

John 15:9-17 “How Do I Abide?”

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- [0 : 01] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us. Last week we started talking about abiding in Christ.
- As we heard that gracious command from Jesus to His followers, to abide in me. To be at home in Jesus.
- He is the true vine, remember? We are the branches. Life and fruitfulness are always and only in Him.
- And this weekend we've had plenty of chances to see branches all over the ground, all over town. Be reminders to us of how much we need Jesus. That's what you've all been thinking as you've driven around, right?
- That we need to stay connected to Him. We must. I've received several helpful comments and questions since last week. I want to respond to one now and one at the end.
- [1 : 11] Perhaps the most repeated question that I got this week was, Really? I mean, abiding all the time?
- And actually I really, really appreciate whatever version of this question you have asked because it means you're taking Jesus' words seriously. Abiding, staying, being at home with.
- That can't be occasional, right? It's not a come and go type of relationship. But do you want your surgeon daydreaming about Jesus mid-surgery, pastor?
- That's what someone asked me. I mean, I can't always be talking to Jesus, right? I have kids to care for, problems to solve, rockets to launch.
- That's right. Being at home in Jesus doesn't mean that you do no other activity ever, okay? Jesus sends us out, but He never leaves us.
- [2 : 18] It's that moment-by-moment walking with Him that we talked about this summer if you were here. His word, prayer, worshiping together, relationships, all helping us walk with Him, abide in Him, even while we do other things, lots of other things.
- For example, I don't get to be, much as I might like, with my wife 24-7, right? But we spend time together.
- That's really important. It does take time, time together, so that when we're not together, when I am doing something else, I still haven't left that primary relationship.
- Sometimes I just find myself doing things that I know she will love, even though she's not right there telling me that in the moment, like cleaning up the kitchen or getting her coffee or getting my hair cut.
- Sometimes I just want to call and share a struggle with her in the middle of the day and not be alone in it and remember that she loves me. I just need that.
- [3 : 32] Sometimes it is simply too busy in the middle of the day to share what we're facing, but I know that she's there and that she'll be at home at the end of that day, right?

And listen, as wonderful as that is, it's even better in our relationship with God because he always keeps us, doesn't he? He never sleeps.

He actually goes with us by his spirit, whether our minds or emotions are tied up with something else because we're so limited, right?

He is holding us. And abiding means this. Abiding means knowing that he's got me, even in those moments when I am too weak, too human, to be consciously aware of it.

That's what abiding is. Have you spent enough time with him to trust him for all the time? That's Jesus' invitation to abide, okay?

[4 : 38] That's what he's inviting you into. And he wants to unpack the image of branches abiding in the vine a little bit more today, which is so helpful because this is meant to be practical, not just theoretical.

How does it happen? This is the essence of life in relationship with God. It's the way he made us. How do we live like this? Let's continue listening to Jesus at verse 9 of John chapter 15.

God's word. Jesus says, 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.

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.

[5 : 46] 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. Pray with me. Jesus, we hear your words.

Would we by your Spirit now hear you speaking to our hearts, shaping us, changing us, making us more like you, growing our love for you.

Do that work we ask in your name. Amen. Amen. Thanksgiving weekend every year, my family has a special tradition of getting our Christmas tree.

[6 : 51] There's a lot of traditions around it. It happens at halftime of the Iron Bowl, when the rest of town is busy with something inside. And we bundle up, pack all of us into the van with all of the necessary tools, and go to pick out our Christmas tree from the gorgeous neighborhood Lowe's lot.

We bring it home. We wrestle it into the tree stand, while apple cider and hot chocolate are warming, and sometimes that takes longer than others.

We debate very patiently whether the tree is straight or not every year. And then, to be honest, we downright argue over white lights or different colors.

That is a tradition. It's important. If, if fewer than half of us are crying or angry by this point in the evening, which is a pretty big if, we decorate the tree.

And it is always really fun, honestly, to get out old ornaments, to tell stories together, to kick off the Christmas season.

