

# Committed to Christ: Fruitful Lives

By Dr. William W. Goligher

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**Bible Text:** John 15:1-8

**Preached on:** Sunday, July 23, 2006

## **Tenth Presbyterian Church**

1701 Delancey Street

Philadelphia, PA 19103-6714

**Website:** [www.tenth.org](http://www.tenth.org)

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I wonder if you'd turn with me in your Bible this morning to John chapter 15. John chapter 15. While you're doing that, can I thank you for the welcome that I've received and bring to you greetings from the church that I represent, as the pastor of Duke Street Church in Richmond, which is in West London? And to help you, instead of taking up time wondering what accent I've got, I'm Scottish. This is the accent we'll be using when we all get to heaven. It's been modified over the years; a little bit of Irish, a little bit of Canadian, and now I'm doing cross-cultural missionary work in London, England, and getting to love them. Really, they're quite lovable, in spite of everything I was told growing up.

A Scotsman went to see his optometrist to get a new pair of glasses, and he was told to put his right hand over his left eye. But he forgot which was his right hand and which was his left eye, so the optometrist went out to find a Kellogg's packet. He cut a hole in it, came back, threw the packet over his head so that one eye was looking out the hole, and asked him if he felt that was all right. The guy said, "Well, it's not too bad, but I was hoping for steel frames like my brother got last week."

That has nothing whatsoever to do with the sermon this morning except to say this: that our aim is that we'll see more clearly at the end, and not go home disappointed. We're going to put on our Bible glasses. Let's read from John chapter 15. Jesus says,

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever

you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.<sup>1</sup>

How would you describe your connection to Jesus Christ? And what difference does your connection to him make in the rough-and-tumble of your every day life? What difference does it make to you? What difference does it make to your relationship to other people? And what difference does it make to the world in which you live?

These are really the questions that Jesus answers in John 15. And over the next few weeks together, we're going to look at the answers to those questions. My question this morning is this: how do you describe your connection to the Lord Jesus?

I'm going to remind you of the background. John 15 belongs to a teaching section of John's Gospel that begins in chapter 13 and ends with chapter 17. It takes place, in the first place, in the upper room, chapters 13 and 14. Then at the end of chapter 14, they get up and they're leaving the upper room, and I think chapter 15-16 is perhaps spoken on the move, or at least perhaps standing, ready to get on the move, towards the garden. And then by the time we get to chapter 17, we find the Lord Jesus in the garden, where he prays and where he is arrested.

In these words, we find his last words, the last and most famous words, I guess, ever recorded in history; words which our Master wanted us to read and wanted us to remember. The chapter opens with a metaphor. And the metaphor's purpose is to teach us about our connection to the Lord Jesus. So let's ask a few questions.

First of all, what is it that makes our connection to the Lord Jesus Christ? I think verses one to three are going to help us with the answer to that. Because the Lord Jesus is teaching us there that the believer's home is in him. And you can see that he makes it very clear that everything in heaven and earth depends upon our connection to himself. If you'll look at verse six, "If anyone does not abide in me, he is thrown away like a branch, and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned."<sup>2</sup>

Your connection to the Lord Jesus Christ is absolutely vital for all eternity. Well, what happens if your connection to him is simply surface connection? Simply that you appear to belong to the Lord Jesus. Well, there's only judgment ahead, he teaches us.

What is the heart of the message that we're being taught here in John 15? Well, the heart of it, I think, is that we're being taught something about union with Christ. Look what he says, "I am the vine; you are the branches."<sup>3</sup>

Now, what does he mean when he says, "I am"? Again, in John's Gospel you'll find the Lord Jesus repeating this phrase over and over again. "I am the Good Shepherd. I am the

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<sup>1</sup> John 15:1-8.

<sup>2</sup> John 15:6.

<sup>3</sup> John 15:5.

Way, the Truth, the Life. I am the Resurrection and the Life, before Abraham was, I am.” He is self-consciously asserting his deity.

