

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

## THE TRUE VINE

*"In these bodies we live,  
In these bodies we die.  
Where you invest your love,  
You invest your life."*

*-Mumford and Sons, "Awake my Soul"*

Some years ago, my nephew became enamored with a storybook app on his mom's phone. Like most toddlers, he soaked up most of the vocabulary immediately. But there was one word our family couldn't quite get: "stawk." He repeated it often—*stawk*, *stawk!*—leaving us to speculate what he was referring to. Stalk, perhaps? Stock? Then we explained that it was a bird. We'd forgotten that his storybook app had been produce "across the pond," as they say. He was saying *stork*—it's just that the British accent had rubbed off on him.

Modern western culture insists that true human fulfillment is found by looking within yourself. But it's our external worlds that shape and mold us. If my nephew's story tells us anything, it's this: That what you look at, you become. If our environment can shape our accent, consider just what else it might be shaping? That's why one of Jesus' central images is that of "abiding" or "remaining" in him. True human flourishing, according to Jesus, demands a lasting, daily connection with him, a pattern of dependence that transforms our character from the inside out.

### YOU ARE WHAT YOU'RE "INTO"

John's gospel contains the word "abide" more than any other writing in the Bible. On a literal level, the word "abide" or "remain" simply means to "reside" or "inhabit" a place or building. But both Jesus and John use the term to refer to a deeper relationship. So, for instance, God "abides" in Christ (14:10), and believers are elsewhere said to abide in Christ (6:56).

It's really not that mystical. In English, we use similar imagery. What's the best way to learn a new language? To be "immersed" in that language and culture, so much that you can't help but adapt to new patterns of thought and speech. To "abide" in Christ means to be truly immersed in gospel culture.

Or, more simply, we might talk of being "into" certain hobbies or interests. "What are you into?" we might ask new acquaintances at a party. And we might reply with things like: "Well I'm really into the Orioles," or "I've been getting into classic rock." This, too, is abiding.

Here's the real heart of the matter: Everybody abides in something. Everybody has something that they're "into," that they immerse themselves in, that dominates their time, budgets, and souls. And what you're into, you become—whether for good or ill. Even John's gospel specifies that you can "abide" in Christ, but you can just as easily "abide" in spiritual darkness (12:46).

In a now-famous commencement speech, David Foster Wallace explained to graduates of Kenyon College that "everybody worships something," and that what you choose to worship has a profound effect on the rest of your life:

"Everybody worships....And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship...is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things...then you will never have enough, never feel you have enough....Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly...Worship power, you will end up feeling weak and afraid....Worship your intellect, being seen as smart, you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out."

Everybody worships. Everybody "abides" in something. And what you abide in, you become, from your accent on down. That's why Christianity can never be a mere intellectual or theological exercise. It's about learning to cultivate a new set of desires within ourselves, desires that are nowhere more fully satisfied than in Christ himself. As James K.A. Smith puts it, "Jesus is a teacher who doesn't just inform our intellect but forms our very loves. He isn't content to simply deposit new ideas into your mind; he is after nothing less than your wants, your loves, your longings." If abiding in the wrong things leads to insecurity, weakness, and death, how much more will abiding in Christ yield the kind of life that Jesus has been promising?

## ABIDING IN THE TRUE VINE

These themes come into sharper focus on the night that Jesus was betrayed. John devotes much of the latter half of his gospel to the "farewell discourse," Jesus' final teaching prior to his arrest and crucifixion. Dallas Willard called this speech Jesus' "commencement address," since Jesus' disciples are about to be ushered into a new world and new challenges once their master departs. It's fitting, then, that Jesus invests time in preparing his disciples for his coming departure, and offering words of instruction and hope for the rough road ahead. After predicting Peter's denial, Jesus shifts gears to assure his followers that his imminent death would be to their benefit:

Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. And you know the way to where I am going." Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him." (John 14:1-7)

Jesus offers two key words of hope. First, that he's leaving "to prepare a place" in his "Father's house." It's natural to think he's referring to the afterlife, here, and that may be partly the case. But recall that

in John's gospel, "my Father's house" refers to the resurrected body of Christ (2:16). What is Jesus saying, then? That his coming death would prepare a place for his followers *in the body of Christ*. Jesus' death would be tragic, but it would be the very event that would allow them to experience unity in the gospel.

Second, Jesus affirms that he is "the way the truth and the life" and the only way to the Father. Again, it's natural to hear this primarily as a claim to religious exclusivity. That's true, to be sure, but in the present context there's no reason for Jesus to compare himself to other religious leaders. He seems more intent on communicating to the disciples that if they want to experience a relationship with God, then this becomes possible through Christ.

Jesus goes on to explain more about his coming departure and the arrival of the Holy Spirit—a subject to which he will return soon enough. Then, he rises, inviting his dinner guests to leave (14:31). It's possible that the teaching that follows happens there in the upper room as they get ready to leave, but it could also be that the remainder of the discourse occurs on the way to the Mount of Olives. It's pure speculation, of course, but it's easy to imagine how the lush greenery might have inspired Jesus' teaching on the vine and branches:

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. 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. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. 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. 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. 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. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. 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. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. (John 15:1-11)

How is Jesus "the true Vine?" Many modern countries have some sort of national symbol. For America, it's the bald eagle. For Russia, it's a bear. And for Israel, it was a vine. Jewish literature was teeming with references to the nation as a vine, delivered from Egypt and planted in the promised land (Psalm 80:8). Even coins from the period featured depictions of vines. As the true Vine, the purposes of God in Israel come to fruition in him. Everything that Israel was supposed to be, Jesus now is.

As the true Vine, Jesus' followers are intimately connected to him as the branches. Jesus doesn't describe the "church" as a building or a structure, but a vibrant organic relationship with himself as the source of life. To experience this life—to have the fullest expression of joy—we must "abide." We must learn to immerse ourselves in Jesus, to remain connected to the true Vine that promotes true fruitfulness and flourishing. The "fruit" of this abiding connection is the development and expression of Christian character. Do you want to be more loving? Then you must learn to abide in the one who lays down his life. Do you want to be more joyful? Then you must abide in the one whose whole life is marked by delight in his Father's purpose. In fact, Jesus says that if we're truly abiding in him, then we can "ask whatever we wish." That's a bold statement, but it actually makes

sense. Jesus isn't promising a blank check to get all our prayers answered. He's saying that when we consistently, deeply abide in him, then the things we want will mirror the things that God wants, and we can be more confident in our prayer life.

Jesus contrasts fruitfulness and faithfulness in dramatic fashion. Those who fail to abide are "thrown away" and even "burned." In context, he's speaking of total, eternal rejection—such as what happened with Judas, his betrayer. He's not suggesting that these individuals lose their salvation; he's saying that there was never any attachment to begin with. It's simply not enough to have a superficial attachment to Jesus. True faith demands a deep connection, without which there can be only death.

Second, Jesus speaks of those who bear fruit, but are "pruned." The image is of a master gardener pruning the branches of a fruitful plant so that it will bear even more. This isn't about the loss of salvation at all, but the discipline of God so that believers can experience even greater fruitfulness. Spiritual writer Henri Nouwen explains it this way:

"Pruning means cutting, reshaping, and removing what diminishes vitality. When we look at a pruned vineyard, we can hardly believe it will bear fruit. But when harvest time comes we realize that the pruning enabled the vine to concentrate its energy and produce more grapes than it could have had it remained unpruned. Grateful people are those who can celebrate even the pains of life because they trust that when harvest time comes the fruit will show that the pruning was not punishment but purification."

Many times the greatest seasons of our spiritual growth come during the greatest seasons of pain. Don't misunderstand; not every painful experience we endure is the result of God's discipline. Nor is every painful event "good" in any absolute sense. But in the hands of the master gardener, all things can work together for our good, and God can use these times of struggle to enrich us and shape us into all that we were meant to be.

## ABIDING IN THE GOSPEL

For Jesus, abiding lies at the heart of the spiritual life. But what does it actually mean to abide? Jesus makes clear that abiding in him primarily involves obedience to his commands:

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. 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. These things I command you, so that you will love one another." (John 15:12-17)

Jesus reiterates his earlier command to love (13:34). He clarifies that true friendship demands obedience. You cannot truly "abide" in Christ unless you're willing to conform your life to his. But it's impossible to abide in Christ through our own obedience alone. Martin Luther noted that to obey

God's commands without inward trust "other only makes worse idolatry and the most mischievous hypocrites on earth."

Abiding cannot depend on our own "sweat equity." It's not about white-knuckling our way through our spiritual lives, hoping that God takes note of our dutiful obedience. Abiding is about "standing on the promises of God," to quote the old hymn, and this brief passage makes note of two distinct gospel truths.

First, Jesus displays greater love in laying his life down on our behalf. His commands are not burdensome. On the contrary; if you want to experience true joy, true flourishing, you will find just that in embracing and emulating the character of Christ.

Second, and perhaps more significantly, Jesus explains that his followers were "chosen" and "appointed." "You did not choose me," he tells them, "but I chose you." Now, mind you, the relationship between divine sovereignty and human choice is no small controversy. But there is no Christian tradition that denies that you and I have been chose in Christ since before we were even born (Ephesians 1:4). We were literally made to abide. And the power to abide comes from a life saturated in the gospel of grace.

## ABIDING IN MISSION

Hopefully you noticed that Jesus specifically says that his disciples were appointed for a reason: to "go and bear fruit." The word "go" hints at a larger purpose than simple character development. It's a summons to mission. Bearing fruit therefore involves bringing others into abiding fellowship with Jesus.

