

What is a Christian?

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[0 : 0 0] Thanks very much, Alice, and good morning, everyone. What a wonderful passage, isn't it, that we're looking at today. We're only going to be able to scratch the surface of it in the next half hour, but I hope as we do that we'll be thrilled by what Jesus has to say to us, but also very deeply challenged by it.

And the two really go together. There's much in this passage that we should rejoice in. There is also a lot that should help us to examine ourselves and our relationship with Jesus.

Let me begin with a very basic question. What is a Christian? Or to put it another way, what difference is there between a Christian and someone who's not a Christian?

Now, Peter's given us one answer to that already. A Christian is someone who follows Jesus. It's not directly on my list. It is certainly true. But if we're thinking of what is a Christian, then very simply, a Christian believes in Jesus.

We've been going for some time now, with a little gap just in the last few weeks, we've been going for some time through John's Gospel. And we've come back quite often to a verse right at the end of chapter 20 of the Gospel, where John gives the purpose for writing.

[1 : 1 6] And he says, So John says, if you want to have life, if you want to have a relationship with God, you need to believe in Jesus.

And if we read through the rest of the New Testament, that's what others say. Paul, when he was in a Philippian jail, and the jailer in desperation asked him, what must I do to be saved? Paul said, believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved.

So fundamentally, a Christian believes in Jesus. We believe that Jesus is the Son of God, who came into the world and lived among us, who died on the cross at Calvary to take the punishment for sin, who rose again, who is now with God, and who is coming back.

And we believe that Jesus is the only way to God. If we want to have forgiveness for all the wrong we've done, if we want to have a relationship with the God of heaven, the only way is through Jesus.

A Christian believes in Jesus. Let me suggest something else. A Christian behaves like Jesus. I think I need to give two caveats to that.

[2 : 4 3] The first of these is, none of us in this world will ever be exactly like Jesus. We all remain sinners, those who go our own way, who disobey God's way, and that will be the case, to some extent at least, for as long as we live.

And so we know that we can't by ourselves win God's favour. We need Jesus. We need to believe in Jesus as the only way to God. The second caveat is, it's not just Christians necessarily live upright, moral lives.

There are people of other religions and of no religion who try to live well and to do good to others. But if we are a Christian, then we want to be like Jesus.

We want to live the way that he lived. We want to live good, moral lives. We want to be self-controlled.

We want to have a real concern for others. We want to spread the good news about Jesus to others. All things that Jesus did that we should do as well.

[3 : 54] The last few weeks, as I'll mention, we've been going through the book of Titus, a great letter of Paul, and that is very much a focus of Titus. How we should live as Christians.

For example, in chapter 2, Paul says, the grace of God teaches us to say no to ungodliness and worldly passions and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in this present age.

Because of God's grace to us, because of what God has done for us through the Lord Jesus, we should want to live like Jesus and to follow his example.

A Christian behaves like Jesus. But I think there's something else, and this is where we're going to come to John chapter 15. I would suggest that a Christian belongs with Jesus.

Now, I've not said belongs to Jesus, although that is true. A Christian belongs with Jesus. You see, being a Christian is not just a matter of believing the right things, of having good doctrine.

[4 : 59] It's not just a matter of doing good things, of having good ethics. fundamentally, it's about a relationship that we have with the Lord Jesus.

We belong with Jesus. And the passage we're looking at in John 15, the Lord gives us two lovely pictures of what that means.

He says that if we are Christians, if we belong with him, then we are branches in a vine, where he is the vine. And then he says later on, if we obey him, then we are his friends.

Now, the picture of the vine in some ways is quite mystical, supernatural, and maybe quite difficult to grasp, but very important. Picture of friendship, perhaps we can grasp more easily.

We understand, we all understand what friendship is, although we'll see the friendship we have with Jesus is a little different from our other friendships. But perhaps we could say that the Christian belonging with Jesus, we share in his life, that's the picture of the vine and the branches, and we share in his love, that is the friendship we enjoy with him.

[6 : 19] These are the two sections, two subsections, of what we're going to be looking at in a minute. Maybe it's worth, though, just taking a minute to position ourselves in John's Gospel, because it has been a few weeks since we've looked at it together.

