

SESSION 6

JOINING GOD'S WORK

THE POINT:

BELIEVERS ARE TO JOIN GOD'S WORK IN BOTH THE CHURCH AND THE WORLD.

JOHN // 15:1-8

¹ "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ² Every branch in me that does not produce fruit he removes, and he prunes every branch that produces fruit so that it will produce more fruit. ³ You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.

MEMORY VERSE

⁴ "Remain in me, and I in you. Just as a branch is unable to produce fruit by itself unless it remains on the vine, neither can you unless you remain in me. ⁵ **I am the vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in me and I in him produces much fruit, because you can do nothing without me.**

⁶ "If anyone does not remain in me, he is thrown aside like a branch and he withers. They gather them, throw them into the fire, and they are burned. ⁷ If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you want and it will be done for you. ⁸ My Father is glorified by this: that you produce much fruit and prove to be my disciples."

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KEYWORDS

a. Gardener (v. 1) – The Father as the Gardener harks back to Isaiah's first vineyard song, where God is depicted as tending His vineyard, only to be rewarded with sour grapes (Is. 5:1-7).

WHAT DOES GOD EXPECT OF ME AS A FOLLOWER OF CHRIST?

Some jobs just sound harder than others. We'd probably agree that fields like brain surgery or teaching advanced physics would top the list, but what about ministry? Some view ministry as one of the hardest jobs out there.

The first international mission trip I took offered scrumptious meals, a beachfront hotel, and welcoming locals. The next one offered airport scammers, hotel tarantulas, and limited food selections. On the second trip, of those we ministered to, not all were happy to see us. But God called us there, so we served. Sometimes we served cautiously, sometimes we were on the verge of fainting from the heat, sometimes we trailed into an unknown wilderness destination . . . but never with doubt! God was with us in the work.

You may not go on an international mission trip, but you are called to minister. Every follower of Christ is called to minister. We do not need to fear the work. The same confidence I found applies to all believers: We are called, and we are not alone.

God Expects Spiritual Fruit //

John 15:1-3

In the fifteenth chapter of John, the disciples didn't know it yet, but disturbing incidents were on the horizon for them. They would need to trust the deity and power of Jesus, and the strength of the relationship they had with Him. These are the events surrounding John 15.

- Jesus predicted His betrayal (John 13:21).
- Judas, one of the twelve closest followers, was Jesus' betrayer (John 13:22-27).
- Fear motivated the disciples to deny Jesus (John 18:25-27).
- Jesus was crucified (John 19:1-29).
- The death of Jesus filled the disciples with disbelief (Mark 16:14-15).
- Confusion and sadness plagued the disciples after Jesus' ascension (Acts 1:6-11).



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- The disciples faced severe persecution during the early days of the church (Acts 5:17-42).

Looking toward the future, Jesus spoke truths to empower His disciples. When He used the construction, “I am,” Jesus was associating Himself with God. The Jews were quite familiar with Exodus 3:14, where God instructed Moses to tell those who inquired that “I AM” had sent him to bring the Israelites out of Egypt.

When Jesus said He is “the true vine,” He signaled He was fulfilling the purpose that Israel didn’t. Many Old Testament writers used the vine as a metaphor for Israel, God’s covenant people. Sadly, in most of these instances, Israel was the vine that failed to bear fruit. In stark contrast, Jesus is the true vine—a vine that produces fruit.

However, Jesus does not do it alone. He produces fruit through the branches—believers who are God’s co-workers (1 Cor. 3:9). In God’s grand design, He works through believers to do good works according to His will (Eph. 2:10).

WHAT ARE SOME THINGS GOD EXPECTS BELIEVERS TO PRODUCE?

The Father is the Gardener who trims and prunes the branches. He does this to increase the fruit-bearing capacity of the branches so that they will bear more fruit. To bear fruit can mean leading people to Jesus (John 4:36); serving them in Jesus’ name (Matt. 7:16-20); and developing the character of Jesus (Gal. 5:22-23). In His care, the gardener does not tolerate non-fruit-bearing branches. If the Father sees a branch that is not bearing fruit, He prunes it—severs it from the vine.

Believers Are Connected to Christ //

John 15:4-5

Momentarily breaking from the analogy of the vine and branches, Jesus with a forceful command told His disciples they must remain in Him. He broke from the image because it failed to illustrate this point: unlike branches attached to a vine, believers have a choice of whether or not to remain connected to Christ. Branches do not have a will; people do. Jesus, in a straightforward, forceful way commanded us to remain in Him.



