

The Beautiful Life

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 02 July 2023

Preacher: Mark Bates

[0 : 0 0] Fathers, we look at your word today. We come and we ask that you would come and meet with us. We pray, Holy Spirit, that you would open our ears, our hearts, our minds to listen to you.

Your word is clear, but oftentimes our minds are foggy, and frankly, our own sin gets in the way. And so, Holy Spirit, we know that unless you work, unless you move, that our time here today will be futile.

So we pray, O Lord, attend to the reading and the teaching of your word. That we may rightly understand it, and our hearts may be transformed by it. And we pray all this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Why is it so hard to do what you really want to do? I wanted to get in shape. I wanted to get strong. So I joined Planet Fitness.

And I went, for a while, I went four days a week, which is my goal. I thought that was pretty good. And I'm going, and I'm working out, and I'm feeling pretty good about myself. But after a while, I find that I'm going less and less.

[1 : 0 1] And soon, I would go, and I'd work out a little bit on a machine, and then it'd start to hurt, so I'd go to the next machine. And pretty soon, I found that I wasn't going at all. I really did want to be in shape.

I just didn't want to work out. Another time, I thought I'd learn Spanish. And, you know, because it'd be helpful, particularly in my role. Every now and then, I'd go to Spanish-speaking parts of the world. And so, you know, Duolingo or Rosetta Stone.

And I got it, and you just start working. You figure, you know, 30 minutes a day, and you can just start. You can pick up a lot. And so I'm doing it. I'm cranking it out. But then soon, I get too busy.

And I'm not doing it at all. And I know very, very little Spanish. I wanted to know Spanish. I just didn't want to do the work of learning Spanish. And nowhere do we feel this tension more than our lives and our character.

I know I want to be a kind person. You want to be a kind person. You want to be a disciplined person. You want to be a person known for your love, for your generosity, for your encouragement. But then you find yourself not being those things.

[2 : 0 8] You say, you know, we'll even make vows. You know, parents, you ever made this vow? Okay, I'm not going to lose my temper with my children. I'm not going to do it. I'm determined. And you mean it, right? You really mean that.

But then that child does something, and you find yourself saying things. Or, you know, you find yourself in your marriage relationship. You roll your eyes at your spouse. And you don't want to do those things.

By the way, I have been cured of losing my temper with my children. They've all moved away. And no longer happens at all. And so, but you know what I mean.

We want to change. You want to be generous, but you find yourself being stingy. You want to be a servant, but when he calls to serve at the church, you're going, oh, man, I really don't want to go do that work day. You know, you just find yourself not doing these things.

So if that's how you feel, then the words of Jesus here are incredibly hopeful and encouraging to us. Because as we look at what Jesus has to say to us, he shows us that we can have a beautiful life.

[3 : 14] A life that bears beautiful fruit. A life that is marked by beauty, love, and compassion for others. And how we get there is all explained to us here in John chapter 15.

So let's look at what it means to live a beautiful life. And so first of all, we see the fruitful life. What does the fruitful life look like? So Jesus talks a lot about bearing fruit in this passage.

He says that he's the vine and we are the branches. Now, that imagery, when Jesus said this, it probably raised some eyebrows among his original listeners. Because throughout the Old Testament, Israel was called the vine, not Jesus.

And so Jesus is saying that he's the vine. In fact, the vine was a national symbol for the nation of Israel. It was across the temple porch when Israel rebelled against Rome. They put it on their coinage. And so Israel was to be the vine.

But here's what Jesus is saying. He's saying, no, I am the vine. I am the vine. Now, what Jesus is saying, he's not saying that he's the replacement. What he's saying is he is the true Israel of God.

[4 : 15] He is the true fulfillment of what Israel was supposed to be. Where Israel failed, he's going to succeed. So he is the true son, the child of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And he's going to accomplish what Israel is supposed to do and to be.

And so if you want to be part of the true Israel, and you want to be part of God's people, you want to be blessed by God, you must be connected to Jesus the vine. So Jesus says, I am the vine.

You're the branches to have life. You must be united to me. And furthermore, he says, if you are united to him, your life will bear much fruit. And if your branch does not bear fruit, he gives these warnings.

If you do not bear fruit, you will be cut off from the vine and cast into the fire. On the other hand, if you do bear fruit, you will be pruned so that you bear more fruit.

