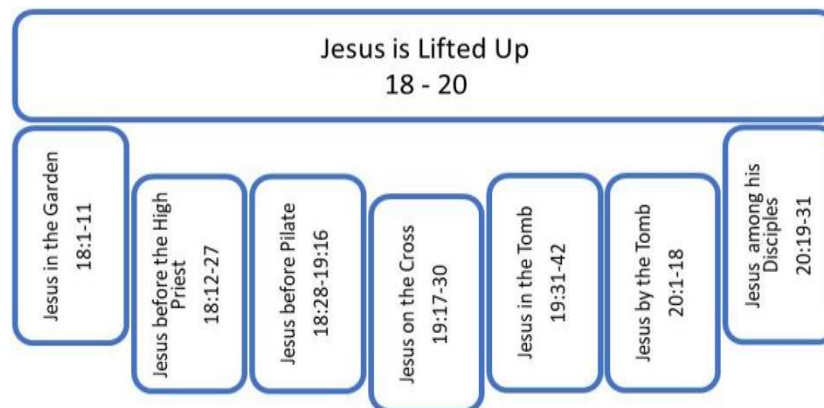


Lesson 25: John 15:1-11 Abiding in Christ

Introduction



Jesus' seventh "I am" statement with an object, "I am the true vine" made a lasting impact on Brenda during her college years. Yesterday, I asked her, "What about that metaphor affected you so much?" She responded, "I am a visual person. I can see the image of the vine and the branches and the fruit. It made so clear to me that I can do nothing apart from Jesus. A branch cut off from the vine can do nothing. At the same time, I was learning in John about the Holy Spirit. We do not live the Christian life apart from Christ in our own strength but through his Spirit in us."

Jesus can teach. He is the expert at communicating vital truth through simple, everyday-life images. Simply recognizing and putting into practice the key idea of this image will transform your life: understanding and putting it into practice. At the same time that he is making a few limited clear points through this strikingly simple image, Jesus is also weaving together a number of themes that he has already raised concerning discipleship. And so, no matter how close we are to Jesus, his teaching about the vine and the branches contains enough depth to draw us further into relationship with him.

Jesus gives this metaphor central place in the long sermon that is John chapters 13-17. In this lesson, I simply want to walk through the text verse by verse, considering the metaphor and paying attention to how Jesus is drawing in and moving forward themes he has already introduced. Let's read the passage, John 15:1-11.

I am the True Vine (John 15:1-11)

¹ "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. ² Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every *branch* that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit. ³ You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. ⁴ Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither *can* you unless you abide in Me. ⁵ I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. ⁶ If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned. ⁷ If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples. ⁹ Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and *that* your joy may be made full.

There is one vine, one vinedresser, and two kinds of branches. (1-2)

This is the first I am statement in which Jesus includes the Father. Jesus is the vine. The Father is the vinedresser, the one who cares for the vine by removing branches that do not bear fruit and by pruning branches that do bear fruit. The image of a grape vine being tended by a vinedresser would

have been very common to Jesus' hearers. And it's common enough to us. In the least, we've seen pictures.

A thick vine grows upward out of the soil. Smaller branches grow out from the main trunk, and leaves and fruit grow from shoots out of those branches. The goal of the vinedresser is to produce plump, sweet grapes full of juice. Branches that do not produce fruit hoard resources with no beneficial result. The vinedresser cuts away those worthless branches so that the vital nutrients coming from the vine will be channeled to the fruit bearing branches. Those branches produce many offshoots, too many. So, the vinedresser prunes, or cuts off, a number of those shoots, reducing the number of grapes to be produced. Too many grapes reduce the quality of the fruit and can even break the branch under the stress of the weight.

Jesus keeps his metaphor simple. Fruitless branches are removed. Fruitful branches are pruned. The pruning is done to ensure continual bearing of more fruit. From that simple image, I know that I do not want to be a fruitless branch. I do not want to be cut away. I also know that I want to be pruned, even if that does sound a little painful. I want the Father's active involvement in my life, shaping me with his loving, expert hands, so that I might produce even more fruit.

