

Series: The Upper Room Discourse

John 15:1-17

The fruit of love

by Scott Grant

The quest for impact

In announcing Walt Disney Co.'s \$19 billion purchase of Capital Cities-ABC earlier this week, Disney President Michael Eisner seemed most excited about the possibility of impacting the world. The money-making potential didn't interest him. The chance for impact did. Whatever anyone might think about Disney's or ABC's impact, the desire for impact is in all of us. Something in us wants to make some kind of difference. So we set off in search of that dream, that endeavor, that achievement that would make a difference. Yet if we listen to the words of Jesus, we can stop searching. All we have to do is start loving.

The subject of John 15:1-17 is believers' love for one another. Although it is only mentioned twice (verses 12 and 17) it is equated in this passage with fruit, which is mentioned eight times, and obedience to Jesus, mentioned five times. Fruit, obedience and love are virtually synonymous in this passage, but the most descriptive of these is love.

The Father's tender care and the Son's furious love, as we receive and appreciate them, enable us to love one another. And love has impact.

The Father's care produces fruit

John 15:1-3:

(1) I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. (2) Every branch in me that is not bearing fruit he lifts up, and every branch that is bearing fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. (3) You are already clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.

All the players in Jesus' story are in place in these three verses: the vine, the vinedresser and the branches. The result in the relationship among the three is fruit.

Jesus says he is not just the vine but the "true" vine. In the disciples' thinking, the vine was Israel, as depicted in their scriptures (Psalm 80:8-13, Jeremiah 2:21, Ezekiel 15:1-8, 19:10-14; Hosea 10:1). In the gospels, Jesus himself uses the picture of a vine to illustrate Israel (Luke 13:6-9). He's saying that he is true Israel. The true people of God are defined not along ethnic or national lines but by their attachment as branches to the vine of Jesus Christ. In Matthew 21:43, Jesus told the leaders of national Israel, "Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and be given to a nation producing the fruit of it." That nation is forming in the hearts of his disciples, who are branches that produce fruit.

The Father is the vinedresser, or gardener. He lifts up every branch in Christ that is not bearing fruit. How are we to understand this? First, these branches are "in" Christ: They are people attached to him. There is no hint that they are fake followers. They are legitimately in Christ. Second, these branches are not presently in the state of bearing fruit. Third, the Father lifts up these branches. The word *airo* can mean either "lift up" or "take away," which is where confusion in translation arises. If the latter translation value is used, the meaning would seem to be that branches are removed from the vine - either that believers become non-believers or that the branches were never believers in the first place. If removal from the vine

were intended, John, the author, could have used a more descriptive verb, such as the one he used in John 18:10, where Peter is depicted as cutting off (*apokopto*) the ear of the high priest's slave. He could have said the Father cuts off (*apokopto*) the branches. Instead, he uses *airo*.

The translation "lift up" is to be preferred. If so, what does that mean? Only a branch that is sagging needs to be lifted up. If it's sagging, it's restricting the flow of nutrients from the vine that would enable it to bear fruit. If lifted up, its ability to receive and process nutrients is enhanced.

At times in our lives we are all sagging branches, so to speak. Life weighs us down, and the last thing we seem able to do is bear fruit. Just making it through the day is all we're capable of doing. Jesus is telling us, "It's OK to be a sagging branch." We don't have to be monster fruit producers. That's because the Father loves sagging branches. He doesn't manhandle them or belittle them or cut them off. He tenderly and carefully lifts them up. He himself enables the nutrients to flow again. He himself restores us to a place where we can once again bear fruit. Many of us are in need of such restoration. Jesus gives us permission to be in that needy state.

How about for the branch that is currently in a state of bearing fruit? The Father prunes it - trims off the superfluous wood. This is the same essential task as lifting up a branch. Each operation - lifting up and pruning - enables nutrients to flow and be processed, although the branch that is lifted up is more needy than the branch that is pruned. Each operation has the purpose of facilitating the bearing of "more fruit." The branch not currently bearing fruit must have borne fruit in the past.

