

Our Prize of Friendship

John 15:12-16

Introduction

Our Privilege of Fruit Bearing

In John, chapter 15, you may remember, Jesus is in the process of turning the tables on conventional Christian thinking.

We were first invited to a busy Palestinian vineyard, in John, chapter 15, verses 1 through 11. We, ultimately, learned that we are considered branches and Christ is the vine. We would naturally think that, since we belong to the body of Christ, we are now going to be able to produce some rather amazing things, like the fruit of the Spirit.

So, we give it our “best shot”. We list the fruit of the Spirit and put it on our refrigerator door with fruity magnets, or we set the list on our dash next to our fruit of the Spirit coffee mug. We think, “Let’s see, this week is joy week. Lord, this week I’m going to develop the characteristic of joy in my life.”

But, about that time, the car in front of you slams on his brakes. You swerve out of the way, tipping over your coffee mug, and coffee spills all over your fruit of the Spirit list. And whatever joy you thought you had, you just lost it! You drive past that crazy person and give him a piece of your mind – a piece you cannot afford to lose.

The truth is, God’s grace will not allow you to be able to do something by yourself that He has already said, only He can do in you and through you. All you and I can be are available branches, connected to the vine. And, if you remember, branches cannot produce. But, branches can bear fruit – fruit that is produced from the life of the vine flowing into branch.

Jesus is turning the tables. He says, “Now that you are a Christian; now that you abide in the vine, you need to know that you can do certain things. Look at chapter 15, verse 5.

I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing.

Every one of us, as believers, are not just slightly handicapped when it comes to fruit bearing, we are totally paralyzed. The point is, the life of Jesus Christ, which we allow to flow in and through us, will produce fruit, which then clings from our lives as grapes cling to a branch.

Now, in verses 12 through 16 of John, chapter 15, Jesus continues to turn the tables in a wonderful way. We move from the Palestinian vineyard into a typical Palestinian home.

In the vineyard, we discovered the privilege of fruit bearing. Now, in the home, we will discover the prize of friendship or relationship. Then, in the last part of this chapter, verses 17 through 27, we will move from the home into the village and experience the pain of being forsaken.

Fruit bearing, friendship, forsaken – three experiences common to disciples of Christ.

Our Prize of Friendship

Now, if we were going to die at ten o’ clock tomorrow morning, I would imagine our thoughts and concerns would be about ourselves. I find it fascinating that just twenty four hours away from the cruel cross, Jesus Christ is concerned about His

disciples – not His rights, not His needs – theirs. How could that be?

John does not leave it up to our imagination. Turn back to John, chapter 13, verse 1.

Now before the Feast of the Passover, Jesus knowing that His hour had come that He should depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, He loved them to the end.

Love! Everlasting, unchangeable, unswayable, “agape,” love.

Now, let us slip back into the upper room and listen in, as their conversation continues in verses 12 through 16.

This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you.

Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.

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.

You 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 of the Father in My name, He may give to you.

I have read that if a person could name more than two people, anywhere in the world, whom he considered to be a close friend, he would be in rare company. The truth is, friends are hard to find – that is, the kind of friend that comes in when everybody else walks out.

One pastor wrote,

Loneliness doesn't exist only in the world, but it is found within the church as well. Consider the words of one older woman who wrote to me, "I sit in the pew next to a warm body every week, but I feel no heat. I'm in the faith, but I draw no active love. I sing the hymns with those next to me, but I hear only my own voice. When the service is finished, I leave as I came in – hungry for someone to touch me, to tell me that I'm a person worth something to somebody. Just a smile would

do it, or perhaps some gesture, some sign that I am not a stranger here."

Frankly, loneliness is no respecter of persons. It does not matter if you are poor or rich, sick or healthy, in the public eye or hidden from view.

Alfred Lord Tennyson visited the Queen of England. Afterward, this great poet said, “Up there, in all her glory and splendor, she was lonely.”

Thomas Wolfe, the famous American novelist wrote, “The whole conviction of my life now rests upon the belief that loneliness is the central and inevitable fact of human existence.”

Jesus Christ will turn, and has turned, the tables on that fact.

We are called His personal friend

Twenty four hours before the King of Kings would die, He is intensely interested in His disciples catching some truths that would carry them for life. He tells that small band of disciples, and He tells every believer today, “You can consider Me your closest friend – and I consider you My friend as well.”

Now, someone could go to verse 14 and say, “Yea, but look at the condition.”

You are My friends, if you do what I command you.

“Who could possibly keep all the commandments? That is too much!”