So John's Gospel divides quite naturally into two sections. The first 12 chapters are about Jesus going around, interacting with people, teaching, discussing, performing signs, miracles, to demonstrate that he is God.

And it seeks to answer the question, who is Jesus? From chapter 13 to the end of John's Gospel, it changes a bit, and it is very much concerned with the events around Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection.

What happened before and what happened after. And chapters 13 to 16, which we're in just now, are sometimes called the upper room ministry of Jesus.

It's Jesus, the night before he died, spending real quality time with his disciples, teaching them the things that he believes they need to know as he is about to leave them.

[7 : 34] Within that, there's a bit of a break at the end of chapter 14. So as we pick up in chapter 15, it's after the end of a bit of a break point. If you've got your Bible in front of you, you'll see that right at the end of chapter 14, Jesus says, come now, let us leave.

So actually, what we're reading in chapter 15 may not have happened in the upper room. It may have been if Jesus' disciples were walking. It may even be when they were standing in the temple precinct where there was a huge golden vine that would have been very visible.

We don't know, but I think there is a change of thought. So I think the end of chapter 14 is a break point in that the focus is slightly different. In chapters 13 and 14, Jesus is preparing his disciples for what is to follow immediately.

He's giving them comfort that they can hold on to as they witness his crucifixion and then later on after he rises from the dead as he goes to be with his father.

Broadly speaking, the focus of chapters 13 and 14 takes us up to Pentecost when the Holy Spirit comes on the believers. I think chapters 15 and 16 are looking further ahead.

[8 : 52] Jesus is saying to his disciples, here is how you should live as the church. As my representatives on earth when I'm no longer there, here's what you should do and here's what you can expect.

What you can expect from the world around you, large rejection, we'll see that next week, and what you can expect from God through the power of the Spirit. And so what we're looking at this morning is really the introductory part of that as Jesus tells us two things that are pivotal in our relationship with him that are part of us belonging to Jesus.

You've probably already worked out that I quite like alliteration, so we're going to use a bit of alliteration again. We're going to talk about lasting fruit and about loving friendship.

And these will be the two sections we'll be thinking about. Broadly speaking, lasting fruit goes up to about verse 8 and from verse 9 onwards it is loving friendship.

So lasting fruit. The analogy of the vine and the vineyard would have been very familiar to Jesus' disciples. In the Old Testament, many times it talks about God as the vineyard keeper and the nation of Israel as the vineyard.

[10 : 14] And what characterizes that in many, many of these occasions is that the vineyard is failing. That it is not meeting the expectations of the vineyard owner.

Classic example of that in Isaiah chapter 5 where God says, what more could I have done for my vineyard than I have done for it? He then says he will allow it to be destroyed and he says he looked for justice but saw bloodshed, for righteousness but heard cries of distress.

And there are other passages similar to that in the Old Testament. Israel was designed to be God's vineyard but it was a vineyard that didn't produce fruit because people's lives hadn't really been changed because the leaders weren't leading them in a way that was in accordance with God's will.

And so in chapter 1 of verse 1 of chapter 15 Jesus says, I am the true vine. The old vineyard is not the thing that we should be looking at now.

We should be looking at one vine and that vine is Jesus. And many of you know this is the last of seven I am sayings of the Lord Jesus in John's Gospel where he reveals truths about himself but also truths about us and our relationship with them.

[11 : 42] And that's very much going to be the case in this one. Now I'm no gardener. If you ever come to our house and admire anything in the garden all the credit goes to Bridget.

And that includes two trees that we've got. Two fruit trees. We've got a plum tree and an apple tree. And we've only had them a relatively short time a few years but they are very fruitful.

We had a good crop from them last year. But I look at them just now in the winter there are no leaves there is no fruit and I think we need to think about cutting these back a bit in the new year.

They've got nice long branches but actually growing nice long branches is not what fruit trees are all about. What you want from fruit trees is good fruit.

And how do you get good fruit? Well the fruit comes from the life of the tree which comes up through the trunk of the tree and the sap that goes out and you want that sap to be producing fruit rather than producing extended branches.

[12 : 42] So you need if you've got a tree occasionally to prune it. And that's the picture that the Lord Jesus is presenting to us here. Much more skilled than I would ever do in terms of pruning but God he says is pruning his vine.

