

Lesson Twenty-One

(John 15:1-16:24)

In this section Jesus continues his late night teaching session with the eleven apostles. Every sentence is packed with divine truths which they will need when Jesus leaves them.

The Real Vine: Jesus

(John 15:1-17)

¹"I am the real vine, and my Father is the gardener. ²He breaks off every branch in me that does not bear fruit, and he prunes every branch that does bear fruit, so that it will be clean and bear more fruit. ³You have been made clean already by the teaching I have given you. ⁴Remain united to me, and I will remain united to you. A branch cannot bear fruit by itself; it can do so only if it remains in the vine. In the same way you cannot bear fruit unless you remain in me.

⁵"I am the vine, and you are the branches. Whoever remains in me, and I in him, will bear much fruit; for you can do nothing without me. ⁶Whoever does not remain in me is thrown out like a

branch and dries up; such branches are gathered up and thrown into the fire, where they are burned. ⁷If you remain in me and my words remain in you, then you will ask for anything you wish, and you shall have it. ⁸My Father's glory is shown by your bearing much fruit; and in this way you become my disciples. ⁹I love you just as the Father loves me; remain in my love. ¹⁰If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love.

¹¹"I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. ¹²My commandment is this: love one another, just as I love you. ¹³The greatest love a person can have for his friends is to give his life for them. ¹⁴And you are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵I do not call you servants any longer, because a servant does not know what his master is doing. Instead, I call you friends, because I have told you everything I heard from my Father. ¹⁶You did not choose me; I chose you and appointed you to go and bear much fruit, the kind of fruit that endures. And so the Father will give you whatever you ask of him in my name. ¹⁷This, then, is what I command you: love one another."

Jesus here stresses that he himself is the true vine (15:1). Back in Jeremiah's day God rebuked the nation of Israel with these words: "I planted you like a choice vine from the very best seed. But look what you have become! You are like a rotten, worthless vine" (Jeremiah 2:21). Jesus means, therefore, that he "is the true Israel of God, the seed of Abraham through whom all the prophecies were to be fulfilled" (Burton Coffman, *Commentary on John*, p. 343).

And it is God the Father who will prune every branch which does not bear fruit (15:2). My grandfather was very proud of his beautiful grapevines. I was only about ten years old the day that I found a pair of shears and gave those vines the closest trim they ever received! I can still see the stunned look on my grandfather's face when he saw what was left of his grapevines. There were no grapes at all that summer, but the next year brought a bumper crop. So it is in the spiritual realm that God will prune away and reject the unproductive vines, people who are not living for him.

The only way we can bear the kind of "fruit" or good works that Jesus expects is to become united with Jesus through faith and immersion (Mark 16:15-16; Rom. 6:3; 1 Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:27) and to stay close to him (15:4-10). If we fail to remain in Jesus then we will become unproductive and we will finally be condemned

to spend eternity in hell (15:6; Matt. 3:8-12; 25:41). Jesus plainly teaches that a backsliding, unproductive Christian is in danger of losing his salvation. And it actually happened to Judas, a person whom Jesus himself picked to be an apostle! Not only must a person *become* a Christian to be saved, but he must *stay* a Christian or he will lose that salvation.

According to 15:16, Jesus personally selected each of the apostles; they did not seek him out and elect him to be their leader. He chose them, just as he continues to choose each of his disciples. As Paul Butler says, "We were divinely elected, but that was made eons ago potentially 'in Christ' (Eph. 1:3-14). Potentially all men are elected to be saved, but only 'in Christ.' Man then must exercise his freedom to choose whether he desires this election or not by coming 'into Christ' or remaining out of Him by obedience to His commandments (1 Jn. 2:3-6, 2:27, 5:1-4, etc.). Even among these first disciples they were chosen by election but they themselves had to choose whether or not they wished that election. One (Judas Iscariot) refused the divine election. Even here they must go and bear fruit if they desire to 'make their calling and election sure' (cf. 2 Peter 1:2-22)" (*The Gospel of John*, II, 280).

The World's Hatred

(John 15:18-16:4)

¹⁸"If the world hates you, just remember that it has hated me first. ¹⁹If you belonged to the world, then the world would love you as its own. But I chose you from this world, and you do not belong to it; that is why the world hates you. ²⁰Remember what I told you: 'No slave is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you too; if they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours too. ²¹But they will do all this to you because you are mine; for they do not know the one who sent me. ²²They would not have been guilty of sin if I had not come and spoken to them; as it is, they no longer have any excuse for their sin. ²³Whoever hates me hates my Father also. ²⁴They would not have been guilty of sin if I had not done among them the things that no one else ever did; as it is, they have seen what I did, and they hate both me and my Father. ²⁵This, however, was bound to happen so that what is written in their Law may come true: 'They hated me for no reason at all.'

