

March 19

Lesson 3

MATCHLESS

LOVE

DEVOTIONAL READING: 1 John 4:16b-21

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: John 15:1-17

JOHN 15:1-17

¹ “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ² 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. ³ You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴ 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.

⁵ “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. ⁶ 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. ⁷ If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.



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⁹ “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. ¹² My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. ¹³ Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. ¹⁷ This is my command: Love each other.”

KEY VERSE

My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. John 15:12

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify the vine, the branches, and the fruit.
2. Explain how the Christian is able to bear “much fruit.”
3. Make a list of God’s “pruning” that often occurs in a Christian’s life.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. Thinning the Peaches
- B. Lesson Background

I. The True Vine (John 15:1-7)

- A. Branches Bearing Fruit (vv. 1-3)
Now or Later?
- B. Believers Abiding in Jesus (vv. 4-7)

II. The True Friend (John 15:8-17)

- A. Disciples Glorifying God (vv. 8-11)
- B. Servants Becoming Friends (vv. 12-15)
Lay Down Your Time?
- C. Jesus Charging Workers (vv. 16, 17)

Conclusion

- A. Limits on Love?
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. Thinning the Peaches

My brother used to work in a peach orchard. There, he and his fellow workers would climb ladders to remove enough tiny peaches so that the remaining ones were spaced every eight inches or so on the branch. This time-consuming task would eliminate more than half the peaches on some trees!

The rationale for this practice recognizes that a peach tree has access to a limited amount of nutrients. If the peaches are not thinned out, they will end up small and hard. If thinned, however, the peaches that remain will be robust and profitable.

Today’s lesson involves an illustration of a different fruit-bearing flora: the grapevine. Orchard and vineyard are similar in at least one way: as peach trees need to have their produce thinned, grapevines need to be pruned in order to produce optimal fruit. But the pruning of which Jesus spoke has a different basis, as we shall see.

B. Lesson Background

The vineyard was a staple of agriculture in the ancient world. The fruit thereby produced became a source of sustenance year round, with many of the harvested grapes being converted into raisins and wine for later consumption (compare [2 Samuel 16:1](#)). One of the enticing descriptions of the promised land was its productive vineyards ([Deuteronomy 6:10, 11; 8:7-10](#)). Indeed, a physical sign brought back by the ill-fated spying expedition into the promised land was a massive cluster of grapes ([Numbers 13:23](#)).

Vineyards were a common sight throughout Galilee, Samaria, and Judea in Jesus’ day. Besides today’s text, he also used vineyard imagery in his parables of the workers in the vineyard ([Matthew 20:1-16](#)), the two sons ([21:28-32](#)), the wicked tenants ([21:33-39](#)), and the barren fig tree ([Luke 13:6-9](#)). Some students consider today’s text also to be a parable, but it’s better thought of as an illustrative comparison or an extended metaphor without a plot. Everything depends on the definition of *parable*. Common experiences regarding vineyards are also assumed in [1 Corinthians 9:7](#).

Grapevines would be pruned severely at a certain time of the year, leaving little more than a leafless, branchless stump that would be propped up with a rock or two. All the old branches would be cut off and carried away, providing valuable fuel for home fires.

After new branches had grown, a second pruning would occur to remove the smaller branches. This allowed the larger branches to produce

bigger clusters of larger grapes. Such pruning was part of the process known as cultivating the vines ([Deuteronomy 28:39](#)).

I. The True Vine

([JOHN 15:1-7](#))

Today's lesson is from a section in the Gospel of John known as the farewell discourses or the upper room discourses ([John 13-17](#)). These consist of Jesus' teachings on the night before his crucifixion as he spent time with his disciples. It was a time of solemn Passover observance with friends; the result was a rich deposit of Jesus' teachings that is invaluable for our spiritual health today.

The *King James Version* of [Mark 14:15](#) and [Luke 22:12](#) is the source of the designation "upper room." Most of Jesus' teaching in this location is found only in John's Gospel.

A. Branches Bearing Fruit (vv. 1-3)

^{1a} **"I am the true vine,**

Jesus uses imagery of a vineyard as a familiar context for the vital teaching he is offering. From the outset, there is no doubt regarding whom the imagery represents. In referring to himself as *the true vine*, Jesus affirms that he is the one chosen by God for the task set forth in [John 3:16](#).

