

## Listen

### Abiding and Asking

John 15:1-11

Mark Vroegop

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*"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup> By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. <sup>9</sup> As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> 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).*

Last year around this time, we had a particular Sunday where I invited you to pray like you mean it. We had a series of doors that we posted around the Sanctuary, and then you put various prayer requests on those doors. From that day until Easter, we prayed. We rejoiced that a number—though not all—of those prayer requests were specifically answered in the way we had hoped.

Now, there were also a bunch of prayer requests that were answered, but they were not answered in the way that we hoped or they were answered with God telling us to wait. God always answers. Sometimes he answers in a way that we see the fulfillment of the longings of our hearts in terms of what we're asking for.

So, last year, we had a door that was filled with answers to prayer, and today we're going to do the same thing. We will take this text from John 15 and think about what it means when Jesus says, "Abide in me, and ask whatever you will, and it will be done for you."

We're going to think about what abiding and asking mean—how those two things go together. We're in John chapter 15. We've been in this gospel since the fall of 2018—pausing in November for advent and then a little series on our church's identity. We left off in the middle of this section that, in John's gospel, is called the upper room discourse. It's a series of instructions Jesus gives his disciples about what it really means to be a disciple.

This is where we find Jesus washing the feet of the disciples. He identifies that one of them will betray him. It's where Jesus gives them a new command. He tells them, "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." It's also here where Jesus has sort of this drop-the-mic moment where he says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life and no one comes to the Father except through me."

In John 15, we see a bit of this, where Jesus connects an Old Testament metaphor of the vine and he expands on it, helping the disciples know what it means to really be a disciple. Today, I want to unpack this abiding and asking dynamic by helping you see what Jesus is talking about here as it relates to being united to him—as it relates to abiding with him—and what it means to have joy in him; what it means for spiritual union and abiding and joy to be true about those who claim to be the followers of Jesus.

### **United to Christ**

First, what does it mean to be united to Christ? Well, that's what we see in the first three verses. Jesus says this, "I am the true vine." The most important word here is "true." The word "vine" is important, but the word "true" is even more important. I'll explain to you why in a moment.

Jesus goes on to say, "My Father is the vinedresser." Here, Jesus is using a spiritual metaphor in order to communicate our spiritual union with him. If you are a follower of him, you are now united to Christ. His death becomes your death. His resurrection becomes your resurrection. His life becomes your life.

You are united in Christ such that everything about your life is connected to one single reality: Jesus is alive and I am forgiven. That union is really important. Jesus says, "I am the true vine." This is the last of seven "I am" statements in John's gospel. It's probably the most important. John 6, "I am the bread of life." John 8, "I am the light of the world." John 10, "I am the door of the sheep" and "I am the good shepherd." John 11, "I am the resurrection and the life." John 14, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." Now we come John 15, "I am the true vine." Why "true vine"? Because the idea of a vine is connected to Israel's history. It's how God described Israel, both in her best moments and in her worst moments.

Go to Psalm 80. We're going to look at two texts besides John 15 today because I want you to see this in your Bible and I also want you to be instructed about how to study the Bible. When you're reading the Bible, don't just get stuck in one text. If you find a verse or a word, use a study Bible or just type it into a search engine: "Where else is the word vine used in the Bible?" You'll see all these references and what's important is for you to see how the Bible stitches together ideas, from Genesis to Revelation. This idea of being a true vine didn't just come out of nowhere.

Now look at Psalm 80:7-14:

*"Restore us, O God of hosts. Let your face shine that we may be saved. You brought a vine out of Egypt; You drove out the nations and planted it You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land. The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its*

*branches. It sent out its branches to the sea and its shoots to the River. Why then have you broken down its walls, so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit? The board from the forest ravages it, and all that move in the field feed on it. Turn again, O God of hosts. Look down from heaven and see; have regard for this vine."*

Jesus becomes the intersection of both the history of Israel, this request for restoration and for God to fulfill all that he intended in the people of Israel to now be embodied in the person of Jesus. When he says, "I am the true vine," he's saying, "Everything leading up to this moment has all been about me," which is an outrageous thing to say unless you really are the Son of God. He's saying, "I am the true vine." In this moment, the people of Israel are lamenting the fact that they are under God's judgment, and they're longing for the day of future restoration. We find that those ideas of judgment and restoration converge in none other than the person of Jesus who embraces the judgment of God, not because he deserved it, but because we deserved it. He is the means by which ultimate restoration comes.