- [8 : 0 7] And that night, that Saturday in November, the tree looks fantastic. The branches are strong. They're holding up beautiful lights and ornaments, just where we put them.
- A few festive weeks of this tree we're going to experience, and then every year, it will go to the side of the road. Branches drooping and brittle, already turning brown.
- Not very festive anymore. Why do we know that? Even that first special night, why do we know that those days are numbered for that tree?
- Well, it's because it's been disconnected from its source of life, right? You may be able to decorate it for a few weeks and make it look fruitful, but there will be no lasting life and fruit for this tree anymore.
- And Jesus is making a similar point about us here. Because we all long to live beautiful, full lives, don't we? We want to grow.
- [9 : 2 4] We want to change over time. We want to have an impact. We want to bear fruit. All of us do. But you can't have lasting change. Real fruit by just hanging some on the exterior of your life.
- Doesn't work that way. Apart from Jesus, he told us last week, we can do nothing. Real change, he says, comes from abiding in Christ.
- From the inside out. It's from the root all the way through the fruit. That is his point. About the branch having to stay at home in the vine.
- His point is there's great hope for anxious people to become peaceful and courageous. There's great hope for selfish people to be those who bless others.
- There's great hope for us to grow into permanently life-giving trees bearing much fruit if and only if we stay with Jesus.
- [1 0 : 3 2] Right? Now that's counterintuitive to most of us. It's not up to us and our own efforts to get better. I've been told I can improve myself.
- It's certainly countercultural. It's not dig deep. You've got it in you. It's not the message. Let's see how Jesus says it actually works.
- He gets a bit more tangible for how we abide in him. Same overall idea. Just a couple more specifics. If you're like me, we need that help.
- Thankful for these specific instructions. First, that abiding in Jesus means abiding in his love. Which will bear the fruit of sacrificial love in our lives.
- Verse 9, as the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love.
- [1 1 : 3 4] Can we just slow down there with me for a second? This short little verse is mind-blowing. The Father has loved Jesus with full knowledge, with eternal perfection, with the complete sharing of all good things, this Trinitarian love within the God who is love.
- He says, just in that way, Jesus has loved you. He knows you completely.
- And he loves you completely. So much so that Paul says, this is a love that surpasses knowledge. And yet he also prays that we will know how wide and how long and how high and how deep is this measureless love because we are told to abide in it.
- To be at home there. To have this reality that is beyond our full comprehension. Be the one that shapes our entire lives. I mean, we sing, Jesus loves me.
- Some of you have been singing that for decades. Do you marvel at that? Jesus loves me. We could sing a million songs about it and barely scratch the surface because we have been shown the greatest love.
- [1 3 : 1 5] Right? Verse 13 says that. Nothing could be done beyond laying down your life for someone. You couldn't love them any more than that. The God who set the galaxies in motion would descend to give his life for me.

Is that story, that love, is that home for you? That, Jesus says, is what will empower you.

It will transform you and it will give you the power to love one another as I have loved you. As you abide in my love, Jesus says, the more it becomes home, you will love others who are undeserving and need grace.

Who are lonely and they need welcome. Who are broken and need care. Several years ago, the football team at Grapevine Faith High School, it's a Christian school in Texas, they were in the middle of a very successful season and had a game coming up the next weekend against a winless opponent.

Seemed like a week to relax. Gainesville State was coming to their stadium. A team of kids from a maximum security correctional facility who hadn't won a game.

[14 : 44] And Grapevine Faith's coach had an idea. He gathered some parents and started talking about what it could look like to show the love of Jesus to young men that most people had given up on and stopped cheering for.

Here was the idea. What would it look like to love them the way Jesus loves us? That's what they talked about.

Here's what happened. Before the game, over 200 faith fans made a tunnel for the Tornadoes. That's the other team to run through into the stadium.

Then they went and sat in their stands on their side of the field. They learned the names of the players from the other team and cheered for them by name. You can read about it on ESPN.com.

That means it really happened. Coach Hogan's message that he wanted the opposing players to receive. Quote, You are just as valuable as any other person on planet Earth.

[15 : 53] Sounds like a message from Jesus, doesn't it? One Gainesville player said that people were usually afraid of them and looked at them as criminals when they came into the game.

But he said, These people were yelling for us by our names, cheering for us to tackle their kids. Grapevine Faith won the game.

Then they gathered at midfield to pray when Isaiah, the quarterback of Gainesville, asked if he could lead. And he prayed, Lord, I don't know how this happened, so I don't know how to say thank you.

But I never would have known there was so many people in the world that cared about us. Surprised, wasn't he? Surprising.

Self-sacrificing love like God's love. I don't know what the fruit of love will look like exactly in your life.

[16 : 57] Maybe your grace group reaches out to a widow. Maybe your friend group welcomes a kid who doesn't fit with anybody else to go to homecoming with you.

