

“In Christ”: The Lost Art of Abiding

10.29.17

John 15:1-11



Reflection questions... [please consider the teaching notes, first, as a basis of your reflections]

“How do you understand Jesus’ message about ‘abiding’ in him? Wouldn’t it have been clearer for him to say, ‘Ok, everyone, let’s go over those commandments one more time?’”

“What are some of the practices that you have adopted which allow you to remain connected to Jesus? How do you keep them from becoming ritualistic and lifeless?”

“Where do you find yourself showing up in healthy ways? Where do you find yourself retreating/isolating in unhealthy ways? Are you ‘coming away’ or ‘running away’?”

“How are the ‘words of Jesus’ that remain in you actually beginning to create distance between your old self and the person that you are becoming?”

“Have you ever considered that your lack of obedience is not necessarily from rebellion, but simply a lack of trust?”

“Are there some places in your life, right now, where a renewed commitment to obedience might actually interrupt some unhealthy pattern, and create some history with God?”

“What if it wasn’t about waiting for faith to create something different in your life, but creating something different through faith?”

Teaching Notes...

It didn’t take me long in my budding relationship with Lynette to realize that “proximity” was a non-negotiable characteristic. But, it was not only proximity, but presence. Closeness.

I discovered that, when shopping with Lynette, the idea was not the closest parking space, nor the quickest access from point A (the lot) to point B (the produce aisle). It was about the ‘journey’; the ‘being with’. It was about not walking in front of her to clear a path. It was about walking next to her, holding hands, sharing the shopping venture. It was not a tactical endeavor, but a relational experience.

After the Last Meal with his followers, somewhere along the pathway (which, I believe, was in and of itself, a metaphor), Jesus directed their attention to the vineyard:

In Jewish tradition, the vine was a picture of God's people, Israel. He brought the vine out of Egypt, and transplanted into a more promising land (Psalm 80).

Jesus is saying that he is the *"true vine"*, in that he was everything that Israel (as God's covenant people) was meant to be; everything we, as humanity, were meant to be. Paul would argue that those who are now, "in Christ" (who identify themselves with him) are "grafted into this vine" (Romans 11). We have been adopted as part of God's true family and are discovering in our status as sons, the sense of acceptance and significance and destiny (future) that such a relationship is meant to ensure. *"What exactly is this fruit that God is expecting from us?"*

In Isaiah 5, the prophet clearly states that the fruit that God anticipated from his people, Israel, was "justice and righteousness." A right relationship with him, resulting in increasing measures of social, relational, and economic equity. In Galatians 5, Paul clearly links it with the very character of Jesus reproduced in us.

Jesus said, *"... if you remain in me, you will bear fruit"*.

It's just what live, healthy, connected branches do, without much effort. So, the issue for us is not the effort to bear fruit, but to remain in love.

(11) times in (17) verses, Jesus called his followers to "abide" in him. It's a statement that both reveals and obscures.

What Jesus called 'abiding' is a whole-life orientation toward the presence of Jesus in you, and the reality of God around you.

The word, "abide", means *to rest, to live, to dwell, to make a home for*. In remaining, we are actively resisting the temptation to move. It's simply about "positioning".

It is the ability to give intentional and sustained attention to something (to meditate on it) until it becomes our delight. To choose to 'glory' in something until it becomes 'glorious' to us!

The Bible calls it, *"beholding"*. Seeing what's easily overlooked. The pace of our lives, the absence of margins, heilybytes of information, all collaborate to produce a life that is void of depth and meaning and is largely, 'trivial'. Jesus had this admirable rhythm of "engage" and "retreat". We would all agree that Jesus *'got stuff done'*, but it was always and only the fruit (product) of oneness with Father ("what I see Father doing. What I hear Father saying...")

The fruit is the work of the Spirit. The choice to remain in Jesus is our decision.

The **"if"** is, grammatically speaking, a **"conditional clause"**. It means that the action can only take place if a certain condition is fulfilled. It is not threatening or manipulative; it just makes stipulations which are valid for certain circumstances.

I can't fully explain the "chemistry", but what becomes apparent is that when the Spirit is at work in my life, that work is largely "unmanageable" for me, but it does require a responsive which will either encourage (promote) or stifle (impede) the process; the flow of such life. That's why Paul says that we can, *"grieve"* (Ephesians 4:30), or *"put out the Spirit's fire"* (1 Thessalonians 5:19).

“When you obey my commands, you remain in my love...” There it is! This is where we were assuming that Jesus was going with all of the abiding talk, right? Obedience.

But he doesn't start with obedience, he starts with love. *“I have loved you... remain in my love.”*

The “remaining in love” is about staying in God’s good grace.

It's not about God's posture toward us, but about our willingness to continue to allow God to love us into a new way of life, of living.

Most of the really important issues in life cannot be relegated to our urges and impulses. We must, at times, behave our way into a new way of believing.

obedience (Latin)- to listen attentively; to heed (respond).

Jesus told his followers that unless they were ready to obey (trust), they could not live in his love. That doesn't mean that he won't love them, but that they can't continue to serve as their own point-of-reference and experience blessing--- God's declarative purposes of love.

In many of the situations, the right decision is undeniably clear. What we need is not confirmation, but simply the courage to respond to what has been revealed; to what we know is right.

Obedience is love's objective response. We obey because we are the object of his love.

Not just doing the will of God, but *“doing the will of God from your heart...”* (Ephesians 6:6)

Once we determine to respond in loving-obedience to the life-giving ways of Jesus--- despite our hesitation and despite the absence of affirming emotions--- we actually experience a grace that was previously unavailable to us and the *“blessed life”* that results.

Obedience is the fruit of trust and trust always has its moorings in history and hope.

Remember, the Greek word for 'command' involves a relational quality which always connected the hearer to the giver. It's why the commands were given to the Israelites. They were not simply the random directives of an unfamiliar deity, but the principles/laws of a covenant God.

It's why there are so many OT references to *“knowing God”*. If you don't trust in the goodness and the good intentions of the One establishing the boundaries, you will always be prone to 'push-back'. Every breach of the boundary says to God, in effect, *“I don't trust you!”*

We are never encouraged anywhere in the Scriptures toward *“blind obedience”*. Our relationship with God never demands a *“leap of faith”*. In fact, if we 'jump', with no valid reason to trust, then I think there's another name for it.

Having *“history with God”* still requires trust beyond our own limited perspective, but it does make each life-decision feel a little less risky.

The fruit of the Spirit is not what we are able to muster in the moment, but what the Spirit produces in us in a lifetime.

The whole theology of the Spirit in the NT is that the most Spirit-led people you know are the most fully human people you know. They are the ones in whom the Spirit has not “assumed” control,

but ones that have relinquished control and their lives reflect a confident “self-control”, as Paul says it, in Galatians.