

# The Gospel of John

Text: John 15:1–16:4

Reading: *Daring Faith*, pp. 135–147

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## “Abide In Me” (John 15:1–16:4)

**Background:** The farewell discourse continues without interruption in chapter 15. Jesus begins with the metaphor of the vine and the branches as a way of speaking about the community’s relationship to Jesus and to God (15:1-11). He invites them into friendships defined by the love of God that is revealed in Jesus; the love that Jesus boldly makes available to the world (15:12-17). The love that is commanded of Jesus’ followers sets up a contrast with the hatred of the world (15:18–16:4). In response to both the love of Jesus and the hatred of the world, Jesus describes the way of life expected of those who follow and abide in him. Friends of Jesus will be friends like Jesus. You will know them by their love—a love made known by laying down one’s life and speaking boldly and openly.

### A. “I AM THE VINE” (15:1-11)

1. The words “I am the true vine” are the final “I am” saying in the Gospel and introduce the central metaphor of the vine, vinegrower, and branches. John’s language draws on Old Testament imagery, perhaps especially Isaiah 5:1-7, in which Israel is depicted as God’s vineyard. The failure of Judah to live in justice and righteousness is expressed through the metaphor of yielding fruit: God, the planter, expected grapes, but Judah produced only wild grapes (Isa. 5:2, 4). This passage also makes use of the language of clearing away and pruning to describe God’s actions toward the vineyard.
2. In John’s reworking of this imagery, Jesus is the fruitful vine, and God the vinegrower. These initial verses focus on Jesus’ relation to God. God’s role is distinct from Jesus’ with regard to the vineyard: it is God, as the vinegrower, who directs its care. The “pruning” activity that God undertakes (v. 2) should be understood as part of the care for the vineyard (see Isa 5:6).
3. At the same time, “pruning” the vineyard is expressed both as God’s activity of caring for the vineyard and as the activity of Jesus’ word. This becomes clear when it is understood that the words translated in v. 2 as “prunes” and in v. 3 as “cleansed” have the same Greek root. This is the same word that was used in the foot washing scene when Jesus declared the disciples “clean” (13:10). In 15:3 the disciples have been cleaned (or “pruned”) by Jesus’ word.
4. Abiding in that word becomes a central theme of the vine image. The listeners are invited to see themselves as “branches” abiding in the vine that is Jesus. Verses 4-5 reinforces that relationship with Jesus is key to bearing fruit. The foundation of the community’s abiding with Jesus is the love that God and Jesus share with each other and that the community is called to make known.

### Discussion Questions:

1. In the picture Jesus describes in verses 1-3, what does each element—vine, vine grower, branches, fruit—represent?
2. Branches that decide to try living without the life of the vine soon discover their mistake. They wither and die and are good for nothing but the fire (v. 6). The urgent question, then, is this: How do we “remain” in him? What does this look like in practice? And what role does the Holy Spirit play in the process?

## **B. DISCIPLESHIP AS FRIENDSHIP (15:12-17)**

**Background:** This passage is shaped the vocabulary of love and friendship. This vocabulary highlights the two friendship themes of **laying down one's life** and **speaking boldly and openly**. Key to the use of these themes here is remembering that the attributes that have characterized Jesus as friend are now transferred to his disciples.

1. In speaking of his disciples' future lives in 15:12-17, Jesus explains the connection between his life of love and the conduct of friends. Jesus calls the disciples his "friends" if they embody his commandment—to love one another as Jesus has loved them (v. 12), to lay down their lives for their friends (v. 13). They will also be his "friends" if they are able and willing to speak as boldly and openly as he has done (v. 15).
2. **The first theme, laying down one's life as an act of friendship**, functions for the disciples just as it does for Jesus: the ideal (v. 13) is transformed into a commandment and an expectation about the conduct of one's life (vv. 12, 14, 17). The embodiment of love that is of the same extent as Jesus' love is not simply a "good idea" for the disciples to consider; it is a commandment. The disciples are called to embody the same love that Jesus embodies.
3. **The second theme, speaking openly**, is central to Jesus' words in verse 15. This theme, too, as we have seen, has been embodied in Jesus' own practice of friendship (7:26; 11:14; 16:25-29; 18:20). As a result of the openness and boldness of Jesus' speech to them ("I have made known to you everything"), the disciples have a complete awareness of what God and Jesus are doing, and so can be called friends, no longer servants. Jesus' plain speech enables his disciples to participate in the intimacy and trust of the Father, the privilege of a free man and a friend.
4. **"Bear fruit" (v. 16)** introduces a new metaphor into the language of love and friendship. It suggests that bearing fruit is the outcome of laying down one's life in love. Jesus' gift of life in love bore the fruit of friendship for his disciples; the disciples are called to bear fruit in the same way.
5. **Defining love and friendship**: Jesus gift of his life for others embodies friendship's highest attribute and defines the meaning and extent of "love." Jesus' boldness and courageous speech, a natural quality of a true friend, charts a way of courage for the present and future lives of the disciples.