Maybe your family adds a foster child, adopts a college student, helps a neighbor, I don't know. But the more you find yourself at home in the undeserved, unconditional, unending love of Jesus, the more you will love others.

That's why we say experience grace. Breathe it in and then express grace. Breathe it out. It's not complicated, but it's not natural either.

It is divine fruit grown only God's way by abiding inside out. Don't try to change any other way. His power is so much stronger than our willpower to just do it.

He changes us and bears this fruit in us. Abiding in Jesus' love is really the headline here in this passage.

[18 : 13] In some ways, these other two points are subsets of that, but they do stand on their own too. So let's ask, where else can we be at home? Can we rest our minds?

Can we find our lives shaped to other things you can do? Abiding in Christ's word produces beautiful obedience.

Jesus already told us this in John chapter 8 that true disciples abide in his word. They stay in his teachings.

They meditate on his instructions. And now here in these final instructions, he highlights the mutual abiding. Abiding in me, verse 7, involves my words, abiding in you so that you do them.

Verse 10 says, that is part of abiding in my love just like Jesus abides in his father's love and obeys his father, everything his father sent him to do.

[19 : 21] This is repeated throughout the scripture, that the word of Christ should dwell in us richly so that our life together as God's people is shaped by his word.

That we're to hide God's word in our hearts. Why? So that we might not sin against him because his word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.

So abiding in his word means reading it, yes? It means meditating on its direction for my life, memorizing it so that I hear it through my head throughout the day even when my hands don't have a Bible in them in that moment.

It's okay to put it down but you can still hear it, right? Young people, memorize God's word now while it sticks with you for your entire life.

There's nothing else that will bear such fruit in your life as you grow up but older people you can memorize too. It's not too late. Just remember that Jesus isn't talking about some robotic relationship.

[20 : 30] Automatic, cold obedience. Every time we know what we're supposed to do, we do it. Is that your experience? Not usually. No, this is in the context of love.

love. A loving relationship with him where we are eager to follow his words. In fact, verse 15, I told you, my friends, everything that God wanted.

You've got all my words. We're friends. And I chose you to bear lasting fruit so that when you ask for anything like to change you, God, make me new, make me different, help me obey, then in time I will do that.

It's lasting fruit. Isn't that great encouragement? The fruit will abide too. It'll have a lasting impact. It's not the kind that looks good for a few weeks but is really dead inside.

You can put that kind on your life and pretend for a little while. Now this is the kind of obedience that is beautiful, that adorns the gospel, that inspires others, not shames them because it grows inside out from a love for Jesus and his design for my life.

[21 : 39] What does he want me to do? So imagine, for example, you sit with God's word and you hear Jesus saying, do not worry about what you will eat or drink or wear.

And for many of us, if we're honest, our first thought is, you know, you know, Jesus, as great as it sounds not to be worried, as much as I would like not to battle anxiety about my appearance every day.

Come on, Jesus. If I don't, if I don't worry at all about my clothes, about what I'm going to look like, about the things that I will wear, no one will like me.

I'll be worthless, left out. Can I just handle this one, Jesus? I know how to handle clothes. How does abiding in God's word change that worried, anxious heart over time?

Well, we hear Jesus reminding us, your heavenly Father knows what you need. Oh, listen, I grieve when you are cast aside by others because you are so precious.

[22 : 58] so you need to know that even if everyone else discards you, even if your own mother forgets you, yet I will not forget you.

In fact, I have engraved you on the palms of my hand. And you hear Jesus say that, and when that reality of being beloved like that becomes home for you, in other words, when that takes hold of your life, it is beautiful.

beautiful. You know it, you've seen it in people. You've seen a peaceful, kind, humble presence in the friend group, right?

Not an anxious, envious, desperate friend fighting for attention all the time, knocking everybody else down. No. What do I do to be abiding in Christ?

Soak in his words so that seed sinks deep. Ask him to shape your life by it. Pray that he will make your life beautiful in a world that is often full of ugly fruit.

[24 : 06] This fruit, this obedience, it doesn't graft you into the vine, right? But it does show that you are crafted in, that you have the life of the vine coursing through you.

One more way to abide in Christ. Abide in his joy. And the fruit will be full joy.

What I think Jesus means by that word full is not pretend superficial happiness like lights on a dead Christmas tree for a few weeks, but deep, lasting, full joy perhaps beyond what we imagine it could be like.

Listen to this mutual abiding again. It's amazing. Verse 11. These things I have spoken to you that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full.

