

# Abide in me

John 15:1-11

**Pastor Tim Melton**

As we look at John 15, we must remember the context. Jesus was talking with His disciples. It was the end of the Last Supper, right before they walked to the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus would be arrested.

Jesus had just told them that one of them would betray Him. He had talked of how He was leaving and where He was going they could not come. He informed them that the king of this world, Satan, was coming. He told them how the Father would send a Helper, the Holy Spirit, to be with them. He talked of how by faith they would do even greater things that He had done, and that they were to love one another as He had loved them. That is how the world would know that they are His disciples.

Now as His words sunk in and the impossible weight of the burden pressed down on their shoulders, Jesus spoke these words:

***“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. <sup>2</sup> Every branch in me that does not bear fruit He takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. <sup>3</sup> Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup> Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> 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.”*** (John 15:1-6)

Jesus was taking a very common idea that the disciples would have been familiar with and using it to illustrate a timeless truth. Jesus is the True Vine. In the Old Testament the imagery of the vine was used to represent the people of Israel, but on almost every occasion it is used to describe them in a negative light. Jeremiah talks of how they had become a corrupt and wild vine. Isaiah described Israel as a vineyard that had run wild. Many of the Jews believed that they had God’s favor because they were Abraham’s physical descendants. In their mind they were the favored ones because they were part of the “vine of Israel”, but Jesus is declaring a new truth. He is the true vine and salvation is found, through faith, in Him alone. Just as Abraham believed and it was counted to him as

righteousness, those who have faith in Christ, the True Vine, it would be counted to them as righteousness. They are the true sons of Abraham who are in the vine (Galatians 3:6-7).

In verse 5 Jesus states that “He is the vine, and we are the branches”. All who abide in Him will bear much fruit, but apart from Him we can do nothing. That was His message to His disciples who were now about to face an impossible situation on their own. Jesus was reminding them that in Him they would have everything they would need to make the impossible, possible. Even in the midst of the coming storm, in Christ they would be able to join with the words of the Apostle Paul: *“We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed”* (2 Corinthians 4:8-9). *“My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is perfected in weakness”* (2 Corinthians 12:9). *“When I am weak, then I am strong”* (2 Corinthians 12:10).

In this simple illustration of the vine, Jesus explains to His disciples that like a vine and its branches, if they will stay connected to Him, they will bear much fruit. Most of us do not grow grapevines, so it is helpful if we take a moment to get a better understanding.

Grapevines were very common in their day. For the greatest harvest grapevines demand a lot of attention. Frequent and detailed pruning is necessary. The vinedresser continually observes the vine. The vine grows two kinds of branches. Branches that bear fruit and branches that don’t. Some branches may have nice leaves and look good, but they don’t bear fruit. They rob the fruit-bearing branches of much-needed nutrients and moisture. Because of this, if the vinedresser found a branch that was not bearing fruit, he would cut it off. Something similar was done with a fruit-bearing branch. If it had sprouts that were not the kind that would eventually bear fruit, the vinedresser would prune off the sprouts, even if they were growing on a fruit-bearing branch.

Jesus is giving us a spiritual example. If one bears fruit, it is proof that they are connected to Christ (John 15:8b). If they do not bear fruit, then they are not connected to Christ. Those who are not in Christ will never be able to bear spiritual fruit that will be pleasing to God. Even if one’s works seem to be good, in the end God will judge their true worth.

One of the clearest passages on this subject are Jesus’ words in Matthew 7:15-23:

*“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. <sup>16</sup> You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? <sup>17</sup> So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. <sup>18</sup> A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. <sup>19</sup> Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. <sup>20</sup> Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.*

*<sup>21</sup> Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. <sup>22</sup> On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ <sup>23</sup> And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’”*

Like fruitless branches with beautiful leaves, there are those who claim the name Christian but who are not really in the faith.

