

**Reading God's Word with God Part 1:  
What does an Authentic Christian Life Include?**

Pastor Tom  
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~ John 15:1-11

This past week, when I was driving to work I heard part of a message on the radio by a speaker named Charles Price. It had some great insights that I thought would be relevant to our Vision 2025, asking God for 250 new believers in Christ. But I'm driving. I can't take notes. I don't have a photographic memory. I only heard part of the message. I don't even know the title. So at the end of the broadcast, they say something like for a copy of this message call this number or go to our website Living Truth.

So I go on this website and there is nothing that really refers to the radio program. They have videos but they are of the current pastor of Peoples Church in Toronto where Charles Price used to be the pastor. I click on the resources tab but I don't know the title of what I listened to. I tried searching their site. I typed in a key word or two I remembered from the message. No results. Though they had an online store, since I didn't know the title or the series, I couldn't find it.

So then I thought I would go to the radio station's website to see if they kept a record of the title and message played. So I go on their website and the only thing there I can find is their schedule. So I click on schedule and I find their weekly schedule with whoever is speaking. I go to Tuesday and find Charles Price at 830 AM. Yes that is the one I listened to. I click on that link and I am getting excited. But the link just lists the times Charles Price is heard on the radio station. And at the top of the page they have this statement – For more information on Living Truth with Charles Price go to – where do you think they sent me – Living Truth where I couldn't find the actual message.

Now I know the Living Truth people weren't lying at the end of the program about the availability of this message. I'm sure it's somewhere. But the instructions turned out to be vague and too general. There were no clear steps on where to actually find that specific message.

The same can be true when it comes to describing the Christian life. If someone asked you "Can you tell me what the Christian life is all about," how would you answer? Or say some friend of yours has received Christ. They have become a Christian. Then they ask you "so now what do I do?"

**How do you we actually live the Christian life?** When we're vague or foggy about this, it can lead to confusion. Some people seem to think that the Christian life is like buying a life insurance policy. When you buy life insurance, you agree

to avoid something reckless that endangers your life. But once signed, you can live basically how you want. Then when you die, your loved ones have some financial compensation. Apply this to the Christian life and you start with an agreement with God. You invite Jesus into your life so you will be forgiven and go to heaven when you die. But until then you can basically live however you want.

Others seem to think the Christian life is like going on a cruise. You get on to God's ship when you receive Christ. You stay on the ship through rough waters. But when the life settles, you get off the ship and do whatever you want. You live however you want to live. Then when life changes or life gets rough, you get back on the ship. Then God brings you to another time of calm/peace. The cycle recurs until the final journey is into paradise.

Still others seem to think the Christian life is like joining a fitness club. You meet with the club rep. You see the benefits of joining. You are told how your life will be better if you spend lots of time at the club. So you join. Then you have to come and do all the work. If you come do the work you get stronger. If you don't, you get weaker. So the Christian life involves joining up and get the benefit salvation. After that it's all about self-discipline and hard work. You get stronger. Until one day, they reach the gold level of Christian club membership. And then they are ready for heaven.

But living the Christian life is very different from all of these. It's not like life insurance, life on a cruise ship or life at a fitness club. Thankfully, God gives us some pictures of this life to help us see it and live it. Today, we are going to look at one picture given by Jesus Himself. It comes from words He spoke to the disciples at the Last Supper. Jesus communicates crucial information so they can live the Christian life apart from His physical presence.

In His instruction to them, we learn vital truths about how to actually live as a Christian every day. These truths also apply to how we read the Bible. Most Christians would agree that reading the Bible is part of the Christian life. But how do we read it so that it actually leads to life transformation like we were talking about last week? The truths Jesus reveals in this passage apply to our Bible reading. So my hope today is that first we will gain a clearer picture of what the Christian live includes. Then we will apply this to our Bible reading so we can connect more deeply with God.

