

New Life: John 15:1-17
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It's a bad spot for us to get in when our relationship with Jesus Christ begins to feel like nothing more than a chore list. When we're in relationship with people that we love, it's not much fun for that relationship to be based on just marking things off a list. This morning, I'm praying a lot and thinking a lot about the person in this room whose relationship with Jesus has become drudgery, a to-do list, or a chore list. It goes something like this in our day to day or week to week or month to month - "Gosh, I need to read my Bible. I've got to tell somebody about Jesus. Tomorrow is Sunday. I need to be in church. I've got to stop doing this and I need to start doing that. God, I need you to not be mad at me right now. I'm working hard here. I'm going to write down all I need to do." This mindset feels like chores.

Today, when we come to our study in the gospel of John, Jesus is working with us in this text to show us that the relationship with Him is so much more than a chore list. I want to invite you to open your bibles to John Chapter 15. This is where we are in our study through this New Testament book. If you're here maybe for the very first time, I welcome you here and I hope you just dive in with us and either listen or read along as we work our way through the gospel of John. We are about three fourths of the way through the gospel of John, but we're in the last night of Jesus' life here on this earth before His death.

It's dark. It's Thursday night. It's down to Jesus and the 11 disciples, because Judas has left the room. Judas is getting together with the Roman soldiers that would find Jesus later that evening in the garden. Then there would be a kiss by Judas to Jesus. Jesus would be arrested, and He would be put on trial throughout the night, and we'll continue to see those details of those last few hours of His life as He was crucified. But here we have Jesus spending some final moments. It stretches out over several pages in our Bible. In these final moments, we see Him discipling the disciples who were there with Him and giving them some final words. If you're a note taker today, this may be a very frustrating 31 minutes. Today, I don't have for you an ordered outline with a neat introduction and tight conclusion. I want to just work through this passage of Scripture. I think as we talk through it that it kind of captures the feel of these verses.

There's a lot of back and forth in the phrases. You'll feel it when we read in just a moment. I want you to see as we get to this passage that there's nothing that will rob the joy of a relationship with Jesus Christ like turning it into a chore list or to-do list. When we get to John 15, Jesus has been giving the disciples some things to do. There are actions. He says to them, "Follow me. Obey my commandments. Even as I've washed your feet, wash one another's feet." It was a picture of serving others. He says to them, "Love one another." He repeats several times, "Obey me, obey me." The disciples hear those things, and it's like Jesus in this moment is telling them what a relationship with Him looks like.

Last week we saw that at least 15 times in chapters 14-16, He tells them these things to do, but then He drops this on them and says, "I'm leaving. I need you to follow Me. I need you to serve Me. I need you to serve others. I need you to obey Me. I need you to love others like I've loved you. You're going to be persecuted. You're going to be hated. It's going to be hard. Oh and by the way, I'm leaving. " The disciples are really scraping to try to get some kind of grasp on how Jesus is King of kings and Lord of lords and the Messiah, but He's given them things to do and He's just leaving it with them and going away.

Last Sunday after talking about this, I was walking through the parking lot and I crossed paths with a guy. He said, "Hey, I was never in the room this morning. I've been in the parking lot directing traffic all morning. How'd it go? Were you in John 14?"

I said, "Yep, we were in John 14 and Jesus is telling the disciples he's leaving."

He said, "You know what? I think about that a lot." He just started preaching to me.

I was like, "You should have been inside. I should have been in a parking lot."

But he said, "I was just thinking about the disciples and how Jesus kept telling them all this stuff and then he tells them he's leaving! You and I, wouldn't we be thinking, 'What are you doing?'"

