

REMAIN IN JESUS

John 15:1-17

Key Verse: 15:5

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will be much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”

John 15:1-17 is part of Jesus' upper room dialogue. It is an intimate conversation; only Jesus and his disciples were present. It takes place right after the Last Supper. Soon Jesus would be arrested, tried, condemned and crucified. Then God would raise him from the dead and he would ascend into glory, leaving this world in bodily form.

The disciples would no longer see Jesus. They wondered if he was abandoning them. They began to grieve his departure. How did Jesus help them? He explained that the relationship he began with them on earth would continue after he left them; it would be the same, but also different, and actually much better. Then he told them to remain in him and bear much fruit. It was the secret to a happy life as his disciples.

This message applies to all who are in Christ. Whether we have followed Jesus for a long time or short, his word speaks to us. We can learn how to live the most fruitful and blessed life. Let's listen. We can divide this passage into three parts: you are clean because of the word (1-3), remain in Jesus (4-8), and friendship with Jesus (9-17).

First, you are clean because of the word (1-3). Look at verses 1-2. “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.” In calling himself the “true” vine, Jesus is distinguishing himself from the nation Israel. God frequently called Israel his choice vine, on which he lavished attention and care (Ps. 80:8; Isa. 5:1–7; Hosea 10:1). He longed for good fruit in Israel. There were great people of God who loved and served God wholeheartedly like Abraham, Moses and

David, but the nation's history was largely one of failure. Most leaders did not want to go through hardships and please God with faith. They wanted to live easy lives, fell into idolatry, and failed to carry out God's purpose. Finally the nation was sent into captivity in Babylon. Where Israel had failed, Jesus would succeed. Jesus would fulfill God's salvation purpose on earth through his suffering, death and resurrection. As the "true vine," Jesus is the unique source of life who empowers us to live for God and become fruitful.

Jesus calls his Father "the gardener." Father God is the sovereign ruler and the great caretaker of Jesus, and Jesus absolutely trusts the Father. But honestly, it is a painful revelation from God. He cuts off branches that do not bear fruit, and prunes branches that do bear fruit. Every branch will feel the gardener's blade. As the branches feel the blade, so does the vine. However, cutting and pruning have two very different purposes. Cutting off is done to branches that have no fruit. They are permanently removed. Pruning is for branches that bear fruit. It is the strategic removal of some stems so the branch may be more fruitful. Pruning is painful. But pruned branches remain in the vine and become very fruitful. In the same way, God cuts away unnecessary things in our lives that hinder us from bearing much fruit. Though it is painful, the end result is a more fruitful life.

On the basis of his analogy, Jesus declares to his disciples in verse 3: "You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you." The word "clean" means they are pure and ready to bear fruit. This is the second time that Jesus calls them "clean." Earlier in the evening, in 13:10b, Jesus said, "And you are clean, though not every one of you." The unclean one was Judas Iscariot. During the Last Supper, Judas got up from the meal, went out and betrayed Jesus to the religious leaders. John says that Satan had entered into him. Under Satan's dominion, he was cut off from Jesus and the other disciples. God allowed Satan's work to cut off Judas. Now Jesus calls the others "clean." What was the difference between Judas and the other eleven? The Eleven had truly received the word Jesus had spoken to them. They made deep commitments to Jesus in response. But Judas did not (Jn 6:67-71). He was always on the fence. So, although he was with Jesus for over three years, he did not commit himself to Jesus. Here we learn the importance of really receiving Jesus' words in our hearts. John 1:1 says, "In

the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God." Jesus is the Word; remaining in his word is remaining in him.

Jesus said in John 6:63b, "The words I have spoken to you—they are full of the Spirit and life." When we receive one word from Jesus in our hearts, we receive the Holy Spirit and Jesus' life in our souls. On this basis we form a life relationship with Jesus. We are cleansed from our sins and empowered to live a new life. Without receiving the word of God, we remain under the power of sin and death, constrained to live by the flesh and human reason until we perish. Thankfully, however, receiving God's words allows us to foster a loving relationship with Jesus.

Growing up as a Catholic boy, I was in the church regularly and went through the rituals of baptism and confirmation. But I had no power to overcome the sinful desires of lust, pride and selfishness. Honestly, I was dying in my sins. I went to Oregon State University and majored in business administration to become a rich CEO in pursuit of the American Dream. While I was there, a Korean missionary, Abraham Kim, invited me to Bible study. The words of Mark's Gospel worked powerfully in my heart. When Jesus said in Mark 2:17: "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners," I knew He was talking to me. I confessed my sins and accepted Jesus as my Savior. He forgave my sins and set me free. He gave me a desire to live as a shepherd for college students. I gave up my American Dream and followed Jesus. The day after graduation, I moved to Chicago to begin a pastoral internship in UBF. I have served on the UBF staff to this day. My life was totally changed by the word of God! Anyone who accepts Jesus' word in their heart enters a life relationship with Jesus.

