

A story is told of a farmer who planted two fruit trees on opposite sides of his property. The one he planted to provide a hedge by his house to hide the unsightly view of an old landfill; the other he planted to provide a shady place to rest under near a cool mountain stream which ran down beside his fields. As the two trees grew, both began to flower and bear fruit. One day the farmer decided to gather the fruit from the tree nearest his house that provided a hedge from the landfill. As he brought the fruit inside the house, he noticed that it was a little deformed but still the fruit looked edible. Later that evening, while sitting on his porch the farmer took one of the pieces of fruit for a snack. Biting into the fruit, he found it to be extremely bitter, and completely inedible. Casting the fruit aside he looked across the field to the other tree over by the mountain stream. And he walked across the field and took a piece of the fruit from the other tree; bit into it and found the fruit to be sweet and delicious, causing him to gather several more pieces of fruit and he took them into his home. The fruit of both trees was greatly affected by the nutrition that came through the root. Just as the tree by the landfill grew to be bitter, and the tree by the stream produced sweet fruit, so do followers of Jesus have a choice. We can either put the roots of our hearts into the soil of the landfill of fleshly pursuits or into the stream-fed, organic soil of the person of Jesus Christ. The fruit of our faith depends on where our hearts are rooted. Jesus affirms this in John 15:7-8: *“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.”* The apostle John affirmed the power of being rooted in Jesus when he opened his gospel by declaring:

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. . . . For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.*

John 1:1-14, 16

The words of Jesus, who is God, are the words of God. And the Words of God are immeasurably powerful. When God spoke, all the universe came into being. Psalm 33:6 says: *“By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all their host.”* God’s Words made everything out of nothing. Jesus’s words, in being God’s Words are immeasurably powerful. When he spoke people were healed, food multiplied, storms were stilled, demons ran for cover, and men rose from the dead. Jesus’ disciples had seen these things happen. In their minds they believed he was God, but their hearts struggled to catch up with those thoughts. In the context of our text for today their faith in Jesus would be challenged. The words Jesus we just read were spoken just a few hours before our Lord was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane and not long after nailed to a cross.

When Jesus’s disciples had taken their initial steps forward to follow Jesus, I suspect they had no idea what they were getting themselves into. After making the commitment to leave their vocations and their families and follow Jesus over the past three years, they now find themselves in fear, turmoil and distress over what would happen to them, as Jesus is now following through on his promise to leave them and begin his painful walk to a bloody cross. All throughout John 14, Jesus had been trying to comfort and empower them for what would soon happen to him and to them. He opened chapter 14 by saying: *“Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me”* (John 14:1) – and after explaining to them the comforting power of believing in him and the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit he would give them – Jesus then tells them

it's time for him to step forward toward the cross and it's time for them to step forward toward the power of the Spirit: *"Rise, let us go from here"* (John 14:31).

And as they begin to take those steps together, Jesus continues to teach and encourage and comfort and empower his disciples by describing the source of his power in their lives and what that power will look like when they live out that power. As he does so, Jesus uses an illustration from their everyday lives to help them understand what he is saying – and we see that in the first eight verses of John 15.

*"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."* John 15:1-8

As Jesus and his disciples walked through a vineyard on the way to the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus used the vineyard to describe the source and the power that we can know in our relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Jesus tells us that those who are truly following him will have a relationship with him that is *"abiding"* (something that has settled in us and is deeply rooted in us) and *"fruitful"* (something which is actively and continually growing in us and constantly changing us). He uses both of those concepts multiple times through his discourse because both of those concepts are intimately and intricately connected. His premise is that *when we are rooted in God, in Jesus, in the Holy Spirit - we will be transformed by God, by Jesus, by the Holy Spirit.* Or in other words when we *"abide"* in God, in Jesus, in the Holy Spirit - we will *"bear" the "fruit"* of God, of Jesus, of the Holy Spirit.

