

I Am A Branch

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[0 : 00] Okay, we're going to turn again together to John's Gospel chapter 15 and we're going to continue our study on the Christians identity. This is what we're looking at in the evening services.

We're thinking through some of the concepts and terms that the Bible uses to describe our identity as followers of Jesus. I'm going to read again, verses 4 and 5 of John 15.

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, for apart from me you can do nothing.

And our title for this evening is, I am a branch. Now throughout this series, we're using a diagram to help us think through this whole question of our identity.

And this is our diagram, recognizing that there's three key elements to our identity. There's what God thinks of us, and then there's what we think of ourselves, and there's what others think of us.

[1 : 12] And what we want to keep coming back to is the fact that at the heart of a biblical understanding of our identity is the recognition that our identity is defined by God.

He is our Creator, he is our Savior, therefore he defines our identity as the ones that he's made and he's saved.

And we want to keep coming back to the fact that what he thinks, what he says, what he does, needs to shape what we think of ourselves and needs to shape the way other people see us.

And we've said it every time and we'll keep saying it, we have to make sure that these arrows are pointing in the right direction. And the reason we have to do that is because it's so easy for the arrows to point in the wrong direction.

Sometimes we can project what we think onto our identity. A great example of that is somebody who really struggles with self-esteem. We think we look at ourselves, we feel like a failure, we feel unlovable.

[2 : 14] That's what we think, and then we think that's what God thinks as well. Or we may find ourselves hurt or judged by others who look down upon us. And we think to ourselves that we're just pretty worthless and others don't like us, God's not going to like us either.

All of that's examples of the arrows going the wrong way. We don't want any arrows going the wrong way. The arrows must flow in the right direction. What God thinks is absolutely crucial.

And we need to keep thinking about this because we're recognizing in this series that it's very easy for us to get our sense of identity wrong as Christians. And it's so easy for either our own thoughts or the influence of others to shape our understanding of ourselves.

And that can very easily lead us to an inaccurate view of God. Now we've been looking at this together over the past few Sunday evenings. And we're basically using this diagram to give us a framework for our sermons whereby we're asking a question related to each part of the diagram. We're asking what does God think? We're asking what should you think? And we're asking what do we want others to think? And the does, the should, and the want are all very important.

[3 : 32] So let's just work through these one by one starting with this question. What does God think? So in terms of this image, the first two parts of our study, we looked at the fact that as Christians, you are a child and you are a saint.

That was the first two parts of this study. And both of those terms are to be understood literally. If you are trusting in Jesus, God the Father really is your father. You really are a child of God.

And you really have been set apart as his saints, as his holy people. So child, saints, these are to be taken literally this week.

It's slightly different because when Jesus says you are a branch, he is using imagery. Now, the words, the word branch in verses four and five here is a metaphor.

And the purpose of that metaphor is to teach us about the relationships and connections that the gospel establishes in our lives.

[4 : 40] And at the very heart of that is our connection to Jesus. We are the branches. He is the vine to which we are connected.

And that is an incredibly important aspect of a Christian theology. In fact, this imagery is pointing us to what is arguably one of the most important theological concepts presented to us in the Bible. It is all pointing towards our union with Christ. And this is really what I want us to think and talk about tonight. Union with Christ, that really, that those three words there sums up the whole scheme of salvation that is revealed in the gospel.

The whole thing is rooted in the fact that if you are a Christian or if you become a Christian, you are united to Jesus. Absolutely everything depends on your connection to him.

And that emphasis runs right through the New Testament. And in other places, there's other imagery used to convey the same truth. So here in Colossians 1, you've got the imagery of a head and a body talking about the connection that we have to Jesus.

[6 : 00] Here we have the imagery of a temple, a building and a cornerstone, again connected to Jesus. And then in Ephesians 5, you've got the imagery of a husband and a wife, and Paul tells us this refers to Christ and the church.

So you've got lots of different images conveying the same thing. You also have a constant emphasis throughout the New Testament, the fact where it's again and again tells us that we are in Christ.

That's something you'll see in the letters all the time. So verse Corinthians starts with these words, to the church of God that is in Corum's, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus. Same in Philippians, to the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, and Colossae to the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae.

