

Jesus - the True and Better Vine

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Date: 13 March 2022

Preacher: Eric Scott

[0 : 00] Scripture reading today comes from also God's love and Jesus is enough. Let's read John chapter 15, verse 1 to 17.

I am the true vine, and my father is the vine dresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit, he takes away. And every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes, that it might bear more fruit.

Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. 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. I am the vine, you are the branches. Whatever abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit.

For apart from me, you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me, he is thrown away like a branch and withers. And the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

[1 : 16] If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my father is glorified that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples.

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 lay down his life for his friends.

And you are my friends, if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you serpents, for the serpents does not know what his master is doing. But I have called you friends.

[2 : 20] 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. This is the word of God. And I'll just pass over to Eric. Good morning, everyone.

How are you today? My name is Eric. I actually used to work at Watermark for about seven years, and it's great to see so many old friends on here today. Good morning, everyone.

It's also great to see some new people who I don't recognize. And I love Watermark Church. It played a huge role in my spiritual growth over the years. I'm still friends with lots of people in Watermark, and I'm so thankful for your church, and I pray for you guys.

If you knew me back in my Watermark days, my family has grown a little bit since we left. And so I have a slide that we can pop up on the screen to show you.

[3 : 39] We've added Judah and Isaiah to our family in the years since we were at Watermark. And I'm now pastoring at a church in Tengcheng called the Bridge Church. But as Kevin mentioned, we're doing a pulpit swap today to show that the church in Hong Kong is bigger than any of our individual churches.

And so I'm here. Kevin's at another church, and that church's pastor is at the bridge. And it's great to be with you here today to share God's word with you. And as we start thinking about today's passage, I have a question for you.

Do you want your life to make a difference in the world? Do you want your life to make a difference in the world? Do you want to have the knowledge that after you're gone, this world is a better place because you were in it?

And I think if I had to guess, I think you do, because I think that's actually one of the most common desires of the human heart. I think you want it because everyone wants it. And that's why people donate millions of dollars to get their names on buildings, because they want future generations to

remember this person made the world a better place.

And you may not have the money to put your name on a building, but I believe that most of us still have this desire to know we made a difference on the earth. But have you ever thought about what it takes to make that kind of a difference in the world?

[5 : 07] Well, in today's passage, Jesus shares one of his I am statements with us from the book of John. That's what this series is looking at, the I am statements of Jesus in the book of John.

And he teaches us with this I am statement how to live in a way that makes a lasting difference in the world. He says, I am the vine, you are the branches. And what we'll see as we look at today's passage is that for our lives to make a positive, lasting difference, we must abide in Jesus.

And we'll be looking at three questions today. What is abiding? Why don't we abide? And how do we abide? But before we dig in and look at the passage, let's pray together.

Father, we thank you for this time together today. We thank you for your word that speaks to us and that tells us who you are and what it means to live for you. We thank you for the unity that we have as churches who are connected in Jesus.

Even though we meet in different places most Sundays, we thank you that you bring us together and that you connect us and unite us with yourself and with one another.

[6 : 18] And we pray that you would give us just focus and clarity as we look at your word today. And in Jesus name, amen. Amen. So our first question today that we need to look at is what is abiding?

And I realized the first issue with our main idea today is that actually abide isn't a super common word in our world today. I did some research this week about how often words appear in books.

And it said that the word abide is rare enough in today's world that on average for every three novels you read, not articles online, but like novels, books, full books.

For every three novels you read, the word abide will show up about once. So it's quite understandable if many of us have absolutely no idea what this word means, which is why our first question today is what is abiding?

And abiding simply means remaining or staying. Using Jesus' vine illustration here where he says he is the vine, we are the branches.

[7 : 26] Abiding means being connected with us in such a way that life flows into us and gives us life. Obviously, that's a spiritual connection, not a physical one.

Maybe a real world illustration would help. You can think of it like marriage. Marriage is supposed to be this mutually life-giving relationship. By being married to one another, a husband and wife, they're meant to encourage one another.

And support one another and help one another through hard time of life through being in this relationship. But if someone just packs up and goes to live in another country from their spouse, and they never call, they never write, that marriage isn't going to be a life-giving relationship because they're not abiding with one another.

There will be some legal paperwork to say that a relationship exists, but there won't be any daily evidence of a relationship. There won't be any encouragement or support.

They won't be strengthening one another. They won't be helping one another get through the day because they're not abiding in that relationship. And it's the same with Jesus. Jesus calls us to live in a daily life-giving relationship with him.

