

Wheelersburg Baptist Church 1/16/94  
John 15:5-8 "Reaching Our Potential in Christ"

**Intro:** Gordon MacDonald tells the following incident taken from a story written by Henry Nowen. Nowen tells about a man who brought to his home a large chunk of marble. A little boy watched as the hefty rock was taken into the man's shop. The youngster seemed little interested in the mass of stone. A few weeks later the boy returned. His eyes lit up when he entered the shop. His eyes fastened on the man standing beside his finished product--a beautiful marble lion. The boy was stunned with fascination. Then he blurted out in all honesty: "Sir, how did you know there was a lion in the marble?"

This morning, we are going to talk about potential, namely, how we can reach our potential in Christ. Here's the beauty of Christianity. Our God sees us not merely for what we are, but for what we can become in Jesus Christ.

Do you realize the potential that is ours in Jesus Christ?! It matters not whether you are young or old, rich or poor, educated in the finest schools or not. The potential is yours in Christ.

Objection: "Why then do some Christians prosper, and others flounder? Does Christianity not work for some? Are some just not cut out for it?"

We don't talk about that kind of question very often. At least not openly. Yet there are more than a few inside of church doors this morning wondering. Perhaps you are one.

How does a person reach his/her potential in Christ? The Lord Jesus addresses that very issue in John 15. This morning, we'll delve into vv 5-8. READ Jn 15:1-8

**Proposition: In John 15:5-8, Jesus shares with us how we can reach our potential in Him. If we are going to enjoy a fruitful Christian life, we need to get a handle on two things.**

I. Get a handle on the Options (5-6).

A. Option #1: The person who abides in Christ is fruitful (5).

B. Option #2: The person who does NOT abide in Christ is barren (6).

II. Get a handle on the Obligations (7-8).

If we are to reach our potential in Christ, it takes...

A. Contact (7a)

B. Communication (7b)

1. The Word

2. Prayer

C. Commitment (8)

Review:

Last week, in our study of Jesus' Upper Room Discourse, we looked at vv 1-4. We learned that fruitfulness involves two activities. The first one is Pruning. Vines don't just happen to produce a crop of fruit. Neither do Christians. It takes pruning. We discovered 3 truths about Pruning:

Pruning is the Responsibility of the Father (1). Pruning involves Radical Surgery (2). And Pruning requires a Relationship with Jesus (3).

Let me give you some background on the Vine (taken from Barclay, 173). Vines were popular in Jesus' day, as they still are in Israel. The vine needs lots of attention if it's to be fruitful. It grows in drastic fashion. I read that a Gardener would plant new starts 12' apart, because they spread so quickly. A new vine is not aloud to fruit for the first 3 years, and each year they're cut back severely to conserve the plant's life and energy. A plant has 2 types of branches: one that bears fruit, and one that does not. A vine will not reach its potential until the Gardener gets rid of the non-productive branches. There's no fruit without pruning.

Now, if the Father takes care of the pruning, what's our responsibility in the fruit-bearing process? What's the second activity Jesus highlighted? First, fruitfulness requires pruning. Second, fruitfulness requires Abiding (4).

That brings us to the issue of our potential in Christ.

If we're going to reach our potential, we need to get a handle on 2 things.

### **I. Get a handle on the Options (5-6).**

V 5 "I am the vine, ye are the branches."

Last week, we learned that in the OT, God called Israel His vine. But Israel failed as a vine. Israel did not bring forth good fruit. She never reached her potential.

In stark contrast, Jesus announced in v 1, "I am the TRUE vine.--I am the fulfillment of what God intended for Israel." He repeated this in v 5, "I am the vine."

Then He clarified something else. Who are the branches? "You are the branches." You--My disciples. He is the vine. He is the source of power and vitality. His followers are the branches. His aim is to reproduce His life in and through us.

Now watch Jesus' next black and white statement. When it comes to fruitfulness, there are two options. It all boils down to this.

#### A. Option #1: The person who abides in Christ is fruitful (5).

V 5 "He that abideth in Me..."

The person who abides in Christ is fruitful. Do you know why? Because simply put, fruitfulness is the result of Christ's life being reproduced in us. Abiding is essential.

What does it mean to abide? You'll find the word some 11 times in ch 15, and 40 times in the entire gospel. It can mean to "remain, dwell, continue, be present" (see 14:25 "These things have I spoken, being PRESENT with you").

What does it mean to abide in Christ? Abiding covers two general areas. First, it can mean to accept Jesus as Savior (6:56). The Christian life begins when we chose to abide in Him. Second, it can mean to continue (or persevere in) believing (8:31 "If you continue in My word, then you are my disciples indeed") (see B.K.C.).