²⁶"The Helper will come — the Spirit, who reveals the truth about God and who comes from the Father. I will send him to you from the Father, and he will speak about me. ²⁷And you, too, will

16. speak about me, because you have been with me from the very beginning.

^{16.1}“I have told you this, so that you will not give up your faith. ²You will be expelled from the synagogues, and the time will come when anyone who kills you will think that by doing this he is serving God. ³People will do these things to you because they have not known either the Father or me. ⁴But I have told you this, so that when the time comes for them to do these things, you will remember what I told you.”

Jesus doesn't try to conceal the difficulties facing the apostles. Since the vast majority of the people hated and rejected the Son of God, the apostles are told that they face an identical reception. They are in the world, but not a part of it (15:19). A ship does not sink just because it is in the water; a ship sinks only when too much water gets into the ship! Similarly, the Christian does not fall from grace just by being in the world; but he will fall if too much of the world gets into him!

What an unusual recruiting procedure! Jesus promises the apostles that if they remain loyal to him they can be sure that they will be hated (15:18) and persecuted (15:20), and that their preaching will be largely rejected (15:20). Not many people would volunteer for a mission like that.

But there is another promise which brings it all into perspective: “The Helper will come” (15:26). The Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, would be given to the apostles to help them through the trials which lay in store for them. Burton Coffman says that 15:27 “has reference to a primary requirement for the office of an apostle (Acts 1:21,22); and the introduction of this clause by the word ‘because’ shows that these teachings about the Holy Spirit have reference to apostles, and not to all Christians. It is true, of course, that Christians receive an earnest of the Holy Spirit; but it is simply not true, nor do the scriptures teach it, that the Holy Spirit will guide Christians into all truth. The proof of this is apparent in the fact that ‘all truth’ is something that cannot be accurately associated with *any* Christian!” (*Commentary on John*, p. 355).

Jesus provides this information about the coming of the Holy Spirit so as to strengthen the faith of the apostles (16:2). They are going to need all the help they can get, for Jesus told them: “Everyone will hate you because of me. But whoever holds out to the end will be saved” (Mark 13:13). In the meantime, they are going to be persecuted by people who think they are doing God a

favor by hurting the apostles (just as Saul of Tarsus felt he was being obedient to God by persecuting Christians; see Acts 22:3-5; 26:9-11; 1 Tim. 1:12-16). Many of God's people have experienced exactly what Jesus warns of here. When William Tyndale translated the Greek New Testament into English and published it so the common person could read God's Word, the Roman Catholic authorities were deeply angered. So in 1536 A.D. they had him strangled and burned at the stake. To his tormentors, Tyndale said: "I never expected anything else." Praise the Lord that there are still those who are willing to stand by their convictions, no matter what!

The Work of the Holy Spirit

(John 16:4-15)

⁴"I did not tell you these things at the beginning, for I was with you. ⁵But now I am going to him who sent me, yet none of you asks me where I am going. ⁶And now that I have told you, your hearts are full of sadness. ⁷But I am telling you the truth: it is better for you that I go away, because if I do not go, the Helper will not come to you. But if I do go away, then I will send him to you. ⁸And when he comes, he will prove to the people of the world that they are wrong about sin and about what is right and about God's judgment. ⁹They are wrong about sin, because they do not believe in me; ¹⁰they are wrong about what is right, because I am going to the Father and you will not see me any more; ¹¹and they are wrong about judgment, because the ruler of this world has already been judged.

¹²"I have much more to tell you, but now it would be too much for you to bear. ¹³When, however, the Spirit comes, who reveals the truth about God, he will lead you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own authority, but he will speak of what he hears and will tell you of things to come. ¹⁴He will give me glory, because he will take what I say and tell it to you. ¹⁵All that my Father has is mine; that is why I said that the Spirit will take what I give him and tell it to you."

In 16:7 Jesus reaffirms his intention to send the Holy Spirit to the apostles after he himself returns to heaven. He says that the Holy Spirit will do three things. First, the Holy Spirit "will prove to the people of the world that they are wrong about sin" (16:8) . . . "because they do not believe in me" (16:9). Second, the Holy Spirit will show that they are wrong about "what is right" (16:8) . . . "because I am going to the Father and you will not see me any more" (16:10). Third, the Holy Spirit will prove that the people of

the world are wrong about "God's judgment" (16:11). Any effort to get right with God, without accepting Jesus as the divine Son of God, is an empty and futile exercise.

