

Sam Storms

Bridgeway Church

John 13-17 / #13

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Sermon Summary #13

The Vine, the Branches, and Abiding in Jesus

John 15:1-11

Last week I came across an article (www.mattmoore.org, “Is Your Heart Good Soil?”) that instantly captured my attention. The author confessed both his “sadness and terror” as he thought about the departure from Christianity on the part of several of his close friends. “One moment they appeared to be joyfully walking with God,” he writes, “and then out of nowhere — to my shock and horror — they began trampling all over his Son I’m not talking about just a little backsliding or a bit of stumbling. These guys and gals flat out rejected Jesus. Today, they proudly admit that they couldn’t care less about the biblical realities of sin, judgment, or God’s gracious offer of redemption. They are utterly finished with Christianity.”

This young man was at first convinced these friends were, what he calls, “bona fide believers.” Their spiritual transformations, he goes on to say, “looked just like mine. They walked, talked, prayed, and praised just like me.” To try to gain some insight into what had happened, he turned to Matthew’s gospel and the parable of the sower. There we read:

“Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. . . . As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away” (Matt. 13:5-6, 20-21).

The author of this article goes on to say this:

“Sadly, my friends who fell away were ‘rocky ground’ kind of people. There was something inside of them that initially found the gospel appealing, but it wasn’t enough to sustain faith and repentance. Maybe the dominant motivation of their heart was to sail smoothly and happily through this life, and they thought Christianity would give them that? Maybe desperation to find good friends or a decent spouse drove them to Jesus and his church? Maybe they were just afraid of Hell? I can’t know what was going on in their hearts, but I can know —because they now reject the gospel — that they didn’t long to be rescued from the penalty and power of sin, and 2) they didn’t see a relationship with Jesus as the most valuable treasure they could ever possess. As soon as life wasn’t running smoothly, church friendships weren’t as dreamy as anticipated, potential spouses were scarce, and the paralyzing fear of God’s fiery wrath wore off a little, they bailed. Gratitude and love weren’t tethering these folks to Jesus. Something else — something incapable of sustaining the Christian life — was keeping their fake-faith afloat.”

I don’t agree with everything in the article but I do believe this author has done a good job of reminding us that not everyone who joyfully professes to trust Jesus is necessarily and always genuinely born again. Jesus himself addressed this issue on yet another occasion in Matthew’s gospel. In the span of five verses he twice said: ***“You will***

recognize them by their fruits” (Matthew 7:16, 20). It would be impossible to overemphasize the importance of this principle. The point that Jesus is making is simply that *the essence of what you are on the inside will inevitably and unmistakably become evident on the outside*. Or to say it in different terms, **who** you are will eventually show itself in **how** you live.

In that same passage from Matthew’s gospel Jesus said: “Every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit” (7:17). Early on and from a distance you may not be able to differentiate between trees. They may look much the same. But eventually, over time, the fruit they bear will testify to the kind and quality of tree they are. If the tree is rotten and diseased, such will be the fruit it produces. If, on the other hand, it is alive and healthy, so too will be the fruit that comes forth.

The simple but profound truth here is that *Christians will produce moral and spiritual fruit that bears witness to or testifies concerning the reality of what is on the inside*. In the absence of such fruit, we should be extremely cautious about telling such a person that he/she is a born-again child of God. We should be rightly suspicious about their claim to conversion. If their behavior doesn’t measure up to their beliefs, something’s terribly wrong.

Some people have mistakenly thought that this puts too much emphasis on good works. To them, it sounds as if we are saying that good works are the condition for salvation, that good works justify us in the sight of God, or that good works are the basis for our acceptance with God. I assure you I am saying no such thing. I do believe good works are essential, but as the *evidence* of saving faith. Good works are *not the root of our salvation, but its fruit*. They are *not the cause of salvation, but they are its consequence*.

Perhaps the best way to say it is by using a familiar phrase that was made popular by both John Calvin and Martin Luther during the time of the Protestant Reformation: *Faith alone justifies, but not the faith that is alone*. The faith that truly saves, the faith that genuinely unites us to Christ, is a particular kind of faith. It is faith of a unique quality. It is living, fruit-giving faith that invariably leads to personal holiness, good works, and a gradually transformed life. That is why Jesus and the authors of the NT so often say, if you want to know whether or not someone’s claim to “faith” is real, test and taste the fruit.

