

# BEING AN EFFECTIVE CHRISTIAN

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*By the Book*™ A Chapter by  
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## Let's Begin

*No one desires to live a life void of effectiveness. Whether it pertains to our personal relationships, our studies at school, our jobs, or even our hobbies, we all possess a desire to be effective, to be successful. How much more that desire exists as Christians when it comes to our faith in God. Does any believer set out to fail in his faith? Of course not. We desire to be effective as Christians.*

*John 15 draws our attention to being an effective Christian. As you will note, however, Jesus speaks in much more colorful terms: "I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing" (v.5). Jesus uses the image of producing fruit as He speaks of living the effective Christian life.*

*A poll taken by USA Today revealed that eight of ten people associated satisfaction with life by being effective—that is, productive—in life. For the Christian, that number should be higher!*

*With that in mind, let's explore John 15 together. We'll use the following outline as our guide:*

- I. An Effective Christian is Devoted to a Productive Life (vv. 1-11)**
- II. An Effective Christian is Devoted to a Painstaking Love (vv. 12-27)**

## I. An Effective Christian is Devoted to a Productive Life (vv. 1-11)

The last verse of chapter 14 indicates that Jesus and His disciples probably had left the Upper Room and were in route to the Garden of Gethsemane: "Arise, let us go hence" (v. 31). That being so, Jesus wasted not one precious moment to continually teach His disciples since death loomed ever so near.

In this chapter, *three relationships* the Christian experiences clearly unfold. In the first section (vv. 1-11), John focuses on the Christian's *relationship with the Lord*. Next, he zeros in on just how a Christian's *relationship with others* is unpacked (vv. 12-17). Finally, Jesus deals with our *relationship to the world* (vv. 18-27).

### Reflection Connection

*How do our relationships affect the effectiveness of our life? Explain. Do you think our relationships should be prioritized? Why or why not?*

The masterful method Jesus uses to unfold these relationships is stunning. Let's begin with our relationship with Jesus. Our union with Christ is perceived, in Jesus' words, as "branches" (v. 5), "friends" (v. 15), and "witnesses" (v. 27). Without the fundamental relationship Christians have with Jesus Christ, especially as expressed in the three metaphors Jesus used, our life remains empty of any effectiveness whatsoever: "for without me ye can do nothing" (v. 5).

More specifically, let's note the *parable* Jesus expresses (vv. 1-3). As Jesus and His disciples were walking toward Gethsemane, the opportunity could have presented itself for Jesus to pass an orchard. A grape orchard would be perfect for Jesus to teach His disciples how utterly fundamental their relationship to Him would be if their lives would be effective: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman. Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit" (vv. 1-2). The vine was a popular image in the Old Testament for



### Reflection Connection

*Name some ways in which we may judge if our life is a failure or if it is effective. Allow others to share their thoughts.*

the nation of Israel (Psalm 80:8-16; Isaiah 5:1-7; Jeremiah 2:21; Hosea 10:1). It stands as no surprise then that Jesus would employ that image toward His followers.

What cannot be missed, however, is that Israel's portrayal as a vine was invariably associated with failure. That is, Israel failed to meet God's expectation. They had no real fruit for God. Their life was, in a word, ineffective.

Jesus walks amidst this national failure and says: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman... Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me" (vv. 1, 4). Jesus was implying that although Israel had always been an unproductive vine, He would not fail. Nor will he fail who lives and abides in Him! (cp. Isaiah 53: 2).

Note also that followers of Jesus are not to be the vine. They needed a function more appropriate to who they were as creatures. Jesus emphatically declared that He was the vine and His followers were the branches (v. 5). As branches, we are dependent upon the vine for our life, our health, our sustenance, and even our very existence. This means, of course, we could hardly be effective in life apart from Jesus Christ. Thus, the relationship Jesus reveals speaks one thing loudly and clearly: *our life is only useful as the Lord uses us as a channel to bear fruit.*

Furthermore, Jesus indicates the husbandman is our Heavenly Father (v. 1). Husbandmen were the crop cultivators in those days. They specifically cared for the branches by protecting them, pruning them, and providing them with proper watch care. This guaranteed the harvest would not only be abundant but also of the finest quality.