When Jesus says, "I am the true vine," all the disciples would have gone, "Ooh." They probably didn't use the word "legit," but if they did, they would go, "That's legit right there. That has historical stuff in it. That's meaningful." Then, Jesus says, "My Father is the vinedresser." Here's how it sounds. "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser." Jesus, throughout this upper room discourse with his disciples, is having a private conversation about what it means to be his follower; and he talks about the Father all the time. John says this in chapter 13:3, "Jesus, knowing the Father, had given all things into his hands."

In John 14, Jesus says, "In my Father's house are many rooms." John 14:6, Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." Then he says this, "No one comes to the Father but through me," and then he has the audacity but the accuracy to say, "I am in the Father, and the Father is in me" (John 14:11). The Father's role is becoming increasingly apparent, and Jesus is bringing it to the forefront of his connection to the Father and the disciples' connection to the Father through Jesus. Now, he calls the Father the vinedresser. We see this further in Isaiah 5. Isaiah is loaded with important Biblical imagery. In verses one to seven, God is described as the vinedresser, but notice the problem: "Let me sing for my beloved, my song concerning his vineyard" (Isaiah 5:1). There's that metaphor again. Isaiah goes on to say,

*"My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones and planted it with choice vines. He built a watchtower in the midst of it. He hewed out a wine vat in it, and he looked for it to yield grapes."*

The image, before we go any further, is this beloved found some land and planted some vines and built a tower because he wanted grapes. That's why you build a vineyard. You want grapes. You don't build a vineyard just to have a vineyard. You build a vineyard because you want grapes. Yet, verse two says this, "But it yielded wild grapes." This becomes a metaphor for the problem of humanity, that God has built a garden, and in that garden was one tree. Adam and Eve were given one instruction. You can eat of all of

these other trees, but don't eat of this one. In classic human fallenness, we are always interested in the thing we don't have. FOMO began in the garden.

All of these trees belong to you. What about that one? The story of our brokenness, the story of your life, the story of my life, is this relentless pursuit of going after that one little thing we don't have. Instead of being content with all that God has given, we want to look in the little boxes or the little places or the little websites or the little products that we don't have. Here are these wild grapes. Verse three, "And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem, men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? And now I will tell you what to do with my vineyard."

Because of the wild grapes, here's what God does:

*"I will remove its hedge, and it will be devoured. I will break down its walls, and it will be trampled down. It will be made a waste. It shall not be pruned or hoed, and briars and thorns will grow up. And I will command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it, for the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting. For he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed, for righteousness, behold an outcry" (Isa. 5:5b-7).*

The nation of Israel demonstrated its lack of obedience to God with a lack of concern for other people in society. God sees them and says, "That's wild grapes." The Father is the vinedresser, and he's deeply concerned about good grapes versus bad grapes, or to bring us back in John 15: Jesus is concerned about good fruit versus no fruit.

Jesus uses this analogy, connecting it to the Old Testament metaphor, to talk about the vinedresser who's deeply concerned about good grapes or good fruit. Here's what the vinedresser does, "Every branch in me that does not bear fruit, he takes away." Why? Because the purpose of the branch is to produce fruit. If you're not producing fruit and you're a part of a vine, you shouldn't be there. That's the point—those two things go together. He then says, "And every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes that it may bear more fruit." Notice this. Branches that don't produce fruit are taken away, and branches that do produce fruit are pruned so that they can then create and produce more fruit. The vinedresser's activity is constantly involved in the display of his wisdom and trying to find ways to help fruitful parts of the vine become even more fruitful and also the removal of things that aren't creating any fruit.

Now, if you're a follower of Jesus, let me talk with you about pruning. You need to know and understand that God is more passionate about your fruitfulness. By that I mean, he is more concerned that the character, actions, and attitude that come out of you glorify God, such that you look like Jesus in ways that you wouldn't apart from that. God is more concerned about that than you are. Now, you may be concerned about that at some level, which is awesome, but God is so concerned about that in your life that he sovereignly directs things in order to force the creation of that fruit. Usually, that pruning process is not initially enjoyable. It's similar to anything you become skilled in. In order to become good at it, you have to make hard sacrifices.

