

John 15:1-6

The Requirements of True Discipleship

Introduction

As we begin a new series it may be useful to provide a title for our study of John 15. I have chosen to use the title "*The requirements of true discipleship*". My reason for suggesting this title and this series is because it is healthy for us to repeatedly be examining our Christian lives in the light of true discipleship. Jesus told the Apostles in Matthew to "*make disciples of all nations baptising them....*"

It is my view that a disciple is a Christian. I do not see in the NT a difference between the two. Discipleship in my view is not an advance on being a Christian. Jesus told us to "*make disciples*" and then to "*baptise*" them. A disciple is a learner, a follower of a master. A Christian is none other than one who has taken Christ as Lord and Saviour and now learns from Him, follows Him and obeys Him.

John 15 presents us with some detailed information on the level of commitment that Jesus anticipates from those who wish to be His disciples. It is no easy matter to be a disciple. It requires utmost commitment, utmost dedication and obedience.

Before we proceed any further, let us seek to set the scene that is before us. It is generally recognised that chapter 13-17 of John's Gospel constitute the "*Upper Room Discourses*". These chapters represent a summary of the teaching that Jesus gave to his Disciples alone. He is not teaching the crowds, only the disciples. Here is teaching for the Christian.

From a general point of view this is an interesting and important matter. Did you know that the Gospel of John only covers three weeks within the three years of the life of Jesus? John extracts only seven days from each of the three years. Now, most of John's material is the teaching of Jesus. Very little narrative features here. John can hardly be called a "*Gospel*". It is really a commentary.

The Jesus that John portrays is that of a Teacher. Within this teaching Jesus is presented to us as Christ and Saviour. But, for our purposes at this stage, I want to draw attention to the fact of Jesus as Teacher. In a Christian climate where the Church is in danger of undermining the importance of teaching, it is vital to recognise that Jesus went about preaching and teaching. Nicodemus addressed Him thus, "*Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher...*" (John 3:1). Indeed, Jesus Himself, in Mark 1:38 Jesus replied, "*Let us go somewhere else--to the nearby villages--so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.*" Preaching and Teaching were vitally important to Jesus and that is why He commanded the Church to continue the tradition, "*.....teaching them whatever I have commanded*".

Now, as we come to focus our attention upon John 15:1-6 it is also important for us to first of all take a general view of the passage. The reason for this is that Jesus appears to be addressing two distinct groups of listeners. First, He is addressing the disciples themselves as He encourages them to bear fruit. But He also speaks, as if were, to another group to whom He gives grave warnings about what happens when they do not bear fruit.

For example, in verse 2a and 6 Jesus gives warnings to a group who were not present in the Upper Room but whom John feels his readers, like us, need to know about. John 15:2 *He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit.....*John 15:6 *If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.* These words are not encouraging, they are warnings and are not addressed as such to the disciples, and they represent a “third party” as it were.

Then, in verse 1,2b-5, Jesus addresses the disciples with encouraging words, John 15:1 *“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener..... every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will 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 a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing”.*

This means that we have two groups of people to talk about and to address. The first group receive a warning, vs 2a & 6, whilst the second group receive encouragements, 1,2b-6.

1. A Serious Warning Issued: 2a, 6

He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit..... If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned”

1. Warnings:

Let us recognise that the Bible issues many warnings. Christianity is like driving a car. Regularly, and for our benefit, we encounter warning signs. A warning sign is a picture or symbol within a triangle. This is different from a symbol within a circle where this is a command, it is mandatory, must be obeyed. Warnings are there to prevent us making serious mistakes, to encourage us to take extra care.

Equally, the Bible has its warning signs. For example, 1 Corinthians 10:11 *“These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfilment of the ages has come”*; Acts 20:31 *“So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears”*. 1 Timothy 5:20 *“Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning”*.

God’s warnings to us are for our benefit. He gives us warnings for us to take heed.

2. To Whom is Jesus speaking in vs 2a, 6. ?

Usually we divide mankind into two major groups. In the first place we speak of Christians and non-Christians. It is right to make this simple divide. Either you are in the Kingdom or outside of it. You may be near to the Kingdom but if you have not repented and know the experience of laying hold of Jesus by faith you are not in the Kingdom.

But, there is in a sense a third group. These are the people who think they are Christians but are not. The kind of person who says, *“Of course I am a Christian, I go*

to Church, say my prayers, believe in God. I don't know anything about the experience of the New Birth and all that, but I pay my taxes and I live a good clean life". You know the sort of person I am speaking about.

