

Jesus at the Center

John 15:1-15

By Dr. Jeff Meyers

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Bible Text: John 15:1-15
Preached On: Sunday, January 28, 2018

Crossroads Ministries
301 S. 8th Street
Opelika, Alabama 36801

Website: www.fbcopelika.com
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/jeffmeyers

That song is based on is the battle of Jericho. It's the battle where the Israelites were commissioned by God to march around the city once a day for six days and on the seventh day to march around seven times. And oftentimes and rightly so, we look at that story and we talk about obedience and we talk about following the Lord and doing what he would have us to do, but there is another side to that coin: not only did they do what God told them to do – hear me clearly – they had to reject the world's advice of how it was going. They had to reject what the world said about the battle plan. What the world said about what the Lord was doing. So today, it's not just the challenge of doing what God would have us to do, it's also the challenge of ignoring what all other voices would encourage us to do.

Let's pray.

Lord, as we come to this time of challenge, as we come to this time of being convicted by your word, Lord, we know we're going to hear your voice, we know you're going to speak through your word. Lord, can I pray that all other voices would be silenced, all other opinions, all other philosophies, all other ideas and ideals that so often compete with your word. Lord, may somehow, some way supernaturally may they just fall by the wayside and may the only voice we hear be yours. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

This morning, I want to encourage you to open your Bibles to the Gospel of John 15. Now, many of you probably expected me to say that. If you've been here a while with us at First Baptist, we've been walking through the Gospel of John and today we find ourselves in chapter 15. In fact, this was kind of the goal, the finish line. This is where we've been headed for a little over a calendar year and so when I said turn to John 15, that was probably something you expected. Now I'm going to ask you to do something that you've probably never heard a pastor ask you to do in your life, I also want you to turn to 2 Chronicles 34. Yeah, that was part of your daily quiet time this week, wasn't it? Yeah, I'm just messing with you. 2 Chronicles 34 gives us a story that in just a few moments we're going to utilize as an illustration for the truth that is found in John 15.

If you're a first time guest or visitor with us or maybe you haven't been with us in a couple of weeks, last week we asked a very important question: what is a disciple? Luke 9:23, Jesus made it very clear what a disciple of his looked like. He said, "If any man come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily and follow me." As we turn to John 15, we begin the process of discovering what does that look like and what we discover today is the first step or the first beginning of the process of that is making sure that Jesus Christ is at the center of our life. In fact, in just a few moments, we're going to read a story from the mouth of Jesus and he's going to use this illustration, this imagery of vines and branches. You know, the Bible says over and over again that oftentimes wisdom and great advice comes from the mouth of babes. We've got a little assistance today. We're actually going to have a picture on the screen for our outline that actually came from our children's ministry here at First Baptist, a wonderful depiction for us of the vines and the branches.

Here in John 15, beginning in verse 1, Jesus says,

1 I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman. 2 Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he takes away: and every branch that bears fruit, he purges it, that it may bring forth more fruit. 3 Now you are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you. 4 Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can you, except you abide in me. 5 I am the vine, you are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me you can do nothing.

Here in John 15, Jesus is beginning this conversation with his disciples. What does it really look like to follow him? What does it really look like in our vernacular to be a disciple of Jesus Christ? And in verse 5, there is this image, there is this picture where he says, "I am the vine, you are the branches."

Now think about that imagery for a moment. It's something that every one of us can grasp because we realize that a branch cannot sustain life in and of itself. A branch in and of its own being has no life-sustaining capacities. It must be connected to a vine. It must have a source by which it receives its nourishment. It must have a source by which it receives everything that is necessary and essential for life.

But notice how Jesus qualifies it. He says, "I am the true vine." You realize that every single one of us, in fact, every single human being is going to find somebody, something, or an entity to attach themselves to. We are branches. That's what we do. And what we do is we go out and we attach ourselves to success. We attach ourselves to people's opinions. We attach ourselves to this. We attach ourselves to that. And what Jesus says is all those other things are false. Every one of those concepts, every one of those desires, every one of those appearances of sources is false.

"I am the true vine." What Jesus is stating is if you desire life, if you desire forgiveness, if you desire life not just in this life but in the next, it is through him and him alone. In fact,

it was in the chapter before this in chapter 14 where Jesus made this statement, he said, "I am the way. I am the truth and the life. Nobody comes to the Father but by me." He qualifies this picture. He says, "I am the true vine." Then in verse 2 he makes a statement that we're going to discuss because oftentimes I think people struggle with it. He says, "Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that bears fruit he purges it, or he prunes it, that it may bring forth more fruit. Now, you are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you."

Oftentimes when people are going through the valleys of life or the struggles of life or maybe there's just been a season where they haven't sensed their relationship with the Lord being what they wish or knew that it should be, sometimes they'll read this passage and go, "Oh wow, I don't know if there's been fruit in my life. Are there means or ways that maybe somehow I've been cast away? I've been removed? I've just been discarded?" Allow me to answer that two different ways. 1. 1 John 3:9 makes this statement, that Jesus Christ is the seed that has been planted in our lives, and last time I checked, whatever the seed is that's planted determines the fruit that is borne. In other words, apple seeds produce apples. Orange seeds produce oranges, etc. And so if there has been a time in your life where you've acknowledged that you have gone contrary to the ways and will of God, you'd call it sin, you asked Jesus to save you, I've got news for you: his seed has been planted in your life and just like in the agricultural world, our lives are not always as fervent as we know they should be; our lives are not always the picture that we hope them to be for the Lord.

I've seen trees in my own backyard go through dormant seasons. I've had trees that maybe for a year or two didn't produce. It did not revoke the seed that was planted -hear me clearly – there was nourishment that needed to be provided so that fruit could be borne again. And so what he's saying is if that seed has been planted and if you are his and your a believer in him, it's not about being cast away, it's about being purged.

Another thing I want you to notice is the audience of which Jesus is speaking. This is John 15. You say, "Well, why is that significant?" This is right in the middle of a passage of Scripture that we call the Farewell Discourse. Beginning in chapters 13 and on, you're in the last night of the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ. In fact, in chapter 13, he brings the apostles up and he begins to wash their feet. In chapter 14, he begins to share with them it's actually going to be beneficial for him to depart because the Holy Spirit will come upon them – and hear this – they will do more with him absent than they could ever do with him present.

When we get to chapter 15, he begins with this imagery about being the vine and the branches. He does say very clearly, he says, "Every branch in me that does not bear fruit is cast away." But I want you to notice verse 3, "Now you are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you." I want you to think about the audience that night in chapter 15. You would have had Peter there who just in a few hours is going to deny that he ever knew Jesus Christ. You've got Thomas there who eight days later is not even going to show up to the meeting because he doesn't believe that Jesus actually rose from

the dead. And yet what does he tell them? "You are clean." In other words, Jesus did not cast them out because they denied. Jesus did not cast them out because they doubt.

You say, "Well, what is Jesus speaking about?" Do you realize in the room that night there should have been 13 but there was only 12? You say, "What do you mean there should have been 13?" Jesus plus the 12 apostles. But earlier that night, a man whom we know as Judas Iscariot comes up to the dinner table and he puts the bread and the wine and Jesus is talking about he who will betray him, he says, "It is I, Lord?" And he says, "Go, do what you must do." And he goes off. But just a few moments before he returns with 500 soldiers, Jesus offers this prayer to the Father in chapter 17, verse 12, he says, "Father, all that you've given me," these guys, "all of them are saved except the son of perdition." He was speaking of Judas and what Jesus is saying in this passage, he's speaking to these 11 and he's saying, "Guess what? You're going to have times where you deny. You're going to have times where you doubt. You're going to have times where you struggle. You're going to have times where you should have spoken up and you were silent, times you should have been quiet and you talked." He said, "Don't worry about that because it is my goal to purge you. It is my goal to prune you." And the picture, the image that Jesus gives us of the vine and the branches leads us to this process that most of us have seen even in recent days.