If you go online and you look for a new diet, and you're like, "The easy diet." You wouldn't find anything of substance, right? If it were that easy, we'd all be better looking. Or maybe you look online for a "no pain workout." In that case, maybe you just show up at the gym, scan in, and you're like, "I'm out. I went to the gym today." No, in order to receive the benefit, there must be pain. These folks who serve us so well in leading in worship are up here because they've spent thousands of hours behind the scenes practicing and working on their craft.

Here's my question: why in the world do we expect it to be anything different when it comes to our spiritual growth? Some of you right now are in pruning moments, and you spent the last week complaining that it's hard. And I just lovingly want to tell you, brother or sister: you need to get over that. I'm not saying that you shouldn't lament that it's hard. I understand that it's hard, but the reality is that hardship is actually going to produce something in you that without it, you wouldn't be as fruitful. God is more concerned about the production of fruit in you than he is about your concern for a pain-free life.

In fact, when I look back at my life, there are really painful things that twenty-six years later, reveal a little bit of God's providential wisdom. For instance, I went to college thinking I was going to be a Pre-Med major. I wanted to go into medical missions. Specifically, I wanted to go to Togo, West Africa. Specifically, I wanted to serve in the very hospital that we're supporting financially with our Christmas Offering. I went to school, and then I got into chemistry. I was like, "Yeah, I don't want to do this anymore." I did one semester and then decided that I wanted to preach and teach the Bible. During my senior year, there was an opportunity to go to Ghana, West Africa—which is an English-speaking country next door country to Togo—for two years.

Right out of college, we began raising support for a two-year missions experience. Long story short, we got about 85 percent of the way there, and the Lord closed the door. I remember coming back from a field trip to Ghana, in New York City and calling my wife to tell her we couldn't go. I remember going home thinking, "What happened? Did I miss God's will? God, did I not hear you calling me to do this all of this time? This is embarrassing. I have to tell all these people that I'm not going. I raised all this money." Well, because of that closed door, I went to Grand Rapids, Michigan and enrolled in a particular seminary. At that seminary was a particular professor. His name was Dr. Jim Greer, who happened to be the mentor of Kimber Kauffman, who planted this church.

To be very honest with you, I wouldn't be here at College Park Church today were it not for the closing of the door in Ghana that led me to meet him, and our church probably wouldn't be financially supporting a project in Togo, West Africa were it not for those moments when I thought, "God, what in the world are you doing?" God knew exactly what he was doing. I just couldn't see it.

Can I just remind you, if you're praying and God's answer is delayed and you're feeling like it is so hard, give it some time. Trust the Lord. Trust that the vinedresser knows what he's doing. See yourself not as an equal with God, like you need to vote on all that God's doing. See yourself as his child, one who can

trust the kind, benevolent care of a God who wants to help us and sometimes has to painfully redirect our steps.

If you're older, however, you want to define that, you need to share stories like I just shared because it helps those who are younger realize that God can be trusted.

This text also has a warning to it. It says, "Every branch in me that does not bear fruit, he takes away." What's that about? This is what this means. It means that there were branches in Jesus that weren't in Jesus. They looked like they were in Jesus, so don't get hung up on the word "in" so much. The real focus is the fact that these are branches that do not bear fruit. These are branches that look like they're healthy in a particular season, but over time, it will become evident that there's no life in them.

For instance, I have a tree in my yard, and there are particular branches that going into the fall had died. Right now, you'd have no idea which branches are alive and which branches are dead. But when spring comes and leaves begin to bud, the dead branches are going to be very clear. So, I'm going to cut those dead branches and throw them away.

Jesus describes the soul condition of particular people in this way. Listen, in a congregation this size and with the folks listening online, there are a number of you who fit that particular description. You know just enough *about* the Bible and you know just enough *about* spiritual things to get people off your back. You know how to do the dance, say the right words, and nod your head. Yet, if someone were to peel away the surface, there's no spiritual life within you.