The story is told of the Great Awakening that took place in the United States in 1740. One of the primary instruments of God during this time was Jonathan Edwards. Thousands upon thousands of people put their faith in Jesus Christ. As the next several years passed, Edwards noted that many lives had truly been changed, but many others bore no evidence of spiritual fruit in their lives. Edwards set about to write about the true fruit of a life that was truly in Christ. He spoke of holiness and an ongoing movement towards God. He offered these questions to help the people evaluate their spiritual condition:

*“Do we fellowship with God? Are we sensitive to sin? Do you obey God’s Word? Do you reject the evil of this world? Do you eagerly await Christ’s return? Do you see a decreasing pattern of sin in your life and an increase in the fruit of the Spirit? Do you love other Christians? Do you experience answered prayer? Do you experience the Holy Spirit opening your mind to the truths of the scripture? Convicting you of sin? Does He bring me joy when I worship? Are super-natural change of hearts and drastic obedience, motivated by selfless love, occurring in your life? Are our desires and affections conforming to His?”*

These are the fruit that are only possible as one abides in Christ, and many in Edwards’ day were not bearing this kind of fruit.

This could be contrasted to the Welsh Revival that began in 1904. It was a spiritual awakening that began to sweep through many towns and churches across Wales. The following description was given of what happened amongst the people of that day:

*“Not only were individual lives changed by the power of the Holy Spirit, but whole communities were changed indeed, society itself was changed - Wales was again a God-fearing nation.*

*Public houses (pubs, taverns, bars, drinking establishments) became almost empty. Men and women who used to waste their money in getting drunk were now saving it, giving it to help their churches, buying clothes and food for their families. And not only drunkenness, but stealing and other offences grew less and less so that often a magistrate came to court and found there were no cases for him.*

*Men whose language had been filthy before learnt to talk purely. It is related that not only did the colliers (coal miner) put in a better day's work, but also that the pit ponies turned disobedient! The ponies were so used to being cursed and sworn at that they just didn't understand when orders were given in kind, clean words! The dark tunnels underground in the mines echoed with the sounds of prayer and hymns, instead of oaths and nasty jokes and gossip.*

*People who had been careless about paying their bills, or paying back money they had borrowed, paid up all they owed. People who had not been friends for a long time, because of something that had happened in the past, forgot their quarrels and were happy together again.”<sup>1</sup>*

The Welsh Revival was truly a picture of lives that had been changed into the likeness of Christ. As they found faith in Christ they bore fruit that was in keeping with true repentance.

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Those who abide in Christ and are connected to the Vine are pruned by the Vinedresser. This is talking about true followers of Christ. A life with Christ does not mean all pleasure and pain-free living. God seeks to make us like Christ, prepared to live a life of holiness that glorifies God, the Father. Because of this, the Father will work to develop the fruit of the Spirit in our lives. As we read in Galatians 5:22-23, ***"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law."*** These are examples of the inner fruit that the Father works in our lives, our faith and in our character. Our role is not to create spiritual fruit in our lives, our role is to abide in Christ. As we abide in Him, the Father will bear fruit in us. He truly is the Vinedresser and Discipler of our souls. As we read in Philippians 1:6, ***"He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."***

Our pruning may come through pain or suffering. At times He strips away all that we trust in so we finally draw near to Him as our only hope. At other times he will usher us through trials or temptations to prepare us uniquely for the task to which He has planned for us. Like a surgeon, His scalpel often brings immediate pain that results in long-term healing.

As we abide in Him may we submit to His pruning in our lives as instructed in Hebrews:

***"My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves and chastises every son whom he receives."*** (Hebrews 12:5-6)

***"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)

As we abide in Christ and He in us we will bear fruit both in our hearts and in our lives. At times it is harder to discern the authenticity of the fruit in our lives. Perhaps we have grown so used to religious ritual that we are more driven by habit than the Spirit. We have been trained to act Christian outwardly, while our hearts are still plagued by bitterness, selfishness and pride. We might have slipped into the sin of the Pharisees, judging others, while it is really our hearts that are far from Him. We must be careful. While giving offerings, attending church and participating in prayer meetings are beneficial, they in themselves are not spiritual fruit.

