

"A Really Good Deal"

(A Sermon for the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost)

Text: I Thessalonians 1:1-10; John 15:5-8

Lectionary Texts: Exodus 33:12-23; Psalm 99; Matthew 22:15-22; I Thessalonians 1:1-10

Subject: Accrued spiritual benefits.

Desired Response: Remain close to Christ.

How To: Memorize passage.

How Long: Start with one 15-20 minute session this week.

Sermon in a Sentence: "Benefits accrue to those who remain close to Christ."

Worship Theme: "God offers His dearly loved children specific benefits when they stay close to Jesus."

Staying close to the Lord—is a good deal. And, if people have trouble doing it, maybe it's because they don't understand the advantages.

I believe one of the greatest lies the enemy spreads is that sin is where all the advantages are—all the fun, all the excitement, all the power, all the self-actualization. And, too many Christians buy into that lie.

So today, I want to unfold some of Christ's thinking on the matter. And, those of you who right now are toying with certain sins—you need to listen closely.

You may wonder what advantages will accrue to you if you do, indeed, listen to what I have to say and, even more, put what I suggest into practice. After all, why bother to listen to a sermon if it doesn't supply some benefit. Right?

One definite benefit of staying close to the Lord comes from the impact you have on those around you: your family, your friends, your fellow employees, even people who just brush up against you in the normal pathways of life.

In our Scripture text for today, the Apostle Paul recounts the effect that a certain group of people have, simply because they have made the choice to stay close to Jesus. Notice what Paul's writes in 1 Thessalonians 4:1-10:

¹ *Paul, Silas and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace and peace to you.*

² *We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers.* ³ *We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.*

⁴ For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵ because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. ⁶ You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.

⁷ And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. ⁸ The Lord’s message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, ⁹ for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, ¹⁰ and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

That’s quite a commendation from Paul to the people gathered in the church at Thessalonica. But, they didn’t achieve this level of spiritual success overnight. It took some real effort on their part to stay focused on remaining close to the Lord Jesus Christ.

I’m not much of an outdoors person, but a few summers back, a dear friend of mine started clearing a path in a wild, kind of wooded area near his house. The path wasn’t very long—64 steps, to be exact. It was for his wife, and my friend wanted eventually to plant some wildflowers along it, and make it kind of nice for her.

Until recently, to the side there was this huge pile of branches that resulted from the initial clearing. I remember my friend telling me how green the branches looked when the pile first began to take shape.

But, after a few weeks, the colors changed. What once was lush and green became brown and dried-out—even black.

Maybe eight or nine weeks later, my friend burned the branches. They went up so quickly, he was afraid to do the whole pile at once. So, he took it in stages—just to make sure it didn’t get out of hand. The dead branches and leaves and vines almost roared into flame the moment my friend lit a match to them.

Now, it was at this same time that my friend and I had decided to memorize certain key portions of Scripture. We were working on John 15. This is a passage of Scripture that I’ve talked with you about before. It’s a time of special teaching where Jesus was instructing His disciples shortly before His death. Jesus talked about the need to abide or remain in Him. The New Testament Greek word is “meno.”

Here’s a portion of this text from John 15:5-8:

⁵ “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.

Needless to say, Christ’s word-picture here in John 15 came alive for me through the vicarious experience of my friend’s gardening. Did I want to be a branch still alive back on the path that was being newly fashioned, or did I want to end up cut down and placed on the burn pile, so quickly gone up in the flames and eventually just ashes?

I said to myself, as I imagined that hot fire burning up the weeds and brush, “I believe it’s an advantage for the branch to remain in the vine.” And now, I repeat this same reminder for you: “I believe it’s an advantage for the branch to remain in the vine.”

“Thrown into the fire and burned”—that’s Christ’s description of the man or woman who does not abide in Him. No great advantage to being removed from the vine, is there?! In fact, to the contrary, (Benefit No. 1) **abiding in Christ keeps us off the burn pile.**

Jesus continued:

⁷ If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

Now here's the second of five positive reasons for remaining close to Christ: (Benefit No. 2) **You can ask God what you will.**

“Big wow!” you reply. “I can do that already!”

But, I respond, “Be aware that there's something markedly different about the way God hears the prayers of the righteous, or those who abide in Christ, or those who are close to Him—as compared to how He hears the prayers of those who tend to meander on forbidden paths.”

Believe me, there's a difference. The man or woman who knows Christ well understands the wonder of what his or her Lord is saying here, and is most grateful for His promise—“*If my words abide in you, ask whatever you will and it shall be done for you.*”

Next, verse 8:

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

And suddenly, we have three more benefits.

