
Tonight we are going to be talking about a critical aspect of abiding in Christ which if it is not present in our lives then we know for sure that at that moment in time we have trusted ourselves to someone or something other than Jesus Christ.

I don't know about you but it has taken me a while to really get a feel for this whole abiding thing. It is not that the concept is complex; after all, Jesus only asks us to trust ourselves to Him and cling to Him for everything. But as I have learned more about what that looks like in my life, I have also discovered that I have an amazing capacity to trick myself in to believing that I am abiding and walking in the Spirit when I simply am not. Our old nature is so dark and so devoid of goodness that it can actually convince us that things that are not of God are from God. It even seduces us to cover up our underlying motives of selfishness—what's in it for me attitudes—and pride, as well as our self-centered and self-protective thinking, in all manner of Christian behavior and Christian dealings so we can still sleep at night. I have learned that our capacity to deceive ourselves must never be underestimated.

But because of our propensity to be deceived, God has given us one tell tale sign to know if we are actually abiding in Christ and that is the *quality* of our relationships with our brothers and sisters in the Lord. It is in the context of our relationships where we find the ultimate litmus test of whether or not we are really walking in the Spirit of God.

Now don't be deceived, this "*quality*" of relationships which I am referring to has nothing to do with whether or not we are hanging out and getting along or doing cool stuff together, or even gathering together at church or at Thursday night prayer; rather, it has everything to do with whether or not God is using us as a vessel to pour out His mercy, grace, compassion, tenderness, reproof, correction,

hope, longsuffering, patience, and jealous love on those whom God has appointed for our lives.

John 15:12-13

"This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you."
Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.

In ***John 14:23*** Jesus said that all those who love (Agape) Him will do what He says, so the natural result of our loving Jesus will be that we obey this commandment to love one another with a love that is best demonstrated when we lay down our life for our friends. It is in this one area, where we are commanded to “Agape one another,” that all we have learned about abiding and trusting ourselves to Jesus comes to a practical head. It is in the context of our relationships where the rubber meets the road in a very real and practical sense for it is in our relationships where all is laid out bare and exposed for everyone to see.

However, before we get into a discussion about what this kind of love looks like in action (and what it does not look like) let’s review the basic dynamic that must be in place in order for us to Agape each other. I say this because if we know the truth, focus on the truth, and compare the choices we make with the truth, then it will be much harder for our old sinful nature to lead us into selfish self-centered deception where the “*quality*” of our relationships will be a far cry from what Jesus desires to see in our lives.

Therefore, in order for us to have this command to “Agape one another” fulfilled through us, we must align our lives and our thoughts with the following:

1. We must abide in Christ in order to even have access to God's Agape love. This means we must trust ourselves to Jesus. We cannot play games in this regard. If you want this commandment of love to be fulfilled in your life, you must let Jesus be Lord of your life. You have to be willing to come to Him and involve Him in every detail of your life. Some of us think that God is our big universal muscle-guy and we get to call on Him to handle the big jobs—those that we have decided are a little too big for us. But for the most part, day-in-and-day-out we are more than comfortable with God staying in the background as we try and manage and control our own life (which ironically I have never met anyone who has done a very good job of keeping their life in control).

Now, this way of thinking is not entirely irrational. In large part we maintain control over our lives because we don't like the paths which God has led us down and we think we can do a better job of managing our life than He does. But *Psalm 25:10* tells us that: "all the paths of the Lord are lovingkindness and truth to those who keep His covenant and His testimonies." So if we are willing to trust Him, He promises that every place He leads us will be filled with Him—as He is love and He is truth. Which means that if He chooses to walk us down a road of difficulty it is only because He loves us and wants us to know Him, to trust Him, and to experience some part of His character and nature that we have yet to experience.

But understandably we don't like that kind of contingency hanging over our lives—even if it is for a good purpose. We are much more comfortable with a god who only promises blessing, which, if you think about it, is why the notion that we can control our lives is actually a very logical and rational response to having to deal with an intangible and unpredictable God.