Second, remain in Jesus (4-8). Now that the disciples were "clean," Jesus taught them what they must do and why. Look at verses 4-5. "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." In these verses, we find two action verbs which Jesus really emphasizes: "remain" and "bear."

“Remain” is repeated 11 times in this passage (4[4],5,6, 7[2],9,10[2]). It is often translated “abide” in other versions. Its meaning is very clear – it is to stay in the relationship with Jesus, not breaking it. Why did Jesus tell them so many times to remain in him? It was because they would be severely tempted to break their relationship with him. Consider the Apostle Peter. In just a few hours he would deny Jesus three times, even before a servant girl. It was a terrible failure. How could he face the other disciples? How could he continue to follow Jesus? He must have felt like giving up. But he did not. While Judas went out and hanged himself, Peter repented, holding onto Jesus’ word. It was bitter and painful. But he remained. Soon he met the Risen Christ! He was filled with the Holy Spirit. He declared the gospel boldly, and God used him to establish Jesus’ church. No one has an easy time keeping their relationship with Christ. Everyone goes through hardships and dark nights of the soul. To remain in Jesus is to keep trusting in him until the trials and tests pass.

Notice that Jesus says, “...as I also remain in you.” Remaining is not just something we do. It is something Jesus does as well. He remains with us, bearing all of our sins and weaknesses with patience. Jesus never leaves us. After his ascension, Jesus continued to be with us through the Holy Spirit. In Matthew 28:20, he promised us, “I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” So as we struggle to remain in Jesus, let’s remember that he is bearing with us and remaining with us always, no matter what happens.

What is the outcome of remaining in Jesus? The expression “bear fruit” is repeated six times in this passage. Jesus talks a lot about fruit! Here we need to consider our lives from God’s point of view. God gave us the precious gift of life, out of his great love. He has a purpose – for us to bear fruit. This fruit starts with inner transformation. He wants us to bear the fruits of the Spirit. John emphasizes love, joy and peace in his gospel. Paul adds patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal 5:22). To summarize, this means we become like Jesus. From a transformed inner self, we bear fruits in our work and relationships. We become a good influence to society – and history makers. God does not want

us to be petty, mundane, and ineffective. He wants us to be great in our character and to be a blessing to the world!

To help us remain in him and bear fruit, Jesus tells us clearly about consequences. Not remaining in Jesus is serious. Jesus said, "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" (6). This means one's life is useless in the sight of God. It may also indicate God's eternal judgment of the spiritually dead, like Judas Iscariot. In any case, we must realize that the consequence of not remaining in Jesus is serious.

More positively, Jesus says in verse 7, "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you." Remaining in Jesus results in a beautiful love relationship with God. We remain in Jesus as his words remain in us. Jesus has given us his words. They are the gospels, written by his disciples, and the entire Bible. When we meditate on the words of God and they remain in our hearts, the Holy Spirit dwells within us. He connects us to Jesus and we enjoy the blessing of sweet fellowship with him. In this union, we have the great privilege of prayer. We can talk heart to heart with Jesus – listening to his words and sharing our own hearts with him. He answers our prayers. In this union with Christ, we find strength in our time of weakness; wisdom when we don't know what to do; love that delights our souls; comfort in times of grief; hope in the darkness, and everything we need to live a holy, fruitful life. I can testify to this. God's word has enabled me to remain in Jesus until now. Among many ways, I will share three.

First, I could overcome my future security problem by God's word. Right after marriage, my wife Dervilla and I were quite poor. My salary was very small. She gave up her graduate study to be a receptionist to help support our family. After our first daughter was born, one day she was crying without having enough milk. Realizing the reality of the situation, I also began to shed tears as I was working in the center parking lot, pulling up weeds. At that moment, Jesus's words spoke clearly to my heart, "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." My burden was totally lifted. I knew God would provide for my

family. I could serve God's work freely, assisting our founder, the late Dr. Samuel Lee. As Jesus promised, God has provided for us – so well, in fact, that we have raised six children. The older four are working professionals who fully support themselves; two have families. The younger two are living with us and assist in the house and church. By the way, the little girl who was crying is now a heart surgeon, making a lot of money.

Second, God's word enabled me to grow deeper in the love of Christ in a time of great trial. About 20 years ago, my oldest son David left our family with bitterness because I did not show love and care for him enough. When it became clear to me that he was serious, I was brokenhearted. It was the worst pain that I have experienced. Then, in the middle of the night, as I was preparing the Sunday message for the next day, the Lord gave me Romans 8:32: "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" For the first time, I could understand how much God suffered to give us his Son. The love of God grew much deeper in my soul. In the love of God, I found hope for myself and for my son. I also realized how much God loves all of his children. Renewed by this love, I could remain in Jesus and continue to serve Jesus and his people. A few years later, my son returned home, we began Bible study, and he has come to accept Jesus personally.