This group can be the hardest and the most difficult to evangelise. Give me a good old atheist any day. You know where he or she stands. They are not pretending. They tell you that they are not Christians. But the other group are very complex. You have to wade through a sea of excuses, religiosity and man-made religion. You are aware as you speak to them that they know nothing of the reality of the living God of the movement of the Spirit. They are proud of their religion.

You will remember that in the experience of Jesus He seemed to prefer the company of the tax collectors and prostitutes and the outcasts of society were more amenable to Him. On the other hand He found the Pharisees and the religious leaders of His day very difficult. He gravitated towards the harlots and sinners.

But, it is to this third group, I believe, these two verses in John are directed. But why do I say this? It is because of what happened in John 13. Here is John's presentation of the Last Supper. It heads the "*Upper Room Discourses*". The Twelve Disciples were met together. Jesus predicts His betrayal and crucifixion and in a covert manner he points to Judas Iscariot. Then read what John says, John 13:30 "*As soon as Judas had taken the bread, he went out. And it was night*". This evil character was now removed from their presence and had gone about his evil ways.

However, before this event the discipleship band had always included Judas. He seemed and presented as one of the Twelve. He seemed to be a "*Christian*". He spoke and looked as if he were a Christian. But in reality he was not one of Christ's. Later he is spoken of by Jesus, John 17:12 "*While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me. None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled*".

Now, I suggest that in John 15:2a, 6, Jesus has Judas in mind and many like him who appear to be Christians but in reality are not.

3. How can we tell a true Christian from a false one ?

The people of whom Jesus is speaking (included Judas) are described as folk who profess to know Jesus, i.e. "*branch in me*" but that they "*....bear no fruit*".

What is "*fruit*" in John 15? "*Fruit*" must be interpreted in the same manner as elsewhere in the NT. "*Fruit*" has always stood for the characteristics of a holy and sanctified life. It has to be those qualities of life that are portrayed in Galatians 5:22-23 "*.... the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control*".

Let me put it this way, there is only one tried and tested proof of our salvation. This is found in our lives. It is right to have a testimony and to be baptised as the bible's way of making people know that we are Christians. But this is different from displaying the "*proofs*".

How may we know that we are Christians today? It is the "*fruit*". Jesus said, Matthew 7:20 "*.... by their fruit you will recognise them*". Then observe the way John portrays this in his epistle, 1 John 2:3-4 "*We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. The man who says, "I know him," but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him*". Take the teaching of Jesus in John's

Gospel, John 14:15 *"If you love me, you will obey what I command"*. John 14:24 *He who does not love me will not obey my teaching"*. John 15:10 *"If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love"*.

We may decide that we are Christians because we come to the Church and worship, or that we read and study our bibles. But, you will not find that these are given proofs of our conversion. It is possible to worship, study, preach and evangelise and never really be a Christian. This, after all, is what Judas did. One assumes that he was one of the seventy sent out to evangelise, who was taught how to pray etc.

4. Here is a serious Warning. vs 2a & 6

"He cuts off every branch that bears no fruit.....If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned".

What is Jesus speaking about? I suggest that this is Jesus teaching on the matter of "hell". Now I know that in some so-called evangelical circles today it is not fashionable to speak about hell. Some professing evangelicals have chosen to reject the bible's teaching on hell in spite of the fact that some of the most graphic descriptions of hell came from the mouth of Jesus. *be thrown into hell, Mark 9:47-48 ".....where "their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched."*

A reformed evangelical, who was a friend and support to me when I was at college struggling with modernist theology, has now become an exponent of "post-mortem evangelism". This is a form of teaching that teaches universal salvation. It is believed that Jesus will enter hell and effectively preach to all the non-converted and that they will turn to repent and believe in him. Thus there will be no hell.

This is not the teaching of scripture. There is no suggestion of a "second chance" beyond death. Death seals for ever the chance for conversion. It is only in this life that we have the opportunity to repent and take Jesus Christ as our Saviour. Beyond the grave there is no hope.

2 Thessalonians 1:8-10 *"He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marvelled at among all those who have believed"*.

Romans 2:3-5 *".....do you think you will escape God's judgement? Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realising that God's kindness leads you toward repentance? But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgement will be revealed"*.

The teaching of John 15 is very powerful and frightening. *"He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit..... a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned"*. It is dramatic in its detail. Yes, it is symbolic, metaphorical, yet it speaks a message of doom to those who are not truly in Christ. It speaks of future damnation to those who think that they are saved but are not.

Here is total rejection. Nothing could be worse than to be rejected by the Saviour of the world. Listen to these words of Jesus, some of the most terrifying words that He ever spoke, Matthew 7:21-23 *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!"*

How do I know that there will be a hell? Of course, this comes from the plain teaching of Scripture; especially the teaching of Jesus. Did you know that no one spoke more openly and graphically about hell than Jesus? His words are more alarming than any of the other NT writers.

