



Daily Devotionals: Connecting People to Jesus | January 1, 2023

John 15:1-5; Luke 15

We desire to be connected to Jesus, abiding with Christ and to connect others to Jesus by sharing the Gospel.

Day 1

This week, we're going to dive deeper into our vision: **to connect people to Jesus**. A vision statement is a statement of a preferred future, a dream we want to come true. That preferred future then drives the decisions and plans—the mission and priorities—of the organization. For us at The Creek, that dream is seeing as many people fully connected to Jesus as possible. We long to both abide in Christ as we ourselves are connected to Jesus, and to share the Gospel so others who are lost can be connected to Jesus as well.

When we talk about our vision of connecting people to Jesus, it only makes sense to start with Jesus Himself. For those of us who follow Him, our lives are tied with His. In fact, we receive our lives in exchange for the life He laid down for us. He is our focus and our chief desire. Read Jesus' testimony about Himself and about His followers in **John 15**.

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. 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. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also 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. 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.” (**John 15:1-5**)

As you reflect on Jesus' statement about connecting to Him here, note in the space below what specific words or phrases jump out at you. *What does it mean to you to “remain” in Jesus, the true Vine? What does that look like practically for you?*

To see our community, our city, and our world connected to Jesus, we must be connected to Him. He is the *true* Vine. Israel no longer is (**Jeremiah 2:21**). While God planted them, they did not remain in Him. They were too busy coming up with their own way of doing things, wanting to be like the other nations. They sought after other gods and they betrayed the LORD their God. Because of that, Israel was both fruitless and barren. They were cut off.



Jesus has now come and He tells us that He is the true, the genuine, and the proper Vine—the one who will never be cut off because of His perfect relationship and obedience to the Father.

It's easy when talking about connecting people to Jesus to look at the fruit, but in God's upside-down kingdom, our eyes should be on the vine. When our focus—our vision, you might say—is on the vine, the fruit will grow *naturally*. And it puts the growth in the hands of the only One who can truly do the growing.

Questions for reflection:

- What fruit are you trying to create in your own strength today? What would it look like for you to attend not to the fruit, but to the “trunk, the roots, and the soil” in that instance? How might doing that be more beneficial than operating out of your own strength?
- As you envision making The Creek's vision real in your life, what things come to mind when you think about making that a reality? How are you already on track? What needs to be pruned? What's dying that needs to be cut out?
- Write a prayer thanking God for the abundant life you have as a branch in the vine. Thank Him for allowing His life and love to flow through you.



Day 2

In **Luke 15** we see the heart of God that longs to connect people to Jesus. Things just aren't right when something is lost (think of the last time you were ready to leave your house only to notice that you couldn't find your car keys), but when lost things are found, our natural reaction is to rejoice. When the lost sheep, coin, and son were found, amazing celebrations took place.

Let's look at a person in one of those stories: the father who had lost his son. We associate the father in the story to God, and rightfully so. And typically, when reading this parable, we associate ourselves with the younger son. I wonder if there are times, though, where we should model *ourselves* after the father who loved *both* of his sons.

Read all of **Luke 15:11-32** and then check out these snippets from the story in **Luke 15**:

“...He got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.” (verse 20)

“But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.” (verses 22-24)

“‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’” (verses 31-32)

The father looked, welcomed, and advocated for both of his sons. His desire was to be with both of them, and he knew things wouldn't be complete without either of them. When we start to adopt the love of the father for his children, we yearn for everyone to be connected. We fervently look for them. We run to them even when they're far off. We rejoice when they arrive. We advocate for one another to have the same joy. As Henri Nouwen says in his book *The Return of the Prodigal Son*,

“Celebration belongs to God's Kingdom. God not only offers forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing, but wants to lift up these gifts as a source of joy for all who witness them. In all three of the parables [in **Luke 15**] which Jesus tells to explain why he eats with sinners, God rejoices and invites others to rejoice with him. ‘Rejoice with me,’ the shepherd says, ‘I have found my sheep that was lost.’ ‘Rejoice with me,’ the woman says, ‘I have found the drachma I lost.’ ‘Rejoice with me,’ the father says, ‘this son of mine



was lost and is found.’ All these voices are the voices of God. God does not want to keep his joy to himself. He wants everyone to share in it. God’s joy is the joy of his angels and his saints; it is the joy of all who belong to the Kingdom.”

Imagine the father going about his day, always in a position to see down the road—stealing glances while branding cattle, mending fences, shoeing horses, sitting every evening on his porch, just watching the road, waiting and knowing his son would be back. Maybe this is the picture that comes to mind when we think of **Colossians 3:17**, “And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

No matter what we’re doing, we can adopt the loving posture of the Father: one eye on our work and one eye scanning the horizon, ready to welcome home the one who is lost for the glory of God.

Questions for reflection:

- Put yourself in the **Luke 15** story. How do you picture the father in the story of the lost son? What’s his expression when his son leaves? What is it when the son returns? How does he speak to the older brother?
- Do you remember when you first started your relationship with Jesus? Was there rejoicing? How can you share that rejoicing with others? If not, what can you do to make that a reality for others?
- How often are you looking for people who are “still a long way off?” What tends to keep your eyes on the imminent so that you’re not able to look at the person who is a long way off? How might looking with God’s eyes change you in those situations?



Day 3

After spending time studying the father yesterday in the story of the Prodigal Son, it only seems fair to look at the sons today. Spend a few minutes re-reading and re-familiarizing yourself with the **Luke 15:11-32** story.

