

The Gospel of John, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 20: The True Vine

John 15:1-27

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

John 15 gives us the last great “I am” saying, “I am the true vine,” and centers on the command to abide. Doctrinally, it teaches that all spiritual life and fruit flow from union with Christ (“apart from me you can do nothing”), that the Father lovingly prunes fruitful branches, and, soberly, that branches which do not abide are cut off and burned, a clear teaching on the necessity of continuing in Christ. It defines love by Christ’s laying down His life, names believers His friends, grounds our relationship in His choosing, and promises the Spirit who would bear witness through the apostles. The heaviest doctrinal block belongs at Question 9 (the Spirit and the hostile world), with major weight at Questions 1 and 5.

The teacher should handle two doctrinal matters with care. First, the warning of verse 6 (the branch cast off and burned) confirms that believers must continue in Christ and can fall away, consistent with the wider New Testament; it should not be softened. Second, the promise of the Spirit of truth who bears witness (vv. 26-27) is given to the apostles who had been with Jesus from the beginning, and points to the apostolic witness preserved in the New Testament, not to modern new revelation.

At the same time, the chapter is deeply formational. Its great call is to abide rather than strive, to find fruitfulness, joy, and answered prayer in union with Christ. So aim at both: a clear grasp of union with Christ, the necessity of abiding, and the apostolic witness, and a heart that abides deeply, welcomes the Father’s pruning, and bears lasting fruit. The disciple we are forming stays connected to the Vine.

Question 1

Student Question:

Jesus said, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser” (v. 1), and “apart from me you can do nothing” (v. 5). What does the image of the vine and branches teach about the source of all spiritual life and fruit?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus declares, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser” (v. 1), and presses the point: “I am the vine; you are the branches... apart from me you can do nothing” (v. 5). The image teaches the most basic truth of the spiritual life: all life and fruit flow from union with Christ.

Draw out the background. Israel was often pictured as God's vine, planted to bear fruit but failing to do so (Isaiah 5; Psalm 80). Jesus calls Himself the true vine, the faithful one who succeeds where Israel failed. To bear fruit, His people must be connected to Him, the true vine.

Stress the totality of "nothing." Jesus does not say that apart from Him we can do a little, or that we can manage the easy things on our own. He says, "apart from me you can do nothing," nothing of eternal, spiritual value. All genuine fruit, love, holiness, witness, every good work, flows from union with Christ, like sap from the vine into the branch.

Apply it. This dismantles the self-reliant approach to the Christian life. We are not the source of our own spiritual fruit; Christ is. Our task is not to generate life by effort but to stay connected to the One who is the life. Ask students how truly believing "apart from me you can do nothing" would reshape the way they approach their walk with God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Union with Christ as the source of all spiritual life and fruit (John 15:1, 5).
- Jesus as the true vine, faithful where Israel failed (Isaiah 5; Psalm 80).
- The totality of "apart from me you can do nothing."
- Fruit as the overflow of union, not the product of self-reliance.

Discussion Prompts

- What does the vine and branches teach about the source of spiritual life?
- Why does Jesus say we can do "nothing" apart from Him?
- How would believing this reshape your walk with God?

Question 2

Student Question:

Jesus said the Father prunes every fruitful branch "that it may bear more fruit" (v. 2). Where has God used painful pruning in your life, and how have you seen it produce growth, or how are you struggling to trust it now?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus speaks of the Father's pruning: "Every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit" (v. 2). Pruning is the Vinedresser's loving work on the fruitful branch, cutting back so that it bears more.

Help students understand the purpose of pruning. The Father does not prune to harm but to increase fruitfulness. A vine left unpruned grows wild and bears little; the careful cutting back directs the plant's energy into fruit. So God, in love, removes from our lives what hinders fruitfulness, even good things, even comfortable things.

Be honest that pruning hurts. The knife is not pleasant. Pruning often comes through loss, hardship, discipline, or the stripping away of things we have leaned on. In the moment it can feel like destruction. But Hebrews 12 reminds us that the Father's discipline, though painful, yields "the peaceful fruit of righteousness" (Hebrews 12:11).

Apply it pastorally. Ask students where they have experienced pruning and how they have seen it produce growth, or where they are struggling to trust it now. The aim is to help them interpret painful seasons not as the Father's rejection but as His careful, loving work to make them more fruitful. Encourage trust in the Vinedresser's skill and love even when the knife is at work.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The Father's pruning to increase fruitfulness (John 15:2).
- Pruning as loving work, not punishment.
- The painful means of pruning yielding the fruit of righteousness (Hebrews 12:11).
- Trusting the Vinedresser's skill and love in hard seasons.

Discussion Prompts

- Where has God used painful pruning in your life?
- How have you seen it produce growth?
- Where are you struggling to trust His pruning right now?

