

## **John Chapter 15**

In chapters 13 through to 17 of this gospel, there is one common theme – it is to prepare the hearts of the disciples for His imminent departure and to give them the help necessary for their continuation without Him. Just as the epistle to the Hebrews speaks of “better” things eg a better covenant, so we can see in this portion of the gospel that old things are being replaced by the new. Hence the laver of the tabernacle is being replaced by the Lord with a basin and a towel. The Father’s house which was the temple in Jerusalem now gives way to the Father’s house in heaven. Our present reality is not just God dwelling in the midst of His people but a divine Person, the Comforter, now taking up permanent residence in the believer. Moreover, if the conditions of chapter 14 are met, there is the possibility that the Christian can also be indwelt by the Father and the Son who will make their abode in him. Now in chapter 15, Israel which prided itself in being the vine of Jehovah, is to be replaced by the Lord Himself, the “true vine”.

The Lord and His disciples left the upper room at the end of chapter 14. In the last verse, we read, “Arise, let us go hence”. Chapters 15 to 17 are therefore the words spoken between the upper room and the arrival in Gethsemane. There are many themes running through the chapter, but principally the theme is that of discipleship. This discipleship is seen in three areas.

1. Verse 1 to 11 The disciples and their relationship to God
2. Verse 12 to 17 The disciples in relationship to their brethren
3. Verse 18 to 27 The disciples in relationship to the world.

That is surely the right order for us today – God first, then our brethren, and finally the world. What should mark our relationship with God is fruit bearing and prayer. What should mark our relationship with our brethren is love. But all that we can expect in our relationship with the world is to experience its hatred.

### **1. Our relationship with God**

The Lord introduces the subject of fruit bearing by describing Himself as “the true vine”. Everything about the Lord is true.

John 1:9 describes the Lord as the “true light”. “That was the true light, which lighteth every man, coming into the world”. John the Baptist was a burning and a shining lamp, which burned ever so brightly for a few months, but the lamp was then extinguished by Herod. John came to bear witness to the “true light”, the Lord Jesus Himself.

In John 6:32, the Lord is the “true bread”. “Moses gave you not that bread from heaven, but my Father giveth you the true bread from heaven”. The Lord has replaced the manna. Moses gave Israel bread from heaven for forty years, but all those who ate that bread are dead. The Lord is the true bread – the bread of God from heaven – and whoever eats of this bread shall have eternal life.

In Revelation 3:14, the Lord is also the true and faithful witness. “These things saith the Amen, the true and faithful witness”. As the Amen, He is God’s last word. He is the alpha and omega, the first and the last. In Hebrews 1, God spoke in times past to the fathers by the prophets. He spoke at various times and in different ways, but at the end of these days of prophetic witness, God has spoken in Son. In Hebrews 11, God had a great cloud of witnesses – faithful men and women who bore testimony to Himself, but only of the Lord is it said that He is the true and faithful witness. In John

18, the Lord said to Pilate, "To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, to bear witness to the truth". His whole purpose in life was to speak truth. He was the very embodiment of truth – "Grace and truth came by Him" (John chapter 1).

But now in John 15, the Lord is the true vine. The vine speaks of Israel of course, just as also the fig tree and the olive tree. All three trees are said to be set aside in the New Testament.

In Matthew 21, the Lord visits the temple and finds it to be "a den of thieves". On leaving the temple, He finds a fig tree with nothing but leaves. He then curses it. "Let no fruit grow on thee for ever". And the disciples marvelled at how soon that fig tree withered away.

In the same chapter, we read of the parable of the vineyard. After the husbandmen have rejected the servants (the prophets), they killed the son also and cast him out. As a result, the vineyard is let out by the master to other servants to whom God would look for fruit. In Romans chapter 11, the natural branches of the olive tree are cut off and other branches (the Gentiles) are grafted in.

Returning to John 15, the vine was of course Israel. In Psalm 80, the writer says to God, "Thou broughtest forth a vine out of Egypt". In Isaiah 5:7, the prophet says, "The vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel". In the same chapter, however, the Lord has to say of Israel that it brought forth wild grapes (Verses 2 and 4). Hosea 10:1 also says, "Israel is an empty vine".

God is still looking for fruit from the vine, and John 15 tells us that He will only find it through His Son. Twice over, at Jordan and on the Holy Mount, God said of Him, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased". The vine is no longer Israel, but neither in the strict context of this chapter, is it the Church. The Church is not formed until Acts chapter 2 and in any case, we would have great difficulty later in defining the branches which are taken away and those that are burned, if we interpret the vine as the Church. No, the vine is the Lord Himself and the branches are those individual disciples who are linked to Him.

