

The Branch Life #4
The Problem with Good Intentions
Refocus 2018

If you are new to Highlands, or even new to church going, I want to welcome you and give you a heads up that today is a bit different from normal because we're going to begin a short series on Refocusing our Vision on why we are here.

If you're new, you'll get a behind the scenes perspective of what we are about.

You heard it during the earlier welcome – “We are a community of believers who seek to meet people where they are and help them in their journey of becoming maturing and equipped followers of Jesus.

Each year at the start of the new “ministry year” I like to revisit some aspect of that Vision. This year, our ReFocus is centered on the passage from John 15 where Jesus gives a series of truths about the Branch Life. That term refers to our relationship with Jesus as described in John 15. We looked at it last week, but we'll pick up this week. As a reminder to those new or were out last week, in v. 5 Jesus says,

5 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.

We're going to look at the fuller context in a few minutes, but first, I want to explore the question, “What Determines where you end up, your intentions or your actions?”

1 I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. 2 Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every *branch* that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit. 3 You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you.

4 Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither *can* you unless you abide in Me. 5 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.

6 If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them and cast them into the fire and they are burned.

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

9 Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also 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 so that My joy may be in you, and *that* your joy may be made full.

ACTION IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN INTENTION

Jesus has nothing to say about good intentions. He speaks quite frankly about the results of our action or inaction.

EX: friend offers to give you an expense paid trip to Destin and you get in the car and he / she begins to head north on I-75. She's very friendly and nice and has great intentions, but on I-75 North you'll end up in Downtown Detroit. Not really the same thing as Destin, FL.

These first two verses are troubling because we are faced with a “performance reality”, and we thought Christianity was about grace, not our performance. Right?

Jesus talks about fruit, more fruit, v2, then “much fruit”, v5. The fruit is rooted in God's grace towards us.

Fruitfulness is EVIDENCE of grace, not the CAUSE of grace.

A. Murray – A machine can do work, but only life can bear fruit. A law can compel work: only love can spontaneously bring forth fruit. Work implies effort and labor: **The essential idea of fruit is that it is the silent, natural, restful produce of our inner life.** The gardener may labor to give his apple tree the digging and manuring, the watering and the pruning it needs; he can do nothing to produce the apple:..
Murray, Andrew. Andrew Murray: Abide in Christ & The True Vine -

Fruit, more fruit, much fruit is the result of the DOUBLE ABIDING – “you abide in Me, and I abide in you (my words abide in you)”

Remember the context – “GET THE PICTURE”

The disciples in chapters 12-15 are coming off the “high” of the Last Supper with Jesus: He washed their feet; He inaugurated the New Covenant with His blood; He revealed Himself as the WAY, TRUTH, AND LIFE, He affirmed His own oneness with the Father, He spoke of the Helper, the Holy Spirit who would be sent and he gave the great promise of His peace that surpasses the peace that the world gives.

Things are sounding pretty good, then he drops this non-fruit bearing vs fruit bearing Branch imagery on them. It had to get their attention, especially since he’d just predicted that one of them would betray him.

Verse 3 could be taken as a word of hope and affirmation, but he goes right back to the “BIG IF” of verse 6.

We live in an age where we don’t like the “binary trap” i.e. the A or B, the Either / Or.

We like BOTH / AND, we like multiple options. We don’t want to be boxed in or defined by someone else’s definitions.

BUT Jesus DOESN’T GIVE US THAT much room. He narrows it down to “fruitless” and “fruitful” or “non-abiding and abiding”.

There is an option to abide or to Not abide. Jesus lays out for us the results of each, i.e. “WHAT’S BEHIND EACH DOOR?”

Jesus is almost a psychic in that he predicts what will happen in John 15. Jesus can speak from a Divine perspective on the nature and behavior of mankind. Either your future is one of being gathered, cast into the fire and burned or it is a future of being pruned so that you bear more fruit. Jesus doesn’t say which has to happen to you as if it’s some sort of fate. Instead, Jesus indicates that the choice is yours.

The hard thing may be Discerning the difference between the two because while we are being pruned we might feel like we’re being gathered with all the other dead branches. If we confuse the two, we might be tempted to give up rather than embrace the pruning.

Lest we are tempted to say, “But I’m unique. God wouldn’t do me that way. I do my thing with him, and it’s all good”, we need to understand something:

Though we are all unique, our stories are NOT. There is nothing new under the sun.

The best way to predict your future is to pay attention to where you are abiding.

YOU ARE ABIDING SOMEWHERE!

Do you know where your heart is?? Listen to the words of Jesus and you can predict your future.

When it comes to our future status as fruitless or fruitful, we all have skin in the game.

Some people may say well, that doesn’t sound very Presbyterian. What happened to “God’s sovereignty and predestination and all of that?”

Those don’t disappear, but in God’s sovereign Grace he has instituted the reality of cause and effect, of reaping and sowing, or of abiding or not abiding. We are not robots or bots on Twitter or Facebook that respond to some algorithm or program. We are living, breathing, sentient, determining, deciding creatures, and sometimes it is scary how much freedom God gives us to even make mistakes.

Note that God the vinedresser is not sitting back helpless and watching stuff happen. He's not like old Asa the bank security guard on Andy Griffith- sort of mumbling and bumbling.



No God the vinedresser is active, and He brings out his divine Hatchet to cut away the dead branches and brings his pruning shears to prune the branches that are bearing fruit so that they may bear MORE fruit.