That language of being in Christ is just an expression conveying the fact that we are united to him by faith. And the reason why union with Christ is so important is because that is what makes our salvation possible.

The whole of Christianity is centered on events that took place 2,000 years ago. The incarnation of the Son of God when Jesus was conceived and born, the baptism and public ministry of Jesus, and most of all the death and resurrection of Jesus.

[7 : 24] These things all happened 2,000 years ago and it's easy to think how can something that happened 2,000 years ago have any benefit for me? And the answer is that through faith you are united to him and you are united to everything that he accomplished.

And that's actually the whole reason why he became human. It's the whole reason why he was baptized to come alongside you and to identify himself with you.

And as he died on the cross and as he rose again, you are tied up in all of that. He did it all for you. And that's because his death was for your sin, not for his, and his resurrection gives life not just to him, but to you as well.

And it's all to undo the problem and damage of sin that we are all completely bound up in. And this is really what lies at the very heart of the Gospel.

[8 : 31] Paul captures it beautifully in Romans 6. I want to just read this little paragraph. This is all, look out for the union language. For if we have been united with him, with Jesus in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin.

If we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again. Death no longer has dominion over him.

For the death he died, he died to sin once for all. But the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

To be a Christian is to be utterly and fully and eternally united to Jesus and to everything that he's achieved.

[9 : 41] Now in terms of our identity, that has an incredibly important implication. It means this, it means that God never ever looks at you on your own.

He never looks at you on your own. Because when he looks at you, he sees a branch and that branch is connected to the vine, to his son, to Jesus Christ.

And it's so important that we work to grasp this because it's not how we tend to think. We tend to look at ourselves and we just see a whole pile of sin and failure, so many ways in which we've mucked up and our heart sinks.

And one of the things that the devil wants for you is for you to feel alone and for you to look at yourself on your own.

And so he'll point out all your failures, all your mistakes, all your inadequacy and all your weakness. He'll want you to look at yourself on your own.

[11 : 02] And at the same time he'll also encourage you to act on your own. And so he'll get you to judge others, he'll get you to take revenge, he'll get you to jump to conclusions, he'll get you to wander away from God, he'll get you to do your own thing.

And sometimes he'll get these two things to feed off each other. So the devil will dare us to go down some path of sin and then he'll crush us because we've done it.

And you know how that feels, how many times have I done that where you think you see something that you know is wrong and yet you're lured towards it, you go and you do it and then you feel crushed, full of regret.

The devil's dared you and then he's crushing you. Or sometimes he'll highlight the failings and the regrets that we've got and he'll make that the excuse to go and do something foolish.

And so you know, sometimes you see that where you feel that you've mucked up in your life, that you've made mistakes and that just makes you think, well stuff it, what's the point? And you just go and muck up even more and use that as an excuse to indulge in sin.

[12 : 20] And all of this at the root of all of these things is the devil's attempts to make ourselves see ourselves on our own.

And yet at the heart of the Gospel is the fact that if you're a Christian or if you become one, God will never ever look at you on your own.

He will only ever see you in union with Christ and that is just amazing.

Because it means that when he looks at you, he doesn't see a whole list of sins. He sees a debt that has been paid in full.

When he looks at you, he doesn't see a whole pile of stains. He sees one who's been washed whiter than snow.

[13 : 21] When he looks at you, he doesn't see someone who's just still in the grip of the kingdom of darkness. He sees the total victory of Jesus over all the power of sin.

And that's because when he looks at you, he sees the finished work of Christ. But most amazingly of all is this, when God looks at you, he sees another of his children.

He sees a son or a daughter whom he loves just as much as he loves his own eternal son.

And I love the fact that when I say that, that God loves you as much as he loves his son, I would find that impossible to believe.

And yet John 17, a couple of chapters from this one, it says exactly that. Jesus' prayer for his people would be that we would be in him and that I and them, you and me, that they may be perfectly one so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.

[14 : 48] And that is just, that is the incredible depth of God's commitment to you. And that's why it's so incredibly important to remember that God is not going to view you on your own.

He will never, ever look at you on your own. He will only ever look at you in your union with Jesus. And this is incredibly important for those moments when we stuff up as Christians.