Verse 1 also adds, "And my Father is the husbandman". James 5:7 says, "The husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it". It was not until the Lord was manifest in the flesh that the Father could enjoy this fruit.

Verse 2 goes on to talk about bearing fruit, or not bearing fruit, as the case may be. So, what do we mean by fruit?. We must not limit it of course to the results of our service eg the number of converts for an evangelist. But the branches can only produce what is in the vine, so the fruit is surely to reproduce Christ and His qualities in our lives. The great purpose of the Christian life is to be conformed to the image of God's Son (Romans 8:29). Paul who wrote these words was himself the greatest example of all of reproducing Christ in himself. In Galatians chapter 1, Paul says that it pleased God to reveal His Son in him. This means not simply to Paul or by Paul but in Paul. Paul was a living example of his own ministry. Thus Paul was an example of the Saviour's love, as seen in Philippians chapter 1. "God is my witness how greatly I long after you all in the bowels of Jesus Christ". He is saying that the love Paul had for these saints was the same love as was found in the Lord Jesus. Paul also had the same kind of faith as the Lord. He says as much in Gal 2:20. "The life which I now live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me". Paul displays this faith in Acts 27 when he stands on a deck of a doomed ship and says "I believe God". 276 souls all reached the shore safely according to the promise given by God to Paul and passed on to those on board. Paul wrote about the "gentleness and meekness of Christ" and says about himself, "I was gentle among you, as a nurse cherisheth her own children". Paul had the same quality of

unselfishness as marked the Lord. He therefore writes to the Philippians, "To abide in the flesh is more needful for you". He forsook heaven for the needs of the saints.

But coming back to verse 2 of John 15, it begins with a solemn note, "Every branch in Me that beareth not fruit, He taketh away". This verse has caused great difficulty to some. How can a branch be taken away?. Does it mean that we would be put to death. Certainly, in the early days of the Church, this did happen. Ananias and Saphira were taken away in Acts 5, put to death for lying to the Holy Spirit. In Corinth, many were weak and sickly, and some even had fallen asleep ie died, through laxity at the Lord's supper. In Revelation chapter 2, there was the threat made against the church of Ephesus that if they did not repent, the lampstand would be removed. The Church might still remain but it would lose its testimony for the Lord Jesus in the world. Fortunately for us, we do not believe that God acts in such a judgemental way today.

This has led some to suggest that the verb "taketh away" really means to lift up or to support. The verb occurs over 100 times in the New Testament, and sometimes it is described as to take away and at other times as to take up. So what is the answer here in John 15?. Basically the verb carries with it two motions – to lift up and carry away. Hence we find it used in John chapter 5 when the Lord tells the man by the pool, "Take up thy bed and walk". There is no doubt about the meaning there – it is "Pick it up and take it with you". It is also used in Matthew 24 of the men of Noah's generation – "The flood came and took them all away". No question of support here. We find it too when the mob said to Pilate, "Away with Him, crucify Him". It is also used of the Lord in John chapter 1, "The Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world". The Lord does not support or lift up the sin of the world. He will take it away altogether. So too with the cross we are asked to bear. Matt 26:24 adds, "Take up thy cross and follow Me".

When Paul wanted to speak about supporting the weak in I Thess 5:14, he uses quite a different Greek word altogether – antechomai, to hold fast, to cleave to.

But, if the fruitless branch is taken away, do we have reason to fear losing salvation. Well, we said earlier that the vine is not the church, the body of Christ. It is Christ Himself. We can lose touch with Him, we can become unfruitful, but we can never be lost. There are three reasons for having such confidence :-

### 1. The family of God

John 1 states that "as many as received Him, to them gave He the right to become the children of God". Once a child is born into a family, he is always part of that family. No matter how much he strays, a son is always a son. If we belong to the family of God, we are always part of it.

### 2. Eternal life

Eternal life is the very life of God. In I John 1, the Lord Himself is described as "that eternal life which was with the Father". Divine life can never come to an end. In John 10, the Lord says about His sheep, "I give unto them eternal life, and they shall never perish". The word "never" in this verse is a triple negative which means, "no, by no means, not unto the ages".

### 3. Divine hands

Divine hands are holding ours. In one hand, we have the hand of Christ – "None shall pluck them from my hand". In the other hand, we hold that of the Father. "None shall pluck them from my Father's hand".

