

The Gospel of John (93) Jesus, the True Vine (2)

Let us return to John 15, which is where we left off ten weeks ago at the beginning of our hiatus in meeting together on Sunday mornings. These words of our Lord were spoken to His disciples on the last night He was with them just before His arrest and crucifixion. He speaks affectionately to them and intimately with them. These are important words. They express concisely major teachings, and summary and foundational principles. These are important words of the Master to His servants, of the Friend to His friends.

The Lord Jesus asserted to His disciples that He was the source of life, even of fruitful life, for His people. He taught His followers of the blessings of abiding in Him and the consequences of failing to do so. Here are the words of Jesus in **John 15:1-8**:

“I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. ²Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. ³You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. ⁴Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me.

⁵“I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. ⁶If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned. ⁷If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. ⁸By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples.

We gave attention to these first 8 verses of this chapter in which we read first of *the close and intimate relationship of the disciples to their Savior (15:1-4)*. We will review what we have already addressed before moving onward in our passage.

The Lord Jesus declared that He was the “*true vine*”. This is suggestive of a false vine or a vine that failed to provide spiritual life to its members. Our Lord was comparing and contrasting Himself with the physical nation of Israel, which by intimation He declared to be a false vine.

The vine is a common metaphor for the nation of Israel in a number of places in the Old Testament record.¹ In each of the passages in which this metaphor is used for the nation, on display is the corruption and failure of Israel to produce what God had desired and designed for His people. It also illustrated that the nation was under the judgment of God and that it had warranted His wrath upon it. Israel had been a vine that had failed to give life to its branches.

But in contrast to Israel of the Old Testament as the corrupt, unfruitful vine, Jesus declared, “I am the true vine.”

This title describes the *quality* of the true vine, how Jesus accomplished everything the Israel-vine was unable to do: He thrives and bears fruit. The qualification of “true” is intended to contrast forcefully Jesus with Israel (cf. 10:11). Jesus is the fulfillment of the Israel-vine and the one who completes its mission... The Gospel of John has already taken great care to describe how Jesus fulfills and replaces the old covenant persons and institutions of the temple (e.g. ch. 2), sacred places/mountains (e.g. ch. 4), Moses (ch. 5), and the Jewish feasts (e.g. ch. 6); as the true vine Jesus also supersedes Israel as the center and source of God’s people. The *places* (i.e. the land, Jerusalem, temple, altar) and the *people* (Israel, Jewish bloodlines, priestly heritage) have been fulfilled and replaced by the *one person*: Jesus Christ.²

¹ See Psalm 80:6-16; Isaiah 27:2-6; Jeremiah 2:21f; Ezekiel 15:1-8; 19:10-14

² Donald Carson, **The Gospel According to John** (William B. Eerdmans. 1991), p. 511.

Or as another put it, “under the image of the vine, Israel gives way to Jesus.”³

Here is another explanation of Jesus as the true Israel:

This pericope (15:1-17) magnifies the incarnational ministry of Jesus, moving Him from His “tabernacling” presence as a human like us to His role as the embodiment of Israel (v. 1). Just as He bore our “flesh” and entered into the sinful condition of humanity, so also did He bear the embarrassing condition and record of Israel—a vine that had been uprooted, thrown to the ground, stripped of its fruit, and consumed by fire—and enter into the sinful and failed state of Israel. But in distinction from our individual existence, Jesus fulfilled to perfection the role of Israel. Jesus restored Israel, becoming the mediator that Israel was always intended to be in Him. Thus, Jesus is true Israel. All the old covenant *places* and *people* have been fulfilled and replaced by *one person*, Jesus Christ. Every other vine, including the rich (and biblical!) heritage of Israel, is declared bankrupt and counterfeit in contrast to the true vine of God. In fact, Jesus had always been the intended and true vine, just as the farmer who had been planting and tending his vineyard had always been the Father.⁴

After Jesus declared Himself to be the true vine, He stated further in verse 1, “***and My Father is the vinedresser.***” God the Father superintends all that is accomplished through Jesus Christ. It was in the Father’s purpose and work that Jesus Christ as the true vine replace the corrupt vine of Israel that had failed to bring forth its fruit in season onto Him.

Our Lord then declared in **verse 2** that the ones who abide in Him bring forth fruit onto God. Jesus said, “***Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit.***” Here our Lord was describing the work of His Father as the Husbandman, the vinedresser. He is the one who assures that true branches are in vital connection with His vine, the Lord Jesus, and that they are bearing fruit. All true branches of this true vine will bear fruit. What is meant by “fruit”? Actually the meaning of “fruit” is not specifically found in these verses. But we may assume that our Lord was speaking of His disciples becoming faithful and joyful followers of Him through whom He would expand His kingdom in the world.

