

John on Jesus - I can make a difference

June 23, 2013

Welcome to Faith Church. Before we jump into our text, I have one brief announcement. Next Sunday, we are celebrating the arrival of Pastor Jordan and Krystal during the service. We are throwing a party for them afterward. I am asking you to bring the side dishes. The church will provide the meat. I wanted this to be a memorable party so I scheduled to have the meat catered from Big “J’s” BBQ. It is slow-cooked ribs and chicken. If you like ribs, this stuff just falls off the bone and melts in your mouth. I am salivating just thinking about it.

I did something a little different with this lunch party. I ordered much more meat than we need for a typical lunch. I am challenging you to bring your neighbors. It is finally warm in Iowa. People are outside. Invite your neighbors to the all-you-can-eat slow-roasted ribs and chicken lunch at Faith Church. If they have a pulse and at least one working taste bud, I think they will come. When they ask about the occasion, tell them about our vision to be one church in two cities. Tell them we are celebrating the arrival of Pastor Jordan, the campus pastor for the Spencer campus. I put this in the Spencer and Spirit Lake papers, inviting the entire community to the free ribs and chicken lunch. I need you to invite your neighbors and bring lots of side dishes to pass.

So Faith church is the church that uses a forbidden Old Testament meat to reach our region for Christ. To God be the glory for ribs. Thank God for declaring all animals clean, especially the pigs, because they are tasty. I hope we double in attendance next week.

We are working our way through the Gospel of John. We are in John 15. Take out your Bibles and find the page. In the pew Bible, John 15 is on page 901. In this section of John, Jesus teaches his disciples how to live when he is gone. He teaches them how to keep on the mission of reconciling the world to God through his life.

Last week, Jesus told his disciples that while he was leaving them, he wasn't leaving them alone. He was going to ask God the Father to send the Holy Spirit that would dwell in them and be with them. We learned the Holy Spirit is very similar to Jesus. One of his key roles in our lives is to bring to mind the words of Jesus and apply them to our lives.

The Holy Spirit is so Christ focused that sometimes he is called the Spirit of Christ. As we head into John 15, we are not talking about having the Spirit of Christ in us but of the importance of living in dependence upon him every day. That is the only way to live a life that makes a lasting difference for God's kingdom in this world.

You see, it is possible to be busy. It is even possible to be successful, but when all is said and done, to be fruitless for the things of God. It is possible to be very religious but to fail to make an ounce of eternal change. That is scary. I don't want to live a fruitless useless life and neither do you. This morning we will learn how not to just be busy but how our lives can make a lasting difference.

Let's put our fingers in John 15.

The only way to be fruitful is to be connected to Jesus.

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

That is a sudden change of subject from last week. Last week we were talking about the Holy Spirit and, in the blink of an eye, we are talking about grapes and vines, viticulturalism. Where is the segue on this one? A brief history lesson will help.

In the Old Testament, the nation of Israel was frequently portrayed as a vineyard (Isaiah 5:7; Ezekiel 15, 17, 19). The nation of Israel's symbolism as a fruitful grapevine was so deeply woven into the national mindset of Israel that during the Maccabean period, a few hundred years before this, the Jews were minting coins with the emblem of a vine on them, much like we put stars and stripes on our money. In the temple in Jerusalem, around the entry gate, was a massive golden vine with grapes on the vine formed by rare jewels. The vine symbolized national pride as ancient Israel thought of itself as a fruitful vine nourished by God.

The problem is, not all of the symbolism that describes Israel as a fruitful vine in the Old Testament is positive. There are numerous times Israel was symbolized as a vine taken care of by God but it produced only sour grapes. On account of its unfruitfulness, the nation of Israel was occasionally disciplined. It was exiled into Babylon. Metaphorically, the Bible tells us Israel's unfruitful branches were cut off and burned. (We find these metaphors in Jeremiah 2:21, Ezekiel 15, 17 and 19, just to name a few.)

As we look at this verse, Jesus called himself the "true" vine. He is what people need to be connected to if they want their lives to produce fruit. A fruitful

life for God didn't come from a connection to ethnic Israel. History had proven that wrong. A fruitful life for God will only come by being connected to Jesus.

The only way to be fruitful is to be connected to Jesus.

Branches that are fruitless are useless.

Then Jesus told us about God the Father, the vinedresser.

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. John 15:2 (ESV)

The first thing we learn is every branch that does not bear fruit, the farmer, God the Father, takes away. At first, this sounds freaky, especially when you couple it with verse 6 which says the same thing in a similar way.

