

# Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – May 6, 2018

## [John 15:9-17](#)

(Click on scripture above to link directly to the passage on biblegateway.com.)

### **Suggested Study / Prep**

1. Read the passage in several different translations and/or paraphrases
2. Read the provided commentary below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

### **Commentary on John 15:9-17**

(From the *Homiletics* archive; “Friends for Hire” – May 13, 2012)

The original audience of John 15:9-17 would have been aware of the role banquets played in a society that was dominated by the Roman Empire's widespread system of patron-client relationships. Patrons provided opportunities and protection for clients, and frequently exercised their power to keep clients in their place. Clients, in return, rendered patrons loyalty, paid for protection, and served their patrons' interests. Patron-client relationships ran from the lowliest peasant-slave all the way up to Caesar and fostered an arrangement designed for mutual benefits that, in the long run, mostly benefited patrons.

This cultural network of patron-client relationships depended heavily on slavery. But one did not have to be a slave to be forced to feel, or be, servile. More socially inferior clients outnumbered socially superior patrons, and patrons themselves often were clients of those who were more powerful still. Consequently, even many free persons knew something about having to serve somebody if they were to survive and thrive in a *quid pro quo* social order that favored the powerful.

Banquets were venues for one of the more notable features of how patron-client relationships functioned in Jesus' day. Patrons would host banquets to demonstrate their power and status. They would honor clients by inviting them to banquets. Clients came to these banquets to give homage to their patrons. Accompanying all of this was a fair amount of wheeling and dealing where patrons and clients alike focused on furthering their own interests.

Patrons threw banquets to keep their clients happy enough to remain clients who paid them respect and money. Clients attended banquets to keep their patrons happy enough to remain patrons who protected them. What more often than not dominated the proceedings were patrons doing what it took to keep their clients in line. Love and friendship were not unheard of at these banquets. But love and friendship were typically sidetracked by overwrought scheming, as people angled to get what they wanted from others.

Jesus offers an altogether different kind of banquet.

John 15:9-17 is set in the midst of the Last Supper, a banquet where Jesus is serving a full menu of love and friendship. John's version of the Last Supper (13:1-17:26) highlights Jesus washing the disciples' feet and promising how deeply God will care for them after Jesus' death. Throughout this particular banquet, the love Jesus demonstrates toward the disciples, as well as the love he calls the disciples to extend to others, runs considerably contrary to the ethos of patron-client relationships.

Even though Jesus has very good cause to look out just for himself as he faces betrayal and death, John 15:9-17 portrays him as a patron who attends to the best interests of his clients, the disciples, by calling them to full participation in God's loving purposes. Jesus encourages them to abide in his love (15:9-10) and commands them to love one another as he loves them (15:12). Instead of personal aggrandizement,

Jesus upholds the importance of self-sacrifice by declaring that the ultimate love is "to lay down one's life for one's friends" (15:13).

Then, considering his position of power, Jesus tells the disciples something startling by the standards of the patron-client relationships of his day: "You are my friends if you do what I command. I do not call you slaves any longer, because the slave does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father" (15:14-15). Jesus calls the disciples into a whole new relationship with himself, God and one another -- not as slaves, not as servants, not as clients, not even as disciples; but as friends.

Here, in addition to 'friend', φίλος can be read more literally as 'loved ones.' Jesus deems the disciples to be loved ones whom he appoints "to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last" (15:16). They are loved ones called by Christ to be friends who treat one another as beloved (15:17).

Emerging from the dynamics of love (αγαπη) and loved ones (φίλοι) depicted in John 15:9-17 is a familiarity, even an intimacy, between the divine and human that operates through Jesus. In Jesus, God and humankind enter into a kind of companionship that disrupts the protocol for maintaining the power structures and status quo of patron-client relationships.

Central to this companionship is Jesus bidding the disciples to abide (μένω) in his love (15:9, see also 15:10). This recalls the metaphor of the true vine in John 15:1-8 through which Jesus illustrates a process wherein disciples abide in Jesus and Jesus abides in the disciples (15:5-7). It also revisits the promised indwelling of the Holy Spirit in Jesus' absence (John 14:16-17). All of this points to a certain mutual abiding presence shared by the divine and the human. The Fourth Gospel's record of the Last Supper does not, like the Synoptics, account for communion by breaking bread and sharing the cup. But John 15:9-17 contributes to a focus that signifies a radical communion via Jesus through which God abides in humankind and humankind in God.

Further underscoring this radical communion in 15:9-17 is Jesus appointing the disciples to bear fruit that will last (or 'abide', from μένη). This fruit connects back to the true vine. The disciples' capacity to bear fruit that will abide is directly related to abiding in the true vine, Jesus. The fruit that Jesus calls the disciples to bear is fruit Jesus is already preparing them to produce. Here, abiding presence is not only a matter of being in communion with God's purposes, but also a matter of growing in communion with God's purposes.

Communion in John 15:9-17 is a call to action based on disciples seeking to abide in Jesus and disciples being open to Jesus abiding in them. Through such mutual abiding presence, disciples discover that they are spiritually equipped to participate in bearing fruit as partners of Jesus -- and by creating partnerships themselves with those God has called them to love as brothers and sisters. Communion does not end at the table. It begins there and reaches out in love to others.

## Additional Resources

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for this week...not all will relate to the Matthew passage we are studying, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out the commentaries and additional resources available for this Sunday (and others!) at [WorkingPreacher.org](#).

**What questions do you have?**

**What do you “wonder” about when reading this passage?**