Jesus said of the work of His Father, the vinedresser: “***Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away.***” Not only do the fruitful branches need God’s attention, but so do those branches that do not bear fruit. God the Father takes them away. Judas Iscariot could be counted as one of these. Only fruit-bearing branches are allowed to be in Christ.

But not only does the Father remove unfruitful branches, but He prunes the branches so that they may become more productive fruit-bearers. We read that “***every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit.***” This speaks of the ongoing work of sanctification that the Father effects in the lives of our Lord’s disciples. Pruning is not necessarily a pleasant process, but being cut and trimmed by the Father is necessary for fruit-bearing branches.

But then the Lord Jesus declared to His disciples their standing before Him. **Verse 3** records, “***You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you.***” Here to be clean speaks of the disciples having salvation and of being in a vital, living relationship with the Lord. It had “already” occurred. They were “clean.” It indicates that they were living branches in Him, who had received and were receiving spiritual life through Him.

What had brought about their blessed condition? Jesus said, “You are already clean ***because of the word which I have spoken to you.***” The “word” that Jesus had spoken to them had resulted in them having become “clean.” His Word had brought them to saving faith, which was the instrument of God cleansing them from the guilt and the pollution of sin. They were no longer filthy and defiled, but they were now clean, and dwelling in Him. His Word had accomplished in them this work of saving grace. It was their faith in His Word which He used to cleanse them from their sin.

³ Carson, **John**, p. 510.

⁴ Edward W. Klink, III, **John**. Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Zondervan, 2016), p. 658f.

Here are the words of **John Owen** (1616-1683) on faith as the instrument that God uses to purify from sin:

Faith is the *instrumental cause* of our purification: “Purifying their hearts by faith” (Acts 15:9). The two unfailing evidences of sincere faith are, that within it purifieth the heart (i.e. what we desire), and without it worketh by love (i.e. how we live). These are the touch-stones whereon faith may, yea, ought to be tried. We “purify our souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit” (1 Pet. 1:22); that is, by believing, which is our original obedience unto the truth. And hereby are our souls purified. “Unbelievers” and “unclean” are the same (Tit. 1:15); for they have nothing in them whereby they might be instrumentally cleansed. And we are purified by faith; because, --

1. Faith itself is *the principle* grace whereby our nature is restored unto the image of God, and so freed from our original defilement⁵ (Col. 3:10); 1 John 3:3).

2. It is by faith on our part whereby we receive the purifying virtue and influences of the blood of Christ; whereof we have before discoursed. Faith is the grace whereby we constantly adhere and cleave unto Christ (Deut. 4:4); (Jos. 23:8; Acts 11:22). And if the woman who touched His garment in faith obtained virtue from Him to heal her issue of blood, shall not those who cleave unto Him continually derive virtue from Him for the healing of their spiritual defilements?

3. It is by the working of faith *principally* whereby those lusts and corruptions which are defiling are mortified, subdued, and gradually wrought out of our minds. All actual defilements spring from the remainders of defiling lusts, and their depraved workings in us (Heb. 12:15; James 1:14). How faith worketh to the correcting and subduing of them, by deriving supplies of the Spirit and grace to that end from Jesus Christ, as being the means of abiding in them, whereon alone those supplies depend (John 15:3-5), as also by the acting of all other graces which are contrary to the polluting lusts of the flesh and destructive of them, is usually declared, and we must not too far enlarge of these things.

4. Faith takes in all the *motives* which are proposed unto us to stir us up unto our upmost endeavors and diligence, in the use of all means and ways, for the preventing of defilements of sin, and for the cleansing of our minds and consciences from the relics of dead works. And these motives, which are great and many, may be reduced unto two heads:--(1) A participation of the excellent promises of God at the *present*. The consideration hereof brings a singular enforcement on the souls of believers to endeavor after universal purity and holiness (2 Cor. 7:1). And, (2) the *future* enjoyment of God in glory, whereunto we cannot attain without being purified from sin (1 Jon 3:2, 3). Now, these motives, which are the springs of our duty in this matter, are received and made efficacious by faith only.⁶

Jesus then gave them instruction in **verse 4**: “*Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me.*” The word, “abide” may be simply translated as “remain.” Jesus was telling His disciples, “Remain in Me.” It may also carry the idea of “dwell” or “stay” or “continue to live.” How is this done? To abide in Him is to be continually connected to Him in faith and fellowship. It is to continue in faith in Him, relying upon Him for our life, looking to Him as the source and the strength of our life in Him.

