

"No Greater Love Than This"
John 15:1 – 16:4
by Dellena Ludwig

If you knew that your life here on earth would be over in a week or a day, what would you want to say to your loved ones? Would you be practical to let them know of the provisions you have stored up for their care? Would you list bank accounts and passwords for them? Would you offer protection against adversaries? Would you warn them about the dangers they would face? Remember, don't let crazy Uncle Yugo get control of the company!

Or would you just tell your spouse, child, grandchild, niece or nephew how much you love them. Encourage each one to forget petty differences, to be kind and loving and help each other through the days ahead. What would you want to do as your last days are counting down?

In our study of the book of John, we find Jesus' example of that very time in His life, giving His disciples His parting instructions. Starting at the Last Supper, John recorded the words Jesus wanted to offer His disciples, to prepare them for the dramatic change that was about to come into their lives – His death.

As we examined John chapter 15:1 through 16:4, we can identify three things Jesus spoke about:

1. The Allegory of the Vine (v.1-8);
2. The Abiding Fruit, which is Love (v. 9-25); and
3. The Advocate, who is the Holy Spirit (v.26 – 16:4).

As chapter 14 closed, Jesus said to His disciples, "Come now, let us leave." (14:31b) So, Jesus was walking with His disciples out of the upper room, out of Jerusalem, across the Kidron valley, and up to the Mount of Olives, toward the Garden of Gethsemane. As they walked, He continued to teach His disciples, beginning with the Allegory of the Vine.

He said, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. 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." [John 15:1,2] This is the final example of Jesus' seven "I Am" statements: "I am the true vine."

In this allegory, it's notable that both the fruitful and unfruitful branches get cut. The fruitful branch is pruned to stimulate more growth; the branch that does not bear fruit, gets cut off of the vine entirely.

My husband planted a grape vine in our garden several years ago. We were so excited when it bloomed with long branches, rich with leaves that spread out across our fence. He watered it and watched for grapes, and we were so excited to see the skeleton of grape bunches hidden under those big beautiful leaves. However, the grapes that year didn't mature. They were small, bitter and very few.

As the season passed, Steve “Googled” videos about how to care for a grape vine. He realized that you must cut off a lot of the green leaves and any branches not producing fruit. That way, the vine will direct more of the nutrition to the fruit, rather than wasting it on branches that only produced leaves. It wasn’t easy to cut away those branches that looked so lush and long. But they were not doing their job; they were not bearing fruit.

At first glance, Judas looked good as a disciple. He faithfully followed Jesus, listened to His teaching and asked questions. He even took care of the money the group received. The other disciples trusted him and considered him as one of their group. Jesus poured His teaching and love into Judas, just as He had to the other disciples. But Judas was a fruitless branch as he left to betray Jesus. And so Judas was cut off from the disciples. Jesus knew this would happen again as the Church grew. There would be those who profess to be His followers; however, their walk would not match their talk. Fruitless branches must be cut off if the church is to remain healthy.

But even the believing disciples, the fruitful branches, must be pruned. Peter’s pride must be pruned to allow the fruit of humility to grow. All of the disciples argued about who would be greatest in the Kingdom of God. John and James were prejudiced against Samaritans. Their pride also must be pruned.

In our “wild vine” state, we also have sinful habits that must be pruned away from our lives so that we can be more fruitful as branches. We have the same pride the disciples struggled with. We believe the lies of the world: self-reliance, comparison with others; I would never do that; I can never be smart enough, good enough, wise enough, talented enough, etc. But as branches who stay attached to the vine, the Lord prunes off those wasted attitudes and trains us through His Word to be His fruitful disciples.

In the next few verses, Jesus explained exactly how the disciples could not only survive this pruning, but thrive and be fruitful in it. “You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.” [John 15:3-5]

The Lord Jesus reminded that the disciples were already “clean.” Their faith in Him had drawn them to follow Jesus; to remain in Him. They heard His teaching and obeyed His commands. Jesus said that if their lives remained in Him, they would be fruitful. But even more exciting, Jesus would remain in them.

