

## **Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth One Verse at a Time***

Abiding in the Vine, Part 1

### **INTRODUCTION**

There is a question that plagues more Christians perhaps than any other and it is this: What is involved in having a vital relationship with Jesus Christ? Not only is it asked by believers in moments of sinfulness, discouragement, or confusion, but it is asked by unbelievers as well. How can we describe the union that a believer experiences between himself and Christ? We talk about knowing Christ, being in Christ, walking with Christ, and loving Him. But what does that union really involve? It's like the relationship of two people in love, especially like the relationship between a father and his son, where there's mutual love and respect. Or it could be likened to the relationship between two close friends or between two brothers who would defend each other to the death. Perhaps the most graphic illustration of a believer's relationship to Christ is that of a vine and branches, given by our Lord Himself in John 15.

There are many truths in the allegory of the vine and the branches that give us insight into the Christian life. Our growth together with Christ is perfectly illustrated by a vine and a branch. We are nothing in ourselves; we gather all our strength from Him--our lives are filled with His energy and resources. By ourselves we can't produce fruit; we must be vitally connected to Christ, who produces fruit through us. In the beginning of John 15, Jesus uses that allegory to teach His disciples about a believer's relationship with Him and the Father. He also explains that the person who only appears to be connected to Him is not a legitimate believer and therefore will be cut off, thrown away, and burned in the fire.

In the last chapter, we met the Vine (Jesus Christ), the Vinedresser (the Father), and the two kinds of branches (the believers who bear fruit and the non-believers who don't). Jesus continues the analogy in verse 4 by making a heart-stirring plea: "Abide in me." He envisions people who are superficially attached to Him--people who may go to church, claim to be devout, and even talk about their relationship to Him--but who aren't real believers. He exhorts the unbelieving fruitless branch to remain in Him. Jesus wants His superficial followers to become true believers, showing the legitimacy of their faith by remaining in Him. That is not to say a believer must work to stay saved, but that he will remain in Christ because he is a believer. To those who don't remain in Him, He gives a solemn warning in verse 6: "If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch." If a person who is apparently attached to Christ suddenly departs from the faith, it is natural to wonder what happened. The answer is simple: Such people were never true believers to begin with, otherwise they never would have left. The false branch does not remain with Christ.

## LESSON

### I. THE BASIC MEANING OF ABIDING (vv. 4, 8-10)

#### A. The Exhortation for the Unbeliever

##### 1. The plea (v. 4a)

###### a. Explained

In verse 4, Jesus is saying to men like Judas, "Don't be superficial; be for real. Abide in Me and prove that your faith is real. You superficial branches need to be saved!" It's tragic when men superficially line up with Jesus Christ but never become true Christians. There are some believing wives who bring their unsaved husbands to church. They may appear to be Christians, but they really aren't. Sometimes young people come to church only because they want to be involved in a youth program, but they don't know Jesus Christ as Lord. Jesus calls to all who have made a statement of faith or an apparent identification with Him to be sure they're real believers.

Jesus said in verse 4, "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine, no more can ye, except ye abide in me." The word "abide" simply means "to remain." Jesus is saying, "Be for real, and give evidence that you're for real by remaining with Me." It's not that remaining in Christ saves you--that would be ridiculous because it would base your salvation on your ability to hang in there. Remaining in Christ is the evidence that you are saved. People often know someone who used to be involved in various church functions, but all of a sudden disappeared and has never returned. That individual proved he was not a true believer because he didn't abide in Christ. He never was real to begin with. If a man really knows Jesus Christ, it is the character of the salvation experience for that man to remain in Christ. The false will always leave sooner or later.

###### b. Exhorted

##### 1) Luke 8:14

Jesus said the seed that "fell among thorns are they who, when they have heard [the Word of God], go forth, and are choked with cares and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to perfection." People who may look like they have experienced a legitimate conversion show that they were never saved to begin with when they fail to remain in Christ and bear fruit.

##### 2) 1 John 2:19

"They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us; but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us." If the church attenders John was talking about had been true believers, they would have stayed involved in Christian fellowship.

