

3 *Vitally Connected to Jesus*

John 15:1–11

Purpose: To challenge us to seek a deeper level of commitment to spiritual intimacy with the Lord Jesus.

The final weekend before Christmas is not the time to visit a shopping mall. If you are fortunate enough to find a parking spot, the press of people inside makes shopping almost impossible. One mother was giving final instructions to her young son before plunging into the crowd: “Stay close to me and hold my hand all the time. We won’t get separated if we hold on to each other.”

As Jesus prepared his disciples to face life without his visible presence, he impressed on them the importance of staying close to him spiritually. He said, “Remain in me.” If you’ve ever longed to understand the secret of spiritual growth, you will find it in Jesus’ words to us in John 15.

1. Have you ever felt far from Christ since becoming a Christian? What circumstances made you feel that way?

2. Read John 15:1–11. Jesus’ instruction to his disciples in this passage revolve around three symbols—the vine, the gardener and the branches. What is Jesus trying to communicate by calling himself the *true vine*?

Question 2. The vine is used in the Old Testament as a figure for the people of Israel as God’s chosen people (see Ps 80:8–19 and Isa. 5:1-5). But the Psalmist also foresees the coming of a divine Redeemer—“the man at your right hand, the son of man you have raised up for yourself.” Jesus was the *true vine*, the unfailing channel of God’s grace and power.

3. What is the significance of calling his disciples branches?

Question 3. This is a good place in the study to insert the necessity of being a “branch” (that is, a Christian). No one shares in Christ’s life unless there is a faith relationship to Christ.

4. Instead of commanding us to bear fruit, why is Jesus' only command "Remain in me" (v. 4)?

5. What does it mean to remain in Christ?

6. The fruit produced by the remaining branch is often viewed as a reference to new converts. But branches produce grapes, not other branches. What other possible meanings are there for *fruit*?

Some of the "fruits" mentioned in Scripture are the "fruits of repentance" (Matt. 3:8, Lk. 3:8) "fruit of the Spirit" (Gal 5:22-26), and the fruit of new believers who have come to Christ (Col. 1:6).

The distance between the rails on a standard U.S. railroad gauge is four feet, eight and one-half inches—a strange number. Why was it used? The New World copied a British model, a pattern that has characterized much of our life for over two hundred years. Then why did the English build railroads four feet, eight and one-half inches apart? The first rail lines in Great Britain were built by people who had built the pre-railroad tramways. They used the same tools and measures they had used for building wagons. Therefore, the rails ended up with the exact same spacing between them as the wagon wheels. But why were wagon wheels four feet, eight and one-half inches apart? Because this corresponded to the wheel ruts in their ancient roads, and it simply did not make any sense to change the width and thereby damage the wagons. Apparently they had not yet learned that "wider is better!" In this crucial historic quest, we keep digging to find out how the wheel ruts in their ancient roads got to be four feet, eight and one-half inches wide. We learn that the roads in ancient Britain were built by the Roman legions. Those ruts that determined the space of rails on modern trains were first

created by Roman war chariots. They were designed exactly wide enough to accommodate the back ends of two war horses!

John 15 is a chapter about standards and measurements. But it does not ask us to go back and compare ourselves with the first-century church that struggled through the Roman Empire when those war chariots rampaged over the Mediterranean world and as far as Europe, Asia, and the British Isles. It tells us we must make the comparison with the vine and keep the connection so the relationship will never be severed. And the standard is not four feet, eight and one-half inches but the life, message, and commands of our Lord Jesus Christ.¹

¹Kenneth O. Gangel, , *John*, Holman New Testament Commentary vol. 4; Holman Reference (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 288-89.

7. The Father's ministry as the gardener is to "cut off every branch ... that bears no fruit" (v. 2). What do you think that means?

Question 7. A number of views exist on what it means for a branch to be "cut off." One is that we lose our salvation if we are unfruitful. That view, however, seems to contradict some things that Jesus has said earlier in the Gospel about our security (See John 5:24, 6:37). A second view is that this is a reference to God's discipline brought to bear on an unproductive branch. The genuine believer does not become lost, but is reprovved by God. A third view is that these branches were not genuine believers in the first place.

If a number of views are represented by members of your study, give time to a presentation of each view but be careful that this issue doesn't overshadow the rest of the biblical material. If everyone in the group seems to hold to one view, you may want to challenge that view to test the depth of conviction in the other members.

8. The Father prunes fruitful branches to make them more fruitful (v. 2). In what ways have you experienced the Father's "pruning"?

What were the results?

9. What spiritual benefits result from remaining in Christ (vv. 7–11)?

10. There are three categories of branches described in this passage—those bearing no fruit, those bearing some fruit, and those bearing much fruit. In which category would you place yourself and why?

11. If you are not bearing much fruit, what is Jesus' counsel to you in these verses?
