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NO SOUR GRAPES

John 15:1-8

We get a ridiculous amount of catalogues in the mail. I assume we are not unique in this regard, but I am amazed by how many of them we get. I have no idea where some of them come from. There are catalogues from clothing companies I’ve never heard of, home décor companies, several cruise lines send us catalogues even though Laurie and I have less than zero interest in going on a cruise. We get one called *Sergeant Grit* with military themed items and the *Wright Brothers* catalogue. We also get *Sharper Image* though I don’t have a sharper image and am quite sure nothing I can buy is going to give me one. We aren’t even the least bit interested in the products all of these feature and I don’t know how we got on their mailing lists. I assume that some company we have done business with must have sold our information to them, but I don’t know which one is the culprit. I wonder why companies spend the money to create and mail these things when they have zero chance of selling us anything.

We recently got a catalogue that is a contrast to the many useless ones we get. It is called Amazon’s Holiday Dash. It features 103 pages of toys kids might want for Christmas. This one is a hot item in our family. Our grandkids love to look through it and pick out items they hope Santa will bring them for Christmas. The only problem is they seem to want an awful lot of what they see in it. At times I say to them “What do you want the most?” That can be a hard one for them because they want a lot of the toys the most.

That is a question we should all think about. Not “what toys do you want the most for Christmas?” But what do you want the most in life? I have mentioned before a touching but humorous thing happened to me years ago. I had used as an illustration a memory from my childhood. There were 2 boys that lived right across the street from us when we were growing up who were the same ages as Jerry and I. John and David McMillen always got the hottest toys and the best stuff. They were the first kids I knew who got 10 speed bikes when that became a big thing. I only got a 3 speed bike. It wasn’t nearly as cool. After that I really wanted a 10:speed bike. I didn’t get one. I finally got one when I was 25 years old. It didn’t change my life at all. Plus it was stolen a few years later. One year the McMillens got real football jerseys with numbers on them and everything. Back then such things were almost impossible to obtain. You couldn’t buy them in the local stores, maybe because there wasn’t room on the Wells Fargo Wagon to deliver them to stores in Bakersfield. I have no idea how their parents got them. I wanted a football jersey so badly, but that wasn’t going to happen in our family. Then my dad mentioned that maybe he could get an old jersey from the high school where he taught. I was thrilled. Wow, a real live East Bakersfield Blades jersey would be way better than those store bought jerseys the McMillens had. I couldn’t wait. I pestered my dad about it because I wanted it more than anything. Finally it turned out that they had a rule against given them out and he couldn’t get me one. What a disappointment! I was heart broken. I never did get a real life football jersey with a number on it as a kid. I used this as an illustration in a sermon. A couple of months later a couple in the church approached me one Sunday morning and said, “We have something we want to give you.” It was a real East Bakersfield Blades football jersey. They had gotten in touch with someone in the athletic department at the school and had arranged to buy the jersey and have them mail it to them. I was blown away. I couldn’t believe they would do that for me. It was so kind.

So now I have that jersey. My life is complete. It was what I needed to fill my life with joy and meaning. Wrong. My life has not changed even a little bit because I have it. It doesn’t matter at all. The thing I wanted so badly, the thing that would fill my life, turned out to be a nothing burger when I finally got it. Maybe that’s because I still don’t have a 10 speed bike. It’s not. It’s what happens with an awful lot of what we think we want. All the toys our grandchildren identify as must haves in that catalogue will have their moment if the kids get them. But it won’t be long before they are basically forgotten and life will go on as usual.

The question of what you want most is a big question, for it has huge bearing on our values and priorities, on how we spend our time and on our hearts. It impacts so many things, including our own feelings and moods and our relationships. The answer to that question is relevant to the passage we are going to look at today in our study of the book of John. This is a familiar passage to many. You might not think it touches on the question of what we want, but it does.

