

Abiding in Christ

The night Jesus was betrayed, He taught His disciples some of the most profound truths perhaps ever heard by man. Recorded in John 14 through 17, they are packed full of truth. And Jesus even had to limit what He shared, as He said, “I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now” (**John 16:12**).

After the last supper, Jesus led His disciples out, and He no doubt passed some of the ancient grapevines on His way up to Gethsemane. And there He stopped, and in a few words, explained the entire Christian life in a way that no one else could. If we want to understand our lives as believers, we need to pay close attention to His words and their meaning.

I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman. Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit. Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me. I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.
If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned. If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you. Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples. As the Father hath loved me, so have I loved you: continue ye in my love. If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in his love. These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full.

John 15:1-11

The meaning of the metaphor: the Christian life

Jesus meant this metaphor as an explanation of the Christian life. He was using a very simple, earthly thing – a grapevine – to explain deep, eternal things. God the Father is compared to a vine-dresser, one who looks after a grapevine, who desires its fruit and takes the necessary steps to ensure it produces fruit. Jesus, God the Son, is the vine itself. He is the plant. The vine is actually a trunk that comes out of the ground, kept at roughly a meter high. From it the branches emerge. The life which will flow into the branches comes from Him.

In the metaphor, believers are the branches. Vine branches need to be tied to a trellis, or propped up with sticks. They are the long and winding branches on which the grapes grow. But take note, each branch is not a vine, it is an extension of the vine. Christians are not little gods. We are not self-sufficient, self-generating, self-dependent demi-gods. We are extensions of Jesus Christ. Everything we are, is derived from the vine Himself. Even the fruit is not something a branch produces; it is something it bears. It must receive sap from the vine, whose roots go deep into the ground, and then it can bear fruit.

The fruit here – the grapes that grow on the branches – is in many ways the point of this parable. Jesus is focused on the fruit-bearing of the branches, and what God the Father does so as to get maximum fruit. So, what does the fruit represent? Well, if Jesus likens Himself to a grapevine, then the fruit of grapes must mean Christlikeness. The fruit that comes out has little, some or much resemblance to Jesus Christ. The more resemblance to Jesus Christ, the more the Father is glorified (**John 15:8**) and the more you bear fruit, the more you are satisfied (**John 15:11**).

So here you have the whole Christian life packed into a simple illustration. God the Father wants the glory. He also wants our joy. He gets the glory, and we get the joy, when as believers we so relate to Him that His likeness is increasingly formed and shown to others. You know, fruit is something that others eat. Branches do not eat their own fruit. The fruit of Christlikeness in your life is a fruit that others eat of, and its sweetness makes them desire God, and so He is glorified.

Jesus gets the glory when extensions of His life reveal what a sweet Saviour he is. The Father gets the glory when it is His Son which is magnified. The more fruit, the more God is glorified, and the more you are satisfied.

The 4 types of branches reveal 4 kinds of people and God's response to each

1) Branches with no fruit

As God looks at you, there is no visible sign of Christlikeness. Two reasons are possible for this state. Firstly, that you are not in the vine at all. A branch that is not in Christ is a branch that is not a born-again believer. You have never repented of serving yourself and turned to embrace God as your Lord and Saviour. You have not trusted Jesus Christ to forgive you your sins through the cross. And as such, you have not become part of the vine.

Say you're out walking, and you find a stick, you don't bring it home and expect it to produce grapes. It is cut off from the plant it was on, there is no life in it. If there is no sign of the character of Jesus Christ in you – His love, His joy, His peace, His patience, His compassion, His holiness, His gentleness – it may be because you have never received Him. And if you have not received Him, so His life does not dwell within you. As such, there will be no fruit.

The second reason why a branch can be completely fruitless is if it is on the ground. Very often young branches tend to grow on the ground. If nothing is done, they will lie there in the dirt, cut off from sunshine, and subject to mildew and other insects. This is like a believer caught up and overcome in sin. Sin, worldliness and selfishness have swallowed you up. You've trusted Christ, you know Him, but you have allowed sin to gain the upper hand.

What does the farmer do with such branches? He 'taketh away' – which in Greek is the word *airo* which means 'lifts up.' He does something to pick the branch up out of the dirt. For a believer, that will be discipline. God may speak, He may warn sternly, He may chasten in the form of unhappiness, pressure, anxiety, frustration, distress; He may even scourge with severe discipline. But it is with the loving concern of a Father. *"For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it"* (**Hebrews 12:11**).

Note, that there is an error if you mistake the discipline as the problem. The discipline is not the problem, it is what God is using to alert you to the problem. Your biggest problems are not around you; they are inside you.