We are already clean. (3)

In verse 3, Jesus tells his disciples, "You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you." In vine imagery, to be clean is to be pruned. All those little shoots have been cut away. There is an ongoing activity of the Father's pruning in the image, but also an initial cleansing that comes by the Word of Jesus. The disciples are not to fear that they are the kind of branch to be cut away. They have an assurance in their response to the Word of Jesus and Jesus is giving them this assurance now: he's telling them, "You are clean."

This assurance is delivered with almost the same words Jesus used to assure the disciples in the midst of the foot washing example. After understanding that he must allow Jesus to do the work of service, Peter wanted a full bath. You know, "wash all of me." Jesus said to him, "You don't need a full bath. You just need to wash your feet." Jesus went on to say, "You are clean, but not all of you." Those are almost the exact same words he uses here in this different context, different metaphor. There Jesus made an exception for Judas, that's the difference. Now he makes no exception. The idea is that these disciples, having been forgiven through faith in the Word of Jesus, because of their response to his word, they are clean. They are not the branches that are going to be fruitless and broken off. And Jesus will assure them again in verse 16, saying, "You did not choose me, but I choose you...that you should go and bear fruit."

Jesus doesn't mean for this image to take on a purely passive understanding of the work of the Spirit in us. In verse 4, he gives us an imperative, this is what we are to do, "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither *can* you unless you abide in Me." Grape branches do not normally choose to abide in the vine. They just do. Human branches, however, seem to have a willfulness that resists abiding. We have to make an intentional choice to abide in the vine. Jesus must command us to abide.

In the next verse Jesus repeats his "I am" statement, though he highlights our role as the vine instead of the Father's role as vinedresser. He says, "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing."

We can do nothing on our own. (4-5)

There's this repetition in verses 4 and 5 that we can do nothing apart from Jesus. That repetition makes it emphatic. "Apart from me you can do nothing." That's a clear point of the image. There is a vine that rises out of the ground. Through that vine water and nutrients provide sustenance to the branches that allow for the production of fruit. The fruit hangs on them, hangs on the branches but the power, the nutrients, that bring about the fruit, comes from the vine. Without that sustenance, the branches are no more than dead wood on the vine. There is no true life in them. The branch can do nothing without the vine. We can do nothing apart from Jesus.

But how do we understand that? Can we really do nothing apart from Jesus? Don't we do things all the time apart from Jesus? Non-believers are wildly active. They are doing things. Actually, even though this is not the point of this image, the answer is still, "No. You cannot do anything apart from Jesus. You would not exist apart from Jesus. And you cannot continue apart from Jesus. Jesus is Creator and Sustainer of all things. Paul wrote in Colossians 1:15-16, "He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation. For by him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible." And the writer to the Hebrews declared in 1:3, "He is the radiance of [God's] glory and the exact representation of his nature, and upholds all things by the word of his power." In light of Colossians 1 and Hebrews 1 and remembering back to how we began this Gospel, "All things came into being by him," it is not possible to overstate the fact that we can do nothing apart from Jesus. Jesus is God. But that universal sense is not the sense of this metaphor. God created human beings in his image, he enabled us with a mind to understand the material universe, he gave us the freedom of choice to act. We can do all kinds of wonderful things, including building towers up to heaven, all apart from yielding to God and entering into personal relationship with him through Jesus. We can do stuff.

We can do nothing of lasting value in all of our doing. What does all our doing really matter at the end of the day when the lights are turned off and the universe has run its course. What have we done?

We are created for relationship with God. We are created to image him in his goodness and beauty and his truth. We are created to help each other come to know God. We are fallen from relationship. We are fallen from our purpose. Life is living out of a relationship with our Creator. We cannot do that independent of the Spirit of God. We cannot glorify him. We cannot know him. We cannot help other people know him. We cannot love like he loves, truly unconditionally. We cannot make an eternal difference on our own heart or in the lives of other people: in our spouse, in our children, in our parents, in our neighbors. We can do nothing of everlasting value apart from him. Two things matter forever: God and people. And we cannot produce the kind of fruit that lasts.