You can kind of understand how they could get some things wrong and how there could be some confusion. How it wouldn't make sense to them and why they might scatter in the midst of that. These are real guys here dealing with this. In fact, later we'll read a verse as we work through John where Jesus says, "I told you things that you wouldn't understand when you heard them so that later after all this plays out, you would remember them and you would believe." His control of the situation, His understanding of what was going on, His knowledge of God's plan - this wasn't just "make it up as we go." Jesus was there fulfilling the plans of God. As He taught, He was teaching them things that probably would not connect in those moments. But later when Jesus had died, He was buried and He rose again, ascended to heaven, and the Holy Spirit had filled them, they would begin to see and understand. They would say, "He told us this. He knew ahead of time we would face this." One of the things we saw last week was that Jesus said, "In all of these things that I've left you to do and be, I've asked the Father and He's sending you a Helper."

We see the Trinity and the Godhead come together. We see God the Father and Jesus, the Son and the Holy Spirit, the Helper, all working in their roles and in their place, in this relationship we have with God. So maybe the question comes in all of these "to-do things," where the disciples are saying, "You're leaving. We're waiting on the Helper. How do we do this?" Here's what Jesus does. He reduces it in His infinite wisdom to one word.

Do you know how Jesus describes our relationship with Him? It's one word. It's abide. Abide in me and I will abide in you. Let me be straightforward with you here. I've worked hard to try to define for you what the word "abide" means. I walked in the office this morning and saw Vic. He and

Joel usually do the 11:30 service. They'll be teaching the 11:30 hour, and Vic was in his office. We hadn't seen each other this week because of some travel with the guys. I walked into his office and he said, "In 30 seconds, define for me 'abide.'" And I just kind of stood there, dumbfounded. We both started laughing. We started talking about it, and what we were wrestling through there was the fact that it is really a difficult word to define in a way that leaves us understanding what it means in how you have a relationship with Jesus Christ. There are 10 times in these first 17 verses that Jesus uses the word "abide." He doesn't give us a Webster's definition for abide. So beautifully, what He does over and over again, is give us the most vivid, telling picture of what it means to abide.

Let's look at it in John 15, beginning in verse one. Remember, it is a dark Thursday night, and Jesus is about to be kissed by Judas and arrested.

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. 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. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. 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. 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.

You see, for Jesus, a relationship with Him was not a chore list. The key in Jesus' mind for us being in our relationship with Him is us abiding in Him.

He says:

Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. 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. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. 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. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

Jesus is saying, "If you want a joyful relationship with me, it's tied to this. It's tied to abiding in Me. And Me and you." There are so many times where we began to think, "I made my list." Are y'all list makers? I'm a list maker. Sometimes if I do something in a day and it's not on the list, I go write it on the list just so I can mark it off the list. Anybody else? Sometimes in our relationship with Christ, we can make our list and we get through and we check them all off and we say, "Oh, that feels good. God's happy with me now." Then we go on about our business and we leave God over here. And God's saying to us, "I don't want a list. I want you to hang with Me. I want you to abide with Me. I want you to find your life with Me. I want you to see Me as your source for everything else you'll do today on your list. Don't leave Me here."

Just a moment ago, we listened to a song called "Abide In Me," and it was actually a plea from a believer to God. This believer is crying out - "Abide with me. God, don't leave me alone. Don't leave me here. Abide with me. Come to me, stay with me. Don't let me walk by myself. I want You to walk with me." We can resonate with that. We connect with that. We don't want to be left alone. We want God to be in our life. But here's the thing, it's not one way. It's not just us pleading with God, "We want you to abide with us! We don't want to be alone!" It's two ways. Jesus is saying to the disciples, "You want me to stay with you? Let me tell you something. I want you to stay with Me. I want you to abide with Me. That's the whole thing. Ultimately, if I go to prepare a place for you, I'm coming again that you may be where I am. We will spend eternity together. Until that time, abide with Me."

Let me go horticulture on you for a moment, okay? In this passage, the technical term would actually be viticulture. It's the science of growing vines. Here, He says, "I am the true vine." This was in reference to there being other vines. The vine was a national symbol for Jerusalem. They understood it as being something that would hold up. When you saw the vine, you recognized that as being Jerusalem. There are passages scattered throughout the Old Testament that identify the people of God, the Israelites, being the branches and Him being the vine. Jesus says, "I'm the true vine. I'm the genuine vine. I'm the real vine. There are a lot of vines you can go to that you try to find something for your life, but I'm the real thing. I'm the true vine. My Father is the vine dresser. He's the one that cultivates gardens. He's the one that grows. He's the one that prunes. He's the one that takes care." And then He mentions the branch in verse five:

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.

