



# THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

## *Abide in My Love*

SERMON BY REV. STEVEN GRANT ■ JUNE 3, 2018

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**W**e are continuing our look at some of the events in the Upper Room on the night in which our Lord Jesus was betrayed. Last week we talked a bit about the symbolism of foot washing with which Jesus taught about forgiveness and reconciliation. Later in the gospel we have these words from our Lord Jesus in John 15:1-17 (NASB):

“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 bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit. <sup>3</sup>You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup>Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. <sup>5</sup>I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he 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 as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are 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>My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples. <sup>9</sup>Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also 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 so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full.

<sup>12</sup>“This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. <sup>13</sup>Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends. <sup>14</sup>You are My friends if you do what I command you. <sup>15</sup>No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you. <sup>16</sup>You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and that your fruit would remain, so that whatever you ask of the Father in My name He may give to you. <sup>17</sup>This I command you, that you love one another.”

Believe it or not it has been one entire year since I had the tremendous blessing of being awarded my Doctor of Ministry Degree from Westminster Theological Seminary. It is hard to believe that an entire year has passed by! I remember the very beginning of that process. The very first thing that we were supposed to do was participate in what was called the Orientation Module, which was to teach us how to be doctoral students. During that module students begin to think about what their dissertation or project might be. One of the lecturers for that orientation was Dr. Leslie Altena, the Director of the Theological Writing Institute at the seminary. She gave us the assignment to write a three-page paper outlining our future project.

I thought a three-page paper would be no problem! This would be my very first chance to do some writing at the doctoral level, so I set to work revising and honing it. I tried to make sure everything was just right; that all jots and tittles were correct. As I turned it in I thought, “Now this is a good, solid piece of writing!”

Then I made an appointment with Dr. Altena to discuss what I had written. I thought it would be great! I would talk about my project and it would really be lots of fun. I arrived on time for my appointment and, as she usually does, Dr. Altena greeted me very warmly and invited me to come sit down. Then she handed me my paper. It was covered in red marks! I could not believe what I was seeing! It seemed that almost every line had things crossed out, little

notes, and arrows all over the place indicating that one part was supposed to go someplace else. Then, to add insult to injury, there was another full page attached at the back with all of her comments!

She must have recognized my reaction, because she said, “Now don’t panic, it’s not as bad as it seems!” Over the next 40 minutes she proceeded to tell me what all her red marks were about. What she was doing was describing to me the differences between how I ordinarily approached writing and what was needed in an academic style of writing. It was not that what I wrote was bad, but it was not what was needed for an academic context. This is what is known as *pruning*.

I do not know anything about gardening, but I am told that wise gardeners will prune, cut back, or shape their plants so that in the future they will produce even more flowers or fruit. What Dr. Altena was doing was not trying to be mean or to deflate my ego. To use Jesus’ imagery, she was not cutting me off and throwing me out. She was not saying I was not good enough to be a doctoral student; rather, she was trying to offer me a gift. She was trying to *prune* my approach to writing so that in the long run I would produce more fruit; not just more fruit, but a certain type of fruit. I could have continued to write the way I had before, and it would have produced some fruit, but it was not the specific type of fruit that was needed in an academic setting, particularly at Westminster.

The faculty’s motivation in the whole orientation process was to remind me and all my fellow classmates that the pursuit of this degree was not primarily about us! Receiving a degree was not primarily about our acquiring a credential or even about maintaining a particularly high seminary standard, though that was certainly included. What they were teaching us was that the purpose of this project and why they wanted it to be the best it could be was because they wanted the project to benefit the Church. The reason they wanted it to benefit the Church and to make me a better pastor was to build up the Kingdom. Ultimately, that is what all our efforts are about: building up the kingdom, glorifying Almighty God, and serving His purpose. When that is the goal, we realize that it requires a certain type of fruit.

Friends, we all go through life doing all the things that we do according to how we have been shaped, how we have been influenced, how we have been taught. The impact from our parents, our family, our friends, our education; the influence of what we have read and what we have observed by personal experience; all of these produce fruit. The results are how we live. This may be suitable for the secular world and a worldly agenda, it may even be suitable for our own agendas, but it may not necessarily be suitable for God's agenda. It may not be suitable for the building of His kingdom in the way in which He wants it built. Jesus needs a certain type of fruit. He needs the branches to be attached to the right source, the right vine. He needs us to be attached to Him.

Listen to what He says to identify Himself in John 15:1. "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser." He is trying to outline the fact that out of all the influences of the world—and there are many constantly bombarding us—Jesus must be overwhelmingly the greatest, most comprehensive influence upon us if we are to be His disciples. It is one thing to sign onto a whole set of beliefs and to be a believer, but to be a *disciple*, to be an *instrument* of His, requires much more than that. It requires drawing from **Him** as the source and the influence over every aspect of our lives; all other things must be subservient to Him, the Lord of all. Jesus goes on to say in John 15:2, "He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit."

Friends, this is why sometimes, perhaps oftentimes, we must go through some very difficult or very uncomfortable experiences; some lessons are hard to learn. There are times in our lives when we are called to account. There are times when we are lovingly corrected and, sometimes, not so lovingly corrected; nevertheless, the correction may be necessary. There are times when perhaps a bad attitude or faulty thinking is being exposed; perhaps we are simply wrong. There are even times when God must break us so that He can rebuild our lives more in His image. We can choose to be bitter. We can choose to be angry or offended. We can beat ourselves up over our shortcomings, or we can receive the correction as a gift and recognize that we have an opportunity to be better disciples because of it.

