

# What Does It Mean To Abide In Christ?

a sermon in the series  
Normal Christianity: What God Intends For You

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John 15:4

*Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in Me.*

All of us who are truly believers have heard the clarion call, “Come unto Me!” The Holy Spirit as the Royal Ambassador of Heaven has granted that invitation to your heart. Oh, what a great invitation this is – to come and to know Christ! It is so wonderful, so awesome, that there is hardly even anything to compare it to. Why, the very call, the very invitation to know Christ is not just an invitation to come, but that invitation has the ability to enact within you a desire to come and empower you to do so.

When you remember seeing the Beloved for the very first time, how exhilarating, how powerful, how life-changing that invitation, “Come unto Me,” was! Today’s text, however, speaks of another call from our Lord. It is just as inviting as the invitation to come. It is equally clear, powerful, and attractive. It is the call, “Abide in Me.”

Since there really isn’t anything more essential than getting right with God, the call to come to God should have primary importance. But there is a danger, and I think modern Baptists for the last 100 or so years have committed this egregious error, in making the sum total of salvation the simple act of coming to Jesus. You may tire of hearing me say that and feel as though I am insulting your intelligence. But I need to keep repeating it, because within everyone’s heart is the scene of deterioration. In your own natural flesh is enough corruption to mislead us, misguide us, and deter us from this most important truth. But the call to come is also the call to abide. You can’t have one without the other.

We tend to think that when a man or woman is saved, everything else just isn’t quite as essential. I agree – nothing could be more essential than getting right with God! But what if being right with God does more than forgive you of your sin and make you a Christian? What if there is more to it than that? What if it includes the blessing of abiding? Stop and think with me: abiding does not save. “Abide in Me” is not a call to be saved, but you are saved to abide! This truth is glaringly absent in modern Christianity!

Christ calls us to come to Him not just to save us from our sin. Jesus calls you to come to Him-

self. Another way of saying it is Jesus calls us away from a master so He can be our Master. He delivers us from treasuring the vile and the wicked so that we can prize the ultimate Treasure: Himself. Jesus saves us from sin so that in sin's place you can have a relationship with Him. What grieves me so is that we make coming to Christ the end of Christianity. However you define coming to Christ, be it asking Jesus into your heart, walking an aisle, praying a prayer, this is the sum total of Christianity. But it isn't! You come so that you might abide.

I think many people have been set free from sin but they don't experience uninterrupted fellowship with Christ. They are true Christians – they have been rescued, but they have not been introduced to their newfound wealth. It's like being rescued from a fiery death, but now your home is gone and you have no place to go. You get by the best you can. Some of you are in that predicament spiritually! Many of you are trying to survive. You have been saved from sin, but you don't move in with Christ and there live. You think you must do the best you absolutely can as a Christian and survive. You know Christ promised to help, but the truth is you feel as though you're on your own.

How many of us have felt on our own? I will be the first to raise both my hands – I know what that is like. If you remember, I began this whole parable because after studying for nearly two months, God began to do something in me. So I am not so far from experiencing the reality of these truths in my life in a fresh and new way. I know what it's like to try to just do the best you can as a Christian and survive. Often released convicts feel the same way: they have been in prison so long that when they are released, they don't know how to cope with that.

I'm not contending that you can have your sins forgiven and still be the same – absolutely not! We are a new creation in Christ Jesus, and we have been given new hearts with new desires, love for righteousness and hatred for unrighteousness. But that in no way guarantees abiding in Christ. Victorious and abundant Christian living will not be automatic. It never is. God making you His child is so earth shattering, revolutionary and radical, you can't be the same. It changes you. But that does not guarantee you're going to be abiding in Christ and fruitful.

Certainly part of the equation is without that a new spiritual nature, you wouldn't even have a chance to live a fruitful life. But that alone is not enough to be fruitful; we also must answer the call to abide in Christ. Love for Christ should deepen with time. I look at newlyweds who think they could never be more in love than this time of life –but they don't know what love is! They think they do. But they will learn as time passes how much better their relationship will grow as their love grows.

When Jesus saves you, it is so good! It is so sweet; you never tasted anything like it. But sadly, the experience of almost every Christian is they look back on their conversion as the sweetest taste of God's love. Surely, it means the child of God has not learned how to abide in Christ. For if he had, he would have discovered vaster resources of God's love. He would not just taste, but would dine sumptuously. Friend, if you can only look back and remember enjoyments of the soul in time past, you have not been abiding in Christ.

