
John 15:4

"Abide in Me, and I in you."

I thought we should spend a little more time on this idea of abiding; after all we are commanded to abide in Jesus so it is something we definitely need to understand. But for many of us this word, this concept, is too amorphous, too "Christian" to have any true meaning in our practical lives.

I would bet that almost without exception that the first thing that comes into your mind when someone tells you to abide in Christ is some connection between abiding and your need to read your Bible more, pray more, sin less and so on. It is always easier to focus on what we must "do" instead of how we are to exist. But that is just so wrong! Abiding is a word that describes an amazing concept that is fundamental to our living as children of God. So tonight we are going to try and put some meat on the bone, so to speak.

First of all, in the Greek the word "abide" simply means to stay in a given place or, in the context of this passage, to remain in continual and ongoing fellowship with Jesus. As we covered last week, our relationship with Jesus is never at risk—we are secure in His hands and He will protect us for a salvation to be revealed in the last days. Therefore, what we are talking about is only our fellowship with Jesus—our ability to remain in a place of continual and ongoing connection and intimacy with Him as a person.

But for many of us, just because we cannot physically see Jesus we have a really hard time connecting to Him as a person and so our relationship with Him is more "religious" in nature, involving religious acts and things, than it is personable. We do not deal with Him as if He is right here all the time waiting for the invitation to

become enmeshed in all that we do. We don't talk to Him as if He is a person that already knows everything about us and therefore knows exactly what we need, the path we should take, the people we should be in relationship with, the words we are to speak in any given situation, the places we should go, and the things we should do. We don't talk to Him as if we really believe that He will talk back to us and will truly lead us, guide us, and disclose to us His will for our lives. We don't talk to Him as if whatever we ask for in His name He will do. Sometimes to us Jesus is less of a person and more of a concept which is just as amorphous as the concept of abiding.

However, in order to understand what it means to abide, we must first believe that Jesus is a person with whom we can have a real living day-in-and-day-out moment by moment relationship. In perhaps what were His final words to those who were gathered around as He ascended into heaven, Jesus said that we can be absolutely sure and fully convinced of this one thing: "I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (*Matthew 28:20*). And *Hebrews 13:5* says that He will never leave us or forsake us.

Therefore, we are supposed to live in such a way where we are always impacted and always moved by the presence of Jesus in our lives. The fact that He is not physically touchable is merely an issue of perception and has no impact on the reality of the fact that He is with every believer. Jesus is always with us and always touchable in terms of our mind and our soul; besides, as He told us in *John 13:20* He desires to invade our lives in such a tangible way that when people meet us they know they have had an encounter with the resurrected Jesus.

I want us to consider some of the ways that the Bible describes the resurrected Christ and I want you to notice that every description of Him is tied to how He, as

a person, is in relationship with us and He is not described as some amorphous entity or being that is busy attending only to the mysteries of the universe.

- He is our High priest (*Hebrews 3:1*)
- He is our mediator (*1 Timothy 2:5*)
- He is our intercessor as He lives to make intercession on our behalf (*Hebrews 7:25*).
- He is our Advocate with the Father (*1 John 2:1*)
- He is the one who has personally guaranteed the new covenant and the promise of our inheritance (*Hebrews 7:22*)
- He is the faithful and true witness (*Revelation 3:14*)
- He is the deliver (*Romans 11:26*)
- He is the prince of life (*Acts 3:15*)
- He is the judge (*Acts 17:31*)

Even though you cannot see Jesus or physically touch Him, based on these descriptions, He is obviously active in our lives all the time—whether we know it or not. Jesus just desires us to get to the place where our physical perceptions do not drive our reality and we not only know all the ways in which He is active but we personally experience His unconditional and continual touch on our lives.

So if Jesus is a person, and abiding is not about “doing” for Jesus but about “being” with and experiencing Jesus, then we still must understand what abiding practically looks like and how it is even possible. But let me warn you, as with all

matters of faith, it is going to come down to choosing to believe the truth and betting your life on the truth. So let's focus on what it is that God wants us to believe and live. I believe the key is found in John 15:9.

John 15:9

"Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love."