And there are two things that he does says Jesus. He takes the dead wood the wood that has no fruit growing in it and he cuts that off and he throws that away.

Not entirely clear what Jesus is talking about there but it may well be people who appear to be Christians who come to church who present as being followers of Jesus but actually they're not really Christians and not displaying the fruit that a real Christian should and maybe their trust is not really in Jesus.

That might be what the Lord is describing. You might be thinking particularly of Judas who had been one of his disciples for three years and now had betrayed him. But let's focus more on the second action that the gardener takes because the branches that are bearing good fruit he prunes.

He cuts a bit of them in the expectation that they will produce even better fruit. Now at first sight that might seem a rather strange thing to do.

[14 : 04] Why do you cut back the thing that is fruitful? You're going to reduce the fruit are you not in the short term? Well maybe you are but what you will get in the long term is both more fruit and better fruit.

Fruit says Jesus that will last. And vineyard keepers whether in Israel or whether in southern Europe they are very skilled at knowing when and how to prune the branches to produce the best crops.

What does that mean for us? If we take ourselves how does God prune us? How does he help us to be more fruitful?

Well I think it could come in a number of ways and they tend to be painful for us. Sometimes perhaps when we have done something we know is wrong or when we're reading God's word and we recognise that we're not meeting the standards as Christians we may feel a bit of a sense of shame.

We may recognise all that Jesus has done for us all that we owe him how we should live and we say I'm just not meeting that standard.

[15 : 19] I'm not good enough. And then perhaps the Lord Jesus comes to us and through the Spirit he reminds us that yes we're not good enough but Jesus has taken the penalty for our sins and there is forgiveness for us even as we continually fail him.

So by helping us to understand our own inadequacy by bringing that sense of failure on us God can help us to grow as Christians and to become more like Jesus as we realise again just how much we owe him.

Then there's a second example which we sometimes call the trials we experience in life. We suffer illness or someone close to us suffers illness. We suffer bereavement perhaps we get made redundant from our job or there's something else that is causing us great stress in our lives.

And we might be tempted to say to God well why is this and it's not wrong to ask that question why is this happening? Well one of the reasons why these things happen is to draw us closer to the Lord Jesus to help us to realise that there are things which we can't control in our own strength but to know we have a God who is in control of everything and our Christian trials the difficulties we face they build our Christian character they help us to become more dependent on the Lord Jesus they increase the bond if you like between the branches and the vine and they help us to be better disciples of the Lord Jesus that pruning process that God uses for us it is painful but it is so important that we never suffer we never develop character and we need to develop fruit by being pruned by our heavenly father but that's the role of the father what about the Lord

Jesus the Lord Jesus who is the vine well the key word that comes again and again in these verses is remain we are to remain in him Jesus says if we remain in him we will have his life we will bear fruit we will become like him so what does it mean then if we want to think about remaining in Jesus well we have to recognize first again that without Christ we have no spiritual life without him we would be dead in our sins and we need to repent and trust him but we need to do more than that we need to cultivate our relationship with him he wants us to have a living active vital relationship where he is part of our everyday lives he is a key part of our everyday lives and we seek to follow him and live for him we maintain the relationship when we read and meditate on the bible when we come to him in prayer when we prioritize serving

[18 : 38] Jesus and living for him above everything else when as we're looking later on when we obey him when we love others that is what remaining in Jesus means it is he is at the center of our lives and we recognize that any life we have any spiritual life we have is only because he is the vine and we are attached to him as the branches his life is flowing through us and making us fruitful and what then is the fruit the good fruit that is going to last as I expect for many of us when we talk about fruit our minds go automatically to the book of Galatians where Paul lists the fruit of the spirit love joy peace patience kindness goodness faithfulness gentleness self-control these are the things which characterize the

Lord Jesus and they're the things that should characterize us as Christians and as we read through that list I'm sure all of us see there are things there that perhaps I'm not doing too badly on but there are things there where I really need to improve where I need to be bearing more fruit and a fruitful Christian is not primarily about what we do it's about who we are it's about our character it's about how we live our daily lives but I think when we think about fruit we need to go a little bit beyond that because there is fruit that is displayed through other people as well so for example if we have the privilege of being able to lead someone to trust in the Lord Jesus that is fruit for the work that we have done not that we would take credit for it is from the Spirit but it is fruit of what we've done that we can rejoice in what we've been thinking about the last couple of weeks we are a church together many of us old and young and we have the opportunity to interact with one another to encourage each other in our faith and in our relationship with the Lord