There is a stern warning in this passage for those who never bear any fruit. If there is never any fruit – the branches are burnt. Temporary fruitlessness looks like spiritual immaturity. But permanent fruitlessness means the branch (or believer) is not part of the vine and will be burnt up. It's important to understand that the burning is not because the branches are fruitless, it is because they did not *abide*. In other words, they were not part of the vine, and demonstrated that by not continuing in the vine. If a branch says, "I once was in the vine, but I don't care much for it now?" – then they'd better check their salvation.

2) Branches with some fruit

As God looks at you, He sees some fruit that pleases Him. He is glad to see that you are not a fruitless branch. You are a believer and there are signs of Christlikeness. It may be small, it may be significant, either way, there is some fruit. And do you know what He is going to do when He sees some fruit? Quickly pick that fruit and be glad there was something? No, we are told – ‘purgeth’. That means – pruning.

With purpose and with thoughtfulness, He will prune you to produce more fruit. Pruning is a cutting away of what is hindering the production of fruit. It’s a cutting away of leaves. Bushes may look lush and full with all their greenery, but it’s deceiving. A lot of leaves can mean little fruit. The same is true with Christians. Leaves might be outward success, more money, more possessions, more ‘lush greenery.’ But these are time and energy drainers.

Pruning often risks being misunderstood. The way to tell the difference is that, in discipline, you will be aware of known sin in your life. In pruning, you will not. Many Christians sadly misunderstand God’s pruning, and get upset, and sin, and end up back in discipline. Instead, we must understand **James 1:2-4**: *“My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.”*

3) Branches with more and much fruit

If you’re a branch with more fruit, you are producing more than before, and God is going to prune you in different areas. He may move from outward things right into the very inner areas of your heart. But the results of previous pruning delight Him, and He will continue. If you’re a branch with much fruit, you are producing fruit in large amounts. God is pleased, but not satisfied. He’ll still be working with you to become even more fruitful.

So, what does God want from us during this whole relationship? We can see what He will do: discipline and prune. But what must you and I do? What must you do? The one command given in this passage, mentioned over seven times, is to ‘abide’.

Our work in regard to God – to abide

Now you’ve probably heard someone somewhere talk about ‘abiding in the vine’. And if we are not careful, we may not fully understand what Jesus is saying. It is absolutely crucial that we home in on this verb and understand what He meant. According to Jesus, this is the key to the fruitful Christian life that will glorify God and satisfy you. So, what does it mean to abide?

The word itself simply means to *dwell*, to *remain*. But we really need to let Jesus’ own illustration explain the meaning of abide. He says that abiding means ‘to be a part of.’ The branches abide in the sense that they are attached to the vine; they belong to it and remain a part of it. If a branch is no longer a part of the vine, it is, by definition, dead.

To remain somewhere, you must arrive there first.

To abide in Christ, you have to first be *in Christ*. Do you know that you are either in Christ, or outside of Him? There is no veranda with Christ! Those who are in are in; those who are out are out. How do I get in? Ironically, by receiving Him in. As **Revelation 3:20** says, *“Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.”*

Abiding means remaining in contact with.

The branches abide in the sense that they derive their life and nourishment from the vine. The branches must all day be receiving life-giving sap from the vine if they are to go on living and being fruitful, and that means they must be in contact with the vine continually. The branches are not like creatures returning to a river that drink once a day. They are permanently connected so as to be continually in contact.

So Jesus doesn't mean 'don't lose my number' but more, 'don't lose contact, remain in communion with me throughout your day.' Let there be a regular interchange of communication. Meditate on His Word, and allow Him to speak to you. Pray and speak back to Him. Thank, praise, confess, ask, trust, seek. What a lost art this is in our busy world! Our appointments, entertainment, work schedules, and technology crowds out abiding.

But God will not bow to our world or our schedule. He says, if you want to bear fruit and have joy, remain in contact. *"Pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:16)* and *"Meditate on [this Book of Law] day and night" (Joshua 1:8)*. Happy is the man who learns how to abide within his busyness.

A man by the name of Brother Lawrence wrote a little book called *The Practice of the Presence of God*. In it, he writes:

"If sometimes he is a little too much absent from that Divine presence, GOD presently makes Himself to be felt in his soul to recall him; which often happens when he is most engaged in his outward business: he answers with exact [faithfulness] to these inward drawings, either by an elevation of his heart towards GOD, or by a meek and fond regard to Him, or by such words as love forms upon these occasions; as for instance, My GOD, here I am all devoted to Thee: LORD, make me according to Thy heart."