[8 : 39] He says that staying connected to him, that remaining with him on a day-to-day basis, is how we receive that spiritual life and vitality that we need in order to operate in the world.

And so you know what that means? It means being a Christian isn't just about life after death. It's not about having some get-out-of-hell-free card for when you die. Being a Christian is actually meant to give us real-world strength and comfort today to help us with whatever circumstances we're facing, whether that's COVID lockdowns or wars and rumor of war, whether that's sick family members, whether we have instability in our jobs or whatever else we may be facing.

Abiding with Jesus is meant to give us strength today to face those things. This also means that if we're not taking time each day to be with Jesus and grow closer to him, and your spiritual life just consists of the fact that I prayed a prayer once to become a Christian a while back, and then that's about it, you're not actually abiding with Jesus.

Saying I prayed a prayer once five years ago, and that's it, is sort of like saying I had a marriage ceremony five years ago, but I haven't spoken to my spouse since. You're kind of missing the point.

By not abiding, you're missing out on the real-world resources for living that Jesus wants to give you today to equip you to live properly for him in the world. So abiding is not some super spiritual accomplishment for ultra-Christians.

[10:14] It's actually what Jesus is calling all of us to do. It's simply living in a life-giving relationship with Jesus, where we have daily dependence and reliance on him.

It's living in a life-giving relationship with Jesus, where we have a daily dependence and reliance on him. So there are real-world resources available today for those who abide in Jesus, who remain in this life-giving relationship with him on a day-to-day basis, and yet, so often, so many of us struggle to actually abide with Jesus.

So before we look at how to abide, let's first look at some of these roadblocks that we face, some of the trouble areas that keep us from abiding properly. And that brings us to our second question.

Why don't we abide? And there are several reasons we don't abide. We don't have time to go into all of them. I want to highlight a couple of them that stick out from Jesus' teaching here. The first is that we're often looking to the wrong vines or false vines.

Did you notice that in verse 1 of today's passage, Jesus doesn't simply say he's the vine. He says he's the true vine. Now, why add that extra word, that extra clarification?

[11:28] Well, you only need to clarify you're the true vine if there are false vines as well. In the context of the Bible, Israel was actually supposed to be God's vineyard in the Old Testament. Israel as a nation, as God's chosen people, was supposed to live in such a way that they bore fruit.

And them living in this way was meant to encourage all the nations around them to come and worship God. But the problem that we see again and again in the Old Testament is that Israel consistently, repeatedly failed to bear fruit like they were supposed to.

They failed to live up to that job of being God's vine. And that's why we need this new, better, true vine. Because so many people in Jesus' day were counting on the fact that I am Jewish.

I am part of God's chosen people. They were counting on their ethnic background to give them a relationship with God. And by saying that he is the true vine, not Israel, Jesus is telling the disciples and us, you don't get to God by being born into a certain family or by being born into a certain religious group or a certain ethnic group.

The only way to get to God and have a life-giving relationship with him is through knowing and living in a relationship with Jesus.

[12:49] Placing our hope in our ethnic background like the Jewish people of Jesus' day did isn't the only false vine out there. Like every day, you and I have voices coming at us from all sides, promising us that if we'll just attach ourselves to this vine or that one, we'll get true, abundant life.

Maybe it's the vine of success. Students, how often do you hear this? You just get the best grades in school and you'll be on the path to full, abundant, true, fruitful life.

Or maybe if you're in the workplace, it sounds more like, well, once you get promoted to managing director in your company, true life is yours. Maybe for you, the healing one isn't success.

Maybe it's forever and you will have the full, abundant, fruitful life that you've always wanted and dreamed of. Maybe it's the vine of control.

If you can just keep your family safe and secure, avoid your family being exposed to COVID, keep your kids from making bad choices as they grow up, and you will have full, abundant, fruitful life.

[14:01] Maybe your vine is a different one. But regardless of which false vine we choose to attach ourselves to, the reality is no false vine can ever give us that lasting satisfaction and fruitfulness that our souls crave.

And by definition, being attached to any false vine gets in the way of us being attached to Jesus, the true vine. You know, just to unpack one of the examples I listed and show how it fails to give us what it promises.

Look at that vine of control. Is it good to have a safe and healthy family full of people who make good choices? Absolutely, yes. That's a good thing, right? But what happens when that's the primary place we look in order to find the abundant life?