The love which Jesus has gratuitously lavished upon us provides the very foundation of our relationship and the basis for our clinging to Him. "Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you." Can you imagine? The love that is shared amongst the Godhead is the same quality and quantity of love that Jesus shares with us. Simply unbelievable! Therefore, the first thing we must know and believe is how big and how all consuming His love for us really is. It is unconditional, continual, and limitless and therefore something in which we can always depend and always find rest.

Romans 8:31-39

What shall we say about such wonderful things as these? If God is for us, who can ever be against us? Since he did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won't he also give us everything else? Who dares accuse us whom God has chosen for his own? No one—for God himself has given us right standing with himself. Who then will condemn us? No one—for Christ Jesus died for us and was raised to life for us, and he is sitting in the place of honor at God's right hand, pleading for us.

Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death? (As the Scriptures say, "For your sake we are killed every day; we are being slaughtered like sheep.") No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.

And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The continual, unconditional and limitless presence of His love is intended to give us strength in weakness, hope in our despair, joy in our suffering, and the ability to make it through this life, no matter what gets thrown at us. This passage in Romans tells us that we are to never doubt the love of God, or for that matter the kindness of God, even though the things in our life might not be going the way we want them to go. In fact, if we are to understand the scriptures appropriately and truly let them have *authority* over our lives, we are to believe that everything that happens to us is always an expression of His great love for us—always!

I know this is really hard to swallow. It makes for good Bible talk, but practically, emotionally, intellectually, it is very difficult to settle with. This is our battle of faith. This is where the rubber meets the road in terms of our ability to abide in His love.

The enemy has told us to filter our view of God through our circumstances. If things are going well, we believe we are being “blessed” and being loved on by our Father. If, however, things are difficult, filled with trouble and distress, we obsess not on His love but on our pain and all the reasons why we don’t have what we want. This kind of thinking always leaves us confused. We begin to wonder where God is, why He is doing this to us, and why He is not providing for us in the way we think He should. But equating the comforts of this world and what we want with the love of God is not only a waste of time it is foolishness. It is a big fat emotional lie that the enemy feeds us in order to destroy us. It is a lie that never leads to rest but always leaves us emotionally unstable.

God’s love can never be separated from our circumstances—whether good or bad. In fact, all that He allows to come into our lives is intended to somehow, someway, draw us closer to Jesus and further help us recognize our need to cling to Him and hold to Him with everything. Graham Cooke put it this way: “What God could easily prevent in His power He allows in His wisdom.”

You see as a wise vinedresser God is always busy tending to you. There are times where He lets you just grow and extend your branch with new offshoots here and there and you begin to bear fruit and life seems so wonderful and alive and you are able to truly enjoy Jesus. Those are wonderful times and I love it when God has us in that place. But unfortunately, we start to think that is how life and ministry are supposed to always be. But remember, God loves us and knows what we need and when we need it and He is always first and foremost about our learning to abide in Him. I hate to tell you this but He is really not all that concerned with our being busy for Him.

So there are times where the vinedresser sees that some of the branches you extended are just too thin and are not stable enough, and maybe the fruit, while

plentiful, is not big enough and tasty enough. So He starts to prune you back. He cuts you here and cuts you there. Sometimes He just trims you back a bit but other times He cuts you all the way back to the vine; and boy does it hurt. During those times, and they often last quite long, He actually does not expect you to bear any fruit at all; rather, He just wants your connection to the vine to become thicker and more secure. And He becomes quite aggressive at accomplishing this purpose in your life.

As the gatekeeper over our lives, God always uses our circumstances to effect this pruning process. In His infinite wisdom, He allows all manner of things, that we would never otherwise want, to come into our lives and to go out of our lives (including ministry, friends, associations, activities, possessions, and so on). In fact, He even allows the enemy great latitude to come against us so that we will learn to hold on to Jesus and to trust only Him with our lives.

But because we don't really understand this process and are not settled in our souls with its necessity, we tend to fight the vinedresser. We want to stay in that place where we are branching out and bearing fruit and we associate that life with being connected and pleasing to God. But again, it is a lie! What pleases God is that we let the reality of His love penetrate deeper into our being where we are willing to trust Him regardless of what He allows or does not allow in our lives.

Keep in mind, Jesus was on this earth for 33 years and God only allowed Him to branch out and bear ministry fruit for 3 of those years—or a mere 9% of His life. Then at the peak of His ministry fruitfulness He was cut all the way back. How is that for a perspective on how God views life and ministry?

“Jesus loves me this I know” just might be one of the most powerful refrains ever written. However, to truly “know” the love of God is so far beyond our intellect; it is an issue of faith—it is a matter of trust.

John 15:4

"Abide in Me, and I in you.

Notice the symbiotic and mutual relationship described in *verse 4*: abide in me, and I in you. Another way of saying this is that as we abide in Him He will be abiding in us. Or, as we give room in our hearts for Jesus to live, He will occupy that space and make Himself more and more at home in our hearts. In his prayer for the church at Ephesus, Paul explains it this way:

Ephesians 3:16-19

I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources he will empower you with inner strength through his Spirit. *Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him.* Your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong. And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is. May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God.

Our satisfaction, our contentment, our peace and our stability in this life of trouble comes from experiencing and being rooted in the love of God. It is through

pruning that we learn to dig into Jesus and trust Him more. And it is through our experience of the love of God, the kindness of God, and the mercy of God that we become filled with the life and power that comes only from God. But notice that the key to experiencing this love is our willingness to *trust* Him—trust that He really does love us—for as we trust He will make Himself more and more at home in our hearts.

You see Jesus never forces His way into our lives. Rather, He lets His love convince us that there is no other way to live. Our Father the vinedresser is always working to persuade us to choose to rest in His love. He does this because He does not want us to be tossed to and fro by every wind and wave that comes against us in this life (whether good or bad); rather, He wants us to be thoroughly convinced that His love is the only thing that will bring continual satisfaction and peace into our lives. That is why the nature of His gift of love and the effect in our lives is the same. This means that because His love is unconditional and continual its ability to continually satisfy cannot be impacted by anything external to us. This is where supernatural inside-out living is possible! As we abide in His love, He will abide in us, and we will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God.

With His love being this big, this broad, this all consuming and extreme, I have to ask, why would we want anything but His love to fill and dominate our lives? Why wouldn't we want to abide in His love—trust in His love? Why do we resist the vinedresser's pruning? Why do we let our circumstances determine whether or not we are ok and doing well?

As I was thinking about these question for my life, and thinking about my dealings with many of you, I realized that although we may want nothing more than to be hidden away in His love, there are still many things that *tempt* us not to

trust in His love—many *wrong beliefs* and *un-beliefs* which prevent us from continually experiencing the power and protection of ongoing fellowship with Jesus. So I want to talk about some of those things.

1. Many of us do not draw our worth solely from who we are in God. Even though *Colossians 3:3* says that our life is hidden with Christ in God, most of us live as if our life is defined by what we do, what others might think of us, whether or not we are successful, how much money we make, how cool our job is, how “Christian” we are able to act, the kind of advice we are able to give others, how many friends we have, how many people depend upon us, how together our family is, and so on.

This list of how we try to find our worth and our identity continually mutates based on who we are with, what is going on around us, and what expectations there are of us by others. Simply said, if we think we are doing it right and if we are getting the right feedback or response from others we tend to be ok with our lives and how we are choosing to live. But if everything becomes upside-down and inside-out and our relationships are filled with conflict or separation, we become very unstable—which of course means we were never stable in the first place; it was all an illusion. We were just a house built on sand; or a branch not truly connected to the vine.

When we try and find our validation in anything or anyone other than Jesus we birth all sorts of rotten fruit in our lives: insecurity, paranoia, obsession, desperation, arrogance, self-righteousness, racial, gender and social prejudice, self-loathing, all manner of self-protecting and self destructive behaviors, and of course we drip with self love and selfish behavior.