(Benefit No. 3) **Bearing much fruit**—or seeing produced in your life the very things for which God is looking. Resaid, just as the vine dresser expects grapes from his branches, so the Lord has expectations of those who belong to Him—He wants to see Christ-like qualities reproduced in them. And, as you abide in the vine, that's exactly what's going to happen. You see, these “*Benefits accrue to those who remain close to Christ.*” That's my key sentence, but I gave it to you sooner than I wanted to. So, let me drop it for now and come back to it a bit later. Here are those other two advantages...

(Benefit No. 4) **You belong to God and bring glory to Him**—what a privilege: my life, your life, being a credit to the very Creator Himself. I mean, the thought is magnificent. It's what Jesus had said earlier when He told us to:

“... let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”

A lot of you listening to me right now are in for a wonderful surprise. All the good things you've done for others because of your love for Jesus—the meals you've made, the money you've given, the sick you've visited, the classes you've taught, the wrongs you've overlooked, the poor to whom you have given hope—your actions may never have made the papers—no one did a TV special about you—but someday, God Himself will say, “You”—and He'll call you by name—“you brought glory to my name, and I wish to thank you.”

Is that an advantage worth mentioning—(Benefit No. 4) **bringing glory to God's name**? I think it surely is!

One more—(Benefit No. 5) **you have proof of your discipleship**. Again, verse 8:

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

Can you prove you're a disciple—or student of Christ's—a true follower of His? How beautiful to be able to respond, “The fruit of my life proves it!” If not to my questioner—it certainly does to my satisfaction. Not that through works I became a Christian, but my works affirm what the Spirit of Christ is doing in my life.

So, drift away from the Lord, and you've made a foolish move. Remain close to Him, and five very distinct benefits accrue. From this passage:

- (1) You're not cast away like a branch and burned.
- (2) You can ask God for what you will.
- (3) You produce the fruit the Vine Dresser expects.
- (4) You'll bring glory to God.
- (5) You have the continuing proof of your discipleship.

Benefits accrue—I like that word “accrue.” Usually it's associated with the banking world. “Accrued benefits” are those that build up naturally in an account. You don't have to worry about them. They just do their thing.

And, the word “accrue” also fits well this vine/branch word-picture. Stay close to Christ, and you don't need to worry about being cast away. Remain in the vine, and the fruit for which the vine dresser is looking will appear in its season. You'll know the joy of asking God for what you will and receiving it. In the process you'll bring glory to God. And, proof of your discipleship will become yours.

Just don't withdraw your account—remain in the vine, and “*Benefits accrue to those who remain close to Christ.*”

“Sounds good,” you say. “I want all you've mentioned. But, it's not a good deal if I can't obtain it. I understand the accrued benefits—tell me how to remain close to Christ.”

Well, in the time that's left this morning—while I can't resolve things for all the remaining days of your life—I can give you a way, starting today, that can begin drawing you close to the Lord. And, by keeping at it, a week from now you'll know a decided change in your life. How's that?

Here it is! Start memorizing John chapter 15, verses 5–8. These four verses will ingrain in your heart these five benefits.

⁵ “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ If you do not remain in me, you are 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 done for you. ⁸ This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

I began this sermon by saying that staying close to the Lord was a good deal. And, I'm ending by repeating that truth: staying close to the Lord is a good deal—a really good deal!

Remember how it worked out for those relatively new Christians at Thessalonica? The Apostle Paul gave them great commendation for the work they have done in showing God's love to others. It wasn't that those good works brought them salvation. No. It was because God had brought them salvation through His Son, Jesus, that the good works of the Thessalonians sprung forth and changed the world around them.

How to get started abiding in Christ? Memorizing God's written Word has a way of drawing you close to Him. So, if I can encourage you to begin that process, the benefits start in operation on their own.

Why not write or type these four verses on a 3x5 card. Then, just review the verses in your free time. If you can put in one uninterrupted session of 15–20 minutes, you'll have a great jump on mastering them. When would be a good time to set aside that time? How about today?

How long has it been since you memorized a Scripture? Too long?

"You abide in me, and my words abide in you."

That's from verse 7. It's what Jesus said. So, hear it as a challenge from Him instead of from me.

Again, this exercise will focus your mind on Christ. Another way of saying the same thing: the abiding process will have either been started or renewed.

And you know I'm right, don't you?

"Benefits accrue to those who remain close to Christ."

Amen.