THE COMMITMENT IN A RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

John 15:1–17

Key Verse: 15:4a

“Remain in me, as I also remain in you.”

We’ve been going through a special series entitled, “A Real Relationship With God.” Through Isaiah 1 we learned how to have such a real relationship—though we’re sinners, God initiates a real relationship with us, if only we’re willing to repent and turn to him. Through Romans 8 we learned the nature of a real relationship with God—it’s a relationship through the Holy Spirit, a relationship that draws us out of the realm of the flesh and into the realm of the Spirit: a real, personal, intimate love relationship with God our Father.

Today we want to think about another aspect in having a real relationship with God. It’s commitment. Today people are afraid of commitment. What is commitment? The Urban Dictionary defines it with a poem: “Commitment is what/Transforms the promise into reality./It is the words that speak/Boldly of your intentions./And the actions which speak/Louder than the words./It is making the time/When there is none./Coming through time/After time after time,/Year after year after year./Commitment is the stuff/Character is made of/The power to change/The face of things./It is the daily triumph/Of integrity over skepticism.”

In having a real relationship with God, God is already fully committed to us, but we have to respond by being really committed to him. How can we be committed to God? What does it mean? And what happens when are? A great passage in the Bible about this is John 15, where Jesus repeatedly tells his followers to “remain” in him. In this passage we want to learn more about who Jesus is, about who we are, and about how we can really remain in him and be truly committed to him. May God speak to us through his living words.

First of all, we want to see what today’s passage tells us about Jesus. In verses 1 and 5 Jesus says that he is the “true vine” or “the vine.” What does he mean? It’s not through nature or ideas or people; Jesus is the only way we can be connected in a real relationship with God. Jesus is the true vine because he’s the source of life (1:4); in fact, he *is* “the life” (11:25; 14:6). Jesus became the true vine, the source of spiritual life with God, through his death and resurrection. Through Jesus, any person, no matter who we are, can be reconnected with God and come alive spiritually. On the other hand, without being connected to Jesus, the true vine, no matter who we are, we’re spiritually dead (Eph2:1–5). In any Christian fellowship there are always people who don’t have this real connection. Jesus says that the Father, who is the gardener, will eventually cut off all such dead branches (2,6). But through being united with Jesus, we have a living, breathing relationship with the living God.

In verse 3 we see that Jesus’ words make us “clean”—it’s through his words that we have a real connection with Jesus, and through him, with God the Father. In verse 4 we also see that Jesus remains in us. Though we’re weak and sinful and fail so often, Jesus remains in us with his unconditional love to help us take a deeper root and grow. And in verses 4 and 5 we see that Jesus is the one who makes us fruitful. Without remaining in Jesus we can’t bear fruit, and in fact, we can’t do anything. But as we remain in Jesus, we’ll bear much fruit, and our lives will glorify God (8).

In verse 9 Jesus shows us what God’s love is. God the Father loves Jesus the Son. In fact, he loved him before the creation of the world (17:23,24). Jesus says in verse 9 that it’s with this love of the Father that he has loved his followers. Beginning with the first disciples, we all taste the love of the Father through Jesus the Son. And we see how Jesus would ultimately love. In verse 13 he says, “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” Jesus laid down his own life for us. He sacrificed himself for us, for our sakes. By doing this, he proved to be our true friend. Finally, in verse 16 he says that he chose us, even though we did not choose him. In doing this, he showed us God’s love that takes the initiative. Jesus shows us God’s love that's so committed to us.

Next, in today’s passage we can learn about ourselves. In verses 1–8 Jesus repeatedly refers to us as branches. As a branch, we’re dependent on the vine. And as a branch, we receive life and nutrients from Jesus so that we can bear much fruit. According to verse 2, as a branch sometimes we need pruning so that we can be even more fruitful. This pruning is God’s discipline. Why do we need God’s discipline to prune us? It’s because even though we’re connected to Jesus the true vine, we have many other things in our lives that weaken our relationship with him. These things can be worldly distractions or attachments that take our hearts and minds away from Jesus and his words. Often we can’t even recognize what these things are in our lives. But God the Father can see them, and in his greater spiritual love for us, he sometimes prunes these things away, so that our relationship with Jesus can grow deeper and more fruitful.

In this passage Jesus addresses us as branches and he repeatedly tells us to “remain” in him. It’s kind of odd, because usually a branch doesn’t have to be told to remain in a vine—it naturally does so, and it doesn’t really have a choice. But in Jesus’ allegory here, we as branches do have a choice. We can either choose to remain in Jesus or choose not to remain in him. What does it mean to “remain in Jesus”? In Greek, the word “remain” literally means to “live in.” We’ve all experienced it: We go to church, a meeting, a conference or a Bible study and feel really inspired and touched by God’s love, but then we go off into our real lives. And in our real lives, we hardly ever hear God’s word. There may be very few believers around us. We get immersed in a godless mindset, to the point that we hardly ever even think about God. We get immersed in a “me-centered” mindset that seems so much more natural, and everyone’s doing it. Worst of all, we forget God’s love for us—his amazing grace and forgiveness. Then we dry up spiritually. Let’s read verse 4a. Jesus repeatedly says in this passage, in one way or another, “Remain in me” (4,5,6,7).