This is, this is wild. But listen to how serious Jesus is about our abiding. vine and branches so closely connected that we listen to his word.

[25 : 19] That we, we revel in his love and we find that his joy is inside of us. I'm not sure I can fully describe this joy of Jesus to you, but it, it has to do with the mysterious relationship between father and son and spirit into which we are being invited.

See, we know that Jesus' joy is not based on happy circumstances and everything going well because it was for the joy set before him that he did what?

Endured the cross. His joy, I think we certainly understand here, involves obedience to his father. And it must have involved their rescuing us and bringing us into that relationship, the joy set before him.

He delights in you, in you sharing in that relationship. See, it's a joy that knows no matter what happens, even death on a cross, good is coming from his loving father.

It's a joy that feels a certainty that satisfaction in God's provision is more fulfilling than anything the world offers. It's a joy that trusts God's eternal inheritance with the Holy Spirit as down payment.

[26 : 52] That relationship with him and his presence forever is more lasting than any other relationship. That joy has got to get deep inside us.

how? When you wake up and sit in my presence, Jesus says, when you come with honest tears and heartache and you open my word and you open your heart to me, Jesus says, here's how it happens, I will pour my joy into you.

A joy that comes from knowing you are the apple of my eye, the delight of my heart, the ones for whom I came to give my life so that you could share in the greatest thing ever, this relationship of life with me and my Father.

I've given you that great love so that my joy can start to fill your heart so that your joy will be full because nothing else can fill you up like that.

There's no other way that you'll get full joy. So when your kid wanders away, when your house burns down, when your co-workers mock you, you hurt and you grieve, but you rejoice in every season, every reason, right, to praise the Lord, to trust his faithfulness, to experience the fullness of his joy and that is beautiful and that is unusual and that is curiosity producing fruit because the very life of Jesus is coursing through your veins, his love, his word, his joy flowing into you and overflowing from you over and over and over, it pours out of you.

[29 : 06] Leads me to think of a really thoughtful, honest question someone sent me this week, I'll close with this. In my words, he asked, what do I do if I'm not as joyful about abiding as I should be?

this guy said he's heard his whole life about the joy and value of this close relationship with Jesus but he often finds himself more excited by other fun things.

First of all, can we admit that we all know that feeling? What really seems exciting today when I wake up is college football. It's making money, it's Pinterest, it's whatever it is.

And y'all, our hearts have been conditioned to delight in other things. We are bombarded with messages, ads, stories telling us that joy is found in something else, in someone else.

It is the air that we have been breathing our entire lives. So we should expect that it will take time for our lungs to be cleared out, for our hearts to be renewed, for our broken joy seekers to be reset to true north.

[30 : 31] My advice, and I believe Jesus' direction here, is don't settle for those lesser joys, but at the same time, don't try to force external joy.

pretend happiness, fake satisfaction. That's not what he's calling us to. You're not in charge of fruit production. You're invited, what?

To abide. To abide in him. And I know that can seem self-defeating. I mean, come on, pastor, that's the only thing you've told me to do, and I told you I'm struggling to do that, so what else do I do?

Y'all, that is surrendering. Surrendering control to an all-powerful, all-gracious, all-good God.

Jesus says it's not joy actually that you seek, it's me, and you actually get me. I make my home in you. We abide mutually.

[31 : 37] I even call you my friend, and for the rest of eternity, your delight in me grows as you see me more clearly. It's okay that you're not totally there today.

Keep walking with me. Keep abiding in me. You allow your heart to be overwhelmed by his sacrificial love for someone like you who is so often unlovely and yet is so often loved so extravagantly.

That's what you do. You contemplate his life-giving words that don't like so many others heap a burden on you to change and fix yourself and yet at the same time promise to change you completely from the inside out and to make you into the glorious creation that he made you to be.

You taste his overflowing joy in bringing you to his father, in sustaining you through the trials of life, in having you live with him forever in the light of his presence and that's his delight and you taste that and I don't know how many years from now it will be when you'll feel you really delight in abiding in Christ the way that you should.

I don't know. But I know whenever it is you'll have an eternity of years ahead to keep enjoying that savior.

[32 : 59] Let's pray. Jesus, grow our delight, help our joy, reset our hearts.

love our hope. We won't look anywhere else. We come to you and we trust you and we need your help because we are so prone to wander.

Keep us as you've promised. Grow us, change us, make our delight overflow to many others. We ask in your name. Amen. For more information, visit us online at southwood.org.