Now, that pruning, you might think of that as a negative image. But really what that means is you're going to be cared for. You're going to be nurtured. It's not necessarily, although it can be painful, certainly, it's a positive image that God is going to tend to you and he's going to care for you so that you end up bearing more fruit.

[5 : 25] So the result of being in Christ is fruitfulness. Or to put it more clearly, the sign that you're in Christ, the sign that you're a Christian, is that you bear fruit.

And if you do not bear fruit, what Jesus is saying is that's a sign that you are not united to the vine. Because if you're united to the vine, you will bear fruit. Anything that's drawn united to Christ bears fruit.

Well, how do you know if you're bearing fruit? What kind of fruit is Jesus talking about? Well, it's living out of the fruitfulness of what it means to be a child of God, of what it means to be a Christian.

And if you do a survey of the Bible, the Bible talks about fruit actually quite a bit, in quite a number of different places. And we can look at these places to see what the fruit is that Jesus is talking about. So, for example, in Colossians, in Romans, in Colossians 1 and Romans chapter 7, fruitfulness is connected to doing good works.

So if you're united to Christ, you're going to do good works. And by good works, the Bible generally means those works that are good for other people, works that produce things, works that serve others, works that care for others.

[6 : 38] And then also, we see in his letter to Philippians, Paul says, and he prays, that his readers will be full of the fruit of righteousness.

And so if you're connected to Jesus, your life is going to bear the fruit of righteousness. But then that raises a question, what do we mean by righteousness? You know, when you think of a righteous person, what comes to mind?

Somebody says, oh, so-and-so, they're really super righteous. They're godly. Positive image, negative image. Remember a number of years ago, there was an episode of The Simpsons, and Homer Simpson's next-door neighbors were very religious, and Homer comes, is out in the yard, and they're coming back.

And he asked them where they've been. They said, oh, we've been at Bible camp. We've been learning how to be more judgmental. You know, and oftentimes, that's the image people think of righteousness. It's not true righteousness, right?

It's self-righteousness. It's something that's produced by self. Christian righteousness is diametrically opposed to self-righteousness. Christian righteousness does not come from self.

[7 : 45] Christian righteousness, as Martin Luther says, is an alien righteousness. It's a righteousness given to you by another that you did not earn, you did not deserve, but you get solely through faith in Christ and your union with him.

And that righteousness that we are in Christ will express itself in righteous deeds and righteous actions. So, of course, Jesus is not talking about self-righteousness.

He's talking about true righteousness. Another place where the Bible talks about fruit, the fruit that is produced by Christ, is in Galatians chapter 5, and it talks about the fruit of the Spirit.

And again, very interestingly here, we see that the fruit of the Spirit is not produced by our own selves. In fact, Paul in chapter 3 contrasts very dramatically the life of faith with the life of works and simply trying to obey the law on your own.

And he says there that those who live by the flesh and live through the law end up producing fleshly deeds. In other words, the more you simply try to reform your life, he says, what happens is you're living by the flesh and that will produce the deeds of the flesh, which are these awful actions that he mentions in Galatians chapter 5.

[9 : 01] But he says instead, if we live by faith and we put our faith in Christ, then faith and the Spirit work. And we trust in Christ when we believe that we're redeemed by him, when we believe that we're saved by him, the Spirit's power is unleashed in our lives.

And so what does that look like? It looks like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control.

So now let's talk about what does a godly person look like? What does a righteous person look like? What's the fruit we should be looking for? Which instead of saying that person is so disciplined, so strict, so severe, they must be godly, we'd say that person is so joyful, that person is so loving, so gentle, so patient, so self-controlled, she must be godly.

That's the fruit of the Spirit. And that's the fruit that our lives are to bear. But if we're truly going to understand what Jesus is saying in John chapter 15, we can't just look at the New Testament.

We have to look at the Old Testament as well. And that's why we read Isaiah chapter 5 earlier. And if you look at that passage in Isaiah chapter 5, it is so similar to what Jesus says in John chapter 15, that Jesus appears to be almost doing a sermon on Isaiah chapter 5.

[10 : 21] He clearly has this in mind because the parallelism is so strong. And so in Isaiah chapter 5, we see that God is the vine dresser and his people are the vineyard.

And yet even though God has cultivated them, he has nurtured them, he's cared for them, they are not producing good fruit. And so he says in verse 4, God says, God says, I've been caring for you, I've been nurturing you, I've been doing everything for you, yet instead of bearing good fruit, you've borne terrible fruit.