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. John 15:6 (ESV)

It sounds like Jesus said that if we are not living a fruitful and productive life for Christ, off to hell we go. It sounds like when we have a bad day or a bad season, God is done with us. Before we get too carried away, I don't think that is what these verses teach. That interpretation goes completely against the rest of the Gospel of John where Jesus told us that it was God who reached down. He softened our heart. He saved us not because of anything we have done. No matter what happens, God will not let go.

I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. John 10:28–29 (ESV)

While it is true that true Christians will be fruitful, it is dangerous to take this metaphor too far. Remember, it is a metaphor. I think it is simply saying that if we are fruitless, we are useless. We are supposed to be fruitful for God. If

we live a Christian life that isn't fruitful, what good are we? We were saved to produce fruit.

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. Ephesians 2:8–10 (ESV)

This is a good challenge for us. Many times, we take a sort of inward focus to our faith. We think that church is what we do on Sunday morning. We don't talk about Jesus outside of Sunday. Jesus gets Sunday, the other six days are mine. That is not true. *Christ didn't save me to attend church. He saved me to live a fruitful life.*

As a church, this is one of the reasons we are opening a campus in Spencer. This is why we have an unreached people group we adopted in India. We are not just trying to do church. We are trying to be risky and live as fruitfully as people and lead more people to Jesus.

Fruitful lives will be pruned.

The second thing we learn is when we live a fruitful life, we will be pruned by our heavenly father to make us more fruitful. When I was a youth pastor in St. Joseph, MI, Cindy and I bought our first house. It was a 120 year old farm house surrounded by corn, a horse pasture and Welch's grape vineyards. In the fall, just before harvest, the place had this wonderful smell of grape jelly. While the harvest took less than a week, I learned there was a lot of work that went with growing grapes than simply harvesting them one week a year. In the spring and fall, migrant workers spent weeks pruning and tending the vines, cutting them

back. If the plants weren't trimmed, they would waste all their energy growing more branches rather than growing better grapes.

This is the background for this verse. If we are the branches on the vine, and our fruitfulness is tied to how well pruned we are by the farmer, we should expect God the father to prune us. Expect to go through hard times. It always annoys me when people share their story about how they came to Christ and they tell everyone their problems went away. That is unbiblical. As we follow Christ, because God the father wants us to be more fruitful, he will cut us. That means our business may go under. Our health may fail. Our children may rebel. The bottom may drop out of our 401K. There will be many times we wonder why God is letting hard times into our lives. Why does he let tough times come our way? He is pruning us. Why is he pruning us? He loves us. His plans are to make us more fruitful for the kingdom.

For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but **he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness.** Hebrews 12:10 (ESV)

While we don't like being pruned. I know this. After having gone through a pruning by God, while we wouldn't want to take the course again, we wouldn't trade away the changes God makes in us. I talk to many people in my office in tears because of the hard times God allowed into their life. Two years later, the same people are changed. They will tell you the train wreck was one of the best things that happened to them. They grew in Christ more than any other time in their life. The changes God made in their life through the hurt were good and necessary. While they wouldn't sign up to go through it again, God's pruning

was good. Their lives are much more fruitful for God now than they were before.

So this morning, I know a number of you are suffering, some physically, some financially, some are stressed, some of you have a broken heart. God loves you. Like a master gardener, he is pruning you to be more fruitful for him.

Fruitful lives will be pruned.

Apart from Christ, I can do nothing of eternal value.

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. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. John 15:4–5 (ESV)

Now Jesus is getting into the pragmatics of how to be fruitful. Going to church and having a pulse doesn't necessarily make you fruitful. We must abide in Christ. Just like disconnecting a branch from the vine will result in death, if we disconnect from Christ, we will become unfruitful.

The million dollar question is, "What does it mean to abide in Christ?" Abide is not a word we typically use.

Abiding means asking Christ for his leadership all the time.

It means to remain connected to Christ's spirit and leadership in our life. This means the Christian life is one where we are to continually asking Jesus for his leadership in all things. When we have big problems, like sickness, we instinctively go to Christ. The key to a fruitful life is not going to Christ only in the big problems, but it is going to Christ in prayer all the time, every day. When we are studying for a test, we talk to Jesus. When we are frustrated in our job, we turn to Christ and ask his spirit to guide us. When we get in a fight with our spouse, before we open our mouth, we stop and ask the Holy Spirit, what would

Christ have us do? Usually the Holy Spirit prompts you to shut up, walk away and cook down, not say the juicy words that are in your mind. That is what abiding looks like.