**John 15:1-11 (ESV)** Page 763

**15** "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. <sup>2</sup>Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. <sup>3</sup>Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup>Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. <sup>5</sup>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. <sup>6</sup>If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. <sup>7</sup>If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup>By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. <sup>9</sup>As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. <sup>10</sup>If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. <sup>11</sup>These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

Jesus starts out with a declaration that governs this whole passage. "I am the true vine." But to us living in a prairie city in 21<sup>st</sup> century Canada, this is a strange statement. We can relate to Jesus' earlier I AM statements in the Gospel of John. I AM the bread of life. Well that's good. We can trust Jesus for life. I AM the good shepherd. That's also good. We want a good shepherd to lead us. I AM the resurrection and the life. That's really good. We want to trust Christ for our resurrection. I AM the way the truth and the life is also reassuring. But "I am the vine?" What does that have to do with us? We hardly even know what vines are in this climate. And what's this about the "true vine?"

Well first century Jewish disciples at the Last Supper understood the significance of this statement. Vineyards filled their country. They saw vines growing everywhere. When Israel first spied out this land, they noticed an abundance of fruit and grapes. In Numbers 13:23, we're told the spies came to the Valley of Eschol and cut down from there a branch with a single cluster of grapes, and they carried it on a pole between two of them." That must have been a huge and heavy cluster of grapes to need a pole and two men to carry it. The vineyard became a symbol for Israel. She was called the vine or vineyard of the Lord in the Old Testament. She was supposed to be the people through whom others came to find the Lord.

But Old Testament references to Israel as a vineyard are mostly negative. Like Isaiah 5:1-2 "Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard. My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it and hewed out a wine vat in it; and he looked for it to yield grapes but it yielded wild grapes." So here Israel was the Lord's vineyard where He expected good fruit. But instead it produced wild fruit. Or in Jeremiah 5:21 the Lord says through Jeremiah "Yet I planted you a choice vine, wholly of pure seed. How then have you turned degenerate and become a wild vine?" God responded to Israel's unfaithfulness by allowing her to be conquered by foreign powers. The vine of Israel failed to be true to God and true to the calling as a light to the nations.

But now Jesus declares I am the true vine. ‘Through Me people will connect with God. I will not be unfaithful. I will not produce wild fruit. I will fulfill the calling that Israel failed to fulfill. I am the true vine’. Then Jesus says “My Father is the vinedresser or vine farmer.” Every vineyard requires someone to look after the crop just like our prairie farmers look after their crops. Here God the Father will look after the vine.

Then in verse 2, Jesus begins to expand on this image. He is the vine. The Father is the vine farmer. And there are branches connected to Jesus which need to bear fruit. Here we find one piece of the Christian life. **What does an authentic Christian life include? 1 - Bearing fruit that Glorifies God (1-2).** The branches represent people. Some branches seem connected with Jesus. But they don’t bear fruit. Other branches do bear fruit, the Father will remove them. Those are authentic Christians.

So one proof of authentic Christianity is fruit-bearing that glorifies God. The authentic Christian life results in actions, attitudes and behavior that glorifies God. It’s kind of like the transformed life we talked about last week. The authentic Christian is being transformed from a self-exalting, self-centered person to a Christ-exalting, others-centered person. There’s only two types of branches – fruit-bearing and fruit barren. The barren branches will be removed by the Father.

Then at the end of verse 2, we find another piece of the authentic Christian life. It includes **Pruning by God so we bear more fruit.** Do you see that at the end of verse 2? “Every branch that does bear fruit he prunes that it may bear more fruit.” Pruning means trimming or cutting away. If you have done any gardening or work with plants, you know they grow out of control pretty quickly. You can’t let every shoot that comes out of a plant compete for space and sunlight. They will crowd each other out and limit the size of the fruit they produce. So you have to prune back some shoots so good shoots can produce large fruit clusters. If you don’t do that, the plant just grows wild producing less fruit.

The same applies to Christians. We come to Christ just as we are. We naturally want God to accept us as we are. He does! But we also want Him to leave us as we are. We don’t want to be changed or pruned because it’s uncomfortable. But God loves us too much to leave us as we are. We need God’s pruning work for us to bear fruit that glorifies Him.

