

## ABIDING IN CHRIST

### John 15:6-II

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"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch of mine that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit" (Jn. 15:1-2).

**A**s Jesus prepared to depart from his disciples, he taught them a parable consisting of three parts, spelling out the conditions of their spiritual fruitfulness in his absence. The first two parts depicted God's provision on our behalf. First, Jesus would himself be "the true vine," securing by his obedience eternal life to give to those who come to him in faith. Second, the Father would be the vine dresser, tending to our spiritual growth primarily by pruning the fruitful branches. Both of these are divine actions, accomplished for our benefit by God's grace.

The third element of the parable presents the believers' responsibility. In order to bear fruit as living branches, Christians are commanded to abide in Christ. "Abide in me, and I in you," Jesus said. "As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me" (Jn. 15:4).

### ABIDING IN CHRIST

Jesus' teaching on abiding in him is evidently of great importance, as seen not only by the fact that Jesus taught this parable on so pivotal an occasion as the night of his departure but also in the extended treatment he gave to the subject. It is clearly important for Christians to understand what it means to abide in Christ. The Greek verb *meno* means to dwell or remain. J. C. Ryle explains how it speaks of our relationship with Christ:

To abide in Christ means to keep up a habit of constant close communion with Him, to be always leaning on Him, resting on Him, pouring out our hearts to Him, and using Him as our Fountain of life and strength, as our chief Companion and best Friend. To have His words abiding in us, is to keep His sayings and precepts continually before our memories and minds, and to make them the guide of our actions, and the rule of our daily conduct and behavior.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus amplifies his own teaching by relating our abiding in him, first, to our resting in his love: “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love” (Jn. 15:19). This informs us that the Christian who abides in Christ is one who believes, trusts, relies upon, and rests within Christ’s love for his own. Even while Christ’s love for his disciples is unbroken, it is still possible for Christians to “live without being mindful of Christ’s love for them and so break the closeness of their fellowship.”<sup>2</sup> This is why Jesus urges us to remain in his love. John wrote of this in his first epistle, emphasizing that “we know and rely on the love God has for us” (1 Jn. 4:16, NIV). To be a Christian is to know the love of God in Christ, who died on the cross for our sins. To abide in Christ is then to rely on that love, so that in all things we draw near to him, look to him in faith, and confidently expect his saving grace to be at work in our lives. Jesus has proved his love for us forever on the cross; now we are to abide in his love.

Jesus points out to us an analogy between his relationship of love with the Father and our relationship of love with him: “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you” (Jn. 15:9). This reminds us that Jesus’ love for us consists of more than mercy and compassion, since the Father does not pity the Son but rather delights in the Son, approves of his Son, and desires the fellowship of his Son. Likewise, then, Jesus delights in his people, approves of those who are cleansed by his blood (1 Jn. 1:7), and delights in those whom he takes as his disciples.

How many Christians are paralyzed in their spiritual lives by a dread of Christ’s disfavor and disapproval. They see a constantly frowning face in heaven. But Jesus says that his love for us is like the Father’s

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<sup>1</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999), 3:116-117.

<sup>2</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Revised), New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 597.

love for him. We might say that Jesus not only loves us but he likes us. Indeed, the primary biblical metaphor for Christ's love for the church is that of a groom for his bride. A groom longs for his bride with great delight and piercing joy. The Bible tells us that since believers are robed in the perfect imputed righteousness of Christ (Gen. 3:21; 2 Cor. 5:21), then "as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you" (Isa. 62:5). No man marries a woman simply because he feels sorry for her, and Jesus' love for us is one of joy in fellowship, delighting in our redeemed persons for his own sake.

Christians who know and rely on Christ's love will respond by obeying his commands. This is the second relationship that Jesus identifies with abiding in him: "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" (Jn. 15:10).

Jesus is not saying that we are saved by obedience, since we are saved only by faith alone in his perfect saving work for us. What he is saying is that as we rely on his love for us and respond with loving obedience to his commandments, the result is that we are drawn near to abide in his love. Ours should be the grateful, devoted attitude of David in Psalm 40:8, "I desire to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart." The source of this submitted will is our knowledge of God's love for us, and its effect is our abiding in Christ.