Having said all that, we come to the very heart of this parable and our responsibility. Up to this point in the parable, Jesus has discussed the responsibilities of the vine and the vinedresser. But in verse 4, the emphasis is on the branches: we are to abide. What does that mean?

Aren't we already in Christ, and therefore already abiding? Evidently not. Abiding in Christ is something different than being in Christ. See what He says in verse 2. Jesus already establishes the fact that branches are in Him—"every branch in Me." Therefore, if abiding is the same thing as being in Christ, the command to be abiding would be pointless and moot. If abiding is the same thing as being in Him, why command it, if you already are in Christ? They cannot be the same thing.

So what is abiding in Jesus? That is the purpose of this message: to answer that question. We will deal only with the first three words of the verse: "Abide in Me."

## **An Analysis of Not Abiding**

First, let us analyze Christians who are not abiding. By doing that, we can establish what is missing in your life. That will give us a good idea of what abiding is. Why am I thinking that? I think it is excellent problem solving. For example, if a doctor is having difficulty diagnosing a patient's ailment, he must not look just at the patient's symptoms, because many maladies have the same symptoms. Fatigue, for example, can be caused by a lack of iron in the blood, heart problems, or sleep deprivation. A good doctor must take into account what is missing in order to define the problem. In other words, what is not working that should be working. If a certain chemical or hormone is not present then he can isolate the source of the chemical's production and examine why it is not being produced. Or if the patient is not sleeping adequately then he can pursue a course of finding out why quality sleep is missing. Look for what is missing and you will have a good idea of defining the problem.

I want to suggest to you that many of us here have some things missing. Let us look at those things, and maybe they will be clues to tell us what abiding is. Whatever abiding in Christ is, it must have something to do with our relationship with Christ. The term naturally points in that direction.

So, I want to look at things that should be in your life but aren't when it comes to relating to Christ. Because whatever abiding in Christ is, it must have something to do with relationship with Christ. The term naturally points in this direction.

## **Symptoms of Not Abiding**

Let's turn our attention first to the symptoms of not abiding. If one is abiding in Jesus Christ, certain things will necessarily happen in your life. If you fail to abide, they will be missing.

### **I. Fruitfulness**

Fruitlessness is the primary and major symptom of not abiding in Christ. This is evident from verse 4, "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me." If I'm not abiding then I will not be fruitful. To whom was Christ speaking? The Apostles. Friends, if the apostles can't be fruitful without abiding in Christ, how in the world do you and I have any hope to be fruitful? If I'm not abiding, I'm not going to be fruitful.

From this I can make at least two observations. The first observation is:

### **Being a branch and being a fruitful branch are two different things.**

Many have wanted to make this parable about conversion, or about what it means to be a Christian from the standpoint of justification. Justification, meaning being declared by God as being righteous and without guilt of sin. But this is not Jesus' thrust. He is not discussing what it means to be converted or how you can know if someone is converted or not. He is speaking to the eleven apostles who were already converted and committed to Christ. Judas Iscariot had already separated himself from Jesus and the other apostles. He had already defected and was in the very act of executing his and the Sanhedrin's plan to arrest Jesus. He is not warning the remaining eleven about apostasy nor is He reviewing what it takes to become a Christian. He is in his last hour with His disciples before being taken from them and crucified. He is doing nothing but prepare them for this event and give them the most essential instructions of how to live the Christian life after He is gone, and gone, meaning not just after His death but also His ascension.

He has made it very clear to them that He considers them already His and saved. In verse 2 He says, "every branch in Me." In verse 3 He tells them that they are already clean. It is to these clean branches that were in Him that He commands, "Abide in me."

The result of abiding is fruitfulness. He says, "the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me." Again in verse 5 Jesus says, "He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing." So, it is no doubt that fruitfulness is the result of abiding. Therefore, a Christian can be either fruitful or barren. And barrenness must be a symptom of not abiding.

My second observation is:

### **Fruitlessness means little to no exhibiting of Christ**

If you are not fruitful, then you are not exemplifying Jesus, for the fruit of the Spirit is the character of Christ in you. Now what should this tell us? If you are not bearing the image of Jesus in your own personality and behavior, then it must mean that you are not interacting much with the Savior. There is very little of His activity occurring in your life. You are not experiencing His dynamic life. You are stymieing His fruit-producing life in you. This is all it can mean.

What else is commonly missing in a Christian's life?

