

## **New People with New Power**

### *Sent: Ambassadors for Christ on Mission for God Sermon 3*

John 15:1-17 | October 22, 2023

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*See page 10 for small group discussion questions*

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When you listen to business entrepreneurs describe what success takes, you notice that it requires more than the right ideas and vision. Success also requires the right people. It's people that carry out the vision, the mission. Missional success depends not only on plans and ideas but people.

Surprisingly, God designed His mission the same. It depends—at least in part—on people, mere mortals like you and me.

We've been studying God's mission this fall and seen that God the Father sends the Son into the world on a mission. And then, the Son sends his people into the world to further that mission: "As the Father sent me, just so I am sending you," says Jesus to his followers (John 17:18; 20:21). The mission of God depends, in part, on people.

That was a lot of pressure to put on a rough band of sinners like the first disciples. It almost broke them. But such was the Lord's plan. And as it turned out, their weakness became their strength, as they learned to rely on a power not of their own—"power from on high" (Luke 24:49).

The same is true today. Jesus has made the success of his mission depend, in part, on people. What I want to consider with you today is how clay-footed, sinful people like you and me can carry out such a mission. How are we empowered for such divine work? This is a sermon, in short, about power.

We'll find some answers in John 15.

### **John 15 and The Vine**

John 15:1-17 is for many a favorite passage. Jesus refers to himself as the true vine and his followers as the branches: "I am the vine; you are the branches" (15:5).

The image was common in the farming culture of the first-century Mediterranean. Jesus likely has in mind times in the Old Testament when God refers to Israel as His vine, often lamenting they hadn't been more fruitful (see Psalm 80).

Christians often turn to John 15 to learn how to abide in Jesus—how by his word or prayer we draw close to him. Or we turn to John 15 for comfort, reflecting on how close Jesus wants to be with us. These are great themes. However, there is another, more dominant, theme that runs through this passage that we'll focus on today—and that is the theme of empowerment for bearing fruit.

Seven times Jesus uses the phrase “bear fruit” in this passage; it's what he desires and expects from disciples: that they would “bear much fruit” for his mission. This passage is about the only power source that can make that happen. Jesus states things bluntly in verse 5:

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 (John 15:5).

Apart from Jesus, disciples have no power to bear fruit for Jesus. We may build or accomplish things in our own power, but inasmuch as it's in our own power, these are not the fruit of Jesus' mission.

Here, then, is how I'll state the point of the passage:

**When it comes to fulfilling Jesus' mission, abiding empowers. For the closer I am to Jesus, the closer he is to you—and anyone else I'm called to serve.**

What we'll do as we now turn to our passage in more detail, is consider three ways the *abiding empowers*. Abiding empowers because abiding (1) reveals the Sender, (2) taps into true strength, and (3) fuels the heart.

## I. Abiding Reveals

John Stott was an Anglican pastor and writer who loved missions and evangelism. Stott knew that speaking the Gospel message was integral to mission. He also knew that speaking the message meant messengers, and that the quality of their lives could help or hurt the witness.

Stott shares the sobering story of former President of India, Dr. Radhakrishnan, who was himself a Hindu scholar. He is said to have commented about a group of Christians in his country trying to witness to Christianity: “You claim that Jesus Christ is your Savior, but you do not appear to be more ‘saved’ than anyone else.”

“We must exhibit what we proclaim,” Stott concluded.<sup>1</sup> Part of the logic of Christian mission is that those who are sent reflect or reveal the image of the Sender. If you see them, you see Him.

Such was the mission of Jesus—he revealed the Father, the one who sent him: “Whoever sees me sees him who sent me” (John 12:45); “Whoever has seen me, has seen the Father” (John 14:9). So too is the mission of the disciples of Jesus—by their words, deeds, and love, they are to reveal Jesus: “People will know that you are my disciples,” Jesus told them, “if you love one another” (John 13:35).

What’s particularly instructive for us, is to notice something of the way Jesus went about revealing the Father: it was through his *closeness*, or *oneness* with the Father, a relational bond fostered as Jesus listened to the Father’s words and only did the Father’s will:

For the works that the Father has given me to accomplish, the very works that I am doing, bear witness about me that the Father has sent me” (5:36).

For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment—what to say and what to speak.... What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me (12:49-50).

I am in the Father and the Father is in me” (John 14:11).

This is the pattern that Jesus sets for us. And here in John 15, it is precisely by saturating ourselves in Jesus’ words and by obeying them, that we come to *reveal* him in our own lives:

If you abide in me, and my words abide in you ... Jesus says in 15:7.

He then says 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” (15:10).

Here is the principle: the closer the sent one is to the Sender, the more he or she comes to look like him. And, don’t we know this by general experience? Do we not come to mimic, act like, sound like, think like, the people we spend the most time with? A son becomes the spitting image of the father; friends come to like the same things; spouses finish each other’s sentences. The more time we spend with someone, the closer we are to them, the more we *reveal* them.