Well, remember to interpret the word “command” in light of the context. Did you notice verse 12a?

This is My commandment, that you love one another . . .

In other words, “You can’t hate each other and then consider yourself My friend. But, if you will obey My command to love one another, then you and I will be able to experience the depth of My love.”

John re-emphasized this truth in I John, chapter 4, verses 20 through 21. Look at these verses.

If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also.

Now go back to John, chapter 15. The point is the same here! Literally, He says, “You can’t be My

friend and hate each other, but, if you love each other, we can be friends too.”

Now, the next question to ask could be, “How can you be commanded to love someone?”

John, chapter 15, verse 12, is not a suggestion; He is not saying, “Listen, it’d be great if you folks could get along civilly while I’m away. Just give it your ‘best shot’.”

Oh no! Verse 12 is a command.

This is My COMMANDMENT, that you love one another . . .

How can you command someone to love?

I could understand, if Jesus had said, “Do you see that Christian over there? Invite them to your home.”

“Yes Sir!”

“Do you see that woman over there? Paint her house.”

“Do you see that young person? Buy them a winter coat.”

“Yes Sir, I can do that!”

No.

He says, “Do you see that Christian brother or sister over there? Love them.”

But you say, “Lord, I can’t generate feelings for that man or woman.”

Do you know why Jesus can command us to “agape,” in the Greek, or to love? Do you know how can He command a husband to love his wife, a wife to love her husband, fathers to love their children? Because “agape,” or love, is not a feeling, it is an act of the will. It is a decision in the mind, with which the body follows through. And, the proof of our love is not in our feelings, but in our actions. The good news is that loving actions produce loving feelings.

The truth is, feelings in a home, in a church, or in a marriage can be worn thin at times, but the command remains. It is best illustrated by a couple who were celebrating their sixtieth wedding anniversary. Several hundred friends and relatives were on hand for the celebration. As they were cutting the cake, with cameras snapping away, Henry decided to give his bride a speech. “Ethyl,” he said, “after sixty years of marriage, I’ve found you to be tried and true.”

“Eh?” she said, hard of hearing.

Then, she “harumphed,” “Well, Henry, after sixty years of marriage, I’m tired of you too.”

Now, notice how Jesus turns the tables in verse 15.

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.

Now, when Jesus told them, in this verse, that He no longer called them servants, He was probably referring to the fact that, in His day, the disciples of any rabbi or teacher were considered their servant. In fact, the disciple gladly acted the role, as they met their teachers basic needs.

During the time of Christ, the life of a servant, or slave, was a horrible existence. It is estimated that in the first century Roman empire, there were sixty million slaves. Conditions were unbearable, as Roman law allowed the slave owner to have absolute right over the slave. A slave could be beaten, sold, abused, starved, and even killed without any recourse.

If you broadened the idea of servant to include the common lot for slaves of the emperor (Christ, soon to be enthroned in heaven), then understand that, likewise, the slave of an emperor was not considered a person, but a thing. He lived only if the emperor allowed it.

A slave had no right to enter the presence of his royal master. At best, they would catch a glimpse of him as he passed by on some impressive occasion. They were never permitted to eat at the same table as their masters. Slaves had separate quarters and were never invited to participate in family discussions.

Here is a wonderful truth – because of the foundation of love, Christ considers us His closest friends. The Greek word in verse 15 for “friend,” and I suggest that you write it in your Bible margin, literally means, “a friend of the court”. It described the intimate, inner circle of friends around the emperor or king.

We are the friend of the King. In this culture, the friends of the king, or emperor, had immediate access to him. They had the right to even approach him in his dressing room at the beginning of the day. The emperor talked to them before he talked to his generals, his rulers, or his statesmen.

Notice verse 15 again.

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.

In other words, you are part of the family discussion! The Lord Jesus considers us His closest friends.

Now, everyone knows that only close friends share secrets. Right?

David understood intimacy with God when he wrote, in Psalm, chapter 25, verse 14,

The secret of the Lord is for those who fear Him, and He will make them know His covenant.

He wrote in Psalm, chapter 103, verse 7,

He made known his ways to Moses, His acts to the sons of Israel.

In other words, the children of Israel saw only the miraculous acts of God; Moses was able to know the plans of God.

The truth is, because of Jesus Christ's death and resurrection; because of His intercession for us and our prize of friendship, we stand nearer to God than Moses did and we know more than David knew.

Think about it – God is our friend!