Today we are going to put this principle to the test by looking at a difficult but very important passage in the farewell discourse: John 15:1-11.

The Vine and the Branches

Here we read that God, as the Vinedresser, lovingly “prunes” believers (v. 2), i.e., cleanses, purges, and purifies them of whatever does not contribute to their spiritual maturity (or fruitfulness). This might occur in any number of ways: discipline, teaching, testing, etc. The debate centers on what God does with the fruitless branches, and what the latter represent. There have generally been three views of this passage.

One popular view is that the “fruitless branches” are genuine Christians who, because of their fruitlessness, or because of their failure to persevere in holiness of life, lose their salvation. When Jesus says these branches will be “thrown into the fire, and burned” (v. 6b), he is referring to eternal punishment in hell.

Another perspective is that the “fruitless branches” are genuine Christians who, because of their fruitlessness, undergo divine discipline. Their “removal” and judgment is *physical* death, not spiritual death. They are and remain saved, but are prematurely taken to heaven as a disciplinary response to their failure to walk in obedience to Jesus.

Yet a third option for those who believe in eternal security is to understand the “fruitless branches” to be so-called “disciples” who experience only *an external, superficial connection with Jesus*. Although they “believe” and “follow” Jesus in one sense, their outward allegiance and verbal commitment to him is not the expression of having been born again and having trusted Jesus sincerely for salvation. The “fruitless” branches, therefore, are not saved and never were. I believe the third option is most consistent both with what we read in the gospel of John and in the rest of the NT. My reasons for adopting this view and rejecting the others are as follows.

First, it’s important that we take note of what Jesus declared in John 10:28-29. There he said in no uncertain terms that those to whom he gives eternal life *shall never perish*. Even more important is the word Jesus uses in John 15:6. There Jesus says that the fruitless branches will be “*thrown away*” (a form of the Greek verb *ballo*, “to cast,” “to throw,” together with the adverb *exo*, “outside” or “out”). But in John 6:37 Jesus uses virtually identical terminology and says, “All that the Father gives me shall come to me, and the one who comes to me I will certainly *not cast out*” (*ekballo* with *exo*).

Are we really prepared to say that what Jesus denied could *ever* happen to a believer in John 6:37, he affirms *will* happen in John 15:6. In other words, Jesus says in John 6:37 that he will *never cast out* those who believe in him but in John 15:6 he says that he will cast them out. Surely neither our Lord in speaking, nor John in recording his words, is guilty of the most obvious of theological contradictions.

Second, what Jesus says of the destiny of the fruitless branches reads more like eternal condemnation than temporal chastisement. The fruitless branch is “taken away” (v. 2). The fruitless branch is “thrown into the fire” and “burned” (v. 6; cf. Matthew 3:12; 5:22; 18:8-9; 25:41; 2 Thess. 1:7-8; Rev. 20:15).

Now, I suppose someone could make the case that this is the language or imagery that one would expect in describing what is done with old, dead, fruitless branches. What else would one do with them but burn them? So perhaps we shouldn’t make too much of it. Furthermore, in 1 Corinthians 3:15, Paul is speaking of Christians when he says: “If anyone’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.” So it isn’t entirely implausible to conclude that Jesus has in view temporal or physical discipline when he speaks of throwing the fruitless branch into the fire.

Third, the view that the fruitless branches are unregenerate people, unbelieving people, is supported by what John’s gospel says about “*unsaved believers*.” Although this sounds strange, *John often portrays people as “believing” in Jesus who are clearly not born again*. He clearly envisions a stage in the progress of belief in Jesus that falls short of genuine saving faith and thus falls short of salvation. Let me take just a moment and demonstrate this to you.

A clear example of this is found in **John 2:23-24**. There we read that “when he (Jesus) was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many *believed* in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people.” Here we see that not all so-called “belief” is genuine, Spirit-wrought, saving faith. People can in some sense “believe” in Jesus and never truly know him as Lord and Savior. In this case these people were fascinated by the miracles Jesus performed. They believed “when they saw the signs that he was doing.” Their so-called “belief” or “faith” was grounded in *their surprise and infatuation with the supernatural*. But clearly it was not saving faith, it was *not a belief that trusted and treasured Jesus as Lord and Savior*.

