

ABIDE In Me

Part 2



John 15:1-17

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By Rev. Will Nelken

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Please take a few minutes to read John 15:1-17 (if possible, use The Message).

We have seen in this passage three elements of a meaningful Christian life:

- Abiding
- Fruitfulness
- Lifeflow

Last Sunday, we learned again that our vital connection to the Real Spiritual Vine, Jesus Christ, is the source of our fruitfulness. No amount of psychological or religious effort can substitute for that connection or produce of itself organic change or fruitfulness.

Abiding

We know that abiding in relationship with Jesus Christ is the one thing that is necessary—no matter who you are, no matter what your station in life. You must develop and maintain a close, vital, life-giving relationship with Jesus. You must know Him as a real, present person with whom you speak, whose presence and voice you grow to recognize.

To know Jesus only intellectually, as an historical figure, as a teacher of spiritual concepts, or even as a miracle worker from the past, is NOT ENOUGH!

Knowing Him with your head—gathering information about Him—while important, is not knowing Him as you should.

Knowing His words and sayings well enough to quote them is insufficient.

Abiding in Christ means establishing and prioritizing your relationship with Him. It involves developing routines for taking shelter under His superintending cover and getting to know Him better. I spoke of some of these last week, numbering five, like the digits on your hand.

Abiding in Jesus involves overcoming the hindrance of distractions and disturbances in your everyday life. If you can't quiet the storm, then learn to ride it out, trusting God to turn it into something good eventually.

It also involves undoing your pride (that inflated opinion of yourself) that so easily causes you to stumble into sin and break relationship with God and other people.

Self-help is superficial, cosmetic change, at best, and must be re-applied daily. However, Christ's salvation effects a systemic change, a holistic transformation. He changes not only your "how to," but also your "want to." And the result is not only personal change, but also personal fruitfulness—impacting our families and communities.

And THAT is what God the Father is after: fruitfulness. That's what He is looking for. In you.

Fruit Is Paramount

"Fruit is paramount." I remember where I was when I heard the Spirit of the Lord speak those words for the first time to me. I was sitting in the third row of my church, as the pastor preached about the supernatural gifts of the Spirit. I was all about spiritual gifts and operating in supernatural power, but the Holy Spirit interrupted my attention to redirect me with those words.

I wrote them down, because I didn't know what the word "paramount" meant, until I looked it up. As I asked the Lord to help me understand His point, I came to this conclusion: If you had to choose just one (which you don't), fruitfulness would be preferable (from God's perspective) to supernatural giftings.

Jesus told His disciples, *"On judgment day many will say to Me, 'Lord! Lord! We prophesied in Your name and cast out demons in Your name and performed many miracles in Your name.' But I will reply, 'I don't know who you are. Get away from Me, you lawless people.'"* (Matthew 7:22-23)

"I don't know who you are." Jesus didn't mean, "I have no record of your existence," but rather, "We've never gotten acquainted, you and I—spent time together, shared our secrets with each other. We don't really know each other, and the lifestyle you've pursued shows it—not by the outcomes, but by your motivations. You were more concerned with impressing others with your outward works, than pleasing me with your inner motives. And that's all you have now: *their* approval, not Mine."

Strong words.

Today, we're pursuing an understanding of how to grow and produce the kind of fruit that pleases the heart of God. We know we must stay connected to Jesus. But there are many in THIS day that say, "Lord! Lord! I go to church as often as I can, and pray for your help, and contribute financially to the church. Why do you still seem so distant and unconcerned with my life? Why does my faith have so little impact on my family and friends?"

What do you think He says to you in reply? Before you answer, remember that this is NOT judgment day. This is the age of grace. But grace is not a free pass to slack off and expect God to do for you what you could do for yourself.

Perhaps He would reply, “Because you expect good things to come into your life just because you prayed a prayer, or went to a church, or played the outward role of a Christian, but you have yet to surrender to Me your heart and self-will.”

Or perhaps, “Because you’re so busy working *for* Me, that you’ve not yet learned to work *with* Me. You imitate my deeds, but ignore My voice.”

God’s grace comes to release you from the paralyzing effect of guilt and self-condemnation. Grace is what frees you to leap to your feet and go forward again.