We become neurotic control freaks. Everything has to go our way or else. We become miserable to be around. I mean, have you ever been around a neurotic control freak and thought to yourself, wow, that person really has the good life.

I wish my life could be more like theirs. No, of course not. When we see someone like that, we think they're miserable and we thank God we're not like that, even if we are and we just can't see it in

ourselves because we know that's a miserable, miserable way to live life.

[15:17] And yet still, what do we do? We grasp for control just like that because we think that having control will give us fruitful, abundant life. But it never can because it's a false vine.

And as long as we're trying to tap true life from false vines, we won't be abiding in Jesus. We won't be experiencing any of the blessings that come from being connected with him.

So false vines keep us from abiding in that true vine of Jesus. The second reason we don't abide in Jesus is fear. Do you notice what Jesus said about his father's role in this process in verses one and two?

He says, my father is the vine dresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit, he takes away. And every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes that it may bear more fruit.

Do you know what pruning is? Do you know what pruning is? Pruning is when you have a grapevine and you cut back parts of the plant so that the plant can give maximum level of energy to the branches that will grow the healthiest and best grapes.

[16:27] Pruning is cutting back or getting rid of living, growing parts of the plant so that the plant can be more fruitful in the future. It's a painful process. And I did a little bit of research this week on pruning and it helped me understand on a deeper level just how painful pruning can be.

Obviously, it's painful, but check out this. Here's one thing I learned from my research. It comes from a website called Modern Farmer. So, you know, it has to be good, right? It said this, grapevines produce fruit on one-year-old wood.

Some of the buds on one-year-old wood grow flowers which develop into fruit, while the buds on older wood produce only leaves or shoots. Now, you know a huge implication of pruning from this fact?

If you have a physical grapevine, the parts of the vine that bore fruit last year are the ones that need to get cut off this year because the same branch can't bear fruit twice.

And I don't know about you, like, if I think about my life, if I think about the things that I've done for God, I find a certain level of comfort in my past success. Knowing I was successful at doing something a certain way in the past makes me comfortable.

[17:40] But actually, as a good gardener, the things from my past that I want to rest on and rely on and take confidence in are often going to be the exact things that God has to prune from my life to make space for new growth.

And that's uncomfortable. I'm afraid of that. There's this part of me that kind of feels like, well, if that's how it's going to be, I prefer a different path that doesn't involve pruning, right? If staying with Jesus means that much pain, maybe there's an easier, more comfortable way.

But what we see in the passage is the only way to avoid pruning is by avoiding abiding, and that's a way that leads to death. If we want a comfortable and convenient life, we're going to be hesitant and afraid to abide in Jesus.

But pruning is necessary if we're going to bear fruit. So we fail to abide because we look to false vines. We fail to abide because we're afraid of the pain of pruning. And the third reason that we often don't abide is we have an overinflated sense of our own ability.

I mean, on a day-to-day basis, how many of us actually believe what Jesus says in verse 5? Apart from me. He says, apart from me, you can do nothing.

[18:57] How many of us actually believe that on a day-to-day basis? And because we don't believe it, we try to rely on ourselves to do what only Jesus working in us can accomplish.

But the problem is, as long as we're relying on our own effort, as long as we believe we are somehow capable of doing things without Jesus, we're not abiding in the true vine.

And I know on one level, there are a lot of things we can do without abiding in Jesus. Right? I mean, if you look at the world around you, you can see non-Christians every day who aren't abiding in Jesus. Working, earning a paycheck, raising families, maybe even doing some really good things in their community.

So what does Jesus mean when he says, apart from me, you can do nothing? Well, he means that ultimately, if you're operating apart from him, then the things we do won't last.

They won't make that lasting positive difference in the world that he wants us to make. The buildings that we donate lots of money to get our names on are going to be torn down for new ones. Our pride and selfishness are going to corrupt our interactions with others where we're trying to help them.

[20 : 03] And we're not going to be as helpful as we thought we were. Apart from Jesus, we can't make the difference for eternity that he wants us to make. He tells us in verse 16 of today's passage, it's only when we abide in him that our fruit abides.

That the things we do make a lasting difference and remain. And you know, our ultimate struggle when it comes to abiding in Jesus. As Jesus says here, we're completely incapable of abiding in him through our own power.

And we already saw Jesus explicitly tells us apart from me, you can do nothing. But also look at how his argument is structured in this passage. In verse 4, he gives us this command, abide in me. Then in verse 10, he tells us, if you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love. And then in verse 12, he tells us the commandment we are to keep in order to abide in his love is that we love one another as I have loved you.