But I want you to focus intently on this next statement as it is a critical concept related to abiding. When you accepted Jesus in to your life, you did not accept Him

into your mind. Your relationship with God was not established on the basis of logic and reason but on belief. Besides, He came to live in your heart but, according to ***Romans 12:2***, to *transform* your mind. He wants us to learn to make choices that are not based on logic, reason and worldly wisdom but to make choices based on the character and nature of God and the wisdom that comes only from Him (which often from our perspective, and the perspective of others, is quite illogical).

I have said this before but it is worth repeating. The only time we really find God dealing with us on the basis of logic and reason is when He is trying to convince us of our sinfulness and our need to trust ourselves to Him. With regard to our sins, He basically says, “come on, let’s just look at the facts, they are incontrovertible—you’re a die-hard sinner and you and I and everyone else knows it.” We see this quite clearly at the beginning of the book of Isaiah.

Isaiah 1:18-20

"Come now, and let us reason together," says the Lord, "though your sins are as scarlet, they will be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool." If you consent and obey, you will eat the best of the land; "but if you refuse and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword." Truly, the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

In this passage, God makes a rational plea to our mind in order to convince us of our need for Him. He wants us to agree with Him that our sins drape us like blood but He can make us white as snow—clean and forgiven. This is truth we can logically understand. We can also understand the promise He gives of blessing

verses cursing based on our choice to agree with Him. But that is as far as logic will take us, for the choice to actually believe God is not a logical choice but a choice of faith—it is a choice to trust yourself to an intangible God that has chosen to reveal Himself largely through sinful men and through His Son Jesus who came down from heaven and was 100% man and at the same time 100% God. I think we can agree that none of this is rational or logical at all. We see this dichotomy quite clearly in Romans 10.

Romans 10:9-12

That if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. For the Scripture says, "WHOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED."

What comes from our mind through our mouth is a confession of truth (Jesus is Lord) but it is based on what we have believed about God, which is an issue of faith and an issue of the heart.

So let me circle back around to the point. During the times when you try and control your life (in any way, shape, or form) and determine the best paths that you should walk, and when you trust in your ability to manage the day-to-day details of your life, then it is clear that you are not abiding. Your relationship with God has regressed to one that is essentially equivalent to an unbeliever (not in substance but in form). You are trying to deal with God on the basis of logic, reason, and your limited earthly wisdom verses His divine character and nature which He has

revealed to you. We have all done this and each of us know how frustrating it is when we try to relate to God on the basis of our reason; He just does not work that way and He does not cooperate with our demands. This is the reason why so many of our relationships are not marked by God's Agape love, but by a selfish humanistic love.

In order to have the command to "Agape one another" fulfilled in our lives we must learn to deal with God based on His character and His nature regardless of whether it makes any practical sense to us. And I have to warn you, Agape love rarely makes sense because God's thoughts are not our thoughts and His ways are not our ways. As the heavens are above the earth so are His ways higher than our ways (*Isaiah 55:8-9*). But know this, His love and the pathways that He determines for our lives are always rooted in relationship and always based on His desire that we know Him fully and experience Him completely.

But God is so big and so much more than we could ever imagine; therefore, His love takes so many shapes and forms that from our perspective it is entirely unpredictable. That is why it is an issue of the heart. We have to choose to believe that He loves us no matter what is happening in our lives. We have to choose to believe that He is in control of everything and that nothing happens to those that are His absent His permission. We have to choose to let Him have the ultimate authority over our life and to relinquish all that flows from our puny, limited, and entirely inadequate earthly wisdom.

A perfect example of how small we make our God when we use logic and reason to direct our lives is that we don't live as if God is even interested in the minute details of our lives. As I said before, we may bring Him into the big issues, but what about just having a conversation with God about everything all the time. *Psalms 37:23* says: "The steps of the godly are directed by the Lord. He delights in

every detail of their lives.” You got that? He is interested in every detail of your life and actually delights in them. This must become to you an issue of the heart and you must let your mind be *transformed* by this truth.

I was talking with a guy this week about his job and I asked if he brings God into the midst of it. I am not trying to embarrass him, especially since most of us do this, but he pretty much said no. I explained to him that God invented engineering and knows way more than he could ever know and, if he asks, God might just be willing to share with him some of His engineering wisdom. But he will never know if he never asks.

