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The Christian Life, Part 1

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TEXT: John 15:1-8 (ESV)

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. 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. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. 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. 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. 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. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.”

Dear friends,

If someone were to ask you to sum up the Christian life in just one word, what word would you use? I invite you to go ahead and think of one. You know, John 15, I've discovered, is a great place to look for the answer to that question. In John 15, Jesus describes the Christian life. He's preparing his 11 disciples for the future, teaching them, saying what needs to be said before His death and resurrection. And He says that the Christian life is all about..., are you ready? Relationships! Relationships: our relationship with Christ, our relationship with one another, and our relationship with the world. That's what John 15 covers.

And the focus of today's passage is on our relationship with Jesus Christ. He's giving the disciples His vision for their lives after His death and His resurrection. Now, first, He emphasizes His uniqueness and His importance for every one of us by pointing out that He is the true vine. He's the one that is intimately being watched over and cared for by His Heavenly Father, who is the vinedresser. What Jesus seems to be implying here is that He's superior over anything else you might attach your life to. He's basically saying, "I'm the only way to go. There are plenty of other vines you could try attaching yourself to, but they can't give you what I can give you." He then goes on to explain, "I'm the vine, you're the branches." Here Jesus is using a familiar analogy from the world of agriculture, which the disciples would be very familiar with. They understood that vine branches don't do so well when separated from the vine stalk. They produce no grapes. They eventually will shrivel up and die. They need that life flow that comes from the vine. They're dead without it.

Well, Jesus then points out, like those vine branches, "You need to abide in me." That can be translated, that word "abide," as remain or stay attached to me, stay bonded to me. I like the way Christian author and radio pastor Steve Brown describes abiding. He says, "Abiding in Christ is simply staying near a friend who loves you." This concept is really important for us. And we see it's important as we watch Jesus repeat it six times in this passage. It's His way of saying, "I just don't want you to miss this truth: abide in me." Our relationship with Him, you see, is the key to our growth and maturity and fruitfulness for God and our ultimate destiny as individual followers. The Christian finds strength and purpose through a personal, abiding relationship with Jesus. And the weak person becomes strong when grafted on to the vine, and the strong person becomes vulnerable and weak when it gets detached from him. We need to understand this and apply this truth to our lives because we all-too-often get so caught up in the business of life and we neglect this with what we're doing and desiring and debating, and we forget we need a higher connection to bring about all that God wants for your life and mine.

This truth also applies at the corporate level: the church. The church has a valid ministry and a healthy ministry only as it is empowered by its dependence on Jesus Christ and that gospel, and on prayer. We are tempted to look elsewhere when we're trying to build the church: to wealthy donors and political connections and leadership manuals for strength and growth, but Jesus tells us fruitfulness and health starts in a different place: my abiding in Him. And when we lose that focus, we get in trouble: we

shrivel up, we get weak, and all too often the church is tempted to believe otherwise, you see. Prayer life gets swallowed up in busyness of ministry. It's the last thing we think of when we're looking at taking on a new ministry. Or we get lost in the rush of programs and we forget to turn to God's word to instruct us; what a mistake that is! Because that's where the power is: abiding in Christ. In Christian Sentry, there was an article years ago that says most professing Christians, from the liberals to the fundamentalists, remain practical atheists. They think the church is sustained by the services it provides or the amount of fellowship and good feeling in the congregation. This form of sentimentality has become the most detrimental corruption of the church and its ministry. The church must abide in Christ; keep that gospel at the center of everything, prioritizing the word and sacrament and prayer ministry in order to do great things for the kingdom of God.

Jesus sums all this up with a very plain and simple truth that we don't like hearing: "Apart from me you can do nothing." That ruffles our feathers a little bit, doesn't it? But Jesus is saying, "You need me." Like the old hymn says, "I need thee every hour." We need Him, first of all, for salvation, don't we – a right, restored relationship with God? because all of us have sinned and are separated from God and the wages of sin is death. And we can't save ourselves. We can do nothing about this. We're helpless to fix it – this relationship with God. Only Jesus, God in Christ, can do that for us through His sacrifice upon the cross. And we simply put our trust in what He did for us and received the gift of eternal life with God. We need Jesus. Furthermore, we cannot grow or live a fruitful life that glorifies God and attracts others to Him without remaining attached to the vine, Jesus Christ. Rather than becoming simply mediocre when not connected to Jesus the vine, we become absolutely powerless. Rather than the value of our work being just diminished, it becomes completely worthless. We can no more function spiritually when unconnected to Jesus than we can function physically when we're cut off from the air that we need to breathe. Jesus tells us how all this ends. He says, "You know, you can abide in me and become fruitful. Or, you can choose not to abide in me and become dead and shriveled and good for nothing except to be thrown out and burned in the end." That's judgement fire, judgment, language. So abide in Christ, that's the bottom line here. That's where the real life is, Jesus says.

So permit me to ask you this personal question: how would you describe your relationship with Jesus Christ right now? Are you trusting in Him for your salvation, and are you staying near to this friend who loves you and is a source of real loving?