This image sort of rubs us the wrong way because it's as if Jesus is telling us for those who have much, God will work so that they will have more. And those that have nothing, or they bear NO fruit, are going to be taken away.

The whole issue of the unproductive branch that is it cast off and put in the fire raises all sorts of questions that this passage, in it of itself, simply doesn't address. **What IS clear is that God wants us as branches to not just bear fruit but to Bear more fruit.**

Verses 2 and 6 are sobering. They raise issues of eternal security, right?

How can a true branch be cut off? Does cast into the fire mean Hell?

If I've "prayed the sinner's prayer, then I'm good, right?"

If I "asked Jesus into my heart when I was a child or an adult, it's all good, right?"

Here's the sobering reality... We are not saved by a prayer, by asking Jesus into our hearts, by joining the church, or even by giving a profession of faith. We are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. This is the result of the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We have already seen in John that not all who are followers of Christ are truly IN CHRIST (ch 6). There were, and are, those who are taken to be real branches, but never were.

What is the evidence in our lives of the reality of being a true branch??? FRUITFUL ABIDING.

The gospel of John is as strong on the eternal security of the true sheep as any portion of scripture. Yet we have this sober warning because scripture does not want us to be complacent or take things for granted. Jesus knew, and we know, that both types of branches mentioned here are present in the church at any given time. John is not alone with such words. Paul speaks of the wolves in sheep's clothing, i.e. fruitless branches in the vineyard. Hear what Peter says in 2 Peter 1...

5 Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge, 6 and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness, 7 and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love.

8 For if these *qualities* are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

9 For he who lacks these *qualities* is blind or short-sighted, having forgotten *his* purification from his former sins.

10 Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you; for as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble; 11 for in this way the entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be abundantly supplied to you.

These verses are also sobering, as they echo what John 6, John 15, and Matthew 13 (Parable of the Four

Soils) tell us about how it is possible to look like we're attached to Christ, but we show we are not by pulling away. The text from 2 Peter also gives us an insight into what abiding entails: v. 9 REMEMBER YOUR PURIFICATION FROM FORMER SINS. i.e. John 15:3 (already clean because of the word spoken to us).

If we don't remember our forgiveness, then we won't hold fast. We won't abide. **A renewed grasp of the truth of forgiveness is needed for a strong spiritual life.** We need to believe it every day because we sin every day.

Abiding entails perseverance, and perseverance is an evidence of being a true branch.

2 Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, 3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. 4 And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. James 1:2-4

Screwtape Letter 28...Uncle Screwtape to Wormwood

The long, dull, monotonous years of middle-aged prosperity or middle-aged adversity are excellent campaigning weather. You see, it is so hard for these creatures to persevere.

William Wallace in Braveheart- HOLD, HOLD!!

The principle of abiding will apply to you whether you agree with it or not, whether you even acknowledge it or not. It is simply built into the spiritual reality of this God created world.

HOW IS THIS GOOD NEWS?

As Branches, all the life of the Vine is available to us.

Here at Highlands we want you to have a life with a purpose. We're all going to end up somewhere, so I pray that we would end up in a place that leads to more fruit. I pray that when we're in those moments where we don't know if God is gathering us to cast us in the fire or he's pruning us, that it would be pruning and that we could trust him and wait on him in those times because we are heading in a Direction that is in line with what He wants for us. Notice that the abiding life is a fruitful life, but it is not a pain free life. Often the fruit is that the end of a thorny reach; at least it is that way with roses.

FRUIT – The tree rooted in the living water of Christ, with growing branches, will bear FRUIT. Those who ABIDE will bear fruit – Jn 15:5.

In scripture "fruit" refers to several aspects of spirituality:

- Godly character- LJPPKGFSGS (Gal 5:22ff)
- Good works / fruit of righteousness– Mat 7:16-17, Col 1:10; Eph 5
- Converts – Jn 4:36; Jn 15:16; Col 1:6 "gospel is bearing fruit and increasing through preaching"
- Worship Heb 13:15 "praise to God is the fruit of the lips that give thanks to His name"
- Giving – 2 Cor 9:10 "seed for sowing to increase the harvest of your righteousness."

Fruit is anything that represents the tangible outflowing of the indwelling Christ. It is His life spilling out through us before God, others, and the world. What is given to us, flows through us.

Such fruit is DIVINELY PRODUCED; we don't produce fruit, we BEAR fruit.

How much fruit is necessary? It doesn't say. It says, "fruit, more fruit, much fruit". The point of the allegory is "fruit".

Doctrine and experience indicate that some branches will be more fruitful than others. As branches, we must trust the Vinedresser whose job it is to determine which branches are fruitless and which need to be pruned so as to bear more fruit.

WHAT ABIDING LOOKS LIKE... Valley Of Vision P. 224

EVENING PRAISE

Giver of All,
Another day is ended
And I take my place beneath my great Redeemer's cross,
Where healing streams continually descend,
Where balm is poured into every wound,
Where I wash anew in the all-cleansing blood,
Assured that thou seest in me no spots of sin.

"I urge you, take time and ask the Holy Spirit to give you to realize the unspeakably solemn place you occupy in the mind of God. He has planted you into His Son with the calling and the power to bear much fruit. Accept that place. Look OFTEN to God, and to Christ, and expect joyfully to be what God has planned to make you, a fruitful branch."

Murray, Andrew. Andrew Murray: Abide in Christ & The True Vine - Deluxe Version Edition -

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