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#84

"Life in the Garden – Abiding in Christ"

John 15:4-11

Introduction

There is are a couple of new brands of theology that are being promoted as Reformed that sound good in so many ways, but in the end contradicts the Scriptures and the Westminster standards. One of them strongly hints that man is brought into the covenant, into the church, into Christ by grace, but then must stay in Him by works. The other has a strong sacramental element to the teaching that states that our baptism is the dividing line between those who are *in Christ* and those who are not. If you are in the church, you are in Christ. If you have been baptized you are elect. These teachings have been kind of difficult to get hold of because good theology wants to affirm the necessity of good works as a **fruit** of true salvation without asserting that our good works in any way contribute to our salvation. And we want to maintain a close connection between our profession of faith and the outward sign of salvation found in baptism, without crossing a line that says the act of baptism is the means of our union with Christ.

All of this finds significance in the passage that we began studying last week. John 15 gives us the wonderful doctrine of union with Christ. It speaks over and over again about *abiding in Christ*. But as we saw last week, verse two is a crucial verse because it either teaches that those who are in Christ can be cut off from Christ if they don't produce fruit, or that those who are *in Christ* will be

lifted up by the Father if they are not fruitful so that they will bear fruit. The latter idea is the more accurate and actually gives a beautiful picture of the grace and power of God. The defining idea of this passage is the idea of being and abiding in Christ.

Today we want to explore this truth more closely. There is nothing more crucial to a Christian's life than his union with Jesus Christ. In fact, the life, vitality, power and dynamic of the Christian life is found in our union – or what we commonly call our walk with Christ. There is a great temptation for Christians, having begun by faith, to want to live and walk independently of Christ.

[John 15:4-11]

In Berkhof's Systematic Theology, he defines our mystical union with Christ as *that intimate, vital, and spiritual union between Christ and His people, in virtue of which He is the source of their life and strength, of their blessedness and salvation*. In spite of several analogies in Scripture to portray it (the vine and branch, the marriage union, a building and its foundation; the head and the body) it is still called the *mystical union* by theologians because it so far exceeds every earthly metaphor in terms of its intimacy, power and excellency that we can scarcely grasp its beauty and significance.

One way of thinking about this doctrine is through the word *abiding*. Jesus uses the word here in conjunction with the picture of a branch abiding in a vine.

The word *abide* means to live, to stay, or to dwell in or with. Certainly we can see it visibly by looking at a grape vine. The branches that bear fruit are snugly attached to the vine. And while we can't see the life giving flow of nutrients passing between

the two, we know enough to realize that if you snap off the branch it will die.

The word abide is used other places in the Bible to show a sense of being at home. When Jesus sent His disciples out two by two they were told to find someone worthy in each city and dwell or abide with them. The idea is that that person would become their provider and their home. Mary went to her cousin Elizabeth after she conceived and she is said to have lived with her for 3 months.

But perhaps it's easiest to understand what Jesus is talking about to look at the current context. Back in chapter 14, Jesus taught them in verse 17 that the Holy Spirit would soon abide in them. As we saw then, they were to expect God to take up residency in them through the Holy Spirit. More to the point, Jesus showed what He meant by this word in 14:25 when He said that while He was here on earth, He was abiding with them. So in that verse especially we get an image of abiding because we can see the nearness, the intimacy, the interaction, and the vitality of the disciples relationship with Jesus during those years.

When Jesus commands us to abide in Him, He is instructing us to receive from Him all that He has to offer. Maybe this is a good time to remember all of the *I am* sayings from this gospel. In them we get an idea of the depth of Christ's offerings to us. Each one is a common thing from life that we know and understand.

- I am the bread of life (food) – satisfaction and nourishment
- I am the light of the world (sun, lamps) - exposure to sin, to truth. Casts out fear, brings growth
- I am the door (passage way) – entry into the kingdom

- I am the good shepherd (caretaker) – one who cares, feeds, protects
- I am the resurrection and the life (funerals, caskets, gravesides) – defeater of death
- I am the way, the truth and the life (directions) – the only answer

The point is that everything we need is offered to us in Christ. He is our sole sufficiency. If we could only somehow tap into that, get connected to it. But just as soon as we start thinking about “tapping into it”, we are forced to realize that Jesus is not talking about *it*, He is talking about Himself. He’s talking about relationship. The vine and the branches (and all of the other analogies) are only there to point us to something far greater. Jesus is offering us a dwelling place, a home – Himself. And if you’ll look closely at verse 4 you’ll discover that it’s not just that we are to abide in Him, but that He too abides in us.

So where does all of this lead? What is the practical meaning of abiding in Christ? What is Jesus really offering us?

1. Fellowship with Christ.

One of the great things about studying themes in the Bible is that we can start to see that salvation is not about getting out of hell and into heaven. Salvation in the Bible is about the restoration of a broken relationship between God and man. When we come to a point of saving faith in Jesus Christ, we enter into a living relationship with Jesus Christ.