An atheist pamphlet mocked God because of His supposed close relationships with Old Testament heroes. The tract correctly noted that, although Abraham lied on several occasions in the biblical record, he was still called the “friend of God”. And, although Jacob was a cheating scoundrel, he was called “a prince with God”. Although Moses was guilty of violent murder, he was still given the privilege of receiving, from God, the Ten Commandments. One of the commandments was “Thou shalt not kill,” thus making Moses a hypocrite for delivering a message he did not keep. David was called “a man close to God's heart,” even though he was guilty of murder and adultery. The tract went on to say, “If there really were a God, what kind of God would associate with these people?”

The answer, of course, is that God the Son would come and die for their sins, and the sins of the whole world, so that, if anyone would place their faith in Him, their sins would be forgiven and forgotten and they could be considered His friend.

What an incredible prize! A slave, a sinner – and now we are His closest friend!

But, that is not all – love is the foundation. The results are that not only are we considered His closest friend, but we also discover, in John, chapter 15, something else that we are.

We are appointed His personal representative

We are appointed His personal representative. Look at verse 16 of that chapter.

You did not choose Me, but I chose you, and appointed you, that you should go and bear fruit . . .

Now, think about this. It is one thing to consider us friends – that is something we can say about almost anyone – but to let that person represent you, to speak for you, to be entrusted with your reputation – now that is serious!

The trouble is, we are really not amazed that God would appoint us, because we are fairly convinced we are already somewhat deserving. Isn't it interesting that when someone you work with gets a promotion, you automatically feel they just got lucky? But, when you get a promotion, you deserved it?!

One author wrote it this way,

Have you ever noticed:

- *When the other fellow is set in his ways, he's obstinate; when we refuse to change, we're just firm.*
- *When your neighbor doesn't like your friend, he's prejudiced; when you don't like his friend, you are a good judge of human nature.*
- *When he tries to treat someone especially well, he's patronizing; when you try it, you are just being thoughtful.*
- *When he takes time to do things well, he's lazy or slow; when you do, you are deliberate and careful.*
- *When he spends a lot, he is a spend thrift; when you do, you're generous.*
- *When someone picks up flaws in people, he's critical; when you do, you're just insightful.*
- *When he is mild-mannered, you call him weak; when you are, it is graciousness.*

- *When someone dresses especially well, that person is extravagant; when you do, it's tasteful.*
- *And, when he says what he thinks, he's cruel and tactless; when you say what you think, you are being transparent and open.*

Ouch! Rarely do we like to be exposed for who we really are.

I like the story of the stingy man who was finally caught in the act. He was Christmas shopping, but everything he saw was too expensive. Then, he saw a fifty dollar vase that was on sale for two dollars because the handle had been broken off. He bought it and told the salesman to wrap it and ship it by mail. He knew his friend would think he had paid full price for this expensive vase and that it had been accidentally broken during shipment. A week after Christmas, he received a thank you note from his friend. The letter read, "Thank you for the lovely vase. It was so nice of you to wrap each piece separately."

In case we think God has been fooled; in case we get carried away with ourselves, take another look at verse 16a.

You did not choose Me, but I chose you . . .

In other words, "You became one of My closest friends – because I chose you."

It was the grace of God that gave me the gift of faith, so that I, in turn, could place my faith in Jesus Christ, therefore becoming His friend.

Verse 16 goes on to say,

I . . . appointed you . . .

You and I have received an appointment. Again, because we deserve it? No! Because He loves us! And, He has chosen to appoint us.

The word "appoint" is different than the word "chosen". It means "to appoint for special service" or "to send for a special reason".

Turn over to chapter 17, verse 18, where John clarifies our appointment. Jesus is praying to the Father,

As Thou didst send Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world.

Matthew, chapter 28, verses 19 through 20a, gives us one of the final commands from the Lord,

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you . . .

This is our commission:

- we are chosen to salvation, and
- we are appointed to service.

There is still more! We are not only His friend and His representative, but verse 16 continues on to give us one more.

We are considered His personal advertisement

We are also considered to be His personal advertisement. Notice verse 16b.

I . . . appointed you, that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain . . .

We represent Christ and are appointed to bear fruit; that is, we are to win the world. How? In what way could we most effectively advertise for heaven?!

Rebecca Pippert, in her fascinating book entitled, *Out of the Saltshaker*, told the story of the time she first arrived in Portland, Oregon. She met a student, on one of the campuses where she worked, who was a brilliant young man with hair that was always messy! She also said that the entire time she knew him, she never saw him wear a pair of shoes.

