



# VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH

## SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

### Abiding in Christ Through the Power of the Spirit

John 15:1–17

Joe Denner | January 1, 2023



If you've been with us for the last few months, we have been taking an interesting trek through the book of Ecclesiastes. We have been talking about and considering the whole idea of "the good life." We've heard about and observed a lot that the Preacher (Solomon) shared with us about the different ways people lived in vain and empty ways that certainly do not reflect the good life.

There's honestly a lot of hard stuff and the Preacher in some ways seems to make the good life a bit elusive. So with several weeks to plan and prepare what to share with you this morning and with Ecclesiastes in the backdrop of my mind, one of the things God has put on my heart is to talk about the concept of abiding in Christ. So I want to share with you something that God has taught me, something that God continues to teach me—and that He has to continually remind me of—about an essential element of truly living the good life.

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Let's start with defining the good life. How do we define the good life? I think one of the ways we do that is by looking at the first question of the Westminster Catechism: "What is the chief end of man?" What's our main purpose? Why are we here? What's this all about, our being created in the image and likeness of God? The answer in the Catechism is, "The chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever." Amen?

That's why we're here. That's what it's all about. So with that in mind, we're going to read John 15. We'll read most of the first 17 verses, so please follow along while I read. I want to point out two things.

- Number one, this is in the portion of the New Testament, in the Gospel of John, that we refer to as the Upper Room Discourse. These are literally the last hours Jesus has with His closest followers and friends before He goes to the cross. This is His last pre-resurrection opportunity to engage with His disciples. So I think He chooses His words very carefully.
- Second, I ask you to listen carefully to what the main point is. What is the driving thing that Jesus is trying to teach His disciples in these moments?

Let's read together in John 15:

<sup>1</sup> I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup> By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. <sup>9</sup> As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

Then move down to verse 16, where He closes this section by saying:

<sup>16</sup>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. <sup>17</sup>These things I command you, so that you will love one another.

As I've been meditating on this passage for many years, the thing that jumps out at me in terms of what Jesus most wants His disciples to hear is "abide." Now, Jesus makes it clear in verse 16 that the reason He chose and appointed them was so they would go and bear fruit, and that their fruit should abide. Then also look back at verse two. There it says, *"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."* So not only is there this idea of abiding, but there's this idea of fruit bearing that's going on in this passage.

Continuing on:

<sup>3</sup>Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>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.

Verse eight, *"By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit."* Let's be clear about one thing from this passage: God wants a lot of fruit. God is looking for fruit. God has designed this whole system so that there would be a lot of fruit-bearing going on. It's woven all through this passage and because of that we see that God wants glory.

If we're not careful, here is where we often get into trouble. We hear that God wants fruit, so we run off and try to start producing fruit. We try to figure out all kinds of ways we can produce fruit. Then, once we start producing fruit, we try to figure out all kinds of ways we can produce even more fruit. After that, we try to figure out how we can produce more fruit better and faster. At least that's the way we do it here in the U.S. "Better! Faster! More!" We create organizations. We create processes. We hire, recruit, select, train and equip people, wanting to also apply that to creating all of kinds of fruit. But in doing so, we often miss an extremely essential point Jesus is trying to communicate in this passage about the means and method of producing fruit.

So in this morning's message, it's all about the method and the means. It's all about how thus fruit is actually going to come to fruition. My desire is to help us understand what Jesus is trying to teach His disciples about this all-important subject. Friends, if we get this wrong, the consequences can be devastating. But if we get this right, if we really hear the voice and call of Jesus, the outcome is oh so glorious!

## The clear order

First, we want to look at the clear order. Jesus lays out an extremely plain and clear order in these last moments He had with His precious friends. In verses four and five, He gives us this clear order: abide, bear fruit, God gets glory. Let's be clear about this. Abiding is first and foremost. That's the start of this whole process. Abiding, then fruit, then glory. No abiding, no fruit. Thank you for the amen because this is really important. No abiding, no fruit, no glory.

If you're a child of God this morning, and you believe what the Westminster Catechism says—that the chief end of your life is to glorify God—then you want to abide, bear fruit and have the Father be glorified. That's what this is all about. That's the clear order. It's important that we don't get things out of order, because it's very easy for us to do that. As ambitious, desiring servants of the Lord, we want to go out there and bear plenty of fruit so God will get plenty of glory. But so many times we forget to abide which is the key to this whole thing. What we have been called to do is abide, then when we abide, there will be fruit and when there is fruit, there will be glory to the Father in heaven. That's essential.