But, I suggest that there is another reason for believing in hell. It is the cross. Why the cross? Why did the cross have to happen? It was because of God's utter hatred of sin and his burning justice. If anything should spell out the absolute need for hell it has to be the cross. When you look at the cross you see how much God hates sin. He hated sin so much He was prepared for His only Son to bear that dreadful experience. He hated sin so much that He made His only Son bear in His own body the wrath, hatred, judgement and condemnation against sin. He could not permit sin to go unpunished. Hence, there must be a hell for such a holy and just God. The existence of hell has nothing to do with whether God is a God of love or not. It has to do with His justice. It is His supreme love that has supplied the cross so that fallen and hell-deserving mankind might find a way of escape from the wrath to come.

On the cross Jesus actually endured hell. That is a picture of what it will be like for the unrepentant sinner on the day of judgement. God will visit that person with the same degree of wrath for his own sin. Calvary was a picture of hell. It killed Jesus. It made the Son of God cry out, *"My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"*

In the words of the famous Richard Baxter, *"there is a hell to shun and a heaven to be won"*. Make sure that you are on the right side. You will only get one opportunity.

2. A Challenging Encouragement Given: vs 1, 2b, 3-5

Jesus now turns to His disciples with teaching that will motivate them towards further fruit bearing. These are the true requirements of discipleship.

1. Pruning to produce more fruit

Vs 2 *..."every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful"*.

I note that in the NIV and the RSV the term used here is *"prune"*. The Greek has πᾶν κλῆμα ἐν ἐμοὶ μὴ φέρον καρπὸν αἶρει αὐτό, καὶ πᾶν τὸ καρπὸν φέρον καθαίρει αὐτὸ ἵνα καρπὸν πλείονα φέρῃ. . The key word is καθαίρει (kathairei) meaning *"to cleanse, of filth impurity, to prune trees and vines from useless shoots"*. Its basic meaning is simply *"to cleanse"* but the lexicons give it the interpretation of *"pruning"*.

This shows how important is the issue of sanctification to Jesus. He is not merely standing by waiting for us to produce the fruit. He is actively engaged in encouraging the good fruit like a committed gardener.

Pruning can be painful, appears to be damaging and hurtful to the tree. There is cutting, sawing and trimming going on. Something is being taken away from the tree. It seems smaller than it was at the beginning. There is a reducing work going on. To the untrained eye the gardener appears brutal, uncaring and damaging to the tree. But, we know that this is the only method by which the tree can be made to be more fruitful.

So in our lives, Jesus is the great gardener. He comes to us with the pruning shears. He begins His divine work of pruning and cleansing. He takes things from us, He appears to hurt us, the experience can be painful as we might experience losses in our lives.

To the untrained and less spiritual person this will be seen as negative and painful. He may wonder whether God loves him. He may complain that God is "*attacking him*", that God has become his enemy.

But, this is far from the truth. It is because God loves us that He so treats us. This is the only way God is going to produce the desired fruit. We must suffer loss if we want more fruit in our lives. Some of this pruning may be the need for chastising. We read in Hebrews 12:6,11" *because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it*".

Christian, look at your experiences. What is happening to you? Do you realise that this is what God sometimes does to us? Have you learned the art of recognising the gardener's hand? You must stop complaining when things become hard and difficult and trying. Maybe God is at work in you. For you it is the pruning season. He appears to be causing pain, but it is to develop you, to strengthen you, to improve you and to make you grow.

Indeed, as the basic meaning of the term καθαίρει (kathairei) means "*cleansing*", so this inner work of Jesus in His pruning has the effect of cleansing us.

2. Teaching to produce more fruit vs 3

"You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you".
ἤδη ὑμεῖς καθαροί ἐστε διὰ τὸν λόγον ὃν λελάληκα ὑμῖν·

John uses the same Greek word here in vs 3 καθαροί (katharoi). The Lexicon says, "*like a vine cleansed by pruning and so fitted to bear fruit*". The NIV has chosen to translate this word by "*clean*". But we can give it the same meaning as above. These disciples already had had some of this "*pruning*" experience.

But according to Jesus, His work was done through the "*Word*" He had spoken to them. The Word of God acts as this "*cleansing*" and "*pruning*" method. The Word of God acts for us as a means of sanctification, as a means of enabling us to produce more fruit.

For example, John 17:17 "*Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth*". Then we must remember, Eph 5:25-26 "*...as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word,*" 1 Peter 1:22 "*Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth...*".

Built into the divine programme God has ordained that through our study, reading and teaching of the Word we are made holy. The word becomes fastened to our minds, thus as the Psalmist says, Psalms 119:11 *“I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you”*. There is a preventative measure contained in the Word of God.