How is this abiding in Christ done? The Scriptures declare that it is through faith in Christ and through faith and obedience to His Word, the Holy Scriptures.

John 5:38. “But you do not have His word abiding in you, because whom He sent, Him you do not believe.”

John 6:56. “He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him.”

⁵ In other words, Adam originally sinned through unbelief, a refusal to have faith in God. God uses the instrument of faith in us to free us from that sin of unbelief which characterized each of us descended from him.

⁶ John Owen, **The Works of John Owen**, vol. 3 (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), pp. 446f.

John 8:31. “Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, ‘If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed.’”

After our Lord addressed Himself as the true Vine in verses 1 through 4, He proceeded to describe **the fruitful life of the one who abides in Him (15:5-8)**. Jesus declared to His disciples these words:

⁵“I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. ⁶If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned. ⁷If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. ⁸By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples. (John 15:5-8)

With Christ a Christian can do much—“he bears much fruit.” Apart from Christ, even a believer can do nothing. Jesus said, “without Me you can do nothing.”

This is the conclusion and application of the whole parable. So long as we are separate from Him, we bear no fruit that is good and acceptable to God, for we are unable to do anything good.⁷

Here we see that everything we *are* as Christians, everything that we *attempt* as Christians, all things that we *accomplish* as Christians, is due to Christ working in and through us. We are always to acknowledge and we are always to pray, “Lord, unless you guide me and help me in this, I’m going to mess it up. I need your strength, and I am now trusting You to do for me and in me that which pleases you, because without you I am incapable of doing Your will.”

The Lord then gave this warning in **verse 6**, “*If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned.*” Every true Christian does indeed abide in Christ. Those who do not and are “cast out” are no true branches of the vine. If one thinks or claims to be a true branch, but bears no fruit that comes forth in every true branch, it is cut off and put into the burn pile. This does not depict a true Christian becoming lost or unsaved, for that is not possible for the one who has been saved by the grace of God in Christ. Rather this serves as a warning to the professing Christian who is not a true Christian. It is a Christian in name only whose life does not bear evidence of having been converted and becoming a disciple (follower) of Christ.

But on the other hand, our Lord promised His people in **verse 7**, “*If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you.*” Asking what we desire is to be understood as the desire to bring forth fruit in one’s life. He abundantly grants this request of His people, those who abide in Him.

And then the first portion of this passage concludes with this word in **verse 8**. “*By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples.*” Only true disciples are true Christians. They show forth that they are Christ’s disciples by bearing fruit of righteousness that Christ produces in them through their abiding attachment to Him. God is greatly glorified by the fruit that He produces in the lives of His people.

And what is meant by glorifying God? It is not us adding to God something He is presently without, but it is our displaying before others who our God is and what He is truly like, leading them hopefully to acknowledge and believe on Him, as we do.

Now ten weeks ago we had ceased here in our consideration of our Lord’s words. But actually this theme of **Jesus, the True Vine**, continues through verse 17. And so, let us read **verses 9 through 17** of John 15.

⁷ John Calvin, **Calvin’s Commentaries**, Vol. XVIII (Baker Book House, 1993), p. 109.

“As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love. ¹⁰If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and abide in His love.

¹¹“These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full. ¹²This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends. ¹⁴You are My friends if you do whatever I command you. ¹⁵No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you. ¹⁶You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you. ¹⁷These things I command you, that you love one another.

We first read of...

I. The love that Jesus has for His disciples and our response to that love (15:9, 10).

Jesus declared that His love for His disciples was comparatively the same as the love that God the Father loved His Son. “*As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you*” (15:9a). Are we able to grasp the wonder of that declaration?

This remarkable statement seems intended to show the depth and magnitude of our Lord’s love to His people. We can form no adequate idea of the love of the Father towards the Son. The feeling of one eternal Person in the Trinity to another Person is a high thing into which we cannot enter. Yet even such is the love of Christ towards those who believe in Him,—a vast, wide, deep, immeasurable love, that passeth knowledge, and can never be fully comprehended by man.⁸

We have already read of the Father’s love for His Son.

John 3:35. “The Father loves the Son, and has given all things into His hand.”

John 5:20. “For the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all things that He Himself does; and He will show Him greater works than these, that you may marvel.”

And later we will read our Lord’s words to His Father.