In 16:12 Jesus shows himself to be the perfect teacher, for he does not overwhelm his disciples with concepts which would only confuse them at this point in their spiritual development. We want to learn all that we can about the Word of God, but that quest is much like trying to walk over a range of mountains only to find other challenging peaks rising behind the first. The apostles are simply not ready for everything that Jesus wants to reveal to them, so that job will be left for the Holy Spirit.

John 16:13 is one of the most abused passages in the entire Bible. There are those who, without regard to the context here, apply Jesus' promise to the eleven apostles to every Christian. They teach that it means that the Holy Spirit is still revealing new truths to people today. (That's what Joseph Smith claimed, and the result was his blasphemous *Book of Mormon*.) If 16:13-15 applies to every Christian, then so should 16:16 — but it doesn't. The fact is that this entire section is directed exclusively toward the apostles. And when the last apostle wrote his last letter or spoke his last message, the Holy Spirit's revelation of spiritual truth stopped completely and forever (Jude 3-4; 2 Tim. 3:14-4:5).

Finally, we should note the Trinitarian implications of 16:15. Jesus referred to the Holy Spirit, to God the Father, and to himself. These are the three members of the Godhead. Yet these three interact in such a harmonious way that there can be no other conclusion but that, while each is in some ways distinguishable from the others, they are still the *one God*.

Sadness and Gladness

(John 16:16-24)

¹⁶"In a little while you will not see me any more, and then a little while later you will see me."

¹⁷"Some of his disciples asked among themselves, "What does this mean? He tells us that in a little while we will not see him, and then a little while later we will see him; and he also says, 'It is because I am going to the Father.' ¹⁸What does this 'a little while' mean? We don't know what he is talking about!"

¹⁹Jesus knew that they wanted to question him, so he said to them, "I said, 'In a little while you will not see me, and then a little while later you will see me.' Is this what you are asking about among yourselves? ²⁰I am telling you the truth: you will cry and weep, but the world will be glad; you will be sad, but your sadness

will turn into gladness. ²¹When a woman is about to give birth, she is sad because her hour of suffering has come; but when the baby is born, she forgets her suffering, because she is happy that a baby has been born into the world. ²²That is how it is with you: now you are sad, but I will see you again, and your hearts will be filled with gladness, the kind of gladness that no one can take away from you.

²³"When that day comes, you will not ask me for anything. I am telling you the truth: the Father will give you whatever you ask of him in my name. ²⁴Until now you have not asked for anything in my name; ask and you will receive, so that your happiness may be complete."

In 16:16-22 Jesus startles the apostles with his statement that "In a little while you will not see me any more." And he tells them that their reaction to the loss of his presence will be just the opposite to how the crowds will respond: "You will cry and weep, but the world will be glad" (16:20). But there is hope on the horizon, for Jesus also says, "I will see you again, and your hearts will be filled with gladness" (16:22). There was never a more despondent group of men than these apostles were when Jesus was murdered; and never a happier group than the apostles were when they realized that Jesus had risen from the tomb!

Concerning 16:23-24, Burton Coffman says: "In all petitions to the Father, the name of Jesus Christ should be mentioned as the ground of the petitioner's right to be heard. High-sounding prayers offered in no other name, and upon no other grounds, than those of the petitioner, or even ambiguously, 'in thy name,' can be nothing other than an affront to Almighty God. Ignoring or by-passing the name of the One Mediator between God and man is presumptuously sinful. Particularly reprehensible is the custom of closing prayers with a mere 'Amen,' for fear that some unbeliever might be offended by the name of Christ. Loving the praise of men more than the praise of God was fatal to believers in Jesus' day (12:42); and it is beyond question fatal to fall into the same error today" (*Commentary on John*, p. 368).

Thought Stimulators on John 15:1-16:24

1. What happens to the unfruitful "branches"?
2. What is the only way by which we may bear fruit for Christ?
3. How is the Father's glory shown?
4. What must we do to remain in Jesus' love?
5. What is the greatest love a person can have for his friends?
6. Why should "the world" hate the apostles?

7. Who was the "Helper" that Jesus promised to give to the apostles?
8. What kind of reception did Jesus tell the apostles to expect?
9. Name some modern-day Christians who, like the apostles, have been persecuted because of their love for Jesus.
10. What had to happen before the apostles could receive the Holy Spirit?
11. The Holy Spirit would prove to the world that they were wrong about what three things?
12. Jesus' promise that the Holy Spirit would reveal "all the truth" was given to whom?
13. Why were the apostles sad?
14. In whose name should we pray?