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The Gospel of John
XLIV. Abide in Me
John 15:1-17

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There has been a logical progression of thought in Jesus' address to His disciples beginning back at the start of John 14. In the first half of John 14, Jesus spoke of the extraordinary love of God for us – telling us that He is going to prepare a place for us in His Father's house forever.¹ And then, in the second half of John 14, Jesus laid out for us how we are to respond to this extraordinary love of God. We answer God's love for us with our own love for God. And how do we express that love for God? Jesus tells us that we do so by obeying His commandments.² And, grace upon grace, Jesus also then tells us that He will enable us to obey His commandments (which we could never do on our own!) by sending us a Helper, the Holy Spirit.³

So as chapter fifteen opens, the question remaining is this: if God's love is what saves us, and if the Holy Spirit is what enables us to love God in return, then what exactly do you and I bring to the table here? It sounds like God is doing it all for us – which, of course, He is. Both our salvation and our new life in Christ – our justification and sanctification, to use the theological terms – both come to us wholly from the grace of God. We are, after all, saved by His grace, and not by our own works. But, again, does that mean that we bring nothing whatsoever to our own salvation and sanctification? And so Jesus, in chapter fifteen, gives us the answer – which is “no.” There is indeed something you and I can do, indeed must do, if God's love and redeeming grace are to bear fruit in us. What is it that we do? Jesus tells us: *“Abide in me . . . As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love.”*

That is what we bring to the table of our own salvation and sanctification. We cannot save ourselves from sin and so earn entrance into the Father's house – but we don't have to. Jesus has taken care of that in His cross and resurrection. And we cannot, on our own, love God in return by keeping His commandments and becoming the sort of persons God wants us to be – but we don't have to do this on our own. We are given a Helper, the Holy Spirit, to enable us to do and to become what He commands us. But – this we can do, and this we must do, says Jesus: we abide in Him. We abide in His love for us. Ten times in our passage Jesus uses the word “abide.” *“Abide in me, and I in you . . . Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit . . . If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you want, and it will be done for you . . . As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love.”* Abide, abide, abide! This, says Jesus, is the work of a human being in response to the amazing grace and extraordinary love of God for us – we are to abide in Him and in His love for us.

But what does it mean to abide in Christ, to abide in His love for us? The most important thing to say about abiding is simply this: that it is not a passive state, but an active one. In other words, to abide in Christ does not mean that all we do is just accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior once upon a time, and then just rest in the laurels of that for the rest of our lives – job done, eternal fire insurance signed and sealed, pie in the sky will be waiting for us when we die. To abide in Christ does not mean that we come to Jesus, get water dumped on our heads or get our heads dunked under the water, and then it's all over and done – we never need do another “religious” thing for the rest of our lives. That is not abiding in Christ, that's just laziness. That's just ignorance. That's just abusing and misusing the amazing grace and extraordinary love of God – and is precisely the target of what Jesus is talking about when He speaks of branches cut off from the vine and bearing no fruit and good only to be burned in the fire. We are warned not to presume upon, not to take for granted, the extraordinary love and amazing grace of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

So no, to abide is not something passive, but active – it's something that we do; it is not a Laz-e-Boy of the soul for us just to recline in for the rest of our days. As the love of the Father, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the help of the Holy Spirit are all active in our lives every day, so our abiding in Christ is something active in our lives every day. It is something that we do, must do, daily – in response to the love of the Father, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the help of the Holy Spirit.

Brother Lawrence, a seventeenth century monk who wrote a little book that is now a spiritual classic, spoke of the active work of abiding in Christ in this way: he said is to “practice the presence of God.” That is the title of his little classic book: The Practice of the Presence of God. And in this book he emphasizes our constant need for God's help, and then bluntly asks, “*But how can we ask him without being with him? And how can we be with him without often thinking of him? And how can we often think of him without forming a holy habit of doing so?*”⁴ A holy habit of abiding in Him and in His love daily.