John 17:23f. “I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me. Father, I desire that they also whom You gave Me may be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory which You have given Me; for You loved Me before the foundation of the world.”

The Lord Jesus loves His people in the same manner and to the same degree that the Father loves His Son. The love of the Father for His Son is an *everlasting* love in its duration. The love of the Father for His Son is *infinite* love in its degree. And Jesus declared that His love for you, if you are a Christian, is the same as His Father’s love for Him. Jesus said, “*As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you.*”

Earlier we read of the love of Jesus for His own. John 13:1 reads, “Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that His hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, *having loved His own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.*” In His human nature Jesus came to love His own as He met them and grew to know them, growing closer to them. But in His divine nature, Jesus had loved His own from eternity. It was the same love that His Father had for them, which is an eternal love.

⁸ J. C. Ryle, **Expository Thoughts on John**, vol. 3 (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987, orig. 1869), p. 121.

God had told Jeremiah, “The LORD has appeared of old to me, saying: ‘*Yes, I have loved you with an everlasting love*; therefore with lovingkindness I have drawn you’” (Jer. 31:3). In His divine nature, the Son of God has this everlasting love for His people, those the Father sent Him into the world to save from their sin. If you have salvation, or if God has elected you to receive His salvation one day, there was never a time when God did not love you. Even when you were in your sin, He had pity, He had compassion on you, and purposed to save you from your sin, for He loved you with an everlasting and infinite love.

Let us consider for a few moments this matter of the love of God. First, recognize and acknowledge the principle object of God’s love. *The greatest object of God’s love is Himself*. Here are the words of **John Gill** (1697-1771).

The principal object of the love of God is Himself. Self-love is in all intelligent beings; nor is it discommendable, when it is not carried to a criminal excess, and to the neglect of others; none are obliged to love others more than themselves, but as themselves (Matthew 22:39). God first and chiefly loves Himself; and hence He has made Himself, that is, His glory, the ultimate end of all He does in nature, providence, and grace (Prov. 16:4; Rom. 11:36; Rev. 4:11; Eph. 1:6) and His happiness lies in contemplating Himself, His nature and perfections; in that love, complacency and delight He has in Himself; nor needs He, nor can He have anything out of Himself that can add to His essential happiness. The three divine Persons in the Godhead mutually love each other; the Father loves the Son and the Spirit, the Son loves the Father and the Spirit, and the Spirit loves the Father and the Son.⁹

In addition, *God loves all that He has created*, because His works are a reflection of Who He is and what He is like. Again here are Gill’s words:

All that God has made is the object of His love; all the works of creation, when He had made them, He looked over them, and saw that they were good, “very good” (Gen. 1:31). He was well pleased, and delighted with them; yea, He is said to “rejoice in His works” (Ps. 104:31). He upholds all creatures in their beings, and is the Preserver of all, both men and beasts; and is good to all, and His tender mercies are over all His works (Ps. 36:6, 145:9), and particularly, rational creatures are the objects of His care, love, and delight.

But *God has a special, covenantal love for His elect*, the people He has purposed to save by His grace.

He bears a special love to elect men in Christ; which is called His “great love” (Eph. 2:4), whom He has chosen and blessed with all spiritual blessings in Him (Eph. 1:3, 4), and which love is distinguishing and discriminating (Mal 1:1, 2; Rom. 9:11, 12). (Gill)

How is this special love for His people demonstrated? God has thoughts of blessing them. From eternity He desired a remarkable way by which He could be just and yet justify His elect before Him, forgiving them of all their sins. He had thoughts and intentions of blessing them from eternity. He desired and purposed their ultimate and everlasting well-being. He would obtain for them pardon of their sins, bestowing His peace upon them and filling their hearts with joy and gladness for all that they experience from Him and before Him. From the beginning He purposed their salvation (2 Thess. 2:13). Through history He directed His providence toward the end of sending them a Savior, even a King who would deliver them and govern them in peace and righteousness. He loved them in sending His Son to assume their nature and gain their salvation. He loved them in suffering and dying on their behalf in order to redeem them. And at some time predetermined in eternity, He awakened them to their need and taught them the way of faith in Jesus Christ, imparting grace to them to repent of their sins and believe on His Son, whereby He saved them.

⁹ From John Gill’s *Body of Divinity* on the love of God.

He forgave them, adopted them, sanctified them, and glorified them by His grace because He loved them with an everlasting love. This is why the Apostle could write,

³¹What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³²He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?... ³⁸For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, ³⁹nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 8:31f, 38f).