Question 3

Student Question:

Jesus commands, "Abide in me, and I in you" (v. 4), and ties abiding to fruitfulness and answered prayer (vv. 5, 7). What does it actually mean to abide in Christ, and how is abiding different from mere busyness or activity for Him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The central command of the chapter is "Abide in me, and I in you" (v. 4), repeated many times. Jesus ties abiding to fruitfulness ("whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit," v. 5) and to answered prayer ("if you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish," v. 7).

Define abiding. To abide is to remain, to make our home in Christ, to stay continuously connected to Him. It is a settled, ongoing dependence and communion, drawing our life from Him moment by moment. Jesus links it to His words abiding in us (v. 7) and to keeping His commandments (v. 10), so abiding is not vague mysticism but a real, continuing life of dependence, obedience, and communion with Christ through His word.

Contrast abiding with busyness. It is possible to be very active for Christ while not abiding in Him, to be busy in service while disconnected from the source. Such activity, however

impressive, is the branch trying to bear fruit on its own, and it withers. Abiding is not less than activity, but it is deeper than and prior to it; fruitful service flows from union, not the reverse.

Apply it. Help students see that the call is not first to do more but to abide more, to stay connected to Christ through His word, prayer, and dependent obedience, so that fruit flows naturally. Ask what abiding more deeply would look like in their actual lives, and where they have mistaken busyness for abiding.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Abiding as remaining and making our home in Christ (John 15:4).
- Abiding tied to His words remaining in us and to obedience (John 15:7, 10).
- The difference between abiding and mere busyness for Christ.
- Fruitful service flowing from union, not replacing it.

Discussion Prompts

- What does it actually mean to abide in Christ?
- How is abiding different from busyness or activity for Him?
- What would abiding more deeply look like in your life?

Question 4

Student Question:

Jesus said, "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love" (v. 10). Where is obedience the doorway into a deeper experience of Christ's love for you, and where is that being tested right now?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question takes up the link between obedience and abiding in 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" (v. 10). Obedience is the doorway into a deeper experience of Christ's love.

Clarify the relationship. Jesus is not saying we earn His love by obeying; His love is freely given. He is saying that obedience is how we remain in the conscious enjoyment of that love, just as His own obedience to the Father kept Him in the Father's love. Disobedience does not make Christ stop loving us, but it clouds our experience of that love and breaks our communion.

Draw out the experiential dimension. Many believers feel distant from Christ's love, and often the issue is an area of disobedience that has put a cloud between them and the Lord. Walking in obedience clears the way to enjoy His love more fully. Obedience and intimacy with Christ are connected.

Press for specifics. Ask each student where obedience is the doorway into a deeper experience of Christ's love, and where that is being tested right now by a specific command. Invite them to step through the doorway of obedience this week, trusting that as they keep His word they will abide more consciously in His love.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Obedience as the doorway into the experience of Christ's love (John 15:10).
- Christ's love freely given, with obedience keeping us in its enjoyment.
- Disobedience clouding communion without ending Christ's love.
- The connection between obedience and intimacy with Christ.

Discussion Prompts

- Where is obedience the doorway into a deeper experience of Christ's love?
- How does disobedience cloud our enjoyment of His love?
- Where is your obedience being tested right now?

Question 5

Student Question:

Jesus warned that a branch which does not abide in Him "is thrown away... and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned" (v. 6). What does this sober warning teach about the necessity of continuing in Christ, and how does it fit with the call to remain faithful?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question carries significant doctrinal weight and must not be softened. Jesus warns, "If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned" (v. 6). This is a sober warning about the necessity of continuing in Christ.

State plainly what the warning teaches. A branch that does not abide is cut off, withers, and is burned. Jesus is teaching that remaining in Him is not optional; those who do not continue in Him are lost. This stands directly against the idea of "once saved, always saved," which would have us believe that a person once joined to Christ is eternally secure regardless of whether they continue to abide.

Place it in the context of the chapter and the wider New Testament. The whole chapter calls for abiding, and verse 6 names the consequence of failing to abide. This is consistent with Jesus' warnings elsewhere and with the rest of Scripture, which repeatedly calls believers to hold fast and warns that they can fall away (Hebrews 3:12-14; 10:26-31; 2 Peter 2:20-22; Galatians 5:4). The branch must remain in the vine to live.

Balance the warning with assurance and apply it. This is not meant to make abiding believers anxious; the Vine is faithful, and those who keep abiding are secure and fruitful. The warning is against presumption and drift, against the false comfort that we may neglect Christ and still be safe. The good news is that abiding is not a desperate striving but a glad remaining in the One who loves us. Help students see the call clearly: stay connected to the Vine. Ask what it would mean to take the warning seriously without losing the joy of abiding.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The necessity of continuing in Christ; branches that do not abide are lost (John 15:6).
- A clear rejection of “once saved, always saved” as security apart from abiding.
- The warning consistent with the wider New Testament (Hebrews 3:12–14; Galatians 5:4).
- Assurance for those who abide, balanced against presumption and drift.
- Abiding as glad remaining, not desperate striving.