Brother Lawrence continues:

*He does not ask much of us – an occasional remembrance, a small act of worship, now to beg his grace, at times to offer him our distresses, at another time to render thanks for the favors he has given, and which he gives in the midst of your labors, to find consolation with him as often as you can. At table and in the midst of conversation, lift your heart at times towards him. The smallest remembrance will always please him . . .*⁵

For Brother Lawrence to abide in Christ is something that we do each day and throughout the course of each day. It is to “*practice the presence of God,*” to “*offer God your heart from time to time in the course of the day.*”⁶ And that is as good, and as helpful, a definition of what it means to abide in Christ that I think we can find. Abide in Christ – practice the presence of God daily. After all, practice makes perfect.

But as good as that definition is, we can't help but still want specifics – what specifically does it look like to abide in Christ, to practice the presence of God daily? Well, once again, Jesus

does not leave us lacking. In our passage, He offers us three specific practices for us to, well, practice in order to abide in Him. First is prayer. One of the most incredible grace notes in the passage comes toward the end where Jesus says, *“You are my friends . . . No longer do I call you servants . . . but I have called you friends.”* Jesus calls us His friends – a whole month of Sundays could be spent on just what an extraordinary gift that is. But for our purpose, let us say simply this: what is the most important aspect of friendship? Friends talk to each other. A “like” on social media from a “friend” is nothing like the real thing. Because real friends talk to each other. They have a real, and real-world, relationship. They share what matters to them, they share what they are struggling with, they share what they are rejoicing in. Friends share real world time and space with one another, they talk about what’s going on in their lives together – the little stuff, but also the big stuff because they have built up a relationship over time that can handle the deep stuff, the difficult stuff that is shared. Friends talk to each other.

And that, fellow friends of Jesus, is what prayer is – friends talking with each other. We make of prayer such a complicated thing. We try to devise formulas for how to do it best, we debate times and places and durations and forms of prayer in order to get the best results – as if prayer were nothing but a business transaction. But all prayer is is talking with Jesus our friend. Telling Him what is going on in our day, telling Him what is going on in our hearts and minds, sharing with Him the big things that we are facing, sharing with Him the little joys and frustrations that make up our ordinary days. Prayer is simply talking to our friend Jesus, sharing with Him throughout the course of our day. To abide in Jesus and in His love is simply to take Him up on His offer to be our Friend – and to do so routinely, even continually, as we go through our day. *“Tell God all that is in your heart, as one unloads one’s heart, its pleasures and pains, to a dear friend,”* wrote one of the master teachers of prayer, Francis Fenelon:

Tell Him your troubles, that He may comfort you; tell Him your joys, that He may [deepen] them; tell Him your longings, that He may purify them; tell Him your dislikes, that He may help you conquer them; talk to Him of your temptations, that He may shield you from them; show Him the wounds of your heart, that He may heal them . . . Blessed are they who obtain to such familiar unreserved [conversation] with God.⁷

“Abide in me,” Jesus invites us, *“and I in you . . . Abide in my love.”* We abide in Christ by talking to our heavenly Friend – prayer.

But Jesus also says that we abide in Him and in His love by also making time and taking effort to listen to Him talk to us. After calling us His friends, He then says to us: *“All that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.”* To abide in Jesus is to listen to the Word of God that He speaks to us. Earlier He had even said, *“If you abide in me, **and my words abide in you**, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.”* In other words – to cut right to the chase – it is to study, to pour over, our Bibles. To gain a working understanding of its contents, to commit portions of it to memory. To ponder and apply what it teaches. To discuss what it teaches with other Christians in Sunday School classes. To let the Word of Christ, the words He speaks to us through Scripture, dwell in us richly. That, too, is our work of abiding in Christ.

But I don't want us to hear this as a guilt-inducing harangue about finally getting around to blowing the dust off the cover of our Bibles and actually opening them up for a change. Because what Jesus is offering us here is not a burden, but a blessing – not a chore, but a chance to become more deeply grounded and more solidly set upon the firm foundation of the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. For to abide in His Word is not only to come to know the truth about God, but also to come to know the truth about ourselves, and about life in this world. People searching everywhere these days to find those truths – and we are sitting here with every truth we need to know right at our fingertips. To abide in Christ and in His love is to listen to Him speaking to us, to invest ourselves deeply in His words, and so build for ourselves a house on a solid rock rather than on shifting sands.⁸ A firm foundation able to stand up and take it no matter what life dishes out.