The opposite is also true. In him we can do great things. We can love our spouses, our children, our parents, our God, like we want to love them with lasting, eternal impact. We can become who we have been created to be, transformed from the inside out if we abide in him.

Worthless branches (6-8)

In verse 6 Jesus comes back to a problem: he comes back to the worthless branches. We'll connect that to verse 7 and the idea of prayer. Here are those two verses.

"⁶ If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned. ⁷ If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you."

Jesus sets up a strong either/or in this vine metaphor. Either you produce fruit or you are broken off and thrown into the fire. Different Christian traditions understand this image quite differently. We might ask the question this way, "What happens to those who do not persevere in their walk with Jesus?" On one side of Christian tradition, you get an interpretation that declares the fruitless branches as unredeemed in the first place. They never knew Jesus. If you do know Jesus and have been chosen by Jesus, you will bear fruit. That interpretation has support in the promise of verse 16, "I chose you...that you should go and bear fruit." So any branches that do not bear fruit were never truly in Jesus in the first place. That's why they are broken off, that's why they're fruitless. On another side of Christian tradition, you get an interpretation that declares the fruitless branches as apostate Christians. They don't persevere because in their own free will they chose to walk away. They truly believed but they refuse obedience. They become hardened, they become fruitless, and eventually they're removed from relationship with Jesus. And just looking at this metaphor that seems like a valid interpretation. It seems to fit well with verse 2 and verse 6. Worthless branches broken off and thrown in the fire.

The first interpretation may not leave much room for active involvement in producing fruit. It is all up to God. God chooses, you produce fruit. The second interpretation might give a lot of room for the believer's involvement in producing fruit, but too much, it takes away the sense of dependence, it's a working or struggling in the self to ensure salvation, to ensure fruit.

I believe that Jesus intentionally sets up the metaphor without addressing the question of the possible fruitless believer. The focus of John up to this point has been to reveal the nature of true faith - well, to reveal the nature of Jesus, but then the human response; what is true faith. And John has been distinguishing that from false belief. There are people who believe in Jesus, but Jesus doesn't entrust himself to them because he knows what's in their heart. There are people who claim to be disciples but they refuse to accept Jesus' teaching, refuse to abide in him, they walk away or they pick up stones to kill him at the end. They don't want to hear what he has to say. And John's setting these people up, these are the people who claim to believe, claim to know, claim to receive, claim to see but they don't truly believe. They don't really know. They don't truly receive Jesus or see Jesus. John sets up a dichotomy between false belief and true belief. A person who declares himself a believer but is not, has not truly been born again, will not produce fruit. He will be a worthless branch. I believe that is the correct way to understand this metaphor in the context of John. The worthless, fruitless branches are those who come to the end of life, or who come to the end of their experiment with Jesus like Judas, like those disciples in John chapter 6, and they walk away. They never really knew Jesus.

But even if that's the right way to take the metaphor that fits best the context of the book, does that mean that true believers will automatically produce fruit? I do not think it does. And I do not believe Jesus addresses that issue here. Jesus' words serve as a warning to anyone who feels secure in relationship and yet fails to produce fruit. We have that. If there is no fruit, we must seriously address the question of whether we have true faith at all. But what about the struggling Christian? Is it possible to be in Christ and not experience transformation? We at least have to ask the question because Jesus has given us an imperative. Abiding does not seem automatic. Loving one another does not seem automatic. Jesus feels the need, the importance of commanding his disciples to do both. That would imply that it's possible to truly believe and yet not automatically do these things.

The two questions of covenant

Let's consider the issue from the perspective of two questions of covenant. Does our forgiveness and acceptability depend on our ability to produce fruit? No. The first question of covenant is answered only one way in the Bible. What makes me righteous enough, acceptable enough to be in relationship with God? I am declared righteous only by the grace of God received by faith. My acceptance is based 100% on grace, not on my ability to abide in Christ and to produce fruit. I could never produce enough fruit to be good enough. I could never abide consistently enough to be righteous in the eyes of God. It's not attainable.

Where then does the command to abide fit in? It's not an issue of the first question of covenant. We're talking about the second question of the covenant. "Now that I have been 100% accepted by God through faith in Jesus, how ought I live?" Abide in Jesus! That's what we're talking about. This is how you live as a true believer. I want to worship my God, serve my King, love my heavenly Father. I did nothing to gain acceptance. I received it. My righteousness is not mine. It is the righteousness of Christ. But now that I have been granted his righteousness, I want to become what he's declared me to be. I want to live for God.

And how do I do that? Well it doesn't begin with me and the effort of my flesh. That's the big mistake. Even though I want to live for Christ, I can do nothing for Christ if I do it in my own power and in my own strength. It begins with abiding in Christ. We can do nothing of true spiritual value for him out of ourselves. But through faith in him, through the Holy Spirit, we are able to participate in our own growth and in our own service. We are able to do good. We invest into our relationship with God through our own actions. We are working out of the salvation that he has already provided for us, but it's still not in our own flesh. It's out of the strength of the Spirit, we're the branch, and the

vine - the nutrients, the source of power and life comes from him. And we approach the second question of covenant, "How then ought I live?" as a relational question. It's not a business question. It's not primarily a religious question, even a moral question. It's a relational question.

We are in relationship with our heavenly Father. How do we live out that relationship? God is going to give us 100% of himself to the relationship. And God is calling on us to give 100% of ourselves to the relationship. I call this the marriage conference answer to the second question of covenant. How much is God's part? 100% How much is my part? 100%. I know that is bad math. But it is good relationship. Love relationship does not work by investing 50/50. That's a business partnership. Nobody is ever truly satisfied. It doesn't work with 80/20. Each partner is called to give their whole self to the relationship. God gives 100% but that does not mean God does 100%. He gives all of himself that he ought to give to relationship. But if he does everything for us, that's not relationship, and there would be no growth in that if we have no responsibility, if we have no part to play; if we're not reaching back towards him. God enables us through the power of the Holy Spirit that we might respond by giving of ourselves to him. We love him back. We will never successfully give anywhere near 100%. It's not a requirement. It is a vision we strive toward. It's a goal. It's an aim. We look at what Jesus is like and we're pursuing to live out our relationship with God just as Jesus did. He gave 100%. We're never going to arrive anywhere near 100%, but we still strive towards giving ourselves fully in relationship with God.

The starting point with "How then shall I live, now that I have been accepted into relationship with God by grace?" is that you live by faith, abiding in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. That's how you live. That is what it means for you to be in him and him to be in you. That is the spiritual truth of your relationship. You are connected with Jesus through a spiritual union. You live this relationship through prayer, through a constant conversation with God.

The carnal Christian

I mentioned before, I think there is a third option that Jesus does not highlight in this metaphor. He talks about the worthless branches thrown away. I think those are people who claim to be believers but aren't really. He talks about true believers who are abiding in Christ and producing fruit. And I believe it is possible for true believers to live life apart from abiding in Jesus. Maybe because nobody has even taught them that you don't do it in your own effort. Maybe because of their sin or their own lifestyle. Maybe because of other struggles. But I do believe it's possible, even though Jesus doesn't address it here. Paul teaches this idea when he writes the struggling believers at Corinth who were experiencing powerful gifts of the Holy Spirit but were not growing in the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Their inner lives were not being transformed. Paul describes three different types of people. In 1 Corinthians 2:14 he speaks of a natural man who does not understand the things of God. In 2:15 he speaks of a spiritual man who does understand the things of God because he has the mind of Christ. I think we've got those people in this metaphor here that Jesus has given us. But then in 3:2-3 Paul also speaks of the Corinthians as neither the natural man or the spiritual. He says,

² I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able *to receive it*. Indeed, even now you are not yet able, ³ for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men?

That word, "fleshly", is the word that means, "carnal" in Old English, and it could be easily used to describe a non-believer. So, what's interesting is that here, Paul is applying it to people he has already called believers. He says that the works of the Spirit, the miracles and speaking in tongues and prophecy, these things are all real and they are coming through them by the Spirit of God, but they have not experienced internal transformation. They look like everybody else. They look like any other Greek assembly. They do not look like an assembly of Jesus Christ. So, in this sense they're carnal Christians. And sometimes that term is misapplied. Sometimes "carnal Christian" applies to those who claim to believe but never have believed. But in this sense with Paul the term applies to true believers who are not seeing transformation in their life. They are not abiding in Christ and they are not experiencing the fruit of the Spirit in their lives.

Paul starts with the natural person and the spiritual person. We know how a person moves from being natural to being spiritual with this terminology. That's new birth. You place your faith in Jesus Christ. It's the issue of the first question of covenant. How do we enter into spiritual relationship with God? By grace through faith. When we place our faith in Jesus, we are forgiven and indwelt by the Holy Spirit. That's all that Paul means by the natural person and the spiritual person.

The Corinthians Paul is addressing, however, do not look like spiritual people. They're of Christ. Christ has indwelt them but they are not abiding in Christ and producing the fruit of the Spirit. So, Paul calls them carnal Christians or fleshly Christians. What happened to them? How did they become carnal? If they are truly spiritual, then why do they look and behave like mere men, mere women, like anybody else?

When we place our faith in Christ, we yield to Jesus as Lord. We yield to him the throne of our life. We submit our will to him. And yet, we have not yet been transformed to the degree that we can consistently yield that place to Jesus. Even if we're not classified as carnal, we still regularly sin. The fleshly part of us constantly wants to retake the throne. We all know this experience. We can't persevere 100% in doing what is right. Yes, we claim Jesus as king, but we constantly decide to do things our own way that do not honor Jesus. When we settle into a state of living out of our own flesh instead of living out of the Spirit of Jesus, then we are in a state of carnality or fleshliness. I don't think there is a need to precisely define that state. If you are struggling to walk with Jesus and at times you're experiencing success in dependence on him, not all the time but you're choosing to trust in him and walk in his power and you're trying to obey him, if you're growing; and we can't determine this by where somebody is at, some people just start with less problems, some people start nicer, so it's not how nice you are, you just might have this nice, pleasant, easygoing personality whether you're a believer or a non-believer, and somebody coming from a really harsh, really difficult background they may not be anywhere nearly as nice as you but they may have been transformed three times as much as you, we can't tell this in comparison to other people. Not everybody has the same struggles. But if you are confessing your sin and you are daily placing your faith in the Spirit, then you might still feel like you're struggling but I wouldn't call you carnal, not in the sense that Paul is talking about. But if you have no fruit in your life as a believer and you lack desire to live for God, you're not really into struggling, you're beginning just to kind of level out, and you don't really confess or pray, your Christianity is primarily certain rituals or habits you've gotten yourself into, if your behavior mirrors other people in society and you're not seeing that positive growth wherever you start from, you're not seeing over time growth, then you need to think seriously about your spiritual state. Something is off.

How do we get there? How do we move from being in a place where we are in that struggle to live for Christ and we're trying to abide by faith and we're praying and trying to trust him, how do we get the point where we just don't care that much anymore, where we're making the choices out of our own mind and flesh? We might be very active, but we're not doing it out of dependence on Christ. Is it simply sin? Is it that simple? We get there by sin. That's probably overall true, but I think it is messier than that so we'll break it out a bit. I just that there's this gunk, that's my theological term, this gunk, this crud that gets in our lives and it weighs down our heart and mind, and we drift from God. I think there are a number of factors that can get us there. Here are four factors.

1) First, unconfessed sin builds up a wall in our relationship with God. And the more we do it, the higher and stronger the wall gets. Jesus told Peter, "You just need to wash your feet." You are clean but keep washing your feet. You are 100% forgiven. But when you sin and hold that inside, you fail to experience the reality of God's forgiveness. Something comes between you and God. You draw away from him. You hide part of yourself. You stop depending on him. And that unconfessed sin is part of that gunk that gets between you and God.

