

“DON’T JUST DO SOMETHING; STAND THERE!”

John 15:1-17

THEME: The Vine and Branches. ‘Being’ vs ‘doing.’

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Most people measure their effectiveness or success by what they do. Rarely, if ever, do we say someone is successful just because she is sweet or kind or loving.

It is said that *‘the two hardest things to handle in life are failure and success.’* That’s because in failure people punish themselves and in success they exasperate others.

There is no end to the number of opinions as to what constitutes success.

Success is relative. The more success, the more relatives.

- I think success begins with being who you should be, because only then are you able to do what you’re meant to do.

Someone has said that *‘The goal of the church is to make Christianity a working success in our personal lives.’*

- What does the Bible tell us about this?

In the Bible one of the best-known metaphors of success in our lives individually and corporately is fruitfulness. We are supposed to bear fruit for God—each of us on our own, and all of us together as a church.

- I couldn’t count the number of times I’ve heard Christians speak of a fruitful Christian as a soul-winner—an effective evangelist who brings people to faith in Christ.

If success means doing something, that’s about as good as it gets. But that is really not what fruitfulness means in the Bible.

There are 64 references to fruitfulness in the Bible. 61 times it’s about who we are and only 3 times is it about what we do.

When God inspects the fruit of your life, he’s watching who you are becoming.

In Isaiah 5 Israel is referred to as a vineyard that God planted, and God wanted fruit. What fruit did God look for in Israel? God wanted to see justice and righteousness! Sad to say, instead God found bloodshed and a cry of distress.

- In the New Testament the Apostle Paul explained that the fruit of the Spirit in our lives is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control (Galatians 5:22).

In his letter to the Ephesian church Paul wrote, *‘For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth)’* (Ephesians 5:8-9)

- Who are the Christians that excel in bearing fruit? Many of them are well known leaders, but I can assure you that many more are quiet, unassuming, patient, gentle, loving, faithful Christians who are happy to play second fiddle, and don’t get upset if they’re overlooked when the accolades are handed out.

These are the ones God is looking at and delighting in. They know that God is the fruit inspector.

- But most of us still tend to equate fruitfulness with ‘doing’ instead of ‘being.’ We volunteer to do things, and that’s certainly not bad.

But we feel frustrated and guilty when we fail to do what we think God is looking for. We fall flat on our faces so often.

I think you all know what I’m talking about. So much of the Christian life is guilt-propelled. We do things because we’ll feel guilty if we don’t do them.

I confess that’s been the story for too much of my life.

- It’s not easy to be an authentic Christian. Each of us has failed miserably and repeatedly because we tried to be a good Christian by ‘doing’.

It doesn’t work that way.

- How do you make Christianity a success in your life?

We’ll go to the actual words of Jesus Christ our Lord in a familiar portion of the Bible, John’s Gospel, chapter 15.

For Christianity to be a working success in your life—and in our life as a church—our Lord shows us two indispensable **responsibilities** that we must fulfill. They’re easy to remember: 1. Stay; 2. Obey.

I. STAY (15:1-9)

Abide in Christ. Remain in Christ.

This is the most important thing for everyone who claims to be a follower of Jesus Christ—a Christian.

If you have repented of your sinful ways and turned from them to Christ's way, then stay there! Abide in Christ.

Remain in him.

That's what the Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Colossae: *'So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.'* (Colossians 2:6-7)

- Let us go to our text for this morning:

¹ *"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener.*

² *He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.*

³ *You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.*

⁴ *Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.*

⁵ *"I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.*

¹⁶ *You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit-- fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.*

A branch separated from the vine won't bear any fruit because it doesn't have any life in it.

The only way to produce anything that God looks for in our lives is by maintaining a relationship of utter dependence on Christ—staying.

- Jesus said this to his disciples shortly before his crucifixion.

They had left their old way of life to follow him.

They had to know what it would take to be his disciple. Their relationship with him had to be their top priority.

That's what it means to remain in Christ.

- What does a branch have to do to bear fruit?