### 3) 1 John 2:24

"Let that, therefore, abide in you which ye have heard from the beginning. If that which ye have heard from the beginning shall remain in you, ye also shall continue in the Son, and in the Father. And this is the promise that he hath promised us, even eternal life." John says, "You that are for real will remain and inherit eternal life." The abiding believer is the only legitimate believer. When someone ceases to fellowship with Christians, they give evidence that they never were believers to begin with.

Jesus calls to every apparent disciple to show the reality of his faith by remaining in Him. He makes a black and white distinction: The true believer abides; the non-believer--sooner or later--departs.

### 4) Colossians 1:21-23

Paul also warned potential Judas-type branches: "And you, that were once alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled in the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy and unblamable and unreprouvable in his sight, if ye continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel, which ye have heard." The Colossians were once sinners apart from God, but Christ died to bring them into a relationship with Him. That relationship needs to be maintained. Paul is saying that the legitimacy of a person's salvation will be determined by his continuance in it.

### 5) Hebrews 3:6, 14

"Christ [is] a son over his own house, whose house are we, if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end" (v. 6). The evidence that we are Christ's house will be our continuing faith in Him. Verse 14 says, "For we are made partakers of Christ, if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast unto the end." True believers start and end their earthly life by being vitally connected to Christ (cf. Heb. 10:38-39).

### 6) Hebrews 4:14

"Seeing, then, that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession." If you have made a profession of faith in Christ, be sure that you continue to do so. That's the evidence of salvation. When I was in the process of being ordained to serve as a pastor of a church, there was an individual on the ordination council who later became

involved in gross immorality and left the ministry. He has totally forsaken any relationship that he ever claimed to have with Christ. It's obvious that if he were a true believer, he would still be following Christ because that is the character of salvation.

## 2. The promise (v. 4b)

Jesus gives a marvelous promise to the abiding branch: "Abide in me, and I [will remain] in you." Not everyone in the world can claim to experience the constant abiding presence of Jesus Christ; only the one who is constantly abiding in Christ. The New Testament talks about Christians being in Christ and Christ being in them. Colossians 1:27 says, "Christ in you, the hope of glory." We have a relationship with Christ, the Vine. When by real faith we are truly saved, we will always abide and Christ will always abide in us. John 14:4 is a comfort to Christians who might otherwise live in spiritual apoplexy, worrying about hanging onto their salvation. It is also a warning to professing Christians that if they aren't true believers, Christ isn't present in their lives. Many people come to church thinking that just because they show up, the Lord is with them. Being in a church doesn't mean the Lord is with you. He lives in the person of the Spirit within the lives of true disciples. An abiding relationship with Jesus Christ comes only with salvation--genuine faith in Christ. It's a permanent, eternal relationship.

## 3. The parallels (vv. 8-10)

Jesus repeats the concept of abiding in different ways in verses 8-10.

### a. Fruitfulness

In verse 8, Jesus said, "In this is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples." Jesus is exhorting people to be true disciples, for only they are capable of bearing fruit. He's envisioning fruitless branches that are superficially attached to the vine. Bearing fruit is equivalent to abiding as a true believer. The unbeliever who is superficially connected to Jesus bears no fruit.

### b. Love

In verse 9, Jesus said, "As the Father hath loved me, so have I loved you; continue ye in my love." A true disciple doesn't enter into the love of Christ and then leave it; he continues in it.

### c. Obedience

In verse 10, Jesus said, "If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love, even as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in his love." Jesus is again exhorting people to abide in Him.

Abiding, bearing fruit, continuing in Christ's love, and obeying His commandments are different ways of saying the same thing. A true disciple obeys the commandments of Christ and remains in a relationship with Him from the moment of salvation. Since Christ desires true disciples, let's not break His heart like Judas did by failing to abide.

Jesus portrays Himself as the perfect example of abiding. He said, "Even as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in His love" (v. 10). Jesus wants the kind of relationship with us that He has with God. In His high-priestly prayer in John 17, Christ prayed that His disciples might be one with Him and the Father (v. 21). He will never depart from His relationship with the Father, and He wants us to abide with Him in the same way.

In the beginning of John 15, Christ is contrasting the true and the false disciple--the real one who is abiding, and the apparent one who will eventually depart. Christ is pleading with superficial followers to abide, bear fruit, continue in His love, and keep His commandments. Those qualities form a perfect portrait of a true Christian. The true Christian obediently remains in a loving and productive relationship with Jesus Christ; he never leaves. In John 8:31, Jesus said, "If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed." A true disciple abides in Christ.