Discussion Prompts

- What does the warning of verse 6 teach about continuing in Christ?
- How does it fit with the call to remain faithful?
- How do we take the warning seriously without losing the joy of abiding?

Question 6

Student Question:

Jesus said, “These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full” (v. 11). How is the joy Jesus gives connected to abiding and obedience, and where do you most need that fullness of joy?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus reveals the goal of His teaching about the vine: “These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full” (v. 11). Abiding is not a grim duty but the path to fullness of joy.

Draw out the connection between abiding, obedience, and joy. Jesus links joy to remaining in His love through obedience. This overturns the assumption that obedience is the enemy of joy and that freedom from God’s commands is the path to happiness. In Christ, the opposite is true: abiding and obeying is where joy is found, His own joy, filling us.

Note that it is His joy. “That my joy may be in you.” The joy Jesus gives is not a manufactured cheerfulness but a share in His own joy, the deep gladness of a life lived in the Father’s love. This joy can coexist with sorrow and survive hardship, because it is rooted in our union with Christ, not in our circumstances.

Apply it. Help students see that the way to fullness of joy is not away from Christ and His commands but deeper into abiding. Ask each student where they most need this fullness of joy and how a deeper abiding in Christ might be the path to it. The Christian life, rightly lived, is not joyless duty but joy made full.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Fullness of joy as the goal of abiding (John 15:11).
- Joy connected to abiding and obedience, not to freedom from God's commands.
- A share in Christ's own joy, rooted in union with Him.
- Joy that can coexist with sorrow and survive hardship.

Discussion Prompts

- How is the joy Jesus gives connected to abiding and obedience?
- Why is obedience not the enemy of joy?
- Where do you most need that fullness of joy?

Question 7

Student Question:

Jesus said, "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends," and "No longer do I call you servants... but... friends" (vv. 13, 15). What does it mean that Christ calls us friends, and how does His laying down His life define the love we are to have for one another?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus defines love and astonishingly names His disciples His friends: "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends" (v. 13), and "No longer do I call you servants... but I have called you friends" (v. 15). Both the definition of love and the title of friend are staggering.

Draw out the definition of love. Christ defines the greatest love as self-sacrifice: laying down one's life for others. He is about to do exactly that. This is the love that is to mark His people for one another (v. 12). Christian love is not mere sentiment or affection; it is self-giving, even to the point of laying down our lives, our preferences, our comfort, for one another.

Unfold the title "friends." That the Lord of glory calls us His friends is breathtaking. A servant does not know the master's business; a friend is taken into the master's confidence. Jesus says He has made known to us all that He heard from the Father (v. 15). This is intimacy and dignity beyond anything we could presume, friendship with God, secured by the One who lays down His life.

Apply it to both wonder and obligation. Being called Christ's friend should fill students with wonder and assurance; they are not distant servants but beloved friends of the Lord. And it carries an obligation: friends of Christ love one another as He loved them, sacrificially. Ask students how the title "friend" changes the way they relate to Christ, and how His self-giving love sets the standard for their love of others.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The greatest love defined as laying down one's life (John 15:13).
- Believers called Christ's friends, taken into the Father's confidence (John 15:15).
- Self-giving love as the mark of Christ's people (John 15:12).
- The wonder and obligation of friendship with Christ.

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that Christ calls us His friends?
- How does His laying down His life define the love we are to have?
- How does the title "friend" change the way you relate to Christ?

Question 8

Student Question:

Jesus said, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit" (v. 16). How does it humble and strengthen you to know that your relationship with Christ rests on His initiative and His purpose for your life?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question takes up Jesus' words: "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide" (v. 16). Our relationship with Christ rests on His initiative and His purpose.

Draw out the humbling truth. We are prone to think we found Christ, that our faith began with our own decision. Jesus reminds the disciples that He chose them; the initiative was His. While the gospel calls for a genuine response, the relationship begins with God's gracious move toward us, not ours toward Him. This humbles every trace of spiritual pride.

Be careful and balanced. This is not the Calvinistic notion of an arbitrary, unconditional selection of individuals for salvation while others are passed over. In context, Jesus is speaking to His apostles about His choosing and appointing them for their mission, and more broadly it reminds all believers that God's gracious initiative precedes and enables our response. God reaches for us first; we genuinely respond to His call.