## **2. Joyfulness**

I don't hesitate to say that many good Christians are just not joyful as Christ intended. They remember the overwhelming joy they had when they were converted, but it's not like that now. Why should joy be associated with abiding? In verse 11 Jesus links His remarks about the parable to joy: "These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full." How many of you are simply joyless? You have little joy in Christ. It's not that you don't have a desire to have joy. You have a desire to be happy in Christ, but you're not. The Psalmist says about Jesus, our Lord and God, "In Your presence is fullness of joy; At Your right hand are pleasures forevermore." The reason you're joyless is because you are not interacting with joy itself, and joy itself is Jesus! Joy is not a byproduct that God gives you; it is Himself. If you want joy, you need to be interacting with Joy—Christ.

It's no wonder that you don't experience your God's joy. How can you? You feel that instead of God being joyful and pleased with you that He is most displeased. You walk with a constant sense of dread, a constant sense of condemnation. You think you are always a source of grief for God, as if you are His most problematic child. How could you have any joy if this is how you think and feel?

## **3. Contentment**

Contentment is also missing in many believers. This will manifest itself as boredom. Boredom is very much linked to joylessness. When one is feeling little to no joy boredom will occur, a boredom with the routine of life. You're always craving some new and exciting thing. I think this is one of the reasons why entertainment is so huge a part of people's lives. They're bored.

If you are bored, you must ask yourself why. What is going on that has led to this discontentment? The short and simple answer is that you're not finding Jesus fascinating. He is no longer stimulating your mind, heart or emotions, which, once again, means there is no real interaction going on between you and Him. Has Jesus become dull and boring to you, causing you to seek excitement elsewhere? Most addictions, be they chemical or sexual, it does not matter, are related to a lack of stimulation of heart, mind, and emotions. Why do people get into those situations? They were made to have fellowship with God. If that fellowship is being neglected, you will be driven to look for something else to bring contentment.

## **4. Faith**

Faithlessness is something that I see in so many. The lack of faith cannot be in any way tied to Christ being untrustworthy. The Christian knows that Jesus is absolutely trustworthy. The problem is not God can't be trusted; the problem is that the child of God trusts himself more than he trusts God. Now, why would I say that faith is missing when abiding in Christ is not occurring?

Because our Lord links faith and abiding, “If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you” (John 15:7). Answered prayer is a product of faith. Therefore faith must somehow be a component of abiding.

## **5. Love**

Yet another thing to be found missing in the life of a Christian is much love for Christ and others. In verse John 15:9, Jesus identifies abiding with love, “As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love.” I’m not accusing any Christian of not loving Jesus. I find that an impossibility. Every Christian loves the Lord. But the degree of that love can be shallow. We can certainly love very little. That is the issue: how much we love Him.

This is an abbreviated list of symptoms ailing many of you. You love Christ and have experienced His love, though the degree of that love right now seems very little compared to what it once was. You’re sure that you’ve had joy in God. You were not at all bored, but now you are; you don’t find Jesus as stimulating as at one time you did. And you would have never claimed to be a man or woman of great faith, but you know that right now your faith is not as strong as it once was, and you feel as though something is missing. You know there must be more to being a Christian than what you are living; you just don’t know what it is. You just keep hoping for this big, special moment when God comes on the scene—maybe you’re looking for an angel, or a burning bush, or a bright light or voice from heaven. Maybe you’re waiting for me or another preacher to dazzle you with eloquence or humor or logic. Perhaps you’re waiting for a glory to come down and fill your soul or lift you up. All you know is something is wrong.

What is your only resort? It is at this point that most Christians apply themselves to more religious duties and spiritual disciplines. They buckle down and get more active. But that will not work either. Spiritual disciplines and duties without the Spirit make you more discontent. If you leave here thinking, “I need to pray more, read my Bible more, and do more religious stuff; then I will be more joyful, content, loving and faithful.” No, spiritual disciplines don’t do that in and of themselves. They prove inadequate. Something is missing – what is it? It is one thing—you are not abiding in Jesus.

## **The Definition of Abiding and Biblical Synonyms**

Have you noticed that all the symptoms I mentioned in this message have nothing to do with actions? As you can see all of these symptoms have something to do with how we relate to Christ and not just behavior. In other words, the problem with these symptoms is not doing enough things but not relating to and interacting with Christ. It is relationship based.

So let us define “abide” as Jesus used it. Abide can be translated dwell, remain, continue, or stay. But what do those mean? We may hear those and think, “I must simply do nothing.” If you told a child, “Don’t move – stay right there!” you would expect the child to simply sit or stand there and do nothing. The idea is inactivity.