Before we can understand what pruning means, we need to understand Jesus' curious statement in verse 3 that the disciples are already clean because of his word. The adjective "clean" (*katharos*) is related to the verb "prune" (*kathaireo*). In verse 3, Jesus tells the disciples that they have already been pruned and are able to bear more fruit. The instrument of pruning was "the word that I have spoken to you." This word concerns the content of the gospel, which they had believed. They believed in Jesus, and their faith was applied to the impending crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. Jesus says in verse 3 that they have already been pruned, and yet in verse 2 he says the Father is presently pruning branches that bear fruit, which the disciples are evidently classed among.

The present pruning, therefore, simply involves enabling us to understand that we've already been pruned. In pruning us, the Father shows us that we're clean, and the depth of love that went into making us clean. And a greater understanding of our cleanliness in God's sight and his love that created that cleanliness will enable more fruit. Love produces fruit.

In both these operations - lifting up and pruning - we see the tender care of the Vinedresser. He lifts up sagging branches, and he shows more sturdy branches the depth of his love. The result in each case is fruit.

I often walk by two houses that feature rose gardens. The houses are separated by two other houses. One rose garden produces shabby roses; the other beautiful roses. One rose garden looks unkempt. The other garden appears meticulously cared for. The difference is not the soil or the bushes but the gardener. One gardener cares intensely for his roses; the other doesn't. And it shows. The tender care of the gardener makes all the difference, and enables his bushes to produce beautiful roses. The Father's tender care of us makes all the difference and enables us to bear fruit.

In verses 1 through 3, the Father's care for the branches is seen as enabling the bearing of fruit. In verses 4 through 8, the branches' union with Christ is seen as enabling the bearing of fruit.

Union with Christ produces fruit

John 15:4-8:

(4) "Dwell in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it dwells in the vine, so neither can you, unless you dwell in me. (5) I am the vine; you are the branches. He who dwells in me and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from me you can do nothing. (6) If someone does not dwell in me,

he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them and cast them into the fire, and they are burned. (7) If you dwell in me and my words dwell in you, ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you. (8) By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples."

The key word in this section is the verb "dwell" (*meno*), which appears seven times, and will appear four more times in verses 9 through 16. It can also be translated "abide" or "remain." In John 14, Jesus spoke of the new temple of God, the church, and the new temples of God, individual believers. The concept of the temple concerns God's dwelling with and in his people. In that context, the verb appeared three times in John 14 (verses 10, 17 and 25) and the related noun (*mone*), translated "dwelling place" or "abode," appeared twice (verses 2 and 23). Although Jesus has changed the image from the temple to the vineyard, the relationship among the Father, the Son and the disciples is the same, and it concerns dwelling - the believer taking up residence in God, and God taking up residence in the believer.

As the branch and the vine dwell in each other, the believer and Christ dwell in each other. The branch-vine imagery speaks of a vital union that produces fruit. Each time this union is spoken of (verses 4, 5 and 7), the word "fruit" is not far behind (verses 4, 5 and 8). In this section, however, we do not yet see the nature of the union or the nature of the fruit.

Jesus begins in verse 4 by instructing them to dwell in him. This is curious, because as believers in Christ, they already dwell in him (John 14:20, 1 John 4:15). If they were not, in fact, dwelling in him, they would be cast out of the vineyard (verse 6) - they wouldn't be believers. Believers are dwelling in Christ. So why the instruction to do something that we're already doing? Dwelling in Christ means to recognize that we are, in fact, dwelling in Christ, to understand that, as branches, we are dependent on the vine. The description of our state is that of dwellers in Christ; the instruction to dwell in Christ is to recognize our dependent state as dwellers in Christ. As believers, we are dependent on Christ, but we may not know it. We may think we know it, but the way we live our lives often betrays strong streaks of independence. Therefore, Jesus instructs us to dwell in him - recognize our dependent relationship. It means recognizing the truth of our relationship to Christ and living it out.

Verse 4 speaks of the negative result of not dwelling in Christ: a life lacking in fruit. A believer who does not recognize and appreciate his or her vital union with Christ will not live in dependence on Christ. The nutrients of Christ will be constricted, and fruit will be lacking.

Verse 5 speaks of the positive result of dwelling in Christ: a branch that bears much fruit. A branch is essentially a receiver. It receives nutrients from the vine. Many of us tend to be doers, not receivers. Doers want to bear fruit. But doers need to receive the nutrients of Christ in order to bear fruit. The essence of fruit bearing is receiving, not doing. Some of us need to stop being doers and start being receivers. For our doing is really accomplishing "nothing," as Jesus says. Our doing bears no true fruit. The statement that "apart from me you can do nothing" is a reference to dependent fruit bearing. No fruit appears without reception of the nutrients of Christ.