## **The Simplicity of the Christian Life**

In John 14, Jesus said, "If ye love me, [you will] keep my commandments.... He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me .... If a man love me, he will keep my words" (vv. 15, 21, 23). Every true disciple loves Christ and obeys Him. The two keys to the Christian life are love and obedience. People sometimes think the Christian life is so complicated--do this, do that, sit down, stand up, wave. No. Christians are simply to love God and others (Matt. 22:37-40), and out of that love will spring obedience to God's Word.

John is contrasting the true and the false disciple. Unbelievers don't abide in Christ, but believers do. All Christians bear fruit, continue in His love, and obey. If someone stops doing those things and forsakes Christ, he never was saved to begin with (1 John 2:19).

## **B. The Expectation for the Believer**

### **1. The ideal pattern**

John draws the line between believers and unbelievers very clearly throughout his gospel. He doesn't contrast one type of believer from another because he wants to paint an idealistic picture of believers.

#### a. Desiring eternal life

Since believers have eternal life, they will never thirst again for it (John 4:14). But unbelievers will always thirst. Although believers may get a little thirsty in periods of spiritual dryness, John doesn't deal with the exception. Similarly, John 6 records Jesus promising that the one who believes in Him will never hunger (v. 35). However, as a believer, do you ever get a little bit hungry for spiritual truth? Sure, but John is primarily interested in presenting the ideal pattern designed by God.

#### b. Confessing sins

The book of 1 John illustrates John's style of contrasting various truths (which is a cause of confusion for some). First John 1:8-10 says, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us." John says believers confess their sins to God, but unbelievers deny their sin. There are occasions when believers don't confess as they should, but John doesn't deal with those. He presents the ideal.

#### c. Obeying God

First John 2:3-5 says, "By this we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments. He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whosoever keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected; by this know we that we are in him." John says unbelievers disobey and believers obey. Do believers ever disobey? Sure, but John doesn't worry about the exceptions.

#### d. Loving Christians

First John 2:9-11 says, "He that saith he is in the light, and hateth his brother, is in darkness even until now. He that loveth his brother abideth in the light, and there is no occasion of stumbling in him. But he that hateth his brother is in darkness, and walketh in darkness, and knoweth not where he goeth, because darkness hath blinded his eyes." Is there anyone in this world you don't love even though you're a Christian? John says believers always love their brothers, and unbelievers never do. You probably know some believers who don't love their brothers. But remember, John is just trying to make the general line of distinction clear.

First John 3:14-15 says, "We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death. Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer; and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him." It may seem like if a Christian hates someone, he will go to hell, yet John is only drawing the black and white distinctions.

#### e. Not loving the world

First John 2:15 says, "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him." There are probably some things in the world you like very much. Is John saying you are going to hell because you want that new car? No.

#### f. Not sinning

First John 3 says, "Whosoever abideth in him sinneth not; whosoever sinneth hath not seen him, neither known him.... He that committeth sin is of the devil .... Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin" (vv. 6, 8-9).

You say, "Didn't John know that some of us Christians might not like some other believer? Didn't he know we might disobey and commit sin?" Sure he did, but I like his style: He puts the ideals where they belong. He's concerned with the positional truths and the general patterns of the Christian life.

## 2. The realistic perspective

John was aware, however, of the exceptions to the ideal. First John 2:1 says, "My little children, these things I write unto you that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." John concedes a little bit so we don't lose sight of the fact that God knows we'll fail sometimes. There are general patterns in the Word of God that distinguish a believer from an unbeliever. John draws them absolutely clear cut. But there are exceptions--times when a believer sins, hates his brother, disobeys, and fails to confess his sin.

