

Abide in Christ

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[0 : 0 0] Well, we come now to our Bible reading for this evening, and you will find that in the Gospel of John. John chapter 15, we're going to look at verses 1 to 17, page 902 of our church Bibles.

And here we have one of the final I am statements of the Lord Jesus in John's Gospel. I am the true vine. I'm sure that this will be a familiar passage to many of us, but it's an important passage that we must keep coming back to again and again throughout our Christian lives.

John 15, and we begin reading at verse 1. Hear the word of the Lord. Jesus said, 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.

[1 : 1 7] 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.

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Abide in my love. 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.

These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

[2 : 2 6] Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.

No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing. But I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.

You did not choose me, but I chose you, and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you.

These things I command you, so that you will love one another. Well, amen, and may God bless to us this, his word. Please do have your Bibles open to John 15, which is really all about our need to abide in Christ.

Amen. Are you worried that you're wasting your life?

[3 : 43] Do you feel that the life you're living is nothing more than a fruitless and joyless slog? Are you worried that at the end of your life, you're going to look back upon all your days on earth, and think to yourself, what a waste?

Or perhaps your worry is more geared towards us as a church family. Do you worry that as a corporate church family, we're wasting our time, and that we're being fruitless people?

Well, if you worry about such things, then it's good that you're here, because John 15 is exactly what you need to hear. For in John 15, Jesus teaches us how we can live a joyful and fruitful life.

We've jumped straight into John's Gospel. This is a one-off sermon this evening. So what's going on? Well, we're in the middle of a scene that began in chapter 13 and finishes at chapter 17.

Jesus is teaching his 11 disciples, that is, his New Testament church, in embryo. And the scene is often called the farewell discourse, because it takes place, as you'll know, on the night before the cross.

[4 : 51] Over the next 24 hours, the Lord Jesus is going to sovereignly control events that will climax and culminate in his own death by crucifixion.

He's about to complete the mission that his Father in Heaven sent him here to accomplish, which is to be a willing sacrifice, a perfect sacrifice, to die to save people like you and me from our sin.

That will happen on Friday, and this scene takes place on the Thursday night before. And, you know, I reckon if you and I were there in that room, I reckon the tension in that room would have been so thick you could have cut it with a knife.

Judas, by this point, is already left to betray Jesus, snuck off into the night. Jesus has told his disciples, I'm leaving you, I'm going. And understandably, they are distraught, deeply troubled.

But Jesus is in complete control. He knows exactly what is ahead. And so what he does is he teaches these 11 men in order to calm their hearts and prepare them for all that's ahead.

[6 : 00] And actually, if you were to read through this section of the Bible, which I recommend you should do as soon as possible, really. Go do it when you go home. You'll see that Jesus spends most of his time preparing these 11 men for what will happen after he ascends back to be with his Father in heaven.

What are they going to do? Well, Jesus, after he ascends, he will send these men out into the world to be his witnesses. They will pass on the evidence about Jesus so that people might believe that he is the Christ and that by believing, they may receive life in his name.

So you could say that the final discourse is actually like a military commander sitting down with his troops on the eve of a battle, preparing them for their mission, telling them about all that's ahead.

And Jesus' troops won't be left to carry out this mission on their own. In chapter 14, the verses that precede our verses tonight, Jesus tells them that he's going to return to the Father and he's going to send them his Holy Spirit to equip them and enable them.

And he says that the Holy Spirit is not going to come to live with you. The Holy Spirit, he's not going to come and live amongst you. The Holy Spirit is going to come and live in you.

[7 : 20] Take up permanent residence in you. And when the Spirit lives in them, he will help these men remember all that Jesus said whilst he was with them in the flesh so that they will then be able to go out and tell it to others and also write it down and record it, which is, of course, why we have our New Testament.

I mean, it's really mind-blowing stuff when you read through chapter 14. Jesus basically says to his disciples, when I leave you, it's going to be so much better for you than it is now, than having me in the flesh in front of you.

Because when my Spirit lives in you, you will know me better than you've ever known me before. And you'll be closer to me than you've ever been before. Because Jesus and the Spirit are one.

When the Spirit comes to live in them, so too will the Lord Jesus. And if the Spirit and the Lord Jesus are in the disciples, so too will the Father. Because the Son and the Spirit are in the Father.

Jesus is saying, I'm not leaving you as orphans. I am leaving. And the triune God is going to come and live in you. Can I just say, if you're a Christian here this evening, that's also true of your life.

[8 : 31] The triune God is not far off. The triune God is not a distant deity who comes alongside you from time to time and then departs. The triune God has taken up permanent residence in your heart, if you're a Christian.