Grace is the power to make positive changes in your life. It is the power to make wiser choices than you have before.

It is the power to say “No” to otherwise addictive thoughts and behaviors. Grace is the power to say “Yes” to unfamiliar opportunities, to venture through doors into new territory.

More Fruit is More Better

Today, let’s learn how to move from bearing fruit to bearing MORE fruit. Fruit, MORE fruit, MUCH fruit. THAT is what glorifies the Father.

Now, I could say “*spiritual* fruitfulness,” but the word “spiritual” has been co-opted as a term for non-Christian use, which may simply mean “non-material” or ethereal or instinctual or, perhaps, imaginary.

I could say “*spiritual* fruitfulness,” but that might suggest to you a kind of fruit that is borne in secret, out of sight of the world, with no direct impact on the world around you—a kind of private, self-soothing, but tasteless, religion.

Or, “spiritual” may simply mean religious after an unstructured, informal manner. Religion on my own terms, as I choose to pursue or practice it.

In such cases, the word has lost its Biblical significance, which refers specifically to something that has been immediately produced or inspired by the Holy Spirit—the same Spirit who hovered over the formless waters of the deep on the first day of creation; the Breath of God that gives life to all it touches. Now, THAT is the kind of fruit God is seeking, and THAT is the kind of fullness we each need to live in.

“The Father is looking for those who will worship Him in spirit and truth.” As if to say, at the impulse of the Spirit and the Truth of God’s Word.

The passage that will be our focus this morning is John 15:5-8. Read it aloud: *“I am the Vine, you are the branches. When you’re joined with Me and I with you, the relation intimate and organic, the harvest is sure to be abundant. Separated, you can’t produce a thing. Anyone who separates from Me is deadwood, gathered up and thrown on the bonfire. But if you make yourselves at home with Me and My words are at home in you, you can be sure that whatever you ask will be listened to and acted upon. This is how My Father shows who He is—when you produce grapes, when you mature as My disciples.”*

Roles and Relationships

Last week, we learned about Jesus’ relationship to our Father. This week, it is our relationship to Him. *“I am the Vine, you are the branches.”*

Plainly, this is a dependent relationship. Branches have no life of their own; it is completely derivative. No one plants branches in hope of starting a vineyard.

The vine supports the branches; it is their channel of life. It is the source of their fruit, and fruit is the purpose of the branches. Just as fruit is your purpose.

Divine Objective

“When you’re joined with Me and I with you, the relation intimate and organic, the harvest is sure to be abundant.”

We’re reminded that God’s aim is fruitfulness—harvest—and His intention is abundance, not scarcity.

It reminds me of a story Jesus told:

“Listen! A farmer went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. Other seeds fell on rocky ground where they did not have much soil. They sprang up quickly because the soil was not deep. But when the sun came up, they were scorched, and because they did not have sufficient root, they withered. Other seeds fell among the thorns, and they grew up and choked them. But other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundred times as much, some sixty, and some thirty. The one who has ears had better listen!” (Matthew 13:3-9)

Four kinds of soil, four different results; only one of them really productive. Notice though, in every case, it was the same farmer and the same seed. The only difference was the soil. Yet,

the farmer continued to sow the seed in all four situations; he wasn't selective—because that's what farmers do.

We are not to pick and choose for ourselves where we will sow the seed of God's Word or the deeds of God's love, as if *we know* what ground will be most productive. What was productive last year, may not be so this year. And what has shown no growth for years, may burst into bloom this year. Only God knows!

Don't try to control your productivity; instead, control your *connection to Jesus*—get to know Him better and do what He asks of you, then leave the results with Him.

I'm struck by the words "*intimate and organic*," which modify the nature of our relation to Jesus. The relationship we should develop is intimate—very close (not remote), familiar (not second-hand), and organic (spontaneously responsive—not in contrast to routine, but as opposed to contrived or superficial or momentary). Does that describe the relationship you are building with Jesus Christ? Because it surely describes the relationship He is trying to build with you.

Warning

There is a warning attached to this objective. For the relationship to remain "*intimate and organic*," we must remain closely connected to Jesus.

