

Basics of the Christian Life -3

Abide

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They had all gathered for a night of celebration. They were the closest of friends. The table was set. All in attendance reclined on the floor around the table to observe the Passover meal. They were there to remember God's mighty works that had freed the children of Israel from slavery in Egypt centuries before. They were also there to remember the promise that a Messiah would one day come to fulfill deliver His people. Throughout Jerusalem all the homes were having this same celebration, but in this upper room, where Jesus met with His disciples, tonight would be different.

At one point during the meal, Jesus took off his outer robe, tied a towel around his waist and washed the feet of the disciples. He then told them how one of the twelve would betray Him. Jesus continued explaining how He would only be with them a little while longer, and where He was going they could not come. This must have been shocking news for most, since they had given up all to follow Christ.

We know, from previous scriptures, that Jesus had already told them that he would be killed and raised back to life in three days, but somehow, they still did not have ears to hear (Mark 8:31). He told the disciples how the ruler of this world, Satan, was coming, but that he would have no claim over Christ. Jesus told them that those who believed in Jesus would do even greater things than He had done. He commanded them to love one another as he had loved them, by this all people would know that they are His disciples. He assured them that He would not leave them as orphans, but that He would return for them. Until then the Father would send a Helper, the Spirit of truth, to be with them.

As the disciples sat there, listening, it must have all come upon them like a gathering storm. Betrayal. Jesus's departure. Satan coming. And in the midst of this they would need to love, believe, and do even greater things that Christ had done.

We don't know for sure what was happening in their hearts and minds in that moment, but we do see Jesus' words: ***"Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you . . . Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid."***

It was at this point, at the end of the Last Supper, that we find these words in John 15:5: ***"I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in Me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing."***

Our society rails against this type of thinking. "You can do it if you put your mind to it! If you believe in yourself! If you apply yourself and pursue your dreams! Where there's a will there is a way!"

But Jesus says, ***"I am the vine, and you are the branches . . . apart from Me you can do nothing."*** This is not a new idea. We see it throughout scripture. His grace is sufficient. When we are weak, He is strong. As the psalmist says, ***"My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever."***

Jesus is not trying to give them poor self-esteem and focus on how lowly they are. That was not the situation. Jesus has just shared with His disciples the weight of the burden they are about to be required to bear, and He is reassuring them that the impossible is possible if . . . they will abide in Him. This same assurance is offered to all who are in Christ.

The example of the vine would have been very familiar to the disciples. The vine or the "trunk" of the grapevine sprouts branches. These branches then produce fruit. If a branch is cut off from the vine, of course it can do nothing. That was common sense. Jesus is taking this commonsense idea and applying it to the disciples' relationship with Him. He is declaring that this necessity of a branch abiding in the vine is similar to a spiritual reality. If the disciples are to live and bear fruit, then they must abide in Him.

Jesus continued with these words: ***"If anyone does not abide in me, he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned."***

Branches of the vine were useless once separated from the vine. They would die, no longer bear fruit, and because of their weakness they could not be used to build or to even make a fire to cook. There was nothing that a vine could do on its own.

This illustration of the vine was meant to help the disciples understand the concept of **abiding in Christ**. It first required that the disciples understood their utter helplessness. It secondly required their complete confidence in Christ. As the disciples humbled themselves before Christ and put their faith in Him, their "branch" would be connected to the "vine" of Christ, and they would receive the spiritual nutrients and power they would need to bear fruit in the midst of their situation.

If they relied on their own abilities and their own strength and did not put their trust in Christ, their task would be impossible, because they would not have access to all the resources that He had prepared for them. This spiritual effect would be the same as a branch that is not connected to the vine and loses fruitfulness, purpose and life.

The key to this passage is **abiding in Christ**. From these verses we can understand several truths about abiding. As already mentioned, it is based on realizing our powerlessness and realizing the power of Christ. But it is more than just realizing that He is all-powerful. He is also good. He is holy, trustworthy, merciful and loving. He is worthy to be trusted with everything that we are.

Scripture gives us various pictures of this abiding relationship. We see Father and child, King and subject, Potter and clay, Head and body, Shepherd and sheep. In all of these images we see relationships where one faithfully cares, and one gladly submits. “Abiding in” is similar to dwelling in, resting in, trusting in, believing in, and hoping in. It is like a people who dwell safely in a walled city or a child who is completely at ease in her parents’ arms.