Because in those moments, God does not think, leave them alone, forget them. In those moments, God says, that's one of mine.

Bring them back. That's what God thinks. He sees you as a branch united to his son.

So, if that's true, what should you think? And again, the should is important because we don't find it easy to think in these terms.

[16 : 03] All of this should have a huge effect on how we think of ourselves. As Christians, we need to see ourselves as united to Jesus. And, you know, especially if you're in that place where you're not quite sure where you stand as a Christian.

If you're just not sure where I stand, you need to see yourself as united to Jesus. That it's nothing to do with what you bring. It's everything to do with what he is.

And the amazing reality of the Gospel is that everything that Jesus is triumphs over everything that we are not. Everything that he is triumphs over everything that we are not.

I was thinking about how to illustrate this. My illustrations always default to something to do with engineering. I want you to think of electricity. If you have a live wire in one hand and a dead wire in the other, and you join them together, what do you have? A live wire.

If you have a glass of salt water and a glass of not salt water and join them together, what do you have? Salt water. If you have darkness on one side of your curtains and sunlight on the other, and you open the curtains, what do you have? Light everywhere.

[17 : 26] And in all these illustrations, what one is completely triumphs over what the other one isn't. The wire is live, the other one isn't, you join them together, both live. This one, this glass of water is salty, this one isn't, join them together, salty.

This side of the curtains is bright, this side is dark, you open the curtains, the whole thing ends up bright. That's exactly how it works with Jesus.

Through our union with Him, we become everything that on our own we're not. We become what He is.

And the implications of this are so incredibly important. So common concern that I hear people talk about, they feel they are not good enough on their own.

And it's true we're not, but Jesus is impeccably righteous. And we're united to Him. We are weak and fragile on our own. Jesus is unstoppable strong.

[18 : 34] And we're united to Him. We are alienated from God on our own. Jesus is at the Father's side and we are united to Him.

And maybe most importantly of all, on our own, we are not gracious enough. What do I mean by that? Well, what I mean is the fact that on our own, we will so often condemn ourselves.

And we'll conclude that we're not worth saving and that we're not worth loving. And every time we think like that, we're showing that we are not gracious enough.

But He is. He is inexhaustibly gracious. And when He looks at you, He looks at you with love and grace and mercy in His heart.

And He unites us to Himself. Everything that He is triumphs over everything that you're not. Everything. And if you're thinking, but I'm this, but I'm that, it covers it. It covers it.

[19 : 51] Your union to Jesus, your union to Christ covers it all. And that's got to shape how we think of ourselves. So I want you just to think, you know, in any difficult situation, a good question to ask yourself is, how does being united to Jesus affect this?

So maybe you've got a big decision to make about your future. How does being united to Jesus affect that decision where you think, well, it means that whatever will happen, I'm not going to be on my own.

He's not going to let me down. Maybe you face disappointment in life. How does being united to Jesus affect it? It's like you're reminded, well, it's okay. What really matters, what really matters is not changing.

Maybe you're tempted to sin, which we all are at times. How does being united to Jesus help that it makes us realize, oh, yes, there is something better than whatever this sin is trying to offer me in this moment.

You get hurt and bruised by life. How does being united to Jesus affect this? Reminds me that he's always going to hold you. He's never going to let you go. So it's a great question to ask, how does being united to Jesus affect this situation?

[21 : 11] But in particular, the passage that Neil read shows us that our union with Christ, our identity as branches connected to the vine, it should shape our expectations.

It should shape our expectations. And from the passage, we can pick out three things that we should expect. The first is that we should expect fruit.

That's what's been conveyed here, 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.

For apart from me, you can do nothing. The branches are connected to the vine and because of that connection, the branches are able to produce fruit. So you, as a Christian, if you are a Christian, if you become a Christian, you are going to produce fruit.

And that fruit does two things. Fruit on any tree does two things. It identifies the tree. So fruit is a visible indicator of the identity of the tree.

[22 : 19] If there's apples on a tree, then it's not an orange tree. It's an apple tree. That's what it tells you. But that's not the only thing that fruit does. Fruit also provides a blessing that sweetens and nourishes the lives of others.