He’s taking us back to Exodus, to Exodus three, where God introduces himself to Moses, gives him his name, I AM THAT I AM, to Exodus six, where that name is unpacked, that God is the great I AM. Jesus is saying, “I AM. I am the only God there is, I am the God with whom you have to do. It is crucial, your relationship with me. I AM. I am the true vine.”

If England and the U.S. have a rose, if Scotland has a thistle, and Ireland a shamrock, if Canada has a maple leaf and the state of Pennsylvania has a mountain laurel, then Israel has a vine. That’s always been the symbol of Israel in the ancient days. And outside the temple, there was a giant golden vine. So when Jesus says, “I am the true vine,” he’s giving us a clue to his meaning. He’s not simply using a horticultural image that came to his attention because they were passing some vines along the way. He is telling us something quite explicit.

If you have your Bible open, just for a moment put your finger in John 15 and turn to Psalm 80, page 491 in your church Bible. I think this is a good basis to start, in understanding this image that Jesus is using here. Psalm 80. If you look at verse eight, the Psalmist is talking to God. “You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land.<sup>4</sup>” Who is the vine? Well, the vine is Israel. Israel, whom God had redeemed and preserved through its wandering in the deserts, had brought into the Promised Land and had planted there. Look at verse 11. “It sent out its branches to the sea [that is, the Mediterranean], its shoots to the river [that is, to the Euphrates].<sup>5</sup>”

He’s describing the golden age of the period of King David and Solomon. Why did God do this for Israel? Was it just a random decision that God had made? No, the whole purpose was that God was going to engage in this special covenant relationship with these people. “I will be your God, you will be my people.” He wanted all the nations round about Israel to look on enviously, at what God was doing for them, and at who their God was, so that the nations around would say, “Aren’t they fortunate to have God as their God? Aren’t they lucky?” Because, obviously, these are non-Christian nations, and non-Calvinist nations. “Aren’t they lucky that God is their god? Wish we were like these people of Israel.”

That was what should have happened. But look at verse 12. “The walls are broken down, the people pluck their fruits. The boar from the forest ravages them, and everything that moves in the field feeds on it.<sup>6</sup>”

They are burned with fire. Why? Because God has rebuked them, verse 16. They’re under the judgment of God. And the only hope for Israel, do you notice in verse 17 and

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<sup>4</sup> Psalm 80:8-9.

<sup>5</sup> Psalm 80:11.

<sup>6</sup> Psalm 80:12-13.

18, is this: “Let your hand be on the man of your right hand, the son of man whom you have made strong for yourself. Then we shall not turn away from you. Give us life, and we will call on your name.”<sup>7</sup>

The only hope for Israel was to be the man at God’s right hand, the Son of Man. Now, what led to the disaster of judgment for Israel? God had chosen, redeemed, preserved and planted Israel, for only one purpose: that it should be fruitful. Isaiah tells us as much as Isaiah five, in verses six and seven. Here’s what it says in verse seven. “The vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel. The men of Judah are his pleasant planting.”<sup>8</sup>

God looked for something, God looked for justice, but instead he found bloodshed. He looked for righteousness, but instead he found an outcry. Jeremiah two says, “I planted you a true vine.”<sup>9</sup> A true vine.

So what we find is that Israel’s calling was to be a fruitful nation. Jesus, by the way, here, do you notice, in verse one, links these two ideas of the vine and the Father. He does that quite deliberately because Israel is described in the Old Testament as God’s firstborn son. So the vine image is not simply something remote or kind of exterior. There is this interior aspect, there is this relational aspect. Israel was meant to be in relationship with God, as a son to its father.

And now this very people, at this very moment of time, through its religious leaders, are hatching a plot with soldiers already on their way towards a garden. And the man of God’s right hand, the Son of Man, the only hope for the renewal and revival of Israel is to be arrested, tried, crucified, buried. God was looking for fruit and he found bad fruit.

Now, you see, that’s the background. Jesus comes along and he says to his disciples, “I am the true vine, I am the true Israel. What really matters for men and women and boys and girls nowadays is that they should be connected to me. I am the vine, you are the branches. What matters is that you should be incorporated into me, united to me, rooted in me so that my life becomes yours, and so that the evidence God is looking for should be displayed manifestly in your life.”