So basically, to summarize that, the disciples have just heard in chapter 14 that the Holy Spirit will bring them into union with Christ.

Union with Christ. And in chapter 15, Jesus continues to teach them about this incredible union by an illustration. Please look at verse 1 of chapter 15.

Jesus said, I am the vine. My Father is the vine dresser. And if you were to look down at verse 5, Jesus says, you disciples are my branches.

You are the branches. So Jesus and his disciples will be united together in the same way that a branch is united to a vine. And you know that. You don't have to be a horticultural genius to know what he's talking about here.

[9 : 32] The vine is in the branch and the branch is in the vine. And that is what it is like for Jesus and his disciples. And Jesus says, you must abide or remain in me.

For just as the life-giving sap of a vine flows into a branch, giving it life, strength, and making it grow fruit, so too will my life flow into you, giving you life, strength, and the ability to grow fruit.

This union between Jesus and his disciples is a gift of complete grace. Utterly undeserved. And Jesus says to him, that's true, it's of grace, but you must do everything that you can to remain in me.

You have that responsibility. For apart from me, you can do nothing. You're spiritually dead. Now we'll come back to that in a minute. We'll come back later on to think about what does it mean to abide in Christ and what does it mean to bear fruit.

But there's something else very significant about Jesus' choice of illustration here. In calling himself the true vine, Jesus is really saying he is the true Israel.

[10 : 43] The true people of God. You see, throughout the Old Testament, the people of God are often described as being the Lord's vine that he planted, took out of Egypt and planted in the promised land, his vineyard.

And the purpose of this vine was that it was to grow fruit. Fruit that would please God. That is, the people were to obey the Lord, keep his covenant, keep his commandments, not out of a legalism or any sense of meritorious trying to earn their way to God, but out of love and gratitude for the grace that he'd shown them.

They were to love him and love their neighbors. And as Israel bore that fruit, what would they do? They would show off to the nations that surrounded them just how good and gracious the Lord was.

So that if I was a Philistine and you were God's people and you were bearing fruit, I would look over at you and say, look at these people. There's something very different about them. Look how beautifully they behave.

Look how much they love each other. There must be something remarkable about their God. That was Israel's mission. To use another metaphor, Israel was to be a light to the Gentiles, to reflect the goodness of God so that the nations would turn to the Lord, the God of the Bible, and surrender to him and trust in his covenant gospel promises.

[12 : 04] But, tragically, Israel failed. That vine didn't produce the fruit that it should have produced because, well, the majority of the Old Testament people of God were unbelievers and they rejected God's gospel promises.

Let me give you some texts that point this out. Listen to Jeremiah 2.21. Jeremiah 2.21, the Lord says, I planted you a choice vine, holy of pure seed.

How then have you turned degenerate and become a wild vine? Well, just think about that parable at the start of Isaiah 5 where Isaiah describes the same sort of heartbreaking story.

There was a man who lovingly established a vineyard and planted a vine and he showered his love and care upon this vine and showed it the great attention. Did everything for this vine.

And one day he comes along and he looks at his vine expecting to find good fruit. And what does he find? He finds that his beautiful vine has produced putrid filth.

[13 : 08] Fruit that is not fit for anything. And do you remember Isaiah having laid out that parable he turns to God's people and he says to them that's you.

That's what you've done. You are the vine and this is how you've treated the Lord. He has treated you with amazing grace and you've spurned that grace with your flagrant lawlessness.

The Lord came expecting to find righteousness and justice instead he found bloodshed and injustice. And so as Isaiah 5 goes on to state the Lord punished his vine.

The Lord handed them over to their enemies who took them off as prisoners to exile because of their fruitlessness. And just think about Psalm 80. Psalm 80, the psalmist in that psalm he writes at the time of the exile and he laments all of this.

He laments the state of the Lord's vine. This is what he says to the Lord. 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.

[14 : 13] The mountains were covered in its shade with mighty cedars with its branches. It sent out branches to the sea and it shoots to the river. Why then have you broken its walls so that all who passed by pluck its fruit?

The boar from the forest ravages it and all that move in the field feeding it. It's a tragic poetic picture of the vine under judgment because it failed.

But you know in the final part of that psalm in Psalm 80 the psalmist actually pleads with the Lord and in a sense he looks forward in time to a time when the Lord would restore his vine and the vine would be fruitful again.

And the psalmist actually says that this vine restoration of the vine being fruitful again it will coincide with the Lord raising up a son of man. Fast forward through the centuries and come to John 15 and we finally meet this son of man.