There's no sustenance of Jesus in you because you know *about* Jesus, but you don't know Jesus or, put it this way: you came to faith in Christ because you were scared to death about going to hell. Now, you should have been scared at one level about that, but you came to Jesus because you wanted assurance for where you would go when you die. Once you did that, you figured, "I'm good now. I don't need to grow, I don't need to deal with my own sin issues, I don't need to repent."

Let me caution you that the Bible describes that condition as being one of a branch that doesn't bear fruit. The text goes on to use some pretty scary language. It says that this branch withers and the withered branches are gathered, they're thrown into the fire, and they're burned (v. 6). It's a reference to judgment.

There are some of you here today who need to start by thinking about abiding—what it means to even have a real relationship with Jesus. I want to encourage you to be honest. Be honest about where you really are spiritually. Maybe today will be the day when you say, "You know what? I genuinely need to come to faith in Christ. No more faking it. I'm one of those fruitless branches." I am thankful you're here today because God, in his kindness, allowed you to hear this warning before it's too late.

Why not come to Jesus today? Why not experience real Christianity? Why not experience what it looks like for Jesus to live in you and take over every arena of your life? You see, that's what it means to abide.

## Abide

That's our second point. The difference between a fruitless branch and a fruit-bearing branch—or the difference between a fake Christian and a real Christian—relates to the idea of abiding. Jesus says this, "Abide in me and I in you," and notice the connection: "as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself." The key to abiding is the absence of the focus of self-sufficiency. Christians, by definition, are not self-sufficient. One of the reasons that prayer is so important is because prayer is a declaration of dependence upon God. Prayer is a way of saying, "God, I need you."

Abide, abide, abide. What's the word abide mean? It simply means to remain in or to dwell in. It is the idea of a dependent relationship. In fact, verse five I think is the most helpful, "I am the vine. You are the branches." I love the clarity. Jesus just lays it on the disciples, "I'm the vine. You're the branches." If I was Jesus, I'd be like, "Say it with me: I am the vine. You're the branches."

Here's the thing. I find that the problem in my walk with Jesus is that I get that verse wrong. Then he says this, "Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit. For apart from me, you can do nothing." I thought, "How could I help this definition of abide to be a little sticky? How could it kind of go with you? How could it help you tomorrow morning?"

Your feet hit the floor, the covers are out. You're ready to hit your day. How do you abide? Think of abiding this way: To abide simply means a mindset that says, "nothing without Jesus." That's how you had your sins forgiven. Nothing without Jesus. My challenge and my exhortation to you is that you understand what it means to abide, that when your feet hit the floor tomorrow morning, that this is your mantra: "I can do nothing without Jesus." When you go to your place of work or to school or whatever it is that you're doing and you run into conflict or difficulties, just remind yourself, "Nothing without Jesus." When your friend says something snarky and you're tempted to retaliate, "Nothing without Jesus."

If you're a follower of Jesus, I think you would agree that most of our trouble is that we live as if we can do everything with me, and we need to remind ourselves, "I can do nothing without Jesus." That's what it means to abide, and John absolutely loves this word. Of the 118 times the word is used in the Bible, it's used sixty-seven times in John. John also wrote the books of 1, 2, and 3 John, and he also uses the word many times in those books. Just listen to how often he uses the word "abide" and how he uses it:

- "Whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same manner he walked" (1 John 2:6).
- "Whoever loves his brother abides in the light" (1 John 2:10).
- "The world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever" (1 John 2:17).
- "No one who abides in him keeps on sinning. No one who keeps on sinning has either known him or seen him" (1 John 3:6).
- "By this we know. We abide in him and he in us because he has given us his Spirit" (1 John 4:13).

- "Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him and he in God" (1 John 4:15).

John's all about abiding. Why? Because for him, to be a disciple is to abide. It's the single most important reality for John that describes what disciples are to do. If someone came up to John and said, "How can I follow Jesus?" he'd say, "Abide in Jesus." Now, some of the disciples who may have asked him that may have been frustrated and wondered, "What do you mean abide?" However, that would be like a young man asking, "How can I be a good a good husband?" My answer would be, "Love your wife. Every season of life, just love her as Christ has loved the church."