The point here is that people claim and actually do, in a sense, “believe” in Jesus for any number of reasons other than a legitimate desire to receive the forgiveness of sins and eternal life that he offers. Some “believe” (like these in John 2) because they are swept away by the sensationalism and excitement of supernatural activity. Some “believe” because by identifying with the local church they find instant friendships and social activities and a place to belong. Some “believe” because they are looking for a way to soothe their guilty conscience or to experience personal affirmation or because they long for transcendent meaning in their lives and religion appears to provide it. Some “believe” because of the pressure to conform that they feel from family or friends. Some “believe” because they find Christianity intellectually satisfying. I could go on almost without end in citing reasons why people “believe” that have little or nothing to do with genuine, heartfelt repentance, love for Christ and a passion to follow him.

Yet another instance is found in **John 6**. You may recall that after Jesus insisted that those who follow him must “eat his flesh” and “drink his blood” (6:53), many were befuddled and bothered. We read in John 6:60 that “when many of his disciples heard it, they said, ‘This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?’” This is then followed in John 6:66 with the declaration: “After this many of *his disciples* turned back and no longer walked with him.”

D. A. Carson explains:

“‘Disciples’ must be distinguished from ‘the Twelve’ (cf. vv. 66-67). More importantly, just as there is faith and faith (2:23-25), so are there disciples and disciples. At the most elementary level, a disciple is someone who is at that point following Jesus, either literally by joining the group that pursued him from place to place, or metaphorically in regarding him as the authoritative teacher. Such a ‘disciple’ is not necessarily a ‘Christian’, someone who has savingly trusted Jesus and sworn allegiance to him, given by the Father to the Son, drawn by the Father and born again by the Spirit. Jesus will make it clear in due course that only those who *continue* in his word are *truly* his ‘disciples’ (8:31). The ‘disciples’ described here do not remain in his word” (300).

Yet another example is found in **John 8:31**. There John refers to certain Jews who had “believed” in Jesus. Yet, according to the verses that follow, these people are in fact slaves to sin (v. 34), indifferent to Jesus’ word (v. 37), children of the devil (v. 44), they accuse Jesus of being demonized (v. 48), they are liars (v. 55), and are guilty of mob tactics including attempted murder of the one they have professed to believe (v. 59). They are said to have “believed” but are clearly not only unsaved but among the enemies of Jesus!

It is clear that in John’s gospel not all so-called “belief” or “faith” is authentic, Spirit-wrought, saving faith. Not every person who aligns himself with Jesus is born again. Not every person who follows Jesus or is in some manner identified with Jesus is saved. What we see in these passages in John’s gospel can only be called “*fickle faith*,” a degree of commitment, perhaps a willingness to agree with the truth of some of what Jesus said and a desire to follow him temporarily. There is also the possibility that these people were swept up in the excitement and euphoria of the crowd and were captivated or fascinated with the spiritual energy that surrounded Jesus. He was a magnetic personality and many were inclined to follow him as much out of religious curiosity as out of genuine love. Clearly this applied to these Jewish people. [Although we can’t be sure, this may also be the case in John 7:31 and 12:11,37.]

To put it in as simple terms as I know how, one can in some sense “believe” in Jesus and declare oneself to be his “disciple” without ever having been saved in the first place. There is in John’s gospel, therefore, a transitory, superficial, surface “faith” or “belief” that may be based solely on miracles seen but is not grounded in and is not the fruit of a saving understanding of and trust in who Jesus really is. Such people are in some sense

connected or united to Jesus, perhaps mentally or emotionally, that they may even be called “disciples,” yet they are not Christian disciples. These, I believe, are the unfruitful branches of John 15:2 and 6.

So how does one differentiate between genuine faith and fickle, false faith? Jesus tells us in **John 8:31**. The mark of true faith is *abiding* or remaining in Jesus’ word. To “remain” or “abide” in Jesus’ “word,” says Carson, means that a person “obeys it, seeks to understand it better, and finds it more precious, more controlling, precisely when other forces flatly oppose it. It is the one who continues in the teaching who has both the Father and the Son (2 Jn. 9; cf. Heb. 3:14; Rev. 2:26)” (348).

Abiding in Jesus does not make you a Christian. What makes you a Christian is the new birth and that saving faith which is its fruit. Abiding is *not the condition* for becoming a child of God. Abiding is the *consequence* or the *evidence* or the *fruit* of being a disciple of Jesus. You become a Christian by faith, the evidence of which is that you abide or remain in your devotion and pursuit of Jesus and your desire to learn from him and love him.