So before digging into John 15:1-8 I want to briefly mention what people really do want. We think we want money, security, acclaim, popularity, power and pleasure, lately I’ve just wanted to feel good and not be tired. In some senses we do want those things, but there are some things behind all of those that are actually more important. It is possible to gain all of those things and discover to our dismay that they are not much different than that football jersey. They’re nice but they leave us wanting something deeper.

What do all humans want? We all want to be loved. We all badly need a sense of approval, a certainty that we are okay. We want significance, a life of full of meaning. We want a full life, one loaded with joy and hope. And we all want the hope of eternal life. We want a life we can feel good about and be proud of. With that in mind, let’s look at what Jesus told his followers in this familiar passage, John 15:1-8.

JESUS SAID:

THE KEY IS TO REMAIN IN HIM

Many people love this passage, and it is a great one. But it has also been the source of some controversy, some misinterpretation, some confusion and some bad application. There are a couple of things we can do to cut through the confusion and controversy. Both of these things have to do with basic rules of good interpretation. If we will apply these rules to this passage it will clear away a lot of the fog it sometimes engenders.

The first thing we must do is always interpret in context. In this case the historical context is important. We must understand what Jesus told his followers in these verses the way they would have understood it. There are several ideas that people camp out on in these verses that would never have occurred to the men who were listening to Jesus that night. There are some theological questions that are raised that would never have entered their minds. It is important that we put ourselves in their sandals and seek to interpret these words as they would have interpreted them. If we do that it will go a long way toward keeping us on track.

A second thing we must do is to note that the core of these verses is an illustration. In verse 1 Jesus said, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener.” Here’s a news flash for you: Jesus wasn’t really a grapevine. He didn’t have leaves and produce grapes. Neither is God the Father a gardener. This was an illustration. There is an important principle of interpretation for illustrations. That principle is that illustrations are intended to help the audience understand one main point. We run into trouble when we try to interpret and apply every nuance of the illustration.

For instance, a few weeks ago when we studied John 14:6 we saw that Jesus said he is the way. He meant he is the way to the Father and to his eternal kingdom. I made the point that he didn’t say he would show us the way, but he said he is the way. I used the illustration of taking a trip to Tahiti or Hawaii or anywhere. The airline doesn’t give you a map and instructions on how to get there. They put you on an airplane and the plane takes you there as you rely on it. So with Jesus, we rely on him as the way to the Father and his kingdom.

But now let’s press all the implications of the illustration as some preachers tend to do. We could say that the airplane is the way to the destination, but you have to buy a ticket to get on the plane. This must mean we must earn our way onto Jesus taking us to the Father. We all know that flying is very restrictive. You are uncomfortably strapped into a seat and have very little freedom to move around. So we should assume that as we rely on Jesus he will seriously restrict us and we should expect it to not be very comfortable. And let’s talk about that closet sized restroom on the plane. And why is it that while you are in the middle of doing your business you get notified that the captain has turned on the seat belt sign and you need to return to your seat. Yeah, I don’t think so, Captain. Actually, I’m not sure what the application of that would be to our flight with Jesus. It doesn’t take much to see the problem with pressing every aspect of an illustration.

Jesus had a main idea he was getting across with the illustration that he is a vine. We need to let his interpretation guide us to understanding and we must not press every detail of his story to get some principle or application from it. This will alleviate some of the controversy that often pops up when interpreting this passage.

Now that we’re done with that long preface, let’s think about what Jesus did say. He had one main point. Because he is the vine we must remain in him, stay connected to him, in order to bear fruit. That is the big instruction of this passage. It is important to note that he said he is the “true vine.” You could translate that the “genuine vine” or the “real vine.” That implies that there is a vine that isn’t the real thing, the genuine vine. What was Jesus referring to?

Over the entrance to the Holy Place in the temple in Jerusalem there was, according to Gary Burge in his commentary on John, “A gigantic grapevine of pure gold, representing Israel.” The vine was one of the common images used to represent the people of Israel. Psalm 80:8-9 says to the Lord, “You transplanted a vine from Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it, and it took root and filled the land.” Israel appears as a vine in Jeremiah 12:10-12, Ezekiel 15:1-5 and other passages.