We talk about it a lot around here, and now is a good time to say it again. We constantly have new people being added to the church, and those of you who have been around for a long time need to be reminded again of just how important your fellowship with God really is. Whether you are new to the

Christian life or been around it a long time, we must never lose our focus on the need for daily communion with Christ.

Whether we talk about public worship, family worship or daily devotions, you need to be connected in an intimate way with Christ. What is your goal in quiet time? Is it to say prayers and read the Bible – or is it to fellowship with God? And how are you doing on that front? Are you taking the time to truly pour your heart out to God in prayer? Are you meditating on the Word in such a way that you are asking God to speak to you?

Verse 7 makes the connection between the Word and prayer. *If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you.* Because Jesus Christ is living within you through the Holy Spirit, your spiritual disciplines and exercises as we sometimes call them, are really simply a means to abide in Him. And honestly, if your personal time in the Word and prayer are not regular and sufficient in length, and from the heart, then how can you have a vibrant, intimate and growing relationship with God? All of the Psalms that speak of desiring God have the context of deep, heartfelt prayer. The beauty of the Psalms is that they illustrate and lead us into union with Christ. If you're not abiding in Christ the way you think you should, spend some extended time in the Psalms.

The second thing Christ is offering us if we abide in Him is:

II. Strength and Power

Isn't it true that sometimes you feel impotent in your daily living? You want to overcome sin and you fail? You want to speak boldly for Christ and have a dynamic witness, but you hold back. You

long to live a life that advances His kingdom, but you feel overwhelmed by the small details of living. We've all experienced these things. We want the strength and power to live above what is common and ordinary. This has been the attraction to many of the charismatic movement. They offer power. But you need to see that power to live for Christ is not something that He is withholding from you. It's not something that will only come with additionally blessings or outpourings of the Spirit. You already have the Spirit dwelling in you. You have all you need.

Without giving a lot of detail, Jesus does give us the principle here. Verse 5 says, *I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.* That's the negative side of it. Paul states the positive side in Philippians 4:13. *I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.*

So here are a couple of things that we really need to grasp. First, the power you need to live a fruitful life is directly connected to your union with Christ. Your strength and usefulness to Christ flows, not out of some extra blessing – nor does it come from your natural talents. It comes from Christ living in you. You have to believe this is true. You really need to affirm this – *apart from Me you can do nothing.* That doesn't mean you can't be busy, that you can't be working. But Jesus is saying you can't do things that will truly glorify God – things that will truly matter in eternity – apart from Christ. I would encourage all of you to consider this carefully – especially if you are a very busy, or a very talented person. Activity and busyness does not mean you are doing the things God desires you to do.

Secondly, remember that to be fruitful and productive for Christ does not mean that you have to

do things that bring you the praise and notice of men. *Apart from Me you can do **nothing*** implies that *in Him you can do **everything*** – everything that He wants you to do. That may mean taking new delight in raising your children and imparting to them a love for Jesus. It may mean a quiet and compassionate ministry to your neighbors or to others in the church. It may mean faithfully encouraging and mentoring a young Christian. It may mean showing love to someone who is down and hurting.

Strength and power to live for Jesus Christ wherever He puts you – with an eye on His glory and His kingdom – that’s the blessing of abiding in Christ. And it is the product of abiding in Christ.

The third thing Christ is offering us if we abide in Him is:

III. Fruitfulness

What does it mean to be fruitful? What is fruitfulness?

- * Living like Jesus Lived.
- * Working like Jesus Worked.

1. How did Jesus live?

- a. He longed for the glory of the Father.
(read vs. 8)
- b. He lived in the presence of the Father’s love. (vs. 9)
- c. He lived to fulfill the Father’s will (read vs. 10)

If we abide in Christ we will live for these same things. Nothing will delight us more than the glory, love and will of Christ.

Abiding in Christ will change us. It will conform us to image of Christ. The more we abide in Him the more we will be like Him.

2. How did Jesus work?

His work was all about redemption and the kingdom. We will come to this a little later in this chapter, but just take a quick glance at verse 16. Bearing fruit by abiding in Christ is not just about our own life and heart. It is about others as well. *You did not choose Me, but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and that your fruit would remain, so that whatever you ask of the Father in My name He may give to you.*

The more you abide in Christ, the more your life will be a light to the world and the more you will affect other people for the kingdom.

So, I want to encourage you today to draw near to God. The greatest gift He has given you is His presence. He has offered Himself to be your place of dwelling. Intimacy with God is not something beyond you. It is not something for the *super Christian*. Abiding in Christ is your duty – but more importantly it is your privilege. Will you commit yourself in a new way to live daily in the presence and in fellowship with Jesus Christ?