But what is this? What's the good fruit, what's the bad fruit? How does God describe these? Well, Isaiah goes on and tells us in verse 7, says that God, he expected a crop of justice, but instead found oppression.

He expected to find righteousness, but instead he heard cries of violence. By the way, in the Old Testament, those words justice and righteousness are often used together to form a single idea, and that of righteous and good works.

But notice here, what is righteousness? You notice this in the Old Testament, we have these poetic passages. The way oftentimes you understand one line is by contrasting it to the line before.

[11 : 40] So what's the opposite of justice? The opposite of justice is oppression. What's the opposite of righteousness? It's violence. And so what he's saying is that true righteousness, what righteousness looks like, is actually a care for the oppressed, a concern for those who are weak, a concern for those who are in need.

And again, this is a theme throughout the Old Testament, particularly the prophets. Well, they talk about the wicked oppress the powerless, while the righteous care for the powerless.

Bruce Walkie put it this way in his commentary on Proverbs. He talks about the contrast between the righteous and the wicked. Walkie says the righteous are willing to disadvantage themselves to advantage the community.

The wicked are willing to disadvantage the community to disadvantage themselves. Do you see what righteousness is then? Righteousness then is a concern for others.

It's a concern where you're actually willing to disadvantage yourself for others. And so when Jesus says care for the weak, we care for the needy, we care for others around us.

[12 : 46] We're not simply seeking to exploit, but we're willing to pour ourselves out for the sake of others. And he even makes this clear in this passage. For that background, go back to John chapter 15.

And then he says in verse 10, Jesus says, those who abide in his love keep his commandments. And then in verse 12, he spells out for them the main commandment that we are to keep.

Notice what he says. This is my commandment that you love one another even as I have loved you. Now, it's no surprise here that Jesus would highlight this commandment because elsewhere he said that if you look at all the commandments, all the commandments in the Bible, all the commandments hinge on two commands, and they are love God, and the second command is love your neighbor.

All the commandments are summarized in that. In fact, the reason we have those commandments are to help us understand what it means to love God, verse 4 of the Ten Commandments. And then the last six are showing us what it means to love our neighbor.

What does it look like to love? And so ultimately, the call of us that God puts on our lives is to love one another, to love our neighbor. That's what a beautiful life looks like.

[14 : 04] All you need is love, right? All you need is love. Love one another, love your neighbor, and that's the fruitful life. Now, that sounds beautiful.

You know, it's great, and I'm sure we'd all like to do it, but it's pretty doggone hard to love your neighbor. I think many of us think of ourselves as loving people, but, you know, what we find is that you love certain people.

One of the reasons I went into ministry is I thought I liked people. And so years ago, I'm a young man. We're planting a church in Orlando, and so I'm like, I'm a people person.

I like people. And so God began to bring people to our church, and what I found out pretty soon is I don't like people, you know? I don't like people, at least some people, because, you know, some people are just mean, right?

And you meet them in church, frankly. Well, you meet them everywhere, to be honest. Some people are mean. Some people are weird. And some people are socially awkward. Not that that's so bad, because I kind of fit that category, too.

[15 : 08] But, you know, some people are very draining. And all these people came to my church all at once. And so here I am, and I'm going, ah, you know? I'm looking at this, and I find out I only like certain people.

Here are my requirements. I like people who like me. If you like me, I think you're great. If you don't like me, I don't like you. It's pretty simple, you know? Or I like people who are fun.

Well, that's not the command, right? It says love your neighbor. It says love your neighbor. It doesn't say which neighbor. It doesn't say love the neighbors you're like, or love the neighbors who are like you.

It includes everyone. It's without qualification. It includes the healthy and the hurting. It doesn't only include those who think like you, but those who have very different backgrounds with you than you.

Those who struggle with issues differently than you. And get this, even people who vote differently than you. Whoa. I mean, now Jesus has gone to meddling at this point, right?

[16 : 07] When he talks about loving your neighbor, he means love your neighbor. All your neighbors. And to love them, again, indiscriminately. And what becomes terrifying about this, Jesus says that if your life is not marked by love for others, because that's the fruit he's talking about in this context, if your life is not marked by fruit of others, if you do not bear the fruit of righteousness and justice and love, you will face God's judgment.

In verse 2, he says that any branch that does not bear this fruit is taken away. Verse 6, those branches that are cut off and taken away are gathered and thrown into the fire and burned.