Further, the problem with this way of living is that all things come and go: success comes and goes, wealth comes and goes, looks come and go, health comes and goes, relationships come and go, people's opinion of you comes and goes, and even your own assessment of yourself comes and goes. But imagine, despite what anyone thinks, despite what is going on in and around your life, the God of the universe has declared that you are so valuable that He was willing to give up His life so you can have His life. There is a kingdom parable that goes like this:

Matthew 13:45-46

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls, and upon finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

Guess what? You are that pearl of great price and Jesus was willing to give up all that He had in heaven to come to earth as a man just to purchase you. Once here, He gave up His life, His friends, and the entirety of His earthly ministry so that you can experience His love and enjoy a deep and intimate relationship with Him. And guess what? He did this when you did not deserve it and had done nothing to earn it; He did this while you hated Him and were completely given over to sin (***Romans 5:8***).

Just try and fathom this truth: Jesus loves you so much that He who had never ever experienced sin became sin on your behalf so that you might be free from the bondage of sin and death and stand in His righteousness (***2 Corinthians 5:21***). Jesus had always been perfect and holy yet He took upon himself every murder, every lie, every rape, every blasphemy, every deceit, every emotion of hate, every fleshly indulgence and every indiscretion just so you can know His love.

With this as your truth, as your reality, who cares about what you do, how much money you have, how many things you possess, how popular you are or are not, how good looking you are or are not, how many troubles afflict you, how unfair things have been in your life, how much you have sinned, or how “righteous” you might be able to act, it is all worthless in comparison to the way God loves you. Just imagine God looks down from heaven at you and He just adores you. He is a person in love.

2. Many of us are deathly afraid of failure. Our fear of failure may have a lot to do with how our parents have dealt with us or just how we have been conditioned by the way the world system rewards us; but, regardless of the cause, we are deathly afraid of failing. This is never more real to us than when we think we have disappointed or might disappoint those in our life whose opinion we value so heavily—those in whom we find a big part of our validation. The funny thing is that our fear of failure usually causes us to react in extremely unnatural ways and we usually end up with the very results that we were trying to avoid.

What we don’t often stop to consider is how our fear of failure is tightly wrapped in our pride. We really don’t handle very well the idea of anyone thinking less of us than we want them to think. So we try so hard to control everything in our life in order to preserve the image we think we have created and it seems the harder we try the more we fail and the cycle of self-imprisonment continues on yet another day.

But one truth that I have had to learn during my time of pruning is that I need to just accept the fact that in my flesh I will fail in every way shape and form imaginable for I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is in my flesh (*Romans 7:18*). It does not matter how much success I have had or might have in the future,

the failure is inevitable because it is part and parcel of my old sinful nature. It is endemic to my human existence.

That is why the love of Jesus provides us so much comfort, relief, and security because it does not really matter if I fail; He still loves me. It does not matter who I disappoint; He is never disappointed in me. It does not matter how many times I do the same stupid thing over and over again; He died for them all. So I don't have to beat myself up when I fail, I don't need to shrink and hide, I don't need to live in shame, I don't need to be distraught with remorse, I don't need to withdraw out of embarrassment, and I also don't need to try and cover up my failure or excuse it with some lame rationalization; rather, I can be free to acknowledge my failure and be free to just move on in His love.

This is the beauty of the gift of repentance. I want you to think about what I am going to say next. Repentance is less about dealing with what you have done wrong as it is about accepting His goodness and His merciful love in your life so you can change your thinking about whatever it was that influenced you in the first place to separate from that place of absolute dependence upon Jesus.

For many of us repentance is a big process of feeling bad, feeling guilty, feeling unworthy and feeling like a total failure. In that place we come to God and act as if we need to beg Him to be merciful on us. But this is all wrong; it is a lie! He has been merciful! He has poured out His kindness on us! We are clean because of the Word He has spoken to us! We stand in His righteousness regardless of our failures because His love is unconditional, continual, and limitless! Therefore, instead of stressing out and fretting each time we fail, we can choose to just rest in the fact that God loves us more than we could ever dare to think.

3. Many of us don't realize that God is not bothered by sin. This is a truth that we must never ever allow the enemy or anyone else to distort. Jesus dealt with sin on the cross; therefore, having been justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (*Romans 5:1-2*). We have absolute peace; we are absolutely always acceptable to Him because of Jesus. This means that sin is no longer an issue between us and God. Sin was dealt with on the cross therefore He now never deals with us on the basis of sin, but only on the basis of His mercy, kindness, and love in our lives. He simply wants us to experience it more, have it more, love it more, and never depart from His love.