Therefore, is it reasonable to conclude there are times when a Christian doesn't abide in the fullest sense? Of course. But the general pattern of his life will be to abide in Christ. A believer may have a temporary lapse in his relationship with Christ and may cease to abide in the fullest sense. Therefore, the passage in John 15 is not totally restricted to the unbeliever; it could also refer to a believer. Many times in the New Testament we can read commands to love our brothers even though John assumes a believer will always love his brother. Such commands speak to the exceptions to the ideal. For example, Paul's epistles are full of exceptions. The first part of Ephesians talks about a Christian's position--who he is in Christ--and the second part talks about a Christian's practice--what he ought to do. If there weren't any believers who made mistakes, the Father could put away His knife because there wouldn't be any pruning to do. However, there are exceptions in the lives of Christians when they fail to abide in the fullest sense.

#### a. The failure

Jesus longs for the believer to abide in Him fully. You may wonder how a Christian could fail to abide. One illustration is found in Galatians 1:6, where Paul, writing to Christians, says, "I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel." When the Galatians started believing legalistic teaching, Paul rebuked them for not abiding. In Galatians 3:3, he said, "Are ye so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh?" The Galatians had been saved in the energy of the Holy Spirit, but they were living as if they'd been saved in the energy of the flesh. They believed they needed to keep a list of rules to retain God's acceptance. They had stopped abiding in Christ and started trying to produce their own fruit apart from Him. Legalism is one way a Christian can stop abiding; it is essentially the opposite of abiding.

When Christians fail to abide in the fullest sense of the word, it doesn't mean they lose their salvation. In John 10:27, Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them." You may be a wayward sheep, but you don't turn into a goat (cf. Matt. 25:31-46). When you stop abiding, it doesn't mean you're out of God's love and His Kingdom--your position is secure forever. But when you wander a little bit and cease to abide in the fullest sense, you move away from the intimacy of a full relationship with Christ.

To abide as a believer simply means to stay close to Jesus. A branch is much better off if it's connected to the vine. Being only a half an inch away from the vine doesn't do a branch any good. To abide is to be totally connected to Jesus Christ in a loving and obedient relationship. As the vine sends its energy through the branch to bear fruit, so Christ can send His energy through you.

#### b. The feeding

You say, "I'd like to remain in a close relationship to Jesus. How do I do it?" The beginning of John 15:7 says, "If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you." A believer who is in God's Word is an abiding believer. One who feeds on the truths of the Word of God stays in a close, living, energized relationship with Jesus Christ. Verse 4 says, "As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine, no more can ye, except ye abide in me." A believer should not operate independently of Christ. At some point in their lives, most Christians cease to abide. They independently try to produce their own fruit. Such a person might say, "I'm a very strong and clever branch. I can bear fruit myself. I've produced great fruit before so I know I can do it again." But how much can a detached branch do toward producing fruit? It can't do anything regardless of its size. The strongest is as helpless as the weakest, and the best is as worthless as the worst if they're disconnected from the vine. Jesus said, "No more can ye [bear fruit], except ye abide in me" (v. 4). Bearing fruit is not a question of whether you're strong or weak, good or bad, brave or cowardly, clever or foolish, experienced or inexperienced. Your gifts, accomplishments, and experience are worthless in helping you produce fruit apart from Jesus Christ. Fruit not produced by Christ is like artificial fruit tied to branches. Even though Paul in Romans 7:18 said, "In my flesh dwelleth no good thing," many Christians have never

learned that truth. They run around grunting and groaning, trying to bear fruit. But you don't bear fruit by trying; you bear it by abiding.

### c. The focus

#### 1) Explained

You abide by recognizing you're a branch and by keeping your position in the vine. If you want to get as close to Christ as you can, that will involve stripping out the things of the world; putting aside all sin, which distracts and saps your energy; and putting aside the kind of self-effort that operates independently of the Spirit. All those things will rob you of a deep, personal, loving relationship with Jesus. Get into the Word of God and you'll be an abiding branch. Don't even worry about fruit--just abide and Christ will produce it through you. Some people say, "I've got to get going: I haven't witnessed in a couple of days!" They just need to get close to Jesus Christ so they can witness in the power of the Spirit. Stay close to Jesus, apart from sin, in the Word, and you won't ever have to worry about fruit because Christ will bear that in you as you abide in Him.

#### 2) Expressed

##### a) Galatians 2:20

"I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me."

