

Abide in Christ, part 1

Luke 7:18-35

Like so many of you, I'd imagine, I've been examining myself longing for greater consistency in my life in obedience, greater faithfulness, higher excellence of service for Christ, deeper more devoted worship of Christ. I, like you, have been longing for less of me and for more of God, for a closer identity with Christ. I'm eager to wean my soul from worldly distractions in order that I, too, may be full of Christ and filled with all the fullness of God.

And the question in those desires, with the presence of those desires the question that so often comes up, we all want those worshipful and obedient attitudes but sometimes, if we're honest, we feel so powerless and inconsistent in our practical obedience. We aspire to higher things, don't we? We sometimes can feel so short of practical doing. There are some who feel so defeated in the pursuit of excellence in Christ, it causes them to shrink back. Causes them to feel some sense of shame even

among the saints, where what are if we're not redeemed saints, sinners who are growing, redeemed by God and trying to pursue obedience.

But our theology tells us not to expect that in and of ourselves we are anything. But theology tells us that in and of ourselves we are nothing. And yet some people feel ashamed when they come into the company of other believers and saints, as if, as if everybody else has got it right; they're the only ones lagging behind. Perhaps they can even become discouraged, despondent, despairing.

If that's you, beloved, or if that's you even from time to time, or if that's you more often than you'd like to admit, I'd like to give you some very good news this morning. I can tell you, with great joy with full confidence, that it is not how God would have you live the Christian life, in despair, despondency. That is not the abundant life that Christ died to give to you. In fact, I can tell you that Christ is now seated at the right hand of God and praying for you. He is serving you as your advocate. He is at work even at this moment by the Holy Spirit,

whom he has sent, in the preaching of the Word, to sanctify you completely, through and through.

Ephesians 5:25-27 tells us that Christ died to save you. He lives now to sanctify you, and he has every intention to present you to himself along with all the saints of his blood-bought church, and he will present you to himself in splendor. In splendor, without spot, without wrinkle, without any such thing, but a holy people, a pure people, beautiful, without any blemish whatsoever.

That is not a description of mediocrity, folks. That is not so-so salvation. That's not a description of half-hearted, uncommitted, inactive Christianity. The Christ who died for us, he was all in. He gave his life for the flock, and he creates and conforms people to his image, first by dying to save them, and then living to sanctify them. And he will make them like himself. This is glory.

This is a description, Ephesians 5, is a description of excellence. That is a description of the very image of the holy

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God in man, in you, and in me, all of us in Christ. And that is the secret, right there, in Christ. That's how we are made partakers of the divine nature. The divine life that flowed in and through Christ it is to flow in and through you as well, to bring glory to God through a godly and fruitful life. And I want to show you that this morning, how the power of that life, how it comes from him and then flows in and through you.

So let's look at this one simple command from Jesus Christ. John 15 verse 1, he says, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-dresser. 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 the word, "because of the word that I have spoken to you." Here it is. "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.

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 is 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."

That one simple word from Christ, that word commands all our joy, it produces all our fruit, it creates all of our gratitude, and it evokes all of our worship. That's the command, verse 4, "Abide in me." Twice in verse 4 and then repeated throughout. "Whoever abides in me," verse 5. "If anyone does not abide in me," verse 6 again in verse 7, "If you abide in me." That is the theme. What's going on in this passage? Well, certainly he is distinguishing true believers from false professors of faith; people who, like Judas Iscariot, only appear to be in Christ.

But listen, Jesus is not in this passage merely trying to help his disciples grow in discernment, even though he is doing

that. He's not teaching them discernment just for the sake of being good at discernment. He's teaching them discernment to encourage them, so that they can see that they themselves, even though many of them will go through weak moments, like Peter denying Christ, failing, three times denying that he even knew him. Going through weak moments, going through times of failure, going through times of persecution, Jesus is teaching them to discern between the true and the false in order that they might be encouraged so that they can see that they are not like Judas, that they are not cut off.

Even though they fail at times, true believers bear the fruit of repentance. They grow in obedience over time, and therefore they bear fruit that glorifies God and brings joy. There is such joy that comes from fruitfulness in Christ, that comes from abiding in Christ, in his Word, in his love, all of this through cheerful obedience to his commandments.

So let me ask a question, What does it mean to abide in Christ? What does it mean to abide in Christ? "Abide in me and I in you," verse 4. Clear words, again. But what do they mean? What does that mean, "Abide in me," seems like a strange thing

for one person to say to another. Obviously, it's some kind of metaphor, here, but what does it refer to? It's the word, *menó*, to remain, to stay, to continue in. So this is a picture, at least, of staying in close proximity. But more to the point, and as the vine-branches metaphor, ah, word-picture illustrates, Jesus is talking, here, not just about close proximity, Judas had that. He's talking about vital connection, living connection, a vital spiritual union with Christ. That's the concept you need to get down in your mind; union with Christ.

It's a spiritual union. And when I say it's a spiritual union, we're talking about a union, a joining that is something unseen. It's invisible because it is by nature spiritual. And yet we know that it's a very real union; it's a vital and powerful union because there's evidence of the union for everyone to see. You just gotta know what to look for.

It's like God's invisible attributes, Romans 1:20, "His eternal power and his divine nature." God is by nature invisible, Colossians 1:15, 1 Timothy 1:17, Hebrews 11:27. God is by nature invisible. The divine essence is not visible to our eyes. God's power as well. God's power, his nature, they've been

clearly perceived by us. How? "By the things that have been made," Romans 1, says, "in all creation." The power of God, the nature of God, it's the invisible made visible through effect, through what's produced.

It's the same way with us in our union with Christ. Our invisible spiritual union with Christ, it's made visible through what? Our fruit. It's made visible through our fruitfulness. The power that flows in and through our union with Christ is manifest in the fact that we bear fruit. And the nature of our union is manifested by the kind of fruit that we produce, not evil, wicked works, but rather fruit that looks a lot like Jesus Christ and the fruit he produced.

Every Christian, at the moment of salvation, enters into a profound, intimate union with Jesus Christ. It's a spiritual reality. And it's because of that vital, invisible union with Christ that the life of God, the power of the Spirit is active and productive in and through our lives. And that's why when you see a lifeless, when you see an inactive, dead as a doorpost, sour and dour person who calls himself or herself a Christian,

I've got to admit I've got serious doubts about whether that person really has a vital connection to Christ.

When I see somebody who sits back with their arms folded and is just looking for something to criticize. I've got to admit I have questions. Why is that? Because there is no life there. There is no power there. There is no spiritual energy there. There's no love. There's no appetite for spiritual things. There's no joyful obedience. There's fruit coming out all right, but it doesn't look anything like the fruit coming out of Christ's life. It doesn't look like what the Holy Spirit produces. I've got real questions.

It could be evidence that someone has not been regenerated, not been renewed, not been reborn. And to claim to know Christ and to belong to him and yet to have no fruit, that is to level a slanderous charge against God. That is to say that his Gospel is powerless and has no real effect. It's to say that his life that is in and working in an individual is really powerless and dead.

And sadly, there's so much of what I've seen in professing churches, professing Christians; it's like that. There are whole churches of people, there are huge stadiums of people who are like that. Paul describes them as "having the appearance of godliness but by their lives they deny its power." There's no power in it. There's no spiritual life. There's no fruit. There's no Christ like fruit, no joy, no love, no happiness. There's no overcoming; there's no enduring with joy and cheerfulness and patience. There's no gratitude.

Here's what spiritual union and vitality looks like. It looks like a vineyard. It looks like a vine. It looks like a grape plant, a vine that grows branches and bears fruit. That's a perfect illustration. Two assertions come in verse 1. "Jesus said, 'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser.'" Jesus drew a metaphor from the surrounding landscape. Vineyards are very common in Israel. Vine-vineyard imagery is a common spiritual metaphor.

All over, in all the ornate buildings; put vines and clusters of grapes and all the rest, as you might imagine. Vines, vineyards, grape clusters, wine, all of that symbolized

productivity, divine prosperity, divine blessing, abundant blessing. God used that imagery to picture Israel, in the Old Testament.

He planted Israel is, as a vineyard to produce abundant fruit. He left his vineyard to Israel and to its leadership to cultivate it, to keep it, to care for it, to gather its fruit and enjoy, to share the blessing of God's bounty. But Israel ignored God's grace and kindness, lost interest in the vineyard, spurned God's goodness, failed to care for the vineyard and would thus suffer punishment.

Back in Psalm 80, the plea of Asaph, "Turn again, O God of Hosts and look down from heaven and see. Have regard for this vine." And when he's saying that, he's trying to tug at God's heartstrings. Have regard for this vine, by the way, which you planted. This is your vine. "Have regard for this vine, the stock that your right hand planted and for the son whom you made strong for yourself." "Let your hand be on the man of your right hand, the son of man whom you have made strong for yourself!" "Let your hand be on that man," why? "so then we shall not turn back from you; give us life, and we will call upon your name!"

Somehow life is connected with that man upon whom God puts his hand. "Restore us, O Lord God of hosts! Let your face shine, that we may be saved!"

Now take a look at John 15 verse 1. Jesus says, "I am the true vine." That's with emphasis in the Greek: "I myself am the vine, the true one." The one that God planted. Listen Jesus is the answer to Asaph's prayer in Psalm 80. And now that Jesus has come, he wants his people to know exactly how they will succeed where generations of Israel had failed.