Genuine, saving faith is the sort that not only learns what he says but loves it as well. Genuine faith displays its true character by producing in the heart of the individual a *persevering attachment* to Jesus. Momentary, flash-in-the-pan commitment to Christ means nothing. We’ve all seen people like this: excited today and out the exit tomorrow; men and women who display an attraction to religion and the benefits it can bring them, but who during the course of an ordinary week are never heard to utter a distinctly Christian word or commit a distinctly Christian act. They are, in essence, indistinguishable from the world. Discipleship is not a sudden, short-lived enthusiasm about Jesus but a life-long love affair, a life-long dedication that is characterized by love and obedience.

Notice how Jesus describes these people who “believe” in him: “you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you” (John 8:37b). That is to say, Christ’s word does not operate in their lives, is given no value in their thinking, has no role in their daily decision making, does not give shape or direction to how they relate to God or others.

Listen carefully. These Jewish people are religious, law-abiding, monotheists! They believe in God. They faithfully attended their synagogue services. They commit no scandalous sins. In some sense of the word they even “believe” in Jesus. Yet, they have Satan for their father (v. 44)!

We have an interesting example of this in **Acts 8**. A man named Simon, a magician, heard Philip preach the gospel and “believed” and was “baptized” (Acts 8:13). Well, then, you would think that settles it. He is definitely a child of God. He must be born again. Well, not exactly.

We read later in the story that when Simon saw the power of the Holy Spirit come upon the people of Samaria, he said: “Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit” (8:19). Here is the Apostle Peter’s response to him:

“But Peter said to him, ‘May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity.’ And Simon answered, ‘Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me’” (Acts 8:20-24).

Was Simon saved? Some say yes. He truly “believed” and was even “baptized” and then apostatized and fell from grace and lost his salvation. But it seems clear to me that Simon’s so-called “belief” was the same as John described in John 2:23-24. There we saw that people “believed” in Jesus after witnessing his miracles, yet they were clearly not saved. Note also:

(1) Acts 8:21(a) – “you have neither part nor lot in this matter,” the “matter” being the blessings of the gospel that have come to those in Samaria who believed.

(2) Acts 8:21(b) – “your heart is not right before God”

(3) Acts 8:23 – “you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity”

There are several other texts that affirm this principle, but today I’ll only mention two of them: **1 John 2:19** and **Hebrews 3:14**.

In **1 John 2:19** John is seeking to expose the false teachers in the church who were leading astray the people of God. Here in v. 19 he indicates that at one time they were “members” and active, vocal participants in the community which professed faith in Christ. They were immersed in the ministry of the church, were well-known among God’s people, and until the moment of separation were hardly distinguishable from the rest of the Christian society. Here is what John says of them:

“they went out from us” – Here John means they either were excommunicated or, more likely, that they voluntarily separated or departed from the community of faith. Note the distinction between “they” and “us”.

“but they were not of us” – Here John says that in spite of their external membership, they did not share our inner spiritual life. The words “of us” refers to the spiritual bond of the body of Christ.

“for if they had been of us, they would have continued (or, remained) with us” – The point here seems to be that if they had truly been “of us,” that is, if they had truly been born again and had shared our saving faith in Jesus, they would have persevered; they would have borne fruit and would have abided in Jesus. Again, we see that the test of life and salvation is abiding or persevering.

“but they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us” – In other words, there is a divine purpose in their secession, namely, exposure of those who are but professors but not possessors. ***Their departure was their unmasking*** (cf. 1 Cor. 11:18-19).

The inescapable point John is making here is that abiding or remaining or continuing or persevering is the sign of the saved, just as apostasy is the evidence of initial unbelief. Note the emphasis of the phrase: "for if they had been of us, *they would have remained with us . . .*" The presence of genuine faith ("of us") implies (necessitates) perseverance.

Note carefully how the author of Hebrews makes this same point: "***For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end***" (Hebrews 3:14). He refers in the latter half of the verse to our "original confidence" in Christ. Clearly he is describing the initial act of faith when a man or woman claims to have put their trust in Jesus for salvation. If a person who professes to have confidence in Christ, a person who claims to have trusted him for salvation holds firmly in this faith all the way "to the end" (a likely reference to the "end" of his life) this proves that they truly "have come to share in Christ."