One thing—remain connected to the vine. Stay. That's all.

The demand is on the vine to produce the fruit. Apart from the vine the branch can produce nothing.

The branch of an apple tree doesn't make apples. The tree does. It's the life in the tree that goes out to the branches and produces the fruit that the branches bear.

- Lots of religious people are extremely busy doing things—good things. But unless they are constantly dependent on our Lord Jesus Christ and drawing on his life, there is not fruit that will last (16)

In 1970 I attended the Urbana Missions Conference and I heard John Stott contrast a fruit tree with a Christmas tree to illustrate a point. Fruit grows on a fruit tree, but artificial ornaments are tied on a Christmas tree whose branches will soon wither. There is no life in the ornaments.

If you are a true follower of Christ your life is grafted into the life of Christ. You are united with Christ, you are 'in Christ' and Christ is in you. So the fruit God looks for is produced in your life.

Lots of religious people want to look good, to look spiritual. But they're just dead branches with ornaments tied on. Tree ornaments are usually more spectacular than fruit. They look good, but there's no life in them.

- Don't neglect your connection to Jesus Christ. If you do, your spiritual life will wither. You will try to compensate by doing things to impress others instead of pleasing God. But they're just ornaments.

⁶ *If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.*

⁷ *If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.*

When it's your passion to stay vitally connected to Jesus Christ, his words remain in you. You love the gospel of Jesus Christ.

William Wilberforce wrote *'The main distinction between real Christianity and the system of the bulk of nominal Christians (Christians in name only) chiefly consists in the different place given to the Gospel. To the latter the truths of the Gospel are like distant stars that twinkle with a vain and idle luster. But for the real Christian, these distinctive doctrines constitute the center in which he gravitates like the sun of his system and the source of his light, warmth and life.'*

We never venture away from the cross of Jesus Christ. We remember God's love and grace in sending his one and only Son to suffer the penalty for our sins, and win the victory over Satan so that we are set free from bondage to evil through faith in Jesus Christ as our Savior.

Christ's words, the gospel truths, are an indispensable part of the life of a Christian who stays in close fellowship with Christ.

Then, Jesus said, your prayers will be answered because they will correspond with God's will. You'll find yourself praying for what God wants to give you anyway.

- Why did Jesus put such emphasis on his followers remaining in him?

He wouldn't have said this if there were no danger of a follower of Christ being drawn away and becoming unfaithful.

You and I know those dangers well—the distractions, enticements, and temptations that constantly tug at us. The New Testament is chock full of warnings about this.

That's why the Lord prunes us. He lops off things that keep us from being fruitful.

¹ *"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener.*

² *He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.*

Don't be alarmed if pruning takes place in your life or in our church.

God may take away some things you've grown very fond of. But they're drawing away so much of your attention and energy that they're taking the place of the fruit God wants in you.

- A tree that has been pruned loses a lot of foliage.

Before coming to Rockford we lived in California, the land of fruit and nuts—and flakes too. I recall driving past mile after mile of fruit orchards after the trees had been pruned. They looked so unattractive, but they had been prepared for phenomenal fruitfulness.

We notice the lush greenery, the leaves. That's attractive!

It's easy to be a leafy Christian and to impress one another by all the things we do. But they're just leaves.

- Has our heavenly Father, the gardener, been snipping away at your life?

Have some things been taken from you that you love and cherish—good things? Have you become angry at God, accusing him of not caring for you anymore?

Could it be that God is drawing you back, through that pain, so that you will throw yourself upon him in utter dependence, and cling to him? God may be getting you ready for the most fruitful time in your life, but right now it hurts.

- Do you think that our heavenly Father the gardener has been snipping and sawing away at the big, leafy tree called First Free Church?

We don't look very good right now. But pruning is God's way to get us as a church to return, to remain, to throw ourselves upon him.

- Some of our church leaders have expressed a longing for all of us to give ourselves to prayer and fasting—to return to that humility and utter dependence upon God.