*"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser."* Jesus says he is not just *"the vine"* but the *"true vine"* - the *"true vine"* of Israel. The true people of God are no longer to be defined by ethnicity or by their background or nationality but by their attachment as branches to the *"true vine"* of Jesus Christ. He said his *"Father"* (God the *"Father"*) is the *"vinedresser"* – the planter, the waterer, the cultivator, the pruner, the keeper and owner of the vineyard. God the *"vinedresser"* is the one who *"takes away"* the *"branches"* that do not *"bear fruit"* - and He also *"prunes"* those *"branches"* that do *"bear fruit"* so that they *"may bear more fruit."* The assumption is clear here that God the *"vinedresser"* expects there to be growth in His vineyard. If we claim Jesus to be our Lord and Savior, we are called to *"bear fruit."*

That being said, Jesus tells us some of those who claim Christ are not bearing fruit, and as a result God *"takes"* them *"away."* The original Greek word here for *"takes away"* also carries with it the idea of *lifting up*. Sometimes in vineyards branches will sag down and touch the ground and they are no longer productive, and so *"vinedressers"* will literally *"take away"* those branches from the ground and *lift them up* and put the branches on supports that keep off the ground so that they can become fruitful. Because we all possess a fallen, sinful nature there will be times we need the disciplining, correcting, taking away, lifting up work of God. There are many things in this world and in our own lives that we just will not let go of – and so our hearts and souls end up getting dragged down and dropped to the ground. Were it not for the gracious hand of our divine *"vinedresser"* who by His mercy lifts us up out of the mire of our own sinfulness, we would never grow in faith and be productive for God. God expects followers of Jesus to bear fruit. Those who truly are *"in" Christ will respond* to the correcting, taking away, disciplining, lifting up work of God. They will be transformed and they will *"bear fruit."*

But even when we do *"bear fruit"* God the *"vinedresser"* will *"prune"* us. Again this is the gracious work of God of cutting away the dependencies, obsessions, and addictions that are barriers in our relationship with

Jesus Christ in the media-saturated, recreation-saturated, technology-saturated, entitlement-saturated world we live in. While most things in our world are not sinful in themselves, they become conduits of sin when we find more joy and satisfaction in them than we do in God. Act 17:28 tells us: *"In him we live and move and have our being."* Everything else needs to be *pruned*.

*"Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you."* The "word" Jesus is speaking of here is something he had said to Peter back in John 13 when he was washing the disciples' feet during the Last Passover: *"The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean, but not every one of you." For he knew who was to betray him; that was why he said, Not all of you are clean"* (John 13:10-11). God "*cleans*" us by taking us away and lifting us up out of sinful nature when our faith and our souls have hit the ground. God "*cleans*" us by pruning the dependencies, obsessions, and addictions that are barriers to our relationship with Jesus Christ. God "*cleans*" us through the cross of Jesus Christ – who sacrificed his life to pay the penalty for our sins, so that we might know forgiveness and redemption and restoration in our relationship with God.

*"Abide in me, and I in you."* Here Jesus is revealing the source by which we will "*bear fruit*" for God the "*vinedresser*." That source is *Jesus himself*. In the context of our text for this morning, Jesus statement "*abide in me*" means to dwell in Jesus, live in Jesus, to make your home in Jesus. Abiding in Jesus means we not only acknowledge who Jesus is and receive him as Lord and Savior - but also live in desperate dependency on Jesus, just like branches are dependent on a vine for nourishment and life. *"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."* When we do not "*abide*" in Jesus our hearts and souls will "*wither*" up and die because they are not being fed and watered by the risen life of Jesus Christ.

*"Abide in me, and I in you."* Not only are we to "*abide*" in Christ, but he is also to "*abide*" in us. Jesus spoke of what this means in John 14:17 when he told his disciples (and us) that when he left this earth, he would send a "*Helper*" the Holy Spirit, *"the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you."* And so Jesus is "*in us*" through the presence, the indwelling, the "*abiding*" of the Holy Spirit in us. We see one of the primary reasons for the "*Holy Spirit in us*" is to reveal the power of the Word of God. In Ephesians 1:17 we see that the Holy Spirit is in us to give us *"the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him."* Jesus connects this with the foundation of the Word of God in John 14:26 when he declared: *"The Helper, the Holy Spirit . . . will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you."* Remember this was how the whole Bible was written, Under the direct guidance of the Holy Spirit, God's words and principles and standards and purposes came to mind and were written down by ordinary people like us – and under the direct guidance of the Holy Spirit we read we read the words of God in the Bible, and by the power of the Holy Spirit the our hearts are changed, our wills conformed, our minds are sharpened, our souls are shaped – as we read the very words the Jesus said that were written down by the very men that lived with him and knew him and walked with him and learned from him and were changed by him and did greater things for him - and *bore fruit* for him.

*"All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness"* (2 Timothy 3:16); *"Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching"* (2 Timothy 4:2); *"For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account"* (Hebrews 4:12-13).

