

LIVE|15 – The Ordinary Revolution

The Beauty of Ordinary

John 15:1-11

Mark Vroegop

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 does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. ³ Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴ Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. ⁵ I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ 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. ⁷ If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. ⁹ As the Father has loved me, so have I 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, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. John 15:1–11 (ESV)

This particular sermon series has been brewing in my heart for a long time. I'm not sure when it began, but it has something to do with the following moments:

- I have witnessed multiple seasons of what some might call revival or mini-revivals, and while those seasons were wonderful and thrilling, I discovered that some people put all their hope and their focus on those short and intense seasons. Many of them struggled finding their spiritual footing after "revival" ended.
- A few years ago a pastor friend of mine said something rather shocking: "The challenge with the Christian life is that it's so DAILY."
- While on sabbatical I found that getting spiritually ready for Sunday morning was harder than what I realized, and I had to lower my expectations or it was easy to be disappointed.
- One my sons and I had a conversation about how to listen to sermons when you aren't moved emotionally by them, and it was surprising to him when I asked, "Why do you think that every sermon should move you emotionally?"
- I was at a conference where I heard a speaker caution pastors about the self-focused pressure of trying to preach extraordinary sermons every week. I was convicted that there were some Sundays when I was exhausted, not just because of the demands of preaching, but because of the internal pressure to preach the "best" sermon.

All of this was brewing in my heart, and then I read this quote from a book called *Ordinary*, by Michael Horton, and he talks about the American Church's fascination with "The Next Big Thing":

“We’ve forgotten that God showers his extraordinary gifts through ordinary means of grace, loves us through ordinary fellow image-bearers, and sends us out into the world to love and serve others in ordinary callings.”¹

Now let me be clear: I’m not saying that extraordinary moments are bad or unhelpful in themselves. They have their place and their role. Nor am I suggesting that we be content with mediocre, sub-par, or average Christianity. Ordinary Christianity does not have to mean doing less or doing it poorly. Instead, my burden is the way that Christians, in the name of quick fixes, immediate results, or “The Next Big Thing,” give up or miss the beauty and the power of the ordinary Christian life.

So much of the Christian life is filled with really good and helpful ordinary moments, as ordinary people use the ordinary means of God’s grace in ordinary lives, in ordinary weeks, and in celebration together on ordinary Sundays.

Therefore, the Ordinary Revolution is renewing our commitment and our passion for the ordinary Christian life that creates extraordinary changes. In other words, while there is something stunning and attractive about radical and sweeping spiritual moments, there is also something equally stunning and attractive about the quiet, normal, and relentless pursuit of Christlikeness that is less flashy and less noticed, and yet more common.

The Christian life is comprised of both “point” and “process.” But it is very easy to forget how important and more common “process” really is. That’s the Ordinary Revolution – highlighting the awesomeness and the power of the ordinary.

LIVE|15 and The Ordinary Revolution

For the last seven years, we have taken some time each August to deal with a topic that we feel is important for our spiritual growth. In the past we have talked about subjects like identity, anger, the mortification of sin, the tongue, and the fear of man. Over the next four weeks, we’ll be looking at the following:

- **Week 1: The Beauty of Ordinary**
- **Week 2: The Context of Ordinary**
- **Week 3: The Practice of Ordinary**
- **Week 4: The Calling of Ordinary**

The vision behind this spotlight event is to have you learn something, do something, and share something. In other words, we want to help you “live” the Christian life, to help you make it really work.

¹ Michael Horton, *Ordinary: Sustainable Faith in a Radical, Restless World*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing, 2014), 14.

Here are a few things you need to know about how LIVE|15 is going to work:

1. When you come each Sunday, pick up the notes and the discussion guide. Take good notes and listen carefully.
2. Today you should have received an Ordinary Challenge Card, and we will use this each week, so keep it and bring it with you each Sunday.
3. On the back of the card, there are twelve challenges related to the ordinary Christian life, and we'd like you to pick one to pursue.
4. After the service, and after each service over the next four weeks, stop by the corresponding LIVE station to pick up your weekly challenge. There will be a new challenge each week.
5. Find ways to share what you are learning in your Small Group or in any group in which you participate.