Now that is the purpose, really, behind what Jesus is saying here. You’ll find it reflected all over the New Testament, it’s this whole idea of being in Christ. If anyone is in Christ, then they’re a new creation. It’s God’s work to place us in Christ. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God has made to us wisdom and righteousness and sanctification and redemption.

John 14 verse 20, Jesus says, “I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you.”<sup>10</sup> It’s a vital, living connection, a vital, living relationship. And to be disconnected from Christ, look at verse two, means that you are taken away, you are taken away to be

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<sup>7</sup> Psalm 80:17-18.

<sup>8</sup> Isaiah 5:7.

<sup>9</sup> Jeremiah 2:21.

<sup>10</sup> John 14:20.

burned, to be disconnected from Jesus. Not to have a living relationship with the Lord Jesus, manifested in the lack of fruitfulness in your life, is to be heading for disaster.

Now, what do we mean by a life that does not manifest fruit? What illustration could we use? Well, in the recent passage, in the upper room, Jesus has given them an illustration of this, though they weren't to notice it or understand it until later. But there's the story of Judas. Judas appeared to belong to Jesus. Judas was numbered among the disciples of the Lord Jesus. He was the treasurer for the apostolic band. He had gone out with them on their mission trips. To all intents and purposes looking on, you would have said, "There's a disciple of Jesus Christ." But he had never known a heart relationship with his Savior. He had never been in tune with his Master. There had never been a saving connection to the Lord Jesus. And so, when the crunch comes, the fruit must out. And the fruit in Judas' life were rotten grapes of betrayal and rejection and reprobation, ultimately.

"I am the vine, you are the branches."<sup>11</sup>

You know, it's quite possible to be, if you like, on the tree that is Christ, more like a bauble on Christmas tree than vital fruit on the living tree, to have that kind of exterior connection to church, and Christian things. To come along to public worship, to call yourself a Christian. I say even to hold Christian values, and yet not have a vital relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. The same apostle John who wrote this, wrote in his first letter, and he says, about some people who were part of his church, that they've gone out from us, and they've shown by their departure that they were never part of us, that they never belonged to us.

And so the first question I want to ask this morning of you is, "Do you have a vital, personal, saving interest in the Lord Jesus Christ?" Is your connection to him real, or is it merely exterior? Is it all show, is it all external? Or do you know the Lord Jesus Christ personally, in a living and vital way for yourself? That's what makes the connection.

Now Jesus doesn't explain here what it is that makes the connection in detail, but we know that faith makes the connection, it is a faith union with Christ. When you believe, you don't just believe on the Lord Jesus. You believe into the Lord Jesus. The Greek word means that, "into him". It's a faith union with Christ.

We know that the Holy Spirit does this. In the new birth, he baptizes us into the Lord Jesus Christ. And, as Jesus says later on in verse 16, it comes from God's choice. "You did not choose me, but I chose you."<sup>12</sup> See, it's the first thing. What makes the connection?

Well, what makes the connection is a vital, personal, living relationship, a union with the Lord Jesus Christ. But then secondly, as we read the parable into verses two to six, we want to ask what maintains the connection. Most of us in this room today are ourselves

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<sup>11</sup> John 15:5.

<sup>12</sup> John 15:16.

believers. What maintains the connection with the Lord Jesus Christ? And there are two things that are mentioned here in verses two to six. Do you notice them?

Verse two, there is the Father's pruning. "Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes [it, or cleanses it] that it may bear more fruit."<sup>13</sup>

Now, I want you to notice that where there is life, where there is a real relationship with the Lord Jesus, no matter how fragile, no matter how little, no matter how unremarkable, the Father will bend his powers to tend for that and nurture that relationship. No matter how simple your faith, no matter how small your faith, no matter how tenuous your hold is upon the Lord Jesus Christ, the Father will bend all his powers to nurture and nourish that relationship. That's what he's doing in verse two. "Every branch that does bear fruit he prunes it, that it may bring forth more fruit."<sup>14</sup>

Now, that is really what God is doing in our lives. As one scholar puts it, "Everything is removed from the branch that tends to divert the vital power from the production of fruit."