By abiding, we reveal to the world the one who sent us. And this revelation—Jesus through us—is *powerful!*

When people encounter the life of Christ in us, it has a powerful effect on them—even if at first, they don’t know what they are encountering. Let me give you an example of this.

There is a character in Russian literature called “the Holy Fool.” It’s someone whose closeness to God leads them to appear out of step with the world, even foolish. But their otherworldliness ends up making them strangely attractive.

In Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, it is the youngest brother, Alyosha, who is the holy fool. When his apprenticeship in a monastery is cut short, and he’s thrust into the world, a friend takes him to the home of a young woman, Grushenka. Grushenka is a tease who lives to torment men—although she’s really hurting deep down. When her charms don’t work on Alyosha, she first mocks him as a silly fool. But eventually, after he refuses to objectify her but instead treats her as someone worthy of being truly loved, she collapses into a pool of tears.<sup>2</sup> She doesn’t know whether to mock him to cling to him. But something deep in her knows she’s encountered a love—a power—that she desperately needs.

That’s what happens when a world steeped in the pleasures of the flesh encounters the Spirit of God, it’s revolted and drawn, shamed and soothed, all at the same time.

In a world that has no moral compass, those whose lives are saturated with the Word of God and ordered according to the ways of Jesus will often look like fools.

Christian parents who aim their children at godliness more so than worldly accolades will at times look foolish. Christian high school and college students who follow Jesus' teachings about relationships and sexual behavior will look foolish. Christians who invest their money in Christian causes will look foolish. Christians who lay down their lives for a God who is invisible will look like they've lost—just like Jesus did on the cross.

But make no mistake, it is here, where the life of God meets the world through our very bodies, lives, that the world senses something of a life beyond this world. And this encounter with holiness—with the life of Jesus in us—is *powerful!* Toward it, the world is strangely drawn.

This is our first lesson: The power of Christian mission is the life of the sender—Jesus Christ—revealed through the life of his sent ones. And this happens only when we are living very closely to Jesus. Abiding, you see, empowers, because the closer I am to Jesus, the closer Jesus comes to those I'm around.

## II. Abiding Taps into the Stronger Strength

In John 15, Jesus envisions disciples bearing fruit that last:

You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide (John 15:16).

The fruit that the Christian life produces is varied—obedience, neighborly love, and Godly character. But what Jesus has in mind here is the fruit of conversions—the fruit of others coming to new life in Christ through the witness of the disciples, “You also will bear witness” about me (15:27). This is “the fruit that will last.”

This kind of missional work quickly reveals our lack of power—we cannot change anyone's heart. And this also reminds us that the mission of God advances against a different type of stronghold.

Paul, at the close of the Ephesians letter, explains,

we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places (Ephesians 6:12).

When the mission of Jesus sets out to bring new life, to transform human souls, it is contending with souls not only sick with their own sin and selfishness. It is contending with souls under the sway of dark forces. This means a spiritual battle. Now how does a mere human being win a spiritual battle?

Imagine a demon came into your room, and you had at your side a metal sword. And you thrust the sword through the demon. But nothing happens. You cannot fight a spiritual being with human weapons.<sup>3</sup>

And this is why Paul speaks of different weapons:

Take the ... sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit (Ephesians 6:17-18).

Prayer is at the heart of what it means to abide in Jesus. Twice Jesus says that abiding leads to asking—and asking means prayer:<sup>4</sup>

If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, **ask** whatever you wish, and it will be done for you (15:7)

You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you **ask** the Father in my name, he may give it to you (15:16).

Abiding empowers because it involves *prayerfulness*—putting before God the things in this world that can only be changed by His power. Prayer engages the stronger strength, the strength of God.

Is there a missional aspiration of Jesus on your heart? Perhaps a friend or family member coming to truly know Christ? Are you praying for this person—daily, with fervency? Martin Luther once said,

“There is no work like prayer.” “Satan trembles when he sees the weakest saint upon his knees,” said hymnist William Cowper.

And a friend we are praying for, that they’d meet Christ, becomes a friend we are far more likely to speak to about Christ: As John Owen wrote, “He who prays as he ought will endeavor to live as he prays.”

Friends, prayer was at the heart of how Jesus stayed close to the Father. He prayed in Gethsemane when he was so discouraged and afraid (John 18). He prayed for his disciples when he was worried that they might fall away (John 17). And the power of the Kingdom worked itself out through the prayers of the Son. It will be the same with us, the Son’s new people.

### III. Abiding Fuels the Heart

Finally, abiding empowers because it fuels our hearts.

One of the more subtle but damaging ways the mission of God is undermined in my life is through apathy and fear. By apathy, I mean that at times I care more about my own plans than God’s. I have almost no feelings about the lost, no desire to see them embraced by the love of God. By fear, I mean that I fear any missional efforts of mine will be in vain or mocked. Apathy and fear—discouragement and complacency—these are all matters of the heart.