God's covenant people of the Old Testament era are also pictured as a vine or vineyard (examples: [Psalm 80:8](#); [Isaiah 5:1, 2](#); [Jeremiah 2:21](#)). The Israelites failed to live up to the covenant, however (see [Isaiah 5:7](#); [Hosea 10:1](#)). Therefore a new vine, one that is the ultimate true vine, is needed—Jesus.

HOW TO SAY IT

Canaan *Kay-nun*.

Deuteronomy *Due-ter-ahn-uh-me*.

Galilee *Gal-uh-lee*.

Judea *Joo-dee-uh*.

Samaria *Suh-mare-ee-uh*.

^{1b} **"and my Father is the gardener.**

The second phrase at the beginning of this illustration is equally clear regarding identification. *Gardener* is a general word for "farmer." As such, it is not narrowly focused on someone who tends only vineyards. We can see the distinction in [2 Kings 25:12](#); [Jeremiah 52:16](#); etc. Even so, the task of a vineyard worker can certainly be part of a gardener's capabilities.

^{2,3} **"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. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.**

The identification that should be obvious in these two verses will be explicitly clear in [verse 5](#) (below): Jesus' disciples are the branches in this illustration. Lifeless branches need to be removed from the vine to allow for new growth. Regarding the disposition of unproductive branches that *he cuts off*, see [verse 6](#) (below).

The fruit-bearing branches are the new ones, budding off the vine in later spring. A bit later, these new branches will themselves receive the gardener's attention so they might be in the best possible state to produce robust fruit.

The action *he prunes* has the specific intent and result of the disciples' being *clean*. This is true of the 11 disciples who remain at this Passover celebration, the one "unclean" disciple already having departed ([John 13:10, 11, 21-30](#)). In the original language, the word behind the translation *prunes* is the verb form of the noun translated *clean*. The figurative pruning hook is *the word* of Jesus' teachings.

As vines are prepared for the final part of the growing season by a second pruning, so Jesus' disciples are prepared for their future ministry after he leaves them ([John 16:5](#)). This preparation will strengthen them to persist when persecution comes ([16:1-4](#)). Unlike the opening illustration in this lesson regarding peach trees, the pruning of which Jesus speaks is not because the vines have access only to a limited amount of nutrients. God's resources are unlimited! The danger, rather, lies in worldly distractions and hindrances to the disciples' mission (compare [Matthew 13:22](#)). Another kind of distraction may be ministry opportunities that are valid in and of themselves, but siphon time away from a disciple's calling (example: [Acts 6:2](#)).

NOW OR LATER?

I once met a man who loved to grow pumpkins. The pumpkins he grew were BIG, weighing hundreds of pounds each. Two such pumpkins would fill the bed of a pickup truck!

His secret was to pull off every blossom on the pumpkin vine except the one at the end. He did this successfully year after year. You might say that his success resulted from having clean vines.

Jesus' disciples were clean because of what he had taught them. This fact should cause us to put ourselves in the spotlight of God's Word to reveal the deadwood in our own lives, deadwood that impedes our service to him. Which is better: to cut away the deadwood now at our own initiative or to wait until God does it himself?—J. B. N.

What Do You Think?

How do you know whether a season of personal distress or retrenchment is to be interpreted as God's pruning?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Considering positive fruit-imagery in Scripture ([Matthew 3:8](#); [Romans 7:4](#); [Galatians 5:22, 23](#); [Ephesians 5:9](#); etc.)

Considering negative fruit-imagery in Scripture ([Luke 13:6-9](#); [Romans 7:5](#); [Galatians 5:19-21](#); [Ephesians 5:11](#); [Jude 12](#); etc.)

B. Believers Abiding in Jesus (vv. 4-7)

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.

To *remain* can imply clinging to someone or something (see [John 8:31](#), where the same word is translated “hold to”). In the context of the vine analogy, a branch that remains is one that is still attached to the main trunk of the vine.

Such is the relationship between Jesus (the main vine) and his disciples (the branches). If there is a strong, living connection, the disciples will *bear much fruit*. Detached branches are not capable of producing fruit.

Jesus does not pause to define the fruit of the Spirit; the apostle Paul will do so in [Galatians 5:22, 23](#). Rather, Jesus seems intent on keeping the disciples focused on the vital importance of remaining with him. What Jesus has to say in this regard applies not only to those gathered with him in the upper room, but to all Christians.