God uses the same process in our life. He is always pruning to ensure an ever greater harvest of effectiveness. Two pruning knives are of particular note that God uses to make our life fruitful and productive. First, Jesus mentions the Word: "Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you" (v. 3). God's Word is the razor blade that slices through pride no matter how deeply rooted it has become. His blade whacks down the undergrowth of selfishness despite its thick outer bark.

And, though not mentioned here, God inevitably uses suffering as another pruning knife to shape us into effective vessels for Him. The Apostle writes: "Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby" (Hebrews 12:11). No one enjoys the discomfort life many times affords us. Yet, according to Scripture, God uses such pain as a pruning process to enable us to produce fruit for Him.

Observe second *the principle Jesus explains* (vv. 4-6). The first thing Jesus explains to His disciples is the secret to effective fruit-bearing. For Jesus, effectiveness is captured in one word: *abiding*. Our Lord says: "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me" (v. 4). Three times Jesus refers to "abide" in this verse, with an additional six times in the next six verses. Clearly, abiding is a key element in understanding what Jesus meant about being effective.

### Reflection Connection

*Reflect upon a time in your life when you were certain that God was using a painful experience to "prune" your life into greater effectiveness for Him. Be sure to allow the groups to share their experiences as well.*



One thing we must remember as we attempt to understand what Jesus meant is the distinction between being “in Him” and “abiding in Him.” Being “in Christ” is a term relating to salvation (cp. 2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 2:10). If we are saved, we are “in Him.” However, “abiding in Him” is a term relating to sanctification; it’s about our fellowship and communion with Him. While we may at times, through disobedience, hinder our fellowship with Jesus-our *abiding*-we can never hinder our being saved. Once saved, we are saved forever.

*We are to remain in Christ.*

A look at the word itself reveals that the term “abide” was often used in connection with the home. The word means “to dwell,” “to remain.” As a man remains in his home, so we are to remain in Christ. We note here that Jesus mentions at least two things that help us abide in Christ. *First, reading His Word keeps us abiding in Christ:* “If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you” (v. 7). Nothing takes the place of the Word of God in the life of the believer. *Second, practicing His presence keeps us abiding in Christ:* “If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father’s commandments, and abide in his love” (v. 10). This is nothing more than putting the written Word-the Word which we learn through reading it-into practice.

Additionally, the abiding we have with Jesus is a two-way relationship. That is, we are to abide in Him and He is to abide in us. The bottom line is, without Jesus our life remains non-productive: “for without me ye can do nothing” (v. 5)

*Let’s finally note the productivity Jesus expects* (vv. 7-11). There is a progression in the words of Jesus when He speaks of bearing fruit: fruit (v. 2b), more fruit (v. 2c), and much fruit (v. 8). As we abide in Christ and He abides in us and as we are pruned by the Husbandman (v. 1), our life progressively produces more and more (cp. Psalm 92: 13-14).

Observe also that Scripture teaches that there are many different kinds of fruit. For example, Paul speaks about both the fruit of *character* (Galatians 5: 22-23) and the fruit of *conduct* (Philippians 1:11). But Jesus speaks primarily of the fruit of *converts* (cp. John 15:16; 4:36). Every follower of Jesus is called to bear Christian character resulting in godly conduct. But abiding in Christ also produces other followers of Jesus Christ.

## II. An Effective Christian is Devoted to a Painstaking Love (vv. 12-27)

Moving into the second half of chapter 15 thrusts us into the greatest necessity a Christian requires to live an effective, productive life-*a non-negotiable, painstaking love which absolutely consumes our lives*. Three separate times Jesus mentions our absolute obligation to love (13:34; 15:12, 17). Thus, some have called this emphasis on love the “Eleventh Commandment.” More precisely, Jesus Himself revealed that love summarizes the other ten (cp. Matthew 22: 35-40).

As we flow through this section, there are three lessons on love that we must learn. *First, we must learn the exhortation of love*. Jesus commands us to love: “

### Reflection Connection

*Do you think our society places too much emphasis on love or not enough? Please explain. How is the love exhortated by Jesus different from the love society promotes?*



This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you” (v. 12). Isn’t it a tragedy that we must be commanded to love? Yet, that is precisely what Jesus does. Love is to be the identifying mark for the Christian’s life (13:35). Love is the atmosphere in which we ought to live (15: 9-10).