It's this second sense in which Jesus uses the word in 15:5. The verb is present tense, indicating abiding is not a one time act, but a pattern of life.

What happens to the individual who abides in Christ? v 5 "much fruit"

God is not the God of the status quo. You won't hear Him look at one of His children and say, "Well, that's good enough for government work!" His aim is to see progress in our lives. Fruit leads to more fruit (2) which leads to much fruit (5).

Option #1: The person who abides in Christ is fruitful. The opposite is true...

B. Option #2: The person who does NOT abide in Christ is barren (6).

V 6 "If a man abide NOT in Me..."

If you sever a branch from the main stem, what soon happens? The branch wilts, shrivels up, and dies. And there's one thing you won't get from a disconnected branch. Heat, yes--in the fire. Fruit, no.

What happens to the person who does NOT abide in Christ? Listen to the verbs: cast forth, withered, men gather them, cast, burned. A pretty dismal picture.

Q: Is Jesus talking about Christians here? Is He saying a Christian can be cut off? Can a Christian lose his relationship with Christ?

Obviously, that's a question which divides denominations. To sift through the controversy, first of all, we need to compare Scripture with Scripture. Jesus already made it clear in Jn 10:28 that His own are eternally secure--"no man can pluck them out of My hand." What does He mean then in 15:6? Who are cut off?

Remember, in Jn 15, Jesus is using a metaphor. In the vine image, there are 2 groups (Hendricksen, 294). What are they? There are branches that bear fruit, and branches that do not bear fruit. Who do these groups represent? Two types of people. Both have contact with Jesus. Both are exposed to the gospel. One responds with genuine faith, and produces fruit. The other responds like Judas. What did Judas do? He left. For 3 years, he looked like a disciple, from the outside. Yet in the end, he left. Did he lose his salvation? No, he never had it in the first place.

Application: You say, "I have a friend who 'got saved' years ago. He was really on fire. But he hasn't come to church for years, and he has no interest in the Lord. Is he saved?" That's a tough one. It's dangerous to generalize, for only God knows the heart. Yet John gave us a principle in I Jn 2. Apparently, members of the early church were upset by a similar question. Some church members who had once been very active had left. What about them? I Jn 2:19, "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have CONTINUED ("abided") with us..."

A true Christian continues, perseveres, and abides. And bears lasting fruit.

Quote: William Hendriksen (296), "In no sense whatever do such passages as 15:2 and 15:6 suggest that there is a falling away from grace, as if those who were once actually saved finally perish. This allegory plainly teaches that the branches which are taken away and burned represent people who never once bore fruit...Hence, they never were true believers."

Illust:

Why is abiding in Christ not optional for the disciple? Look back at a phrase in v 5, "for without Me, you can do nothing." Our Lord actually used a double negative, "Without Me, you're NOT able to do NOTHING!"

We get into serious trouble when we forget this. "Oh, I can handle this. It's only a small problem." That's what Joshua thought about Ai. Friends, let Jesus' words sink in, "Without Me, you're NOT able to do NOTHING." Nothing. Nothing.

Objection: "Yea, but I know people who aren't trusting Christ, and who seem to be making it pretty well in life." That's what bothered Asaph. Remember Ps 73?

v 3 "For I was envious...when I saw the prosperity of the wicked."

v 12 "Behold, these are the ungodly, who prosper in the world..."

v 13 "Verily I have cleansed my heart in vain..."

v 16 "When I thought to know this, it was too painful for me."

Until what?

v 17 "Until I went into the sanctuary...then I understood their END."

Without Me, you can do NOTHING. Oh, you can ignore Christ, and apparently get by for awhile. You may even prosper in the world's eyes. But in the end, what will your lot be? Please friend, Jesus' words ring true forever, "Without Me, you can do NOTHING."

Tran: If we're to reach our potential, first we need to get a handle on the options.

## **II. Get a handle on the Obligations (7-8).**

Notice the change in pronouns in v 7. In vv 5-6, Jesus states the principle: "he" that abides/If a man abide not. In vv 7-8, Jesus states in practical terms what this principle should mean for His disciples: "If YOU..." We have some obligations.

If we are to reach our potential in Christ, it takes 3 things...

### A. Contact (7a)

V 7a "If ye abide in Me"

Stop there. Here's that word again--"abide." How do we abide in Jesus? In a word, contact. We need to be in constant contact with Christ. When it comes to evangelism, there is no impact without contact. When it comes to potential, there is no fruit without contact.

I want you to notice something. Jesus doesn't tell us to bear fruit here. He tells us to abide, to abide in Him. Why is that? Because if we abide in Him, we can't help but bear fruit.