In another place, Brother Lawrence writes:

"And I make it my business only to persevere in His holy presence, wherein I keep myself by a simple attention, and a general fond regard to GOD, which I may call an actual presence of GOD; or, to speak better, an habitual, silent, and secret conversation of the soul with GOD, which often causes in me joys and raptures inwardly, and sometimes also outwardly, so great that I am forced to use means to moderate them, and prevent their appearance to others."

It's probably safe to say that a branch that has a thick connection to the vine where it meets the trunk, will bear a lot of fruit. Why? Because the contact is great. The more flow, the better the fruit. The less flow, the smaller the fruit. Those believers who are increasingly learning the art of abiding are the ones whose crop of Christlikeness is growing as well.

Abiding means remaining dependent on.

The branches abide in the sense that they require connection to bear fruit. The branches do not *produce* fruit, they *bear* fruit. All they need to produce fruit must come from the vine. The moment a branch is independent is the moment it is in real trouble. Its life depends on its dependence: *"for without me – ye can do nothing" (John 15:5)*.

To **remain dependent upon** Christ is to look to Him for His will in every situation. Not so much 'what would Jesus do?' but 'what does Jesus *want*?' Depending on Him for strength to do His will, to carry out what is expected of you. Depending on Him for wisdom to make the best possible choice for the best possible outcome. Depending on Him to produce the Christlike thoughts, words and deeds you need in a lost world. Depending on Him to give you boldness to speak out for Him and witness for Him.

If a branch tries to produce grapes on its own – what will it produce? Nothing pleasing to the vine-dresser. He doesn't want wild grapes. He doesn't want works initiated in our flesh, done in our strength, done for our glory. That will not be glorifying to God, edifying to others or truly satisfying to ourselves. For this reason – we must remain in an attitude of humility, praying: 'Lord, help me. Lord, teach me. Lord, strengthen me. Enable me to obey you.'

Depending upon God entails trusting, waiting, seeking and submitting. It's the posture of the heart that says, "Lord do your work through me! Be First in my Life! Glorify Yourself, and do not let me get in the way!" So really, it's very simple: be in Christ, remain in communion with Him, remain dependent on Him. But how? And how do I grow in this? What are some of the keys to learning to abide, and continuing therein?

Four keys to abiding

1. **Remember *His* position to you:** "*I in you*" – He is here, now. He is not only in the past, or in the future, or somewhere else. He is here, now. He is in you. There is a presence in the room, and it is Him.
2. **Remember *your* position to Him:** "*in Christ*" – you are accepted in the beloved. You do not need to run from God; you are so fundamentally a part of Christ that the Father delights in you. He is not disgusted with you. You will not abide in Him if you believe your position changes every time you sin. Abide in His love.
3. **Store up His Word in yourself:** "*Let my words abide in you*"; "*keep my commandments*" – You can only abide in Him to the degree that His Word abides in you. You cannot know His will, and what He wants, apart from His Word abiding in you. You cannot know His wisdom apart from His Word. You cannot know His promises apart from His Word. You cannot know His strength, His power, His entire nature, apart from His Word. Unless you take it in, and meditate on it, and retain it, you cannot abide in Him.
4. **Prioritise quality time for God:** One terrible curse of technology has been to want to fit so many things into our days. We no longer have to wait for many of the things that were part and parcel of our ancestors lives. The result is we are able to squeeze more and more activities into each 16-hour day that we are awake. And sadly, we are taught by our world to devote very little time to each task. 'Do more' seems to be the push – and this is not conducive to knowing and loving God. The man who would know God must give time to Him. Not five minutes on the run. Not a few seconds of prayer before a meeting. Real time – an hour daily, perhaps. The tired phrase 'I don't have time' needs to be retired. No one gets more time than another. All of us get the same amount. Each of us take the knife called 'priorities' and we slice that pie up. Remember, you can't cram God. You can't do a crash-course "quiet time" to make up for weeks of silence. Abiding means a growing, steady, continual walk with God.

But abiding in Him brings true blessing:

- Your prayers are answered.
- You'll develop a sense of the leading of the Lord.
- You'll be filled with the Spirit – and all His richness and abundance of power.
- God will give your rest.
- God is glorified.
- Others are edified.
- You are satisfied.

So whatever type of branch you are today, the call is to abide. If you are not in the vine, get in so that you can begin abiding. If you are fruitless, repent of the sin in your life and begin abiding. If He is pruning you, thank Him for being so committed to your fruitfulness, and keep abiding.