Empowerment for missional living must include empowering our hearts. They must become motivated, moved, and aimed at the things of God’s heart.

Notice in verse 7 a connection between abiding in Jesus and the desires of our hearts.

If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you (15:7).

The logic of this verse runs like this: first, we draw close to Jesus’ heart by being saturated in Jesus’ word: “If you abide in me and my words abide in you.” Second, we ask (pray) for whatever we wish. Assumed is that what we “wish” for has been cultivated by Jesus and his word—so it aligns with

Jesus' will. And the word "wish" here speaks to desires and longings of our hearts—it's what we long to have, what we want to see come to pass.<sup>5</sup>

Abiding in Jesus reorders and refires what our hearts *wish* for—what they want.

It's not uncommon for people to look for things to help motivate their hearts—to help them get focused and energized for what they need to do.

I watched a football documentary recently where the star quarterback has his alarm clock go off to a motivational speaker. So when at 5am he got up, the first thing he heard was a man hollering at him: *"Stop just waking up like an accident! What do you want? And then once you find out what you want spend the rest of your natural life waking up and going after it!"*<sup>6</sup>

What are the first words that set your heart when you wake up?

It is said that John Stott prayed the following prayer every morning before his feet hit the floor:

Good morning, heavenly Father; good morning, Lord Jesus; good morning, Holy Spirit. Heavenly Father, I worship you as the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. Lord Jesus, I worship you, Savior and Lord of the World. Holy Spirit, I worship you, Sanctifier of the people of God. Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.

Heavenly Father, I pray that I may live this day in your presence and please you more and more. Lord Jesus, I pray that this day I may take up my cross and follow you. Holy Spirit, I pray that this day you will fill me with yourself and cause your fruit to ripen in my life: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Holy, blessed, and glorious Trinity, three persons in one God, have mercy upon me. Amen.

It is said that the next thing Stott did was turn to God's word, to listen to God's voice.

Friends, it is by this closeness to God, as we speak to God and he speaks to us, that our hearts are fueled for mission.



Imagine you wake up tomorrow morning, with so many agendas on your mind, so many voices vying for your allegiance. But you turn to Jesus' word—and in Matthew 28 you hear Jesus say, "Go and make disciples" today (Matthew 28:18). You reply, "But I lack the power." To which Jesus replies, "I am with you, always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

And now in your interactions with your kids, your spouse, your colleagues, you have in your heart this passion and prayer: *you long to see them in the embrace, and under the leadership, of Jesus.*

Abiding empowers, for the closer we are to Jesus, the closer Jesus draws to those around us—he reveals himself through us, he responds to our prayers for our friends, and he fuels our hearts for their wellbeing.

Let me close by turning to a final word in this passage: *friend*.

In verse 15 Jesus calls us his friends:

No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends (John 15:15).

There is something of the heart of the Gospel in this little word, friend. It reminds us that Jesus did not come into the world to condemn us, but to save us (John 3:17). It reminds us that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8). It reminds us, as Jesus says right here in John 15:9, "As the Father loved me, so have I loved you."

Perhaps the most important fuel to our mission is to never forget that in Jesus' eyes and heart, we are his mission. He came for us—for you, for me. And why? So that we could be his friends.

Dear brothers and sisters, as we hear the call to go forth into the world on mission for Jesus, let us not go very far out, without going very far in—into the arms, into the heart, of the one who calls us his friends. For in abiding is power. In abiding is life.

## Questions for small groups:

Members of your small group are encouraged to listen to the sermon if they were not there on Sunday. We also encourage you to begin your small group meeting with prayer and then by reading John 15:1-17. The below questions are suggestions for how to have a meaningful discussion about the passage—but you may have better questions that come up in your group.

1. Who is someone who's had a great influence on you and why? How did they shape the way you think, act, talk, and live?
2. What are some ways Jesus has influenced how you live?
3. What does abiding in Jesus look like for you?
4. How might closeness to Jesus empower you for specific missional tasks for Jesus this fall?
5. Who is someone far from God that you are praying for?

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## Endnotes

1. John Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, revised edition. (IVP), 163.
2. "And having uttered this 'pathetic' phrase, Grushenka suddenly could not help herself; she broke off, covered her face with her hands, threw herself onto the sofa, into the pillows, and sobbed like a little child." Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (Vintage Classic), 355.
3. This illustration comes from Francis Shaffer, "The Lord's Work in the Lord's Way."

4. "In short, these closing words again remind the reader that the means of the fruitfulness for which they have been chosen is prayer in Jesus' name" (D. A. Carson, *John*, 524).
5. "θέλω," is the Greek word translated "wish," and according to BDAG, 447, carries the sense: 1. to have a desire for something, *wish to have, desire, want*.
6. Refers to Jameis Winston and the *Hard Knocks* documentary on the Tampa Bay Buccaneers.