Are you frustrated with a lack of fruit in your life? You say, "Yes, and I want to be fruitful, but I don't how. What should I do?" The answer is simple, yet profound: Make it your #1 priority in life to abide in Christ. Contact.

Do you know what really breaks my heart? My heart breaks when I see shrivled up Christians. My heart aches when I counsel fruitless Christians. They wonder what went wrong, why their lives are miserable. And here's why my heart breaks. The reason they're wasting their potential is because they've made contact with Christ a low priority in their lives.

Contact with Jesus does not just happen. Secondly, if we are to reach our potential in Christ, it takes...

### B. Communication (7b)

V 7 "If you abide...and My words abide..."

People who reach their potential in Christ are those who admit their need for Christ. There's a vital connection between abiding in Christ and communicating with Christ. If we don't communicate, we don't abide. No communication, no intimacy. No communication, no fruit.

How do we communicate with Christ? Communication is a two-way dialogue.

#### *1. The Word*

Christ speaks to us through His Word--v 7 "my words abide in you."

The Bible is the starting point for reaching our potential in Christ. If we're going to have Christ's words abiding in us, we need to saturate our minds with the Scriptures. Listening to sermons is good. And Christian radio is certainly helpful. But friends, there's no substitute for having a personal, consistent intake of the Word of God.

Do you know how to feed yourself the Scriptures, or are you dependent upon someone else to feed you? If you don't, let me encourage you. Lots of people are walking in the same shoes. My challenge for you is this. Make the Word of God a priority in your schedule.

Two practical suggestions:

--Scripture Memory --Discipleship Groups--sign up (a 10 week commitment)

There's another side of communication. There's listening, and there's talking...

#### *2. Prayer*

What happens when we abide in Christ, and His words abide in us?

V 7 "ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done."

This is staggering. The word rendered "ask" is one of the strongest greek words regarding prayer. Commentator G. Campbell Morgan says it means "demand your due" (254).

Have you ever felt, "I don't know what to pray"? Think about what Jesus is saying. If I'm abiding in Him, and His Word is abiding in me, whatever I pray will please Him, and He will grant it to me. Friends, prayer is natural when we're abiding in Christ.

I don't think we really grasp what Jesus is saying here. Listen to the LB paraphrase, "But if you stay in Me and obey My commands, you may ask any request you like, and it will be granted!"

Vv 5-6 offer a great picture of what Jesus intends for us, His disciples. We're to abide in Him. We're to allow His Words to abide in us. We're to pray. We're to see answered prayer.

Does that picture represent your life?

If we are to reach our potential in Christ, it will take Contact, Communication, and...

### C. Commitment (8)

V 8 "In this is my Father glorified..."

The word "glorify" is a marvelous word. It comes from the Hebrew word "shekel" which means "weight, heavy." To glorify God means to make God's reputation weighty, to give credibility to Him. The Greek word for glory is "doxas" from which we get our word "doxology." Glory and reputation go hand in hand.

When we raise God's reputation in the eyes of others, we glorify God. When we distract from, or discredit God's reputation, we do not glorify God.

Herein lies what should be our highest ambition in life. This ought to be our greatest commitment: to glorify God. The Westminster Shorter Catechism asks the question, "What is the chief end of man?" Answer--"The chief end of man is to glorify God, and enjoy Him forever."

We have been created to glorify God. We have been redeemed to glorify God (Eph 1:6). We don't exist for ourselves. We exist for Him. Here's how Paul summed it up in I Cor 6:19-20, "For you are bought with a price. Therefore, glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's."

Q: "Ok, I want to glorify God, but how practically do I do it?"

Notice Jesus' answer in v 8, "In THIS is My Father glorified." How? "that ye bear much fruit." What is fruit? Remember, fruit is the product of the plant. Fruit is the evidence that Christ is living in and through me. And don't miss this. The image of fruit reveals that Jesus expected every disciple to reproduce.

Do you see the fruit of Christ in your life?

Problem: Evangelical, fundamental churches across America are packed with people who take in the things of God all their lives, but don't give them out. They want to be edified, but they don't want to evangelize.

Is your life bringing forth fruit to the glory of God? True, not every branch bears a bumper crop (Wiersbe, 356). But where's there's life, there's always fruit.

### **Conclusion:**

If we're going to reach our potential in Christ, if we're going to be fruitful, here's what we have to do. First, get a handle on the options--Abiding leads to fruitfulness, and not abiding leads to barrenness.

Next we must get a handle on the obligations. If we are to bear fruit, it takes Contact, Communication, and the right Commitment.

Illust: