

**ABIDING
John 15:1-11**

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You remember the names Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin – the first men ever to walk on the moon, the Apollo 11 space mission. The moon lander touched down at 3:17 p.m. Eastern Standard Time on Sunday, July 20, 1969.

When Apollo 11's Eagle lunar module, at last, landed on the moon, Armstrong and Aldrin had to do something hard: wait (6 hours). They were anticipating opening the door of their lunar lander and stepping on the unknown surface of a completely different world – a place where no man had ever gone before. The mood on the module was sober. Both Armstrong and Aldrin knew how important their mission was. "I was certainly aware that this was the culmination of the work of 300 or 400 thousand people over a decade, and that the nation's hopes and outward appearance largely rested on how the results came out," Armstrong recalled.

As the men prepared for the next phase of their mission, Aldrin got on the communication system and spoke to the crew back on Earth. "I would like to request a few moments of silence," he said. "I would like to invite each person listening in, whoever or wherever he may be, to contemplate for a moment the events of the last few hours and to give thanks in his own individual way."

Aldrin had brought with him a tiny communion kit, given to him by his church, that had a silver chalice and wine vial. "[During] the radio blackout," he later wrote, "I opened the little plastic packages which contained the bread and the wine. I poured the wine into the chalice. In the one-sixth gravity of the moon, the wine slowly curled and gracefully came up on the side of the cup. Then I read the Scripture, 'I am the vine, you are the branches. Whosoever abides in Me will bring forth much fruit, for you can do nothing without Me.'" He read it from a little note he had stowed away just for the occasion. (The little handwritten version of our passage today, John 15, sold at a space-related auction in Dallas, Texas, in 2007.)

He had intended to read the passage back to Earth, but at the last minute Deke Slayton requested that he not do this. NASA was already embroiled in a legal battle over the Apollo 8 crew reading from Genesis while orbiting the moon at Christmas. Aldrin recalled that he reluctantly agreed.

As the Eagle's metal body creaked, he said, "I ate the tiny host and swallowed the wine. I gave thanks for the intelligence and spirit that had brought two young pilots to the Sea of Tranquility. It was interesting for me to think the very first liquid ever poured on the moon

and the very first food eaten there were the communion elements.” (Bill Carrell, godandscience.org/apologetics/communion.html; <https://www.history.com/news/buzz-aldrin-communion-Apollo-11-NASA>)

Of all the passages to be read at that historic moment when men were going to walk on the moon, Aldrin, a Presbyterian elder, chose the passage before us today. “I am the vine, you are the branches; whoever abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit; for you can do nothing without Me” (John 15:5). That was the entirety of the passage that he read – the second man to ever walk on the moon, just one step behind Neil Armstrong.

“I am the vine; you are the branches.”

Down through Jewish history, the image of the vine has been used as a symbol of God’s people, a symbol of Israel. In fact, at one point in the history of Israel, the vine was actually stamped on the coins. When Josephus described Herod’s temple in Jesus’ day, he said, **“under the crown work was spread out a golden vine, with its branches hanging down from a great height, the largeness and the workmanship of which were an astonishing sight to the spectators”** (*Antiquities of the Jews*, 5.5.4).

The passages that support the idea of the people of God, or Israel, as a vine are numerous. In Isaiah 5:1-7 we hear these words, Let me sing now for my well-beloved, a song of my beloved concerning his vineyard. (The Lord is his well-beloved.)

My well-beloved had a vineyard on a fertile hill.
And He dug it all around, removed its stones,
And planted it with the choicest vine.

And He built a tower in the middle of it,
And hewed out a wine vat in it;
Then He expected it to produce good grapes,
But it produced only worthless ones.

And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah,
Judge between Me and My vineyard.
What more was there to do for My vineyard that I have not done in it?
Why, when I expected it to produce good grapes did it produce worthless ones?

So now let Me tell you what I am going to do to My vineyard:
I will remove its hedge and it will be consumed;
I will break down its wall and it will become trampled ground.

And I will lay it waste;
It will not be pruned or hoed,
But briars and thorns will come up.
I will also charge the clouds to rain no rain on it

For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel,
And the men of Judah His delightful plant.

Thus He looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed;
For righteousness, but behold, a cry of distress (Isaiah 5:1-7).

It's actually amazing how similar this passage in Isaiah is to the passage in John – separated by so many centuries, passages of different ages, and yet passages that tell the same story. God in Isaiah, like God in John, is the vine dresser. He is doing everything He can to produce fruit. He expects good grapes after all of his investment into His vineyard, after all the sweat and the labor, the hoeing and the hewing, only to discover that there is nothing but sour grapes coming from the vineyard in which He's invested everything.

Look how he closes in verse 7. He looked for justice, but, behold, bloodshed. For righteousness, but, behold, a cry of distress. One translator put it this way, "Looking for measures he found massacres, and for righteousness he found riots." The vineyard of Israel failed to produce any real righteousness, any real Godlikeness (cf. Jeremiah 2:21; Psalm 80-8-9).

The Jewish readers would have understood that the vine represented the people of God and that God had always been the cultivator and the caregiver to the vine – He is the vinedresser. They would have known that the prophets had declared that God expected the fruit of righteousness to be produced from His people, from His vine.

Jesus begins in John 15:1 by reflecting and echoing the words of the prophet and the words of the psalmist and all the Old Testament writers who spoke of God's vine. "I am the vine, the true vine," He says. "My Father is the vinedresser."

The vinedresser had always been the Father in the Old Testament, but now the vine has changed. The vine is no longer Israel, but, rather, in particular the vine is the Son, the Messiah, the Christ. In so many ways, Christ fulfills what Israel failed to do.

In John's gospel we have several "I am" statements. Jesus says,

- "I am the bread of life" in chapter 6,
- "I am the light of the world" in chapter 8,
- "I am the gate" in chapter 10,
- "I am the good shepherd" in chapter 10,
- "I am the resurrection and the life" in chapter 11.
- And the last "I am" statement is here in chapter 15, "I am the true vine."

Israel has been replaced as the vine, and Jesus, Himself, is the true vine.

Remember, Jesus and His disciples have celebrated the Passover in this gospel. Judas has left the group to set up the betrayal. Look at the end of chapter 14: "Arise, let us go from here."

So they left the Upper Room where Jesus has washed their feet. They were on their way down into the Kidron Valley and up the slope of the Mount of Olives to the Garden of Gethsemane. As

they walked along the trail, Jesus and His disciples passed through the vineyards that surround the city.

I want us to notice several things about this passage, a passage which calls for us to abide in Christ.

I. As we abide in Christ, we produce fruit.

Believe it or not, in these ten verses in chapter 15, we hear the word “abide” from the lips of our Lord ten times. Abide. Abide. Abide. Yea, ten times, “abide.”

The purpose of the vine is to bring forth fruit. God expected ancient Israel to produce fruit. When He got nothing but sour, rotten, tasteless grapes, God was frustrated with His people. He expected righteousness. Instead, He found oppression and cruelty and exploitation of humanity.

I want you to notice the emphasis on the fruit in this passage – you can’t miss it. In verse 2 he says, “Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit....” Again He says “bears fruit” and He closes the verse with “bear more fruit.”

In verse 4 He says “bear fruit.” In verse 5 He speaks of “much fruit.” In verse 8 He speaks of “much fruit.” So in this passage you have fruit, more fruit, and much fruit repeated time and time again.

As we abide in Christ, we will bear fruit. Part of the bearing of fruit involves God, the vinedresser, pruning us. The pruner removed all the dead wood, and even some live wood was cut back, so that the life force of the plant would not go into making more branches but, rather, into producing fruit.

God prunes us. We all go through a painful pruning process. We have the Father’s pruning knife cutting of the sucker branches of our old self.