6. “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.

If a branch is detached (*thrown away*) for any reason, it immediately begins to die. Its leaves wither. Any fruit that happens to be on it begins to rot (compare [Matthew 7:15-20](#)). Unless there is hope of being grafted back in ([Romans 11:17-24](#)), detached branches are used for fuel (compare [Ezekiel 15](#)).

Note that the act of detaching by “the gardener” (vv. 1, 2, above) happens because of a disciple's failure to *remain* in Christ. To withdraw from the Lord is to make oneself fit only for *the fire* of judgment and destruction (see [Luke 3:8, 9](#)).

What Do You Think?

What are signs a person is about to “get burned” in this life because he or she is not attached to the true vine?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Regarding causes/results of “burnout”

Regarding causes/results of “burning bridges”

Regarding causes/results of “burning with passion”

7. “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

This verse clarifies how Jesus lives in us: it is due to the fact that his *words remain* in our hearts and minds. We have listened to his teachings and are following them.

This is a two-way relationship, however. For just as branches do not produce fruit without nutrients from the vine, so Jesus does not expect fruit from his disciples without his help. This he promises to give when asked (compare [Mark 11:24](#); [John 14:13](#); [16:23](#)). The fact that his words abide in us helps ensure that we will pray in ways that are pointed toward producing fruit. When we do so, our thoughts will be aligned with the intentions of the one who will answer prayer: God.

II. The True Friend

(JOHN 15:8-17)

Verse 8 marks a transition as Jesus leaves the vineyard analogy behind in order to speak of the dynamics of friendship and love.

A. Disciples Glorifying God (vv. 8-11)

8. **“This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.**

The fruit-producing life of a sincere disciple brings glory to the Father (compare [Matthew 5:16](#)). To give God *glory* means for him to be honored appropriately.

9. 10. **“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.**

The Father’s love for his Son, Jesus, is a marvel to consider (see [John 3:35](#); [10:17](#)); it is eternal, existing “before the creation of the world” ([17:24](#)). Also a marvel to consider is the fact that Jesus compares this eternal love of *the Father* for him with his (Jesus’) love for the disciples!

An important distinction between the two loving relationships is that the first is unconditional while the second is conditional. The condition is clear: *If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love*. The disciples should follow Jesus’ example. As he has shown love for the Father by keeping the *Father’s commands*, so too the disciples can show their love for Jesus by keeping his *commands* ([John 14:15](#); [1 John 2:5](#); [5:3](#)).

11. **“I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.**

The time in the upper room—a time of confusion and uncertainty ([John 13:22](#), [36](#), [37](#); [14:5](#), [22](#); [16:18](#))—is soon to give way to a time of great sorrow. That sorrow will result from the traumatic events of Jesus’ arrest, trials, torture, crucifixion, and death, which are but a few hours away. But on the other side of this great sorrow will be *joy* (compare [16:22](#)). Jesus promises joy that is *complete* and lasting (also [17:13](#)). With our advantage of 20/20 hindsight today, how can it be otherwise?

What Do You Think?

What should others see in us that indicates the fullness of our joy in the Lord?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

In times of want ([Habakkuk 3:17](#), [18](#); [2 Corinthians 8:1-5](#); etc.)

In times of persecution ([Acts 5:41](#); [1 Peter 1:3-9](#); etc.)

In times of blessing ([Deuteronomy 16:15](#); [Matthew 5:11](#), [12](#); etc.)

Other

B. Servants Becoming Friends (vv. 12-15)

12. **“My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.**

Jesus has just stressed the importance of keeping his commandments, but he does not state specifics such as what, when, where, etc. He has given the disciples no list like the Ten Commandments, no manual of discipline, no employee handbook. The reason why is clearer now in the fact that Jesus has in mind one central *command*, that they *love each other*. This is the “new command” Jesus introduced earlier in the evening ([John 13:34](#)).

John, the author of this Gospel, never forgets this imperative. He surely preaches it continually as the decades roll by, because he eventually refers to it as not new; it is one he has had “from the beginning” ([1 John 3:11](#), [23](#); [2 John 5](#)).

The disciples do not pick the type or intensity of the love they are to exhibit; those are established by Jesus as he teaches that their mutual love is to be on the order of how he has loved them.