2) Second, passivity also leads to a spiritual lethargy. You just don't feel like doing stuff. If all of our Christianity is attending church or listening to other people, if we're just a passive receiver and we have not found ways for active obedience, if we're not striving to obey God or serve God, then we

don't really need God. It's really more about us. We're not being challenged. We need to be stretched and moved out of our comfort zone. We need reason to pray. Sometimes when we're passive God brings something hard into our lives with a child or a spouse or a job and then we become spiritual again, because we need to pray, we need to depend on God. We need something in our life by which we're saying, "Jesus, help me. Holy Spirit, please, work through me." And if it's not through positive obedience, then it might be through some pain. But when we're passive in our faith, we forget our need for Jesus and we just kind of coast. And as in any relationship, passivity leads to drifting away in the heart. Passivity is part of that gunk that gets in our relationship.

3) Third, good works in our own strength can prevent us from experiencing the fruit of the Spirit. This is a tricky one, because this is how most people view religion. You know, we put in effort. We use our gifts, we have abilities as human beings. We gain experience, that's how we become better at things. We do those things, but when we do them out of our flesh, we're not experiencing the work of the Spirit. It can be that what used to be out of my comfort zone might become quite natural to me. Whenever you think, "I can do this with my eyes closed," be careful because you might start doing that. You might start doing that with your spiritual eyes closed. It's one of those challenges of as we grow, we might start getting a little pride, start depending on ourselves and so then we need to be put into a different environment. We need to be challenged again so that we'll depend. Whether it's serving or teaching or leading or caring, we don't want to get to the point where we just do it by rote, out of our own strength.

I mentioned before, it could be that we're working out of our own strength not because we've become confident and we've forgotten to depend on the Spirit. It might be that we never heard of the Holy Spirit. You could grow up in church and nobody talks about the Holy Spirit, or not in this way of simply having conversation with Jesus. "Jesus, I depend on you. Work through me. I believe your spirit is in me. Fill me with your spirit and work through me." Learning to depend on the filling of the Holy Spirit in us, abiding in Christ. If you never knew that, if you don't know any other way, you've just been reading the Bible in your own strength and praying in your own strength and going to church in your own strength, it can become very boring, easily burn out or you can gain religious pride that way. Because it's religious works. Those good works can be part of that gunk that prevents us from abiding in Christ.

4) Fourth, A bad diet makes us lethargic. Have you ever seen that documentary, "Super Size Me", about the Morgan Spurlock who ate McDonald's food three times a day for a month? His cholesterol and weight sky-rocketed. His weight shot up. So, we can ask, that's the metaphor, Where am I in my culture? Where is my spiritual diet coming from? What conversations do I have week by week? What movies, what music, what books, what am I putting into my mind and heart? What is the conversation among friends or among family? Do I have any small group of Christians I meet with? When we meet, what do we talk about? When I do have free time, do I use it all for fun or exercise or home improvement? None of that's bad but I just need to be asking, "where is the healthy input coming from and how much am I getting?" Without healthy input from friends and from church and from reading and from my music, my mind is gonna slip away from Jesus. Bad spiritual diet is part of that gunk that messes up my relationship.

Unconfessed sin, passivity, good works done in the flesh, a bad spiritual diet, these are all the things that lead us away from dependence on Jesus, and the result is that we look just like we've always looked. We kind of plateau out. We look fleshly, as Paul says. You look like mere men, mere women. We're acting like sinful human beings and that growth chart that we were on, we were moving up from wherever we started, it plateaus out. And we lack the transforming power of Jesus in our lives.

So, the big question is, if I feel like I'm trending there, or I know I'm stuck there, how do I come back to abiding in Christ? We come back through faith. Just like we enter relationship with Jesus through faith, we remain in relationship with Jesus through faith. This is how we express our faith. We acknowledge our desire, we confess any known sin, we receive his forgiveness, because that's what we believe, he's already forgiven us, we state our belief that he is in our lives because we believe

him; he said he's come into our life and we believe it; and we offer ourselves to him, asking him to guide us and empower us through the Holy Spirit he has sent to us.

And we communicate this to him, and when we communicate in faith what we're doing is praying. To remain in Christ, we need this practice of ongoing prayer with him every day, through the day.