This is very re-assuring for the believer, but it remains true that if our lives are producing nothing for God, He may remove us from the vine. It would be a judicial act. The husbandman who has long patience may eventually lose patience with us. It

is a solemn thought. Yet even in this there is hope for the Bible says that God is able to restore the years which the locusts have eaten.

On the other hand, every branch that bears fruit, He purges it, that it may bring forth more fruit. While we may be content with our life, God is not. He always wants more. So too with Paul. The Philippians had already proved their love to him by their giving, but Paul's prayer for them was that their "love may abound yet more and more". So, how does God produce more fruit. Like the gardener, He purges or prunes the branches. This could be a painful process of course, for it could involve some hardship on our part. Hebrews 12 asks the question, "What son is he whom a father chasteneth not?". So God may work in our lives in order to remove the dead wood and bring out more fruit.

So, how does God do this work? Verse 3 is the answer. "Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you". A Christian who is not a public person ie a preacher or a teacher may well ask the question, "Why should I read the Bible?". One answer is that it cleanses us. Psalm 119:9 asks, "Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way?" The answer follows, "By taking heed thereto according to thy word". Eph 5:26 gives us the present aim of Christ for His Church. "That He might sanctify it and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word".

In verse 4, we have the secret of fruit bearing. "Abide in Me, and I in you". The idea of abiding in Him is repeated no less than five times in the first seven verses of this chapter. It is obviously the vital secret. But what does it mean?. In the New Testament, we often have the expression, "In Christ". This has often the sense of being secure in Him. Romans 5:17 says, If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature". There is a new creation – something new has been formed in us. "In Christ" is a doctrinal position, but abiding in Him is a spiritual condition. Paul sought this all his life. In Phil 3, his ambition was still to know Him, and the power of His resurrection. So there can be no fruit apart from abiding in Him.

But He must also abide in us. It is true of every Christian that He is indwelt by the Spirit of God. He shall be with us and in us for ever. But it is possible to be indwelt also by the Father and the Son. Firstly, though, there is a condition that must be fulfilled. In John 14:23, the Lord says, "If a man love Me, he will keep my words, and My Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him". In John 14:2, there are many mansions in the Father's house but in verse 23, the Father and the Son seek to make their abode (mansion) in us. The Lord abides in us if we love His words and these words abide in us. Verse 5 ends with an absolute law of discipleship, "Apart from Me, ye can do nothing".

But what if someone does not abide. Notice the impersonal use of "a man" in the expression, "If a man abide not in Me". He does not say, "If ye abide not.." See how He continues, "He is cast forth as a branch, and is withered: and men gather them and cast them into the fire and they are burned". These are not true branches. They look like branches and they are cast forth like a branch. This is picture of the empty professor. He may look like a branch, but there is no reality. He is fit only for burning. The arch example of this is surely Judas Iscariot. He looked like a branch but he was a mere professor.

Verse 7 now is the secret to a successful prayer life. "If ye abide in Me, and my words abide you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you". This may seem very simplistic, but the conditions have first to be met. We have seen that we must abide in Him, like the beloved disciple leaning on Jesus' bosom. And His words must abide in us. This is more than just hearing his words as in a sermon, or reading His words as in the Bible or in a book. His words are to abide in us ie to take up residence in us. When Paul gives his teaching to Timothy, he tells him to "meditate upon these

things: be wholly in them, that thy progress may appear unto all". David said in Psalm 1:2 of the blessed man, " His delight is in the law of the Lord and in His law doth he meditate day and night".

Verse 8 also speaks of glorifying the Father. "Herein is My Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit". The Father was glorified of course by the life and death of the Lord Jesus. John 17 says, "I have glorified Thee on the earth, I have finished the work which Thou gavest Me to do". God was also glorified in the death of His Son. "Now is the Son of man glorified, and God is glorified in Him". We can readily understand how this was true of the Son, but it is of us that the Lord now says that the Father is glorified if we bear much fruit.

Verses 9 and 10 tell us of a reason for the Lord to love us. First of all in verse 9, He makes a glorious comparison. "As the Father hath loved Me, so have I loved you". Who can measure the Father's love for His Son?. John 17 tells us that love was eternal. "Thou lovest Me before the foundation of the world". The Father loved the Son because of His obedience – "Therefore doth My Father love Me, because I lay down my life that I might take it up again". In such a way, the Lord also loves us. It is surely true that He loves all of His children. Eph 5 tells us that He "loved us and gave Himself for us". But John 15:10 gives Him a fresh reason to love us. "If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love". In John 14, keeping His commandments was a proof of our love to Him. Now, in chapter 15, it is a fresh cause for Him to love us.