A tree doesn't eat its own fruit. We come along and we take it. And it's all pointing us to the fact that the inward spiritual union that we have to Jesus makes a difference in our outward lives.

It makes a tangible difference to what other people will see and to what they will experience as they interact with us. And it's summed up so beautifully by Paul. He says, this is the fruit of the Spirit. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such things, there is no law.

And just, I think this is an incredibly important thing to remember. Sometimes, when we're thinking about coming to faith and especially when we're thinking about professing faith, we think, what do I say?

[23 : 45] What do I say? What would I say to Thomas? What would I say if I was meeting with the elders? What would I say? Do you know what you say doesn't matter?

The key thing is what we see. And we see this.

When we can see fruit in your life, you don't actually need to say anything. And I'm just going to say this. There's people in this room who are not yet members.

In every single one of you. I can see this. In every one of you.

Which means it doesn't matter if you don't have anything to say. If you can't express it, it's okay.

Anyway, that was a wee aside. What I want to highlight is that fruit is something that we should expect.

[24 : 58] And that's part of the reason why Jesus repeats again and again in these verses, look, whatever you ask of me, I'm going to give it to you. Ask of me and I'll give it to you. Ask of me and I'll give it to you. Now, that's not like a wishful thinking, free for all.

Just get whatever you like if you follow Jesus. It's not shallow like that. It's all about abiding in him. And the fact that as we abide in him, as we seek to bear fruit, as we ask for that, he is going to grant it.

And it's promising us that as you go through your life, as you meet people this week, as you work with them, as you live with them, as you communicate with them, you can be a beautiful source of fruit in their lives.

In other words, you can be what's maybe the one part of their life this week that is not sour or bitter or rotten.

Instead, you can be sweet, beautiful fruit that benefits others. And you know what happens as you do that?

[26 : 11] As we go and bear fruit, as we go through our lives showing this love, joy, peace, as that's our characteristic, we leave something behind.

So we're going along through our lives. It's a terrible drawing, but here we are. We're going through life bearing fruit, and all the time we're dropping something.

What are we dropping? We're dropping seeds. That's how the seed of the Gospel is stoned. That's what happens when fruit is taken and left.

It leaves a seed. And as we go through our lives following Jesus, we're sowing those seeds in the lives of others. So we should expect fruit. The second thing though that we need to expect is pruning.

I am the true vine. My father is the vine duster. Every branch of me that does not bear fruit, he takes away every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes that it may bear more fruit. Now this part's not so pleasant because being pruned can feel hard.

[27 : 18] And for a time pruning will look as though it's made things worse rather than better. I remember I once visited a castle and there was a big notice in the garden.

They had this beautiful garden with a really famous magnificent hedge. And they said, this hedge is famous. It's been here since 150 years or something, but it was getting heavier and heavier and heavier and bigger and bigger and bigger.

And it was starting to bring down a wall that was behind it and they said, we've taken the decision to prune it. And it looked horrendous. It looked absolutely awful.

But they had to do it. Now that's probably about 10 or 15 years since I was at that castle. It probably looks amazing again now, but at that time it did not look good.

But it was essential because it was actually going to crumble if it was left. And God uses pruning to increase our health, to increase our fruitfulness, to make us even more of a blessing to others.

[28 : 23] But the key point is this. Pruning, so in other words, something difficult or hard or disappointing or confusing happening in your life as a Christian.

Pruning does not raise questions about your identity. Pruning confirms your identity.

And that's captured so powerfully in Hebrews. I'm going to read this passage in full from Hebrews 12. Have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord.

In language I'm using just now, you could say, don't regard lightly the pruning that the Lord does. Don't be weary when reprov'd by him, for the Lord prunes, he disciplines the one he loves and justifies every son whom he receives.

It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. But what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you're left without discipline in which all have participated, then you're illegitimate children and not sons.

[29 : 27] Besides this, we have earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respect to them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them.

But he disciplines us for our good that we may share his holiness. For the moment all disciplines seem as painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceable what?

Fruit of righteousness to those that have been trained by it. When things don't go the way we want them to go, it's so easy to think God is punishing me or to think God has abandoned me.

But really we should be thinking maybe God is pruning me. And if he is, it's because he's preparing to bless others through you.

