



SERMON TITLE: "Abide"

DATE: October 18, 2020

SCRIPTURE: John 15:1-17

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"These things are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ" (John 20:31). This is how John concludes his biography of Jesus. He wanted the young, the old, the sick, the well, the despairing, the hopeful, the skeptics, the faithful, and whoever reads his account of Jesus to believe and trust him more fully. But what did John want them to believe? He wanted them to believe that Jesus alone brought eternal life into the present, broken world. And for all who enter this eternal life with God right now, we—like John—are exiles. For all who enter a relationship with Jesus, we will very likely be marginalized and dismissed because we follow him. So, what does it mean to believe? And how do we mature in believing? What does it mean to remain faithful to God when the pressure is on? These are the things that John will help us explore by showing us the glory and beauty of Jesus.

Jesus was celebrating the Passover with his friends and started to talk to them about what it was going to mean to follow him after he left them. And one of the final pictures he leaves them with can feel a bit odd. He wanted to teach them to abide. But why?

There are tons of metaphors for life with God. There's the kingdom, which is Jesus' favorite, where God rules and wants us to share in his reign. There's adoption, where God is a loving Father that brings us into his family. There's freedom, where God brings us out of slavery to sin. There's the courtroom metaphor, where he declares us "not guilty" and justified. Paul talks about walking as a metaphor for intimacy with God. Then there's the "run the race with perseverance" picture that is used throughout the New Testament. And with all of these and more available to him, here's Jesus' choice for the night he's arrested. Here's his secret that's supposed to unlock life with God: Stay. That's it, that's what abide means. So, we have to consider well what Jesus is talking about in John 15:1-17, and we'll do so with three questions: What is abiding? How do we abide? And why do we abide?

What is abiding?

Well, simply put, abiding is us having the same relationship with Jesus as a branch has with a vine. "Abide in me, and I in you. *As the branch* can't bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me" (15:4). But why does Jesus choose the vineyard as his main image? Because a vineyard in the Hebrew Bible was the image of God planting his people after he delivered them from slavery in Egypt (see Psalm 80, Isaiah 5, Hosea 10, etc.). And the Psalms and the Prophets continually portray Israel as a terrible vine that wasn't fertile or fruitful. Or, as Psalm 80 says, "it got ravaged by wild boars." And this Old Testament picture reframes what Jesus is saying.

Jesus is positioning himself as Israel-in-a-person. Distinct from ancient Israel, "I am the True Vine" (15:1). Israel is the shadow of which Jesus is the substance. Israel was supposed to live rightly unto God and the world, and they failed. And now, Jesus is "representative Israel" in a person, being faithful where they were faithless. And because God planting his people in the OT was after the exodus, Jesus is insinuating something here about freedom. He's saying, "You thought slavery in Egypt under oppressive political leaders was bad, but it's nothing compared to slavery to sin and death, and I'm here to set you free from that." So, how does this help us with "what is abiding?"

Abiding is living in such freedom for, likeness to, and intimacy with Jesus that God's own life is moving in us and through us.

How do we abide?

The main way we do this is tucked in the vine metaphor. "Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it may bear more fruit" (15:2). So, how do we abide? The big answer is in the word *prune*.

And when you prune the branches, you get them ready for harvest. Pruning is good for the branches, not bad. But if you ask a branch about it while it's being pruned, it might tell you otherwise because pruning is not a trivial trimming; it's a substantial cutting back, and it requires submission to the pruner's knife.

Our Father, the Vinedresser, is like a skilled surgeon with a scalpel. His cuts may be painful, but they yield, sustain, and empower life. And if you don't know what you're looking for, and you walk into a vineyard during pruning time, you would be shocked, maybe even angry, at all of the green on the ground. It seems so wasteful. However, if you do know what you're looking for, you know there's not a random snip, clip, lop, trim, slice, chop, or severe in the entire process. Nothing is wasted, and you see a harvest that is yet to come. You see abundance and growth in its most seed-form. It might be hard for the branches, but the Vinedresser gets it. And because Jesus is the Vine, nothing that is taken away is truly a loss. He is the faithful and fruitful Vine that Israel wasn't and that we can't be on our own. And with him, nothing that fades or falls is a penalty or a punishment. It is a pruning, a preparing for growth and fruit and maturity. And if you're following Jesus, what you might consider loss is likely God's loving, patient pruning. This is the ultimate *how* of abiding.