The one who's talking to his disciples here. The one who will restore the vine back to fruitfulness. That is what Jesus is saying here in John 15 verse 1. I am the fulfillment of such prophecy such as Psalm 80.

[15 : 30] I am the true Israel. I am everything that unbelieving Israel failed to be. I have lived the life that the Father was looking for. I have done everything that he asked me to do.

I have fulfilled his will perfectly. And so for that reason I am the one now that you must come to to receive life and to bear fruit.

I am the exclusive source of life. If you're not in me says Jesus then you are spiritually dead and cut off from God's people. And just think what an encouragement that must have been to those 11 men standing in front of Jesus.

Just think about John's Gospel. Think about the way that the majority of ethnic Israel responded to Jesus. How did they respond to him? Answer? Rejection.

And in fact if you go back and look at chapter 12 at the end of Jesus public ministry in John you'll find that the most powerful people in ethnic Israel have refused to bow the knee to Jesus.

[16 : 31] It's not very encouraging is it? But Jesus says to his disheartened disciples don't be disheartened. They've rejected me because they're not the true Israel.

I am. And if you're in me then you're part of the true Israel as well. The true people of God. Don't let your hearts be troubled. And it's the same for us today.

Same principle. Any religion that claims to be from God but has rejected this vine his true vine well it's fruitless spiritually dead. Judaism Islam Jehovah's Witnesses Mormonism etc.

etc. They all reject the true vine. And so Jesus is clear. If you reject the Jesus of the apostolic gospel then you're fruitless spiritually dead and religion like that is only fit for the bonfire.

So Jesus is the true vine the true Israel and his disciples are the branches. And just in case the disciples start to get a little bit arrogant or start to think that somehow they've earned this position Jesus gives them a humbling reminder.

[17 : 42] Please look on to verse 16. Jesus says it like this You did not choose me You did not choose me but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide.

In other words the only reason that anyone is in Christ is because Christ has chosen to be gracious to them and bring them in. That's what he's saying. It is utterly undeserved and all of grace.

But you know Jesus is also crystal clear that whilst this union with him has been established by grace disciples must and I underline the word must they must do all that they can to ensure that they abide in him.

And what Jesus does in the passage here is he gives a warning and an encouragement to motivate his disciples to abide in him. Let's look at the warning first of all. Please look at verse 2.

Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he that's God the Father takes away. So disciples must abide in Christ and they must let Christ bear fruit in them because if they don't and Jesus is clear here they will be cut off.

[19 : 01] Now I take it that Jesus is talking here about real church members real church members those who are in the covenant community of God those who are part of his visible church on earth but are not regenerate those who profess to belong to Jesus but from the absence of fruit in their lives it is clear that they're simply paying Jesus lip service and they've never really received the life-giving sap of the vine.

And of course Judas Iscariot is an example of this given the context. I wonder if that's who Jesus is referring to here. Just think about Judas Iscariot for a moment all the things that was true of him he was part of the visible covenant people he looked like he was in Christ he shared in some momentous experiences with Christ he heard Christ proclaim the words that he'd received from the Father he saw Christ do the works that the Father had required of him he was the church treasurer he had roles and responsibility but he didn't bear any fruit and in fact he produced wild fruit because of course he betrays Jesus and we know from the other gospel accounts that later on when he had the opportunity to repent he flat out refused and faced his sin by himself.

He was fruitless and so he was cut off just like unbelieving Israel in the Old Testament exile. question is it possible for a professing Christian in the church to fall away from Jesus?

and the answer that the Bible gives is don't you might be thinking oh come on Phil I've read John chapter 10 in John chapter 10 Jesus says that all of his chosen people they are eternally secure he will never let any of them be snatched out of his hand and they are also so secure because they are also in the hand of the Father do you not believe that Phil?

yes I do I believe that but I believe that Jesus who said those words in John 10 also said in John 15 you must abide in me yes both are true can a real believer fall away from Christ?