Third, I could serve as UBF General Director by the power of God's word. In February 2022, I was elected to be the sixth UBF General Director, succeeding P. Moses Yoon. It was quite a surprise to me, because I felt very unqualified. But God made his will known, and I was chosen. In my prayer, the Lord inspired me to visit Korea UBF and meet leaders in person, to express my respect and desire to work together. When I arrived at the airport with my wife in mid-March, there was a Covid quarantine in effect. Not even husband and wife could stay together. Unexpectedly, I had one week of involuntary solitude. During that week I prepared my life testimony. The Lord gave me John 1:14, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." Jesus' humility to leave heaven and come to earth in the flesh to live among us moved my heart. I wanted to follow Jesus. Learning and practicing Jesus' humility became the basis for my

service as General Director. As I tried to follow humble Jesus, many people's hearts were moved and they were willing to support my leadership. As we have worked together during the last three years, God has revived our ministry in many ways. It is nothing but the grace of God. I could remain in Jesus by the power of God's words. Though I have given personal examples, there are many UBF leaders who can share similar stories. We can remain in Jesus and become fruitful by remaining in Jesus' words.

What is the purpose of bearing much fruit? It is to glorify God. It is to show the power and love of Jesus in action to the world. Jesus said we must show ourselves to be his disciples. Among many examples, I would like to share two stories of how God's power has manifested in answer to our prayers.

In the fall of 2022, I led a team from UBF headquarters to travel to four Asian countries. One of our stops was in Sri Lanka. We found that the two missionary families there were not on good terms. Our visit forced them to get together. As we traveled together, our van broke down a long distance from our hotel. We were stuck. With a deep sense of helplessness we prayed. Suddenly a man approached us. His Sri-Lankan name "Deva" means "Angel" in English. He helped us to find a repair place and a rental van. However, one missionary had to remain behind. That evening we fasted and prayed for God's guidance and protection. Then the other missionary began to repent and sent a text message of apology. It was well received, and answered with a heart emoji. The next morning, the two missionary families shared a meal together for the first time in years. They began to talk from heart to heart. They reconciled and agreed to work together to host the Asian director's conference which was held last year. It was a great success through their prayer and coworking. We experienced God's miracle.

Last fall, I visited M. Barnabas Kang of North Macedonia. He was deathly ill and being treated in the Ansan hospital in Korea. He weighed only 58 kilograms. The UBF community began to pray for him. By faith, I told him that our UBF headquarters journey team was planning to visit North Macedonia in the spring of 2025. And I said, "Let's see each other there!" In June of this year, we met each other in North Macedonia! He was healthy

and strong, and has gained 14 kilograms. His doctor in Macedonia was surprised to see him return and said, "It is a miracle." These testimonies reveal Christ's power at work to save life and restore, in answer to prayer. It is to God's glory. Praise God!

Third, loving friendship with Jesus (9-17). In verses 9-17 the word "love" appears nine times. Essentially, Jesus tells his disciples that he has loved them as the Father has loved him, and that they should remain in his love and love one another with the love he gives them. The word "command" appears five times, and this tells us that we must love not only when we feel like it, but always, because God commands it. The word "joy" also appears twice; this tells us that living in this divine love is joyful, even though it is commanded. And the word "friend" appears twice, telling us that the nature of this love is like friendship. In verses 13-14 Jesus said, "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command." In just a few hours, Jesus would demonstrate to them the greatest love. He would lay down his life by dying on the cross to save them from their sins — and not only them, but all who believe in him.

Jesus knew what we needed most — salvation from sin. Sin separates people from God. Sin is at the root of all the pain and misery that we experience. Sin damaged God's beautiful world and made it a place of pain, sorrow and death. Sin degenerates the beautiful image of God in us and turns us into ugly beings. Sin causes physical death and spiritual death, which is judgment in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. The destiny of sinners is too horrible to think about. But Jesus came into this world to love sinners and to save us. The only way was to shed his blood on the cross for us. He did this willingly, paying the highest price. Who can put a value on the blood of God's one and only Son? This blood is so powerful, and his sacrifice so effective, that by his one sacrifice, he paid the debt of all people who believe in him, once and for all. Now, through faith in him, we receive forgiveness of all of our sins, adoption to sonship in the family of God, and living hope in the kingdom of God. Also, he gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit to dwell in us, and we can live our earthly lives to do the work of God and make a real impact in advancing the kingdom of God.

Jesus did this because he loves us. And in this love, he calls us his friends. But there is one thing he requires of his friends. It is to obey his command, practicing the love he has shown us with one another, unto and before a watching world. In a world broken and torn, with so many suffering and hurting people, Jesus wants us to reveal his love and be the agents of grace who change this world.

Let's accept Jesus' word "remain in me." Let's hold one word of Jesus in our hearts. Let's grow in the image of Christ and become friends of Jesus who can be used greatly by God. May the Lord transform our families, friends and neighbors, schools and cities, and even our nation and this world. Let's bear much fruit by remaining in Jesus.