

Abide in Me

John 15:1-8

I'm not much of a gardener. I enjoy the various plants and flowers that Sharon has around our house, but I'm really not much good taking care of them. I like building things, but nurturing plants so they grow well isn't my strength.

I do know an important principle, though, when it comes to plants. Pruning. I know that some plants, some bushes and trees, need to be pruned. I understand that idea. For something to grow well, you have cut back and cut off old growth. And not only for appearance' sake, but for the life and vitality of the plant itself. Pruning is necessary for life.

That is is the sort of illustration that Jesus uses in John 15 when he teaches his disciples about their own Christian lives. He is moving on from the comfort and encouragement that he offered them in chapter 14, to more specific instructions in what we call discipleship. How does Jesus expect his disciples to live? To make his point, he uses a parable,

I. A GREAT ILLUSTRATION.

v.1-2

A vine, a vine-dresser, and branches.

Any Jew would be familiar with that illustration, since the OT nation of Israel was itself called a vine, most especially,

Ps. 80:8 "You have brought a vine out of Egypt; You have cast out the nations, and planted it."

And Jesus actually calls himself "the true vine." Just as he is the "true bread," as compared to the temporary and highly symbolic bread of manna which God gave the OT people of

Israel, he is also the true vine. But what does it mean?

First of all, it is an illustration of God. Specifically

A. An illustration of both the Father and the Son.

Jesus is the fulfillment of all the references to the vine in the prophetic words of the OT. He is the vine, in person. In the fullness of the meaning of the image.

He is the vine and his father is the vinedresser. The gardener. The husbandman. Ultimately, it is the father who takes of the vine, governing and ruling over it all with the tender care of a master gardener.

It is useful to think of a gardener and a vine in thinking about the relationship between the first and second persons of the Trinity. It's not a perfect illustration by any means, but it's helpful. Specifically, you get a good sense of the closeness of the relationship and purpose of the father and the son, and the intimate closeness between the son and his people.

There is another reason for the appropriateness of this illustration of a vine in relation to God, namely that Jesus is speaking these words the very same night as he instituted the Lord's Supper, perhaps even during the meal itself. On that table set before them would be the cups, cups which Jesus called the fruit of the vine. In describing the cup which became the cup of the sacrament we still observe today, Jesus said,

1 Cor. 11:25 In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me."

The connection is made clear when Jesus says to his disciples, "I am the true vine," and then after the Lord's Supper, says, "I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of

God comes.”

The illustration was very helpful, very insightful in teaching us about Jesus. Jesus is the vine. The parable of the vine also makes reference to us as Christians, the disciples of Jesus Christ. Specifically, we are the branches growing off that vine, and the parable gives us,

B. An illustration of our identity as creatures.

Branches.

v.2

Also, v.4

This is one of many appropriately humbling descriptions of man. We are just branches. Branches that have no existence, no life, no value in themselves. Only when they are connected to the vine.

But there is another aspect of the symbolism of the vine and the branches, as,

C. An illustration of judgment upon unbelievers.

v.2a

Those are severe words. “Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away.” Unto eternal condemnation.

Those branches who bear no fruit prove themselves to be unbelievers. They proved themselves to be not united with Christ. They proved themselves to be worthy of destruction. They are taken away!

And just so you don't think I'm overstating it, look at,
v.6

The sequence is painfully plain. Cast out, thrown away. Then withered, or dried up, in spirit and soul. All experiences of joy and peace are withered with such devastating effects as you would observe in a person who is dehydrating, even unto death. The unforgettable example of this would be Judas.

Then those unfruitful branches are gathered, picked up. Gathered up for judgment. And thrown into the fire. Burned. We read of that process in,

Mat.13:30 “Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, ‘First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn.’”

It is a description of everlasting punishment, an unquenchable fire. It is the fire of judgment coming at the end of this age, described in,

Rev. 20:7 “Now when the thousand years have expired, Satan will be released from his prison 8 and will go out to deceive the nations which are in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together to battle, whose number is as the sand of the sea. 9 They went up on the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city. And fire came down from God out of heaven and devoured them. 10 The devil, who deceived them, was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet are. And they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.”

That is the very definition of hell, for Jesus describes hell as the place,

Mark 9:48 “...where Their worm does not die, And the fire is not quenched.”

So there is a lot of symbolism in all this, but that wasn't what was so important. Rather, the emphasis fell upon the great promise and the great responsibility that Jesus taught using the great illustration of the vine. First,

II. A GREAT PROMISE.

I should say, great promises. There were several, but the one foundational promise is found in,
v.3

Now, the word for "clean" in verse 3 is actually the same Greek word translated "prunes" in verse 2. And there is some importance in seeing two different things in those two verses, which is why the translations usually give us two different English words. But those two things are inseparably connected. We'll be looking at the pruning in just a moment, but those whom God prunes are the one he has already cleaned.

