

SESSION
SEVEN



ABIDE IN HIM

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Reading adapted from a message by John Ortberg

There is one last truth about servanthood that you need to know. It is a sobering truth that, frankly, I would just as soon hurry over. But it is a truth that we all must know: *It is possible to be busy with service but to bear no fruit at all.*

It would be a tragedy if it happened, but it is possible. And so for all of us overachievers whose drivenness can even extend into the spiritual realm, Jesus offers these words:

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. . . . Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine and you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.

—John 15:1, 4–5 (NRSV)

In the metaphor of the grapevine, when a branch abides, fruit is inevitable. When it does not, fruit is impossible. No matter how fast you run or how hard you try, you can't produce fruit on your own. Jesus is very clear on that.

The task of a branch is almost laughably simple: to stay connected to the vine. Agriculturally, it works like this: Nutrients in the water flow from the soil into the roots of the vine. They travel into the trunk and then are

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carried by little capillary tubes to every branch and into the canes that shoot up new every spring, and ultimately into every leaf. There is unceasing flow of life from the vine to the branch. It never ends.

Arguably, our chief objective in serving can be summed up in one phrase: *Be a good branch*. Stay connected to the Source of life in such a way that you are constantly receiving from him whatever it is that you need to bear fruit—wisdom, rest, encouragement, power, love, joy. It's not complex. But to do so will require frequent wrestling with three questions.

Deciding

Will I decide that abiding in the Vine is my number-one priority as a servant?

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You and I make that decision every day. One difference between human branches and grape branches is that you and I have a choice. Jesus highlights this reality with a simple two-letter word: *"If anyone abides in me. . ."*

Have you chosen to make abiding with God the highest pursuit of your life? One thing is certain, you will not drift into it. We live in a world that is constantly pulling us away from abiding. I believe there is a primary form that this pull takes. The evil one loves to keep us from leading fruitful lives by getting us to lead busy lives instead. He has convinced us that to be busy is to be important. Busyness has become a status symbol.

There's an interesting thing about grapes. It takes about as long to produce a grape today as it did in Jesus' day. Fruitfulness doesn't happen in a hurry. Jesus never said, "Abide with me, but let's do it quickly because I don't have much time." Abiding is a slow word.

A point of clarification is needed here. Some people think that to abide means having unending quiet time while doing nothing but prayer and Bible study twenty-four hours a day. They think they could never abide. Only monks have time to abide. At the very least, abiding will

have to wait until some other season of life—after the kids grow up, after retirement, or maybe after death.

Abiding simply means to invite Jesus to walk with you through every moment of your whole life. Certainly, you will need to engage in times of solitude and prayer. But genuine abiding is something we must do all throughout our day.

For example, consider starting every morning with an abiding prayer: “Lord, I invite you to walk with me through this day as I seek to serve you. I am just a branch. Help me to cling to you as the vine.” Then—just as the branch has an unseen connection to the roots—so you too can have a secret conversation with God as you walk through your entire day. Pour your heart out in private moments of worship. Ask him for whatever it is you need. Pull away, perhaps for just five minutes in the midst of your day, to reconnect. Listen for his Spirit’s promptings.

Let each day be a private, intimate, priceless connection between you and God. His life will flow into you. It really will. No one will see it, but it will change the way you act, see, speak, and serve. You will live differently. Fruit will be inevitable.

Submit to His Pruning

If you want to be fruitful, the second question you must wrestle with is: Will you submit to the Gardener’s pruning?

Pruning. A fruitful branch requires it. “He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful” (John 15:2). How many branches? *Every* one. No fruitful branch gets a free pass from this pruning business.

Vines and branches require heavy pruning. From what would have been forty to sixty canes shooting up, a gardener ruthlessly cuts them back to only five in the wintertime. Of course, to prune is to wound temporarily. But the wound heals. A wise gardener wants the branch to

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focus every bit of energy on the glorious reason for which it was made—fruit.

You see this pruning in Scripture. A classic example is the rich young ruler. “Sell your possessions and give to the poor. . . . Then come, follow me” (Matt. 19:21). Why did Jesus say that? He didn’t say it to hammer the guy. Jesus said it because he saw the fruitful life the ruler could live if he would only release his grip, unclutter his life, and begin abiding with Jesus. So Jesus took out the pruning shears.

Jesus will do this in your life and in mine. He may convict and prune in the area of sinful behaviors. He may take his shears to attitudes that need to change—pride, envy, approval seeking, discontentment. His pruning may involve your calendar or, like the rich ruler, your checkbook. His pruning may come through the voice of a friend, or through the two-edged sword of his Word. But it will come.