Who has not known the experience of the Word of God flashing into our minds when faced with temptation? Or felt pangs of remorse once having sinned when the Word of God challenges our consciences?

3. Abiding in Christ enables us to bear fruit 4-5

John 15:4 *“Remain in me, and I will 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 a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing”*.

The key word here, of course, is this much used term, “abide”, as the AV and RSV have and the NIV “remain”. What does this word mean? μένω (meno) means “to remain, abide in reference to a place, not to depart, to continue to be present”. The tense of this verb is an aorist imperative and is described by syntax as an inceptive aorist, that is a decisive action that is to begin to do something. So Jesus is saying “you must begin definitely to abide in me”.

The word comes from μένω meaning to remain. It is used in John 2:12, and 8:31 as “continue”, and in the NIV as “stayed” ; ie John 2:12 *“After this he went down to Capernaum with his mother and brothers and his disciples. There they stayed for a few days”*.

Hence Jesus is saying, “stay in me”, don’t wander off, don’t drift from me, stay with me. Life is such that we are apt to allow things, people, activities etc. to come between us and Jesus. We know little of this “Enoch” experience. You remember, the man of whom it was said “Walked with God”.

“Abiding in Christ” is adopting this form of life style that determines to maintain a constant consciousness of Christ. Wesley said that he did not allow one hour to pass in the day but that he consciously through of Christ.

Life, duties, pleasures; activities are all carried out with Christ at the centre. It is Paul saying “for me to live is Christ”.

He then gives us His reasons for saying that we must “abide in Him”. *“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 a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing”*.

Fruit bearing is impossible without Him. Thank God that we are not left alone in this business of sanctification. He is at work within us. He gives us of His Spirit. His power enables us.

When Jesus says these famous words, “apart from me you can do nothing” although within the context they point to the task of fruit bearing, we are at liberty to extent the application to “all things”

This is similar in some respects to Paul's great claim, Philippians 4:13 "*I can do everything through him who gives me strength*". Even if those words really only apply to his previous explanations of being able to endure plenty and want, nevertheless, the principle does apply to "*all things*" in general.

Thomas Brooks the Puritan says this, "*Jesus does not say "Without me you cannot do many things"; but "Without me you can do nothing"; nor does He say, "Without me you cannot do difficult things", but "Without me you can do nothing"; nor does He say, "Without me you do no spiritual thing", but "Without me you can do nothing*".

The Greek is interesting. χωρὶς ἐμοῦ οὐ δύνασθε ποιεῖν οὐδέν . It reads literally, "*without me not are you able to one thing*". Οὐ...οὐδέν (ou...ouden) meaning, "*not one thing, nothing*". The double negative in Greek indicates an emphatic negative. Jesus is saying plainly that we will never be able to accomplish anything, not even one thing for Him without this abiding in Him.

Christian, do you really believe this?

Our dependence upon Christ is immeasurable. There is no independence in the Christian life. We live and speak as if we were independent and this is demonstrated by our lack of prayer, our lack of bible study, our lack of acknowledgment of the Spirit and our lack of worship. It is a hard lesson to learn that even if we are grow up in the adult world where we are expected to be responsible for all our own actions, within the spiritual realm we are fully dependent upon Christ for everything as a little child is upon its mother and father.

Conclusion

1. Let us learn the first and most important lesson from John 15
Fruit bearing.

This is the whole point of the passage. By your fruit you will know today whether or not you are a Christian. It is not enough to be a preacher, worshipper, leader, Church member. This is not the deciding factor. Christian, what of your fruit? What of your sanctification?

2. Let us learn the second most important lesson from John 15
Genuine Christianity.

There are three groups of people in this world. The first group at the genuine born-again believers. The second group are the decisive unbelievers, the atheists, the ones who reject everything that Christ stands for.

But it is the third group who are the most dangerous. Those who think that they are Christian but are not; those who are fooling themselves; those who are living in a fools paradise. They are the religious, the ones who use Christianity like a hobby but whose lives do not show any spiritual fruit.

Friends, to which of these three groups do you belong today?

3. Let us learn the third most important lesson from John 15
Staying with Jesus.

Six times within six verses Jesus used this term "*remain*" / "*abide*". There is a significant point here for us. I wonder if Jesus would prefer our company to our

activity: our presence to our performance; our relationship to our work? When busy Martha was gently rebuked by Jesus in contrast to Mary, this was not to suggest that activity for Christ is undervalued. Rather, it was the spirit of Martha that was so wrong. Somehow we must learn to couple abiding in Christ with activity for Christ. The latter is easy and can over-shadow the former, but it must not.

Richard Lee.