God purposed to do all this for you, if you are one of His own, and the Lord Jesus purposed to do all that was necessary to secure your salvation, because it was as He declared in the passage before us, “*As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you.*”

After this declaration of Jesus to His disciples, He gave this command to them, “*abide in My love*” (15:9b). This could be translated, “*remain* in My love.” It is the same Greek word (*meno, μένω*) that we have already encountered seven times in our passage of John 15:1-8. It is here in verse 9, and it is used twice more in verse 10. This idea of abiding in Christ and abiding in His love is a major theme of this portion of Scripture. Of this word **Edward Klink** wrote,

The term has become a technical term in the Gospel (5:38; 6:56; 8:31; 12:36; 14:10, 17, 25), though its meaning and function is fully established in this pericope. Wallace suggests that the aorist imperative (the tense and mood of command of the verb) is a constative (a solemn command), which stresses the *urgency* of the act: “It is as if the author says, ‘Make this your top priority.’” This command serves to introduce the primary category by which the Christian relates and communes with God. This is the foundational manner of Christian existence; this is the nature of salvation. It is what the church has long described and defined by several theological terms, perhaps primarily “union with Christ.”¹⁰

In verse 4 Jesus had commanded His disciples, “Abide in Me.” And then here in verse 9 He commanded them, “Abide in My love.” The idea that our Savior was conveying is that we should always be mindful, appreciative, and enjoying this love that He has for us. His love for us is to be a reality that is always with us in our very being. It means that we are to be always mindful of His love for us and that knowledge ought to comfort us, inspire us, motivate us, and strengthen us in our resolve to live in His presence and live in obedience to Him.

How does one obey this command? How does one “abide in His love”? The answer is in the next verse. We read in **verse 10**, “*If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and abide in His love.*”

We should not think that abiding in His love is some link of mystical experience that we feel. To remain in His love is seen and experienced in the response of obedience to Him. He had declared to His disciples earlier, “If you love Me, keep My commandments” (John 14:15). And here we understand that obedience to Him is the way in which we may abide in the realization and enjoyment of His love.

Love and obedience are two themes that are emphasized by our Lord in His departing discourse to His disciples. Christian obedience is not simply conforming to a law code, even if that law code is found in the Bible. There are many professing Christians who live a moral life that may reflect in a measure the righteousness of the law, but their obedience is not motivated by love for Christ or directed as obedience to Christ. To abide in His love is seen and experienced in a conscious obedience to Jesus Christ as Lord.

Now we must not think to change the proper order of love and obedience. First there must be an awareness and belief in His love for us, and then our obedience flowing from that knowledge enables us to know more clearly and fully that love. To quote **Edward Klink** once again:

¹⁰ Klink, p. 653.

Two aspects of these pillars (i.e. love and obedience) need to be further explained. First, we must be careful not to reverse the order of love and obedience. That is, obedience springs from love and is a response to love, not the reverse. This pericope has been intentional to make God the cause and the disciple the effect (cf. vs. 4, 6, 7); God is the source and the disciples are the passive recipients but also the active respondents. Reversing the order makes the disciple the active agent, the one to whom God responds, but this is not so. For God demonstrated and initiated His love for us “while we were still sinners” (Rom. 5:8). It is never that we obey in order to receive God’s love but rather that we obey because we have received God’s love. We obey because God is love, and our obedience returns to Him what is rightfully His and shared with us in Christ, who exemplified love and obedience to the Father on our behalf.¹¹

There is nothing that you can do to gain or increase God’s love for you. The love that He has for you in Christ is already infinite in degree and eternal in duration. There is nothing that you can do, therefore, either to increase or diminish His love for you. But there is much in way of your obedience that you might better comprehend and experience His love, and this is contingent on your obedience to Him.

Jesus Christ exemplifies for us how we are to live. He was obedient to His Father. We are obedient to the Lord Jesus. As He kept His Father’s commandments and thereby always abode in His Father’s love, so we are to keep the commandments of the Lord Jesus and thereby abide in the love of the Lord Jesus for us. All of our “good works” are to be done due to our love for the Lord Jesus through whom we experience and enjoy the love of God the Father.

Now after having considered *the love that Jesus has for His disciples and our response to that love* (15:9, 10), we next read that...

II. Jesus directs His disciples to love one another in the same way that He had loved them (15:11-17).

The Lord first declared to them His motivation for having spoken to them about these matters. **Verse 11** reads, “*These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full.*” He had earlier spoken of “My love” and of “My peace”, and now He adds to these, “My joy.”