It would be nice if pruning could be done just once and then be over forever. But it is not so. You will have to submit to pruning again and again if you want to be a fruitful branch.

Feeding

The last question is this: Are you willing to feed on God’s Word?

Fruitful branches are nourished by the Vinegrower’s words. If you want to abide with Jesus, you will need to immerse yourself in Scripture, especially in the words of Jesus. This is not a matter of studying them simply to know the facts of what he said; you need to feed off them.

Our spirit is being fed by a constant flow of inner words—thoughts, understandings, and perceptions. Not all of the inner words I feed on are good words.

Once during a worship service, there was someone behind me singing so loudly and off-key that it wasn’t even funny. I heard notes that I’d never heard before in my whole life. I decided I would turn and look. It wasn’t

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quite a dirty look—more like a slightly soiled look. As I turned, I was stopped cold. This loud, off-key voice belonged to a severely disabled person. Thankfully, he had his eyes closed. His head was back, his mouth wide open. His was the least self-conscious worship I have ever seen—a man who had so many reasons to be miserable was instead extolling the goodness of God. I wish the words that had been abiding in me had been the words of Christ in John 15—“Abide in my love. . . . Love one another as I have loved you . . .” (vv. 9, 12 NRSV)—instead of the inner words of my critical, judgmental self.

If we want to bear good fruit, we need to abide in Jesus’ words. Maybe what you need to do tomorrow is to take some of Jesus’ words and live with them all through the day. Consider the very words, “Abide in my love.” Write them down. Put them on the dashboard or on your desk. Let the Lord say those words to you in challenging moments, anxious moments, tender moments, tempting moments. If you live with those words, slowly they will change the way that you live. You won’t have to worry about bearing fruit. You simply *will* bear fruit.

A Final Thought

There is one last thing, and I almost wish that this was not in the text. These are hard words Jesus says in John 15:6 (NRSV): “Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.”

Jesus is just commenting on how things are. If a grapevine didn’t bear fruit, it was useless for anything else. Fruitless branches were gathered and destroyed. Jesus doesn’t say this to create inappropriate anxiety in any sincere followers. The point of this teaching is that it is possible to deliberately choose not to abide in Jesus—to reject him as my vine. I can decide that I am going to spend my life connecting to something or someone else.

You don’t want to get to the end of your life and say, “I did not abide in Jesus. He was there waiting for me

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every morning when I awakened, but I had other things to do." You don't want to say, "I was busy. I accomplished a lot. But in the end there was no lasting fruit."

"I am the vine and you are the branches. Abide in me as I abide in you, and you will bear much fruit." In all of life, *this* is the best offer you will ever get.

SPIRITUAL EXERCISE

Consider this statement from the reading: “Arguably, our chief objective in serving can be summed up in one phrase: *Be a good branch.*”

“Be a good branch.” Your exercise this week is to live with that phrase. Post it on your mirror, car visor, refrigerator, desk. Consider snapping a branch off a plant. Keep it in a visible place all week as a reminder of what happens to a disconnected branch. What will it take for you to serve intimately and fruitfully connected to the Vine this week? Here are a few suggestions:

- Consider starting each morning with an abiding prayer. (“Lord, I invite you to walk with me through this day as I seek to serve you. I am just a branch. Help me to cling to you as a vine.”)
- Continue to ask God to use you. Listen for his promptings along the way. Look for ways to allow his servanthood to flow through you to others, even in the most mundane aspects of your day.
- Throughout the day, keep a secret conversation going with God. Talk to him often. Engage in private moments of worship. Request his help.
- When you encounter a difficult situation or find yourself becoming frantic, discipline yourself to stop. Remind yourself that what you *most* need in that moment is to be a connected branch. Ask for God to supply the courage, wisdom, and power. Trust him for it.
- As you use your spiritual gifts this week, deliberately pause and ask, “Am I doing this *for* Christ or *with* Christ right now?”

At the end of the week, do a review. What difference did it make to live your life this way? How difficult was it to do? What most helped you stay connected? What most frequently thwarted that effort? What were some of the fruits of this exercise—for you personally and for others? Did staying connected to God cause serving to flow rather than feeling like burdensome work?

BIBLE STUDY

1. Centuries before the coming of Christ, the prophet Isaiah brought a word from God expressing God's desire for his people to be fruitful. Read Isaiah 5:1–7. How does God feel about his vineyard?

How would you answer the rhetorical question God asks in verse 4?