13. **“Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.**

The significance of the qualifier “as I have loved you” in [verse 12](#) is intensified yet cloaked by the prophetic word we see here. This is foreshadowing, a hint of what lies ahead (compare [John 10:15](#)). The greatest gift Jesus grants his friends is eternal life. That comes about through Jesus’ death on the cross, which becomes reality in just a few hours from when Jesus speaks. What is cloaked in the upper room will remain so until understanding comes ([Luke 9:44](#), [45](#); [24:25](#); [John 20:9](#); etc.).

LAY DOWN YOUR TIME?

Years ago, a friend proposed that we demonstrate [John 15:13](#) love when we invest our time in others. That seems to minimize Jesus' intent or even miss it altogether. As valuable as spending time with others can be, doing so doesn't match the severity of the text's "lay down one's life."

Jesus was emphasizing the need to love as he loves us. He demonstrated at the cross what he meant. The self-sacrifice on behalf of sinners of one who had no sin is the greatest example of love that can be imagined! The spirit and attitude of such willingness is what Jesus asks us to emulate. See [1 John 3:16](#).—J. B. N.

What Do You Think?

What are some ways to emulate Jesus' self-sacrificial spirit?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

When among fellow believers

When among unbelievers

14, 15. "You are my friends if you do what I command. 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."

A result of obeying Jesus' directive to love one another is that the disciples have a new status: they are no longer called Jesus' *servants* but his *friends*. The word translated *servant* refers to a slave. The one-sided nature of the slave-master relationship is seen in Jesus' statement *a servant does not know his master's business*. The master never feels obligated to discuss his dealings with his slave.

In Jewish culture of Jesus' day, a disciple's status parallels that of a servant: "The student is not above the teacher, nor a servant above his master" ([Matthew 10:24](#)). But now Jesus frees his disciples from this model. The proof of their new status is Jesus' statement *everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you*. Those gathered with Jesus in the upper room are, and will continue to be, privileged to have more information about God's plans than any believer prior to that time ([John 14:26](#); [16:12-15](#); [1 Peter 1:10-12](#)).

C. Jesus Charging Workers ([vv. 16, 17](#))

16a "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you"

The fact that Jesus has chosen those now gathered with him in the upper room (rather than the reverse) is documented in [Matthew 4:18-22](#); [Mark 1:16-20](#); [3:13-16](#); [Luke 5:1-11](#); [6:13-16](#); [John 1:35-51](#); [6:70](#). *Appointed* means Jesus has placed them in positions of authority, power, and purpose. The Gospels reveal the extraordinary nature of the authority and power Jesus grants his apostles (see [Matthew 16:19](#); [Luke 9:1](#); [10:19](#); [John 20:23](#)). They play a unique role in the founding of the church ([Ephesians 2:19, 20](#); [Revelation 21:14](#)).

16b "so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—"

Jesus qualifies his "bear much fruit" desire from [verse 8](#), saying the fruit *will last* (a form of the word *remain*). Believers exhibiting fruit of the Spirit produce enduring fruit in the form of new disciples. Evangelism becomes the primary fruit-bearing task (see [Matthew 28:19, 20](#)).

16c "and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you."

We are considering [verse 16](#) in three segments for convenience, but this third part must not be divorced from the other two in application. It is important that we understand that the *whatever* does not mean that Jesus is promising that any and all prayer requests will be granted. The larger context is that of fruit-bearing, and the construction of [verse 16c](#) is linked to that.

The wording and context of [John 14:13, 14](#) are similar: Jesus' promise to do "whatever you ask" is tied to his statements regarding "the works" he has been doing and prophecy of the "greater things" to be manifested by "whoever believes in me" ([14:12](#)). The greater results to be achieved by Jesus' followers point to the expansion of Christianity, as growth in the number of converts accelerates after Jesus' ascension.

But what about all the other prayer concerns we may have? The author of this Gospel notes in one of his letters that "if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us" ([1 John 5:14](#)). The power behind prayer is also noted in the statement "the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up" ([James 5:15](#)). We like to claim this power, but all Christians have experiences when earnest, specific prayers are not answered in the way desired. We should never give up on prayer ([Luke 18:1-8](#)), but if our faith is based on an absolute reading of [John 15:16](#) for us personally, we are in a danger zone.

What Do You Think?