Our hope for this series is to ignite a new passion in your life for the normal, everyday, and ordinary activities of the Christian life that are incredibly powerful. And we hope that you will share what you are learning with others so that they can benefit. Our prayer is that you will simply take one step in the right direction toward the normal Christian life and start developing some new habits in your life.

If you are not yet a Christian, this is a great way for you to start learning about and exploring what the Christian life is all about. I'd love for you to investigate one of the challenges, especially the one on Scripture reading, while you explore what it means to have a personal relationship with Jesus.

The Ordinary Beauty of Abiding

I want to start our journey in this subject of the ordinary by looking at a text that has always fascinated me. There is something very important, powerful, and simple here. There is also something here that is easy to miss.

First, let me give you some context. John 15 is part of the "Farewell Discourse" of Jesus. Beginning in John 13, and continuing through John 17, Jesus is sharing with His disciples His final thoughts as to who He is, who they should be, and what should characterize their lives together. Here are a few of the highlights:

- Jesus washes their feet, giving them an example of humble service (13:1-20)
- He announces that one of the disciples will betray Him (13:21-30)
- He gives them the command to "love one another as I have loved you . . ." (13:31-35)
- Jesus makes this famous statement: I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (14:6)
- He promises the Holy Spirit (14:15-21)
- Jesus comforts them with the hope that He has overcome the world (16:16-33)
- He prays specifically for them (17:1-26)

Hopefully you can see that John 13-17 is a wide-ranging and personal explanation of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. These are His final words, and they are a great summary of the essence of the Christian life.

In the middle of this section of Scripture, we find John 15, and it seems to me that this is the heart of Jesus' message. There is something here about the essence of the Christian life, and yet it is stated in a rather ordinary way.

Lord of the Ordinary

Verses 1-3 connect divine sovereignty with a common image. We see a picture of who Jesus and the Father are, and we see a picture of who we are through a metaphor of a vine.

Jesus says "I am the true vine," which is the last of seven "I am" statements in John.² There is an historical context here since Israel was often called God's vineyard, but one normally yielding wild grapes (Psalm 80:8-9, Isaiah 5:1-7). In other words, Israel was a broken and sick vine, but Jesus is the true vine.

The goal of a vine and its sign of health is fruitfulness, a theme that we will see often in verses 1-11. It is the Father, the vinedresser, who provides the actions that keep the vine healthy and full of life. Part of the Father's vinedresser role is to prune the vine, removing unfruitful branches so that the vine can bear even more fruit.

Jesus, the Father, and fruitfulness are clearly the important themes in the first three verses. And it is clear that fruitfulness is so important that it is guided by the sovereign power of God. In fact, so much so that Jesus provides assurance in verse 3 that the disciples are already clean. They need not wonder about the vinedresser's orientation toward them.

The point of the first three verses is simply to identify who Jesus and the Father are in relationship to their relentless goal of fruitfulness. Jesus is the vine, the Father is the vinedresser, and fruit is the goal – all under the authority of the Father and sustained by Jesus.

Essence of Ordinary

Verse 4 gets to the heart of John 15 and the essence of what it means to be a disciple:

⁴ Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. John 15:4 (ESV)

Jesus presses the vine metaphor by further explaining that His disciples are comparable to branches which have no life and no fruit without being connected to the vine. In the same way, followers of Jesus are lifeless, fruitless, and ineffective without a direct association with Jesus.

Now that connection, association, or relationship with Jesus is commanded by virtue of these words: "Abide in me, and I in you." The whole metaphor, and the hope of fruitfulness, is connected to this phrase.

The Greek word for abide is *meno*, and it means to remain in, to continue in a certain state or condition, or to stay in something. This is a favorite word of the apostle John. The word is used 118 times in the New Testament, and 67 times it is John who uses the word. Here are a few examples from 1 John:

² See 6:35, 8:12, 10:7, 10:11, 11:25, and 14:6

- “. . . whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.” (1 John 2:6, ESV)
- “No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him.” (1 John 3:6, ESV)
- “By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.” (1 John 4:13, ESV)
- “Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God.” (1 John 4:15, ESV)

For the Apostle John, the Christian life could be summed up in the phrase “abide in Christ.” It could be compared to the way that the Apostle Paul uses the phrase “in Christ” so profusely. The essence of the Christian life, the ordinary Christian life, is abiding in Christ.