Like this story told by a pastor about visiting with a member of his congregation at her home. He found her busily embroidering a piece of cloth. The cloth had been stretched taut over an oval frame, allowing her to more easily work the needle through the cloth. And as they visited, she suddenly said, *"Pastor . . . I realized what's wrong with me – I don't have a frame. My feelings, my thoughts, my activities – everything is loose and sloppy. There is no border to my life. I never know where I am. I need a frame for my life like this one I have for my embroidery."*⁹ That's what it benefits us to abide in His Word. By listening to Him speak to us through the Bible, and so abiding in Him, we gain the necessary – and the correct – framework for our daily living. That which we need to stay on the Way, and in the Truth, as we live our lives in response to the One who is our Life.¹⁰

"Abide in me, and I in you . . . Abide in my love." The last specific Jesus offers us for what it means to abide in Him, our work in response to His, is worship. I suppose that in our passage it is more implied than stated – but it's certainly there. And weekly, faithful worship is certainly essential to what it means for us to abide in Christ. *"Greater love has no one than this,"* says Jesus, *"that someone lays down his life for his friends."* Jesus lays down His life for us, His friends, upon the cross. And worship is about remembering that this love of God for us is what it is all about – our lives, the world, eternity, everything. Worship is calling to mind again and again the great fact that, indeed, *"God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."*¹¹ That is what it is all about – everything.

But how easily the Monday through Saturday world makes us forget that this extraordinary love and amazing grace is what gives our lives their true meaning and right direction. So we come to worship on Sunday – every Sunday – to be reminded, to be reoriented to that miracle of His love and of His grace. We come to worship to rejoice and give thanks for that all-encompassing truth. We come to worship that we might abide in that true reality amid all of this world's false realities not just on Sunday, but also Monday through Saturday, and forevermore.

"Abide in me, and I in you . . . Abide in my love." That is our part in what God is doing for us, in us, and through us – *"Abide in me, and I in you."* For by abiding in Him our lives will indeed bear fruit. By abiding in Him, we will indeed be made fit for that room in the Father's house where we will abide with Him forever.

One last story. To me this is a beautiful picture of what it means to abide in Him – to practice the presence of God in all the ways Jesus has been talking about. A pastor was visiting a small congregation in Charleston. In this church, before worship started, the children would come into the sanctuary from Sunday School and sit down up front. Then, one by one, they would tell the gathered congregation what they learned that morning in Sunday School. The pastor writes:

That morning, a . . . twelve-year-old girl rose, and she said, “Our story this morning was about Enoch, and our text was, ‘Enoch walked with God, and then was not, for God took him.’” And then, explaining what she had learned about that verse, she said, “You know, every morning when Enoch awakened, he prepared to go out and walk with God. Everyday, he’d walk with God in the community . . . seeking to do the things that needed to be done.”

“But,” she said, “one day, when they were out on a long walk, toward evening it became dark, and God said to Enoch, ‘Enoch, it’s closer to my house tonight than it is to yours; why don’t you just come and spend the night with me.’”

And she concluded, “Enoch and God had walked together so long and had come to love each other so much, that they just decided to stay in God’s house forever.”¹²

“Abide in me,” Jesus invites us, and instructs us. “Abide in me.” Until that day when He will come and take us to that place prepared for us.

¹ John 14:2-3.

² John 14:15.

³ John 14:16, 26.

⁴ Quoted in Philip Yancey, Reaching for the Invisible God (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), p. 204.

⁵ Yancey, pp. 204-205.

⁶ Yancey, p. 205.

⁷ Quoted in Bob. W. Parrott, ed., Albert Outler The Preaching (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988), pp. 18-19.

⁸ Matthew 7:24-27.

⁹ Eugene H. Peterson, A Long Obedience in the Same Direction (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1980), p. 48.

¹⁰ John 14:6.

¹¹ John 3:16.

¹² Source unknown.