Verse 11 is a deviation from love, for the verse now speaks of joy. "My joy", says the Saviour. But did the man of sorrows ever have joy on earth. It was not the joy of earth or the joy of circumstances. The Lord's joy was that born of obedience. He can surely use the words of Psalm 40:8, "I delight to do thy will, o my God" (see also Heb 10:7). His joy was also in divine revelation. Luke 10 reveals this joy. "In that hour Jesus rejoiced in spirit and said, I thank Thee Father... that Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent and hast revealed them unto babes".

So, if we keep the truth of all that has gone before in John 15:1-10, the joy of the Lord will be in us, and be full.

## **2. The disciple's relationship with his brethren**

From verse 12, we move into a new section of the chapter. It is not now our relationship with God, but rather our relationship with our fellow disciples. The section begins with love in verse 12. "This is my commandment, that ye love one another, as I have loved you". In John 13:34, the Lord called this a new commandment. The old commandment was contained in the Law, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. The new commandment though has a far higher standard – we are to love one another, as He has loved us.

His love is :-

### **1. Sacrificial**

Eph 5 says, He "loved us and gave Himself for us" In Gal 2:20, Paul says of the Lord, "He loved me and gave Himself for me".

We are to do likewise. In I John 3:16, we learn that "He laid down His life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren"

### **2. Unending**

John 13 – "He loved them unto the end"

### **3. Unselfish**

John 13 Knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, with those selfsame hands, He took a basin and a towel and began to wash the disciples' feet

#### 4. Causeless

Eph 2 Even when we were dead in sins.

Now, in verse 13, the Lord is going to speak of His friends. "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends". This is the true test of love. The proof of friendship. So who are the Lord's friends, and what would endear them to Him ?. The Lord says, "Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you". The basis of our friendship is our obedience to Him. And what is the value of being a friend of the Lord?. Should we not be content with being servants only?. "Saved to serve" is our motto. Well, there is something better than being a servant, for a servant simply carries out commands. He has no right to ask, "Why?" But a friend is different. A friend can confide in and seek out the mind of his friend. The Lord reveals to His friends not only His own mind but also the mind of the Father. "All things that I have heard of My Father, I have made known unto you". The Lord takes the things of the Father and reveals them to us. The Spirit takes the things of Christ and reveals them unto us.

Verses 16 and 17 are really a little summary of the chapter so far. "Ye have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit" We might well begin to feel very special after all this teaching. We can know His love, His joy, His will. We must be special then. Not so, says the Lord. "I have chosen you". His sovereign will chose us, and the reason? – to bear fruit. To become like Himself and to glorify God in our lives. The promise of prayer concludes verse 16, and the command to love one another is repeated in verse 17.

### 3. The disciples' relationship with the world

Having dealt at some length with the subject of love, we now come to what is the very reverse of love – hatred. While the believers are to show love in the world, they can expect only hatred from the world. We are only but following in the steps of the Master. "If the world hate you, ye know that it hated Me before you". It is not just because we follow the Lord Jesus that the world hates us. It is because we are not of the world that we meet with its displeasure. There is constant pressure upon all men to conform to the accepted standards of the day. Eccentrics are laughed at or dismissed altogether. The Christian seeks to be different from this world. He is a "non-conformist" in the true sense of the word. In the UK perhaps, this does not go so far as hatred. Perhaps indifference or amusement would be more true, but there are many countries in the world where Christians are severely persecuted for their faith.

In the Old Testament, we read of Daniel and his friends how they fell foul of men because of their refusal to conform. Daniel, for instance, found himself in a strange land, the land of Babylon. There was nothing much he could do about that. Indeed at the start of the book of Daniel, we read how that the Lord gave Jehoikim king of Judah into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar. They came into a strange land because the nation had rejected the Lord. We are in a strange land today because our Lord is still rejected by this world. The Chaldeans attempted to change Daniel. They filled his mind with the learning and the language of the Chaldeans. But we read later that God gave them knowledge and skill in all wisdom and understanding. We read of the strange food they refused, even though it were the very best of the land – from the king's table. As a result, they were fairer and fatter in flesh than all the others. Then they changed also Daniel's name. His name which meant "Jehovah is my judge" was changed to Belteshazzar, "The prince of Bel", a pagan God. Despite all these pressures, however, Daniel stood firm and this led to the plot against him which saw

him eventually cast into the den of lions. This was the hatred of the world.