So what specifically does abiding in Christ mean? It is helpful to think of it in three overlapping aspects:³

- 1) Connection** – To abide in Jesus means, first and foremost, that we have a life-changing, personal relationship with him. It means that we have turned away from ourselves and our sinfulness and that we have looked to Jesus as our Savior and Lord. Our hope for forgiveness is Him. Our hope for eternal life is Him. The righteousness that has been given to us is actually His. Those who have believed in Jesus are united to Him and He to them. And without that connection to Jesus there is no life, no fruit, and no hope.
- 2) Dependence** – Union with Christ is the starting point, but it does not end there. To abide in Jesus means that there is a life-long dependence upon Him. The branches are intimately dependent on the vine for a fruit-producing life. Everything the branch does is empowered by this dependence. Jesus makes this point twice – in verses 4 and 5. It is summarized with these words: “apart from me you can do nothing.” Nothing that is produced in a believer’s life happens apart from the spiritual empowerment of Jesus. No fruit, no success, no growth, no change, and no maturity happen without the life-giving power of Jesus. Christianity starts with Jesus, and it is empowered by Jesus.
- 3) Continuance** – This is where I think many believers miss the significance of why Jesus said “abide” instead of “trust me” or “believe in me” or “hope in me.” The uniqueness of “abide” is the sense that it is to be continually applied. To abide is to reside in Christ. To abide is to take refuge in Christ. To abide is to remain in Jesus. To abide in Jesus is to love what He loves. To abide in Jesus means that we continue in His words (v. 7) and in His love (v. 9).

To abide is to bring the life-giving power of Jesus into every aspect of your life such that everything is touched by the influence of His life, His power, His words, and His love. It means that everything about you has been radically changed by the life of Jesus: how you think, what you love, what your purpose is, what you do, what you don’t do, what makes you happy, and what makes you sad. The life of Jesus affects how you view a broken world, your identity, your gender, singleness, marriage, children, work, sexuality, money,

³ I am indebted to Brian Hedges for this helpful framework: <http://www.brianhedges.com/2014/03/what-does-it-mean-to-abide-in-christ.html>

and eternity. And the essence of Christianity is living out this “life of Jesus” in major, defining moments, but also in living every single day.

I would argue that many believers do not understand or appreciate the beauty of “abiding in Christ.” We live in an age of rugged individualism and expect answers to questions in nano-seconds. We are used to figuring things out on our own and expecting quick answers.

While we may understand what it means to be connected to Christ and to be dependent upon Him, there is a real battle to continue abiding. It can seem so . . . ordinary. To abide seems so slow, so organic, and so boring. And yet it is anything but that!

Effects of Ordinary

Abiding in Jesus, and He in us, actually opens the door to some unbelievable promises from Jesus. We don't have time to unpack all of them this morning, but here are a few:

- You will bear much fruit (v. 5)
- You will give evidence of true conversion (v. 6)
- You can receive answers to your prayers (v. 7)
- You will glorify God (v. 8)
- You will be affirmed in God's love (v. 9)
- You will love what God loves (v. 11)

That is a pretty amazing list. Frankly, there are some pretty radical things that Jesus says here. And yet all of them are rooted in a word that feels and seems very ordinary: abide.

The Ordinary Revolution

Maybe abiding in Christ seems ordinary, but it is actually quite revolutionary! Could it be that we are missing the beautiful revolution of the ordinary Christian life? There is something beautiful and powerful about abiding in Christ in the ordinariness of life:

- A person who abides consistently, faithfully, and intentionally spending time saturating his mind with the Word of God over 50 years
- A mom who abides by faithfully praying for her kids and lovingly correcting them in alignment with the Word over and over and over
- A dad who abides by opening the Word with his family and pointing them to Jesus
- A single adult who abides by asking Christ to give her strength to “swim against the stream” of the culture at work and with friends
- A person struggling with life-long illness who abides every day knowing that life is not what he'd hoped for
- A teenager who fights for purity by abiding in the precious promises that he is intentionally engraving into his mind
- A husband, like Roy Gelpke, who faithfully followed Jesus and served his wife, Gloria, over the last eight years, as Alzheimer's slowly took his wife away

Do you see how ordinary and revolutionary these examples are? I could go on and on. However, sometimes we miss the spiritual significance of abiding in Jesus in the ordinary things of life.