On the night before he was crucified, Jesus told his disciples: *“Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.”* History tells us that the words Jesus spoke to his disciples dramatically changed their hearts and lives. The words of Jesus that he speaks to us, that we read in the Word of God, still dramatically change hearts and lives. By God’s spoken Word, all the universe came into being. By God’s spoken Word He dramatically changes hearts and history. In Isaiah 55:6-13 we read of how the power of the Word of God *abiding in us* will joyfully bear eternal fruit.

*“Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it. For you shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall make a name for the LORD, an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.”* Isaiah 55:6-13

In these words of the prophet Isaiah - who prophesied the transformational power of the Word of God, 700 years before Jesus was born - reminds us that we have been privileged to have our Sovereign God, the Son of God, the Creator of the universe, the Word of God, the Savior of the World – has been with us here on earth for that last 2000 years, in the form of the indwelling Holy Spirit - showing us who God is, convicting us, regenerating us, teaching us, guiding us, comforting us, encouraging us, strengthening us, empowering us, enabling us, and transforming us. And still we find it difficult to truly *“abide”* in God, so that God is truly settled in us and is deeply rooted in us, so that God might actively and continually growing in us and constantly changing us to be more and more like Jesus.

But Jesus tells us this is what abiding and bearing fruit means. This is what it truly means to be born-again follower of Jesus Christ. This is the life, that we who claim Christ as Lord and Savior, are to be living here on earth. This is the work God calls us to do in this life. In John 6:28-29 Jesus was asked: *“What must we do, to be doing the works of God?”* And Jesus said: *“This is the work of God - that you believe in him whom he has sent.”* The *“work”* that God calls us to do, is to fully live out our faith in Jesus Christ. Real, living faith is the *“work of God”* that enables us to abide in Jesus and bear the fruit of Jesus. All other *“work”* - in everything that we think, everything that we say and everything that we do in our lives - is to be based on this *“work of God”* - to believe/trust and fully live our lives for Jesus.

This is the *work of God* that we are called to in order for us to abide and bear the fruit of God. But in order for this work of God to be real, we must *believe in God and trust in God intimately now and for all eternity*. In other words we are called by God to do the work of God by living out our eternal salvation in the presence of God every moment of every day we live on this earth. What this means is that our main *work of faith* of abiding in God *is to cultivate God’s presence in everything we think, say and do*. This should be the first item on the agenda of our lives all the time. The Bible speaks of this abiding in God in what is known as the Greatest Commandment: *“The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength”* (Mark 12:29-30; Deuteronomy 6:4-5). Abiding in God is cultivating the presence of God, so we might bear the fruit of love. This is our *“work”* from which everything in our lives should flow. We see this in the context of the words that directly follow Jesus’ words from our text for today.

*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 have I 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. John 15:7-11*

To abide in Jesus means to keep his commandments and to keep his commandments means to love God with all our hearts and souls and minds and strength. Jesus tells us here that the greatest display our love for God is through our trust and devotion and obedience to Him. We abide in Jesus through our love relationship with him. We can do so because Jesus loved us first.

The greatest display of Jesus' love for us is his humble, sacrificial death on the cross in our place for our sins, so we might be forgiven and redeemed and cleansed and restored back to God, so we might live with Jesus in the glory of heaven, forever and ever. And we also see Jesus' love for us in that we didn't choose him; he chose us and he chose us to live out our work of faith in obedience to him. We also see Jesus love for us in that he has been and is and will always be empowering us to do that work of faith in abiding in Jesus – because *apart from Christ, we cannot do anything*. This is good news for us! In our fallen condition of perpetual self-centeredness we desperately need Jesus to help us do everything.

The fruit that Jesus speaks of is simply evidence of a relationship with him. It is a relationship that he initiates by and through his steadfast love – and it also a relationship where we can come to know the fullness of the joy of Jesus! *“These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.”* And because Jesus joyfully loves us, he expects us to grow and to bear the fruit of love and joy with others – and he gives us opportunities to do so. One of the greatest displays of the love and joy of Jesus that we can know in our abiding relationship with Jesus is *the church*. It is in the church where Jesus gives us opportunities to grow deeper in our abiding with Jesus and bear the abundant fruit of the love and joy of Jesus – through how we live out our *work of faith* in our relationships with one another.