Jesus and when we can see that character of Christ developing in others to an extent that is our fruit as well we are being fruitful by setting a good example and by encouraging others in their faith and you can probably think of other examples of fruit as well but as we remain in Jesus as we bear fruit in our lives what wonderful things he promises to us so in verse 10 the Lord Jesus says if you keep my command you will remain in my love just say I kept my father's commands and remain in his love so we will enjoy Christ's presence with us and the knowledge that he loves us more than we could ever understand and that he has the best in store for us the Lord Jesus also says that if we remain in him this is verse 7 if we remain in him ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you what a marvellous promise that we can come to our heavenly father in Jesus name as those remaining in Jesus and we can present the requests of our heart knowing that

God listens and that God will answer now it has to be said with that that this is for people who remain in Jesus and if we're remaining in Jesus our desire should be not for our own comfort or our own wealth or whatever it should be for his glory but that doesn't take away from the greatness of the promise that those who remain in Jesus can come to God the father and can see answers to prayer and then finally and there's lots more we could talk about Jesus talks about joy verse 11 I've told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete joy whatever our circumstances joy through the difficult times as well as easy times if we remain in Jesus if we are enjoying his life and his presence we can take comfort and strength from that and we can rejoice in his goodness whatever circumstances we face what a great privilege it is to be part of the vine that is the Lord

Jesus and to produce lasting fruit let's move on though and look at the second part of the passage which I've called loving friendship I'm going to focus particularly on verses 12 to 14 but we will cover the other verses as we go along one of the first sermons I ever preached was on these three verses and the reason was that I was really intrigued by the structure of them and it is tremendous look in the way I've tried to illustrate in the slide to look at how the verses fit together you can start with any of them and read round and round in a circle going back from verse 14 to verse 12 every time and it follows on it flows very naturally my command is this love each other as I have loved you greater love has no one than this to lay down one's life for one friend you are my friends if you do what I command my command is this love each other and we go round and round and just marvel at what

[24 : 36] God what the Lord Jesus is saying to us and what it means for us we'll start at the end today and work our way round to the middle so verse 14 says you are my friends if you do what I command now that should immediately say to us our friendship with the Lord Jesus that he offers to us is a different kind of friendship you you probably wouldn't be very impressed if I came up to you and said you can be my friend but only if you do everything I tell you to that's not the way a normal friendship works friendship is normally a relationship between those who treat each other broadly as equals our friendship with Jesus is different we are in no way Jesus equals the best analogy perhaps would be a king or in those days an emperor the king would have a court and there would be courtiers who might regard as his friends they would be his confidants people who might give him advice people who he would tell what he was thinking but they would still be his subjects they would still be under him and need to obey his commands and that's the kind of friendship that

Jesus is talking about here and the contrast he makes in the friendship is not between friends and enemies it's between friends and servants he says I'm no longer going to call you servants I'm going to call you my friends and he says the distinction there is a servant just has to do what they're told and not ask any questions master says do this and they go and do it a friend is privileged to understand why they're being told and to know a little bit more about the background so Jesus says up till now you've treated yourself as my servants you've been my disciples and you have taken it as your role to serve me I now want to call you my friends because I've told you everything you need to know and so the relationship is much more one of friendship than of serving servants to serve to serve to serve to serve the will of the one who is talking with them what a privilege it is for us to understand the mind of

Jesus and to understand God now in the context Jesus obviously was talking to his disciples who spent a long time with him that we haven't physically but yet in the Bible we can see God's mind and God's will and something about our God and who he is and so Jesus says you're my friends you understand then he repeats the promises he's made earlier the promise of fruitfulness the promise of answered prayer but it's all dependent on obeying Jesus commands you are my friends he says if you do what I command so then we need to go back to verse 12 what does Jesus command Jesus says my command is this love each other as I have loved you if we were to go a bit further back to verse 9 we can see the love that Jesus has for us and he has us to have for each other is also the love that God the Father had for