Tish Warren was a 22-year-old who served in an African village. After she returned from the mission field, married, and had two kids, she began to think about what it meant to serve Jesus.

*What I'm slowly realizing is that, for me, being in the house all day with a baby and a two-year-old is a lot more scary and a lot harder than being in a war-torn African village. What I need courage for is the ordinary, the daily every-dayness of life. Caring for a homeless kid is a lot more thrilling to me than listening well to the people in my home. Giving away clothes and seeking out edgy Christian communities requires less of me than being kind to my husband on an average Wednesday morning or calling my mother back when I don't feel like it . . . I've come to the point where I'm not sure anymore just what God counts as radical. And I suspect, for me, getting up and doing the dishes when I'm short on sleep and patience is far more costly and necessitates more of a revolution in my heart than some of the more outwardly risky ways I've lived in the past. And so this is what I need now: the courage to face an ordinary day . . ."*⁴

Again, let me remind you that Christianity is both the radical and the ordinary. So it isn't an either/or kind of issue. But there is a tendency to think that radical Christianity is real Christianity. It's happened before. The revolution of the Protestant Reformation was the way that the gospel of grace alone by faith alone through Christ alone transformed how people viewed what was true Christianity. Prior to the Reformation, it was fine to be an ordinary lay person, but if you wanted to be really spiritual, you needed to become a priest, monk, or nun. Marriage was acceptable and celebrated, but celibacy was really the more spiritual choice. Regular gatherings in churches and normal vocations were respectable, but the truly dedicated lived in monasteries.⁵

When the gospel surfaced again, it changed how people viewed ministry, marriage, and spirituality. The ordinary Christian life came out of the shadows as people began to see the sweeping implications of the grace of God in every arena of life. And when that happened, it was revolutionary.

That's what I hope happens to you over the next four weeks. I hope you see and savor the beauty of the ordinary, "abiding in Christ" Christianity. My prayer is that your life will be incrementally different, not because of some "new thing," but because of a renewed commitment to a way of living or a way of thinking that you sort of gave up on because you didn't see the immediate effects.

The Danger of Living Only for the Extraordinary

I've seen the other side too often, where people only live for the extraordinary. Once again, let me say that there are extraordinary moments, but it is too easy to live for those and neglect the good and helpful grace that God wants to give us in the ordinary.

Over the years, I've seen people really struggle, and I've struggled with too much focus on anything but the ordinary. Here are a few effects:

⁴ Horton, 15-20

⁵ Horton, 23

- **Emotionalism** – While Christianity should be emotional, there are times when we can wrongly measure the depth, the genuineness, or the hope of spiritual growth based upon how we feel. We can allow our feelings to become the ultimate test and guide of our spiritual life. And that is dangerous.
- **Disappointment** – Since so much of Christianity is not extraordinary, we can become discouraged and disheartened when our expectations are not met.
- **Impatience** – Looking for the extraordinary can diminish the importance of the slow, methodical, and incremental work of sanctification.
- **Critical Spirit** – Sometimes people who have witnessed or experienced an extraordinary spiritual season can look at other people or their church as less than spiritual.
- **Doubt** – It is easy to doubt the work of God in your life when the progress seems slow, less flashy, and less dramatic.

And there are more. The point is simply that there is something unbalanced about always living for the spiritual next big thing. There's something unhelpful about looking for quick fixes. And there's something unsettling about downplaying the beauty of the ordinary Christian life.

Now What?

My burden for you and me today is for us to not neglect the beauty of the ordinary Christian life. I want you to think and pray with me this week about what it means to “abide in Christ.” I want you to ask the Lord to embed a new sense of purpose in everything that you are doing. I want you to be reminded every day that there is something really revolutionary about ordinary people in ordinary neighborhoods with ordinary jobs who attend an ordinary church who are abiding in Christ's words and His love such that they look and act like Him.

And I want you to take one of the ordinary challenges and see how the Lord might awaken a new appreciation for the beauty and the power of spiritual activities that you may have previously viewed as less than revolutionary.

My hope and my prayer is that we will come to see that God showers His extraordinary gifts through ordinary means of grace, loves us through ordinary fellow image-bearers, and sends us out into the world to love and serve others in ordinary callings. That there is something revolutionary about ordinary Christianity.