So according to Jesus, those who do not live a fruitful life incur the eternal judgment. Now you might say, okay, wow, I've got some work to do.

I need to get my act together. I'm just going to be selfless now. I'm going to be loving. I'm going to be patient. I'm going to be kind. The problem is you can't change you.

You can't change your heart. I cannot make myself be a loving person anymore than I can make myself love kale. It's not going to happen. It's just not something that's going to come natural.

[17 : 21] You can't just wake up one morning by sheer willpower and say, oh, I'm going to love annoying people. It won't happen. Willpower will not do it. The key to change is not the will but the heart.

The key to change is not the will but the heart. Jonathan Haidt has this illustration like this. He says, imagine a man riding on an elephant. And so you have this image.

It's probably a small man, big elephant. And the elephant represents the emotions, and the man represents willpower. Now, a man can ride that elephant, control where it goes.

It's pretty remarkable. But what if at some point the elephant gets spooked and wants to go a different direction than its rider wants it to go? Who's going to win, the man or the elephant? Elephant every time.

The heart will trump the will every single time. Every single time. And so what we see in Christianity with the gospel is Christianity does not call us merely to behavior modification but to heart transformation.

[18 : 26] And your heart cannot be transformed by you but only by Jesus. Because as Jesus says here, apart from me, you can do nothing.

Nothing. So we are called to abide in Christ. Well, what does that mean? So look again at verses 5 and 6 to see what it means to abide in Christ. He says, I am the vine, you are the branches.

Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit. For apart from me, you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me, he's thrown away like a branch and withers, and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

Now, Jesus' point is not, if you want to abide in him, you better bear fruit. That's not what Jesus says. His point is, if you abide in him, you will bear fruit.

And so we have to be careful that we do not confuse the result with the cause. We don't bear fruit in order to abide in Jesus. We bear fruit because we're abiding in Jesus.

[19 : 27] If you flip those two things, you no longer have Christianity. You have a religion, but it's not Christianity. Because Christianity starts with us abiding in Christ and therefore bearing fruit.

Jesus says, apart from him, we could do nothing. So the key here, see, fruitlessness is not the main problem. Fruitlessness is a symptom, a sign of the problem that you're not abiding in Christ.

Notice, Jesus does not command us to bear fruit. That's not a command. He commands us to abide in him, and as a result, we bear fruit. So again, what does it mean to abide in Christ?

Look again at what Jesus says throughout the passage. Repeatedly, he says, abide in me. Verse 4, abide in me, abide in me. Verse 6, abide in me. Verse 7, abide in me.

But then in verse 9, notice the change. He says it slightly differently. He says, abide in my love. Here's the key. Here's where it all comes together.

[20 : 29] What it means to abide in Christ is to abide in his love. To abide in his love. The key to the Christian life is faith. The key to the Christian life is faith.

What that is, is faith is not simply being optimistic. Faith is not having a positive outlook. Faith is believing that the gospel is true. Faith is believing that Jesus Christ came, lived a perfect life in my place, died on the cross, took the penalty for my sins.

And because of that, he's shown his love for me, and he's going to care for me all the way until he brings me home. And when we believe that, the Holy Spirit's power is unleashed in our lives so that we bear fruit.

We believe the gospel truth. The key to the Christian life is faith. It's the good news. It's what Jesus says in verse 13. Here's what you're called to believe. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends.

So we abide in Jesus by believing that. By believing that it's actually true. He did not die because we're good. He did not die for us because we're fruitful.

[21 : 35] Well, on our own, we bore no fruit because apart from him, we can do nothing, right? We can only bear bad fruit. On our own, we deserve death, but in him, we have life.

See, the death of Christ shows us both the reality of our sin and the reality of his love. Because our sin is so serious that we deserve to be cut off and thrown into the fire.

But the love of Christ is so real and so deep that he was cut off and thrown into the fire on our behalf. Where we deserve judgment, he gives us life.

And where he had earned life, he receives our death so that we can have life. We abide in Christ by believing that, by believing the gospel. And when you believe that, it actually changes everything.

You'll live a fruitful life, not because, oh boy, I better do this in order to earn God's favor. Rather, we live a life of obedience and seek to live a life of righteousness because we already have his favor.

[22 : 36] John Calvin put it this way. As he comments on this passage, he says, The obedience which believers render to God is not the cause of why God continues to love us, but it is rather the effect of his love.

You see that? God's love produces that obedience. To abide in his love means to live with a conscious awareness that Jesus delights in you.