So to help us, Jesus gives us an illustration of the vine, the vinedresser and the branches. Let's look at this analogy for a few minutes, because it's really important. It helps us understand the roles and responsibilities in this system God has created.

### The vinedresser is the owner

We're going to start a little out of order and look at the second character in the story, the vinedresser. Jesus says in verse one, *"...and my Father is the vinedresser."* The vinedresser is the owner. He owns the vineyard, so everything in the vineyard belongs to him. All the vines belong to him, all the branches belong to him, all the fruit belongs to him. All of it.

The vinedresser's primary responsibility is to monitor and maintain the vine and branches—the branches in particular—in order to get the maximum amount of fruit out of his vineyard. That's his responsibility. Then ultimately when this vineyard is bursting with fruit, the vinedresser gets to enjoy the fruit of his labor and he receives all the glory.

### The vine is the source

Then we have the vine which in this case illustrates Jesus. Jesus says, *"I am the true vine..."* There's a key word I want you to remember here. This is one of the most important words in this analogy—source. Jesus is the source of life and fruitfulness. As a matter of fact, in one of Peter's earliest sermons in the book of Acts, he actually refers to the Lord Jesus as the "author of life." Jesus is the source of life. God created the world through Christ, the Word, Who was with Him in the beginning.

Notice that Jesus calls Himself "the true vine." I think the reason the adjective "true" is inserted here is that in the Old Testament God refers to the nation of Israel as His vine and His vineyard. Jesus says now, "I am the true vine. I am the ultimate culmination and fulfillment of all that Old Testament imagery, shadow and analogy." So the vine's job is to be the source. As the source, the vine conveys or sends the vital nutrients and elements, both to and ultimately through the branches.

### The branch is the conduit

I'm going to get a little bit ahead of myself, but it's really important to tie this together. Notice that I used the words "to" and "through." The vine sends or conveys the vital nutrients to and through the branches, because the branches "bear" fruit. It does not say that they "produce" fruit. So what's that about? Well, the Greek word "bear" does not mean to generate, manufacture or produce. It simply means to hold up. It simply means to display. So you and I are divinely created display cases. We're divinely created branches to just display the fruit that the vine produces. Keep that in mind; it's super important.

The vine contains and possesses everything necessary for the production of fruit. The branch is just a vehicle. The branch is just a conduit. We've got to remember this because no vine and no connection to the vine means no fruit. We can have all the branches we want, but if we don't have the vine, we have no fruit.

I don't know about you, but there are times when I want to be the vinedresser. There are times when I would like to be the vine. The vinedresser gets to prune. Maybe there are some people in your life you'd like to prune. Sorry, that's not your job; that's the Lord's job. He's the vinedresser. We'd love to be the vinedresser or the vine, but He says, "No, no, no. I have the perfect role for you. You're the branches."

We get to be the conduit that God wants to use to bear much fruit for the glory of His name. This is the clear calling of this passage. This is the clear command, the encouragement, and I would even say the invitation that Jesus gives: "Be the branches and just abide."

Before we move on, let me repeat what I shared earlier: abiding, fruit, glory. No abiding, no fruit, no glory.

## The central operation

If we are not bearing fruit, it's easy for us to think, "Oh man, I need to bear some fruit. Like, I've got to get out there and work harder. I've got to try harder. I've got to sacrifice more." Then we run off to try to produce fruit on our own, forgetting that Jesus said, "Nope. That's not your job. Your job is to abide. Your job is to stay put."

So let's take a deeper looker at this word abide. This word appears seven times in verses four to seven. For those of you who don't really study the Scriptures, or who maybe wouldn't consider yourself to be scholarly, that might have just gone over your head. Repetition has done that many times in my life, yet the more I've learned, the more I realize that when the Holy Spirit uses that level of repetition, God is up to something. He's saying, "It's really important to abide." Not only does He say it seven times in these three verses, He says it again three more times in verses nine and ten, in a slightly different context about Him and His Father.

So what does the word "abide" mean anyway? Abide means to remain, continue, stay put. If you think about it, the disciples had been walking with Jesus. They had been with Him. Mark 3:14 says He called and appointed twelve apostles *"so that they might be*

with him.” So over these last three years, this group of men and women had been with Jesus and now He’s saying, “Stay put. Continue.”