If you wonder for yourself, How will I succeed when my evangelical forefathers have failed? It's right there. God's right hand is on the, man, the Son of Man, whom he has made strong for himself. And what is the result of that? "We shall not turn back from you." He will give us life, and we will call upon God's name. "I am the true vine," he said, which means, I am the man of God's right hand. Jesus is saying that. The strong, the mighty Son of Man, I am the source of energy and power and vitality and life.

Instead of acting as an angry judge in this text, Jesus says, No, Look at him this way, look at the Father this way. He is personally engaged in cultivating his own vineyard. He's in this work. "I am the vine, and my Father is the vinedresser." A vine can't have too much hot or too much cold. They can't have too much water, too much or too little sunlight, and it has to be pruned, cut, directed, shaped so it produces abundant fruit.

So that means this vinedresser, if he's a good vinedresser and skillful, he's monitoring the vine all the time. He's there to eliminate pests, to watch for disease and treat it. He's fertilizing, he's irrigating, he's managing the canopy, he's pruning the branches. In fact, that is how the vinedresser manages the, the canopy, which is the above ground parts the trunk, cordon, stems, leaves, flowers, fruit. His skillful management of that canopy that grows out impacts the final product. His skillful care, it affects the yield, it effects the quality, and the vigor of the grapes.

Notice in verse 2, Jesus draws their attention to two things that this vinedresser, the Father, does. He says, number one, "Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes

away.” Number two: “Every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes that it may bear more fruit.” The first is about unproductive branches, and the second is about productive ones. Unproductive branches are actually hostile and threatening to the productive ones. They’re hostile to the plant; they sap the vine of its valuable nutrients, it steals the vitality and for no purpose whatsoever robs the good branches of life-giving nutrients, and those unproductive branches need to be cut off of the, for the good of the vine, for the productivity of healthy branches, to allow the vine’s nutrients to go through the vine and reach out to the productive, fruit-bearing branches.

What’s the difference between the unproductive branches and the productive ones? Fruit, right? I mean, as branches, they look identical, they look the same. But looks and appearance can be deceiving, and it’s by the skillful eye of the vinedresser that he prunes those branches. He cuts them off for the sake of the good branches. His expertise is what makes all the difference. His constant care and attention makes all the difference. At the end of the day, the productive vine is the vinedresser’s pride and joy.

The disciples are listening to all this, and perhaps they're wondering where, where they stand. Am I a good branch, or a bad one? So to settle the sensitive conscience, Jesus interrupts the flow, here, he stops to provide a word of assurance, verse 3. Remember, as Judas Iscariot had already left their company, so he says to the remaining eleven, verse 3, "Already you are clean because of the word I have spoken to you." What does Jesus mean here, clean?

He sets aside the vine imagery for a moment to make use of another metaphor about cleansing and washing. He's talking, here, this is a metaphor referring to spiritual regeneration. The Greek word, clean, *katharos*. It's the same word used to translate a very important Hebrew word, *tahor*, in a very important passage. Ezekiel 36:25, "I will sprinkle clean water on you," that's the same word, *katharos* clean water on you "and you shall be clean." There it is again, "from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you."

Jesus is here in verse 3, he's referring back, alluding back to Ezekiel 36. He says, basically, you're clean because of the word I've spoken to you. You've already been regenerated by

means of the word that I've spoken to you. The rest of the promise comes in verses 26 to 27 in Ezekiel 36, "And I will give you," in addition to cleansing, I'll give you "a new heart. A new spirit I will put within you. I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh." What's a heart of flesh? Heart of stone: Unresponsive, cold, dead, lifeless. Heart of flesh: Responsive, beating, doing its job, able to respond to impulses from the brain, electrical stimuli; a heart of flesh. "I will put my Spirit within you. I will cause you to walk in my statutes and to be careful to obey my rules."

For anybody who's wondering, How do I get this done? That's the wrong question. The question is: How does God get this done in and through me? How does God do this? And frankly, for some of us, we're stubborn vessels, aren't we? We're clogged. How does he get this in and through me? The disciples may not have understood fully Jesus' allusion to Ezekiel 36, but they would understand later.

Jesus is assuring them, verse 3, "You have been born again because of the word that I have spoken to you." The gospel that

I've preached to you. In other words, I, Jesus says, by my own initiative, I have caused you to be born again. He says, you're mine, and your spiritual life is my doing. To borrow the language from the Apostle Paul, Jesus says to these disciples who belong to him, Now you need to work out your salvation. It's a salvation that you possess. You need to work it out, for it is God who as work in you.

That's the assurance he gives his true disciples here, sovereign initiative, divine power causing them to be born again. And this is God's doing. So sovereign initiative followed by their responsibility, verse 4, "Abide in me and I in you." Another way to render the command, make sure you continue dwelling, remaining in me just as I am also continually dwelling and remaining in you.