##### b) Philippians 2:13

"It is God who worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure." Don't ever worry about the fruit. That's not even your concern. God produces fruit through you as you abide in Christ. The Holy Spirit does not help you bear fruit, and you don't have to help the Holy Spirit bear fruit either. The Holy Spirit can really do it all alone. So what are we to do? Nothing. Just abide in Christ.

##### c) Galatians 3:3

"Having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh?" The Galatians started out abiding, but soon got misdirected into trusting in their flesh for sanctification.

Have you ever tried to read the Bible and found it boring? When you've witnessed, have you felt like you've had ashes in your mouth? Maybe you've prayed in a superficial sense: "Bless the missionaries; now I lay me down to sleep. Amen." You go through the motions but you don't sense any spiritual life. If that's the case, let me encourage you to work on your relationship with Jesus. Don't concentrate on the deeds because they will be the joyful result of that relationship. God wants your life to be fruitful even more than you do. But you can't do one thing yourself to produce it. Just be

close to Jesus by being in the Word, and by loving and obeying Him, and you will find His energy surging through you to produce fruit. The result will be joy. John 15:11 says, "These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full." Would you like to live in the midst of full joy? You say, "What will I have to do? Win eighty-four souls to Christ a month?" No. One thing: abide.

These words in John 15 were spoken by our Lord almost two thousand years ago, but He says them to us today. If you're a superficial Judas-branch, seek to be a true branch--genuinely open your heart and ask Christ in. To the believer He says, "Your general pattern is to abide. Don't let those lapses come. Abide in Me in the fullest sense and I will produce fruit in you."

### **Focusing on the Facts**

1. What does Jesus use the analogy of a vine and branch to teach His disciples about?
2. What does Jesus want His superficial followers to do?
3. What does the word "abide" mean? In the context of John 15, what is abiding in Christ evidence of?
4. What effect can worldly cares and riches have on someone who has initially responded to God's Word with a measure of faith (Luke 8:14)?
5. If a church attender discontinues his involvement in Christian fellowship, what does he give evidence of? Why (1 John 2:19)?
6. Is our reconciliation with God, mentioned in Colossians 1:23, conditional? Explain.
7. What is the promise Jesus gives to those who abide in Him, according to John 15:4?
8. What are three parallel manifestations to the concept of abiding?
9. How is Jesus the perfect example of abiding (John 17:21)?
10. What are two keys of the Christian life? Which is a product of the other (John 14:15)?
11. Why doesn't the apostle John emphasize different maturity levels of Christians?

12. Give some examples of the apostle John's style of contrasting believers and unbelievers.
13. How does the apostle John show his awareness of the exceptions to the ideal pattern for a believer in 1 John 2:1?
14. Explain why Jesus' exhortation to abide could apply to believers also.
15. How can a Christian fail to abide (Gal. 1:6)?
16. When Christians fail to abide, do they lose their salvation? Explain (John 10:27-28).
17. According to John 15:7, how can we remain in a close relationship with Jesus (see p. 8)?
18. What is the only way a Christian can bear fruit, according to John 15:4?
19. What types of things can rob us of a deep personal relationship with Jesus?
20. Does a Christian need to worry about bearing fruit? Explain.
21. According to John 15:11, what result can every Christian experience by abiding in Christ?

### **Pondering the Principles**

1. The apostle John said this about false teachers: "They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, in order that it might be shown that they all are not of us" (1 John 2:19; NASB). Do you know individuals who have disappeared from your congregation? Do you know why they left? If you have wondered what happened to old so- and-so, see if you can track them down and find out how they are doing and why they left. If they were emotionally hurt, encourage them to forgive. If they were attending church for the wrong reasons, explain the purpose for Christian fellowship. If they were confused about spiritual things, give them biblical direction. You may have the opportunity to lead them to Christ, however don't automatically assume they were unbelievers. They may be Christians who have had temporary lapses of abiding in Christ. Your sensitive admonition and instruction may bring them back into fruitful Christian living. Meditate on Romans 15:1-2, 14.

2. Are you abiding in Christ? Or have you slipped in a routine of legalistically grinding out various Christian duties? Evaluate your motivation for your involvement in various Christian activities. Are you in the Word on a regular basis? Do you seek to know more about the One who saved you and who you claim to follow? Memorize Philippians 3:8-10. Focus on Christ and you will become a fruitful

branch for His glory.

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