Notice those phrases. It's happened several times in this passage where He says, "whoever abides in me and I in him." It's a two-way street. Do you know what happens when you see the trunk of a vine and you see the branches? What do we notice? We notice the leaves. We notice the fruit. We notice the strength of the trunk. We notice the spread of the canopy when the grapes are hanging there. We say, "Wow, look at those! That's beautiful! Look how it's in full bloom!"

What do we not see? What we don't see is what's going on inside the bark. What we don't see is actually like a major highway of traffic going two ways. Inside that trunk and inside of the branches that are connected, you have the xylem and phloem. You have the xylem that's flowing upward and the phloem that's flowing downward. You have the xylem that's carrying the water to the leaves, and you have the phloem that's carrying the sugar back to the roots. Over and over again; it is like a factory. It is life. You see the fruit, the leaves, and the growth. But what's happening inside is life! The leaves are being fed, and the fruit is being produced.

Do you know what brings glory to the root? Do you know what brings fame to the trunk? The fruit. That's what makes you brag on the vine. In this picture here, He is saying, "When you abide in me, when that life has taken place, when you're being fed and you're bearing fruit, it is a back and forth." You give nutrients, and He gives glory.

He says in verse five, "Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing." It's so much more than just checking a list. I mean, for years I have admired this passage of Scripture. Maybe it's because of a horticulture background, but I've got to be honest with you. As I come to it, I know that I've not absorbed everything that's here. We're wrestling with what it looks like to be linked in to the trunk to draw our life from it.

As we draw our life from the trunk and from the vine, as branches, there's pruning that takes place. He says, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. 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." Later in verse six, He says, "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."

We have to move away here for a moment from the beautifulness of this picture of the vine and the fruit and realize the very serious event that happens when God observes a branch with no life. Dead wood is not connected to the vine. It's a picture of being cast away. So there are two kinds of pruning that take place. The pruning that takes place where the dead wood is separated, but there's also pruning that takes place of those that bear fruit. So the first question here for us right now would be, are we fruit bearers?

Am I bearing fruit? Are you bearing fruit? The fruit is not a list that's marked off. You're not bearing fruit today just because you filled the chair or filled a pew. How do we bear fruit? By giving signs of life. In this context, you see that a fruitful life is a fruitful prayer life. He says in verse 7-9: "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love."

The fruit of an abiding life is a productive prayer life. Look at your life - is your prayer life bearing fruit? We should be so bold this morning to take Jesus at His word. Here's what the long time Christian who's been reading his Bible all his life does. He looks at this verse and it says, "If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you." Does our mind not immediately respond by saying, "He doesn't actually mean whatever you wish." Don't we do that?

We immediately begin to make excuses for why our prayers haven't been answered. We look here and read, "Ask whatever you wish," and if you're 15 years old in the room today and you see that, all of a sudden you perk up and think, "I can get a car!" Yeah! Some of you just woke up and thought, "He just went Creflo Dollar on us! What just happened?"

Look at what He says and let's believe what He says. He's saying, "If you abide in Me, you draw your life from Me. I'm your source. We're in relationship together. We are walking this life together. I'm in you and you're in Me. If you abide in Me and my words abide in you, what He's spoken, what He's said, these words abide in you. So whatever you ask, it will be done."