It’s interesting that when He says this to them, they’re seated around a table, reclining at a table, which means they’re leaning on one another. Having a meal together in the ancient Near East was an extremely intimate thing to do. You didn’t just do this with anybody. Jesus is with this intimate group and He says, “You see what we have right here? Continue right here, connected to Me, united with Me. Remain. Stay put.”

### **Abiding begins with surrender.**

So here’s the key takeaway I want you to think about this morning. This is huge. This is really, really important, and this is a lesson I’ve had to learn the hard way. I’ve learned that abiding does not come through brute force. Abiding does not come through sheer will. That’s not how it happens. Abiding does not come through good works or from any other kind of human, fleshly manufactured thing. Abiding only happens one way: it comes from a life that is surrendered and yielded to God the Holy Spirit, the third member of the Trinity. Peter and Paul, at different points in their epistles, also refer to the Holy Spirit as “the Spirit of Jesus.”

If you have been born again and belong to Jesus Christ, you have been filled with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit resides in you; He is the agent of Jesus Christ in you to keep you connected and allow you to bear fruit. So the Holy Spirit is important. Now, the beginning of our surrender is when we say, “Jesus, You died in my place. You are the Lord of my life. I surrender my life to You.”

Earlier this morning we celebrated, recognized, acknowledged and remembered the fact that Jesus Christ died for each one of us. We surrendered everything to Him which has an incredibly important and ongoing aspect to it. It involves a day-by-day, moment-by-moment, repeated decision to simply yield ourselves to the filling, control and power of the Holy Spirit. Look with me for a moment at Romans 8, an all-important passage on this subject. We don’t have a lot of time to go into this, but if you think about it, Romans 6-8 is a mini-treatise inside this larger treatise of the Apostle Paul. It’s all about salvation, struggle, sanctification and freedom. In Romans 6, we find out that we need to surrender our life to Christ, we need to be born again, we need to be baptized.

Then in chapter 7 we wake up and find Paul struggling with this. “I don’t do what I want to do. I do what I don’t want to do. I can’t do what I want to do; all I can do is what I don’t want to do.” Then he gets to the end and here’s the key to freedom, friends. The transition at the end of chapter 7 into chapter 8 is critical. Paul is not saying in chapter 7 that we are left to ourselves. Rather, he ushers us into chapter 8 which is the solution to the struggle. It is the solution to the crisis of faith that we may experience after we come to Christ. The solution is living in and by the power of the Holy Spirit. Look at Romans 8:1: *“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”* Let’s just stop and say, “Praise the Lord!” There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Thank You, Lord.

Verse two says, *“For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus.”* Notice that there’s no condemnation for those who are in Christ. There’s freedom for those who are in Christ, freedom from the law of sin and death.

Verse three explains, *“For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us”*—not by us, but in us—*“who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh”*—in the power of, in the mindset of the flesh— *“set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to”*—in step with, in the power of— *“the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.”*

Let’s go on here:

<sup>6</sup> For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. <sup>7</sup> For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot. <sup>8</sup> Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

<sup>9</sup> You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. <sup>10</sup> But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. <sup>11</sup> If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.

This is the key. The Holy Spirit will bring those dead bones in us to life. It is the only way we can live. It is the only way we can abide. We can't remain in Christ just because we try harder. It's about surrender.

Let's look at Romans 6 for one final thought from Paul on this topic before we go back to John 15. This whole thought begins in Romans 6, but I encourage you to read Romans 6, 7 and 8 together to see the fullness of what God is calling us into by abiding in Christ through the power of the Spirit.

Let's start with Romans 6:12 for context: *"Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body..."* Going back to Ecclesiastes, we think, "Man, there's sin reigning all over the place." But Paul says to us as believers, *"Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body," why? "...[T]o make you obey its passions."*

<sup>13</sup> Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. <sup>14</sup> For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

So this idea in verse 13 is the key. To "present" is the same word as "yield." It's the same word we've been talking about: "surrender." What Paul is saying is that we are to do this on a daily basis. The tense in the Greek here is an ongoing, repetitive action. This is not, "I got saved, thank You Jesus; now I'm going to go live my life the way I want to." No, it's an ongoing presentation. It's an ongoing surrender of all my members. What are your members? Your members are your hands, feet, mouth, ears, eyes. What are you letting in your eye-gates? What are you letting in the ear-gates? Where are you allowing your feet to take you? What are you putting your hands to? He says, "Don't present, don't yield, don't surrender your members to sin, but rather surrender them to God as weapons." One translation actually says, "as weapons of righteousness."