So say a person becomes a Christian who has a big mouth. They seldom if ever hold back from speaking out every thought they think. They justify this by claiming to be honest and straight with people. It doesn’t matter if what they say is hurtful or harsh, they just say it because they think are right about most everything. But their harsh words drive people

away. Then they come to Christ. Though they might want to share their new found faith with others, they can't. People walk away because of their harsh words. Then God comes along and speaks to this person through 1 Peter 3:15. "In your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect." So big mouth needs to change the way they speak. They need pruning. They need the Holy Spirit to bring this life change. They receive power to restrain their talk and start speaking in a way that glorifies God. Then, instead of driving people away, people want to spend time with them. They are willing to listen to their faith story. They begin to bear much more fruit because of God's pruning work. So the Christian life includes fruit bearing and pruning by the Father.

Jesus goes on and gets to a central piece of the authentic Christian life back in John 15:4-5. "Abide in me and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine. You are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit. Apart from me you can do nothing." So notice that word "Abide" which actually occurs 11 times in this passage. But what does it mean? We don't use the word abide any more.

Some of your versions translate it "remain" which helps us understand a little more. It basically means to remain attached so you can get life from the vine. So another aspect of the Christian life is **constant connection to Christ so we can bear fruit**. The only way a vine's branch can produce fruit is if gets nutrients and life from the vine itself. The only way a Christian can produce fruit is if we remain in constant connection with the vine – Jesus Christ. I think verse 5 is really the central verse of Jesus' teaching here. It provides a very clear answer to the question "how do you live the Christian life?" **To live the Christian life, we must remain constantly connected to Christ**. When we do that, bearing fruit will be a natural outcome. Verses 7 to 11 show what fruit bearing looks like. So verse 7 – If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you. Constant connection to Christ leads to **"A God-centered prayer life."** Notice Jesus does not only talk about prayer. He talks about prayer that leads to fruit. Ask what you wish and it will be done for you.

Or verse 8 – By this my Father is glorified that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. By remaining connected to Christ, we bear fruit which results in **glorifying the Father**. When God's people give God glory we do what we were created to do.

Or verse 9-10 – As the Father has loved me so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love.” Well there’s another piece of fruit. **Obeying Jesus commandments.** That honors God. Notice that when we obey, we don’t get a star on the wall or check mark beside our name. We abide or live in His love. There’s something sweet and beautiful about actually obeying God. We discover His commands are good. He meant them for our good. So we develop a greater love for someone who has our good in mind.

The last piece of fruit in this passage is really wonderful. Verse 11 – These things I have spoken to you that my joy may be in you and your joy may be full. So remaining connected to Christ leads to **experiencing deep joy in the things of Christ.** Is your Christian life joy-filled? I’m not talking about joy because all your problems disappear. Nor am I talking about joy because everything goes well in life or you’re having a good run. No, I’m talking about joy despite suffering – joy in the midst of trial – joy that goes beyond earthly comfort and pleasantness. Jesus says this mere hours before His arrest. He will be twisting in agony on the cross within 12 hours. Yet He still talks about His joy being in them and their joy being full.

Joy is possible when we find deep satisfaction in all that God is for us in Christ regardless of what else is going on in the world. If you’re lacking joy because you are angry at someone, ponder how much you have been forgiven by Christ. The more we understand the magnitude of our own sin and how much God has forgiven us, the less capacity we will have to be angry at others. Now this certainly doesn’t minimize the reality of relationship stress. But some of the tension can be released when we remember how much we’ve been forgiven.

Or we might find joy as we think about how much God does to protect us from the devil. John Newton – the former captain of a slave ship and author of Amazing Grace reflected on the Phrase in the Lord’s Prayer phrase “but deliver us from evil.” That last phrase can be translated – “deliver us from evil or deliver us from the evil one.” He prefers the latter. Newton lived a rebellious sinful life for his first 25-30 years. So he thought long and hard about the devil’s influence over him. He writes “the devil tempts the conscience. By working upon the unbelief of our hearts, and darkening the glory of the Gospel, he can hold down our soul . . . so that it shall not be able to look up to Jesus, nor draw any comfort from his blood, promises and grace.”<sup>1</sup> He paints a clear and well thought out perspective on the multiple ways the devil