These very words were ascribed to Jesus in the New Testament (Heb. 10:7), so that his obedient love to the Father sets the pattern for our obedient love to him: "just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love" (Jn. 15:10). The greatest pleasure Jesus had on earth was in showing his love to the Father by obeying his commands. Likewise, our love for Christ and our abiding in him involves the submission of our will to his will, so that on the path of obedience that Jesus himself walked we have close fellowship with him. Realizing this, we are warned from thinking that abiding in Christ manifests itself in mystical experiences. Instead, abiding in Christ manifests itself in devoted obedience to his Word.

Jesus is describing a lifestyle of abiding in him that moves from love to love. In the fourth chapter of his first epistle, John enlarges on this theme, stating that "in this the love of God was made manifest among

us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him” (1 Jn. 4:9). Our defining reality as Christians, he says, is God’s love for us in Christ and Christ’s love for us on the cross. Both the Father and the Son continue to love us so that believers live through Christ, abiding in his love, living for his pleasure, and accepting his will as our own. John sums up the Christian life, saying, “We love because he first loved us” (1 Jn. 4:19), and the way that we show our love is through joyful obedience to his commands.

This was the mentality displayed by the aged bishop Polycarp, when the Roman proconsul urged him to renounce Jesus in order to escape being thrown to the beasts in the arena. Polycarp answered, “Eighty and six years have I served him, and he never did me any injury: how then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?”<sup>3</sup> Every Christian should reason likewise: what wrong has Jesus ever done so that I might disobey the commands of him who loved me so?

## ABIDING IN CHRIST DELIVERS US FROM JUDGMENT

**H**aving defined abiding in him in terms of his love and our obedience, Jesus also set before the disciples four great results that ensue from our abiding in him. The first is that abiding in Christ *delivers us from the judgment of God*. Jesus expressed this truth in negative terms, speaking of false professors who do not abide in him: “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” (Jn. 15:6).

Throughout the New Testament, fire is used to depict the torments awaiting those who stand under God’s judgment for sin. An important example is Jesus’ parable of the weeds in Matthew’s Gospel. Jesus said that he has planted his good seed in his field, but the evil one has come and planted weeds there also. The weeds in that parable represent false professors and correspond to the fruitless branches in John 15. Jesus said that we should not concern ourselves with trying to sort the wheat from the weeds, but we should leave it for when the harvester comes. He explained, “The harvest is the

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<sup>3</sup> *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, ch. 9, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, x vols, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 10:41.

close of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the close of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Mt. 13:39-42). This is one of many places where hell is described as a place of personal, physical, and perpetual torment as God’s just penalty for sins (see Mt. 3:12; 5:22; 7:19; Mk. 9:47, etc).

Jesus speaks here of God’s judgment not on sinners generally but on professing believers who did not possess his saving life and bear good fruit. In the context of the farewell discourse, we think of Judas Iscariot as the classic example of a false professor who was first removed and then condemned by God. Jesus referred to him as the “son of destruction” (Jn. 17:12), that is, one doomed to eternal judgment for his betrayal of Christ.

The Old Testament background for Jesus’ teaching on the burning of the fruitless branches is Ezekiel 15:1-6. The prophet pointed out that the wood of the vine is good for nothing unless it bears fruit. “Is wood taken from it to make anything? Do people take a peg from it to hang any vessel on it?” he asked (Eze. 15:3). The wood of the vine is so useless that it will not even serve as a peg. Therefore, if it will not bear fruit it can only be used for fire, and even then it burns too quickly. Since the vine was a symbol of Israel, this was a warning of God’s judgment, which soon fell on fruitless Jerusalem through the siege of Nebuchadnezzar and the city’s destruction. God warned, “Like the wood of the vine among the trees of the forest, which I have given to the fire for fuel, so have I given up the inhabitants of Jerusalem” (Eze. 15:6).

Christians should look on the fall of Jerusalem and realize how useless to God is fruitless religion. A profession of faith in Christ is of no interest to God unless it goes on to bear the fruit of a godly life, and such an empty profession of faith renders us fit only for the fires of God’s judgment. It was with this in mind that James wrote that “faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead” (Ja. 2:17). He did not mean that we are saved by a combination of faith and works, but rather that saving faith is always a faith that goes on to bear the fruit of good works, along with a changed life. According to Jesus, then,

false professors of faith will sooner or later be taken away by God (Jn. 15:2) and ultimately they will be subjected to God's fire, all because they never truly embraced Jesus as Savior and therefore died without their sins being forgiven.