The importance is this--there is something that God is doing in an ongoing fashion in our lives, and that is tied to something very particular and distinctive that he did for us once for all in the past. "You are already clean," he says. "Because of the word." To explain that as simply as possible, the truth is that,

A. We are made acceptable to God in Christ.

"You are already clean." And not because you cleaned yourself. Not because you made yourself acceptable to God. But because God cleaned you!

The theological word for that is "justification." Justification is a pronouncement made by a judge in a court of law. It is the judge declaring a defendant to be "not guilty."

Our shorter catechism defines it this way, "Justification is an

act of God's free grace, wherein he pardoned all our sins, and accepted us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone."

And what is the basis of that? What is the ground of that? What is the means by which we obtain that justification. By faith. And "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God."

We are made acceptable to God. God the judge declares us to be acceptable. And in that declaration, he cleans us. He washes away the guilt of our sin.

Tit.3:3 "For we ourselves were also once foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another. 4 But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, 5 not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, 6 whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, 7 that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life."

And so I say to everyone of you who is in Christ, everyone who believes in Christ for salvation, "You are already clean." Because of the word of God.

But what about my sin? You are already clean. But what about the continuing presence of sin in my life? You are already clean. What about my feelings of guilt? And feelings of unworthiness? You are already clean. Period.

Now that's a great promise.

And that is the promise that I must proclaim to you who are not Christians, you who haven't specifically trusted Jesus Christ to be your Lord and Savior, surrendering your lives to him. The promise of forgiveness of sins is just that, a promise. You do not earn it. You cannot earn it, not by your own works. For you already fall short. But the gift of eternal life comes as a promise.

For you who feel particularly guilty about your sins, you should! And then you should hear this,

1 John 1:9 "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

He cleans us. We are made acceptable to God. In Christ. And only in Christ. And directly related to that,

B. We are made fruitful.

v.5

There will be fruit, even much fruit, in the lives of all those who believe in Jesus. If you belong to Jesus, you will bear fruit.

Now, I'm going to stress that as an exhortation in a few minutes, in my third point, but before I make it an exhortation, I want you to understand that it is a promise. GOD will make you fruitful. God will MAKE you fruitful.

If you are connected to the vine, you will bear fruit. It is inescapable. It is certain. Because God promised it.

To be sure, there are differing degrees of fruitfulness. There are differing levels to which we attain, depending sometimes upon gifts and opportunities God gives us, and depending sometimes upon our own faithfulness. But there will be evidence. There will be fruit. When God is at work, God's work is evident.

But let me add to that promise, with this promise.

C. We are made increasingly fruitful.

Here is the idea of pruning.

v.2

Now pruning is a good word to use, because it makes you realize that something needs to change if we are going to bear fruit. Branches needed to be cut back. And the image of pruning conveys an idea of pain. If trees could feel pain, certainly cutting off the end of a branch would be painful.

So it is with us. Sometimes the pruning that God does is painful. Sometimes that pruning can be the same thing as discipline. Fatherly discipline. Chastening. Remember what is written in,

Heb. 12:7 "If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten?"

Chastening is endured, meaning it is difficult and painful. But good!

Heb. 12:11 "Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it."

The fruit of righteousness. That's really what I'm talking about in John 15, when I speak of fruit. Evidence of saving faith in the daily affairs of life. Obedience. Holiness. Godliness. Righteousness. I mean the same thing by all those words.

And God will discipline you in order to produce such righteousness in you. If you are a wild tree, growing in all sorts of directions without form and control, he will prune your branches.

He will cut off the things that need to be cut off.

Sometimes that pruning comes about simply in the daily affairs of our lives which are ordered by his providence. Circumstances, hard times, struggles, trials.

And what is the fruit?

James 1:2 “My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, 3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. 4 But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.”

That’s what I mean when I say that we are being made increasingly fruitful. The fruit of the spirit. Things like patience. Gentleness. Self-control, “that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.”

That’s God’s promise! And it is made so personal in,
v.7-8

The context of that “asking,” the prayers, is the quest for this fruit of righteousness. And so don’t be tempted to use this verse as an excuse for selfish praying, like little children going to Santa Claus to give them whatever they want. What Jesus is saying is that whatever you ask for, in your Christian growth and maturity, whatever fruit of the spirit you seek and ask for, he will give it.

If you wish to have the fruit of patience, ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you.” Just don’t be impatient when you ask! “Lord, give me patience and give it to me now.”

If you wish to have the fruit of joy or peace, ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. “By this my Father is glorified.”

In other words, God is glorified when we grow in grace, therefore you can be sure that God will bring about those things that glorify him! You can be sure that God will enable you to bear much fruit. You can be sure that in bearing that fruit, you will show yourself, or prove yourself, to be his disciples.