We are at a season of our culture now, kind of the area that we live, some people refer this as crate murder season. I don't know if you're familiar with that. Because this is the season where we begin the pruning process. We go to trees and to bushes and to plants that from a distance if you observe them, they appear to be healthy, do they not? They appear to look good. They appear to be okay, but as you begin to investigate, you discover that there are some branches, that there are some growth areas that are impeding more fruitful growth. So when you go and you prune and you cut back and you take some branches off a tree, a bush, whatever it may be, hear me clearly, the process of pruning is not to punish the tree but to tell the tree, "I want you to be greater this year than you were last." That's why we prune. We don't prune to punish. In fact, if we wanted the tree to become stagnant, if we wanted the tree to be of no use, we would leave it alone because if you leave it alone with all those excess branches and all the things that need not be there, it would stagnate and eventually die out. You see, it is the pruning "purging" process that the Lord utilizes in our life to tell us that even though things may be good now, I desire them to be great down the road.

Now let's be honest, pruning, it's not pleasant, is it? Let's move from the agricultural to the personal. Pruning is not fun. Any time you take an aspect or an area of your life and allow it to be discarded, it's painful. In fact, there's a television show that my wife loves to watch and because I'm a good husband, I endure it with her occasionally. It's called "What not to wear." I don't know if you're familiar with that show but there are these two individuals that are supposed experts in the fashion field and they take a client, now this client has usually been referred to by family or friends, coworkers, and let's just be honest with ourselves, typically the person they deal with is still stuck in 1987. Is that an honest assessment there? That they are dressing ages and typically their clothes are tattered, they're worn, they're disheveled, and it is their goal, it is their job to take this worn out,

tattered, outdated appearance and to rejuvenate it and to make it what it can and should be.

Now I'll be honest with you, it's not a show that really floats my boat, so to speak, but there is one part of it that I love to watch. It's toward the beginning when they take the client and they bring everything in their closet into the showroom. I mean, they've got a rack there and it's everything they've ever worn that they should have never worn. They begin the process of taking these old out of date clothes and throwing them away right in front of their eyes. Here's why it's interesting: they are pruning their closet. They are purging their closet because that which may have been good last year or last decade needs new growth to take place.

Here's the thing I find interesting. They'll have some individual on there and they'll bring out this sweatshirt. You've seen it. If you've ever seen the episode, the sweatshirt's got food stains, coffee stains, a couple of holes and it's just nasty, right? And they go, "Oh, don't throw that away! Please, that's my favorite!" And they'll say, "Why?" "My ex-boyfriend gave it to me." They are holding onto some guy that they haven't talked to in 20 years with a sweatshirt that is nasty and tainted and needs to go. We laugh about that but does that not happen in our own lives as well? We're holding onto aspects, we're holding onto relationships, we're holding onto this, we're holding onto that. What does the Lord say? He says, "Hey, if you want to grow, if you want to mature in your relationship with me, there are some things that need to be pruned."

This is where I'm going to challenge you to go back to 2 Chronicles 34. We meet a man by the name of Josiah. He's one of the few kings in the Old Testament who the Lord sought to bring revival through, and beginning in verse 1, we discover that Josiah was eight years old. He's a third grader when he becomes the king of Israel. Verse 2, it says as a young man he did everything the Lord desired of him. He followed in the footsteps of King David. Verse 3, "For in the eighth year of his reign, while he was yet young, he began to seek after the God of David his father." Let's stop there for just a moment. That means he's 16 years old. He's a sophomore, maybe a junior in high school in our culture today, and all of a sudden he looks up and says, "Hey, maybe there's more to this God stuff than I've been giving credit for." He begins to seek God.

Notice now in verse 3, "in the twelfth year," that's when he's 20 years of age, in our culture oftentimes a student of some sort, "he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem from the high places, and the groves, and the carved images, and the molten images." Notice what he says: as he begins to seek the Lord, as he desires – hear this – to become a greater disciple and follower of the things of God, eventually he realizes there is some stuff in the way and it needs to be removed. He begins to purge the images. He begins to purge the carved things. He begins to purge the high places which literally means he's removing them from having access to.