During a rehearsal of Beethoven's "Ninth Symphony," the musicians under the direction of Arturo Toscanini responded to the maestro's wishes with particular sensitivity. The musicians were awed by Toscanini's direction and gave him a thunderous ovation at the conclusion of the rehearsal. Toscanini, though, tried desperately to stop them. He waved his arms and shouted at them to be quiet. When the ovation subsided, he said in a broken voice: "It isn't me, men - it's Beethoven."

Toscanini recognized his complete dependence on Beethoven. Apart from Beethoven, Toscanini could do nothing. It was Beethoven's brilliance that enabled the conductor to bear fruit, so to speak. He received the music of Beethoven. As Toscanini was dependent on Beethoven to convey music, we are dependent on Christ to bear fruit. We receive the nutrients of Christ and convey them.

In verse 6, Jesus speaks of someone who is not dwelling in him. By his description of what happens to this person, being cast out of the vineyard, it's clear that this person is not attached to Christ. This person is not a "branch in me" (verse 2) but is simply a "branch." This branch is to be distinguished from the sagging branch in Christ whom the Father lifts up and enables to bear fruit. This branch is not in Christ at all. And not being in Christ, it cannot bear fruit, unlike the sagging branch. All it is good for is fuel for the fire - an

emphatic statement regarding its uselessness.

The word for "someone" can also mean "a certain one." This branch, literally, "was cast out" of the vineyard. It is not unlikely that this is a reference to Judas Iscariot, who had just shown himself to be a branch unconnected to the vine and useless for bearing true fruit. The fruit he bore was the betrayal of Christ.

Verse 7 gives us a slight variation on the dwelling theme. Note that this time it is not Christ who dwells in a person but his words. Dwelling in Christ, then, has something to do with receiving his words. The nutrients that we receive from Christ have something to do with words. The nature of our union with Christ is gaining definition, but is not yet complete. The words that dwell in us need definition.

On the condition of the reality of this mutual dwelling, Christ invites the disciples to ask for "whatever" they wish and promises that it will be done for them. "Whatever" we wish is governed by our dwelling in Christ and his words dwelling in us. Clearly, then, as we saw in John 14:13, "whatever" isn't whatever. Our union with Christ conforms our desires to his desires. The nutrients flow into us, and they change our desires into godly desires. He conforms our wishes to his godly wishes, and then gives us the privilege of asking that those godly wishes be granted.

In verse 8 we see that the godly wishes concern fruit bearing that glorifies the Father. The fruit that a branch bears gives evidence of the vine and the vinedresser. Fruit means the vine is healthy and the vinedresser is real. Fruit shows us to be disciples of Jesus, which reveals his relationship with the Father.

In the next section, Jesus explains the nature of our union with him and the nature of the fruit it produces.

The union is love; the fruit is love

John 15:9-12:

(9) "Just as the Father has loved me, I have also loved you; dwell in my love. (10) If you keep my commandments, you will dwell in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and dwell in his love. (11) These things I have spoken to you that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be made full. (12) This is my commandment, that you love one another just as I have loved you."

Verse 9 represents a staggering truth. Think for a moment of the Father's love for the Son. Jesus is the Father's "beloved" Son (Mark 1:11). Such is the nature of the Father's love that Jesus often can't wait to get away from the crowds so that he could bask in the love of the Father (Mark 1:35). This love relationship has existed for all eternity. It never was not. The depth of love that the Father has for the Son is indiscernible. Yet Jesus, incredibly, says he loves us in this same manner. The love that the Father has for the Son is the love that Jesus has for us.

Then Jesus instructs the disciples to dwell in his love. Before, he commanded them to dwell in him (verse 4). This dwelling had something to do with receiving his words (verse 7). Here we see, conclusively, the nature of our dwelling in Christ, the nature of his words. It's all about love! Dwelling in Christ means receiving his love. Receiving his words means receiving his words of love. Christ's love for us is the nutrient on which we feed.

