

# The Vine and the Branches, John 15:1-17

## Part 2: Abiding

Abide [μένω, *menō*]: to live (1 John 3:9), stay (Acts 9:43), remain (1 Cor 7:40), endure (2 Cor 9:9), stand (Rom 9:11), persist (1 Tim 2:13), continue (Heb 13:1)

1. The same word which is central to John 15 appears in 1 Cor 13:13, “And now these three *remain*: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.” This is the climax of the famous “love chapter,” a favorite text for weddings. In his sermon at the wedding of his daughter, Gilbert Meilaender said the following:

Kierkegaard pictures two people (“lover-beloved”, joined by the hyphen that is God’s own love, the love which abides) who no longer seem able to sustain their bond. “And so the breaking-point between the two is reached,” he writes. The beloved turns away. But, says Kierkegaard, the lover keeps the hyphen: “lover-.” Imagine, Kierkegaard says, that you saw nothing but a word followed by a hyphen. What would you say? You would say that the word is not yet complete. Consequently, the lover—who wills to abide in the eternal love that is God’s—believes that the relationship which another considers broken is a relationship that has not yet been completed. The lover abides.

Kierkegaard imagines the marriage relationship being strained, the marriage failing.

“And so it came to the breaking-point.” Lover and beloved are no longer speaking to each other. But, Kierkegaard writes, “the lover says: ‘I abide; therefore we shall still speak with one another, because silence also belongs to conversation at times.’” And once more Kierkegaard does it, using one grand image: “Does the dance cease because one dancer has gone away? In a certain sense. But if the other still remains standing in the posture which exposes a turning towards the one who is not seen, and if ‘because you abide’ you know nothing about the past, then you will say, ‘Now the dance will begin just as soon as the other comes, the one who is expected.’” Every time I read that, I try to picture it. The lover, standing there in the posture of the dancer, waiting for the beloved. Not assuming that the dance has ceased, but abiding. Expecting the beloved to come and the dance to begin again.<sup>1</sup>

For Meilaender, Paul’s view of love is both intimate and unceasing, beautifully expressed in the lover who waits and waits for the beloved, whether the beloved has strayed, is somehow hurt, broken, unresponsive, or finally waits beyond the veil of tears. Love *abides*. *God’s* love abides. And we bear fruit when we also abide in Jesus just as Jesus and his words of love abide in us. Not leaving, and when it’s dark and hard, nor content with a casual relationship, but *abiding, remaining* in love.

How does 1 Corinthians 13 shed light on John 15?

2. As discussed last time, the vine metaphor is used primarily in the OT in the context of *judgment* (cf. Ps 80; Ezk 15, 17; Hos 10:1 Jer 2:21) for Israel’s sins. For instance, Jer 2:21, “I had planted you like a choice vine of sound and reliable stock. How then did you turn against me into a corrupt, wild vine?” Israel is called to account for its sins, for the choices it made.

Despite this backdrop, and despite Jesus’ urging the disciples to “keep [his] commands” (10, 14, 17), it is common for preachers to use this passage to assert that fruit is born by doing *nothing*, so long as one is

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<sup>1</sup> *Christian Century*, Oct 11, 2000 (990).

connected to Jesus. A great example of this is Francis Chan's moving sermon, "Just Stay Connected," given to fellow pastors at the Oxygen conference in 2014 (<https://youtu.be/M4tI3InVQ2c>).

Is this a valid inference given that the OT metaphor is meaningless unless seen in terms of the *choices* Israel actively made?

3. *To abide (menō)* is a spiritually rich, multi-layered concept. John, the author, turns the concept over and over throughout his account, allowing us to see different facets. Unfortunately, it is often hidden from us by the translation, given its lexical range. Read the following, noting how *menō* is used:

- "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and **remain** on him" (1:32)
- "Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that **endures** to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him God the Father has placed his seal of approval" (6:27)
- "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood **remains** in me, and I in them" (6:56)
- "If you **hold to** my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (8:31-32)
- "Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has **no permanent place [remain] in** the family, but a son **belongs to [remains in] it forever**. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (8:34-35)
- "The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, **living** in me, who is doing his work" (14:10)
- "the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he **lives** with you and will be in you" (14:17)

Given these and the many instances of *menō* in chapter 15, how do you *menō* in Jesus? (Love other believers in the church? Love those outside the church? Immerse yourself in his teaching? Participate in the sacraments? Speak to Jesus conversationally to build your personal relationship with him? Believe and not fall away? For it to be all of these is to empty it of meaning.)