The Bible tells us the church is means by which the world can come to know the reality of Jesus Christ. The purpose of the church is to glorify God by bearing witness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ unto the world by loving God and loving others. This is primarily done by the preaching and teaching the Word of God, and by responsibly helping those in need. Those in the church are to *work out* that very same purpose within the church through their love relationships with one another – through teaching and preaching and serving and discipline and accountability and fellowship. Together, the primary activity is to be regular worship by giving glory to God by exalting Jesus in preaching, praying and singing. God created the church as a means to gather together those who have surrendered their hearts and lives to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior - to abide in Jesus together and to bear fruit for Jesus together. Scripture is replete with echoes of Jesus' imperative that his followers are to be about the work of faith that we abide in Jesus, and that Jesus' words abide in us – so by the power of God's love for us and the power of the Word of God and the presence of the indwelling Holy Spirit - we might grow deeper in our relationship with God, so we might grow and bear much fruit for God and prove to be Jesus' disciples.

*And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy; giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. Colossians 1:9-14*

*Since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and*

*endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.* Romans 5:1-5

*I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.* Ephesians 3:14-21

*“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.”* Jesus is telling us here how we as his church are able to humbly and obediently to respond to his call to be his disciples: *“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me”* (Luke 9:2). In these words Jesus affirms his church is where his follows make the commitment to abide in Jesus together and to bear fruit for Jesus together, because *when we are rooted in God we will be transformed by God.*

In the church, that commitment is called church membership. Regarding church membership, Mark Dever, the Lead Pastor of Capital Hill Baptist Church writes: “A build has bricks. A flock has sheep. A vine has branches. And a body has members. In one sense, membership begins when Christ saves us and makes us a member of his body. Yet his work must then be given expression in an actual local church. In that sense, true church membership begins when we commit to a particular body. Being a Christian means joined to a church. The practice of church membership among Christians occurs when Christians grasp hold of each other in responsibility and love. By identifying ourselves with a particular local church, we are telling the church’s pastors and other members not just that we commit to them, but that we commit to the in-gathering, giving, prayer and service. We are telling them to expect certain thing from us and to hold us accountable if we don’t follow through. By calling someone a member of your church, you are saying that that individual has your church’s endorsement as a Christian.” In order to respond to the Spirit’s prompting regarding our desperate need for abiding and bearing fruit, we will be presenting a session on the Beliefs and Practices of Arrowsmith Baptist Church on the Sunday evening of January 20<sup>th</sup>. Our time together will be focused on who we are, what we believe and why people join. We encourage all of members, attenders and those interested in joining the church.

What does abiding in Jesus look like? John Piper: “Hour-by-hour abiding in Jesus means hour-by-hour trusting him to meet all your needs and be all our treasure.” J.C. Ryle: “To abide in Christ means to keep up a habit of constant close communion with Him, always leaning on Him, resting on Him, pouring out our hearts to Him, using Him as our Fountain of life and strength, as our chief Companion and best Friend. To have His words abiding in us, is to keep His sayings and precepts continually before our memories and minds, and to make them the guide of our actions and the rule of our daily conduct and behavior.” John Owen: “Would a soul continually eye His everlasting tenderness and compassion, His thoughts of kindness that have been from of old, His present gracious acceptance, it could not bear an hour’s absence from Him; whereas now, perhaps, it cannot watch with Him one hour.” Followers of Jesus have a choice. We can either plant the roots of our hearts into the soil of the landfill of fleshly pursuits or into the stream-fed, organic soil of the person of Jesus. Jesus’ “words” cannot “abide in” us without having dramatic effect. They will take root and “bear fruit.” Reading, studying, memorizing, listening to the words of Jesus, the words of God, produce the Christ-like fruits of faith, love, grace, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, mercy and holiness. When Jesus’ words “abide in” us, we are transformed ever more into the image of Christ: *“And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit”* (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Come, my brethren, and let us day by day set ourselves at His feet, and meditate on this word of His, with an eye fixed on Him alone. Let us set ourselves in quiet trust before Him, waiting to hear His holy voice—the still small voice that is mightier than the storm that rends the rocks—breathing its quickening spirit within us, as He speaks: “Abide in me.” The soul that truly hears Jesus Himself speak the word, receives with the word the power to accept and to hold the blessing He offers. And it may please You, blessed Saviour, indeed, to speak to us; let each of us hear Your blessed voice. May the feeling of our deep need, and the faith of Your wondrous love, combined with the sight of the wonderfully blessed life You are waiting to bestow upon us, constrain us to listen and to obey, as often as You speak: “Abide in me.” Let day by day the answer from our heart be clearer and fuller: “Blessed Saviour, I do abide in You!” Andrew Murray

*The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save ; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing. Zephaniah 3:17*

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