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<sup>1</sup> John Newton, The Works of John Newton, Volume 1, Carlisle, PA, Banner of Truth Trust, 1839, 2015, 384.

works to discourage us and drives us away from God. He writes, “Surely we should be more earnest and frequent in praying, “Lead us not into temptation.” From the little I have known of the malice and subtlety of our spiritual enemies, and the weakness of those barriers which we have to prevent their assaults, I am fully persuaded that nothing less than the continual exertion of Almighty power which preserves the stars in their orbits, can maintain our peace of mind for an hour or minute.”<sup>2</sup> But then Newton describes the hope we have because of our protector. “We cannot tell what an hour may bring forth: but we are under his protection and if we depend on him, we need not be anxiously afraid. He will be faithful to the trust we put in him, and we will suffer no temptation that will overtake us, but only what he will support us under and bring us through.”<sup>3</sup> No matter what’s going on in your life today, you can choose to focus on the fact that God is at work defending and protecting you from the worst of the devil. That in itself is a reason for joy. So continual connection to Christ produces fruit, a God centered prayer life glorifying the Father, living in His love through obeying His commandments and a deep full joy in the things of God.

Jesus points to all these wonderful fruits that show up in the life of authentic Christians when we remain constantly connected to Him. But how? Well there are several ways; prayer; going out into creation to observe God’s beauty; serving; worshipping; gathering with other believers who spur you on in your faith; sharing your faith. And reading the Bible.

How do we remain connected to Christ as we read the Bible? We have to start by acknowledging the truth of the last phrase of John 15:5. Apart from me, you can do nothing. **To begin reading God’s Word with God, admit you can do nothing apart from Christ.** I always struggled with this phrase when I was growing up as a Christian. “Apart from me you can do nothing.” There are lots of non-Christians who do a lot apart from you. So what does this mean?

It must mean in this context that we can’t do anything that involves fruit-bearing apart from Christ. He’s just said “whoever abides in me and I in him bears much fruit.” A branch connected to the vine bears fruit. But a disconnected branch doesn’t.

If we apply this to our Bible reading, it means we can either read our Bibles in a fruit-bearing way or a non-fruit bearing way. To bear fruit, we have to admit we can do nothing apart from Christ. We can’t even read our Bibles in a fruitful way apart from Christ. We need to come humbly.

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<sup>2</sup> Newton, 387.

<sup>3</sup> Newton, 388.

We need the Holy Spirit to work humility and a teachable spirit into our hearts. Otherwise we may approach the Bible distracted or pridefully. We may distort it or dismiss it. In Isaiah 66:2 God says, “This is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word (Isaiah 66:2).” So we must come humbly.

Then we are free to read as God’s children looking forward to His provisions as we read. After all, Jesus said we must come to Him as a child. Though children can be selfish and proud, they freely admit they need someone else to provide for them. I suspect there is not one parent in this room who heard a young child say “I am so down because I can’t provide for my needs.” Kids don’t do that. They look to their parents or caregivers to provide. They accept that as their place in life. They just trust that the food is coming from their provider.

That is the way we are supposed to approach life including the way we read the Bible. We don’t come thinking we know it all. We don’t come thinking we have something to teach God. We come recognizing that apart from Jesus we can do nothing. So once we do that, we start reading and anticipate God’s provision. The admission of our helplessness is the first step in Reading God’s Word with God. This will naturally lead to prayer which we will take up next time in this series.

But for today 2 final words. 1. If you don’t know Christ or have been far from Him – the way to Him begins with this same admission “Apart from You, I can do nothing Lord.” Some people think that before they can come to Christ, they must be good or do a bunch of good things. But God’s invitation is for anyone, anywhere at any state in life. If you have sensed God’s call on your life or have resisted it because you think you need to do something or become good, you don’t. Instead admit “apart from You Lord, I can do nothing. So with nothing I come to receive you.” 2. Christian – apart from Christ we can do nothing – we cannot bear fruit or live the Christian life or engage in ministry as God calls us to or read His Word. So will you also come to Christ & admit “I can do nothing apart from You.” Then receive what He provides.