There was an old Irish evangelist who used to say to people, "Look, if the devil cannot keep you from converted, he will do all he can to get you diverted." It's true. If he can divert the vital energies of your spiritual life into things that are immaterial, things that are of no eternal consequence; if he can divert you into things and activities and ways of doing things that also occupy your energies, instead of cultivating your relationship with God, he will do that, because he hates to see the people of God growing in their relationship with God.

So God does the pruning. Pruning sounds painful to me, and it is painful. It's a radical thing here. It involves sorrow and sickness and suffering and loss and bereavement and disappointment and frustrated ambition. Sometimes in the course of this pruning, our relationship has to break, or something has to give, or some new direction in life has to be pursued, but it is all the Father. Do you notice, it is the Father's hands who hold the knife? It is the Father who is the vinedresser. It's a great connection here because the writer of Hebrews picks up the same idea, though he focuses on the fatherly aspects.

And he says this, "He disciplines us for our good, that we might share in his holiness."<sup>15</sup>

Pruning, then, is a drastic process. Now, I've seen this done by expert gardeners. I've sometimes thought that cutting back the roses so radically and drastically was something that was overkill, but apparently not. And I just do as I'm told. I'm the gardener's assistant. She's sitting back there somewhere.

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<sup>13</sup> John 25:2.

<sup>14</sup> John 15:2.

<sup>15</sup> Hebrews 12:10.

You have to be radical. And I remember, when we lived in Canada, coming down the Niagara peninsula down towards Niagara Falls, and on your right-hand side, as you go down there, all the vineyards. And in the winter, those vineyards would be bare stumps sticking out of the snow, in all of the ugliness, really, of the preparation that was necessary for them ultimately to produce fruit. The Gardener is doing that in your life and mine.

Wouldn't it be good if God didn't use suffering? Malcolm Muggeridge once wrote this, "Suppose you eliminated suffering. What a dreadful place the world would be. I would almost rather eliminate happiness. The world would be the most ghastly place, because everything that corrects the tendency of this unspeakable little creature, man, to feel over-important and over-pleased with himself, would disappear. He's bad enough now, but he would be absolutely intolerable if he never suffered." The knife is in safe hands. The Psalmist says, "Before I was afflicted, I went astray, but now I keep your Word."<sup>16</sup>

And again, he says, "It was good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes."<sup>17</sup>

So we have to submit to the Father's pruning, in trust.

Amy Carmichael once said this, that she prayed this prayer, "Rid me, good Lord, of every diverting thing." And then she wrote this, "What prodigal waste it appears to be, to see scattered on the floor the bright green leaves, the bare stem, bleeding in a hundred places from the sharp steel. But with a tried and trusty husbandman, there is not a random stroke in it all. Nothing cut away, that it would not have been loss to keep and gain to lose."

Now, you may feel the sharp steel in your life just now, as it were, God the husbandman, the gardener, cuts deeply into your life, believe this. "There is not a random stroke in it all. Nothing cut away, that it would not be loss to keep and gain to lose."

There is not only the Father's pruning, there is also, look, in verse three, the believer's abiding. "Abide in me, and I in you."<sup>18</sup>

Now these two verses establish the relationship between Jesus and his people. It's established by the will and the work of the Father, and by the word of the Son.

John Calvin says, "This is the conclusion and the application of the whole parable. It is that we should abide in Christ." And to abide in Christ means to maintain and develop the already existing relationship we have in Christ. More exactly, we have to abide in Christ and then allow Christ to abide in us. And if Christ is going to abide in us, then we must let him do so. We must allow him to be Lord of our lives, we must allow him to be

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<sup>16</sup> Psalm 119:67.

<sup>17</sup> Psalm 119: 71.