Abiding means reading God's Word and asking the Holy Spirit to apply it.

A big part of abiding in Christ is not just praying to Christ in all things but it is reading God's Word regularly asking the Holy Spirit to apply Christ's word to our life. He will give us just what we need.

This past week, I talked with Willie DeBoer. He is suffering with cancer. He told me how, when he was reading his Bible, in the book of Philippians, it talks about the peace that passes understanding. He shared how, in that moment, when he read those words, that peace is what God gave him as he faced the anxiety of his cancer. Christ speaks to us through his word. If we want live a fruitful life, we must open the book. We must stay connected to Christ.

Abiding means regularly attending worship where we grow together, not just individually.

We worship together because we are not lone rangers. We are a community that is gifted by the Holy Spirit to serve one another. When we don't meeting together, we killing our fruitfulness. In addition, there is some fruit we can only bear for Christ together. For instance, opening another campus in Spencer is something we can only do together. Nobody here can do that on their own.

Abiding in Christ also means refusing to move beyond Christ.

This was a problem in the ancient world, and it is still a problem today. People like the latest fads. It is no different in the church, both ancient and modern.

In the ancient church, their fad was a heresy called gnosticism. It comes from the Greek word gnosis, which means knowledge. These were people who thought they had insider information about God that you could only have if you were part of their club, sort of like the Masonic Lodge is today. They were a secret society. In Paul's letters, he blasts the tar out of these guys telling them that as soon as they leave Jesus and focus on some special inside knowledge about God besides Jesus, you leave God. Abide in Christ or you have absolute nothing. There is no new thing beyond Jesus.

Today, one of the latest fads I see in the church are people who call themselves spiritual guides or spiritual directors. I have even seen this in large churches where people get spiritual coaching. I get suspect of this stuff. It smells like modern gnosticism where you need somebody to give you a special directions to God.

Whiles there is wisdom to be found from others, there is a limit to this. Don't let anyone get between you and seeking Jesus. The only way for our lives to be fruitful are to abide in Christ. The only way for Faith Church to be fruitful is for us to preach Christ. That is why we open the book each week. It is why we refuse to preach about anything but Jesus. He is the main event.

If we don't abide in Jesus and seek his leadership, will we be busy? Yes. We may even make lots of noise and gather a crowd, but there will be nothing of eternal value that happens with our life. Apart from Christ, we can do absolutely nothing.

God will answer our prayers to bear more fruit.

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. John 15:7–8 (ESV)

Here comes another of those blanket prayers that everybody misunderstands. It sounds like Jesus says, abide in me, and get whatever you wish. It appears like we have a magical promise for health, wealth, popularity and to lose ten pounds if we just have a daily Bible study and pray before meals.

What kind of prayers are these? These are prayers that are praying for God's thoughts and God's will. Notice these prayers that have their origin in abiding. When we walk with Christ, that is abide in him, and his words abide in us, we start to think God's thoughts after him. Our thoughts begin to mirror God's thoughts. When we ask for answers to those prayers, God will answer them because the origin of our desires are God's desires. We are thinking God's thoughts after him.

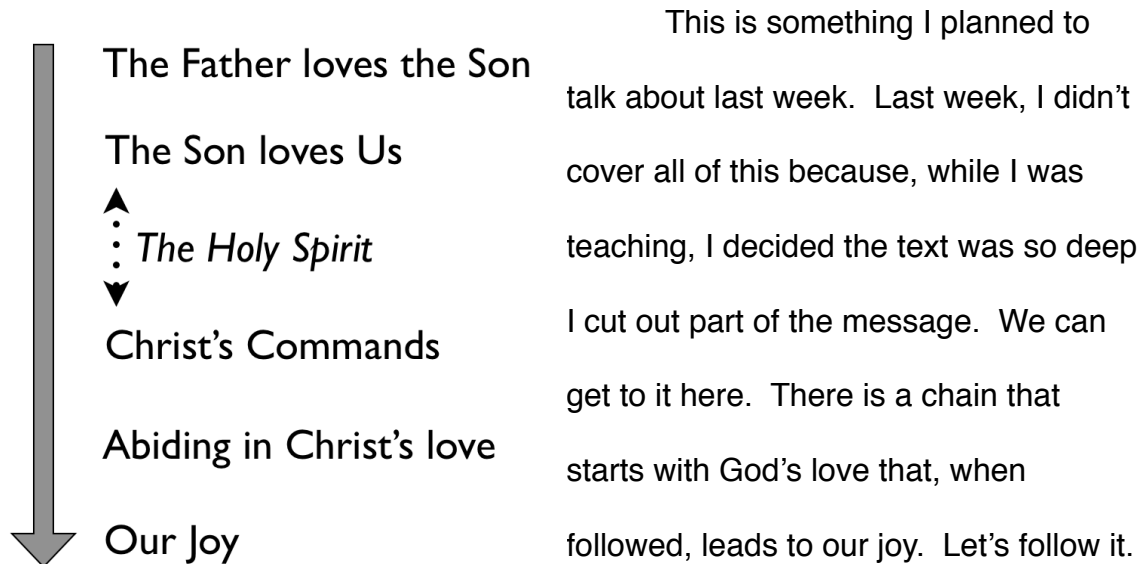
These are prayers to be fruitful. God loves to answer prayers for fruitfulness. That is God's plan and desire for our life.