All of our relationships are characterized by love. Scripture places a high value on love in our *family*. Love sustains the marriage relationship (Ephesians 5:25, 28) as well as the parental relationship (Ephesians 6:1; cp. Proverbs 13:24; 30:11-12). When love reigns in the home, the generation gap will be cured!

We’re also exhorted to love the *brotherhood* (1 Peter 2:17). By brotherhood the Bible does not mean a men’s organization. Rather the focus is on brothers and sisters in God’s family. It is loving the church! In the little letter he wrote years later, John recalls what our Lord said: “And this commandment we have from him, That he who loveth God love his brother also” (1 John 4: 21).

Additionally, Jesus exhorts us to love our *neighbor*. The parable of the Good Samaritan clearly teaches us neighbor-love (Luke 10: 30-37). Finally, we are obligated to love even our *enemies*. Consider the words Jesus spoke: “But I say unto you which hear, Love your enemies, do good to them which hate you, Bless them that curse you, and pray for them which despitefully use you” (Luke 6: 26-27). Living a life of love means living a life of effectiveness. Nothing else can suffice.

*The second lesson on love we learn from these verses is the exhibition of love.* Consider carefully the words of Jesus: “ This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you” (v. 12, italics mine). The kind of love Jesus demands from His disciples is the kind of love He Himself exhibits-*as I have loved you*. Also, this love-that is, loving the way Jesus loves His followers-constitutes the “new commandment” about which He had earlier instructed them (13: 34).

Is it possible? That is, to love like Jesus loves us? Not in our own strength and power are we able. However, recall that we are not alone; Jesus Himself abides in us (vv. 4-5). Just how did Jesus exhibit His love? He did so first by coming to earth, leaving the bosom of the Father for the lowly manger. He gave up the praises of angels for the jeers of evil men. Here is how Paul put it: “ For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9).

It is perfectly normal to wonder just why He would do such a thing. John tells us elsewhere exactly why He did it: “In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4: 9-10). That’s the love of Jesus for us plainly exhibited in His life and works. Again, the Apostle Paul tells us Jesus exhibits His love even for ungodly sinners: “ But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died

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### Reflection Connection

*What is our normal response to our enemies? Is it possible to live up to Jesus’ standard of loving our enemies? Why or why not? Name some examples of Christians who loved their enemies. Be specific.*

### Reflection Connection

*Are we expected to give up everything we hold dear as did Jesus in order to love like Jesus loved? Why or why not?*



for us" (Romans 5:8). The term "commendeth" literally means "to demonstrate," "to show," "to prove." The cross is God's love captured in time.

*The third lesson we learn about love is the extension of love.* Jesus reminded the disciples: "These things I command you, that ye love one another.. But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me" (vv. 17, 26). Love as an attribute of Jesus' disciples is directly connected to the coming of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit makes love personal.

Yet, love is not just personal; love is *radically* personal. It extends to you, me, and the entire globe. His love reaches out to the weak, the ungodly, the enemy, and the failure (cp. Rom. 5:6, 10). No person remains unlovable to God. We may do some unlovely things but we cannot become unlovable no matter what we do. God loves. Period!

### Golden Greek Nugget

Jesus spoke of His Father as the "husbandman" (v. 1). The term is a compound of two other terms meaning "dirt" and "work." Hence, it means one who works the dirt, a farmer or a gardener. The context reveals that the husbandman takes care of the "branches" which he prunes in order for them to bear more fruit. So, the image obviously is the vinedresser who oversees the vineyard.

### Wrap Up

Living a life of satisfaction stands high on our list of priorities. No one sets out to settle for dissatisfaction. Furthermore, satisfaction in life is directly linked to being productive—that is, making life count. Jesus gives us a strategy for living effective Christian lives. That strategy includes not only being devoted—sold out—to abiding in Him so that our lives will be fruitful, but also devoted to the non-negotiable principle of love.