How can we know whether or not Charley or Karen or Mike or Megan genuinely shares in Christ, which is to say, is born-again and is justified and is a child of God? How can we know? We can know by observing whether or not they hold that original confidence firm to the end. Note well: the author does **not** say that if you hold that confidence firm to the end you "*will*" be one who shares in Christ. He says, rather, that we "*have come*" (past tense) to "share in Christ" if "we hold our original confidence firm to the end." In other words, it is one's on-going, future perseverance in faith or consistent abiding in confidence in Christ all the way to the end that serves to demonstrate or prove that a person genuinely came to share in Christ in the past.

Also note that he does not say if you *fail* to hold firm your original confidence this means you once had it but later lost it. Rather, if you fail to hold it, it means you never had it. If a person does not hold firmly to the end of this "faith" or "confidence" that he claims to have put in Christ, this reveals that he never truly and sincerely shared in Christ in the first place.

Perhaps it will help you see what our author is saying if you state it *negatively*. "We have **not** come to share in Christ, if indeed we do **not** hold our original confidence firm to the end." His point again is that if you are born again and have thus come to share in Christ, if you were justified and forgiven of your sins and adopted in God's family by faith, ***you cannot fail to persevere***. You *will* hold your original confidence firm unto the end.

Fourth, and finally, let's not forget that Jesus is using an image drawn from horticulture that requires we be careful in not pressing the details for more theological information than he intended. The point Jesus is making is that ***fruitfulness is a necessary and infallible mark of true Christianity***. He uses the picture of a vine to drive home this truth. Where else could a branch be located if not in some way connected with the vine. Jesus could hardly make his point by directing their attention to a bunch of disconnected and isolated branches scattered about on the ground. Jesus is saying that no branch that fails to bear fruit can be thought of as part of him or as united to him. If you are going to be connected to Jesus, you must bear fruit. Therefore, what else can be done with fruitless branches other than to cut them off and cast them away?

But we shouldn't press the imagery and draw the theological conclusion that this means many people are true Christians but then fail to bear fruit and are then cut off or lose their salvation and suffer eternal condemnation. That is pressing the image beyond what it is intended to teach us.

My conclusion, then, is that this passage does *not* teach that a true, born-again Christian can apostatize from the faith and lose his/her salvation. It *does* teach that it is *impossible* to bear fruit apart from a life-giving, saving union with Jesus (v. 4) and that it is *impossible not* to bear fruit when that connection with Jesus truly exists (v. 5). It also

teaches that some (many?) who profess to be “united” with Jesus, who claim to “believe” him, and who even “follow” him as so-called “disciples” will be revealed by their lack of fruit as spurious and thus subject to eternal judgment.

Conclusion

In the controversy over eternal security that this passage raises, it would be all too easy for us to miss what may be the most important thing of all that Jesus says to us: “**apart from me, you can do nothing**” (v. 5b).

“But Sam, that makes no sense. After all, I do lots of things in life every day without ever thinking of Jesus. So too do all non-Christians. We go to work and put in a solid day at the office. We go to movies and dinner with our spouses and meet in our D-groups. What could Jesus possibly mean by saying that ‘apart’ from him we can do ‘nothing’?”

The context tells us precisely what he means. He is talking about “*bearing fruit.*” *You can bear no meaningful, lasting, eternally significant, life-changing spiritual and moral fruit apart from Jesus.* He’s talking about authentic transformation in the human heart and meaningful, eternal influence for good in the lives of others. He’s talking about those things that truly honor and glorify God and serve to spread his fame throughout the earth.

What Jesus is saying is that apart from conscious, consistent communion with him, apart from drawing on his presence and power in our lives, we can accomplish nothing of spiritual value. If we want to live in such a way that our lives honor God and help others, we must abide in Christ.

And what does it mean to “abide” in him? It means to immerse yourself in his word. It means to obey his commands. It means to be always prayerful, embedded in Christian community, worshiping Jesus in all of life. It means to live on mission with him every day. It means that your sense of personal identity is inseparable from Jesus: you are in him and he is in you and this truth consistently governs your life.

And in the absence of abiding no one can be assured of salvation. As Jesus said in 8:31, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples.” And as he says again in 15:8, “By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.”