"Guide me, Lord. I'm going to work. Help me to live at work for you. I'm going to school. Help me to encourage people in your name. Help me to be courageous. Meeting with these people, help me to speak words of love. Help me to speak up, Lord." Or, "Help me to hold my tongue, Lord." It depends. "Love through me, Lord. I want to be kind, but I want even more that they experience your spirit through me. Help me do this service, this thing I'm doing for your glory. Even if nobody notices, Lord, let it be for you."

So, we're having this conversation of abiding. By faith I'm expressing dependence on Christ and his Spirit in me. He's the vine. I want to be the branch abiding in the vine. As we abide in Jesus, we begin to make a difference for him by the fruit that he bears through us, as we have this kind of conversation. Because Jesus is bearing the fruit through us, he is glorified by what we accomplish because we're accomplishing it through dependence on him. So, Jesus can say in verse 8, "My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples."

Heart, Acts and Fruit of Abiding (9-11)

Now, we don't want to get our eyes too fixed on the fruit of abiding. That's the end of the process. We don't want to get things out of order. Every Christmas I am reminded how much people would like to have the fruit and yet, how they don't want to really do anything to get the fruit. Apart from Jesus Christ we can do nothing. But countless secular TV shows, and songs, and news announcers, and greeting cards wish everybody peace and love and joy. You know, all the fruit. But where is the power to bring that about? Are people doing the kinds of things at Christmas that result in peace and love and joy or are they doing the kinds of things that lead to strife and anxiety and exhaustion?

The fruit of abiding does not come with that acts of abiding. What are the acts that Jesus is calling us to in this passage?

In verse 7 Jesus made a connection between prayer, the word and abiding. "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you." So these are the acts of abiding. We abide through an ongoing conversation of prayer. We also abide through ongoing study and reflection in the word of Jesus. We get another in verses 9-11. Jesus brings obedience back into the discussion.

⁹ Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and *that* your joy may be made full.

I see Jesus connecting three acts of abiding here: prayer, obedience and the word. These acts bring about bring about the fruit that we want: the fruit of abiding. But we still have to take another step back. It is so easy to get Christianity wrong at this point. Spiritual fruit does not come from religious works or religious acts or religious disciplines if the heart of the individual is not in the right place. The fruit of abiding follows the acts of abiding when the acts of abiding follow the heart of abiding. This is really where we need to start. We don't start with the fruit, we don't start with the acts. We start with the heart.

In verse 11 Jesus tells us he spoke these things that his joy may be in us and that our joy be full. So he says he wants us to obey so that we might experience joy. But joy does not come from all forms of obedience. Obedience doesn't automatically lead to joy, not when it's grudging obedience where you feel forced to obey out of fear, or where you're just obeying to get something else, to get some kind of reward. That's not where joy comes from. Joy comes from obedience performed out of a heart of

love. When obedience is an expression of love for God, then we experience joy in the service of our heavenly Father. But if you don't have a heart for love, don't expect the joy.

Along with love, a heart of humility is necessary for bringing about the fruit of abiding. Jesus impressed the importance of humility on his disciples through his example of foot washing. We know we must abide in Christ because we humbly accept that true, lasting fruit is produced through him. We can do nothing on our own. We abide in dependence out of a heart of humility because we recognize our low state compared to his high state. And he is Lord God and that brings humility out of our heart, and that heart of humility is going to lead to acts of abiding and fruit of abiding.

And I'd add one more. We abide out of a heart of faith. In 14:1 Jesus said, "Let not your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe in me." Later, he says, "My peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you." The fruit of peace is experienced through faith in Jesus. I would even say that a heart of faith precedes a heart of love. As a fallen person who still struggles with the flesh, I am sometimes motivated to obedience out of a heart of love. But not always. When I am not, I can still obey out of a heart of faith. I can choose to obey even when I'm not feeling it because I believe it. And one day, when God remakes me in heaven, I will experience constantly the heart motivation of love. But for now, in this already, but not yet state of redemption, I do not always experience the right response of love toward God. But I can still choose to act out of a heart of faith.

The fruit of abiding follows the acts of abiding, which follows the heart of abiding. We do not want to get that order wrong. We start with faith, love and humility. From this heart, we do the acts of prayer, obedience and word. And through these acts we experience the fruit.