Let us be mindful of the setting in which our Lord Jesus expressed these words to His disciples. He was even then being betrayed by one of His disciples to the Jewish leaders who would soon arrest Him, try Him, and crucify Him. But Jesus desired to have His disciples experience the full joy that He enjoyed. This joy would be in the knowledge and wonderful accomplishment of His mission to save His people by His death on the cross on their behalf. This joy of Jesus is what flows from Him having accomplished His mission. “The *joy* of Jesus is the joy that arises from the sense of a finished work.”¹² It was our Lord’s confident assurance of what He was about to successfully achieve that brought Him great joy. This joy is what strengthened Him to endure the cruel cross before Him. We read of this in Hebrews 12:1f:

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ²looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, *who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*

And similarly, when our joy is full due to our contemplation of what He had secured for us and for what is set before us, we, too, should be filled with joy. The Christian life is not as the typical worldly life thinks-- a life of dull, boring, ritualistic and morbid existence. If we are thinking rightly, and abiding in the love of God in Jesus Christ for us, even as we are ordering our lives in obedience to Him, the certain prospect of what lies before us should instill within us a sense of joy, even the fullness of joy. This is what our Lord would have for each of us who know Him, “that your joy may be full.”

¹¹ Ibid, p. 655.

¹² Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (William B. Eerdmans, 1971), p. 674.

We then read of our Lord's command in **verse 12**, "*This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.*" The words of our Lord before us are an expansion of what He had told His disciples earlier, as recorded in **John 13:34f**. There we read,

³⁴*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another.* ³⁵By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

All of our Lord's words in this passage have in view His impending death on their behalf on His cross. He is telling them as He was laying down His life for them because He loved them, so they should love one another, even being willing to lay down their lives for one another.

Verses 13 and 14 make this idea clear that there love for one another should be sacrificial in nature. Jesus said, "*Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends. You are My friends if you do whatever I command you.*" The Lord was intimating His own sacrifice that would soon take place for His friends.¹³ He then declared what identifies and distinguishes them as His "friends." We read in **verse 15**, "*No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you.*" Of this great privilege to be a friend of Jesus Christ, **Thomas Boston** (1676-1732) wrote of the means of his identification:

1. A high and honourable privilege which some enjoy: they are *Christ's friends*. It is a relation, and a kindly and honourable one. Some are His enemies, and He will treat them as such, saying, "Those mine enemies which would not that I reign over them, bring hither, and slay them before Me," (Luke 19:27). Yea all are so by nature, Romans 8:7, "The carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can it be." But there is a party of mankind brought into a state of friendship with Him, whom He has done and will do the office of the best of friends to.

2. The character of those who enjoy that privilege. Many are pretenders to it; but few can make it out. Here is the badge they bear, the sign they are known by, *If we do whatsoever I command you*. Those who bear it, Christ will own.¹⁴

In these few verses that are before us we may read of three characteristics of friends of Jesus Christ. Jesus said,

1. Friends of Jesus love others as Christ has loved them. (15:13)

Jesus said, "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends." This statement of our Lord follows His command that His disciples love one another as He has loved them. To what degree did our Lord love His own? He gave Himself to die for them. From the disciples' vantage point, Jesus was presently teaching them the principle, and then He would shortly demonstrate this principle in the events that immediately follow. From the vantage point of the readers of the Gospel, including us who are aware of its historical setting, we see immediately and clearly He is referencing His own death on the cross on behalf of His people.

By the way, in these words our Lord is teaching *limited atonement*, is He not? The often debated question is this: For whom did Jesus die? Whose debt for sin was paid for by the death of Jesus Christ? Did Jesus die making payment for the sins of the entire human race? Or did Jesus die specifically to pay for the

¹³ Interestingly the Greek word for the noun, "friends", is *φίλων* (*philon*) which in its verbal form is the Greek word for "love."

¹⁴ Thomas Boston, **The Complete Works of the Late Rev. Thomas Boston**, vol. 5 (Richard Owen Roberts, 1980), p. 221.

sins of His people. The Scriptures are quite clear on the matter: **He died on behalf of His people, the elect of God, the redeemed of all ages.** This is taught in numerous places. It is taught here. Jesus said, “Greater love has no one that this, than to lay down one’s life *for his friends.*”

Now when our Lord gave this statement, “Greater love has no one that this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends”, *He was giving a positive duty that He has imposed upon us His people.* And He has placed the highest standard upon us for this love; we are to love one another as He has loved us. We are not to love the brethren less than what is set forth. The standard has been established. As Christ Jesus has loved us, we are to love one another. We are to love all the brethren in this manner. Our love for one another is to be self-denying and self-sacrificing. We are to lay aside our own preferences and priorities, yielding to those of others.