Jesus this is an enormous standard that he's setting for us the love in the most intimate relationship in the universe between God the Father and God the love sacrificial and wholly undeserved that the Lord Jesus has shown to us that is the kind of love that we should be showing to each other it might seem impossible in a sense maybe it is impossible but as we develop the character of Jesus as we come to understand more of the love that Jesus had for us that should be reflected in the love that we have for one another we are to love each other as Jesus has loved us and how has Jesus loved us well we're on to verse 13 aren't we greater love has no one than this to lay down one's life for one's friends

Jesus saying I'm laying down my life for my friends you are too as well now Jesus actually went beyond that he laid down his life for us when we were his enemies when there was nothing in us that would deserve him to do that great sacrifice for us where only the grace of God was sufficient to save us from our sins Jesus Jesus Jesus says I have done that I have died laid down my life for you you should lay down your life for one another that might sound on the face of it quite unlikely how likely is it that any of us will have to die for our Christian brothers and sisters literally physically die well it is possible we couldn't rule it out but probably it's not going to happen for most of us but it's just indicative of the kind of love that we should have that we should sacrificially be willing to give of ourselves for one another that our relationships our interests in others shouldn't be superficial and just for the good times that when people are going through difficult times when they're struggling when it is really hard for them perhaps it's hard for us to be involved in their lives we should be willing to sacrificially show love for them

[30 : 50] John's gospel the ministry of the Lord Jesus has many parallels in John's first epistle the book we call first John you can see again and again as you read through first John this is based on something that Jesus said in the upper room and first John chapter three verse 16 says this this is how we know what love is Jesus Christ laid down his life for us and we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters and we might say yes I agree with that if it comes to the bit I would be willing to lay down my life for someone else what what does John say next what is the example he gives that might give us an idea of what it is to lay down our lives for brothers and sisters he says if anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them how can the love of

God be in that person and that brings us right down to earth doesn't it this isn't all about being heroic of sacrifice for others this is in our day to day life being able to help people with their needs might be physical might be material needs might be spiritual might be emotional being able in some way as the Lord enables us to show the love of Christ to our Christian brothers and sisters the test of our love is not in the big gestures it's in the everyday way in which we interact and in which we show our love so John concludes that little section in his epistle dear children let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth that is where we have Christ honoring evidence of life of fruitfulness of our friendship with the

Lord Jesus let me end with a quote from Charles Spurgeon Spurgeon was a great preacher from the 19th century sometimes called the prince of preachers his servants are marvelous read his sermons you'll be so blessed by them take some getting into sometimes languages a little old fashion but there is so much in them writing on this passage Spurgeon said this the moon cannot shine as brightly as the sun does and you cannot love as much as Christ does but you can be like the moon and shine with borrowed light you can reflect on others the light of the love which Christ has shed upon your soul if you're a Christian this morning as we've described it think on these words we're not going to be able to be exactly like Christ we're not going to have the love that he had which is beyond our understanding but we can reflect that love in the way that we deal with others whether it's those in the church or those outside whom we're seeking to help and to help to the reflected light of the

Lord Jesus so I hope that's been encouraging this morning to us I hope as I said the start is being challenging so here are the challenges I'll leave you with first of these is can we ask ourselves am I part of the vine am I really a Christian do I believe in Jesus as the only way to God do I try to live like him do with him in that living relationship of the vine if the answer to that is yes then the next question is is the life of Christ evident to others life of Christ in me evident to others am I bearing spiritual fruit am I showing the character of the Lord Jesus in my daily life and becoming more and more like him and in particular is the love of Christ in me do

I reflect that great love that Jesus had for me do I obey him as I show that love to others and if we can if we do then we will be fruit we will enjoy the presence of the Lord Jesus with us we will bathe in his love we will have joy whatever our circumstances and we will have the ear of who will answer our prayers let that be true of all of us let's pray together now father we thank you for your word we thank you for this tremendous teaching of the Lord Jesus that we are living branches if we are believers in him that our life flows to us from him producing fruit making us more like him we pray that you help all of us to ensure that we have that life that our faith is in Jesus and help us to be fruitful particularly as we show to one another the love of

[36 : 09] Christ that in our everyday life we may build one another up that we may see fruit in each member of the church we thank you for our time together this morning we commit ourselves to you now in the name of the Lord Jesus Amen