But how can we remain in Jesus? Let’s read verse 7. Jesus says we remain in him as we allow his words to “remain” in us. Notice he doesn’t say “my word” but “my words.” It’s not one or two things Jesus said, but everything he said. To remain in Jesus, we’ve got to get really interested in everything Jesus ever said or taught. We’ve got to keep thinking about it, meditating and reflecting on his words and asking what he really meant. We’ve all heard the expression, “In one ear and out the other” or “Like water on a duck’s back.” Often, right after church or a Bible study, we can’t even remember what it was all about, or even what the passage was. For his words to remain in us, we’ve got to be intentional enough to keep thinking about it. This is why it’s good to write things down whenever we study the Bible, so that what we hear can actually remain in us. It’s also good to write a reflection after studying a passage in the Bible, so that we can retain what we learned and start applying what Jesus taught to our practical lives. It’s good to even memorize verses of the Bible.

But this can be tricky. Even the Pharisees memorized large chunks of the Bible from their childhood, and yet Jesus told them, “You have no room for my word” (8:37). For his words to remain in us is not what we know or write or say, but a matter of what’s really in our hearts. If our hearts are full of other things, practically speaking, we’ve got no room for Jesus’ words. We’ve got to get rid of some of the other things in our hearts to make room for the words of Jesus. The words of Job in the Old Testament actually help us. He wrote: “I have not departed from the commands of his lips. I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my daily bread” (Job23:12). Most of us delight in delicious food. But for Jesus’ words to remain in us, we’ve got to treasure them more than the most delicious meal we can imagine.

Let’s read verse 7 again. The other way to remain in Jesus is to pray. If we never really pray personally, it’s just not possible to remain in Jesus. Sometimes we don’t know how to pray. But as we turn our thoughts to Jesus’ words, we can find things to pray about. We can ask God’s help to do what Jesus taught. And we can ask God to help the people we care about to be connected to Jesus the true vine and to remain in him.

Here’s where we come back to the whole idea of commitment. Any real relationship requires a mutual commitment. As we’ve seen, God is already totally committed to us. The problem is our commitment to him. As in any relationship, we can take and take and take and not really be committed. To be committed, first of all, we’ve got to make time. Most people are very busy. Most people have to go to work to make money to pay their bills to survive. And a job can be very demanding—it can consume all our attention and strength. Even if our job is mindless, when we’re off work, we just want to relax and enjoy. Students are busy going to school and to classes, and when they’re not there, they usually have homework. Some have to work and study, and so there’s so little time for anything else. But for Jesus’ words to remain in us, and to have a real prayer life, we’ve got to make time when there is no time. People do it all the time. Some people work and study and still make time for friends or for being in a relationship with a boyfriend or girlfriend or spouse. How much time do we put into having a real relationship with Jesus, with listening to and making room for his words and spending time in prayer? Some people may think they know it all already, and so they stop making room for his words, and they stop praying. Over time, they dry up spiritually. May God help us take Jesus’ words seriously. Read verse 7 again.

There’s another way to remain in Jesus. Read verses 9,10. To remain in Jesus is to remain in his love. How do we do it? We should remind ourselves of his love every day. It’s good to start out praying, thanking God for his great love for us in Jesus. If we don’t remember his love, we can’t really remain in it. Jesus also teaches us here a specific way to remain in his love. He says we need to keep his commands. As we keep his commands, we remain in his love. He says this is the way he remained in the Father’s love, by keeping his commands. And he had a specific command in mind. Let’s read verse 12. We remain in Jesus by obeying his command to love each other the same way Jesus loved us. If we don’t love the way Jesus did, there’s no way to remain in him. If we stop loving the way Jesus did, we cease to remain in him. Loving the way Jesus loved is the way to remain in him. This, too, requires commitment. We’ve got to love others in the same self-sacrificing way Jesus loved us when he laid down his life for us.

It’s how we transform the promise into reality, how our actions speak louder than our words, how we make time when there is none, how we come through time after time, year after year, how our character becomes like Jesus, how we gain power to change things, and how we change from skeptics into people of integrity. The fruits that come from a relationship with Jesus are love and joy. If we’re not loving and not joyful, we need to examine our relationship with Jesus. May God help each of us really commit to remaining in Jesus.