The result, however, of separating one’s self from the vine leads to ultimate separation from God. “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.” [John 15:6]

The Lord is referring to those who heard Him teach, but never believed that He had come as Messiah and Savior of the world. They remained separated from the Vine and disconnected from His life-giving salvation.

Jesus said the disciples were “already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.” (v.3) As they followed Jesus, they connected to Him through faith. All they had learned by following the words Jesus spoke had already pruned off a lot of the sinful habits they had before. Verse seven explains this further. “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.”

The disciples remained connected in Jesus. Unlike those who refused the connection of belief in Him, they continued in a vibrant growing relationship with Christ through His words. Verses seven and eight revealed that this connection would give them tremendous resources. “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.” [John 15:7,8]

The disciples had spent most of the last three years with Jesus. The word “remain” is translated “abide” in the King James Version. Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words explains that the Greek word “meno” is translated into English by the words: abide, continue, dwell, endure, remain, stand, or tarry.” [Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words; p.12 abide, abode] – depending on the verse.

What a beautiful word to describe the relationship of a believer with their Lord. Jesus wants us to abide in Him just like a branch must abide on the vine. Only as we continue with Him and dwell in His word, will we be fruitful. As we remain, stand or tarry in close connectivity with the Lord Jesus, we will learn to know Him, thrive in Him and live for Him. That brings glory to the Father, as we remain in Christ and bear much fruit.

Our life abiding in Jesus is described in more detail in the next three verses: “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.” [John 15:9-11]

Do you see the closeness of our relationship with Christ? His love for you and I is patterned after the closeness, the love, that the Father God has for His Son, Jesus. Jesus wants that same type of closeness with us as He had with the Father and with His disciples. In verse 12 He reminded them, “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.” [John 15:12] He loved them dearly, warts and all! Jesus desired that each disciple produce the fruit of abiding in Him: love.

But He would also build that relationship with all believers because He would die for them. “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command.” [John 15:13,14] Christ told His disciples that His crucifixion would be the means by which He would give His life for them, because of His great love for them.

Because of Christ’s amazing love for us shown by the giving of His life for us, He asks that we love each other. Now, we know how unloving we can be at times. We get grouchy,

irritable, and downright selfish at times. It seems like an insurmountable task to show love when we're like that. And how can other Christians show love to us when we're like that? Galatians 5:22 tells us that love is a fruit of the Spirit.

As we remain in Christ, we will bear the fruit of love. Keeping His command to love yields joy in us and we want to keep His commands, like: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind; Love your neighbor as yourself." [Matthew 22:37, 39] Then we will feel His complete joy and show it by loving others.

What a marvelous love the Lord Jesus has for us! This is nothing like the bondage the world demands. The world demands that we perform - act like the unbelievers around us. The lie of the world says, "Conform to the world, but be just good enough to earn life in the here-after." That's a transaction that never has any security, because how do we know if we have ever been "good enough?"

But not so with our Lord. Rather than a transaction to be earned, He has a relationship of love with us. "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. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit – fruit that will last -" [John 15:15,16a] Our obedience to the Lord's commands is because we love Him, not to make Him love us.

Our close, love relationship with the Lord Jesus gives us access to the Father. The second half of verse 16 offers, "and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give to you." [John 15:16b] Notice the key phrase, in my name, repeated in the following parallel verses:

John 14:12-14 "Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it."

John 15:7 "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you."

What a privilege to be friends of God! Our Father does not place conditions on His love for us. He does not keep us at arm's length or turn His back on us. Rather, our Lord God wants nothing more than that we "remain in Him." Therefore, He delights that we reach up to Him and ask Him for things He desires to give us in answer to our prayers made in His name.

Being "friends" with God is an awesome privilege and an awesome responsibility. When we are friends, we know that person so well, that we are able to know what they want, what they like, how they would decide things should be, in a given circumstance. God reveals that to His friends in His Word.