I have to ask you a few questions. Was Jesus punished enough? Did He suffer enough? Was He judged enough? Yes, Yes, and Yes! The Father punished Jesus and judged Him in your stead so he never has to punish or judge you. Thus, for His children, for those He has personally chosen to be His own, there is no longer any place for judgment, anger, wrath, condemnation, or separation.

Can you imagine? God is not put off by your failure, by your weakness, by your stupidity, by your sin, or by the frailty of your humanity. Rather, He sees what is missing in your current experience of Him and He gets busy to address those areas in your life. In fact, He is always tending to the branches so you can have more of Him in your life. He only wants you to learn to rest in Him and never again be tempted to trust in yourself, in the lies of the enemy, or in the world system.

4. Many of us don't realize that every command of God comes with His provision to obey that command. We studied this truth a couple of weeks ago when we studied the "obedience" of Christ and the command to love Jesus. He tells us to agape love Him however we know that only He can agape. Thus, it takes God, indwelling in our new creation, to love God. He also commands us to agape love each other; however, since He is the only one who can agape, He is the one who

obediently loves others through us. Why? Because everything originates in Him as He is the entire source for everything we need in this life.

Romans 11:36 says: “for from Him and through Him and to Him are all things.” Yes, even everything we need to be in relationship with Jesus He provides; we just have to choose to receive His provision and we do this by trusting ourselves to Him. If we trust Jesus, He will keep us connected to him; He will abide in us and we will remain in His love. And in this place of abiding we can deal with everything and anything that He allows to come into our lives. We will be able to stand in His power and His strength and be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God.

5. Many of us don't realize that Jesus was serious when He said that He will reveal Himself or disclose Himself to us. One great thing about abiding in Jesus and trusting yourself to Him is that you will start to see Him everywhere. It won't matter a lick to you that He is not physical; you will still be able to see Him—or be aware of His presence—all around you. You will see Him in your relationships, you will see Him in your circumstances, you will be aware of how His hand is moving the events of your life, and you will know that you don't have to panic and freak out. You will be able rest because you can see Him.

Do you remember the story in **2 Kings 6** about Elisha and His servant? Elisha was a prophet of God and he had a lot of enemies that wanted him dead. One day they found him and had completely surrounded the area where he was staying. Elisha's servant woke up and walked out of the tent looking forward to his first cup of coffee thinking that it was going to be a pretty good day and suddenly he was overwhelmed by the number of horses and chariots that surrounded them. But Elisha was able to see that those who were with them were more than those who were against them. Elisha saw the armies of angels—the horses and chariots of

fire—which protected them. Tell me, which of these two men do you think was able to be at peace and rest with their circumstances and kick back and enjoy their morning coffee?

Yes, Elisha definitely got a rare glimpse into the supernatural, but the point is that if your head is up and if you are looking, you will see God at work all the time. You will actually be able to see *through* your circumstances, knowing that the vinedresser is busy doing something with your life. You will no longer be stopped and hindered by your circumstances. In fact, as you experience Him more and more you will become increasingly aware of how He moves in your life and how He leads in your life. You will also learn how He talks to you. Remember, in *John 10:27* He said that His sheep know His voice.

Sometimes His hand will be very subtle and other times it will be so overwhelmingly clear, but either way what is so cool is that you are actually seeing Jesus. You will be filled with wonder, amazement, and thankfulness as you know that God is busy at work in your life. You may not always like it, but you will be more than comforted knowing that His hand is on your life and that you are safe, protected, and hidden away in His love.

This is our Jesus who gave everything to be in relationship with us. This is our Jesus who absolutely loves us. This is our Jesus who wants to abide in us. This is our Jesus who reveals Himself to us. This is our Jesus who wants to produce much fruit in and through our lives. This is our Jesus who gives us peace of mind and heart. This is our Jesus who provides everything we need to love Him, to obey Him, and to hold on to Him. This is our Jesus who talks to us, leads us and guides us down the paths He has chosen for us. He is why we *can* trust ourselves to Him and remain in His love. He is why we *must* trust ourselves to Him and remain in His love. Let's Pray