Paul said in Galatians 2:20, *"I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."* Dear friends, this is the life God has called us into: abiding in the vine, staying connected to Christ.

### **Abiding must be nurtured.**

Abiding begins with surrender, but abiding is nurtured by the Word of God and prayer. As we expose ourselves to the truth of God, the Holy Spirit is allowed to come in and change our minds. He changes the way we think about ourselves, about our neighbors, about the world, about God. God's Word is a two-edged sword, able to do surgery in each and every one of us and make us think the way He wants us to think (Hebrews 4:12).

So abiding is nurtured by the Word of God. Abiding is nurtured by both personal and corporate praise and worship. What we're doing here this morning together is a way of nurturing our abiding. Our abiding is nurtured by serving the Lord as He calls and equips us to. It is also nurtured by some of the other spiritual disciplines you may be aware of.

Here's the key distinction. Abiding remains primarily and essentially a place of surrender. If the nurturing thing becomes the main thing, we've lost the thing. Some people read their Bibles just to check the box: "I've got that done." No, no, no. Put yourself before the Lord. Surrender yourself. Say, "Father, speak to me through Your Word. Change my mind."

It's the changing of your mind that's going to lead to the changing of your life. It's not just gutting it out and saying, "Man, I've got to do better at that." Think about Scriptures like 1 Corinthians 13, where it talks about love. Love is patient. Love is kind. Love is all these things. Or think about Galatians 5, listing the fruit of the Spirit. We look at those things and think, "Man, I've got to do more of that patience thing. I've got to do more of that goodness thing. I really need to be more kind." No, no, no, no. It is not a to-do list. Galatians 5 and 1 Corinthians 13 are not to-do lists; they're fruit evaluation lists. If those fruits are absent, it's not time to try to be more this or that; it's time to repent and abide, because the Holy Spirit is the only One Who is going to give you the power to love like you need to love. The Holy Spirit is the only One Who can give you the power to be patient the way you need to be patient. The Holy Spirit is the only One Who can give you the self-control you need to avoid temptation. Don't try harder; surrender and abide.

## The certain outcome

With this last point, I want you to be encouraged. There is a certain and inevitable outcome. If we abide in Christ, there's going to be fruit! It's guaranteed. The vine guarantees it. "You stay connected to Me and you will bear fruit. Not only that, but you will also bear much fruit." Why? Because the Vinedresser is going to see you bearing fruit, so He's going to come along and prune you. He's going to cut away the unproductive parts of the branch that are holding you back from bearing—not producing, but bearing—more fruit. Pruning can be really, really hard. I know I've been through some pruning in the last year and a half, yet God has been so faithful. God has been so tender and so kind. I can't say that it hasn't hurt.

Some of you older folks like me are familiar with the name Charles Stanley. He shared this fun story about when he lived in North Carolina, the area of the country where there are a lot of vineyards. One day he decided to go out and visit one of his parishioners. He happened upon this guy as he was pruning in his vineyard. He was just hacking and hacking and hacking and hacking at this branch. Charles couldn't help himself. He said, "Stop! Stop! You're going to kill that tree!" The vineyard owner looked at him and smiled, saying, "Pastor, you stick to preaching, and leave the pruning to me."

That story has impacted my life deeply. There are probably times when you feel like you're going to die and you don't know if you can take any more of God's pruning. The Father says, "Hey, you stick to abiding and leave the pruning to Me. I love you. I have a plan for you. I've designed, created and redeemed you for the very purpose of bearing fruit." It's the inevitable outcome.

If we don't abide, the outcome is also inevitable. No matter how much we try, no matter how much effort we put in, there will be no lasting fruit. Remember what Jesus said in John 15:16? "*I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide.*" Remain. Continue.

So this morning, dear saint, dear friend, I just encourage you to learn what it looks like and what it means on a daily basis, moment by moment. You may have hit the wall dozens of times in a day, thinking, "God, I can't. I can't be patient. I can't be kind. I can't figure out this problem." Yet God is just saying, "Surrender. Give it to Me and I will bear the fruit in and through you that I desire." Amen?

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All Scriptures quoted directly from English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

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