

## [John 15:9-17](#)

Welcome to Part Two. No, there hasn't been an advertising break, although I can do nothing about the adverts which YouTube runs on these videos, all of which are beyond my control, and none of which benefits me financially.

No, this is Part Two of the 'I am the Vine' passage in John 15. Last week we looked at what Jesus said about our relationship with him, particularly with reference to being pruned branches and remaining in him by listening and obeying.

This week we focus in more closely on that 'remaining', specifically because in these verses Jesus expands 'remain in me' to 'remain in my love', which we do in response to his love, which in turn comes from the Father's love for him. We're going to look at our love for Christ and our love for one another, but before we get to those two points, let's just dwell on the fact that the love we show is a response to Christ's love for us.

John's Gospel here is very similar to the First Letter of John, where we read, 'We love, because he first loved us' (1 John 4:19). God's love in Christ comes first, to the extent that the Apostle Paul said, 'While we were still sinners, Christ died for us' (Romans 5:8). Does that amaze you? God in Christ loved us while we were still sinners. We were loved by the Almighty when we were the most unworthy of that love. Always that love of God's comes first.

The Gospel question, then, is something like this: you are loved – how are you going to respond? If we fail to respond, then we cannot receive the wonderful offer of God's love and remain outside it, potentially for eternity. But if we do respond, then we respond as sinners who are dearly loved. All our response to such love is a 'thank you' for it.

To put it another way, the love we are called to show does not earn us the love of God. It does not make us worthy. We shall never be worthy of ourselves. We cannot rely on saying, 'Look, Lord, at how good and loving I am. I deserve your love.' Whatever the best of our life is, we cannot offer something that matches up to God's love in Christ. Rather than giving anything, we hold out empty hands to receive his love. Then, when we have received the gift of that wonderful love in the forgiveness of our sins, in his power to live a new life, and in his reorientation of our lives towards his kingdom, we show love for God and for others as gratitude, as a sign that we have received his love.

So how are we going to respond in gratitude to God's love in Christ? As I said, there are two ways: loving God and loving others. Now is the time to explore them both a little more.

**Firstly, loving God.** Let's boil this down mainly to one verse, namely verse 10:

<sup>10</sup> If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love.

It's simple, isn't it? The way we love God is by keeping his commands.

Now you may think that's simple to state but less simple to justify or to live. What kind of love is so one-sided that one party needs to obey the other? Haven't we done away with such concepts of love, for example where a bride no longer promises to obey her husband in the marriage service?

This is to assume that all love is mutual between two equals. But that is a mistake. Would we say that of the love between a parent and a young child? We would expect that the parent loved the child sacrificially in time, attention, energy, money, and so many other ways. We would not expect the child to be able to match that. But we would normally expect a child to follow the instructions and wishes of a loving parent.

That gives us a clue here. We shall never be equals with God. Creatures are not on the same plane as their Creator. We are sinners, God is holy. Our knowledge is far more limited.

I could go on, but the essential point is that God ranks far above us. There is nothing unreasonable in Jesus saying, 'If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love'.

And obeying Christ out of love makes for an interesting test of our actions and our attitudes. When I resist what I know to be the command of Jesus and choose to do something else, I am saying, I prefer my will to yours, Jesus. It's a case of 'My will be done,' not 'Thy will be done.' When I put it in those terms I realise how wrong my actions are. They aren't just a moment of weakness, they are a moment of defiance. No wonder God takes them seriously.

But having noticed that, let's be positive. We want to show gratitude for God's great love for us in Christ, love that went to the Cross. What he has done for us is so wonderful and so stunning that we want to show our gratitude. We do that by obeying him.

Think of it like this – although it might seem trivial in comparison to the Cross. Have you ever had someone do something marvellous for you, whether it's one particular act or some sustained actions over time? You may have thought, how can I show my gratitude? So you ask their spouse, is there something they particularly like? Armed with the answer, you go out and buy that. You want to please them in the way you show how grateful you are. When you see their reaction to your gift, it brings joy to you as well as them.

I think that's why Jesus goes on to say,

<sup>11</sup> I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.

The sequence is something like this. God loves us, especially by Jesus dying for us. We are so grateful for such love that, in the words of Paul in Ephesians, we 'find out what pleases the Lord' (Ephesians 5:10). When we do that, it brings joy to Jesus and that reverberates in us.

How can each of us bring joy to God today by obeying his commands?

**Secondly, loving *others*.** Jesus goes on to say:

<sup>12</sup> My command is this: love each other as I have loved you.

The snag is, how has Jesus loved us? The answer, of course, is by going to the Cross. So it's not surprising that he then says,

<sup>13</sup> Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.

Jesus goes on to explain that he calls us friends, and so it is us for whom he lays down his life. Therefore – and here's the challenging bit – he calls us to imitate his love, even to that limit, if necessary. Not that we can die for the sins of the world, of course, but we may need to lay down our lives for the well-being of our friends.

Just to say that causes a sharp intake of breath for me, I don't know about you.

That said, we do recognise this in other ways. I think if one of my children was about to be run over by a car and there was no alternative, I would as a parent risk my own life to save theirs. That's what love does.

Maybe one of the differences here, then, is that we just haven't had relationships with our fellow Christians that are as close as a loving family. We

may say they are our brothers and sisters in the faith, and we may refer to the church sometimes as a 'family', but to be honest, these are just words. We are more of a social club than a closely-knit family of believing disciples.

God's love for us in Jesus is meant to bind us so closely to him that we love to obey him, and so closely to one another that we would give up our lives for one another if that were required.

Well has it been said that you can choose your friends but not your family, but that doesn't really extend to the church. We can't choose who our friends and family in the church are at all!

If we were gathered together in a church building I would at this point invite you to look around at your fellow friends of Jesus, your brothers and sisters in Christ, and I would ask you to consider for which of them you would be willing to lay down your life.

When we reflect on those we would love to the point of death and those we wouldn't it's a searing test of how near or far we are from Jesus' concept of his kingdom community.

So it's worth considering what would need to change for us to be the family or the band of friends where we do love each other so much because of Jesus that nothing would be too much for us. What needs to change in my heart? In your heart? Where is it that we haven't yet apprehended 'how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ' (Ephesians 3:18)?

Do you remember how, according to the church leader Tertullian it was said of the early believers 'See how these Christians love one another'? Wow! Don't you think that means they had an incredible grip on how much Jesus loved them first?

What would the world say if we had a similar sense of how much we were loved by God in Christ?