And then in verse 17, he says, these things I command you so that, or with the intended result that you will love one another. Now, I know that's a bunch of verses all at once, but if you put that all together, what do you get?

[21 : 13] He says, we're called to abide in Jesus. To abide in Jesus, we must love one another. But then the result of abiding in Jesus is that we love one another.

So we need to love one another in order to abide. We need to abide in order to love. There's a circle going on here, and there's no on-ramp to the circle through our effort from the outside. There's nothing we can do to jump our way into that cycle.

There's nothing we can do through our own power to begin doing this life-giving abiding that lets us live in a way where we can make a lasting positive difference in the world.

To get into this cycle, we need a miracle. And realizing that that's the case brings us to our final question today. How do we abide? And the answer is, in order to abide, we need grace.

Grace, God's unmerited favor and blessing on us, is what jumps us into that loop. At the end of the day, us getting in on this abiding, it's not about us trying harder and doing better, about us pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps to prove how really useful we are to God.

[22 : 22] It's about Jesus getting us in through his work. Look at verse 13 of today's passage with me. Jesus says, Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.

Now, as Jesus spoke these words, he was walking with his disciples from the Last Supper to the Garden of Gethsemane, where he was about to be arrested.

And over the course of the next day, Jesus was going to be put on trial. He was going to be beaten and mocked, eventually executed as a criminal, even though he had done absolutely nothing wrong.

And why did he go through all of this? Well, it's because he was acting as the living embodiment of his own teaching right here. Jesus was laying down his life for his friends, including those of us who trust in him today.

And what does it mean that his death was for us? Well, it means there's something we need, but we can't get through our own effort. And him dying provides us what we need in such a way that we could never have provided for ourselves.

[23 : 33] Through his death for us, the way is open for you and me to have access to this new life-giving relationship of abiding in Jesus. This relationship we could never earn through our own efforts.

And as we see in this passage, once he's saved us, he calls us to obey. Our obedience is important. But our obedience is important because we who used to be disconnected branches have now been connected to Jesus so we can bear fruit.

Our obedience isn't the thing that connects us to Jesus. Already connected. We have a new identity.

We have new life through the grace that he has given us. And so as a result of that, we live differently. And once we have that life, once we've been brought into this cycle, how do we grow in our abiding each day?

Well, God has given us certain tools called spiritual disciplines to help us intentionally abide. And the things that are covered in spiritual disciplines probably won't be shocking or new to you.

[24 : 37] Even if this is your first time at church and you've never been around a church before, a lot of these things that I'm about to mention are things that you've seen as part of this service today. Things like Bible reading, prayer, going to church, meeting up with other Christians to live life

alongside of them.

Doing these things, not just once a week when we meet on Sunday, but on a day by day, even a moment by moment basis, is how we stay connected to the true vine. Did you notice that not once, but twice in this passage, Jesus makes some really big, huge, open-ended promises about whatever we ask in prayer he's going to give us?

Do you ever wonder about that? What's going on there? It's not some sort of blank check saying like, hey, here's the deal. If you want to be a billionaire, all you have to do is become a Christian, pray a prayer, and it's yours.

Yes. That's not what's going on here. No, that's these promises are Jesus way of reminding us that this abiding thing is really hard. We don't have the resources in ourselves to do it.

And in order to keep on abiding, we need a miracle. We need some great, big, huge, open-ended help. But he's promising to give us all the help we need.

[25 : 53] He's promising to do that miracle for us. And as I mentioned spiritual disciplines, remember the goal of these disciplines is a relationship.

It's abiding with Jesus. It's not about checking a box. Hey, I read my Bible today. Done. Hey, I prayed today. Done. No, it's about a relationship. Relationships can't survive without good communication.

So obviously some level of interaction with God through his word and his prayer and his people is essential if we want to abide like Jesus is telling us to here. If we want that vibrant living relationship with God that he's calling us to.

But the goal of doing these things isn't to just check a box and say, I've made it. I'm now a good Christian because I've done these things. No, the goal is to know God.

But maybe it would think of it help if we think of it this way. Imagine I read a book on how to be a great husband. And it tells me a great husband.

[26 : 51] There's three things that all great husbands do. All great husbands help their wives with the dishes after dinner. They read their kids a bedtime story before bed and they take their wife on a weekly date night.