In contrast, to abide in Christ is to be delivered from God's judgment, since the branches that abide in him bear fruit through their possession of saving life. How urgent it is that every professing believer actually abide in Christ – relying on his love, living in close fellowship with Jesus, and bearing the good fruit of obedience to the commands of the Bible – which is the only kind of faith that actually saves us from the just wrath of God on our sins.

### ABIDING IN CHRIST LEADS TO POWER IN PRAYER

A second result is that abiding in Christ *leads to power in prayer*. “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you,” Jesus taught, “ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you” (Jn. 15:7).

This promise is essentially the same as the one made in John 14:13-14: “Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it.” The difference here is the nuance of Christ’s words abiding in us. Jesus earlier said that if we ask in his name he will answer our prayers; now he insists that we must pray with his Word abiding in us.

A. W. Pink explains that Jesus refers here to a life that is “regulated by the Scriptures.” Jesus speaks of his “words,” which refers to “the precepts and promises of Scripture personally appropriated, fed upon by faith, hidden in the heart.... It is... constant and habitual communion with God through the Word, until its contents become the substance of our innermost beings.”<sup>4</sup>

In God’s Word we find that Jesus tells us not to expect comfortable circumstances or the absence of trials and temptations. What we should seek is faith to trust Christ, strength to obey God’s will, grace to transform our lives, and compassion to care for a lost world. In John 15, Jesus has stressed the vital importance that we abide in him,

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<sup>4</sup> Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 825.

relying on his love and obeying his commands. Surely abiding in him, then, is something for which we should pray, with confidence that Jesus has promised to bless prayers that are according to his Word. According to Jesus' promise, whenever we pray for the priorities he has taught in Scripture, we should pray with an absolute certainty of divine answers. Do we pray for grace to believe, for compassion on the lost world so that we will witness the gospel, or for courage to stand against the pressures of the world and of sin? We must pray for these things, and when we pray Jesus' own words back to our Lord, when his teaching forms the substance of our pleas, we can be assured that they will be heard with favor in heaven.

If we wonder why we do not seem to enjoy greater power in prayer, we are given a vital clue in this passage. Perhaps our lack of power in prayer stems from a lack of abiding in Christ and in his Word. F. B. Meyer writes: "If you abide in Christ in daily fellowship, it will not be difficult to pray aright, for He has promised to abide in those who abide in Him; and the sap of the Holy Ghost securing for you fellowship with your unseen Lord, will produce in you, as fruit, desires and petitions similar to those which He unceasingly presents to His Father."<sup>5</sup> The "secret" to power in prayer, then, is to live closely enough to Christ that our own desires, expressed in prayer, have been molded by his Word.

An example of how abiding in Christ works with prayer was given by Corrie ten Boom in one story of her poor but godly father, Casper. Living under Nazi occupation in Holland, their family faced many difficulties and great poverty. On one occasion, they had prayed for God to send a customer to buy a watch so they could pay their overdue bills. A customer did come, picking out a quite expensive watch, and casually remarked as he paid that another merchant had sold him a defective watch. Corrie's father asked the man if he could examine that watch, and pointed out that only a minor repair was needed. He assured the man that he had been sold a fine quality watch by the other merchant and gave his money back as the man returned the watch he was going to buy.

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<sup>5</sup> F. B. Meyer, *The Life of Love* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming Revell, 1987), 296.

Little Corrie asked, “Papa, why did you do that? Aren’t you worried about the bills you have due?” Her father replied that it would not honor the Lord to allow another man’s reputation to be wrongly harmed, especially since the other merchant was a believer. He assured the little girl that God would provide, and just a few days later a man came and bought the most expensive watch they had, the sale of which not only paid their bills but also paid for two years of Corrie’s education.<sup>6</sup> How simple it would have been for Casper to take the man’s watch and claim God’s answer to prayer! But he put obedience to Christ first, and then did not lack for anything as abiding in Christ produced not only obedience but also great power in prayer.

### ABIDING IN CHRIST GLORIFIES THE FATHER

The Westminster Shorter Catechism begins by telling us that man’s chief end is “to glorify God.” This highlights the importance of the third result of abiding in Christ, that in this way we *glorify the Father*. Jesus added, “By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples” (Jn. 15:8).