This condemns selfishness, the resistant insistence of having one’s own way, the sinful resistance and resentment when *our* desires and *our* plans are thwarted. This condemns the spirit which refuses to grant forgiveness to others that is so freely granted to His people. *These kinds of things do not characterize true Christians.* True Christians may fail with respect to these things from time to time, but they are not common actions or reactions of a true child of God. They have been taught to love one another according to the love that their Lord manifested toward them. As Paul wrote of the Thessalonians, it may be said of all true Christians,

⁹But concerning brotherly love you have no need that I should write to you, *for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another;* ¹⁰and indeed you do so toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, that you increase more and more... (1 Thess. 4:9-10)

We all need to increase more and more in this matter, but it is a matter of “increasing” what is already present.

Paul intimates elsewhere that if one lacks this love, he is no Christian.

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become as sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. ²And though I have the gift of prophesy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. ³And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing. (1 Cor. 13:1-3)

Love is an essential grace from God that is present in every Christian. This is so much the case that failure in this matter is death to any hope of eternal life.

In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother. (1 John 3:10)

And,

We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death. (1 John 3:14)

J. C. Ryle gave a solemn warning in the light of these words of our Lord:

A precept like this should stir up in us great searching of heart. It condemns the selfish, ill-natured, jealous, ill-tempered spirit of many professing Christians, with a sweeping condemnation. Sound views of doctrine, and knowledge of controversy, will avail us nothing at last, if we have known nothing of love. Without charity we may pass muster very well as Churchmen; but without charity we are no better, says saint Paul, than “sounding brass and tinkling cymbal” (1 Cor. 13:1). Where there is no Christ-like love, there is no grace, no work of the Spirit, and no reality in our religion. Blessed are they that do not

forget Christ's commandment! They are those who shall "have right to the tree of life, and enter in through the gates into the city" (Rev. 22:14).

We next read a second characteristic of His friends:

2. Friends of Jesus Christ are ones who obey Him. (15:14)

Jesus said, "*You are My friends if you do whatever I command you.*" The ones for whom Jesus died are His friends. His friends are ones who order their lives according to His commands. Jesus Christ is their friend, but He is also their Lord.

Obedience to God through Jesus Christ is the grand mark of the true Christian. It is the fruit of the new birth. When God causes one to be born from above, born of His Spirit, God imparts a new heart that longs to be fully obedient to God and His Son. **Arthur Pink** (1886-1952) described it this way:

Regeneration is that miracle of Divine grace wrought in the soul which enlists the affections Godward, which brings the human will into subjection to the Divine, and which produces a real and radical change in the life. That change is from worldliness to godliness, from disobedience to obedience. At the new birth, the love of God is shed abroad in the heart by the Holy Spirit, and that love is manifested in a dominating longing and sincere purpose to *please in all things* the One who has plucked me as a brand from the burning. There is a greater difference between the genuine Christian and the deceived professing Christian than there is between a living man and a corpse. None need remain in doubt if they will *honestly measure themselves* by the Holy Word of God.

As soon as the light of God's salvation shone into Paul's heart, he asked the Lord, "Lord, what will You have me to do?" (Acts 9:6). This is the response of everyone who comes to saving faith in Jesus Christ. Obedience is the outworking of saving faith.

Now, when Jesus said, "You are My friends if you do whatever I command you", he was not stating *how* people become His friends. Rather, He was simply describing what His friends are like. They do order their lives according to His commandments. True Christians are obedient friends of Jesus Christ. Every true Christian is a true friend of Jesus Christ.

Obedience to God is one of the tests by which we may have *assurance* that we are true Christians.

By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments. For *this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments*. And His commandments are not burdensome. (1 John 5:2f)

Also,

Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, "I know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But *whoever keeps His word*, truly the love of God is perfected in him. *By this we know that we are in Him*. (1 John 3:3-5)

3. Jesus Christ reveals the will and purpose of God to His friends. (15:15)

Jesus said, "No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you." This suggests several matters respecting our relationship with the Lord Jesus.

(1) It depicts a closer relationship with God that Christians enjoyed than believers enjoyed before the coming of Christ. Of John the Baptist Jesus once said, "For I say to you, among those born of

women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist.” But then He said, “but he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he” (Luke 7:28). In the Old Testament, only Abraham and Moses were referred to as friends of God. Under the new covenant Jesus regards all Christians as friends, yes, every Christian, as His friend.