But, in all of that, there is,

III. A GREAT RESPONSIBILITY.

These promises are not things upon which you can presume. You cannot live your own life however you please, and then come to God and claim the great benefits that he describes here. You have to abide in Christ. The promises are given to those who abide.

v.4-5

Indeed, the condition for the promise we just looked at is clear,
v.7

What does that mean? That’s always a good question for me to ask when I’m preaching. And it is one I will verbalize somewhat often. What does that mean? What does it mean to abide? How do go about doing it? What do we have to do, in order to abide?

I hope you are asking yourself those questions, because it means that you are right with me this morning. Let me start answering those questions by saying this,

A. We must recognize that we are helpless in our own ability.

If you think that you can handle life by yourself, you won’t abide in Christ. If you think you can solve your problems in your own strength or wisdom, you will not experience the promise of

the verses that we have been studying. Jesus makes that quite plain.

v.5b “Without Me you can do nothing.”

Indeed, to abide in Christ is to despair of yourself. It is to confess and admit your own weaknesses and failures, your shortcomings and your inadequacies. It has to start there, which is why human pride is such a terrible barrier to Christian growth and maturity.

Pride will get you so far, to be sure. Self-help might take you a certain distance down the path. And then you will fall.

Pr.16:18 “Pride goes before destruction, And a haughty spirit before a fall.”

Pride is the barrier that many people fail to cross even as Christians, and it is a barrier that keeps many people from ever coming to Jesus Christ in faith. It is the barrier of self-sufficiency. Self-reliance. The unwillingness to surrender that sense of autonomy and self-direction.

But you must recognize the true state of your condition. By yourself, you are helpless.

Do you want a more thorough description? Turn with me to Revelation 3, the words to the church of Philadelphia.

Rev. 3:16 “So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth. 17 “Because you say, ‘I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing’-- and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked-- 18 “I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see.”

You can do nothing without Christ. That’s where abiding in Christ begins, with a sense of your own utter helplessness. As Jesus tells his disciples,

v.4-5

The branch has to be connected to the vine, and so I ask you, “Are you connected to Christ.”

You might use that word in your relationships with one another, husbands and wives, or parents and children. You might talk about “connecting with each other.” And what we mean by that is that in the busy-ness of most of our days, we need time to be together. Time to talk. Time to put your minds on the same subject, to interact with one other. Time to connect. It is essential for any good relationship. It is absolutely essential for a marriage.

I believe that expression adequately explains what Jesus is speaking of here. You have to connect with Jesus. Though with him, it is not a connection made among equals, and so the language of abiding in him is more appropriate.

B. We must seek to abide continuously in Christ.

Every day, and that takes effort. For whatever effort you put in today, you need to start over again tomorrow. Abiding in Christ today won’t help you tomorrow! You have to abide again tomorrow.

And there is a high level of energy needed to do that, a high commitment and priority on our part. These words are words of exhortation, as I said. Great promises are the foundation. But there must be strenuous effort to seek the fulfillment of those promises.

Abide, as an exhortation. A command. Abide.

v.4a “Abide in me...”

And the challenging condition of,

v.7 “If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you.”

“IF you abide in me.”

And that means that he will abide in you!

v.5a

Specifically that means, according to verse 7, that “my words abide in you.” To abide in Jesus means to fill and saturate your mind and heart with the word of God, the words of Jesus.

But do you? That’s the challenge? Do you abide in him? Do you consciously, intentionally, persistently seek to live your life in the presence of God, utilizing the power and strength of God, seeking the wisdom of God, in every situation and circumstance? Do you allow his word to abide in you, to govern and control your actions and your attitude?

It’s challenging, isn’t it? It requires, at minimum, daily efforts to pray. And to pray diligently. Daily efforts to read the Bible. At minimum, with the pattern of life God established at creation, it requires weekly participation in public worship on the sabbath day.

It takes hard work to abide, and there are no short-cuts or instant recipes for this sort of spiritual strength and maturity. Simply the ongoing commitment to live with Christ. To connect with him. To walk with total and complete dependence upon him, in total and complete submission to him. It requires the willingness to accept hardship and trouble from his loving hand of

discipline, and to accept his definition and interpretation of what is right and what is wrong.

Abiding in Christ means that you find your security in him, not in the security offered by the things of the world, things like financial stability or good health. Abiding in Christ means that you find your delights and joys in him, not in the fleeting pleasures and enjoyments of the world. Abiding in Christ means that you will seek to transform your mind by the word of God, choosing to believe that which the Bible says is true, choosing to abstain from that which the Bible says to be wicked, and choosing to put into practice that which the Bible says is wise.

You who trust in Jesus for your salvation, be encouraged by these words. “You are already clean!” And with that encouragement, make sure that you abide in Jesus, day by day by day. Make sure that you live your life with a deep and personal connection to Jesus. Don’t just go through the motions. Don’t just perform your duties. Abide with Jesus. And you will bear much fruit.