Jesus says "dwell in my love." He doesn't say "dwell in condemnation" or "dwell in good works" or "dwell in defeating sin." He says "dwell in my love." His love is the only thing that produces fruit. Self-condemnation doesn't do it. Trying harder doesn't do it. Defeating sin doesn't do it. His love does it. So what remains for us to do? Soak up his love. As a branch soaks up the nutrients of the vine, we soak up the love of Christ. The problem is we soak up counterfeit nutrients of condemnation, fear and self-effort. And we wonder, "Where's the fruit?"

Toscanini's brilliance as a conductor in the rehearsal was commensurate to his perception of the brilliance of Beethoven. As he saw the notes on the page, he was no doubt awed. His wild attempt to stop the applause

also indicates he was awed. But mostly, the manner of his sensitive direction indicates that he was awed. He bore fruit because he was in awe of Beethoven's brilliance. Are we in awe of Christ's love for us? Have we given ourselves a chance to be in awe of Christ's love for us? Have we opened up to him? If we understand and appreciate the brilliance of Christ's love for us, we'll bear fruit.

This time, after discussing the mutual dwelling, Jesus discusses not fruit but keeping his commands. This is a further, yet still incomplete, definition of fruit bearing. We know the nature of our union with Christ (love), and we're given a further definition of the nature of the fruit (obedience). As of verse 10, we don't know what commands Jesus is talking about.

In verse 10, Jesus connects dwelling in his love with keeping his commands. The conditional clause appears in an order reversed from what we might expect. We might expect him to say, "If you dwell in my love, you will keep my commandments." We have ample statements like this in scripture that indicate our obedience is in response to his love. This statement does not contradict those but enhances them. He's inviting us to trust him, to move out in obedience. We have enough evidence of his love to do this. And if we move out and find him faithful, we'll see more of his love; we'll have even greater opportunity to dwell in his love.

We often associate obedience with despair. It comes across to us as impossible drudgery. It often strikes us as anything but a joyful enterprise. Yet Jesus speaks of joy in verse 11. He says he has told the disciples "these things," which would be the Father's care for them and their love union with him that produce fruit, or obedience. These things are not for the sake of drudgery or despair but for the sake of joy. And this just isn't any kind of joy; it's Christ's joy, meaning it's joy found in the wonder of a worshipful relationship with God. Christ's joy fulfills our joy. This is the joy, quite simply, of being who we are. We are branches connected to the vine.

If a branch had consciousness, it would be full of joy to see itself bearing the fruit it was intended to produce. It would be full of joy to be what it is and live out the truth of that being. So it is with us. We are branches with consciousness, created to soak up the loving nutrients of Christ and bear fruit. To see that happen to any degree in our lives is to experience the joy of Christ that fills up our joy.

What is the fruit we were intended to bear; what are the commandments that we are to keep? Jesus narrows it down to one kind of fruit, one kind of commandment. In verse 12 he tells us that we are to love one another. This is the nature of the fruit: love. The nature of the union with Christ is his love, and the nature of the fruit that the union produces is our love for each other. We are to be people of love.

This is hard. It's easy for us to emphasize other spheres of so-called obedience because love is difficult and frightening. It's also easy for us to talk in idealistic terms regarding love, thinking that we understand it. It's easy to preach and dream about and think that preaching and dreaming equate with practicing and realizing. In reality, it seems impossible to practice and realize. But Jesus is clear: True love for one another is realizable. But he is equally clear regarding the source: the Father's care and the Son's love.

I had the privilege recently of watching tears roll down the face of a friend as she began to see herself as loving some people who didn't seem able to love in return. She couldn't quite describe how it happened. But they were tears of joy on her face - the joy of Jesus fulfilling her joy. She was who she was - a fruit-bearing branch in vital union with the vine. And it was a joyful experience for her to see the love of Jesus reproduced in her life.

So we have seen the nature of the union is Christ's love for us. The nature of the fruit is our love for each other. In the following verses, Jesus will explain the nature of Christ's love for us and the nature of our love for each other.

The nature of Christ's love, the nature of our love

John 15:13-17:

(13) *"Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends. (14) You are my friends,*

if you do what I command you. (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 the Father I have made known to you. (16) 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. (17) This is my command, that you love one another."