We rightly abide in Jesus when we trust God's wise and loving pruning in our lives.

And what does God's pruning require of us? Trust. We are called to trust his timing, trust his sovereignty, trust his purposes, and trust his faithfulness. And God's not new at this, so we should trust his veteran years of being the Gardener. We must trust that what we call squandered, he calls scheduled; what we call barren, he calls blessed; and that what we call waste, he calls grace, and "that these light momentary afflictions are preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison" (2 Cor 4:17).

Why do we abide?

Well, negatively, we abide because branches that are gathered up and thrown away don't honor God. Tim Keller rightly asks, "What is a dead branch? It's a branch that has a *formal* and not a *vital* relationship with the vine. It's stuck in all the vine growth, the tangled and the fertile." And Jesus' major point is that if we're abiding, if we're submitted to our Father the Gardener, trusting him, obeying him, loving him, and loving others, we don't have to fear the deadness and fire he talks about in 15:6.

Jesus' biggest point is that if we're intimately joined to him, we are destined, not to fire, but to fruit. "By this abiding, my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples." And fruit in the Bible goes all the way back to page 1: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth." Fruit is life the way God intended. It's God's own life experienced, enjoyed, and shared. Fruit is beauty, truth, love, grace, and hope that can't be accounted for on our own. Only Jesus gets the credit for the fruit, not us.

And Jesus invites us to these things for our joy: "I'm telling you all this that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full" (15:11), so that we might be branches happily weighed down with the fruit of the Spirit, and that our lives would have a joyfully heavy sense of God's power and love upon them. So, Why should we abide?

We should abide in Jesus in order to bear fruit for our joy and for God's glory.

If you don't want God to be glorified in your life, don't be happy in him. If you don't want to be happy in him, don't abide in Jesus. Or, if you want to trust that Jesus is actually telling the truth, his invitation to trust him and be intimately connected to him is one that puts God on display as Worthy and True and Good. That same invitation has overflowing joy as part of its objective. This joy can be more filling than the pruning is fragile, and if you reject the pruning, the joy won't be as full. They're a package deal.

And Jesus never intended any of this to be abstract. If it never leaves the realm of a good metaphor, we miss it. Jesus is telling us that abiding in him means we can't also abide in money, politics, ESPN, or social media. Jesus is telling us that abiding in him means we can't also abide in our marriage, our kids, or any other good gifts he has given us. Jesus says, "Abide in me," not "Abide in what I can do for you." And when we abide, and we trust, and we're pruned, and then we bear fruit in Jesus' name, we're supposed to take that fruit of God's own life moving through ours, and make it visible in spaces like hobbies, sports, family, politics, jobs, relationships. Bearing fruit is about wanting Jesus' life to be seen as the most important and not our own.

And here's why Jesus is the most important. In the Old Testament, Israel sinned. They failed to bear fruit for God and for others, and it led to divine judgment. And that judgment was exile. But here in John's gospel, Jesus is "Israel in a person," rightly growing branches and bearing fruit for God and for others. He's the true fruit-bearing, freedom-giving Passover Lamb. And we know this supremely because he went to the cross and got wrapped up and entangled in all the thorns, thistles, and overgrowth of sin, death, and divine judgment. Jesus took to himself the death that our sins deserve. On our own, we're withered branches that ought to be thrown out. But Jesus was "thrown out" for us. On the cross, he experienced separation that we might experience connection and belonging to God. He was pruned back all the way, even unto death, so that we might have life through him. This is the gospel. This is good news. "Greater love has no one than this that someone lay down his life for his friends" (15:13).

Discussion Starters —

- What does it mean to abide in Jesus?
- Who is someone you know who joyfully abides in Jesus?
- Why might "pruning" be difficult?
- Personally, what are some hindrances to abiding in Jesus?
- What is fruit supposed to look like in a Christian's life?