God expected his vine to produce fruit. In Jeremiah 2:21 God says to Israel, “I had planted you like a choice vine of sound and reliable stock. How then did you turn against me into a corrupt, wild vine?” In Isaiah 5:1-2 the prophet says God planted a vineyard on a fertile hillside. He cleared the land of stones and planted the choicest vines. But the end of verse 2 says “Then he looked for a crop of good grapes but it yielded only bad fruit.” God only got sour grapes from the vine he planted.

I can relate to this. Toby and Anna have done a lot of work in their back yard recently, including putting in a number of fruit trees. They have a peach tree, an orange tree, a nectarine, an apricot, a guava tree, some banana trees and an avocado tree. That tree has already produced an avocado. This has reminded me of an unfortunate attempt Laurie and I made. We thought it would be great to grow avocados in our yard, so we planted an avocado tree. We tried to do everything we could to nurture that tree, but it never thrived. It just kept looking worse and worse. Eventually all we had was an avocado stick. Not only did it have no fruit, it had no leaves, and hardly any branches. We finally dug it up and threw it away. God’s experience with Israel was kind of like that. He expected delicious grapes from his vine, but he only got the grape equivalent of an avocado stick.

The grammar of verse 1 is worth noting. In Greek the form of the verb told you the person, number, voice, mood and tense of the verb. In this case the second word in the verse is the Greek word *eimi*. It is the first person, present tense, active indicative of the verb meaning “to be.” It means “I am.” But that is the second word. The first word is *ego*, which means “I.” It wasn’t necessary, but not only did John use it, he put it in a place of emphasis. So John has Jesus say, “I, yes, I am the real vine.” He is contrasting himself with the vine that’s not real.

First century Jews, including Jesus’ disciples, believed that lsrael was God’s vine and because they were born to Jewish parents they were automatically attached to the vine. Because they were part of God’s vine they would be part of his kingdom. Jesus claimed that vine was not the real thing. He said he is. This was a shocking. The way a person becomes part of God’s people is by being attached to Jesus, remaining in him. That meant there were people who were part of the other vine, the physical nation of Hebrew people, who would not be part of God’s kingdom because they were not attached to Jesus. Jesus didn’t go into this at that time, but this truth had the astounding implication that some people who are not a part of that other vine, physical Israel, would be a part of God’s kingdom because they are attached to Jesus. We are a part of that fortunate group.

What did Jesus mean by the command to remain in him? This is a critical point of this passage, so we need to understand that. Many older translations translated the Greek word for remain with the English word “abide.” So Jesus told his disciples to abide in him. But abide isn’t a word we use a lot. For some reason I remember a line from the original *Star Wars* movie. C3PO says at one point, “I can’t abide those Jawas.” He meant he couldn’t tolerate them. We hear the word used that way occasionally. But that’s not what Jesus meant.

Some preachers and Bible scholars have long discussions of what it means to abide in Jesus and explain at length how to do that. In fact books on “abiding in Christ” have been written. To abide in him has taken on an almost technical, special meaning. Sometimes these discussions of abiding in Christ include long instruction on what we need to do to abide in Christ. Often there are steps to follow, or things we must do to abide in him.

This is where we need to employ the hermeneutic principle of historical context. The way we do that is by asking, “What would Jesus’ disciples have understood him to mean when he told them to remain in him?” They certainly would not have figured there was some special meaning to the word translated “abide” or “remain.” They would not have thought there was a list of things they needed to do in order to keep abiding or remaining in him.

Jesus knew that the future would be challenging for them. Here he is simply telling them to just keep believing in him, staying faithful to him. They would have understood him when he said, “Remain in me,” to mean keep on believing in Jesus, keep following him, stay faithful to him. No mysterious special meaning, no steps to follow, no list of things to do, just “stick with me boys.” It is simple and clear. That’s what it means for us. Stick with Jesus. Stay attached to him.