2. Using a construction metaphor, Paul warned of people who engaged in activities during their lives that would not bear lasting results. Read 1 Corinthians 3:10–15. The assumption is that these people are all Christians, because they have the foundation of Christ in their lives (v. 11). They are all building on that foundation. What is the stated difference?

What would be an example in your own life of service that is “gold, silver, or costly stone”? What about “wood, hay, or straw”?

Do you think “gold, silver, and costly stone” refers primarily to church work? Why or why not?

NOTE: One simple way to understand how to do works that are gold, silver, and costly stone is to answer the question, “Am I abiding in Christ and controlled by the Spirit right now?” For example, if you are simply taking out the trash and you can answer the above question with a yes, then that simple act of service is of the gold, silver, and costly stone variety. On the other hand, if you were preaching to multitudes but at that moment you could not say, “I am abiding in Christ and controlled by the Holy Spirit,” then that work—no matter how “spiritual” it appears—is mere wood, hay, and straw.

3. Some of the most sobering words Jesus ever uttered are in Matthew 7:21–23. Would you call the people described in verses 22–23 fruitful based on their activities?

According to verse 23, what were these people missing?

NOTE: To know someone in the sense Jesus uses here is certainly not a matter of merely having correct information about the person (as evidenced by verse 21), but something much richer and more intimate. God wants us to know him in a personal, intimate way, and without that, no other kind of knowing—or doing—matters. Another illustration is found in the French language, where there are two verbs for the word *know*: *savoir*, which is said of facts (but not a person), and *connaître*, which is personal knowledge of an individual. This latter usage comes closer to what Jesus had in mind here: the personal, two-way connection to someone who abides in him.

Reflect for a moment. Is it possible that you might be busy with some activities for God, yet you are not connected to him as you serve? What would it be like to hear Jesus say to you, “You were busy *for* me, but you didn’t live *with* me. I don’t really know you”?

4. The reading spoke about the pruning work of God in John 15:2. How have you seen that in your own life at times—perhaps even right now?

Even though intellectually we know pruning is a good thing, why is it still hard when God does it? How can that lead to more effective service?

5. The reading also expressed the importance of feeding on the Word as we abide in him. Read Psalm 1:1–3, then paraphrase its truth.

What is your “delight factor” right now when it comes to God’s Word?

Practically speaking, what form could meditating on the Word “day and night” take in your life?

6. One of the surest ways to test the health of our abiding is by looking for the fruit of the Spirit in our serving (Gal. 5:22–23). If we use the *gifts* of the Spirit while abiding in Christ, the *fruit* of the Spirit will be seen. It’s a thermometer that doesn’t lie. Take a few moments to do an honest assessment of your serving during the past month.

	DECLINING			GROWING	
LOVE	1	2	3	4	5

How tender was your heart toward God and those you served? Toward lost people? Toward “the least”? How often did a critical or judgmental spirit rear its head?

	1	2	3	4	5
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Did your service flow freely or did it feel like burdensome work? How high was your irritability factor? How inclined were you to feel like a martyr?

	1	2	3	4	5
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How content were you regarding your giftedness and place of service? How often were you anxious? Did you relate with fellow servants in a way that promoted peace or stirred up conflict?

	1	2	3	4	5
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How gracious were you when serving led to frustration? How tolerant were you when someone wasn’t performing or responding as you hoped?

	1	2	3	4	5
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How often did you encourage and affirm others? Was there a warmth to your servanthood? How readily did you engage in simple acts of kindness?

	1	2	3	4	5
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As you served, did you find yourself doing the minimum required or going above and beyond? How joyfully did you open your wallet to meet a tangible need?

	DECLINING			GROWING	
FAITHFULNESS	1	2	3	4	5

Were you a person of your word? Would those around you say you served dependably, consistently, and diligently?

GENTLENESS	1	2	3	4	5
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How available were you when someone needed a comforting word or a listening ear? In speaking the truth, were you gracious or harsh? Were you moving too fast to even think of being gentle?

SELF-CONTROL	1	2	3	4	5
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Would others say you were a team player or one who imposed opinions in a controlling way? Did you think before speaking? Did your words build up or tear down?

Summarize your conclusions. What one or two areas need the most attention right now?

7. As you end this chapter and this entire study, consider making a pledge that you won't let your life be wasted by activity done without connection to Christ—that you will not allow working *for* him to be a substitute for abiding *in* him. Write out your version of that commitment below and then offer it in prayer to him.

TAKE-AWAY

My summary of the main point of this session, and how it impacts me personally:

NOTE: You will fill in this information after your group discussion. Leave it blank until the conclusion of your meeting.