4. As early as Augustine, "whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you" has been interpreted to mean that "*abiding* in Jesus and allowing his words to abide in one (which is roughly equivalent in practice) entail continuing to love and trust in Jesus, with the assurance that the lover of Jesus, whose desires are ultimately for Jesus' agendas, will receive answered prayer" (Keener, *John*, Vol. 2, 998).

We might ask whether we pray for the same sorts of things Jesus and Paul did. We might also ask whether Jesus intended this as a law of prayer, the way Christians often treat it... and when our prayers aren't answered, we find ourselves treating it as a limp tautology: "just ask what the Father *already* wants to do and the answer is yes."

Instead, let's consider Meilaender's invitation (above) to think of "abiding" in terms loving faithfulness and trust as in marriage. Consider someone you are married to or someone you are similarly very close to. Have that person's responses to requests evolved as that relationship has deepened from casual to deep?

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"Fun" fact: Jesus used the same word, "abide," not long after his nighttime walk with the disciples described in John 15, when in the garden he said, "My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, to the point of death; remain here and keep watch with me."

Be still and know that I am God,  
be still and know that I am God,  
be still and know that I am God.

In thee, O Lord, I put my trust,  
In thee, O Lord, I put my trust,  
In thee, O Lord, I put my trust.

## Leader's Intro:

1. The vine metaphor was used in the OT typically in the context of judgment, the vine being Israel. Here, *Jesus* is the vine.
2. Perhaps the most relevant OT use of this imagery is from Ps 80...
3. Note the plays on words in vv. 1-2:

God "cuts off" [αἴρω/*airo*] (15:1) unfruitful branches

God "prunes" [καθαίρω/*kathairo*] (15:2) fruitful branches

The disciples are already "clean"/pruned [καθαρός/*katharos*] because of Jesus' words.

Earlier (13:10) Jesus told them, "you are clean but not all", a likely reference to Judas

## Themes and question ideas:

- What is meant by "fruit"? Carson: obedience, new converts, love, Christian character. "These interpretations are reductionistic. The branch's purpose is to *bear much fruit* (v. 5), but the next verses show that this fruit is the consequence of prayer in Jesus' name, and is to the Father's glory (vv. 7, 8, 16). This suggests that the 'fruit' in the vine imagery represents everything that is the product of effective prayer in Jesus' name, including obedience to Jesus' commands (v. 10), experience of Jesus' joy (v. 11 – as earlier his peace, 14:27), love for one another (v. 12), and witness to the world (vv. 16, 27)." [517]
- Pruning: suffering and loss that bring growth. Is there a time in your life when, looking back, you can see that losing something (a habit, an attachment, an unhealthy relationship, a goal, a dream, etc.) drew you closer to God? Is there something in your life now the loss of which would draw you closer to Jesus?
- Abiding and fruit-bearing as modeled in Jesus' relationship with the Father: abiding speaks to a relationship. We
- Being cleaned by Jesus' words
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**John's gospel is unlike the others because of the degree to which John writes on multiple levels, but with the simplest vocabulary of any of them. At first it sounds like a fortune cookie—it's so repetitive, the sentences so short, the writing so seemingly artless. But if you take the time to sit in it and pay attention and follow his hyperlinks which are so central to his writing, it pays off and you start to see things the way Neo does in the matrix, and a whole world opens up.**

**So when we read this passage, at first it's ho-hum, so churchy and 2-D. Remain in me. Stick by me. I would like us to dig in and spend enough time in this passage to see beyond the churchy language to get what Jesus is saying here and be changed by it.**

If you do you'll get what you pray for, a promise so amazing that it actually *undermines* the rest of passage. It would be 100x more effective to our minds if he had said, abide in me and you won't be quite as lonely and you'll get 10% less joint pain. THAT would seem amazing. THIS is a WAY bigger promise, so much so that we read it and think we have wandered into mythology and find ourselves writing it all off.

So what do we do with this passage? The only way to get into the Bible, and especially into John, is to sit with it. That's when you notice the gorilla walking behind the basketball players. That's when you notice the giant toothbrush, when you see that this passage isn't at all what you expected.