<sup>18</sup> John 15:3.

the life giver. We must yield to him control, we must look to him for his enabling, and must rely on him to supply our needs.

There's nothing inactive about this abiding. It isn't the kind of rest and relaxation we get when we're lying in a hammock in our backyard underneath the sun, if you ever get sunshine here. That's not the kind of abiding that we're talking about here. This is an active abiding.

“Abide in me, cling to me, stick fast to me. Live the life of close and intimate communion with me,” writes Bishop Ryle. “Get nearer and nearer to me. Roll your burden on me. Cast all your waste upon me. Never let go your hold of me, not for one minute.” It is the wholehearted focusing of the life that we have in Christ.

How do we abide in Christ? What are the practical measures we take to keep that going? Well, we have to be diligent in our use of the means of grace. We need to read the Bible, and we need to pray, and we must be disciplined in our attendance of corporate worship and the Lord's table. But this abiding is absolutely indispensable to holiness. God isn't just looking, you see, for baubles on the tree. He's looking for the production of fruit, for the life that is of Christ within me, to begin to emerge from my life. That's what he's looking for, that's authentic Christian holiness.

Now look at what he says in verse four. “Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide [or remain] in me.”<sup>19</sup>

Why? “For apart from me, [verse five], you can do nothing.”<sup>20</sup>

Of course, there are some things you can do without Christ. You can get up in the morning, you can have your shower, maybe. You can go out into the world, meet your friends, have your coffee, go to work. You can choose what subjects you do at university, you can pick your career path. You can meet and marry someone. You can do all of that stuff without Christ.

But here's what the Master is saying to you this morning. You can't do any of that stuff without Christ and be a fruitful Christian. You cannot be rich towards God, you cannot be productive of spiritual matters without Christ. You cannot turn the energies that you pour, even into Christian activities, into spiritual fruitfulness unless you abide in Christ. So there's how we maintain a connection, through the pruning work of the Father and the abiding work of the believer.

I want to ask what makes the connection, union with Christ? What maintains the connection? And then, thirdly, what marks the connection? How do you know if you are connected to Christ?

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<sup>19</sup> John 15:4.

<sup>20</sup> John 15:5.



And the answer, of course, is obvious from the passage. It is that you may bear fruit; more fruit, much fruit. Bear fruit. Our fruitfulness is the infallible mark of true Christianity. Now that's important because it kind of clears away some of the misunderstandings that we sometimes bring to the Scriptures. The mark of fruitfulness is not some esoteric experience. The mark of a Christian is not that you've encountered some great ecstasy of spiritual life, that you've been moved by some great thing that has happened to you. That isn't the mark of a Christian.

I had an e-mail conversation with a person who a Satanist, and didn't realize how much Satanists know of the Bible. They know it through and through. They believe everything we believe, except from the other side. And the thing that's offered by Satan to Satanists is an emotional experience, is an ecstatic experience, it is an amazing, overwhelming experience. And this person was raining down pity on us Christians because we didn't have such experiences. That's because the evidence of real spiritual life isn't an ecstasy. It's fruitfulness.

Now, see how he spells it out in verses seven and eight. It's obedience to the Word of Christ. "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you."<sup>21</sup>

Again, you notice here, it's the words of Jesus. We've talked about abiding in Christ, but here it's letting Christ's words abide in us, remain in us. So let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as Paul says to the Colossians. It's drinking deeply of the stream, letting the Word of Christ become part of the fiber of our being. And that takes effort.

Again, Bishop Ryle puts it like this. "Our Lord guards us against supposing that a mere indolent abiding in him, with a dreamy mystical kind of religion, is what he means. His words rather must be like a burning fire within us, constantly activating our character." So that, to use words used of Charles Spurgeon, "If people prick us, our blood flows Bible." Because we're in the Word of God, shaping our thinking, schooling our opinions, molding our character in obedience to his Word. And obedience to his Word, you notice, brings us, verse eight, into conformity to the will of God; conformity to the will of God.