1 Corinthians 3:12-14 uses a different analogy to explain how our fruit will be tested by fire in the end:

***"Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward."***

Good works done in our own power will be burned up. Good works that were done for our own glory will be burned up. Good works that were done for selfish motives will be burned up. Only the fruit that came as we abided in Christ will last.

Spiritual fruit in its purest form lines up with Matthew 5:16 where Jesus says, ***"In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."***

A story of evangelist Dwight L. Moody is a great example of this. Moody was uneducated, but God had used Him mightily when Moody preached to the masses. In 1875 he preached in Birmingham, England, and God moved mightily. A well-respected theologian and congregational minister named Dr. R.W. Dale cooperated in this hugely successful evangelistic campaign. Dale would later write this in his denominational magazine:

*"I told Mr. Moody that the work was most plainly of God, for I could see no real relation between him and what he had done. Moody laughed cheerily and said, 'I should be very sorry if it were otherwise.'"<sup>2</sup>*

From a human perspective Dale was not impressed by Moody or his preaching, and yet God worked in tremendous ways. That is our goal. That we would humbly abide in Christ in such a way that as He bears fruit in and through us, only God will be able to get the glory.

In the second part of this passage we find the word "love" 9 times. It is the heartbeat of this lesson on abiding in Christ and bearing fruit:

*"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. 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 . . . This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends . . . These things I command you, so that you will love one another." (John 15: 9,10,12,13,17)*

Those of us who are truly in Christ are called to Abide in Him. As we do, we will bear fruit. This fruit will be an expression of our love relationship with God and will flow out into a love for others. It can be no other way. We cannot make the mistake of the Dead Sea, in Israel, which is below sea level. Because of this, water only runs in, but never flows out. This results in a body of water that has no life in it. No fish, no plants, nothing.

As we abide in Christ, we receive the love of Christ and then are able to be a conduit of His love to others. That is the way of abiding and bearing fruit. We receive the love of Christ so that we can give the love of Christ.

As we return to the original situation of these verses, Jesus is stating clearly to His disciples that "without me you can do nothing." Jesus was using their need to draw them more fully to Himself. In difficult situations we often strive to make things work, to find a solution in our own power, but there are times that God allows it all to be stripped away, and in these times of pruning we are driven to put our hope only in Christ and experience Him like never before.

If that is your situation today, "Don't kick against the goads." I am referring to the words that Jesus spoke to Saul when He appeared to Saul on the road to Damascus. Acts 26:14b *"And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.'"*

In Jesus' day the farmers would use oxen to plow their fields. They would carry a long pole that would have a sharp metal point on the end. This sharp point was called a goad. Whenever the oxen

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Swindoll, "Paul, A Man of Grace and Grit", p. 116.

would slow or even stop, they would prod the oxen on with the goad, the metal point. At times the oxen would grow angry and kick in retaliation, but it would only cause greater pain as the oxen kicked against the metal point of the goad.

For those of you who are sensing that God, the Vinedresser, is pruning you, don't kick against the goad. Don't bring greater discipline or pruning on yourself. God loves you. Trust Him. Bow to Him. Obey Him. Submit to Him. Abide in Him. That the Father will be glorified. That you will bear much fruit and so prove that you are His disciples. That your joy may be full.

Let me read this prayer found on the body of a fallen soldier after a battle during the American civil war:

#### **A Christian Confederate Soldier's Prayer**

(Anon. Alleged to have been found on a CSA casualty at the Devil's Den, Gettysburg.)

*I asked God for strength, that I might achieve.  
I was made weak, that I might learn humbly to obey.  
I asked for health, that I might do greater things.  
I was given infirmity, that I might do better things.  
I asked for riches, that I might be happy.  
I was given poverty, that I might be wise.  
I asked for power that I might have the praise of men.  
I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of God.  
I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life.  
I was given life, that I might enjoy all things.  
I got nothing that I asked for but got everything I had hoped for.  
Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered.  
I am, among all people, most richly blessed.*

Don't kick against the goad. Abide in Him and bear fruit, that your joy may be full.