

Greeting

Week 1 - Ephesians 1:1-10 Alive in Christ (Brian Long)

"We don't work for God's acceptance; we work from it."

"The Christian life begins with grace, continues with grace, and ends with grace."

Week 2 - Romans 8:1-11 Living from Grace, Not Guilt (Phil Christiansen)

Have you ever felt pressure to get to sleep ... and then couldn't?

- Perhaps you planned to travel early the next day and needed to go to bed early to get some sleep ... and just couldn't sleep despite all your best effort.
- Or perhaps it was work related, and you found yourself waking at 4am, and wanting desperately to get another hour or two of sleep but your mind kicked into hyperdrive ... and you just couldn't make it happen.
- Or perhaps it was a doctor's appointment or surgery the next day that kept you awake half the night before ... despite all your best efforts to lie there and sleep.

It seems that the harder we try to fall asleep, the less likely it is to happen. We cannot force sleep by willpower. In fact, anxiety about sleeping often keeps us awake! Sleep comes when we rest and surrender.

Many Christians approach spiritual growth like insomnia—trying harder and harder to produce peace, joy, patience, or love. You can no more force spiritual fruit than you can force yourself to sleep.

Here's the simple idea—but the big idea—this morning: **Jesus says that spiritual fruit grows not from frantic effort but from abiding in Him.** Our role is not to manufacture fruit but to remain connected to the One who produces it.

Come with me to a key and foundational text found in **John 15:1-11 (NIV).**

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ² 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. ³ You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴ Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. ⁵ "I am the vine; you are the branches. **If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. ⁷ If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. ⁹ "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. ¹⁰ If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. ¹¹ I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.**

Friends, the central thrust of this passage is simply this: **At its core, the Christian life is not about striving harder but abiding deeper.**

What a stark contrast to just about every major religion in the world which says that spiritual achievement is the result of major spiritual effort! It's a stark contrast to the version of Christian faith that I have encountered in so many places. Let me say it again...

At its core, the Christian life is not about striving harder but abiding deeper. That's not to say that there isn't effort and sacrifice and commitment and discipline involved in following Jesus, but the Christian life starts and matures when we abide in Jesus.

And the dominant image of *discipleship* that Jesus used is...
not a worker learning a trade,
not a student learning information,
not someone doing acts of service,
but a branch receiving life.

It was the night before His crucifixion, and Jesus was laying out some of the principles that He considered most fundamental and most important for the upcoming Christian movement and for Christian living.

- He might have talked about spiritual disciplines. He didn't.
- He might have talked about church governance. He didn't.
- He might have talked about politics and ways to vote. He didn't.
- He might have talked about social issues and Christian solutions. He didn't.
- He might have talked about establishing Christian schools and hospitals. He didn't.

He talked about **abiding**. Not because all those other things don't matter. They do! But they are secondary to **abiding**.

And I am struck by the last words in our passage this morning. **Verse 11: "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete."**

We abide in Jesus so that His joy may be in us and our joy made be complete (or full)! Okay. Now you're talking my language. The whole purpose of abiding in Jesus is an abundant life ... on the inside!

The ancient Jewish prophet Habakkuk lived about 600 years before Christ, and saw disaster on the horizon from the invading Babylonians. He began his short three-chapter-prophecy with the cry, **“How long, O Lord, will I call for help, and you will not hear? I cry out to you ‘Violence!’ yet you do not save me.” (1:2)**

Have you ever felt that way? Isn't that the cry of nearly every human at some point?

But listen to how Habakkuk closes his prophecy. He writes: **“Though the fig tree should not blossom and there be no fruit on the vines, though the yield of the olive should fail and the fields produce no food, though the flocks should be cut off from the fold, and there be no cattle in the stalls [utter disaster], Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation, God the Lord is my strength....” (3:17-18)**

That's the joy I want! I want that joy that transcends my circumstances. I want that confidence, that assurance, and that deep conviction of God's sovereignty. People who have it live different lives—better lives!

And Jesus says, “Abide in Me...that My joy may be in you and your joy may be complete!”

So, He began with the words: “I am the true vine.....” Everything springs from this basic declaration.

Jesus is the True Vine: Abide in Him

[Take a dead branch as a prop for the message.]

There's a reason that this stick is not green and vibrant and productive. It's not attached to its source of life!

See verses 4-5 again. ⁴“Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. ⁵“I am the vine; you are the branches. **If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.**”

“Apart from Me, you can do nothing!” Really? Unbelievers can build cities, govern nations, raise families, write books, and perform on stages! So, what might Jesus have meant? Simply put...we can do nothing that will transform our own hearts and fulfill our spiritual calling and destiny, without Jesus!