Boy, I hope you are, it's a good life with Him. An eternal life. Now, if the Christian life is remaining in Jesus, we need to ask, then, what does that look like, this abiding remaining in Him? Well, the first thing that comes to mind is we give service to God in regular worship – not just now and then, but regularly. Worship is the breath of life for the Christian. It reminds us of how big and great our God is. It wakes us up to who we are: sinners in need of forgiveness, saved by grace through faith in Christ. It points us to the cross and resurrection and God's loving solution for sin. It allows us to commune with Jesus at the Lord's Supper as we hear the words, "The body of Christ given for you, the blood of Christ." He's there in the faces of brothers and sisters, in the family of God who need him like I do. Boy, have I missed that during this pandemic, haven't you? And when I'm worshipping, I walk away with a sense of hope and confidence for facing life in the future. Because worship gives us the big picture: God is in control and history is headed towards a great and glorious day when Christ will reappear in glory and majesty with His new Heaven and new Earth and all will be well. A friend of mine said, "When I stopped regularly worshiping, that was the beginning of the end of my walk with Christ." I've discovered that for myself as well.

We abide in Him also as we give service to others, particularly the needy. Remember, Jesus did say to the disciples, "I was hungry and you fed me. I was thirsty, you gave me drink. A stranger, you welcomed me; imprisoned and you visited me. Truly, I tell you as you did it to the least of these, my brethren, you did it to me." Finally, there is service that we need to give ourselves: in prayer. In the word, prayer gives us power, it refreshes our spirits, it guides us. As we come and commune with our Heavenly Father, it gives us the nourishment and strength that our souls need. And I can't overemphasize how important it is that we're people that are in the book – the word – because the word is God's means of cleansing and pruning the disciple who believes it and obeys it, for it's in the word that God, the vine dresser's sharp pruning knife, cuts away at my pride and my ego and selfishness and distrust and misplaced priorities and unhealthy worldly values. I need Him. I need His word. Christian writer and preacher John Stott says about this:

That the greatest single secret of spiritual development lies in personal, humble, believing, obedient response to the word of God. It is, as God speaks to us through His word, that His warning can bring us conviction of sin, His promises to assurance of forgiveness, and His commands to amendment of life. We live and we grow by His word.

The more we know scripture, the more will know the Lord of Scripture.

We must, by the way, keep in mind that this isn't some sort of overnight sensation, this bearing fruit. Abiding and cultivating that relationship with Christ, that's going to change you and your character and make you more beautiful and a blessing to others and fruitful in God's sight... that's a lifelong process, a continuing action, that needs to be taken until we breathe our last word and Jesus takes us to Himself.

Now, there are promises that are attached to this abiding in Christ life, great promises. First of all, your prayer life is impacted in a very powerful way, because Jesus says if you abide in me and my words in you, you'll ask whatever you desire and it'll be done for you. What? That sounds like a blank check, some people might say. But it's not. There's an important condition attached here. Such connectedness to Jesus shapes our asking: if we abide in Christ and His words abide in us, our asking will be in accordance with His will. Whatever you desire will not be frivolous or an evil thing. As we abide in Christ, our hearts will be focused on Christ's concerns, and our prayers will sound more like His prayers, like the Lord's Prayer that He taught us. You will have exciting times with God, communing with Him, just like Jesus did, as you pray like Christ.

And you'll bear much fruit, that's the second promise, that's what Jesus says. Galatians 5:22, the fruit of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. In other words, you become more like Jesus, loving and obedient and joyful. And therefore, your relationships with others will be impacted in a very positive way as you abide in Christ. That abiding has the power to shape us through worship and word and prayer. Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote a book, The Great Stone Face Story, of a boy named Ernest who gazed upon a face-like rock formation. Legend foretold that the greatest and noblest person would look like that formation. So, obsessed with his meditation and about this legend and studying the great stone face each day, Ernest, eventually in the book, reflected the image of the mountain. So it is with us. The more we gaze upon God's majesty in Scripture and meditate upon Christ and His love for us and obey the truth that He gives us, the more we become transformed to the likeness of Christ.

Finally, you bring glory to God. Jesus says, "By this, my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit." God being glorified in the Bible means God's majesty and greatness is revealed, is shown to human beings. That's our ultimate goal as Christians: God being

glorified through us so that others might move to give Him glory and worship Him and obey Him. You know, fruit was an important source of food in Jesus' time. A good fruit-bearing vineyard or orchard was an important cash crop and a blessing to the owner. Good fruit-bearing trees and vines enhanced the owner's standing in the community. "Look what a great vine dresser he is," they would say. Well, the fruits of Christ-like living in the same way, bring glory to our Heavenly Father, the vine dresser. As we live out our days as loving, hopeful people, then others are drawn to these qualities. And that gives opportunity for us to witness for the Lord who makes that kind of life possible. Oftentimes when we're saying our goodbyes to a friend who is traveling back home, we'll say something like, "Let's stay connected." Well, that's the gist of today's message. The best friend you will ever have, who loves you and gave his life for you to rescue you and give you a new life, is saying to you and to me today, "Let's stay connected."

Amen.