Following from a distance will only lead to great humiliation and sorrow. Remember how Peter followed Jesus after His arrest, "from a distance," and then, contrary to his bold assertion—"*Even if I must die with you, I will never deny you!*"—he denied Jesus publicly three times, and, realizing his blatant error, he "*wept bitterly*." (Matthew 26:35,75)

We are very stubborn about this! The illustration is clear—a branch separated from the vine cannot produce fruit—and we get it, intellectually. But with our imaginations, we keep insisting that we can squeeze it out somehow. "No one sees the waywardness of my motives and thoughts. God doesn't seem to mind my faltering. I can pick up and move on."

But where is the fruit? "*By their fruit, you shall know them.*"

There may be a lot of deadwood just lying around on the ground, but eventually, it will be gathered in a heap for the bonfire. "*Don't be foolish! God is not fooled. What you sow is what you will reap.*"

What fruit shall we look for? Paul described the fruit that the Spirit of God produces as "*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.*" (Galatians 5:22-23)

Curiously, he used the singular word “fruit,” not the plural “fruits,” suggesting these elements were all of one kind, just different varieties. So, not a basket full of different fruits, as it may often be pictured in children’s lessons, but rather a basket of one kind of fruit, like apples—Braeburns, Golden Delicious, Fuji, Gala, Honeycrisp, Granny Smith, Cameo, Rome, and Red Delicious.

However, the Spirit’s fruit are not distinct items, but interconnected, like nine nested spheres.

Think of it as ONE fruit, with multiple layers. The outer shell—the visible part—is God’s love. But every manifestation of His love is supported by and dependent on the layers beneath. Within the love of God is joy and peace, patience, kindness, and goodness, faithfulness and gentleness, and—at its very heart, the core and foundation of all the rest of its manifestations is—self-control.

Without self-control, the rest will be hollow and implode. And without love, the rest have not yet found their real expression. They are not separate acts; they are one fruit, the product of the Holy Spirit, working through our lives.

One Thing Needful

Last week, it was Mary who reminded us of the “one thing needful”—remaining in Christ, in vital relationship with Him—not departing from Him, not neglecting Him, not rejecting Him. Connected, and following closely.

This week, we return to this theme with these tender words: *“make yourselves at home with Me.”* At home. When you turn to Jesus, you’re coming home. Home, where you belong, where you are family, where you are safe.

In today’s society of fatherless, motherless, disrupted, abandoned, and divorced households—many can scarcely remember what it means to feel “at home.” To feel wanted. To feel safe. To feel like you can contribute.

Jesus reliably provides that. His people, the church, should do the same. Church is to be a safe place to let down your guard, in humble prayer and enthusiastic worship and sacrificial service. Church should be the one place you can be sure you will be loved.

But there are conditions...

Not arbitrary rules and regulations, regularly policed by haughty people who think themselves better than others. But *godly* conditions. What are they?

“If you make yourselves at home with Me and My words are at home in you, you can be sure...”

You'll never be secure without meeting these conditions. You may still hope for the best, but you won't be able to *trust* for it. And trust, not hope, is the key to meaningful productivity in your life as a Christian.

"Whatever you ask will be listened to and acted upon." This promise is not isolated in a vacuum chamber of spiritual sayings. It is dependent on meeting the given conditions. *"Whatever you ask"* will NOT be heard or acted upon if you are not *"at home"* with Jesus and His words.

If you have any framework of thoughts and emotions—any personal sense—of being *"at home,"* apply those to your journey with God and Christ. Seek, with all your heart, that *"at home"* feeling, even if unknowns and uncertainties remain. THAT is how you may recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit. That's how you may recognize the church to plant yourself in. That's how you can know what decision is best for you. Let the peace of God direct you.

This is where your fruitfulness will flourish. And fruitfulness *"is how My Father shows who He is"* and where He is working. If you want the Lord to be seen by others in your life, focus on your personal fruitfulness.

Begin by letting the Holy Spirit have control of your self—your natural instincts and impulses. And aim to express God's love to others, as Christ has done to you—not just when it's easy and convenient, but when and where it is most needed in your circle of life.

You must sow good seed *everywhere*, but you should work only where the Father places you and is Himself working—where His seeds are sprouting, where blossoms are blooming, where fruit is maturing.

Do this, and your harvest will be abundant.