The Bible gives us clear commands about what God wants us to do. In this passage alone He reveals: v.3 Remain in Me; v.5,8 & 16 Bear much fruit; v.7 My words remain in you; v.9 Remain in My love; v.10 keep my commandments; v.12 & 17 love each other. We can clearly know what God wants, by abiding in His Word. The more we know His Word and keep it precious in our hearts, the more we will understand what He would want in each circumstance. So, we can pray, or ask our requests in His Name.

Our prayers are vital to our remaining in Him. We worship Him, glorify Him, praise Him, express our love to Him in prayer. We confess our sins to Him, ask for His help to turn from those sins and pray for His guidance as we seek to live for Him. We pray for His wisdom so that we can live as examples of His love in the way He can use to further the gospel.

When we, or a friend, are caught in a sin habit, we know that habit keeps us from remaining in Him. So, we know we should confess that sin. We can pray to Him to bring us to repentance and forgive us.

When we wonder if we should say something about Jesus to a friend, family member or even a stranger, we know Jesus wants us to bear much fruit, so we ask Him to use us to help them come to know Jesus.

When we are frustrated and angry but we know God wants us to love each other, we can ask God to calm us down and that His Love would shine through our reactions and words. That is asking for something in His name; asking in prayer for something He would want to happen.

This amazing access to the powerful King of Kings in prayer is phenomenal. There is no caveat for our requests but that our requests be made in His Name. But notice that Jesus is not asking His disciples to merely tag on the phrase "in Jesus' Name" at the end of our prayers. He is asking that we remain in Him so closely that, as we pray, we will pray according to His will. What would glorify Jesus in this situation? We are asking that whatever the object of our prayers may be, the Lord God would fulfill His will on earth as it is in Heaven, drawing all people to live life glorifying Him.

Verse 17 sums up how the Father wants us to live for Him. "This is my command: Love each other." One definition of love is that you want to do what is best for the other person. Praying for each other is the best thing we can do to show our love for each other.

As He taught the Disciples in the last part of His discourse, the Lord wanted them to be prepared for what was about to happen. They had seen already that there was a hate building up against the Lord Jesus, that was in complete opposition to the love Jesus taught.

But, when Jesus would leave the disciples, that hate against Him would turn on His disciples. "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you." [John 15:18,19]

Perhaps, like me, you have wondered at the severity of hate that is now being exhibited in our world today. People hate others that are different from them. They hate others that don't agree with their ideas. They hate others that don't follow their hate!

But here in these Scriptures, the Lord Jesus had a very good handle on the source of that hate. The world hates us because we have been chosen out of the world; we are no longer part of the world, or its twisted ideas.

At the same time, those who remain in Christ Jesus will understand the hate. Verse 18 explained, "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first." In verse 20 Jesus said, "Remember what I told you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also." Verse 21 explained, "They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the one who sent me." [John 15:18, 20, 22]

Jesus came to offer life to all the world. But because He came and spoke the truth about the Father, those who "cut themselves off" from Jesus, have cut themselves off from the Father too.

"If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not be guilty of sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin...As it is, they have seen and yet they have hated both me and my Father." [John 15:22, 24] Such a contrast to the love that the Father offers each believer! In fact, their hate was the fulfillment of that which was prophesied in Psalm 35:19, "They hated me without reason." (John 15:25b)

The disciples had seen this hate at work. They knew that every moment they remained in Jerusalem, they were in danger of the religious rulers acting on that hate, against Jesus. They weren't sure that they could handle such hate; not like Jesus could. But Jesus, in this last evening He had with His disciples, didn't want to leave them worried about what the evil people might throw at them. The Lord Jesus had Help prepared for them.