And you know it's so important to remember sometimes pruning can just, I don't know, take a day or something. What do you grow in an egg nest? You prune that it'll grow back in a day.

[30 : 35] In a garden you prune your flowers a couple of days and they're back. But if you prune a big hedge or something like that or a massive tree, it might take years to get back to where it was meant to be.

Some Christians go through pruning that can take weeks, months, maybe years.

But in it all God has never let you go. And in it all God is accomplishing his purposes through you.

So we should expect fruit, we should expect pruning and we should expect joy.

These things I've spoken to you that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full. At the heart of our union with Christ is a transmission of joy. Never ever forget that God is fundamentally and abundantly happy.

The relationship between God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit is a relationship of infinite eternal joy. And a key aim of the gospel is to share that joy with you.

[31 : 51] In other words union with Christ means that you're united to the happiest person who has ever existed. And every moment of joy that we experience now is a foretaste of the eternal joy that will be ours in heaven.

All of this is reminding us of a very basic and very crucial theological truth. The fact that knowing Jesus is flipping brilliant.

It's just brilliant to know Jesus. And at the heart of his purposes for you is to pour his joy into your life.

So our union with Christ should shape what we expect. One more tiny thing under this point is that there's one thing that we should not expect that's highlighted in this passage.

There's one thing that we should not expect because it's something that God doesn't expect. Verse 5 teaches us that God never expects us to achieve anything without him.

[32 : 58] Apart from him we can do nothing. He never expects you to achieve anything on your own. That's why as you go into a new week, as you seek to serve him in your life, he is with you every step of the way.

Last question, I'm losing my weekly battle with the clock but we're very nearly done. What do we want others to think? Well, there's loads that we could say here. There's one thing that I just want to highlight that comes from a key word.

We want our union with Christ, our identity as branches connected to the vine, to shape how other people see us. And there's one key word that Jesus uses that describes what we want other people to see when they look at us.

We want them to see that we are friends.

That's what we want people to see. That Jesus is our friend and that we are united together in his family, in his vine as friends.

[34 : 17] That's what we want people to see when they walk in here. That's what people do see here. That's what's been so encouraging for me over these past couple of years. The number of people who have visited Carly and have said, wow, it's so warm and friendly.

That's exactly, that is just utterly biblical behaviour from you all. I'm so thankful for it because that's exactly what Jesus wants us to be.

And this is an important reminder that our soteriology and our ecclesiology are inseparable.

Now, what do these awful big words mean? Soteriology is what we mean when we talk about all the aspects of theology that refer to God saving us. So it's the theology of being saved, soteriology.

And then ecclesiology is the theology of the church, everything that the Bible teaches about the church. So everything that the Bible teaches about being saved is here, everything that the Bible teaches about the church is here.

[35 : 19] And all of this is reminding us that these two things can never, ever, ever be separated. Because when Jesus saves us, we are united to him and that means we are united to one another forever.

That's why, you know, we must never think, you know, sometimes I've heard people say, you know, I believe in Jesus, but I don't need to bother with church. That's the equivalent of saying, I believe in Jesus, but I think he's wrong.

Because at the heart of the Gospel is the fact that we are united together as one family, as one beautiful plant, a vine and the branches all connected together.

That has a couple of important implications. One is that it's a massive warning against division. It's just reminding us again how division is so wrong in the church. We should not be divided.

The churches in Carlyway should not be divided. It is ridiculous that they're divided. They should not be. There should not be division in the church. We should never be going it alone thinking, I don't need anybody else.

[36 : 31] We should never be unfriendly as Christians in the workplace or in our families or anything like that. There's warnings there, but there's also a wonderful reminder. Being a Christian opens the door to so many wonderful friendships.

And you know, I just look at you and it proves that that's true. And so friendship is just such a crucial part of God's purposes for us.

So you're a branch. You're united to Jesus. I've run out of time. The last thing I want to say is this.

You might be thinking, but what if I'm not a Christian? You might think, I'm not united to Jesus.

Well, maybe you're not united to Jesus yet. Maybe you're not a Christian yet. If that's the case, then there's something else that's true. And this is the thing I want you to remember more than anything else. Anyone who is not united to Jesus is invited to Jesus.

Amen. Let's pray.