One day, the student, named Bill, decided to attend a middle class, well-dressed church that was across the street from the campus. The church had been wanting to develop more of a ministry to the students. He walked into church, wearing his blue jeans, tee shirt and, of course, no shoes. People looked a bit uncomfortable, but no one said anything. So, Bill began walking down the aisle looking for a seat. The church was quite crowded that Sunday, and as he got to the front pew, he realized there were no seats. So, he just sat down on the carpet, in the middle of the aisle, crossed his legs, and began to look around.

The tension in the air became so thick, you could have sliced it. People were craning their necks to see this visitor. Then suddenly, an elderly man began walking down the aisle toward the boy – one of the pillars of the church. Rebecca's friends, who saw the man approaching and told her about this event, recalled thinking, "Well, you can't blame him for

what he's going to do. The boy is disrupting worship."

As the man kept walking slowly down the aisle, the church became utterly silent. All eyes focused on him, and you could not hear anyone breathe. When the man reached Bill, with some difficulty, he lowered himself and sat down next to the young man on the carpet. He crossed his legs and shared his hymnal. That Sunday, he worshipped there on the floor – an advertisement for heaven.

Jesus Christ considers us His representatives – and we are to win the world.

How? Do we debate them into the kingdom; do we scare them in; bribe them; threaten them in? No. We are to attract them.

How? By our love for each other, and by the fruit that we bear that resembles the character of God Himself.

By the way, I like the promise, that is usually overlooked, within verse 16,

I . . . appointed you, that you should go and bear fruit, and . . .

(what?)

. . . that your fruit should remain . . .

There are few things that spoil more quickly than fruit, even if it is kept cool and dry. Those bananas on top of our refrigerator go from yellow to brown in a matter of days. Yet, in this verse, Jesus promises that we can bear a different kind of fruit that lasts forever.

We are advertisements of an eternal King, for an eternal purpose, with eternal power, and with eternal results.

How did we get so lucky? It was not luck – it was grace. It was Jesus choosing you to be His friend, forever.

Are you enjoying His friendship? Can you relax in His acceptance and love? Do you feel comfortable in His presence?

One author wrote,

O the comfort of feeling safe with a person, having neither to weigh thoughts or measure words, but to pour them all out just as they are, chaff and grain together, knowing that a faithful hand will take and sift them, keep what is worth keeping and, with a breath of kindness, blow the rest away.

That is the kind of friend He is to you.

Did you notice the little promise that is also tucked away in the last part of verse 16?

. . . that whatever you ask of the Father in My name, He may give to you.

In other words, "Since you are My friend, you can talk to any member of My family at any time you want."

Jesus is turning the tables. You are no longer a slave, but His closest friend. You, the disciple, are His personal representative. And, you are His special advertisement.

Joseph Scrivin was born in Dublin, Ireland, in 1820. After graduating from Trinity College, he had great expectations and plans. He would marry his lovely Irish sweetheart and together, they would begin a Christian home. He would put to use the fine training he had been getting at the college in starting his own business. Wedding plans were made, business ventures were decided upon – but then, tragedy struck. His bride-to-be accidentally drowned the day before their wedding. His world fell apart.

In hopes of forgetting, which he never did, Scrivin went to Canada and lived his life – as a missionary bachelor, alone, yet driven to help the unfortunate as a missionary. Years later, when his mother became seriously ill, he was unable to be with her. Instead, he sat down and wrote a poem for her. He made a copy for himself, scribbled on scratch paper, that was discovered by someone who had come to visit him. It would become a poem, set to music, that would encourage the church for more than one hundred fifty years.

Frankly, it seems motivated by the truth we have just discovered from John, chapter 15. Listen to the words.

What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear!

What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer!

O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear,

All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer!

Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere?

We should never be discouraged; take it to the Lord in prayer.

Can we find a friend so faithful who will all our sorrows share?

Jesus knows our every weakness; take it to the Lord in prayer.

Are we weak and heavy laden, cumbered with a load of care?

Precious Savior, still our refuge; take it to the Lord in prayer.

Do thy friends despise, forsake thee? Take it to the Lord in prayer!

In His arms He'll take and shield thee; thou wilt find a solace there.

Joseph Scriven, to onlookers, would have seemed to be living a lonely life – with unfulfilled dreams and a broken heart. It was after Joseph Scriven's death, ironically also by drowning, that his poem began to circulate and the true strength of Scriven was understood – his closest friend was Jesus.

I do not know what you are facing; I do not know about your trials and temptations, nor your load of care – but, from this morning on, remember that Jesus, on the night before He died for you, whispered into the ear of his frightened disciples, "I consider you My closest friends – you can call Me your friend too!"

And as your friend, He will never leave you nor forsake you. He is your friend – forever!

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