DIGGING DEEPER MINISTRY

Ministry is service to one another. For Christians, Jesus is the supreme model of a minister. In His inaugural sermon, Jesus read from the prophet Isaiah, summarizing the purpose and the many dimensions of His ministry (Luke 4:18-19). Although Jesus has all authority in heaven and on earth, His style of leadership and ministry was not one of dominating His followers (Mark 10:42) but one of service. Jesus’ ministry included teaching, preaching, evangelism, casting out demons, healing, providing for physical needs of people, and counseling. His supreme act of ministry was His obedience to the Father in going to the cross where He gave His life to atone for the sins of the world.

How does ministry as a spiritual discipline impact the spiritual life of believers?



Remain means to abide or dwell within something, and it carries the idea of personal, intimate residence. Jesus emphasized His followers must remain or abide in Him, and He in them. It is a mutually intimate, conjoined union. The intricacy and interconnectedness of the relationship between Jesus and His followers is difficult to express—and impossible to overstate! Jesus wants His followers to abide in Him as closely as He abides in them. That's close!

HOW CAN WE STAY CONNECTED TO JESUS, THE TRUE VINE?

The reason for Jesus' call to remain in Him is fruitfulness. Jesus promised us that we will be fruitful if we remain in Him. He reinforced this point with repetition. First, He stated it negatively: "Just as a branch is unable to produce fruit by itself unless it remains on the vine, neither can you unless you remain in me." Then He repeated the principle in a positive way: "The one who remains in me and I in him produces much fruit." Jesus is clear: we will not be fruitful without Him, and we will be fruitful with Him.

HOW DO SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES HELP US REMAIN IN JESUS?

God Receives the Glory //

John 15:6-8

Unconnected branches are good for nothing. Psalm 1 contains a parallel metaphor: the one who walks with God is fruitful "like a tree planted beside flowing streams," but the ungodly "are like chaff that the wind blows away" (Ps. 1:3-4).

The contrast is strong and it makes a point. Instead of living a life that goes up in smoke, those connected to Jesus bring God glory. We bear fruit so that God is glorified. God receives the glory; we don't. It is His glory—His weight, His authority, His reputation—not ours. Any fruitfulness on our part comes from being connected to Jesus, so the glory is all His, never ours.

Being fruitful for Christ is not a synonym for success. Abiding in Christ does not guarantee you will reach all your life goals or be successful in any worldly sense. The fruit we produce in His power is fruitful in the way it glorifies God.

During the first quarter of Super Bowl XLIV, Indianapolis Colts kicker Matt Stover pointed to the sky when he made a 38-yard field goal. This is not unusual at all—many athletes show

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similar gratitude to God for their successes. But in the fourth quarter, with the game on the line, Stover missed a 51-yard field goal attempt. Yet again, he pointed toward heaven. Recognizing the significance of the gesture, the announcer noted that Stover was “a ‘spiritual man’ grateful for divine blessing in success and failure, victory and defeat.”

God is glorified, not just because the fruit is produced, but because the fruit-bearing branches depend on Him no matter what. When we produce spiritual fruit, we glorify God and prove that we are Jesus' disciples. I would argue that Matt Stover had a fruitful day, even though he was not always successful. As he pointed to the heavens after a personal failure, he was acknowledging that it was not about him. He was acknowledging that he was dependent on God, who gave him the ability and opportunity.

As we live in Christ and live for Christ, we will bear fruit—and God will be glorified.

WHAT DOES THIS LESSON TEACH US ABOUT OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD?

DID YOU KNOW?

Author and pastor, Dr. Tony Evans, connected his life, family, and ministry to Christ at an early age. Now a father of four, grandfather of twelve, and great-grandfather of one, Dr. Evans has impacted the lives of millions for more than 40 years. One of his messages was centered on being connected to the Vine, which is Christ. He advised Christians not to confuse their religion with their relationship with Jesus. He said, “Religion is anything you do for God that does not stem out of a heart connected to God.” He gave the following example: if you go to church because it is the religious or spiritual thing to do rather than going to spend time worshipping God, learning about Him, and experiencing Him, then that is religion. Dr. Evans encourages all believers to make Christ first in their lives.²¹

HOW CAN BELIEVERS ENSURE THEIR RELIGION GROWS OUT OF THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH CHRIST?

LIVE IT

How will you deepen your involvement with other believers and ministry to His church?

Every follower of Christ is called to minister. We don't need to fear the work. We are called, and we aren't alone. Jesus has commanded to us to connect to Him. We can only do the work He's called us to do and produce fruit if we remain connected to Christ. Ministry focuses us beyond ourselves to impact the lives of others, but it also impacts us personally as God's plans become our plans.