What if we just left it right there? What if we just said, "Father, I want to abide in you. Christ, I want to abide in You. I want to spend time with You. Love You, serve You, honor You, walk with You, rest in You." What if we read His word and fed on His word and we took Him at His word that He is the bread of life? What if we fed our soul and then we asked and waited for Him to do it? Do you know what happens as you abide in Him and you feed on His word? Your wishes become His glory. What you wish for over and over and over again are prayers that are answered to bring Your Heavenly Father glory and praise and honor. We bear fruit with a healthy, productive prayer life. We bear fruit by having an obedient life. We bear fruit by having a love for others life. We bear fruit by having a joyful life. All of that is in this context of these verses.

Here's what happens. In the midst of bearing that fruit, obeying, being joyful, and loving others, right in the middle of prayer, He prunes us. He cuts some things away. Why does He do that? Well, the biological reason for pruning is that when you cut things away that are extra growth in our life, that takes away from the main purpose of the plant. It causes all their nutrients to be pushed to what you want to happen.

If you never prune a peach tree, you're going to have a weak harvest. But every year, as you cut the peach tree back and you prune the peach tree, it pushes the nutrients in the food into that highway of life. It pushes it toward the bloom and toward the fruit, and you bear more fruit simply because it was pruned back and it took the extra stuff out. In our life, as we read the word, we're pruned. As we walk in the Spirit, we're pruned. The Spirit of God through the word of God puts His finger on our lives and hearts, and He says, "This has got to be out of your life. You've got to take this away. You're finding your strength in this; you need to walk in weakness. I'm taking your strength away so that you will bear fruit by Me being your vine, not something else being your vine."

But we argue and we say, "Wait, wait, God. But they can. They have it in there." And He says, "Not You. That needs to be pruned in your life. It needs to be cut back."

Do you know what else prunes us and causes us to bear much fruit? Suffering. Suffering is a way that we're pruned. When we go through difficult things or things that are beyond us and bigger than us, we come through that bearing fruit. In your life today, you may be experiencing the pruning of God. Wait on the harvest, walk with Him, abide with Him, and let Him bring about the fruit that He wants to bear in your life.

He prunes. We abide in Him. He abides in us. Let me give you Tenney's definition of abiding. Merrill Tenney says, "To abide is the maintenance of an unbroken connection rather than repose and bespeaks the necessity of a constant, active relationship between the believer and his Lord if the result of life is to be productive." Aren't you glad Jesus didn't put it that way? He just looks at us and says, "I'm the vine. You're the branches. Abide. Just get your life from me."

God's the vinedresser, and He gives us this beautiful picture of gardening and cultivation. But it speaks to the fact that we rest in Him and as we rest in Him, there is activity. There's life going on. Maybe you meet someone and think, "It seems their life bears so much fruit of the glory of God. I

wish I could be like that." What we maybe don't see is what's going on behind the bark in their life, the suffering that they've experienced, the brokenness that they've been through, the story that's been written in their life. We see the fruit and God gets the glory, but we don't see behind the scenes of abiding. The call to you and I today in our life is to abide with Him.

I have the wonderful privilege of living next door to a retired couple. That's supposed to be funny! Here's what happens. I pull into my driveway and I see them in their yard. I back out of my driveway and I see them in their yard. I pull into my driveway and back out of my driveway and pull into my driveway and back out of my driveway. And I see them in their yard. And when they're not in their yard and the weather's nice, they're sitting in a chair underneath their tree that they've worked on in their yard. And I think, "I want their yard." And there are people in my family that say out loud, "Don't we want their yard?" And I'll look at that and I say, "But they've got so much time."

The reason there's beautiful fruit in their yard is because they abide in their yard. For you and I to see the fruit of Christ in our life is not to hold up a checklist of all the things that we get done. I don't need to see what Wayne did this week in his yard. I can see what he did in his yard because of the way it looks. So in our life, abiding comes down to time with God. We don't leave Him. He won't leave us. We rest in Him and we talk with Him. We read His word. We get together and fellowship with other believers where the spirit of God can speak to us. We listen to music that feeds our soul. We read books that feed our soul. We let the bread of life be our food. We let the light of the world fill our darkness. We let the Good Shepherd guide us. We follow His way and believe His truth and receive His life. He's the vine. Abide in Him.