[21 : 19] well Jesus says don't don't even consider it abide in me bear fruit don't consider it any other possibility those who do not abide in Jesus those who do not bear fruit they will not persevere and in fact they will not stand in the final judgment please look at verse 6 Jesus says this if anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers and the branches are gathered and thrown into the fire and burned friends on the last day in order to show that the grace of God has flown into us we must be able to show that it has flowed out of us can I just say if you're sitting here this evening having heard all of that and if you feel unsettled then that's good because that is precisely what Jesus' words are trying to do here that is exactly how you're meant to feel

Jesus warns his disciples out of love so that they will do all that they can to abide in him and not fall away and also I think if you're troubled by these verses I actually think that's a very good sign because what does it show about your heart?

well it shows that being in communion and fellowship with Jesus for all eternity is so precious to you that the thought of being cut off from him is devastating I would actually be worried about you if you're sat here having heard all this and not being unsettled if you're sitting here thinking then I would be worried actually so that is Jesus' loving warning but here's Jesus' encouragement here's Jesus' encouragement and we need encouragement don't we?

for all those who abide in him please look at verse 5 I am the vine you are the branches whoever abides in me and I in him he it is that bears much fruit here's a precious promise for you to remember Jesus says that whoever abides in him won't just bear just a little bit of fruit they will bear much fruit Jesus will produce much fruit in their lives and Jesus isn't the only one who will be involved in this work please look again at the second half of verse 2 Jesus says every branch that does bear fruit the father prunes that it may bear more fruit I'm not that much of a gardener in our current house we've got a couple of pots outside that I put maybe three or four plants in and that's about as much as my gardening skills go but in our last house which was down in England there was a massive garden and at the bottom of the garden there was a there was a vegetable patch with a previous owner

I think he was a chef he tried to grow his own produce and there was a few remnants of his old vegetable patch still growing there there was a massive rhubarb plant and I was so disappointed because I can't stand rhubarb it would have been nice to have something else there but I went down to this rhubarb plant and I cut it back I pruned it right back right down actually I got quite severe because I don't like rhubarb right down to the very roots and all that was left in the ground was just a stump and I gave the rhubarb to a neighbour who did like rhubarb fast forward 12 months my rhubarb bush was back with a vengeance and I'm not I'm not even kidding you for the purposes of this illustration in the sermon I'm not even exaggerating it must have been at least about twice the size that it had been the year previously pruning really does promote growth it really does promote fruitfulness that is what God the Father does to all of his people all those who abide in his son he cuts away things in our lives so that we will grow more fruit and it's clear from the rest of the Bible that this pruning process that will go on throughout our lives and as verse 3 tells us that the shears that the Father uses to prune us is his word which of course is the same as Jesus' words you see as we apply the word of God to our very inner lives the Father will use it to challenge and change us for our own good the pruning process that might be painful didn't look very pleasant for that rhubarb plant that I absolutely cut back to its root and it might be like that in our lives but ultimately when we are pruned it's for our own good so that we will become more fruitful and in fact in the end we will be bursting with fruit look at verse 8 this is what Jesus says will happen when we are bursting with fruit verse 8 he says by this my Father is glorified that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples so if we abide in Christ we will bear much fruit the Father will prune us we'll bear more fruit and the Father will be glorified and it will also give us assurance in our own hearts when we bear fruit that we really are

[26 : 27] Jesus' disciples and our non-Christian friends when we bear fruit for God the Father it will also show them that we are Christ's disciples and they will be attracted to Christ in us bearing fruit is an evangelistic enterprise so that's Jesus' encouragement but if you were like me sitting there you might be sitting there thinking these two questions okay Phil but what does Jesus mean by fruit and what does he mean specifically by abiding in him what does abiding in him involve with the last minutes of the sermon I want to answer these two questions and then we'll drive home final application so here's question one what does Jesus mean specifically by fruit well he doesn't actually give a specific definition in this passage but I take it that fruit is the outward expression of the vine life inside a branch in other words the type of fruit a branch produces depends upon what type of vine it is in union with so if a branch is in an olive vine it will produce olives if a branch is in a grape vine it will produce grapes if a branch is in Christ it will produce

Christ likeness his life his character will start to show itself in our behaviour and in our character and in our speech in preparing for this sermon I spent a bit of time just listing some of the wonderful things that we see about the Lord Jesus and the gospels I mean really if we were to list all of them we'd be here for days let me just list out some of the things I came up with and ask as I read them ask yourself are these things growing in my life here we go loving God with all of his heart soul mind and strength obeying God's commandments and finding joy in obeying God's commandments a willingness to submit to the authority of scripture Jesus did that showing mercy to enemies humility patience speaking the truth and love to others defending truth hating sin hating man-made religion and what it does to people being willing to suffer for the gospel and to suffer for the sake of God's people having compassion for the lost we could go on and on and on these are just some of the wonderful traits some of the fruits of the Lord Jesus Christ that a believer who's in union with Christ will start to display and a church that's in union with Christ will start to display and you know most commentators agree that Jesus has another fruit in mind in verse 16 please look at verse 16 you did not choose me but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide now notice the fact that Jesus says that this is fruit that the disciples must go and bear suggests that he's talking about fruit that will come about as a result of gospel mission and evangelism to totally confuse and mix the metaphor this type of fruit that Jesus branches will bear is other branches new believers new converts if you're not convinced by that interpretation just notice also at the end of verse 16