But what about verse 2 where Jesus says, “He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit” and verse 6 where he says if someone doesn’t remain in him, “You are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned”? That sounds scary. It sounds like a person ends up being condemned and sent to the place of eternal punishment. Can we lose salvation? Again we need to remember the historical context. At that point Jesus had not completed his work of redeeming the world through sacrificing himself. The disciples didn’t fully understand the gospel of grace yet because it hadn’t been completed. They would not have worried about losing salvation because it never would have entered their minds. Jesus was not addressing that question at all.

Jesus brought up the “gardener” cutting off branches because most of the people of Israel were not going to continue to believe in him. There were a lot of people who sort of believed in Jesus, but who were not going to remain in him if it meant rejecting the prevailing ideas of the Pharisees, which it would. They would be cut off.

In these verses Jesus was making clear that the disciples had to make a choice. They could not follow Jesus, remain in him, while hanging on to the popular beliefs of their culture. They couldn’t continue to believe what the Pharisees believed, teaching they’d followed most of their lives, and also remain in Jesus. To remain in him was to go his way, not the way of their culture. He was about to be violently rejected by the elites of their culture. He was challenging them to remain in him, keep believing he is the way, the truth and the life, and thus keep following him. That is the point of remaining in Jesus. Go his way, not your culture’s way. Jesus added some of the discussion of cutting off branches to add color to his story. It was not his main point. He was not giving a lecture on whether salvation can be lost or not. This was mostly part of the illustration. So don’t get caught up in it. Stay on the main point.

WE WILL BEAR FRUIT

Jesus then went on to tell them what would happen if they remained in him. He said if you remain in him, “You will bear much fruit.” Not, it will be possible for you to bear fruit if you do the right things. Rather, it will happen. He made a promise. Remain in him and you will bear fruit. You have all used those automatic faucets at the airport or other public facilities. You wave your hand under it and the water comes out. We have one like that in our kitchen. We have the faucet turned on. But you have to put your hand in front of a sensor on the faucet to make the water flow. When you do that, water comes out. For some reason people have a little trouble figuring it out. But it works. Put your hand in front of that sensor and water will come out. In the Honolulu Airport on our recent trip home I encountered some weird looking faucets. They were kind of shaped like airplanes. I didn’t know quite what they were all about. But then I figured out the central nozzle was for water and I was supposed to wave my hand under it. I did, and nothing happened. I kept waving my hands all over the place, looking like some kind of kook, until I realized it was malfunctioning. I moved on to another faucet and was relieved when it worked. I found out the “wings” of the thing were for hot air to dry your hands. Well I’m here to tell you, our kitchen faucet works. Put your hand in front of that sensor water comes out automatically. Jesus said he’s kind of like that. Remain in him, and fruit comes out.

What sort of fruit did he mean? Again we appeal to context. What sort of fruit would the disciples have envisioned? Remember the picture of the vine in the Old Testament and how God said Israel had not produced the fruit he expected. In Isaiah 5:7 the prophet said of God, “He looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.” God was looking for the fruit of a godly life. It was a life of humility, justice, love and goodness, a life faithful to God. This was the fruit the disciples would have thought of. This is consistent with Galatians 5:22-23 that describes the “fruit of the Spirit” as love, joy, peace, kindness, patience, faithfulness, self control. This is the fruit remaining in Jesus produces.

This makes sense. In our back yard in Bakersfield when I grew up we had a lot of fruit. There were grapevines around the edge of the yard and we had a nectarine tree, a pear tree, two almond trees, a cherry plum tree and a plum tree. Here is what I noticed. The grape vines produced grapes. The nectarine tree produced nectarines. The plum tree produced plums, and so on. The life of the tree flowed into the branches and out came whatever was the nature of the tree or vine. That’s what happens with the vine that is Jesus. His life flows into the branches that are attached to him, and out comes the nature of the vine. The life of Jesus is the fruit, a life of faith, love, peace, joy and grace.