So, our last question for today, "What is the fruit of abiding? What's the fruit that comes from abiding in the vine?"

The fruit of abiding includes both the transformation that the Spirit brings about in us and also the transformation brought about in others through our witness. I am going to talk about witness in our next lesson, so I will limit my focus now to that fruit of internal transformation. What are those fruits? Paul gives us a list in Galatians 5:22-23 "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control..."

Do you recognize the beginning of that list in our current context, love, joy and peace? We have mentioned all three so far in this lesson. All three are repeated in this section of John, chapters 13-17. Jesus mentions peace three times, starting in chapter 14 with, "My peace I leave with you." He mentions joy seven times, starting with this reference in verse 11, "that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be made full." If he mentions peace three times and joy seven times, how many times do you think he mentions love in John 13-17? How often is love mentioned? Thirty-four times. "A new commandment I give to you that you love one another just as I have loved you." Love is essential to Jesus' teaching on discipleship here in John 13-17. Love really fits all three of the categories I've created. We are called to live out of a heart of love, to do acts of love, and to experience the fruit of love. But since I have a nice balance of three elements in each category, I'm going to keep love in the categories of heart and fruit. You can add it to acts if you like, I don't mind.

To sum up Jesus' teaching on abiding here in these 11 verses, we recognize the importance of the heart in living out life with Jesus. The heart of abiding is a heart of faith, humility and love. Out of an abiding heart flow the acts of abiding, prayer, obedience, the word. And through these acts of abiding, we experience the fruit of abiding, love, joy, peace, transformation in our hearts.

I want to close in prayer to give you an opportunity to put into practice an ongoing conversation with God. I will pray slowly, giving you opportunity to pray with me right now. Or you can take a moment after the podcast and pray on your own.

Let's start by communicating our faith in Jesus. If you are not sure if you have ever placed your faith in Christ Jesus, then this is where abiding starts. Let's pray, and if these are the words of your heart, you can pray them after me.

Lord Jesus, I believe that you are God. I believe that you came to die for the sins of the world. I confess that I am guilty of sin. I know I can't live a life good enough to pay for my sin. I believe you offer me forgiveness through your death for me on the cross. I accept your wonderful gift. Thank you for loving me. Thank you for dying for me. Thank you for forgiving me. I acknowledge you as my Lord and as my Savior. Please make me into the kind of person you created me to be.

Now let's confess any specific sin is on our heart or mind.

Lord please help me to confess my sin to you and to accept your forgiveness. Help me to be honest with you. Whatever sin you bring to my mind I confess to you now.

Thank you, Lord, for forgiving me of that sin. Please help me to seek restoration with anybody I have hurt.

Now let's pray a prayer of abiding.

Lord God, I want to live for you. I believe that you indwell me with your Holy Spirit. Please, guide me today. Please, help me see truth. Please, love through me. Give me courage to live for you. You are my Lord. You are my life. Fill me with your Holy Spirit for your glory. I believe in you. I believe in you in me. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Amen! Walk by faith in the Holy Spirit! Jesus be with you!

Reflection questions

1. Read John 15:1-11. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What are some questions that come to mind?
2. This passage is placed centrally in this section of John. Jesus intends for his followers to reflect on this metaphor as an aid in understand discipleship. Draw a vine including all the elements you notice in this metaphor. Visualize for yourself the roles of Father, Son, Holy Spirit and you, a disciple.
3. How important is it to you that Jesus declares his disciples as already clean at the beginning of the metaphor in verse 3 (which he also declared in 13:10 during the symbolic act of washing their feet)?
4. How do you understand the declaration that you can do nothing apart from me in 4-5? How do you express this truth in your own life? How do you express your dependence on Jesus?
5. In the context of John, do you believe that the worthless branches in 6-8 could be true believers who have failed to depend on Jesus? How do you understand the worthless branches?
6. How would you describe a heart of abiding according to verses 9-11? What concepts stand out to you?
7. Take time to pray to Jesus, expressing your dependence on him using the language of his own words here in this passage.