But inactivity is not what Jesus has in mind. He wants you to think of living together in close fellowship with Him. This is not a picture of doing nothing; it is rather about being involved with Him.. If I said to you, “I want you to remain with me,” that would mean you must follow me wherever I go. You must stay with me. That is the idea behind “abide.” It is not inactivity but activity.

In order for a branch to bear fruit it has to be in harmony with the fruit-bearing agenda of the vine. It has to be participating in the vine’s business of fruit production.

I’m not a big A.W. Pink fan. But he was a Christian and an author who I think can give us some value here.

To abide in Christ has always reference to the maintenance of fellowship with God in Christ. The word ‘abide’ calls us to vigilance, lest at any time the experimental realization of our union with Christ should be interrupted. To abide in Him, then, is to have sustained conscious communion with Him. To abide in Christ signifies the constant occupation of the heart with Him—a daily active faith in Him which, so to speak, maintains the dependency of the branch upon the vine, and the circulation of life and fatness of the vine in the branch.”

In other words, abiding with Christ is a real experience—a union with Jesus. Abiding is to be conscious of your oneness with Christ, and that uninterrupted. It is a word that speaks of interaction—an interaction that causes the fruit-producing life of Jesus to enter into you. Next week I will deal more extensively as to how this abiding is to occur. But for now, let me say, abiding is not automatic, hence the command. But it is not a work or burdensome labor in order to have fellowship with Christ. It is sweet fellowship. Are you daily, hourly, minute by minute in conscious realization of His abiding presence? Are you doing all that you do in light of his promise, “I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee”?

For the most part, the answer would be no. We don’t always abide. I’m still learning how to, not daily, but minute-by-minute have constant, conscious realization of His promise to abide with me. Your lack of joy, love, faith, contentment and fruitfulness is largely because you are not constantly conscious of His divine reality in you.

My sinner friend, if you can get anything out of this, understand that being a Christian is not a religious formality. It isn’t like getting your driver’s license. You don’t jump through hoops or check off lists on an application. Being a Christian is all about knowing and relating and experiencing and depending upon Jesus on an ongoing basis that deepens with time! Being a Christian is not about doing good to cause God to love you. No, you do good because you love Him. And you love Him because He first made you to experience His love for you. Salvation is personal interaction with God through His Son, Jesus Christ.

Let me give you a couple of synonyms of this word *abide*. In John 14:21, Jesus says the same thing, but He uses the word *manifest*. To abide in Christ is to have Christ manifested to you on an ongoing basis. Jesus said, “He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And

he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him.” Jesus is not saying, “Just do what I tell you and everything will be OK with you.” He says, “If you love Me, you will do what I want you to do because of your love for Me.” This verse is about relationship. That’s what abiding in Christ is: experiencing Christ as He continually manifests Himself to you. Be warned: it’s not always sensational or marked with drama, but there is interaction.

The last synonym is “being filled with the Spirit.” In the first message of the series, I said that there are basically only a few themes from in John 13-17 that Jesus is teaching. One of the primary themes He is discussing is the ministry of Holy Spirit to the disciples. He was assuring the apostles that the Holy Spirit would be to them what He Himself had been to them. He would not be with them bodily, but He would be with them in the person of the Holy Spirit, who would be their very lives. John 14:16-17 Jesus says, “And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may **abide** with you forever – the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you.” Did you notice the word “abide”? This is the language of relationship, the language of interaction.

*“But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you” (John 14:26).*

*“But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me. And you also will bear witness, because you have been with Me from the beginning” (John 15:26-27).*

*“However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you” (John 16:13-14).*

Interaction.

In conclusion, to abide in Christ is the same thing as being filled with the Spirit. To abide in Christ, as I have come to understand it, is to be desperately dependent upon the indwelling Holy Spirit, interacting with Him in such a way that makes you bear the likeness of Christ. In other words, it is a constant, conscious interaction with the Spirit of Christ.

You have now heard enough to know whether you are abiding in Christ. If you are not abiding in Him, not drinking in and receiving what the Spirit gives, not actively in fellowship with the Spirit of Christ, then let me plead and beg with you to humble yourself now and confess your disregard of this holy commandment to abide. Let this church corporately as well as individually cry out in much repentance, because in essence, we have forsaken the Living Waters to live by our own strength. We have tried to be both vine and branch. Amen