(2) It reveals that one of the central aspects of the Christian life is learning fully God’s purposes in Christ. True friendship can only exist when there are common aims and outlook. Our Lord Himself told His disciples that this is what differentiated them from others. They knew who He was and what God had intended to do through Him. Again, Jesus said,

“You are my friends, if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you.”

The first statement identifies who His true friends are--they obey Him. If one does not order his/her life according to teachings of Christ, that one is no friend of Christ, regardless of what is claimed. He is no Christian who is no friend of Jesus. The second statement states the reason they are His friends--they have become aware of what God was doing through Him. And so, at the heart of a vital and growing relationship with Jesus Christ, I would assert, is the understanding of God as to who He is and what He is like, but further, to understand what He is doing in history through Jesus Christ. Just as God chose to reveal to Abraham and Moses what He was intending to do, therefore they were friends of God, so the Lord Jesus reveals to His disciples His will and His purposes that He intends to accomplish.

If you want to grow spiritually, if you want to grow in your personal relationship with God the Father and His Son, if you want the Spirit of God to be your Comforter and Enabler, filling you with power in day to day life, you must understand what it is God is doing and how He is going about it, and then, upon that understanding, purpose as He enables you, to assist or serve Him in that task.

Friendship with Jesus Christ, the essence of being a true Christian, is seeking to further His will through one’s life in His world. Since this is the case, let us consider several matters. *First*, do you see how shallow and short-sighted it is to package the gospel solely to appeal to non-Christian people for what benefit they are going to derive from the gospel? People generally are uninterested and unconcerned to know what the will and purpose of God is, they know what their will is and what they want is to be shown how they can use God to further their desires. But this is not the way of the Christian. The Christian is to lay down His life for His friend, Jesus Christ, and He does so because He loves His Lord and desires that His purposes are furthered in the world.

Second, do you see the importance of being a student of biblical doctrine (teaching)? The Bible is God’s book that reveals to us who our God is and what He is doing in history. It is not to be reduced to simply a book of commandments which responds to a reader’s quest, “God just tell me what you want me to do.” It is a book that reveals to us the nature of God and the mind of God. It reveals to us what He is doing in history. It reveals to us how we can be fellow workers with God in His work in history. This is what it is to be a Christian, a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Much of our Christian life should be given to this pursuit of growing in our knowledge of our God and His Son Jesus Christ. This is the way of growth, the way of peace, the way of intimacy with God, the way of usefulness in His kingdom. This is why **Paul** prayed for new Christians the way he did.

Therefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, do not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers: that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation *in the knowledge of Him*... (Eph. 1:15)

And **Peter** wrote to Christians just before he was martyred,

Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord, as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, *through the knowledge of Him* who called us by glory and virtue... (2 Peter 1:3f)

The highest calling and the most glorious task for the Christian is to attain to this knowledge. The Christian is to pursue this knowledge so that he comes to think God's thoughts and to assume God's goals, and to pursue God's work to bring them about. Those ones who attain to a great degree these aims are the ones closest to Christ, they are His closest friends.

This is also the great calling and task of the church. We are to understand this truth, affirm it among ourselves, and seek to proclaim this truth to the world in which God has placed us. It was **Herman Bavinck** (1854-1921) who wrote of this knowledge, using an older term, "dogma", to describe doctrinal teachings of the church:

This means that the church of Christ therefore has a certain task to fulfill with respect to dogma. To preserve, explain, understand, and defend the truth of God entrusted to her, the church is called to appropriate mentally, to assimilate internally, and to profess it in the midst of the world as the truth of God.¹⁵

He went on to say rightly,

A religion without dogma, however vague and general it may be, without, say, faith in divine power, does not exist, and a nondogmatic Christianity, in the strictest sense of the word, is an illusion and void of meaning.

May the Lord help each of us long for and attain to a greater knowledge of our God and His Son. May He give us clarity of understanding of His purposes in His world in history, so that we might be used by Him to further those purposes. In this way we may manifest our love for Him. In this way we may show that we are indeed His friends.

“The LORD bless you and keep you;
The LORD make His face shine upon you,
And be gracious to you;
The LORD lift up His countenance upon you,
And give you peace.” (Numb. 6:24-27)

¹⁵ From Herman Bavinck, **Reformed Dogmatics**, vol. 1 (Baker Academic, 2003)