Fast forward to verse 8, "Now in the eighteenth year of his reign," he's now 26, "when he had purged the land, and the house, he sent," all these guys I don't want to mess up this morning, "to repair the house of the LORD his God." The picture, the image that we have

of this process of pruning, it's much like we talked about last week. We talked about being a disciple of Jesus, that oftentimes our spiritual lives mimic or are a mirror for our spiritual lives. Just as Jesus told Nicodemus, "You must be born again." The Apostle Paul talks about there's a time where you're drinking milk, there's a time where you're eating meat, there is this maturation process, this discipleship continuum that happens in our lives.

Look at what happens here in Josiah. He's 16. He's a young man, a teenager in his faith, to use our imagery. He decides to seek after the things of God. After a while seeking God, he realizes there are some things that have to be removed in order to go forward. Then once he removes those things, then he's 26 years of age, he's a young adult, what does he decide? The house of the Lord must be repaired. Here's where I want you to make the connection. Oftentimes we think, "If I just seek the Lord enough, it will be repaired." He says, "No, no, no, you have to seek me and then some things have got to be removed. We've got to get some of this brush out of the way so you can grow and mature to what you were designed to be."

Let me take you back again in the Old Testament to the story of the Israelites. I'm sure you're familiar with it. They come out of the land of Egypt after 400 years of captivity. They go across the Red Sea. You know what happens next, right? What should have been an 11 day journey took 40 years. They began to whine and moan and argue and say, "Oh, but we had it so much better when we were in Egypt." The Lord made it clear, "Okay, fine. This generation will and must die out."

You fast forward the story 40 years. You get to the edge of the Jordan River. You get to the edge of the Promised Land and there we have a man by the name of Joshua who, by the way, is the same Hebrew word as Jesus, Yeshua, Redeemer, who says, "I'm going to take you to the Promised Land." Here's what I want you to hear: if you want to go to the Promised Land spiritually, if you want to go to the Promised Land in your relationship with the Lord, something has got to be left in the wilderness. You can't take your empty bag. You can't take your junk with you into the Promised Land. He says, "Hey, if you're not going to trust me, leave it in the wilderness. If you're not going to believe me, leave it in the wilderness. If you're going to doubt me, leave it in the wilderness. If you're going to go off with those folks, leave it in the wilderness." You see, the battle of Jericho was won because the Lord worked with people who not only sought him but had purged from their life stuff in the wilderness.

Later on, Joshua, same audience later in life. The famous passage in Joshua 24, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." He comes to them and he says, "Alright, folks, we've established the land. We've won the battles. The Lord has done it. I want you to put away the gods from the other side of the flood. I never want them to be revisited. Put away the gods that your fathers served." In other words, all the stuff that was left in the wilderness, let it stay. Don't bring it back up again. Keep it purged.

He says, "What do you think?" Do you know what the Israelites say? "Oh, we want to seek God with everything we've got." Do you know what his response to them is in

Joshua 24? "You cannot follow the Lord." You say, "What a mean pastor. Why would he say that?" Because they never said they would forsake those gods. They never said, "We'll leave it in the wilderness." And the process that we see here in John 15 when Jesus says that we are the branches, he is the vine and those that are in him must be purged, is that when we seek him and desire to be grown and matured in our faith, there has got to be some stuff, sometimes it's relationships, sometimes it's ambition, sometimes it's a dream, sometimes it's rebellion, sometimes it's addictions, whatever it is, that's got to be purged. But he doesn't say this without giving us a promise. Notice verse 5 of John 15, "I am the vine, you are the branches. He that abides in me and I in him shall bear much fruit." In other words, you will do more than you could ever imagine.

Jesus tells a parable in Mark 4 of the parable of the sower about the seeds that are put forth and that final seed that is in fertile ground. It says it brings forth some 30, some 60, some 100 fold. In other words, they were able to do more than even he who planted could have ever imagined.