If we are willing to humble ourselves and yield to our Lord, the most fruitful time for this church may be just ahead.

- And please remember, the fruit is character—being like Jesus Christ. The 'doing' that will make a difference comes out of our 'being.'

Maybe there are some things you're holding onto and refusing to let go because you've convinced yourself, "That's what we've always done."

How much of your attention and energy have you been giving to holding on to that? Are you willing to yield it to the gardener for him to trim and remove whatever it takes for us to be what he wants us to be.

⁸ *This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.*

⁹ *"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love.*

The title of my message today is, "Don't just do something, stand there!" I didn't come up with that line; I read it somewhere many years ago. It fits what we're dealing with.

- It's natural to emphasize doing. The measure of anything we think important is what we do. But so much of it is just leaves, not fruit.

The essential thing is to stand firm, to stay, to remain in Christ.

In our own strength and through our own efforts we can produce nothing. We read in verse 5 that Jesus said, *'apart from me you can do nothing.'*

It's time, now, for us to return—to be the people God called us to be in Christ.

[2nd indispensable responsibility)

II. OBEY (15:10-17)

How do you know if you are remaining in Christ? Is it a feeling that comes over you? Should you concentrate really hard on staying in fellowship with Jesus?

Jesus answers this question for us:

¹⁰ *If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love.*

¹¹ *I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.*

¹² *My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.*

¹³ *Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.*

¹⁴ *You are my friends if you do what I command.*

¹⁵ *I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.*

¹⁷ *This is my command: Love each other.*

In one of George MacDonald’s novels, William Marston explained to his daughter Mary: ‘A Christian is one who does what the Lord Jesus tells him—no more and no less.’ (*The Shopkeeper’s Daughter*)

Once again our Lord Jesus Christ makes it clear to us that it’s all about who we are—our character.

The essence of obeying Jesus Christ is not doing something—it is being someone, someone who remains in Christ’s love and loves others.

- Christ’s followers are to be known for their love.

Jesus had just a few minutes earlier told them, ‘By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.’ (John 13:35)

- In my many years as a pastor I have often seen Christians working very hard at doing stuff—good things—in the church, but I could see they were seething with resentment. It was all just leaves! It looked lush and impressive, but there was no fruit in their lives.

The Apostle John wrote, ‘Whoever loves God must also love his brother.’ (1 John 4:21) That’s not a suggestion. It’s an order to obey.

- Each of us can easily say that we love all Christian brothers and sisters everywhere.

But that means squat if there is one Christian brother or sister we don’t love.

C.S. Lewis warned that ‘*Loving everybody in general may be an excuse for loving nobody in particular.*’

- Living as a follower of Jesus Christ the way God expects you to live is not easy. It’s not something you can do in your own strength.

The only way to do it is by staying in a close relationship with Jesus Christ your Lord, and by obeying his word.

At the end of a sermon some people want to be told exactly what they should do about it. I don’t always tell people exactly what to do.

But in the almost 15 years I’ve been here I hope you’ve picked up that my emphasis is much more on being than on doing.

When people have heard God’s word through me, my prayer is that they will be different because of it, and not just go out and do something—and then forget about it.

Without getting stuck in parsing terms, sometimes the thing people need to be challenged to do is to focus on being. I maintain that the truth of God’s word is supposed to soak into your life and get down to the roots of who you are.

Then you’ll know what to do, most often. That’s a characteristic of a mature Christian.

- Anyway, there’s nothing that I can tell you to get out there and do today, except this:

Consider how much of your Christian life is defined by doing things. Are there things you do faithfully in some area of the church’s program, but they leave you feeling empty and unfulfilled?

Of course God wants you to serve others and to do good things, but not as a substitute for dealing with the kind of person he wants you to be.

Don’t just do something. That doesn’t work. Stand firm in Christ. Stand there. Abide, Remain near to God. Don’t let anything get between you and the Lord.

- If the Lord is prompting you to act on this, do it. Step out and come forward, stand here at the front or kneel. Settle some things with the One who’s been doing some tough pruning in your life.