The reason God is interested in all aspects of your life is because He wants you to relinquish control to Him and trust Him with everything. He will not take it from you but He will gladly receive it. And remember, nothing can be left behind; nothing can be stuffed in a pocket, so to speak, just in case you might need it later. Nothing is to be left to your judgment; everything has to become His. In order to abide, you have to choose to believe that He is the one who gets to decide what goes on with your life and you do not. But again this is a choice that you have to make. You are the only one who holds the power to turn it all over to Him.

2. We need the joy of the Lord to have the strength to love. Jesus commanded us to abide in Him so that His joy may become our joy and that our joy will overflow from our lives. When we come to truly believe how much God loves us it is amazing the fountains of joy that flow through our lives. There is nothing quite like coming to the realization of the depth, length, height, and width of Jesus’ outrageous, unending, and unlimited love for you (although it is so great we can never really fully grasp it). I am only recently learning to love being loved by God (and not resenting the way He chooses to love me), and it is producing within me His joy.

This joy that He brings into our lives, however, is not just so we can have a cool experience, but Jesus gives it with intentionality. His joy is a provision which enables us to love those that would otherwise be unlovable. You see the grace of God, which flows from His love, always targets the unworthy!

Nehemiah 8:10 says that the joy of the Lord is our strength. Thus, when we are filled with the joy of the Lord, we will have the strength to love people and believe me it will be needed. Most of the time, people do not “deserve” to be loved, at least not based on a logical or rational response to their behavior (this is why God does not want us to make choices based on logic and reason, but on faith).

After all, people are so into the “Me” it is ridiculous: love me, love me, love me (of course, love me in the way I want you to love me) is the cry of our hearts. It’s sickening how selfish and self-centered we can be. Yet, God’s irrational love is constantly reaching out to those who are fixated on themselves simply because He knows how badly they need Him and how badly they need to be loved. And guess what? He wants to love them through you and me. But God never asks us to do anything without providing for us the means to do it.

If it was not for God infusing in us His joy, we would be so beaten down by people and their love for the “Me” that we would not be able to function. We would become disillusioned, disappointed, lose hope, and lose all desire to keep giving ourselves away to others. We have all been there with each other; you know what I mean.

But Jesus gives us His joy so we can approach the people He has appointed for our lives with the same intentionality in which He approaches us: to love those that don’t deserve it. It is His joy that enables us to just let things pass by and to brush off what would otherwise offend us, insult us, annoy us, hurt us, and tick us off.

His joy is our provision so that we can be ok within ourselves knowing that our validation, our identity, and our personal constitution do not depend upon others, but on the God who outrageously loves us.

The presence of His joy is also a reminder as to why we must daily—in everything—stay so close to Jesus and simply be willing to let Him love others through us. He will do His part and love through us; we just need to stand in the strength of His joy and make the choice, by faith, to let Him have control.

3. We must believe that without Him we can do nothing.

In order to be an instrument of God's Agape love, we must believe that we cannot do it on our own and every attempt on our part, even to love someone, will crash and burn. All the deeds that we do, no matter how well intentioned, how nicely they are wrapped in Christianity, or even how well received by others, that are not Jesus living through us (as a result of our abiding) are filthy, rotten, and will over time will wreak havoc on our lives and the lives of others. We are all quite familiar with the damage that comes when we try and do things our way. Remember, apart from Him we can do nothing—so don't hesitate, invite Him into your everything!

4. We must believe that we are loved with an outrageous love!

Jesus said that He loves us in the same way that the Father has loved Him. If we look to the way Jesus related to His Father, we can begin to understand how we are to relate to Jesus' love for Jesus trusted Himself entirely to the Father's leading and direction for His life. Jesus looked only to the Father to meet His tangible needs (physical needs, emotional needs, relational needs, and spiritual needs) and this is how we are to be in relationship to Jesus.

We are to look only to Him to lead us, guide us, provide for us, and fill us. Alternatively, this means that we are not to look to others to fill us. We are not to try and take from others to get what we think we need. Our relationships with others are NOT to be built on a required exchange (tit for tat; I will give as long as I am receiving what I want from you) but on the freedom to give because you have been filled and the freedom to receive because you have learned to love being loved.