“Apart from Me, you can do nothing!” It’s so true!

Friends, it doesn’t take very long in life to realize that:

We’re not in charge!

We’re not self-sufficient!

We’re not all-powerful!

We’re not immune to pain and heartache!

We quickly feel powerless, vulnerable, incompetent, ignorant, and afraid. “You can do nothing” rings true!

So, how do we abide in Jesus?

I think the text may give us *at least* two clues.

Verse 7: “If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you.”

I want to make just two suggestions this morning in this *Everyday Faith* message—two basic and predictable statements, with a twist.

1. We abide in Jesus when His words abide in us.

I've heard all of my life that you can't know the will of God if you are not reading the Word of God. And I believe that's true. I don't know how you follow Jesus or know the heart of God, if you are not reading the Word of God.

Yet, over the years I've chatted with countless people who just don't "get anything" out of reading the Bible. It feels dry and hard to them, and more often than not they run out of energy and enthusiasm to keep reading. Might that describe some of you?

But there's a twist here in John 15. Jesus doesn't tell His followers to read the Bible. He says that our joy will be made full when we abide in Him and His words abide in us!

Indeed, on one occasion, Jesus criticized the religious academics of His day by saying: *"You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me, and you are unwilling to come to Me that you may have life"* (John 5:39).

Those Jewish scholars studied the Bible and debated every jot and tittle in it. But they didn't see Jesus in it! They might as well have been studying Plato or Socrates for all the good it was doing them.

I want to invite you to read the Bible ... but read it differently! Read it like the early Church, who knew something about abiding in Christ.

- Read it looking for Jesus.
- Read it with a prayer that Christ will reveal himself or something of the Father's heart through what you read.
- Read it through the lens of Christ and the cross.

Read it differently! We will abide in Christ when we specifically want this divine book to lead us to Christ. THEN, these words become His words and abide in us.

2. When we abide in Jesus, our prayers get answered.

Verse 7: "If you abide in Me...ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you."

This sounds like a "genie in the bottle" text. Rub the lamp the right way, and get unlimited wishes. But there's the qualifier—"If you abide in Me."

There's a whole lot to say on this topic, but let me take you to one common practice that we might have misunderstood.

Jesus told His disciples on one occasion: "Whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, so that the Father may be glorified through the Son. **If you ask anything in My name, I will do it**" (John 14:13-14).

For some of us, this has become our magic formula, so we commonly finish our prayers with "In Jesus name. Amen." We tack it on the end of a prayer, often hurriedly and with hardly a thought as to what we are saying or what we might be suggesting.

What does it mean to say "in Jesus name" at the end of a prayer? There are various possibilities:

1. By the authority that belongs to Christ and is given to me.
2. Because of what Jesus made possible through the cross.

What about this possibility? **May this prayer be aligned with the heart and desires of Christ Himself, and may God respond to this prayer to the extent that it is in alignment with the mind of Christ.**

When we are abiding in Christ, and His words are abiding in us, and our minds are being aligned with His, and our hearts are listening for Him, and our wills are surrendered to Him, we will pray differently and our prayers will be answered more dramatically.

Friends, the power and effectiveness of our prayers is not in cleverness of speech, but in sensitivity to Christ. **Here's the simple principle:** Prayer is not to get God's attention. It is because we consistently give Him our attention. We increasingly have the mind of Christ.

Apart from Christ, our prayers touch ears. Aligned with Christ, our prayers touch souls.

1 John 2:6 "The one who says he abides in Christ ought to walk in the same manner as Christ walked."

When we abide, then we will abound!

Application: "How close am I to Jesus?"

Friends, as we land the plane this morning, the question is not: "Am I doing enough?" The question is: "Am I remaining close enough to Christ for His life to flow through me?" Many Christians think fruitfulness starts with trying harder. Jesus says it starts with being rooted in Him.

This week, don't ask first: "*What can I do for Christ?*" Ask: "*How can I remain in Christ?*" Because the fruit you long to see in your life grows naturally from a branch that abides in the Vine.

Want to see your marriage renewed or restored or simply rejuvenated?

Want to be a better mom or dad or uncle or grandfather?

Want to cope better with the pressures at work?

Want JOY?

Stop striving so hard. Abide more.

Read the Bible looking for Jesus and listening to Jesus.

Pray in the name of Jesus, seeking to be fully aligned with Him in what you ask.

Then His joy will be in you, and your joy will be complete.