

Abide

John 15: 1 – 8

God's Will and Other Matters

Mark Twain has been quoted as saying, “It ain’t the parts of the Bible that I can’t understand that bother me, it’s the parts that I do understand.” Of course, Twain was an atheist, so probably most of the Bible was more than a little problematic for him, but I think we too sometimes find certain passages of Scripture, well, troublesome?

When I was in the young people’s group many years ago we were all constantly encouraged to seek God’s will for our life. That wasn’t a bad thing, mind you, because it taught us a certain way of looking at the world; but it wasn’t easy, because supposedly “God’s will” was kind of his hidden agenda for each of us and it was a secret that had to be discovered. What am I supposed to do with my life? What am I supposed to do in any particular circumstance that may come along? What is God’s will for me?

Then along comes 1st Thessalonians 5: 16 – 18.

¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray without ceasing, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. 1 Thessalonians 5:16–18 (ESV)

Of course, you all know this passage. You often hear it at the end of our Sunday services. And it’s troublesome, isn’t it. “This is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” So, now I don’t have to seek God’s will any more. I just have to do it. The nice part about always looking for the will of God was that as long as you were looking you never really had to do much. But here it is in black and white.

¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray without ceasing, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; **for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.** 1 Thessalonians 5:16–18 (ESV)

Maybe we’re a little bit like Mark Twain after all and it ain’t the parts of the Bible we don’t understand that bother us as much as the parts that we do.

How to Glorify God.

The same could be said of the magnificent first question and answer in the Westminster Shorter Catechism. We are asked, “What is the chief end of man?” and we are taught to reply, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God...” Which is great, because if we never moved beyond that answer to... I don’t know... the Bible, then we could spend a lifetime trying to figure out just how we’re supposed to glorify God, and, kind of like looking for God’s will, as long as we’re supposedly busy looking, we can avoid the doing.

Then along comes Jesus in John chapter 15, verse 8, and deprives us of the opportunity. We read it a few minutes ago:

⁸ By this my Father is glorified... John 15:8 (ESV)

So, wait a minute, here it is. How are we to glorify God? (You might want to take out a pencil and jot this down.)

⁸ By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.
John 15:8 (ESV)

Of course, by “fruit” we don’t mean literal fruit. The passage is an extended metaphor. We started with the words,

¹ “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser.” John 15:1 (ESV)

And a little later we came to verse 5:

⁵ I am the vine; you are the branches... John 15:5 (ESV)

Given, then, that we are not literal branches on a literal vine, there’s still something to be discovered here, and it’s not whether you’re going to bear apples versus pears, or even white grapes versus red grapes. But still, we are confronted with a passage of scripture that tells us something practical. We are confronted with a passage of Scripture that doesn’t leave us wondering about some relatively vague theological concept. (“Man’s chief end is to glorify God and fully to enjoy him forever.” Well isn’t that nice.) But, here in John chapter 15, Jesus just tells us flat out, you were saved from something (yes), but you were also saved to something (and it wasn’t that you were saved *from* the penalty of sin so that you could go ahead and just enjoy life, sinning as much as you might like and then not facing eternal condemnation at the end of the road; there is a current notion about grace which runs more or less along those lines, by the way).

Saved to Bear Fruit.

In point of fact, you were created and then saved to bear fruit. That’s kind of the point of a vine and a vineyard, isn’t it? You know this.

When Lynda and I lived out at Burdett, we used to love having canola in the field across the road. It was so beautiful in the summer when it bloomed and there was this field of gold. But it wasn’t planted so that we could enjoy the flowers. It wasn’t planted so that anyone could enjoy the flowers. It was planted to produce a crop and to provide an income.

Vineyards too. Some of them are set in the most beautiful places and it’s nice to visit and to have a look around and maybe even to sample some of the merchandise; but ultimately a vineyard is planted to produce a crop and to provide an income.

Branches in a vine are meant to bear fruit, so, according to Jesus, **we** are meant to bear fruit. So much so that Jesus said, “Every branch in me that does not bear fruit He takes away...” Now, I know that there is a “kinder, gentler” interpretation applied these words today and it’s probably even true—*now*. Current wisdom hold that if a branch is not bearing fruit the vinedresser does not immediately take it away. First he “lifts it up” out of the dirt and shadow and into the sunshine where it can receive all that it needs in order to bear fruit. The thing is, we’re not dealing with today’s best practices; Jesus was speaking in a first century context. Even so, the idea of lifting the branch and caring for it is still consistent with the next line, “... every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.” Also with verse 3,

³ Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. John 15:3 (ESV)

So, good. God doesn't leave us in the dirt and shadow of sin then. He lifts us up. He cleanses us by the word that he speaks to us. He deals with us tenderly and carefully, as a good vinedresser who is concerned for His vines and as a Father who has compassion for his children. Still, he does so that we might bear fruit because bearing fruit is how we glorify God.

⁸ By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.