Jesus says that this type of fruit is fruit that will abide abide it's the same word in the Greek text that is used throughout this section of disciples of believers so for those reasons I'm persuaded that Jesus means fruit that will come as a result of gospel mission new converts so to summarize what does Jesus mean by fruit here well answer is a broad broad term meaning Christ likeness and new converts for the gospel question two what does it mean to abide in Jesus what does that look like what does that involve well Jesus actually mentions three things in the text and I want to suggest that they all overlap and go hand in hand with each other let me run through them abiding in Jesus means first of all believing in his word look at verse 7 as he says there letting his word abide in us then you think to yourself okay what does that look like answer it looks like not merely hearing his words not merely hearing his commandments but doing his commandments obedience and you think to yourself well what is it that Jesus commands and the answer there is in verse 12 where he sums up all of his commandments in one command and really this is really what it looks like to abide in Jesus and I think this is where the real challenge of the passage hits home to us this is what he says verse 12 this is my commandment that you love one another as I love you so abiding in Jesus means believing in his word which means obeying his commandments which practically means loving other people in the church

I wonder if that surprises you listen to this one commentator says this abiding in Christ is not some sort of a mystical activity that you carry out in isolation from the rest of the vine actually it is an immensely practical and corporate church activity let me say that again it is not a mystical activity that you carry out in isolation from the rest of the church actually abiding in Jesus is immensely practical and it is a corporate activity that involves every one of us abiding in Christ is not to be measured primarily about how you feel about Christ abiding in Christ is measured in how you treat Christ's people that is what Jesus is saying if a person couldn't care less about Jesus' people the church then that person is not abiding in Christ but if a person is seeking to do all that they can to joyfully love Christ's people with a sacrificial love that's Christ-like then that person is abiding in Christ and that person will be the one who bears much fruit for the glory of Christ and his Father well friends our time is gone but let me just finish by coming back to those questions that I asked at the beginning are you worried that you're wasting your life do you feel that the life you are living is nothing more than a fruitless and joyless slog well let me see if you believe

Christ's words if you're seeking trying your hardest to obey him striving to love the other members of the church family here to the best of your ability then let me tell you you are not wasting your life in fact you're actually living the life that Jesus wants you to live you are abiding in him the true vine that's exactly what you should be doing good keep on doing it more and more and you will grow in fruitfulness and friends even if like me you look at your own life and you see or at least you think you see just really small bits of Christ like fruit in your life well Jesus says even if you have a little bit of fruit in your life you will grow you will bear more if you keep abiding in me I will see to it that you will bear much fruit so don't give up don't give in keep abiding in me and you will bear much fruit and if you're abiding in Christ here this evening then please note that you are doing your bit that we all must do if we're members of the church here to make the church a corporate fruitful body remember that as a church we are corporately what we are individually if the church is full of people who are not abiding in Christ then as a corporate church we will not abide in Christ and as a church we won't be fruitful in fact we will be a bunch of wasters we will be useless and eventually as a church we will be cut off but if every single one of us by the power of Christ in us in response to his wonderful grace if we abide in him then we can have great certainty that as a church we will be fruitful and that the Lord Jesus will use us throughout our city to reach the lost to bring in fruit that will abide new believers new converts who will come and join us so at the start of this new year 2019 let's all examine ourselves

[35 : 39] Jesus says this I am the vine you are the branches whoever abides in me and I in him he it is that bears much fruit from apart from me you can do nothing if you keep my commandments you will abide in my love and this is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you where are you abiding well let's be quiet for a moment bow our heads and we'll take some time to respond to Christ's word in our own hearts and then I'll pray for us our dear heavenly father we are amazed at the grace and the mercy that you've shown us in your son you've reached out and brought us into union with him and he willingly died laid down his life for us he even calls us his friends what a privilege and we ask that you will give us the strength that we need to abide in him all of our days to remain in him all of our days to never depart from him please help us to believe his word help us to obey him and so love one another more and more we confess father that we are so weak and we confess that actually we will never fully be able to obey him as we should in this life because the old remnant of Adam is in us constantly waging war against your spirit tempting us to do what we know we shouldn't do so please help us father give us the strength that we need to obey your son and love each other for we know that when we live this way we really are abiding in him and we really will bring glory to your name and we really will prove to be your disciples we pray all of this again in Jesus name and for his sake amen come on peace to be peace inrim about that goodbye