"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. And you also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning. All this I have told you so that you will not fall away." [John 15: 26 – 16:1]

The word "Advocate" here is translated from the Greek word, "parakletos" which means literally, "called to one's side, i.e. to one's aid...It was used in courts of justice to denote a legal assistant, counsel for the defense, an advocate; ...In the widest sense, it signifies a succorer, comforter." [Vine's Expositor Dictionary of New Testament Words, comfort, comforter, etc. 5; p.210]

Yes, Jesus was going away. Yes, His "time was at hand." The disciples would witness the fury of the hate against Jesus on this same night and next day. But Jesus would send an Advocate, a Comforter to walk beside them and help them through the trials they would soon encounter.

This special one would be sent by the Lord Jesus and from the Father. Jesus spoke very little about the Holy Spirit during His ministry. But the Holy Spirit was an Advocate for Jesus Himself, during His walk on earth. We learned in John 1:32 that John the Baptist “saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remained on him...” [John 1:32] So the Holy Spirit indwelt Jesus all through His ministry on earth.

Now, the Lord would ask the Father to send the Holy Spirit to be with each disciple to help them “to testify about me.” In chapter 14 Jesus had already promised the disciples that this advocate would come “to help you and be with you forever -” [John 14:16] and He, the Holy Spirit “will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.” [John 14:26]

The presence of the Holy Spirit would be imperative, because of all that was to happen to the disciples as they testified in Jesus’ Name. “They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, the time is coming when anyone who kills you will think they are offering a service to God. They will do such things because they have not known the Father or me.” [John 16:2,3]

If we could have seen the disciples’ eyes when they heard this teaching in the dark of Passover night, I think they would all have had a huge concern. They had experienced the Jews putting Jesus out of the synagogues, and that was frightening enough. They knew the religious rulers had tried to stone Jesus and even now were hunting for Him to try to kill Him. But Jesus who faced the brunt of this hate, shielding His disciples from the worst, was warning that these same evil schemes would soon fall on them. And the perpetrators would think they were serving God as they would do this!

But Jesus encouraged them by saying about the Holy Spirit, “He will testify about me. And you also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning.” [John 15:27] Although Jesus must go away, the Holy Spirit would be with them, testifying through them, remaining with them, comforting them as they stood before their enemies.

Most importantly, the Holy Spirit would help Jesus’ believers keep that most important communication open with our Heavenly Father. Jesus said that the Holy Spirit would “teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.” [John 14:26] And He helps us talk with the Father. “And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God.” [Romans 8:27]

Jesus reminded them, the hate was not about them alone. “They will do such things because they have not known the Father or me. I have told you this, so that when their time comes you will remember that I warned you about them. I did not tell you this from the beginning because I was with you.” [John 16:3,4]

Although Jesus had sheltered His disciples from some of the enemies that were to come, He now addressed the worry they may soon face; “Why do they hate us so much?” They must remember through this future onslaught, that it is not about them – it is all about Jesus.

He already told them: "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first." [John 15:18] "If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you." [John 15:19] "They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the one who sent me." [John 15:21] "They will do such things because they have not known the Father or me. I have told you this, so that when their time comes you will remember that I warned you about them." [John 16:3]

So, as I conclude this lecture, let's put ourselves in the position of Jesus' disciples, that dark night before the crucifixion. Let's take His admonitions to heart. Let us remain in Him, so we will be fruitful vines, exhibiting His love to the world. Let us realize that apart from our Lord Jesus Christ we can do nothing. Let us remember that remaining in Him will produce the abiding fruit of love for each other. Let us be challenged to remain in His Word so we will understand how to pray in Jesus' name according to His will.

Finally, let us recognize the Holy Spirit's work in our hearts. Let our habit of "remaining in Jesus' love" be our identifying characteristic through the work of the Holy Spirit. And let us dwell in Jesus' extreme expression of His love for us – that He laid down His life for his friends, as our example.

"My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: that one lay down one's life for one's friends." [John 15:12,13]

Keeping this command to love is the greatest gift we can pass on to those we love. Let our lives show others His unmatched love as we remain in Him; our true vine.