In verse 5 Jesus says, *“Whoever abides in Me and I in him.”* This abiding is a two-way relationship. For all who have turned from their sin and trusted in Jesus Christ, the Spirit of Christ has come to abide in them. It is a permanent fact. For the disciples, they were already in an “abiding” relationship with Jesus, but yet Christ commanded them to abide in Him. It might be similar to a relationship between a parent and a child. They are permanently related in the most intimate of ways, but at times the relationship may become distant, where the children do not receive the full benefit of belonging to their parents.

In these verses Jesus is speaking of this “Christ in us and we in Christ” relationship. He is calling His disciples to nurture the abiding relationship that already exists. To stay close. As James instructs us to, *“Draw near to God and He will draw near to us.”* The well-being of our Christian lives depends on it.

In verse 3 of this passage Jesus tells His disciples that they are already clean because of the word that Christ has spoken to them. In verse 7 Jesus goes on to say that *“If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.”* We see from these verses that one of the components to abiding in Christ is allowing His Word to work in and through us. For us to continually abide we must be regularly exposing ourselves to the Word of God. Those who realize their great need and Christ’s great faithfulness will be people of the Word. If we are not people of the Word, one of those two pieces is missing. Either we don’t realize our desperate need for God, or we don’t trust He is our only hope.

This verse also talks of prayer: *“Ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.”* This seems as if God is giving us a blank check. That He is letting us have whatever we want, but we must understand the entire verse. If we are truly in Christ and His Word is in us, then our perspective, our desires, even our emotions will become more and more conformed to His. As we delight in Him, He will begin to transform our longings to agree with His. Once we humbly arrive at this point in our spiritual lives, we no longer will be praying for the selfish, superficial, materialistic requests of the past. We will be seeking God’s kingdom, God’s glory and Christlikeness in our lives. At this point our prayers will be answered because we now have come to know God well enough that we are praying in line with His will.

Regularly exposing ourselves to God’s Word and praying in ways that conform to His will are essential if we are to abide in Christ, but it is more than just legalistically reading and praying. It must be built on the foundation of realizing our utter need and trusting in the complete faithfulness of Christ. Without a submissive humility and a total dependence on Christ, we are no better than the religious leaders of Jesus’ day, who knew God’s Word and prayed regularly, but in Jesus words were, *“Hypocrites!”* Who were like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside, but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside they appeared to people as righteous, but on the inside they were full of hypocrisy and wickedness (Matthew 23:27-28).

If we are followers of Christ, we are in Christ, but to walk intimately with Christ in power and purity we must nurture our abiding relationship with Him. One way it has been described is **Living a God-Sensitive Life**. Some fast, memorize scripture, give to others in need, confess sin with a trusted friend, or actively share their faith. Others seek to live simpler, quieter, contented lives. Others order their lives in such a way that remove temptation or spiritual distractions. Others follow the words of Hebrews and try to rid their lives of **“everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles”** and add to their lives disciplines that help them fix their eyes on Jesus.

All of these are fine if we understand their role. Abiding in Christ is based on a relationship with Christ that is characterized by our humble submission and trusting in His faithfulness. All other actions are merely nurturing and strengthening our knowledge of Christ and our experience with Him.

In John 15:10 we find these words: **“If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.”**

If we are truly in Christ, if we recognize our desperate need and we believe in Christ's goodness, then the result will be obedience. Why would we want to do anything else? The sweetness in our relationship with God is found in submission, obedience and reveling in the Lordship of Christ. There is no better place that we can be.

Obedience and submission in recent times has gained a very negative connotation, but in the very next verse Christ states: **“These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.”**

If you played football on a team that had the best coach in the world, would you not take joy in following his commands? If you were a soldier in an army led by the greatest general who ever fought, would you not charge in to battle with confidence? If you were sick and being cared for by a gracious and brilliant physician, would you not follow their instructions? If you were a child of a parent who was kind and fair and loving and fun and merciful, would you not be drawn into obedience?

“If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.” Disobedience is proof of a rebellious heart and a lack of the knowledge of the goodness and greatness of God.

Christ comes calling us to abide in Him. As we abide in Him and He in us, His joy will become ours and finally we will know the fullness of joy.

Discussion questions:

1. What in this sermon did you find most interesting?
2. What emotions do you think the disciples might have felt as they heard the words of Jesus in the upper room during the Last Supper?
3. Why do you think people find it so difficult to admit their total need for Christ?

4. How would you say John 15:5 in your own words?
5. What could you do to better nurture your relationship with Christ?
6. What can you add to or remove from your life so it will be more sensitive to God?
7. When a person disobeys God, what might be the underlying problems in their spiritual relationship with Christ?
8. What do you need to remember from this sermon?
9. What do you think God wants you to do in response?
10. How can we pray for you?