With no small irony, this mission of love would not always be met favorably. On the contrary, Jesus anticipates that after his resurrection, his disciples would encounter no small resistance:

"If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me. If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have been guilty of sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin. Whoever hates me hates my Father also. If I had not done among them the works that no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin, but now they have seen and hated both me and my Father. But the word that is written in their Law must be fulfilled: 'They hated me without a cause.' (John 15:18-27)

This, too, says Jesus, is a fulfillment of God's divine plan. To identify with Jesus means that we identify ourselves with one of the most controversial and misunderstood figures in all human history. Sure, it's easy for modern western culture to embrace selected ethical teachings of Jesus: love your neighbor, judge not, and so on. But the minute that Jesus demands fierce, total commitment, the second that we describe "sin" and "righteousness" in absolute terms, the conversation shifts. In our culture's perspective, religious conviction has been the source of too many social ills. Writing in *The New York*

*Times*, Frank Bruni explains that while he respects people of conviction, the “debate about religious freedom” must also liberate “religious people from prejudices that they needn’t cling to...rightly bowing to the enlightenments of modernity.” In other words, Christianity is increasingly assumed to be socially repressive, even dangerous. If Bruni is to have his way, Christ’s followers have only two choices: change or be left behind.

Remember, John wrote his biography during an era when Christians were being actively removed from traditional places of worship. Jesus even alludes to this, offering his disciples reassurance in the face of unprecedented challenges:

"I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away. They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. And they will do these things because they have not known the Father, nor me. (John 16:1-3)

Jesus assures his followers that they will experience rejection only because he was rejected first. This is meant to be more than mere comfort. Jesus is reminding his followers that if they abide in him, they will not merely suffer *like* him; they will actually share in his sufferings. One modern writer puts it this way:

“[B]ecause Christians do not merely imitate, follow, or feel inspired by Christ, but actually live in him, are part of him, dwell supernaturally in a new world where the air they breathe is his Spirit, then for them henceforward suffering accepted in Christ must bring comfort, death accepted in Christ must bring life, weakness accepted in Christ must bring strength, foolishness accepted in Christ must bring wisdom.”

Abiding in Christ therefore aids us in mission, in that it helps us navigate rejection and hostility with greater ease. Why? Think of it this way. If I am loved, chosen, and accepted in Christ, then who else’s approval do I really need? The gospel liberates me from walking on eggshells around neighbors and skeptics, and to speak the truth in love—even when that truth offends them. Instead of worrying that I may offend someone, or even make them angry, the approval I have in Christ gives me the freedom to speak faithfully even in an age where Christian belief is assumed to be repressive or regressive.

## ABIDING IN THE SPIRIT

Perhaps most significantly, abiding in Christ is made possible through the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit. Earlier, Jesus had promised his disciples that by departing the present world, he would make way for the arrival of “another Helper,” a “Comforter” who would guide them as they carried out the gospel mission. He’s speaking, of course, about the Holy Spirit. Jesus is saying that the presence of the Holy Spirit would be even better, because the Spirit would provide the supernatural resources needed to fulfill God’s commands and mission:

I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: concerning sin, because they do

not believe in me; concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer; concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged. (John 16:7-11)

After the resurrection, the disciples receive the Spirit. According to Jesus, the Spirit would play a major role in mission, first by convicting the world of sin. But the Spirit would play a secondary role in further revealing the person of Jesus:

“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.” (John 16:15-17)

For those with a background in church, the mere mention of the Holy Spirit may conjure up images of sweaty revival services and miraculous works of healing. We don't quite find that here. Instead, we find a Spirit who serves as the mouthpiece of God, and the One who amplifies the person and work of Jesus Christ. J.I. Packer describes it this way:

“It's as if the Spirit stands behind us, throwing light over Jesus who stands facing us. The Spirit's message is never, 'Look at me; listen to me; come to me; get to know me,' but always, 'Look at *him* and see *him*, and see his glory; get to know *him*, and hear his word; go to *him* and have life; get to know *him*, and taste his gift of joy and peace.”

Abiding means trusting the Spirit's guidance. It also means trusting the Spirit to give us a renewed vision of Christ each and every day. The principle still applies: What we look at, we become. God's Spirit plays a role in fixing our gaze on Christ alone, and motivating us toward discipline and mission.

## STAY CLOSE

Our world is not exactly prone to “abide” in much of anything. On the contrary; we're much more accustomed to pay attention to what's “trending,” or the latest “breaking” news. Decades ago, Neil Postman lamented that the advent of the television fostered the development of the “peek-a-boo world,” one in which “this event, now that, pops into view for a moment, then vanishes again. It is a world without much coherence or sense; a world that does not ask us, indeed, does not permit us to do anything; a world that is, like the child's game of peek-a-boo, entirely self-contained. But like peek-a-boo, it is also endlessly entertaining.” It's worth noting that Postman wrote this critique long before the development of the social media newsfeed (!).

How can we abide in a world like that? It's easy to get distracted by the tyranny of “what's next.” There's always something that beckons our attention—and our devotion—as long as we “stay tuned” for what's next.

Or, we could abide in Jesus. We could stay close to Jesus. I'm not suggesting that we turn a blind eye to the world's problems. Far from it. Instead we look to Jesus as our ultimate source of peace, comfort, and justice.

Abide, Jesus says. Stay close.

When we hear about “breaking footage...” *Stay close.*

When we learn of another victim... *Stay close.*

When others’ opinions stir our anger... *Stay close.*

When our children are looking for answers, we tell them to stay close to *The Answer*, the Alpha, Omega, the One who promises that when his name is exalted, he draws all men to himself.

Stay close.