This is where we begin to see the relevance of this passage to the question that we began with. What do you really want? Well, I want a lot of things. I want to be done with cancer. I want my kids and grandkids to be happy. I want the Padres to go to the World Series next year. I want a lot of things, and some of them are important. But those are not the ultimate things that we all want. Consider the question, do you want your life to be fruitless? A fruitless life would be empty and frustrating. We all want a fruitful life.

Jesus claimed that fruitful life comes from remaining in him. If we will do that his life will flow in us and we will have peace, love, joy, kindness, goodness. We will have meaning and we will have hope. This is the life we want, one that we can have even if our circumstances are not ideal. Isn’t that what we all want? To have real peace, to be joyful, to be loved by God and to love others, to be good and kind? Don’t we want to have a life that will have impact? Yes, because otherwise our lives are empty and pointless. Having a life full of meaning, peace, joy, love, will impact other people.

In Philippians 1 Paul wrote about what he was experiencing while in chains. He had been unjustly in chains for several years. To make matters worse there were Christians who were doing everything they could to undercut him and his ministry. In verse 17 he said they were “supposing they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains.” Can you believe that? Christians were trying to compete with Paul and cause him even more problems in ministry while he was imprisoned for his faith. How can people be so terrible? Those “brothers and sisters in Christ” needed some serious spanking. But look at Paul’s response. In verse 18 he said, “The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice.”

What a life! He is being treated unfairly. Brothers in Christ with horrible motives are trying to do him harm while he is in chains. And he rejoiced. Wouldn’t you like to have a life where no matter what happened you were able to rejoice and be full? Jesus promised that, and Paul lived it out. So can we, if we will heed Jesus’ words in these verses. The key is remaining in him.

CONCLUSION

REMAIN IN JESUS

Let’s demystify this thing a little bit. Remember what this meant to Jesus’ disciples. They had lived from childhood on believing in a system of theology that was all about the Law of Moses. It was taught by the Pharisees, and it was focused on trying to keep the laws to the best of one’s ability. But now they were following Jesus, and he brought a very different way of thinking. And it was about to get even more radical. They had been thrilled by what they heard from Jesus and saw in him, even though it was a violent contrast to the Pharisee’s ways.

Now Jesus was telling them that the way forward required that they keep believing in him, even when it was hard. He was saying keep faithful to him, keep trusting in him just as they had been. He says the same to us. The key for us is not to get distracted from the truth we know. On the one day of our recent “vacation” that Laurie and I were actually able to enjoy before covid 19 ruined the party, at one point we went for a swim in the ocean. The hotel we were staying on is on the beach of a bay that is very calm. It has a few waves, but they are mostly baby waves that wouldn’t be much different than what you see on a lake. Because we weren’t going to dive under the water I had my Padres hat on and my sunglasses. We were having a great time enjoying the water when a couple of larger waves rolled in. They were nothing we couldn’t handle. We just floated over them. We were just about to get out of the water when a considerably larger wave showed up out of nowhere. In fact, this one was quite large. We have lived all of our adult lives near the ocean, and we are not dumb about it. We have respect for what the ocean can do. As this wave approached we realized we couldn’t just float over it because it was going to break on us. We both know what you’re supposed to do when a big wave like that comes along. You just dive through it and it’s no problem. Unfortunately, we weren’t prepared for that. I had my Padres hat on and my sunglasses and Laurie was wearing some nice sunglasses as well. We knew if we dove into that wave I was going to lose my hat and we were both going to lose our sunglasses. So we decided to try to run for the beach, even though we knew that was a bad idea. We hoped we could get far enough toward the sand before the wave hit us that it would have diminished. It didn’t work. I was sprinting through the water one minute and the next thing I knew I was slammed down on my back on the sand and pounded by the wave. I don’t know how I landed on my back. I had my back to the wave, but somehow it spun me around before slamming me onto the sand. I had heroically gone to the “Every man for himself” strategy because I knew there was nothing I could do to help Laurie. I looked around and found her shakily trying to get to her feet. I asked her if she was all right and she said she was. Then she said, “My sunglasses are gone, though.” Then I realized, amazingly I still had my hat and sunglasses. Both of them were totally soaked and covered in sand. Laurie stood up, looked around then said, “Hey, look, there are my sunglasses.” They had washed up on the beach and were fine. I felt stupid. I figured there were probably people there observing all this and thinking, “Look at those idiots. Obviously they know nothing about the ocean.” The truth is, we were fortunate not to get injured. That would have made our vacation perfect, be stupid, get injured by a wave, then get covid. At least that didn’t happen. But we put ourselves in jeopardy and almost got hurt because we ignored what we know about the ocean. We knew we should always respect its power and should be prepared to do what is necessary to stay safe, but we lost sight of that wisdom. I tell you this because the same thing can happen to us in regard to the truth of this passage. Here’s how to have the fruitful life we all want. Remain in Jesus. The problem is, we know this, but it’s easy to forget it, to stop paying attention to what we know to be true. We start chasing toys and football jerseys and let the desire for them and the pursuit of them rule our hearts and our lives. The result of that will always be sour grapes. Keep believing that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. Stay faithful to him, keep believing in him no matter what happens. That is the only way to have the fruitful life we really desire.