If you said, "How can I be helpful in my neighborhood?" I would say, " be a good neighbor." Well, what does that look like? It looks like a hundred thousand things. If you limit it to just two or three, it's not helpful. What John says here is that to abide is to lay hold of Christ. It means that our life is in Jesus.

Now, this involves fruitfulness: "If anyone does not abide in me, he is thrown away like a branch and withers. The branches are gathered and thrown into the fire," (v. 6) and then, "By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples" (v. 8). Abiding results in some level of fruitfulness. It also results in obedience. Look at verse 10, "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love." There's a connection between obeying and abiding. You can't disobey and abide. Obedience and abiding go together.

He then says, "Just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love." The focus of the particular application that I want to identify is where Jesus says, "If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you. (v. 7)" I want to suggest to you that this is one of the signature ways we express the mindset of without Jesus, I can do nothing. Nothing without Jesus. People who understand this pray. Why would they pray? Because they know they need Jesus's help. Why do they pray often? Because they know that they need Jesus's help all the time.

This is where some of you who are followers of Jesus are making a huge mistake. Your prayerlessness is a barometer of how you view abiding. You live a self-sufficient life, even as a Christian. You're converted. You know Jesus as your Lord and Savior. Your heart gets stoked up for him. You live dependent upon him, but it leaks over time. Then, God brings hardship into your life and your first response is, "What in the world? I didn't sign up for this." Some of you are angry, wondering why God is allowing this pain to occur. Meanwhile, God's reason for doing this is because he knows that without pruning and without hardship, not only will you be unfruitful, you won't pray. For some of us, our prayer lives are so dependent upon pain, and God has to bring pain or we won't pray. And God is more interested in your praying than he is in an absence of pain in your life. Does that mean if we pray more, there'll be less pain? I'm not saying that. What I am saying is that we ought to thank God for pain because without it, for some of us, our prayer lives will be in the tank.

What does Jesus mean here when he says, "If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish?" A lot of people, understandably, come at this passage with the wrong understanding. It



doesn't mean that Jesus is some kind of genie who gives us whatever we want. It means that because of our abiding relationship with Jesus, we're so connected to him that what he loves, we love; what he wants, we want. That deep connection affects what we see and what we want. Every husband in this room knows this. Thirty years ago, I could have cared less about what was at Bath & Body Works or what was on HGTV. But since I'm a married man, I not only am interested in those things, I love those things.

My wife wanted a new end table and she asked what I thought of it. My response? "This is an awesome end table!" Now, thirty years ago, I would have been said, "It's a table..." Why? My affections and what I love have shifted because of a union with a woman named Sarah. Her loves are my loves, and many of my loves are now her loves as well. The same thing should happen with Jesus. You read the Bible and you see what the Bible says and you're like, "Oh, this is what Jesus loves. This is what I love. This is the heart of God. This is my heart," such that what we ask begins to fit with the very heart of Jesus.

### **Asking**

Jesus says, "If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish." In other words: if we know him and his words, what you ask is going to fit with the very will and heart of God. It's going to be connected to the work of God, so that God is at work in you and the effect, look at the last verse: Here's this very quick little third point. It is that there is now this joy in Christ because these things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full. Here's the point. There is never a more joyful moment in the believer's life than when their heart is so connected to Jesus that they love what he loves, they want what he wants, and they pray to him, and God does it and does it such that you can see it.

In that moment, you know Jesus is alive. That happens when God answers prayer. That's why, dear friends, we're going to spend some time just thinking about what it means to abide and ask. For some of you, this is a call for spiritual renewal because your asking is so far away from your abiding, and those two need to be brought together. You need to say, "Jesus, I need your help because it's been a long time since my affections have been in the right place."

What is it that reflects the heart of Jesus and would reflect your heart that you'd love to see God do? We're going to commit to pray between now and Easter for these prayer requests and see what God will do. Then, when God answers the prayers, we're going to move them from the trellises to the cross that'll be somewhere in the facility over the next number of weeks. Let's take this season of prayer to believe that if we abide and ask, God could do great things for us, for our church, for his kingdom. Let's just use this as a moment to say, "God, we need you."

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