To live this way, we have to believe that people, in and of themselves, have not been designed to meet our needs. Rather, we have been designed to have our needs met through Jesus (and here is the illogical conundrum) in large part as He lives through people, through our brothers and sisters in the Lord. If we are willing to believe this truth, the entire dynamic of our relationships will be changed; they will become less and less about the “Me” and more and more about knowing and experiencing Christ and his love through each other.

Christ in each of us. This is why we can love as we are loved. Further, what is great about this love is that no matter how much we give it away we will not become drained. If we abide, He will always fill us with more and more of Himself. And like joy, His Agape love is not something He gives to us as a gift; rather, it only comes with Him. Therefore, as we let Him have more and more control of our lives, we will, by definition, be filled more and more with His Agape love—and He will be entirely free to lavish it upon others according to His desires. Christ in us—this is abiding and our resource to His Agape love!

John 15:12-13

"This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you."
Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.

This commandment to love is in the present active tense. This means that all our interactions with our brothers and sisters in the Lord are to be based on His Agape love. However, this is a choice we must make. This brings us back to a concept that we have discussed many times but which I know has not sunk down into the depths of our being. And that is this: if we are not being active in our faith then we are NOT acting out of faith. And the Bible is clear, whatever is not of faith is sin (*Romans 14:23*).

Thus, there is no middle ground of passivity where we just live our life and do our thing, there is only an illusion or shall say a delusion of this middle ground where we think we are ok because are not doing anything “bad.” Probably the best way to say it is that whether you know it or not you are either active in your faith or you are active in wrong belief and unbelief. It is an either/or concept without exception. This is a hard truth and a pill that most people do not want to swallow.

Consider that Jesus said we are to love as we have been loved. His love for us is in the aorist active indicative tense which means that from beginning to end—from before time and what will extend throughout eternity—He actively loves us. He has never stopped and He will never stop. It is just how He is toward us and there is nothing we can do to impact the depth, height, length, and extent of His love. This is how He desires us to love and, by the way, our love is to be with the same level of intentionality by which He chooses to loves us.

Now this love is epitomized when one lays down His life for another. When I read this verse I usually think of Jesus' great sacrifice and this passage begins to slip through my fingers as if Jesus was only talking about some rare opportunity under massive religious persecution where we can give up our lives for another. But when we limit our minds to Jesus' extreme example, we minimize the potency of this verse and I think we miss the very heart of this passage. Practically speaking, one of the best elucidations of this concept is found in Philippians 2 where Paul makes it very, very simple.

Philippians 2:3-4

Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.

So in a very real and practical sense, laying down your life for another is about setting aside your selfishness and self-centered thinking and prioritizing the interests of another—even when they otherwise would not deserve such consideration. Let's consider some of the ways we can do that.

How are you around the house? Do you take care of your responsibilities in a timely way or do you just leave things until they become a problem? Do you leave things for others to do that you could do for them? Do you have little consideration for how your mess impacts others or in the alternative if you are one who has to have everything clean and in order, how your compulsive behavior impacts others? Are you aware of what is happening with your roommates, housemates, or family members? Do you regularly think of ways to lighten their load?

How are you with your money? Do you see it as your hard earned money that is first and foremost for you? Do you ever stop and consider that if God lifted up His finger of protection from your life that your ability to earn might just disappear in front of your eyes? Do you see your provision as a gift from God and do you seek what God might want you to do with your money understanding that you are just a steward of what belongs to Him?

How are you with your time? Is your time reserved for what you want and what you think you need? Do you easily allow your time and your agenda to be interrupted by others or do you guard and protect your time as if it is your most precious possession.

When you talk with people, do you make a conscious choice to focus on them or is your mind on a million different things (namely yourself and how you think they perceive you)? Do you give your best attention those that you like the most and give just what you feel you “have” to give to those with whom you are really not all that in to? Do you take up most of the air in the room and do you find a way to turn every conversation back to something relating to you? Do you seek to let others talk and explore what is happening with their lives? Are you sensitive as to when it is appropriate to dive in deep or when it is best to keep things light and breezy?

Are you too fixated on your hurt, your circumstances, and the problems in your life that you do not really care about the pains, the hurts, and difficulties that some else might be experiencing, especially when their troubles are “nothing” compared to your troubles? Do you see when others are in pain but are either too afraid or too “busy” to do anything about it? Do you even care? Do you even notice?