When Bob and Patty Brower traveled in France in the 1970s, they fell in love with two things: the wineries and the French country chateaus. They came home, packed up their belongings on the East Coast and headed for California, looking for a spot to start winery of their own. They settled on 16 acres tucked away in the hills of Monterey County, which eventually grew to over 240 acres of grapes.

But they learned through trial and error that in making good wine one must not overlook canopy management. Here’s the problem canopy management addresses: runaway growth. Vines left to themselves will sprawl out all over the place and produce huge canopies of shoots, leaves, and branches, and unless that canopy is controlled, the vine won’t yield much fruit or top-shelf grapes. It is a counter-intuitive activity, the cutting back of the canopy, because all that greenery, all those leaves suggest that you’ve got a very healthy vine. But really, it’s all show and no tell.

Jesus is afraid that His disciples might face this same problem. He wasn't interested in showy discipleship any more than He is interested in showy churches and showy Christians today. What he is interested in is fruit – and not just fruit, but excellent fruit. (“Canopy Management,” homileticsonline.com)

Have you ever noticed how much suffering changes who we are? Have you ever noticed how you see things differently after you suffer? Every time I speak to a believer who has gone through a tragedy – he or she will say, nine times out of ten, “I really didn't understand life before. Now I know what's really important. Now I see things differently. My whole world view has changed.”

The pruning process is painful. And through the circumstances of our life, God, our Father, shapes us into the branch that He would have us to be so that we can bear fruit for His kingdom.

To prune means to cut off some of the branches, and that can hurt. Accidents, sickness, [divorce], failures, the loss of a job, the death of someone you love – various unexpected events – can hurt and wound life in us and leave us in a state of grief and desolation. We feel empty. Life no longer flows through us. We have lost our enthusiasm and sometimes even all desires. We are wounded in our all energies of life. Like the wounded vine whose branch has been cut off, we have to wait for new life to flow in us. We are pruned for something new, for a life more centered in God and the things of God. Before pruning, perhaps we were taken up with “things to do.” Maybe even good things, but not the best things. When life is cut or pruned this way, we may have feelings of emptiness and anguish. This emptiness can bring forth anger and depression, but it can also prepare us for something new. Our emptiness can become a cry to God. ... Some pruning comes unexpectedly and violently; some comes gradually as we grow older and are less taken up by things to do and the need for success, reputation, and power. We have more time for God and the things of God, and can give more attention to the sacred space within us. Some pruning comes because we want it, ask for it, wait for it. We yearn to have more time with and for God. This is what Jesus means when He says to His disciples, “You have already been cleansed by the word I have spoken to you” (15:3). (Jean Vanier, *Drawn Into the Mystery of Jesus Through the Gospel of John*, p. 269)

We're not told specifically what the fruit is in this passage, but there can hardly be any doubt. When we look at the passage in Isaiah, we see that it is really the righteousness of God's people. That matches up with what we're told in the New Testament about fruit.

We have a list of that fruit in Paul's writing in the book of Galatians. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

As we abide in Christ, as we realize our position in Him, that we're nothing apart from Him. Then we begin to exhibit His characteristics in our lives.

As a child, I purchased and planted a hibiscus plant – huge pink flowers the size of a pie plate. Also, I sometimes planted roses. I'm not sure why, but my mother, from time to time, would take pruning shears to my plants. I don't know what frustration she was working out, but I might

come home from school and my hibiscus plant, which had been five feet tall, was nothing but a five-inch nub. It became a joke around our house: “Don’t let Mama get hold of the pruning shears because she is not a surgeon – she’s a butcher.”

Unlike my mother’s madness in her pruning prowess, God comes into our lives – the true vine dresser comes into our lives and carefully clips away those things that are preventing us from being fruit bearers for His kingdom.

It’s interesting in verse 3. He uses the language of “cleansing” rather than the language of “pruning,” showing that the real issue is not horticulture but, rather, spiritual maturity.