This is an important statement, first, because it reminds us that we “prove” our discipleship by bearing fruit to the Lord. Jesus adds that the same fruit that grants us assurance of salvation also brings glory to the Father. This indicates that if we are not abiding in Christ and bearing the fruit of changed lives, then we are denying God glory that ought to be his. It is easy for us to speak of praising God and to sing hallelujahs, but the way that God especially desires to be glorified in us is by our transformed lives. That our lives might contribute to the glory of the one, true, and eternal God ought to fill our hearts with wonder and amazement. Moreover, that we might give something back to the God who has given his own Son for our salvation ought to spur us with great zeal for the glory of the Father.

Christ’s fruit in our life glorifies the Father before the holy angels, who Peter says long to look into the things of the gospel (1 Pet. 1:14). Our changed lives vindicate God’s saving purpose before the accusations of the devil. Back in the garden, God cursed Satan,

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<sup>6</sup> Cited from George Guthrie, *Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 449.

declaring that he would be made to eat dust (Gen. 3:14). One of the chief ways God feeds the serpent dust is by first forgiving our sin through Christ's blood and then actually making us holy, so that even Satan must glorify God in our salvation. The fruit of our lives further glorifies God before the watching world. Gordon Keddie writes that even the hard-hearted world "cannot but see the hand of God in the saving change of an otherwise corrupt and condemned sinner." The unbeliever "may pour contempt on his friend who is converted and gives up his former wicked ways, but he knows somehow that he protests too much and is really covering a deeper amazement at a change that he cannot explain."<sup>7</sup>

When Jesus says that our fruit proves our discipleship, a corollary principle is that many professing Christians lack assurance and peace in their salvation, some living with great doubt and fear, because they are careless about abiding in Christ. Ryle observes that "Men are content with a *little* Christianity, and a *little* fruit of the Spirit, and do not labour to be 'holy in all manner of conversation' (1 Pet. 1:15). They must not wonder if they enjoy little peace, feel little hope, and leave behind them little evidence."<sup>8</sup> The way for us to receive the most benefit from our faith is the same way that we are of maximum usefulness to the Lord: if we will abide in Christ we will bear much fruit so as both to glorify the Father and prove our discipleship.

## ABIDING IN CHRIST FILLS US WITH JOY

**L**astly, Jesus states that *abiding in Christ fills us with joy*: "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full" (Jn. 15:11). The world insists that turning from sin to follow Christ is bound to take all the pleasure out of life. Jesus insists that the exact opposite is in fact true. The way to possess true and abiding joy – not the joy of the world, but what Jesus calls "my joy" – is to abide in him.

It is obvious from this that we may fail to know the joy that ought to be ours. We lose our joy when our fellowship with Christ is broken through worldly distractions. Disobedience and unbelief steal our

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<sup>7</sup> Gordon J. Keddie, *A Study Commentary on John*, 2 vols. (location: Evangelical Press, ), 2:161.

<sup>8</sup> Ryle, *John*, 3:118.

joy. This is why David pled in his great prayer of repentance, “Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation” (Ps. 51:11-12). David missed the spiritual joy that he previously knew, and he pled with God not only to forgive him but also to restore his presence and therefore his joy. Jesus found his joy in pleasing the Father through obedience. Leon Morris comments: “It is not cheerless, barren existence that Jesus plans for his people. But the joy of which he speaks comes only as they are wholehearted in their obedience to his commands.”<sup>9</sup>

Jesus stated his desire that by abiding in him “your joy may be full” (Jn. 15:11). Jesus was not speaking here of a fairy-tale happiness in which all our worldly dreams come true. Jesus never promised a carefree life to his followers, but he did offer us fullness of joy as his life grows in us. Hebrews 12:2 says that “for the joy set before him” Jesus endured the cross, so that even that great baptism of suffering could not snuff out the eternal flame of his joy. Abiding in him, as a living branch in the true vine, his life flows into us through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, so that our deep experience of blessing matures into the rich wine of spiritual joy as we abide in him.

Do you find that you long for the fullness of Christ’s joy in your life? It is evident that Jesus longs for this, too. Indeed, there can be no greater object in love than for the one we adore to have joy in our fellowship. We do not need to live joyless lives, but we do need to abide in Christ, relishing his love, offering our obedience in return, and then abounding in the perfect divine joy that he has eternally possessed and that he delights to give to those who abide in him.

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<sup>9</sup> Morris, *John*, 598.