Today, let's start with **Luke 15:13-20**:

“Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

“When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ So he got up and went to his father.” (**Luke 15:13-20**)

Let's start first with the younger son. People find themselves in various stages of the younger son's story. Sometimes they demand what's theirs so they can leave, live however they want, and only wind up reaching the end of their rope. Or, they find themselves lost without a hope. Maybe that sounds familiar. Perhaps you know someone who's in a pit, working on their speech to convince their father to take them back. Maybe that was (or is) you. You need to know that the father is scanning the horizon, searching in love for his child.

Let's look now at the older brother.

“The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’” (**Luke 15:28-30**)

The older brother experienced a different way of being lost. Maybe you identify with him faithfully serving, never straying or ever breaking the rules. The older brother had three options: (1) saying good riddance when his brother left, (2) celebrating with others upon his return, or (3) leaving the comfort of the house to go get him and bring him home. We could safely say the older brother in the story chose poorly.



And we get to make our own choice.

- If we're in the shoes of the younger brother, will we allow God to bring us home? Will we let God find us? Will we let God love us? Will we let God know us?
- If we're in the shoes of the older brother, will we forego entitlement? Will we emulate the love of the Father? Will we get rid of pride and ego? Will we get rid of the comparison? Will we get rid of the resentment? Will we get rid of the craving for attention and status and the "atta-boys" or "atta-girls"?

Maybe we can follow the example of another "older brother" who left His home to come looking for those who are in the pit. That's the choice Jesus made; he came to selflessly serve others to draw them to salvation (**Mark 10:45, Luke 19:10**).

Questions for reflection:

- Has there ever been a time in your life you felt like the younger son? You spent time writing a speech to recite to God to convince Him to let you back in the house. What was that time like? What did your speech say? What was your perception of God during that time?
- Has there ever been a time in your life you felt like the older son? What internal characteristics were present that led you to that point?
- Who's your younger brother? Who are you willing to bring back with you? Spend time thanking Jesus that He took on that role of bringing you back, and ask Him for the strength and grace to be able to do the same.



Day 4

Now that we're starting to understand God's heart for all of His children, and our potential roles in the story, let's use our imaginations a little today.

Read Mark 2:1-12. Whether or not you're familiar with the story, take time to read through it a few times as though you haven't heard it before. Get comfortable and take a few deep breaths as you acknowledge the presence of God with you through His Spirit.

On the **first reading**, try to envision the scene: the people, the house and other buildings, the weather. Take it all in.

On the **second reading**, put yourself in the story. Who are you? What do you see from your particular perspective? Listen to the voices of the conversation. Imagine making the hole or seeing the hole being made. Notice the reactions of everyone.

On the **third reading**, let the scene come more to life and listen for any invitation you might be receiving. Notice the love of the four friends and how much they must have trusted Jesus to heal their friend.

Take time to pray and journal what you noticed in the provided space.

Now that you've stretched your mind a bit, let's continue to use your imagination. What are some ideas you can come up with? Use the space below these bullet points to make a list and get started.

- Maybe there are particular names and faces that come to mind that you can reach out to in a particular way.
- Maybe there are gifts to give or ways to serve someone nearby that might open a door to a new relationship.
- Maybe there are neighbors, colleagues, or family members that you can share your story with, telling them how Jesus has changed your life.
- Pray for inspiration, get a little radical, share your ideas with your life group, and be open to the possibilities. God might really surprise you with the opportunities He provides.



Day 5

A man working in an orchard was walking through the trees in mid-summer. He noticed that many of his trees had dead branches. In trying to find a solution, he decided to paint hundreds of wooden apples, then he filled a wheelbarrow with his beautifully painted apples and walked through the rows of trees. As he came to a tree with a dead branch, instead of cutting it off, he would take a handful of apples and painstakingly hang them from the branch. Then, he'd move on to find the next dead branch. Harvest time came, people came to buy his apples, and the orchard keeper was ruined because his attempts to create his own fruit had failed.

The following year, the orchard owner reopened his orchard after his near-disastrous plan for selling fake apples. The people who came, while perhaps skeptical due to last year's "crop," found trees filled beyond comparison with ripe, juicy, and delicious apples—apples that were better than any they could remember. Many found the orchard owner and asked about the drastic change. "Nothing special," he would tell them, "I just learned that **the secret to really great fruit lies not with the fruit, but with the tree.**"

When we live our lives focused on Jesus, staying connected to the Vine, the fruit will grow naturally, and it will be the kind of fruit that is not only appealing, but satisfying to anyone who comes and eats it.

Read the following passages below. In each one, mark out words or phrases that stand out to you and jot your notes in the empty spaces. As words or phrases stand out, reflect on what it is about those words or phrases that resonates with you. In other words, *what is God teaching you through these verses?*

"...And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart." (**Hebrews 12:1-3**)

"But blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him. They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit." (**Jeremiah 17:7-8**)



“Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.” (**Colossians 3:1-4**)

The Bible makes it clear, when we are following Jesus and we fix our eyes on Him, the fruit of our lives will grow to an exponential harvest.

The Creek’s vision statement is a simple one, but we believe there is incredible, world-changing power when we keep Jesus as our focus, stay firmly connected to Him, commit ourselves to seeing others through the eyes of the Father who loves all His children, and stop at nothing to connect as many people to Jesus as possible.

Questions for reflection:

- The fruit we bear is one way to prove how connected we are to Jesus. How is the fruit of your life? Is there evidence of connection to Jesus?
- As you read the three aforementioned scriptures, what stands out to you about vision? What can you infer about what the Bible says is important in accomplishing our vision?
- What might be stopping you from being more deeply connected to Jesus? How can your life group encourage and hold you accountable to remove those obstacles?
- What specific action steps do you need to take to both stay connected to Jesus and to connect others to Jesus?