purpose for your life as John 15:16 makes clear. The context of the guaranteed answers to prayer at the end of that verse is the provision of the resources we need to *bear fruit- fruit that will last*. It is not a blank cheque to pray for the number of winning lottery tickets or for your favourite sports team to win their next game! Or to pass your school or university exams without doing the necessary work; God who demonstrated the greatest love of all in sending Jesus as our Lord and Saviour desires us to follow in His footsteps by showing that same love to other people. The test for us all is our spiritual fruitfulness? May the Lord help us to resolve to be the best we can be for Him, for Jesus' sake, Amen.