**Summary:** The name "friend" and the relationship of friendship is a gift from Jesus to the disciples, just as his life is a gift to them. Jesus is calling the disciples into a world that is shaped by looking to the interests of others. The challenge for them is to enact and embody friendship as Jesus has done. The disciples know how Jesus has been a friend; they are called to see what kind of friends they can become.

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. How do you define the word "friend"?
2. In what ways does Jesus' definition of "friendship" differ from conventional definitions/expectations of a friend? In other words, how does Jesus raise the bar?
3. Jesus issues the command that we are to love one another, and so to remain in his love, because he has acted out, and will act out, the greatest thing that love can do—laying down his own life for his friends. We are called to bear the fruit of friendship in the same way.

**What are some practical ways that we can be friends like Jesus—loving others in a sacrificial way, the way that Jesus has loved us?**

### C. **“IF THE WORLD HATES YOU...” (15:18–16:4)**

Jesus' invitation to friendship in John 15:12-17 is followed immediately by a section of the Farewell Discourse in which Jesus describes the adversity and suffering that the disciples may experience “on account of my name” (15:21). In this section, Jesus calls his disciples to boldness of speech (15:27) and names his own boldness of speech as grounds for the disciples' boldness (16:1).

**Read in light of the friendship themes of laying down one's life and boldness of speech, John 15:18–16:4 may be read as one continuous teaching about true friendship.** In 15:12-17, the friendship theme of love and the giving of one's life as embodied in the life and death of Jesus is at the center of Jesus' teaching. Jesus challenges his disciples to love one another as Jesus loved them.

**In 15:18–16:4, the friendship theme of boldness of speech and action, regardless of the risk, is at the center of Jesus' teaching.** This theme, too, as we have seen, has been embodied in Jesus' own practice of friendship (7:26; 11:14; 16:25-29; 18:20). Jesus is willing to speak and act boldly throughout his life because he is willing to lay down his life.

**In his words in 15:18–16:4, Jesus continues to challenge the disciples to do what he does—to live their faith boldly and unafraid, regardless of the situation in which they find themselves.** Read in this way, 15:12–16:4 is one continuous teaching on the life of friendship: to be a friend by loving as Jesus has loved; to be a friend by witnessing clearly and boldly to one's faith. Clear, courageous speech has its effect when the disciples act on God's love of them and their love of Jesus.

**The life of friendship as depicted in John 15 is a life of challenge. The disciples are called to love and witness in their own lives as fully as Jesus did in his.** How is it possible for the disciples—disciples in the story of John's Gospel and disciples throughout the story of the church—to accept and embody this challenge? How is possible for disciples to live fully as friends? God recognizes the difficulty of this challenge and knows that the disciples cannot love as Jesus loved without some help.

**The third promise of the Holy Spirit intervenes at this point (v. 26).**

- a. The Holy Spirit embodies the friendship described by Jesus by speaking openly and plainly. The Holy Spirit is portrayed as Jesus' defense counsel, testifying on Jesus' behalf. Testifying, bearing witness, is an important act of plain speaking for the community, and the Holy Spirit's role as witness is a clear example of the the Holy Spirit embodies friendship.
- b. Importantly, the Holy Spirit's witness provides a model for the community's own witness (v. 27). Those who follow Jesus will find themselves in a new situation, facing new dangers as well as opportunities. Through the model and presence of the Holy Spirit, the community will also testify, speaking boldly and plainly as friends of Jesus.

**Summary:** As we have already seen, in the Holy Spirit, there is a continuity of God's presence and a consistency of Jesus' teaching (John 14). The Holy Spirit is the community's friend in Jesus' absence: empowering them to embody the sacrificial love of Jesus, testifying on Jesus' behalf, and strengthening the community as they boldly witness to Jesus in word and action (15:26-27).

In discerning how to live in a world that hates Christ's followers, the popular question, “What would Jesus do?” misses the point for John. There is no need to ask that question about Jesus—Jesus already gave his life in love for others and always spoke and acted boldly, the ultimate friend. The more relevant question to contemplate is, “**What would friends of Jesus do?**” because when Jesus called his disciples “friends,” he passed on a life of love and boldness to all who would follow him.

**Discussion Questions:**

1. What does Jesus mean when he says that his followers are not “from the world” (v. 19)? Who is “the world”? What actions or characteristics differentiate Jesus’ disciples from “the world”?
2. How have you reacted in situations where Christ’s name and character were attacked? Looking back, do you wish you had responded differently? If so, how?
3. Love and friendship are the goals of Jesus’ “plain speaking.” How does Jesus’ example guide us as we witness to Jesus in a world of hatred? How does the Holy Spirit help with this?
4. What obstacles keep us from living as friends of Jesus (laying down our lives for others and speaking boldly and openly)? How can we as a community help one another be friends like Jesus?

**Sources:**

Gail O’Day, *The Gospel of John*

Gail O’Day and Susan Hulen, *John*

N.T. Wright, *The Gospel of John*