Apart from Christ, we can do nothing (v. 5). It’s the negative statement of what Paul has said in Philippians 4:13, “I can do all things in Him that strengthens me.” In isolation from Christ, no spiritual maturity is possible. We must constantly be abiding in Him. And as we abide in Him, we do bear fruit.

It’s clear in the passage (v. 6) that if we do not abide in Christ then the vine dresser, the Father, casts us away because fruitless vines have no value. The very purpose of the vine is to produce fruit. And when no fruit is produced, we hear these strong words that emphasize the necessity of remaining in vital contact with Christ.

Those are powerful words in verse 4: “Abide in Me, and I in you.”

II. As we abide in Christ, we pray with power (v. 7).

Look at verse 7. “If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you.” The condition of prevailing prayer is abiding in Christ. As we abide in Christ, His words and His teachings abiding in us, then we have the ability to pray with power.

Studies on prayer in medicine have a way of demarcating the battle lines between saints and skeptics: Christians long for scientific proof of the efficacy of prayer. Critics, waiting for the opposite, hope to undermine religious faith. For better or worse, we have seen many attempts to measure the healing effects of intercessory prayer. The first known studies were published in 1873 by English polymath Francis Galton. C. S. Lewis asserted that such attempts always end up trying to measure something more akin to magic than a real movement of God.

Scripture attests to this reality. God, for example, answered Israel’s prayers for release from Pharaoh’s hand, but his answer – when it finally came – was unexpected, unpredictable, and anything but tame (as a generation left in the desert could attest). His answer to Israel’s prayers for release from Caesar’s grip proved even more unanticipated and, for many, simply unacceptable. Thus, it is no surprise that Jesus taught us to pray “thy will be done,” as he himself prayed all the way through Gethsemane. In all this, we discover that our obsession with whether prayer works is the wrong question. We know prayer works. The real question is, are we prepared for God’s answer?

Not surprisingly, those who were prepared for God's answer to Israel's cry for the Messiah were people who prayed. Anna the Prophetess, who spent the bulk of her life worshiping in the temple, was one of the first to recognize him. Lydia, who saw the truth of the gospel and opened the door to Philippi, was in the right place at the right time because she was praying. Thus, we pray not only because God answers our prayers. We also pray so that we might recognize and receive God's answer, know how to respond, and perhaps see God himself. ("What Do Prayer Studies Prove?" Gregory Fung and Christopher Fung, www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2009/may/27.43html)

When you abide in Christ, you are able to pray in such a way as to really make a difference.

III. As we abide in Christ, we live lives of obedience (vs. 9-10).

As He is talking about abiding in His love in verse 9 – the Father has loved Him and He has loved us – we need to abide in His love. He says if we keep His commandments, we will abide in His love – just like He kept the Father's commandments and abided in His Father's love.

IV. As we abide in Christ, we experience full joy (v. 11).

I think about the times in my own ministry when I really experience the greatest joy – it's those times when I do something that no one could possibly expect me to do. I help someone who has no way to help me in return. I give to those who can never repay. Those are moments of pure ministry – not politically motivated, not driven by power or pleasure, but simply true service in the name of Christ Jesus.

Jesus doesn't seek any cheerless, barren existence for His people, but, rather, full joy (see John 3:29).

The word "joy" has been used in John's gospel only in chapter 3, verse 29. But in this section around the Upper Room we find it seven times – twice in this verse. In John 16:20, He says their sorrow will be turned to joy. In 16:24 He says their joy may be made full. We find it again in John 17:13. The joy of Jesus is the joy that comes from finished work.

As we abide in Christ, we bear fruit for His kingdom. And that fruit brings joy to our lives.

Abiding in Christ.

Abiding in Christ. "I am the Vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit. For apart from Me, you can do nothing."

"I am the vine; you are the branches." Words spoken by Jesus long ago. Words repeated by Buzz Aldrin, a man on the moon. Words spoken countless times in this room. "Abide in Me, and I in you...." Much fruit.