Why was it that men hated the Lord Jesus?. Was it because of ignorance; was it because they knew little about Him, or God His Father?. The Lord, rather, shows how far He had gone to make Himself known. Verse 22 says, "If I had not come and spoken unto them, they had not sin, but now they have no cloak for their sin". There were times when men marvelled at the gracious words which proceeded from His lips. Even those who were sent to take Him captive returned with the confession, "Never man spake like this man". But the majority of men closed their ears to His words, thus proving their own sin, now exposed. But the Lord did not only speak to men, He revealed His mighty works. "If I had not done among them the works which none other man did, they had not had sin: but now they have both seen and hated both Me and My Father".

To what extent was it true that the works of the Lord Jesus were those which none other man did ? Certainly in terms of quantity, the Lord performed more miracles than all the O.T. prophets put together, but it is surely not mere quantity that the Lord is speaking about here. It was the very nature of the works which should have spoken to men. When we look at the history of Elijah and Elisha, we learn that the dead were raised, a leper was cleansed, and the hungry were fed. To what extent did the Lord's works differ from these earlier works ? Let us consider just the works of Elisha.

### 1. Leprosy

In II Kings 5, we read the story of the cleansing of Naaman the leper. It was a miraculous event, yet not achieved without some effort on Naaman's part. "Go and wash in Jordan seven times...and thou shalt be clean". In Matthew 8:2, a leper comes to worship the Lord saying, "Lord, if Thou wilt, Thou canst make me clean". The Lord put out His hand and touched him, and immediately his leprosy was cleansed. Again, the Lord was not constrained by numbers. In Luke 17:12, there met Him ten lepers. He sent them off to show themselves to the priest, and as they went, they were cleansed. Thus the Lord's dealings with the lepers in His day far exceeded the work of Elisha.

### 2. Feeding the hungry

In II Kings 4:42, there comes a man to Elisha with twenty barley loaves. The prophet commands, "Give unto the people, that they may eat". Elisha's servant immediately objects, "What? Should I set this before a hundred men? " How could twenty loaves feed a hundred, yet they did all eat, and left thereof. It was a miracle, no doubt about it.

The contrast with the Lord is obvious. Five barley loaves were given to Him, and with them He fed 5,000 men besides women and children. Yet they not only ate to the full, they gathered up of the fragments that remained, twelve baskets full.

### 3. Raising the dead

In II Kings 4:31-35, we read of the death of the Shunammite woman's son. She comes pleading to Elisha who at first sends Gehazi ahead with the prophet's staff. But this is to no avail. At last Elisha himself arrives and stretches himself out upon the child. The child grows warm but still there is no life. The prophet then walks to and fro in the room, then stretches himself out again upon the child. The child then sneezes seven times and opens his eyes. What energy, what zeal, goes into the raising of this child.

The Lord raised no less than three people from the dead. The daughter of Jairus has just died when the Lord enters the house. He takes the child by the hand, saying, "Maid, arise". And her spirit came again and she arose immediately. The widow of Nain's son was on the way to his burial when the Lord arrived on the scene. He had

been dead perhaps only that day, perhaps the day preceding, but the Lord was still able to raise him. But surely Lazarus was a hopeless case. He had been dead four days and by now the carcase was beginning to decompose. Yet time is no barrier to the Lord who is able to call Lazarus from the tomb.

No wonder then the Lord could say, "If I had not done among them the works which none other man did". In John 9, the man born blind asked the question, From the beginning of time was it ever heard that one healed someone who was born blind. Others before the Lord did miracles, but none in such a way as He did. His works were greater than those of any other.

Summing up the attitude of the world towards Himself, He says, "They hated Me without a cause".

How then did the Lord respond to the hatred of the world? Did He come in unsparing judgement upon men?. Did He reject men in the same measure as they rejected Him? No doubt He will do this in a day to come, but this is God's day of grace. Thus the Lord sent, not judgement, but the Comforter, the Spirit of truth, whose task it is to testify to the world concerning the rejected Saviour. If the Lord responded thus, so should we, hence the injunction laid upon His disciples, "And ye also shall bear witness, because ye have been with Me from the beginning". We are not of the world, we might even be hated by the world, but we are to testify to the world regarding the Lord Jesus.

It is most interesting also in these three divisions of the chapter to see the relationships of the three persons of the trinity. There is a response expected from the believer to each. We owe a response to the Father as the husbandman, we owe an response to the Lord for He has chosen us, and we owe a response to the Holy Spirit for He has left the Father to testify of the Lord on earth. We should also do the same.