You know, we think about the audience that's listening there in that Upper Room that Passover week. This imagery of agriculture, this imagery of bearing fruit, was in a place and if you've never been to the Middle East, it's very different than what we see around us today. In fact, Israel is one of the only places that I've ever been to where they actually tell you to take rocks away. They want you to leave them. Why? Other places, it is actually a crime to take rocks or to take some type of item like that, but in Israel they've got so many rocks, they're like, "Please, take as many as you want. We don't want them anymore." Israel is filled with hills and rocks and deserts but did you know that today, this very day, that little tiny country of Israel is known as one of the greatest exporters of fresh fruit to Europe and the entire world. You say, "Well, how does that happen?" Because the Lord makes it clear if you're where you're supposed to be with me, I'll do incredible things with you. For 2,000 years that piece of land was barren, unfruitful, because those that were supposed to dwell there weren't there for 2,000 years. They get back into the land and guess what happens? Fruit begins to bear again. In other words, here's his promise: if you allow him to prune you, if you continue to seek him, you may not see it in a brief amount of time but he will begin to bear much fruit in your life but you've got to be in position.

Those of you that have any type of sports affiliation or background, it doesn't matter if it's baseball, basketball, football, hockey, curling potentially with the Olympics coming up, I don't know, you know that you cannot succeed if you're in the wrong position. You've got to not only be where you should be, but not be where you have no business being. In the imagery that Jesus gives us of the vine and the branch, it's real simple: he says, "My desire is to do with you more than you could ever imagine. My desire is to grow you to extremes that you shall bear much fruit. But in order for you to be what you are designed to be, it's not just about seeking me, it's not just about wanting me, but you've got to allow me to prune some things as well."

Let's pray with our heads bowed and our eyes closed. This morning, as we prepare to continue our service together, maybe you're here this morning and you realize for the

very first time that the branch of your life has been connected to the wrong vine. Maybe it's been the vine of success. Maybe it's been the vine of opinion. Maybe it's been the vine of materialism. Whatever it may be, and you realize today that you've never been connected to Jesus and maybe you're here this morning and you're saying, "You know, this is the time. I've been chasing the dream, I've been chasing this, I've been chasing that, but I realize today that all along Jesus has been chasing me." I've got great news for you. You don't have to sign up to take a class. You don't have to jump through a bunch of "religious hoops." You just need to do what Romans 13:10 says, you need to call on the name of the Lord.

You don't have to do so out loud. In fact, you don't have to even use the same words that I might use but allow me to kind of guide you this day. Maybe your conversation, maybe your prayer to God today would be something like this. "God, I just want to admit what you already know about me. I'm plugged into the wrong source. I've been listening to the wrong voices. I've been walking down the wrong roads but I realize today that the one that I have been searching for, the one I've been desiring this whole time is the person of Jesus Christ. I believe today, God, I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much that he was willing to be born on my behalf. I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much that he was willing to live a sinless life on my behalf. I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much he was willing to bear the pain of my sin on the cross and three days later raise from the dead so that I could be forgiven and I could be saved. God, today I don't have all the answers to all the world's problems but I do know that Jesus is the answer to my sin problem. In the best way I know how, I'm asking you to forgive me. I'm asking you to save me and I just want to turn my life over to you."

Maybe you're that person today who had that conversation with the Lord. We'd love to have a conversation with you. We'd love to just hear how the Lord moved in your life today. But maybe, maybe that person today who said, "You know, I had that conversation with the Lord years ago. I had that conversation with the Lord decades ago and honestly my tree has got a bunch of branches that have no business being there. I've got stuff, relationships and endeavors and ambitions and dreams that are not a part of God's plan for my life." Maybe today at this time of response isn't about a "formal decision," maybe it doesn't even require coming to have a conversation with myself or somebody else. Maybe today your response is a resolution that you're going to allow the Lord to prune all the stuff in your life that has no business being there.

Lord, as we come to this time, God, I just want to thank you for second chances. I thank you that you didn't leave us to our own devices. You haven't said, "Well, that's fine. That's just the way they're going to be." No, your desire is to move in our lives with your Holy Spirit and not just to fill us with the joy of your life but to show us the error of our life, to show us all the dead branches of our life, to show us all the stuff that has no business being in our life. God, thank you that your sole desire is to purpose us and to prosper us, not to punish us. God, may we yield ourselves to your moving in our life this day. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

I'm going to ask you if you would to stand with me as our team leads us. If there is any decision, I'll be here at the front.