I think that's something we forget. We know it because he just sang about it a minute ago. We know it, but we forget it. And see, what happens, though, is when we believe the gospel is true, that's what produces obedience.

Now, as we talk about trust and obey, those two are not equal. What happens is we trust and therefore we obey because we live out of that faith, out of that trust.

You know, it changes how we live. It changes everything about us when we actually believe that he loves us. And so, to abide in Christ's love means to believe that.

[23 : 40] So, to remain in his love, then, means we live with that constant awareness that God loves us. Here's what's interesting. Have you ever gone to church and heard a sermon or Sunday school and you go, I really didn't get anything out of it.

I already knew everything they said. That's not the point, right? What we're doing as we come together in worship is we're being reminded. We're not here to learn something new.

We're being reminded of something old. And we need to be reminded. We need to constantly be in that fellowship and that union with Christ, reminded of his love, because otherwise we're prone to forget.

You know, I think my wife knows that I love her. I told her 37 years ago, right? You know? And I'm thinking, you know, do I need to repeat that?

Yes. I think she loves me. But, you know, we tell each other we love one another. That's not new information. You suddenly go, oh, my goodness, you're just finally now coming around.

[24 : 41] No. No, we spend time together. We share our love for one another because you need that constant reminder, because absence makes the heart go wander, right?

And so same thing in your relationship with Christ. You know, your children, you know, if you're absent a lot of times, I remember this. I was working a lot when my children were younger, and I'd come home, and my middle daughter would give me the cold shoulder because I hadn't been around for a while.

I mean, she would just, like, totally ignore me. Because what a child needs to know is her father loves her, right? And so that's, like, constant reassurance. Well, we need the same thing.

We need to be reminded. So we come and we worship. But we also have to be thinking about this throughout the day every day. We have to abide in his love. And so that's why we pray.

That's why we read our Bibles. That's why we meditate. That's why we go through. And it's a conscious thing we have to do throughout the day because if we don't do it consciously, we will not abide in his love.

[25 : 42] And so we're reminding ourselves of the gospel, that Christ died for us. And when we do that, when we remember that Jesus loves us, then it transforms how we live.

Because then obedience is not merely a duty. Think of this. Think of it as a parent, what it's like raising children. I mean, if you saw a job description for a mom, it's horrific.

You know? It is terrible what you have to do. Change dirty diapers. Stay up late at night. Then they become teenagers. And oh, my goodness. And then they move away. Now, you know, do you know what my children are doing right now?

I have no idea. I mean, they're gone. And you have all these worries and all these concerns, and yet you find yourself sacrificing for your children, not because it's your job.

You could not pay me enough to be a father. But I would not do it. You know, I would never give it up. Never give it up. You do it because of love. And when you see Christ loves you, then here's what it does to obedience.

[26 : 44] Here comes the command of God. Love one another. Or command to do not lie, do not steal, whatever the command is. And you're thinking, this God loves me. He knows everything.

He knows what's best for me. He cares for me. And so if he gives me a command, and he knows me, and he loves me, and he knows what's best for me, then I have to assume that the best thing possible for me to do is to obey that command.

It flows out of abiding in Christ. And plus, I'm going to want to do those things because I want to honor him. And so abiding in Christ transform your life.

Think about how it changes your relationship with other people. If God can love me when I'm annoying, I'm far more annoying to God than anyone is to me, right? I've sinned against God far more than anyone sinned against me.

And if God can love me even though I'm unworthy, then certainly we can love our neighbor whether they're worthy or not, right? It changes everything about us. Abide in Christ, and our lives are transformed.

[27 : 46] If God can love me, then I can love others. But if you want your life to bear beautiful fruit, instead of trying to change your life by sheer willpower, instead of just trying to gut it out, seek to live an obedient life, but do so out of remembering his love.

Abide in my love, and you will bear fruit. Let's pray. Father, we do thank you that we do have that privilege of abiding in you, in Christ.

And so because of that, we can abide in your love. But Father, we come and we confess that sometimes we don't abide in your love because sometimes we look at our own works and our own performance, and we realize we haven't earned it.

We look at our fruit and think that somehow you love us for our fruitfulness rather than the other way around. So Lord, forgive us. Forgive us for doubting your love when you've given your Son for us.

Forgive us for questioning your love when we disobey you. Forgive us for doubting your love when we are unwilling to sacrifice to serve others. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.