And of course you also need to ask how disciples would have heard Jesus' words. And to do that, it helps to remember where we are at. It's the last night before Jesus is going to surrender himself to torture and death, and this final lesson is one you can tell he thought about a LOT, because it's got to hold them when he's gone. What's more, he's just added

this super cryptic line where he says, “I will not say much more to you, for the prince of this world—meaning Satan—is coming,” after which he rushes them out the door, and they leave the upper city to wander Jerusalem at night. If they weren’t creeped out *before* that, if his mood and manner didn’t say that it was about to get very real, they were now.

And having told them that they could expect a change of custody because the HS was coming, and it would all be okay even though they didn’t have a clue what he meant, he now brings out this image of a vine and branches. Now these weren’t the A students, but I they probably knew that whenever this image is used in the Hebrew Bible it’s bad news, either a warning or an explanation for why things went so wrong. Where we hear this like a children’s message, they would have heard the doctor telling them they have cancer. A great example of this from the OT is Psalm 80, which is a post-mortem from the fall of the northern kingdom. Listen to these verses:

How long, Lord God Almighty,  
will your anger smolder  
against the prayers of your people?  
<sup>5</sup>You have fed them with the bread of tears;  
you have made them drink tears by the bowlful.  
<sup>6</sup>You have made us an object of derision<sup>[b]</sup> to our neighbors,  
and our enemies mock us.  
<sup>7</sup>Restore us, God Almighty;  
make your face shine on us,  
that we may be saved.

Then later in the Psalm, we read this remarkable plea:

Watch over this vine,  
<sup>15</sup> the root your right hand has planted,  
the son, the branch you have raised up for yourself. [Heb for “son” can mean “branch”]  
Let your hand rest on the man at your right hand,  
the son of man you have raised up for yourself.  
<sup>18</sup>Then we will not turn away from you;  
revive us, and we will call on your name.  
<sup>19</sup>Restore us, Lord God Almighty;  
make your face shine on us,  
that we may be saved.

This is NOT even REMOTELY what the disciples want to hear. But Jesus puts a twist on it that is easy to miss at first. In the Hebrew Bible, Israel is the vine, the vine that so often disappoints the farmer. In this passage, though, Jesus is the vine, not Israel. When the Psalmist wrote about the son of man, the man at your right hand, he was asking God to less their king, and to bless them. Jesus says I am that person, that king, that leader.

That’s the context. But what about the content? Jesus starts with the warning, like any good vineyard metaphor: the Father will cut off the unproductive branches. He’s about to go away, and he wants them to know what to do when he’s gone, how to keep growing when he’s not there in person to correct their weird ideas and to settle their disputes and tell them the next thing to do. More than that, he tells them how to flourish spiritually, but flourish is too churchy a word. He is telling them how to be amazing people, how to walk on water, how to be ten feet tall, how to be the kind of person people can’t forget, who makes a difference.

And this is why I think God wants us to study this passage right now, because we all crave this. It may be number 19 on our list of hopes and desires below “I hope my kids don’t break any more bones” and “I would love to get a good night’s sleep twice in a row” and “I hope I win the lottery so I can afford college and retirement.” But it’s there and when we aren’t just trying to survive, we may remember that we once dreamed of having lives that are remarkable.

There are four key themes in this passage which can be brought out for discussion:

1. Pruning: The Father *wants* you to grow and bear fruit. Jesus doesn’t mention the water, the sunshine, but rather the pruning. The disciples were about to be “sifted,” to face personal loss and disillusionment and shame. They were going to be pruned. Jesus wanted them to know that this was not a sign of God’s disfavor, but rather his

love. Similarly we face pruning. The early church writers interpret this to mean persecution (Justin Martyr—“though beheaded, crucified, thrown to the wild beasts, and chains and fire and all other) and purges (Chrysostom)

<i>Jesus and the Father</i>		Jesus and us	
5:19: <i>the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing (also 14:31). 5:20: the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does. Yes, and he will show him even greater works than these, so that you will be amazed</i>	The Son obeys and imitates the Father. The Father shows the Son all <i>He</i> does.		
5:26: <i>For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself (also 6:57)</i>	The Father gives life to the Son		
	The Father and Son are united in love		

**Extra questions and observations:**

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