And I say, all right, I am going to be a great husband. And I start doing these three things consistently. Every night after dinner, I help with the dishes.

Every night when the kids are going to bed, I come in and I read them a bedtime story. And once per week, at least I take Justine out for a date night. Now, are those three things generally good things for husbands to do?

Probably good ideas, right? But will I automatically be a great husband with a great marriage because I'm doing these things? Maybe, but not necessarily, right?

Because having a great marriage isn't about the boxes you check of the things you do each week. It's about having a loving relationship with your spouse. You know, in my marriage, there are many days where it's far more helpful for my wife.

[27 : 56] If I take an hour away from my work in the afternoon to help with the kids and then go back and do more work after dinner once the kids are in bed while she does the dishes. If I was so fixated on this idea that good husbands always help with the dishes, that I said no to helping with her greater need because I need to check this box.

I'm going to miss out on my relationship with her because I'm so focused on what I'm supposed to be doing to have that relationship. The relationship is the primary thing, not the box that you check to try and earn the relationship for yourself.

And in the same way, spiritual disciplines, they're essential for growing closer to Jesus. But when you do spiritual disciplines, you need to find what works for you and helps you connect with Jesus. Again, if you're not communicating, you won't have a strong relationship. You need time in God's word, but what works for you? Maybe reading your Bible is something you do best from a hard copy of the Bible.

First thing in the morning, when you wake up, not on your phones, you don't get distractions from different notifications. Maybe you can't focus when you're staring at words on a page. And maybe for you, it's way more effective if you listen to an audio Bible rather than reading it from a screen.

[29 : 13] Maybe for you, it doesn't matter how it comes in. It's not going to stick with you unless you journal some reflections on it or discuss it with your friends. If that's the case, start journaling, start discussing with friends.

You need to be hearing from God, but the key isn't here's exactly when and how you must do this. The key is what actually helps, what actually helps your relationship with Jesus grow deeper? What helps you abide with Jesus? We see in verse 11, Jesus' goal to abide in him. It's not to burden us. It's not to make us miserable. It's to give us joy.

Joy that can only be found through knowing him. And practicing spiritual discipline so we can abide in Jesus is a path to lasting joy. And when we do this, when we abide in Jesus, when we know him and trust in him through his grace to rescue us, when we spend time growing closer to him each day, Jesus will begin to transform us from the inside out to be people who bear abiding fruit. It won't happen overnight because fruit doesn't grow overnight. But Jesus defining success as bearing fruit, man, that is liberating. It redefines success for us, right?

[30 : 29] Like society tells us success is moving up into the right. As time goes by, things only get better and better and better. But that's so tied to your circumstances.

Like how do you move up into the right, make sure things are constantly getting better when you're locked up in a tiny Hong Kong flat with screaming young kids during COVID? Drive yourself crazy if you're trying to do that.

You'll constantly feel like a failure. But if success is bearing fruit, if success means by the grace of God, growing in things like love, joy, peace, patience, that's something that can happen in any circumstances.

It's not dependent on your circumstances. And actually, if bearing fruit is our definition of success, if success is growing in things like peace and patience, there are ways that you will be growing in peace and patience during COVID lockdown that you would not be able to learn otherwise.

If fruitfulness is the best, then this is the best season where Jesus invited us to great success and great growth in a way that the world could never allow us to have success during this time.

[31 : 48] And if you're frustrated because this process of bearing fruit is slower than you'd like, that's okay. You know, in my research this week on grape plants, I learned grape plants don't actually start growing a crop of grapes until their third year of growing.

And even then, it's a small crop. But as the branches keep staying attached to the life-giving power of the vine, and they keep being tended by a skillful and caring vine dresser, their production grows year by year until they grow into a full, big crop.

And so the key isn't to be super productive today. The key is to keep staying connected to Jesus, the true vine, and staying patient as he slowly transforms us into the people that he wants us to be. Let me pray for us. Father, what a joy that you call us to abide in you, that you offer us the opportunity to live connected to the true vine, the true source of life, God.

I pray that you forgive us for the times that we don't do that. Whether it's because we're connected to the wrong vines, or we're afraid, or we're just relying on ourselves too much, God.

[33 : 04] I pray that you would free us from the things that keep us from you, and that you would bring us to yourself and help us to trust in you and abide in the fruit that abides.

Father, we need you more than we know. God, I pray that you would be giving us a love for you today. In Jesus' name, amen.