How do we ensure that "in Jesus' name" is more than words merely tacked on ritually to the end of our prayers?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Cautions to be drawn from [Exodus 20:7](#)

Cautions to be drawn from [Matthew 6:9](#)

Cautions to be drawn from [Acts 19:13-16](#)

Cautions to be drawn from [James 5:14, 15](#)

Other

17. **“This is my command: Love each other.”**

Yet again Jesus stresses the imperative to *love each other* (see [John 13:34, 35](#); [15:12](#)). To what extent should we take this? How far does this go? Remember that Jesus defined the greatest love for others as a willingness to die for them ([John 15:13](#)). This is a high standard, and frankly, we have a long way to go!



Visual for Lesson 3. Start a discussion by pointing to this visual as you ask, “How does the theme you see here reflect today’s lesson?”

Conclusion

A. Limits on Love?

A common theme in advice about relationships is the need to set boundaries. Ministers, for whom demands on their time seem endless, are advised to learn how to say “no.” Having been to Burnout Land more than once in my four decades of ministry, I realize the dangers of overwork. But a friend recently advised me to learn how to say “yes.” Find ways to help; don’t be quick to limit your willingness to lend a hand.

This will work only if motivated by love. We must not serve others out of obligation or expectation, but out of love. This is particularly difficult for ministers who feel they are being paid to serve the members. In such cases, ministry becomes something like paying a plumber to fix a leaking pipe. But when love becomes our motive in serving, we may notice others following our example. Their love-motivated service will make our own burden of service lighter.

B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, may we produce fruit for you, fruit that is lasting, as we spread the message of your Son to the unbelieving world. We pray this in the name of the true vine, Jesus. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Love one another!

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Into the Lesson

Say, “It will soon be time for backyard gardeners to begin preparing the soil.” Start a discussion on gardening. Ask who is planning to have a garden, what they plan to raise, and talk about how much better homegrown vegetables taste. Have some of the home gardeners share some tips for producing the best garden favorites.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “So You Think You Can Plant!” activity from the reproducible page, which you can download. Have students work in groups or use this as a whole-class activity.

After either activity, lead into the Bible study by saying, “Gardening is not only a great hobby, but it also puts some of our favorite foods on our tables! Grapes were an important crop in Israel. This made a gardening analogy a memorable way for Jesus to frame some final instructions for his disciples. Today we will look at this important lesson.”

Into the Word

Say, “Jesus was teaching with metaphors in this passage. He spoke of familiar elements of his disciples’ lives in order to illustrate more abstract truths.” Read the lesson text aloud, and help the class understand what each item represents in Jesus’ analogy: the vine (the part of the plant that remains from season to season), the gardener, the branches (the seasonal shoots and leaves growing from the vine each season), the harvest of grapes, the pruning, and the abiding in (remaining attached to) the vine.

Divide your class into three groups. Give each group paper and pen. Each group should be assigned a section of the lesson text. Each group should try to rewrite their text *without* using metaphor—that is, in plain, straightforward language. Assignments and our sample rewrites follow.

Group 1—Wise Gardener (vv. 1-3)

God wants the church to be faithful to him and make more faithful disciples. He will not allow empty piety or immorality to remain in the church for long. Doing so would only harm his people.

Group 2—Sturdy Vine and Fruitful Branches (vv. 4-8)

Every generation of disciples stays faithful to the church by being connected with the living Jesus. Ignoring Jesus’ teaching and example will only cause unfaithful followers to be ineffective and useless.

Group 3—Plentiful Harvest (vv. 9-17)

A life connected to Jesus and to his church is the best possible life! It is a life of joy, love, and understanding that will draw more and more people to Jesus.

Allow time for the groups to share their summaries with the rest of the class.

Into Life

Say, “Pruning is not just a severing of the relationship between Christ and unfruitful disciples; it is also done to purge or cleanse those who do bear fruit. Therefore, we can expect some pruning in our lives.”

Ask learners to make a list of events that they believe to be acts of pruning in their lives. These can be general or specific. For example, one might say, “God can use illness as pruning” (general), or “I believe God used my cancer diagnosis last year to call me back to what’s really important” (specific).

Ask for volunteers to share from their list. (Be sure there is no pressure to share personal information; any such sharing ought to be purely voluntary.) Discuss the significance of these events. What is the proper response to such cleansing?

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Rules of Gardening” activity from the reproducible page. Have students draw principles for spiritual growth from one or more of these rules.

Close either activity with prayer that each student can be a fruitful branch in God’s vineyard.