Laurie and I were talking to some of our neighbors yesterday and they expressed sympathy for us regarding our recent dumpster fire of a vacation. They knew how much we wanted to celebrate the end of cancer treatment for me by relaxing and rejoicing in Hawaii and they knew what a disappointment it was that we were sick the entire time. That definitely was a big let down. But it occurred to me after we talked to them that it changed nothing. We still have joy, we still have love, we still have life, and we trust that God is still at work. We can actually laugh about the whole thing. Remaining in Jesus gives us life.

We got a reminder yesterday that this is huge for believers. Another of our neighbors who is a godly, wonderful brother in Christ, told us he was laid off from his job this past week. It was a big, unexpected blow. It is certainly not what he wanted. But he is remaining in Jesus, so he is at peace, even in the face of a significant unwanted situation.

LET HIM PRODUCE THE FRUIT

I mentioned that in our backyard in Bakersfield we had a lot of fruit. One late spring day I had an unusual experience. I was out in the back yard and I noticed our plum tree looking very stressed. It was sweating and straining and looked very tired. I said, “Hey, plum tree, you’re not looking great. What’s the matter?” It said, “Summer is coming and I have to produce fruit. I’m trying my hardest, but it’s just not working. I’m giving it all I’ve got and the plums just aren’t coming, and I’m exhausted.”

Okay, that never happened. That plum tree was quite happy go lucky and never stressed about anything. Every conversation I had with it the tree was relaxed and was always up beat. Okay, I’m not Looney Tunes. I never had any conversations with that plum tree. But that tree did not work itself to exhaustion. It didn’t stress and strain to push fruit out on its branches. It was just a tree. The branches just stayed tightly attached to the tree. That’s all they did, yet they produced absurd amounts of fruit. Jerry and I would sit out in the back yard and pick plums off that tree until we were sick, and we didn’t even make a dent in the massive amount of plums it produced. Our parents would give bags of plums away to friends. It got to the place where our friends would avoid my parents because they already had too many of our plums. And still plums would fall off that tree onto the ground and rot. The tree produced more plums than we could ever consume or give away. And all the branches did was stay connected to the tree.

That’s what this passage tells us to do. There are no steps to follow. There’s no list of things to do to “abide in Christ.” All we are to do is to stay connected to Jesus. Keep believing in him, trusting in him, living in his presence every day of our lives. Let him have control of things, rely on him, and relax. Rest in him, stay connected to him and the fruit will come.