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- Surrender your plans and choose to remain in Christ, living in Him and in His power. Pray for open eyes to see the ministry opportunities He places before you.
- If you are already involved in a ministry, offer to mentor someone who is not.
- If God is calling you to ministry leadership, accept His call. Talk with your pastor about this calling and your next steps.

DAILY READINGS

1. TRUE VINE // JOHN 15:1

When Jesus said He is “the true vine,” He signaled that He was fulfilling the purpose that Israel did not fulfill. The vine was used as a metaphor for Israel, God’s covenant people. Sadly, Israel was the vine that failed to bear fruit. In stark contrast, Jesus wants His disciples to know He is the true vine and He has called us to be branches that bear fruit. As disciples who follow Christ, we must be rooted in Him (not in Israel or the church) if we will bear fruit for God. To be rooted in Christ means that we are in communion with Him. Our hearts should desire this intimate relationship with Christ. If we choose to be connected to anyone or anything other than Christ, our walk will be fruitless, just like Israel’s was.

Choose to remain connected to Christ, so that you can produce fruit for the kingdom of God.

2. FRUIT OR FRUITS // GALATIANS 5:22-23

Fruit can refer to one item or several items of the same fruit. In the Book of Galatians, Paul listed the fruit of the Spirit as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. No mystery on why many people make the mistake of thinking the word “fruit” should be plural. Yet, the nine are one. It’s either all or none, because the Spirit has only one work to do in each believer. The work of the Holy Spirit in a Christian’s life is an on-going process that grows the fruit within us, so that we become holy through sanctification.

We cannot get or grow this fruit on our own. Instead, we must join our lives to the life of Christ.

3. WITHERED? WATERED? // JOHN 15:6; PSALM 1:3-4

John 15:6 reveals the life story of branches separated from the vine. They are worthless; they become dead, dry twigs that have withered. The Gardener gathers the brittle remains to be burned in the fire, because disconnected branches have no life purpose. Psalm 1 provides a contrasting metaphor: the one who walks with God is fruitful

“like a tree planted beside flowing streams” that are watered. How would you describe your walk with God—withered or water? The Bible’s clear description of both helps us determine the best option for our own good and for the glory of God. A withered life is a sure indication that unhealthy choices have been made, which have resulted in a disconnection with God.

Recognize the severity of the withered life, and for the sake of your own spiritual survival, reconnect with God.

4. IMMEASURABLE JOY // JOHN 17:12-13

The word “remain” means to abide or dwell within something. It carries the idea of living up close and personal. The details of just how close and personal Jesus is with us is difficult to express. It can only be felt, but never can it be overstated. It is a life-giving, soul-thrilling, joy-producing experience that continues without end. Jesus’ followers must agree to remain or abide in Him, and He in them. Judas, whom Jesus chose, didn’t choose to remain in Christ. And we know what happened to him. Jesus wants us to be immeasurably joyful, which we can obtain only through intimate contact with Him, because He is the source of all joy.

When we remain connected to Christ, we will experience the special care and joy of God.

5. GLORY // ISAIAH 43:7

Living the Christian life, which means we are fruit-bearers, won’t prevent us from having a few fruitless moments. You know those times when the wrong things are said or done. In those moments, push the reset button! Confess, ask for and accept God’s forgiveness, and move forward. God is glorified not just when fruit is produced, but also when severed branches reconnect through confession. Don’t let Satan get the upper hand. You were created for God’s glory and messing up does not change that.

Give glory to God, the One for whom you live and the One who loves and cares for you.



MAKE CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS WITH YOUR CLASS

DARCHELLE M. GARNER

Christmas is among the most celebrated holidays on the Christian calendar. The annual December 25th commemoration of the birth of Jesus Christ is typically observed by a season of parties and get-togethers; tree-decorating, toy-shopping, and gift-giving; cooking, baking, and eating; and traveling near and far to be with loved ones. New Christmas films beckon us to the movie theater, while Christmas “classics” require a sit-down in front of the television. Excitement, anticipation, and plenty of busyness mark this “most wonderful time of the year.”

+ But in a season known for bringing delight, many Christians instead experience stress. Emotions can run high at Christmas. Unrealistic expectations can lead to disappointment. Extra responsibilities can bring on exhaustion and frustration. Grief over a loved one no longer here to share the holiday can be fresh—and refreshed—at Christmas. Dealing with family conflicts, meeting children’s needs, even coordinating travel plans can all take their toll. Financial difficulties can cause worry, while loneliness and depression can dampen the soul. Holiday stress is real for many, and in its midst, the true meaning of Christmas can be easily lost.

So, what is a Christian to do? How can you relieve the stress? How can you release your emotions, renew your outlook, and realign your walk through the Christmas season? How can Christians truly celebrate Christmas?

First, be intentional. Make a conscious effort to slow down. Take moments throughout each day of the season to mindfully breathe. Also, take time to identify the specific sources of your stress and the overwhelming feelings that can cause it. Talk about your feelings with your Bible study class or a trusted friend, as sharing can help lighten the emotional load. Above all, take your stress and emotions to God in prayer. He already knows your heart and what you feel. He is ready to help. Just ask. Then, rediscover the true meaning of Christmas, as it is the celebration of the greatest gift ever given to humankind. Let that sink in . . . the greatest gift ever! Christmas commemorates when God, the Almighty Creator of everything and everyone, sent from heaven to earth His one and only Son,

Jesus Christ, in the form of a newborn baby. Humanity had been awaiting the arrival of the Messiah, the One who would bring salvation for all, and finally, He was here, gifted to the entire world by God Himself. It was a Gift given out of God's incomparable love for each of us and all of us. What a remarkable, amazing Gift!

It's important to get reacquainted with this Christmas story in Luke 2:1-21, for it's a story of wonder and awe, promise and peace, joy and love. Read it, then read it again. Reflect on it and discuss it with your Bible study class. Pray about it, seeking fresh understanding of the true meaning of Christmas. Then, celebrate the birth of Christ in a new and meaningful way by carrying out one of the following Christmas activities. Establish your selected activity as an annual tradition for your Bible study class, family, or group of friends.

Carry out random acts of Christmas kindness. There are so many ways to bring joy to others at Christmas: when dining at a restaurant, pay for a stranger's meal; deliver cookies to a homebound church member; give a stranger a compliment; choose to smile; let someone cut in front of you in line; leave a Christmas note (a Scripture verse or a prayer) on a stranger's car windshield; buy coffee for the person behind you in line; feed someone's parking meter; read a book (or the Christmas story) to an elderly neighbor. Acts of kindness can be big or small. You won't always witness the impact, but you can be certain that even one small act can make a positive difference for someone at Christmas. Set a time frame with your Bible Study class, perhaps one week. Then share stories of your acts with each other when you again come together.

Memorize the Christmas story. Each person in your Bible study class or family can take a verse or two (21 verses total) and memorize it. Then come together to recite the entire Christmas story. For added fun, video your group reciting it. As you walk through the Christmas season, meditate on the verses you have memorized as a reminder of the true meaning of Christmas.

Plan a Christmas prayer meeting. Make a list of those in your family, church, community, and world who need special prayer during the holiday season. Then, assign a set of the names to each class member and spend a Bible study class lifting them all in prayer. Include both individual and group prayer during your meeting, and remember to pray for each other.

Host a family (or two) for a Saturday Christmas breakfast. Consider a family whose financial resources are low; who are from another country

and have no nearby relatives; who have a parent deployed in the military, an incarcerated parent, a family member in the hospital; or who are new to the Christian faith. Sing carols together and share the Christmas story. Present each child with a Christian children's Christmas book, the parent(s) with a daily devotional book for the following year, and the family with a food basket.

Take a group visit to a local homeless shelter. Help serve a meal and minister to the guests. Share with them the love of Christmas by singing carols and telling the Christmas story. Inspire hope by reminding them that Christmas commemorates the glorious night when God gave humanity the greatest Gift ever. The Gift of Jesus Christ is for them, too!

Support the military. Partner with a local nonprofit to write Christmas cards and prepare care packages to send to deployed military troops. Christmas can be a lonely time for military personnel stationed far away from loved ones. Let them know they are thought of, appreciated, and prayed for during the Christmas season.

Throw a Birthday Party for Jesus. Invite a few families from your community for this special birthday celebration. Simple decorations will make the space festive and fun. Be sure to have a birthday cake, and sing the "Happy Birthday" song. Plan several Christmas-themed games or arts and crafts for the children. Sing Christmas carols together and read (or act out) the Christmas Story. Then send everyone home with a small, wrapped gift with a Christmas tract tucked inside.

Go Christmas caroling in your neighborhood. Or visit a local nursing home or rehabilitation center for caroling and gift-giving. Simple, useful presents such as socks and scarves can be ideal gifts, especially for seniors.

As you carry out your selected activity, remember the story of that extraordinary night 2,000 years ago when our Lord and Savior was born. Let the joy and peace promised that night flow through your heart. Your stress will recede, and you will experience the true meaning of Christmas. Merry Christmas to All!

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