Have you forgotten how gracious and compassionate God and others have been with you such that your expectation for others is out of balance? Do you think people should be at the level of maturity where you are at even though God has just begun the work or is in the early stages of drawing them into Him? Do you get easily annoyed or have a trite and condescending attitude with others?

Do you desire to be in right relationship with others such that you are willing to repent and apologize regularly even for those little things that you know you did that hurt someone? Do you have to be proven wrong before you will apologize? Do you always argue or deflect when someone approaches you with something you have done that might not be right?

Do you let go of a wrong or do you hold on to it until it is made right? Do you punish people and withhold communication, affection, and so on when you are displeased with them? Do you freely forgive as you have been forgiven? Are you patient with others even though they keep blowing it in the same way over and over again? Do you feel the need to always have to confront and have a “talk” about everything that someone has done that hurts you or do you ever just take it to Jesus? Do you give others the benefit of the doubt based on the “quality” of the relationship or do you still look at them with suspicion and doubt? Do others somehow always seem to fail you?

Do you love to talk to others about what someone has done merely cloaking your desire to emote, judge, and condemn with some feigned Christian diatribe about being worried for them because you think they are walking in the flesh?

Are you willing to get your hands dirty with the lives of others or are you just a watcher and a talker? Are you ever willing to carry someone when they cannot walk and help them work through their stuff even though you might be tired or

would rather be at the Sun or some other fun place? Are you willing to let them get their hands dirty in your life or do you keep everything that pertains to you close to the vest?

Do you rejoice with others when God blesses them or do you harbor a little bitterness because you are not experiencing what you want out of life? Do you desire what others have? Do you desire to be in the relationships that they are in? Do you wish you could have the talents, gifts, looks, or capabilities of others believing that it will make you “important” and “valuable” in the eyes of others?

Do you relish the freedoms that God has given you even when others are being hurt by your actions? Does the exercise of your freedoms ever prevent you from even being aware of what is going on with others?

Galatians 5:13-15

For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF." But if you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

Half the time we do not even know the ways that we bite and devour each other all because we are not being intentional in our love. Our heads are dropped and our eyes are focused on ourselves (it could be on our fun, our pleasure, our relaxation, our need to escape for a while, our rights, our comfort, our misery, our pain, our despair, or whatever) and we are simply not aware of what is happening around us. We find out later that someone was hurt and we act all bummed out, but the reality

is that if we are not intentional in our love then there is more than a good chance that someone will get hurt.

For example, I have seen this situation happen too many times. People get together and they want to have a good time and chill out a bit and they start to drink and sometimes they drink just enough that they are only able to think about themselves and the good times they are having; they are not clued in at all to what someone else is feeling or going through much less what God might want. As a result, they are in no position to be an instrument of His love.

I am sure if I thought longer and harder I could come up with more thoughts that highlight how often we deal with each other out of selfishness and empty conceit rather than with humility of mind regarding others as more important than ourselves, but I think we all get the point.

Now, I know that if I were to have a one-on-one with each of you that everyone of you would say you want this command to Agape to be fulfilled in you. So here is our challenge for the week. I encourage you to be intentional. Write down on a piece of paper (or put in your phones) ***John 15:12-13, Philippians 2:3-4*** and ***Galatians 5:13-15***. For one week meditate on these verses every morning before you start your day. Carry them with you so you can be reminded of these truths during your day, and then review it at night to see if you really trusted yourself to Jesus or if you were living in a Christian deception.

If you find that you were trusting in yourself and your relationships reflect that reality, then just stop, attempt to understand why, and then simply choose to move forward in active believe. That is all you have to do. No big drama, just give yourself to Jesus and do this every day multiple times a day. Before long, you will

find that you will be so connected to Jesus—all the time—that your life will just flow with His love.

But if you are not paying attention, if you are not aware of what is happening, if you don't stop and consider the "*quality*" of your relationships, then you will probably just continue in your wrong belief and unbelief all the while thinking you were doing it right. Let's not be such dullards. Let's always be intentional and always be talking to Jesus asking Him to help us trust ourselves to Him so we can love as we are loved. Let's be willing to lay down our lives for one another in a very practical and real sense considering others as more important than ourselves. This is the way of His love!

Let's Pray