John 15:8 (ESV)

So He lifts us up and cleanses us by the word that He has spoken. Good. That's what God does, but then, Jesus shifts the nature of the metaphor a bit, drawing some applications for His disciples and going on to say in verse 4,

⁴ Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. John 15:4 (ESV)

As I said, the metaphor is changed here, because a vinedresser would never stand in the vineyard and command the branches to abide in the vine. Branches either do or they don't. But while the relationship between us and Jesus can be compared to a vine with its branches, we are human beings created in the image of God, we have something to do here, and it boils down to this. Verse 4:

If you abide in me and my words abide in you...

⁴ Abide in me... John 15:4 (ESV)

Simple, really. It's about remaining "in" or "connected to" Christ. Because if we do we will not only bear some fruit; Jesus went on to say in verse 5:

⁵ I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit... John 15:5 (ESV)

But, how? How are we to "abide" in Christ? Well, watch the progression through this passage. In verse 3, John wrote:

³ Already you are clean... John 15:3 (ESV)

But how?

³ ...because of the word that I have spoken to you. John 15:3 (ESV)

This, by the way, is a theme in Scripture. Peter wrote,

²³ ...you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, **through the living and abiding word of God;** ²⁴ for "All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls," ²⁵ but the word of the Lord remains forever." And **this word...**

(the living and abiding word of God...)

is the good news that was preached to you. ¹ Peter 1:23–25 (ESV)

In Ephesians as well, Paul wrote of how Christ gave himself up for the church,

²⁶ that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word... Ephesians 5:26 (ESV)

So, through the word proclaimed, and through the word demonstrated in the sacrament of baptism, we have been made clean. But as I said earlier, “You were saved from something, but you were also saved to something.”

³ Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. John 15:3 (ESV)

But the washing of regeneration with the word is only the beginning, and verses 7 and 8 carry the theme a step farther.

⁷ If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. John 15:7–8 (ESV)

And again, before you get distracted by the “ask whatever you wish”, hear the condition that sets the stage for the promise.

⁷ If you abide in me, and my words abide in you... John 15:7 (ESV)

So, we are made clean through the word that Christ has spoken, but now we’re told that we need more; we need to abide in Christ and more still, His word has to abide in us. Really, this is not two separate things. It’s one and the same. Abiding in Christ means that we abide in his word and we allow his word to abide in us.

Abide in My love...

Verse 9 adds yet another aspect:

⁹ As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. John 15:9 (ESV)

Now that sounds delightful, doesn’t it? Who wouldn’t want to abide in Christ’s love? But here’s the thing; verse 10,

¹⁰ 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. John 15:10 (ESV)

Which may not have quite the appeal. And I know, people talk a lot about God’s unconditional love—“he cannot love more and will not love less,” “love wins”, “all you need is love”, and all the rest of it—but this is the word of Christ. This is the word of the Gospel. We cannot be made clean by keeping his commandments. We cannot be saved by the good that we do, but having been saved, if we would abide in Christ’s love, then we must keep Christ’s commands. To abide in him is to abide in his word and to let his word abide in us as we keep the commandments that we find there. Really then, abiding in Christ is just a matter of following Him. So this is the secret which is no secret. It’s the key to a door that is not meant to be locked. It’s one of those simple principles of God’s will for our lives that we find disturbing not because we don’t know what to do, but rather, because we do.

And it turns out, if you want to be a truly great soccer player, you have to do some abiding on the practice field, and you have to listen to the coach. The same, only in a gym, if you want to be a great basketball player. You'd never know it now, but back in the day I was a pretty decent swimmer and to be so, believe me, I spent a lot of time abiding in the pool, or sometimes a lake, and listening to the commands of the coach.

So, this principle of abiding is not a secret. The hardworking farmer spends time out in the field. A good teacher actually has to spend time teaching her students. If we would bear fruit to God, which is after all the purpose for which he saved us, then we're going to have to spend time abiding in the word of Christ (in other words, the Bible). There's no shortcut. There's no easy way. You can't skip the book and just catch the movie. "The Chosen", "The Bible" and "A.D. – The Story Continues", may be a whole lot better than some of the other "stuff" (I'd like to use a stronger word, but we're in church) that is on television, but they still aren't the word of God (and don't even get me started on some of Hollywood's other so-called biblical epics).

Abiding in Christ such that his word abides in us is the only way.

It's the only way for our prayer (think relationship to Christ) to be so shaped that we can be assured of God's answer.

Fruit that will abide.

And it's the only way to bear fruit to the glory of God. By the way, if you have been wondering, "What is the fruit that we bear to the glory of God?" well, chapter 14, verse 27:

²⁷ Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you... John 14:27 (ESV)

Chapter 15, verse 11:

¹¹ These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. John 15:11 (ESV)

And, chapter 15, verse 12:

¹² "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." John 15:12 (ESV)

So, love, joy, and peace...the fruit of the Spirit, as Paul names it in Galatians chapter 5, and later on, as we'll see in John chapter 16, that's exactly what it is here too. The fruit that we bear to the glory of God as chosen branches on His chosen vine, is the fruit produced by His own Spirit, as we abide in Him and His words—His commands—abide in us, and this is fruit that will abide. Once more then, in the words of Jesus:

⁷ If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. ⁹ As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ These things I have spoken to you, that my joy

may be in you, and that your joy may be full. John 15:7–11 (ESV)