"Ask whatever you wish."<sup>22</sup> Isn't it great to think, there's a blank check? Some people come and they read this and they walk out and they say, "This is what you need to hear." I heard it on television this morning, in our hotel room. I heard someone to say this very kind of thing. "You just go to God and you ask him for whatever you want for today. You want a new car, or a new job, or a new friendship, or whatever? You just ask God, and if you believe it, if you believe it, if you believe it hard enough, you screw your face tight enough, you'll get exactly what you want."

I can understand from this morning, what I saw, why you need Bible Christianity in this country. You need off the televisions, and you need Bible Christianity in people's hearts, don't we? We do in Britain. Look, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. I

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<sup>21</sup> John 15:7.

<sup>22</sup> John 15:7.

want you to notice the whole verse. The conditional clauses. “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you.” There’s two conditional clauses there. The first, if, gives us confidence. “If you remain in me, then you’ll be confident, you’ll come to God, boldly to the throne of grace. And if my words abide in you, then you’ll come intelligently before God, you’ll come having been given guidance.” In other words, the first words of Jesus give us confidence. “If you abide, and my words abide in you”, that gives us guidance, that we know what to pray for.

As I come to God, you see, with my mind schooled by the Word of God, my heart stirred into action by what God has said to me in the Scriptures, suddenly what I find is that what I’m praying for is in accordance with the will of God. I pray for what God wants. And here is the Lord Jesus. He is our model and example here. You find him in the garden, later on in chapter 17. And what is his great concern? He comes to the Father and he says, “Father, glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. I’ve finished the work you gave me to do. I’ve given them the words you gave me to give them. I’ve done that. Now I’m coming to the cross, and I know this is the crucial moment. For their sakes, I sanctify myself. I put myself upon the altar. Take me as I am, use me for the salvation of your elect. Father, take me and use me for your glory.”

What is the Lord Jesus doing? Throughout John 17, what he is saying to the Father is, “Let your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” And when he is sweating drops of blood, coming to terms with the great horror that is before him, what does he say to his Father? “Not my will, but yours be done.”

What do we learn there? We’re learning that as you abide in Christ, and his words abide in you, so it shapes what you want until what you want is the will of God. And ask whatever you want, and it will be done for you. Well, what is this parable teaching us as we come to a close? The mark of our connection to Christ is fruitfulness. And at the end of the day, that fruitfulness is Christ likeness. “I am the vine, you are the branches. Bear fruit.”

What kind of fruit does the vine produce? Grapes, not apples, not pears, not oranges. The fruit that’s produced is consistent with the nature of the vine. Your connection to the Lord Jesus means that fruitfulness in your life is Christ likeness. At the end of the day, that really is what glorifies the Father. Again, John 17 teaches us that. “Father, glorify yourself.” Do you know these words?

“Not only in the words you say, not merely in your deeds confessed, but in the most unconscious way is Christ expressed. Is it a beatific smile? Is it a holy light upon your brow? Or, no. I felt his presence when you left just now. To me, ’twas not the truth you taught, to you so clear, to me still dim. But when you came, you brought the sense of him. And from your eyes he beckons me, and from your heart his love is shed, ’til I lose sight of you and see the Christ instead.”

The mark of our connection is fruitfulness, which is Christ likeness. And get this—“by this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove [prove to whom? Prove to the world, prove to yourself] to be my disciples.<sup>23</sup>”

Let's pray.

*Father, we pray that in your great mercy you would come to those who are struggling within themselves, and bring them to the place where, for absolute assurance today, they know that they are savingly united to the Lord Jesus, that they have a saving connection to him, that they would put their trust in him, rest all their lives upon him. And to those of us, Lord, who are going through the mill, as it were, and are under the knife, will you give us the reassurance we need that the knife is in you, our Father's, safe hands? Help us to remain in Christ, to be diligent in pushing our way forward into him, finding more of him, trusting more in him, that in our lives the fruit of Christ likeness might increasingly be obvious, to the glory of God and to the good of men. In Jesus' strong name we pray. Amen.*

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<sup>23</sup> John 15:8.