Apply it to both humility and strength. Knowing our relationship rests on Christ's initiative humbles us (we cannot boast) and strengthens us (our standing rests on His faithfulness, not our

fickle resolve). And His purpose, “that you should go and bear fruit,” gives our lives direction. Ask students how it humbles and strengthens them to know Christ chose them and appointed them for a fruitful purpose.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The relationship grounded in Christ’s gracious initiative (John 15:16).
- God’s initiative preceding and enabling our genuine response.
- A guard against reading this as arbitrary, unconditional individual election.
- Christ’s purpose giving direction to the believer’s life.

Discussion Prompts

- How does it humble you to know Christ chose you?
- How does it strengthen you to know your standing rests on Him?
- How does His purpose for you, to bear fruit, give your life direction?

Question 9

Student Question:

Jesus said the world would hate His disciples as it hated Him, yet they were to bear witness, and He promised the Spirit of truth who “will bear witness about me” (vv. 18–27). What does this teach about the cost of following Christ in a hostile world, and how does the promise of the Spirit, given first to the apostles who had been with Him “from the beginning” (v. 27), relate to the witness preserved for us in the New Testament?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson, holding together two themes: the world’s hatred of Christ’s disciples, and the promise of the Spirit who bears witness. Jesus warns, “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you” (v. 18), and promises, “When the Helper comes... the Spirit of truth... he will bear witness about me. And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning” (vv. 26–27).

Draw out the cost of following Christ in a hostile world. Jesus is honest: the world that hated Him will hate His followers. Faithfulness to Christ will, at times, bring opposition, rejection, and hostility. This is not a sign that something has gone wrong but a sign that we belong to Christ rather than the world (vv. 19–20). Help students expect opposition without being surprised or discouraged by it.

Now handle the Spirit promise with care, as in the previous lesson. The promise of the Spirit of truth who would bear witness is joined here to the apostles: “you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning” (v. 27). The ones who had been with Jesus

from the beginning were the apostles, eyewitnesses of His ministry. The Spirit would empower their witness to Christ.

Connect this to the New Testament. The Spirit-empowered witness of the apostles, those who had been with Jesus from the beginning, is preserved for us in the New Testament Scriptures. We come to know and believe in Christ through their witness (compare 17:20, “those who will believe in me through their word”). This is how the trustworthy testimony to Jesus came to us.

Guard against misuse and apply it. As with chapter 14, this promise of the Spirit’s witness should not be used to claim new revelation or continuing sign gifts today. The apostolic witness is complete and preserved in Scripture. The Spirit still works in believers, but He bears witness to Christ through the apostolic word He inspired, not by delivering new doctrine. Apply both themes: help students prepare to bear faithful witness in a world that may oppose them, resting on the trustworthy apostolic testimony to Christ, and to count opposition not as defeat but as fellowship with their Lord. Ask how the promise of the Spirit-empowered apostolic witness gives them confidence as they witness today.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The world’s hatred as a normal cost of following Christ (John 15:18–20).
- Opposition as a sign of belonging to Christ, not of failure.
- The Spirit’s witness joined to the apostles who were with Jesus from the beginning (John 15:26–27).
- The apostolic, Spirit-empowered witness preserved in the New Testament (John 17:20).
- A guard against claims of new revelation or continuing sign gifts.
- Confidence in witnessing today resting on the trustworthy apostolic testimony.

Discussion Prompts

- What does this passage teach about the cost of following Christ?
- How does the promise of the Spirit relate to the witness preserved in the New Testament?
- How does the apostolic witness give you confidence as you witness today?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over this chapter and its one great command to abide. What is one specific way Jesus is forming you to abide in Him more deeply and to bear fruit that lasts?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone question returns to the chapter’s one great command: abide. The aim is to send students home not with a resolution to try harder but with a deeper commitment to stay connected to the Vine, from which all fruit flows.

Help students see that everything in the chapter hangs on abiding, fruitfulness, answered prayer, love, joy, and faithful witness. The way forward in the Christian life is not mainly more effort but deeper abiding. Fruit is the natural result of a branch that stays connected to the vine.

Make it concrete. Ask each student to name one specific way Jesus is forming them to abide more deeply, perhaps a renewed life in His word, a more dependent prayer life, a turning from a disobedience that has clouded their communion, or a deliberate slowing to commune with Christ amid busyness, and one kind of lasting fruit they long to see.

Close with the invitation, not the warning. While the chapter contains a sober warning, its dominant note is the loving invitation to make our home in Christ. Let students leave with the one word ringing in their ears: abide. Stay connected to the Vine, draw your life from Him, and you will bear fruit that lasts.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Abiding as the key to fruitfulness, prayer, love, joy, and witness.
- Fruit as the result of remaining connected to the Vine.
- The Christian life as deeper abiding rather than mere effort.
- Concrete, specific formation as the goal of the lesson.

Discussion Prompts

- What is one way Jesus is forming you to abide more deeply?
- What lasting fruit do you long to see in your life?
- What would it look like to stay connected to the Vine this week?