In verse 12 Jesus told the disciples to love each other just as he loved them. In verse 13, he explains the nature, or extent, of his love. The greatest expression of love is giving up one's own needs so that the needs of another may be met. This disposition is most greatly expressed in the actual giving up of one's life for the sake of a friend, if that's what a friend needs. That's exactly what Jesus was doing for his friends, because that's exactly what they needed. They needed a savior to die for them. He did.

Jesus tells them in verse 14, "You are my friends." In other words, he's saying, "Do you realize the love I have for you, my friends. I love you so much that I'm dying for you." This is the nature of Christ's love for us. It is love so furious that it dies for us.

We need look no further than the Upper Room Discourse to see this furious love illustrated by Jesus. In John 13:3-5, Jesus got up from his position at the table, donned the garb of a slave and did a slave's job, washing the feet of the disciples. This illustrates the love of Jesus in the incarnation, in which he got up from his heavenly throne, took on human flesh and served humanity out of love, going to the cross.

Verse 14 might seem conditional, as if Jesus were telling them they are his friends if and only if they obey his commands. But verse 15 makes it plain that the protasis introduced by "if" is descriptive of their condition, for Jesus says that "I have called you friends." Their obedience is evidence of the friendship. In other words, they are his friends, and he is laying down his life for them. This, then, strikes us as encouragingly descriptive, not discouragingly conditional.

Jesus provides additional evidence of his friendship with them by telling them the nature of the things he has shared with them. If they were simply slaves, they'd be in the dark regarding the motives of the master. The master commands; the slave obeys. The slave doesn't have an intimate relationship with the master. Friends, on the other hand, share intimate details. The evidence of Jesus' disposition toward them as friends is the nature of the things he has shared with them: He has shared what he has heard from the Father. What has the Father shared with the Son? We've already seen it in verse 9: The Father loved Jesus. Jesus has shared with his disciples intimate details of the Father's love.

How do we benefit from these intimate details? They're all over the scriptures - word after word, sentence after sentence, page after page of God's love for us, nuggets of gold waiting to be discovered and cherished. Earlier, Jesus talked of his words dwelling in us (verse 7). Integral to our love union with Christ are his words of love - all of God's word, in fact. This tells us how we should read and study the scriptures. Because they are words of love, we should look for God's love and ask him to show us his love. We cannot dwell in the love of Christ without soaking up the word of love.

Jesus reminds us in verse 16 that he is the initiator in this fruit-bearing enterprise. He chose us and appointed us for the purpose of bearing fruit, which he has already described as loving one another. Jesus does not choose and appoint without enabling. It's a reminder on the one hand that we are able to bear fruit and on the other hand that we are able only insofar as he enables us. The fruit is not ours to generate. The Father lifts up and prunes, and the Son pours his love into us. Fruit happens.

Notice also the particular kind of fruit this union produces: it is fruit that remains. It's lasting fruit. There is something in all of us that desires to make some kind of difference, to leave behind some sort of legacy that has lasting impact. Some may aspire to some sort of greatness, hoping that such greatness will survive into the ensuing generations. Living a life that results in lasting fruit has deep-seated appeal. The wonderful thing here is the way Jesus defines lasting fruit. Fruit concerns loving one another. So if we want to make a difference, if we want to leave behind a legacy of impact or if we aspire to some sort of greatness, what should we do? It's quite simple: Love someone. We don't have to build a building, write a masterpiece or even start a family. Love makes a difference. Love lasts. Love is greatness.

That's what Jesus did: He loved his friends. He was written off in his own generation. He only had a small following. He was executed, and his small band of followers scattered. But he spent his life loving 12 men. Consider his impact.

Echoing verse 7, Jesus in verse 16 tells them that the Father will give them whatever they ask for in his name. By inviting us to ask in his name, Jesus grants us his authority to appear before the Father. And once again, as we have seen in John 14:13 and John 15:7, "whatever" concerns fruit bearing. The Father is committed to turning us into people who love each other. If this is what we want, that is what he'll give us.

Finally, and fittingly, Jesus reminds us in verse 17 that he's teaching us about loving one another.

Tender care, furious love

So our descriptions are complete. The nature of the union with Christ is Christ's love. The nature of the fruit is our love for each other. The nature of Christ's love is furious. The nature of our love for each other is lasting. The Father's tender care and Christ's furious love, once received and understood, enable us to love one another.

- SCG, 1995

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