I am reminded of the teaching in Proverbs 3:11-12. We presume this is Solomon who says,

My son, do not reject the discipline of the LORD  
Or loathe His reproof,  
For whom the LORD loves He reproofs,  
Even as a father corrects the son in whom he delights.

You see, it is not just for our own benefit. It includes that, as God wants us to have full lives, He wants us to have a close relationship with Him, and He wants our lives to be full and joyous. But that is not all. We are to be His instruments in building up His kingdom. He needs to shape us. In Romans 8:28 Paul says:

...we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.

In this way, we can make sense out of suffering and troubles. The Bible uses the phrase "the refiner's fire." It is the way in which God uses all our experiences to shape us, to prune us so that we will become more like the Master. Whenever we are off-base we can be sure that it is because we are not connected to the right source. There is another source we are drawing on, there is another agenda, there is something else that is influencing us and causing us to do or to think or to say the things that we do. Something other than the Master is driving us.

There is a wonderful story of Jacob in the Old Testament. Jacob was up to his old tricks. He had cheated his brother Esau out of his birthright and Esau was angry. Jacob knew that Esau and all his men were on their way to deal with him. Jacob had camped out by the side of the river. We read about it in Genesis 32:24-28.

Jacob was left alone, and an angel wrestled with him until daybreak. <sup>25</sup>When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he touched the socket of his thigh; so the socket of Jacob's thigh was dislocated while he wrestled with him.

What Jacob is wrestling with is the question of how he will face his brother the next day. Up to that point he had been conniving and manipulative, but that would not work now because Esau was on his way with his armies. The angel appears, the manifestation of God's presence. Jacob grabbed hold of the angel who said, "Let me go, for the dawn is breaking." But Jacob answered:

"I will not let you go unless you bless me." <sup>27</sup>So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob."  
<sup>28</sup>He said, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel; for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed."

He needed God's guidance on how to deal with his brother. Sure enough, the next morning Jacob approached his brother Esau in an entirely different way than he had ever done before; he did it God's way. He was reconciled with his brother.

Notice that in the wrestling, Jacob injured his hip. This teaches us that sometimes the truth hurts and that there are times when God must break something within us to reshape us in His image. Also, Jacob receives a new name which indicates *transformation*.

In John 15:5 Jesus says:

"I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing."

Nothing? Nothing regarding building the Kingdom. You might build up something else, but what is needed is to build up the Kingdom in the way He wants it built.

If you remember two Sundays ago, Pastor Allen preached a wonderful sermon that culminated in the concept of how we as brothers and sisters in Christ must be unified. Last Sunday I raised the question, "How do we do it? We are sinners all, we get on each other's nerves, and we do things that create division; how can we make that unity happened?"

Last week we talked about Jesus washing the Disciples' feet, and we learned that it is so much more than just the idea of serving. Built into that imagery was the idea of *forgiveness* and *reconciliation*. You do not have unity if you do not have the capacity to forgive and be reconciled. This elicits a further question. How can I forgive and be reconciled? How can I make that happen? Sometimes it is hard to forgive. Are you thinking of a person or a circumstance right now that was very difficult for you to forgive? Maybe there is someone you still have not forgiven. How do we do that? This is where our passage today is crucial. Listen to what Jesus says in John 15:9-10.

“Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love. 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.”

What He is telling us is that the extent to which we are filled with the love of Jesus, the extent to which we have embraced and fully opened ourselves and reminded ourselves of how much Jesus loves us will spill out toward everyone else. The way in which we relate to others is utterly transformed when He is the source; we are so filled with the love of Jesus that it becomes as natural as if it were part of our DNA!

He says, “...keep My commandments, you will abide in My love.” How do we keep His commandments? I look around and see people trying so hard to do that, or who give up because they believe that it is just too difficult. We look at the Bible and see all the rules—do this and this and this. How can we keep all His commandments? What makes it so difficult is that we view them as obligatory rules that we are required to follow, implying that we otherwise would not. Do you understand that when you are full of the love of Jesus His commandments become the desire of your heart? You then want nothing more than to follow those commandments! It just flows! This is how the Holy Spirit transforms us from the inside out! It all starts in **abiding in His love**. When we realize how much Jesus has loved us and we allow that love to be all-consuming for us,

no matter who it is or what the circumstances, the natural result is to be inclined to embrace the person standing in front of us.

What is the specific fruit that Jesus requires for the building up of His kingdom? John 15:11-12 tell us.

“These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full.”

He is talking about our joy being made full. Sometimes we think that all the obligations and rules of the Bible cramp our style. We look around at all the things of this world that make us happy and make us joyful. Those are nice things, but they are *not* what can satisfy us ultimately. Jesus says that when we are full of His love our joy will be full because nothing will take it away from us. He goes on to say, “This is My commandment, that you love one another, **just** as I have loved you.” Very specific fruit. He is not talking about the way **we** think we should love. He is talking about the way we **should** love. He says, “...the way I love you.”

That is why the Sacrament of the Lord’s supper is so important and why we regularly share in it. The Sacrament of the Lord’s supper is essential to the life of the congregation of God’s people because it reminds us of the sacrificial love of Jesus. As He said, the way He loved us, He sacrificed, and He has unconditional love for us; that is the way He wants us to love each other: **sacrificially**.

This sacrament before us is more than just a church ritual, it is more than something we see, taste, and touch. Notice that Jesus did not say to look at this. He did not say to touch this. What did He say? **Eat** this, **drink** this because it is something that we take into ourselves and it reminds us of the source of our spiritual nourishment. If we are what we eat, then Jesus’ sacrificial love becomes who we are and determines how we live. This sacrament is more than a religious ritual; it defines our way of life; it defines who we are. Most importantly, the sacrament defines **whose** we are!