God promises to answer our prayers to bear more fruit.

Abiding in Christ leads to my joy.

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. John 15:9–11 (ESV)



1. **The Father loves the Son, so the Son love us. Abide in my love.** It all begins in the Godhead. The Father loves the Son. From the foundation of the world, God the Father chose to give us to the Son. Jesus loves us with the same kind of love the Father has for him. Which, if you think about that, is pretty mind blowing.

Some of us struggle with our identity. We feel we are not important unless we have done something significant in our life. We think, that unless we have won a state championship or become incredibly wealthy, we don't matter. Others of us let a piece of history become our identity. A wife divorced us. A girlfriend left us. We think we are unlovable. Those things do not matter. What matters is we are loved by Jesus with the same love that God the Father has for God the Son. That is mind blowing! Nobody can love us more than Jesus does right now! Wrap your mind around that and it changes your life. That is why Jesus says, "Abide in my love." Don't forget this. Think about it every day when you

get up in the morning and look in the mirror. Jesus loves me as much as his father loves him. If you are single, and searching, tell yourself the truth. If you know Jesus, you are already loved more than any other human can love you. Don't forget this. Abide in this. Tell this to yourself every day.

2. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as Jesus has kept his Father's commandments and abides in his love. God the Father, at the request of Jesus, sent the Holy Spirit to opens our hearts to comprehend the Son's unimaginable love for us. The more we understand God's love for us, the more we desire to obey the Son and keep his commandments. But it turns around and goes the other way. When we keep the Son's commandments, both the Father and Son are delighted in our obedience. The result is joy. We get joy from God.

Think of this with regards to a parent and children. When we give our children a directive to obey, and they obey, we delight in them for their obedience. In honoring us, they get our love and the result in their life is joy. The same is true with God but the joy is much better. It is much richer joy.

So the way it works is God the Father loves the Son, who loves us. The Holy Spirit quickens our hearts to understand this love and begin to get our mind around it. The more we comprehend it, the more we want to obey. When we obey, we experience more of the love of Christ, which leads to our joy.

My obedience to God always leads to joy from God.

Love one another with sacrifice, like Jesus.

“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. You are my friends if you do what I command you. John 15:12–14 (ESV)

Now Jesus gives us one of his commandments as an example. It is an umbrella commandment under which many of the other commandments can be found. Love one another, like I have loved you. The greatest act of love is laying down one's life for their friends. This is exactly what Jesus was about to do for them in approximately 18 hours.

One of the ways our abiding in Christ is seen is our laying down our lives for others, like Christ laid down his life for us. This means loving others when it costs us, when it hurts, it means love that involves sacrifice.

This is the church in the book of Acts where people sold their possessions to help provide for those in need.

God calls me his friend.

No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. John 15:15 (ESV)

This is amazing. Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, calls us friends. In the Old Testament, only Abraham and Moses were called a friend of God. Jesus calls all believers friends of God. I talk to many people who wish they had a good friend, a friend who understood them, a friend who cared about them, a friend they could be open with about what was going on in their life. Jesus tells us he calls us his friends. He is open with the disciples, and us through this

Gospel about everything God the Father has told him. God calls us friends.

What a privilege.

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. John 15:16 (ESV)

God chose us and appointed us to bear fruit, to not just waste our time living but living a life that will make an eternal difference for Christ and his kingdom. The only way we can live a life of significance is by staying connected to Jesus, by abiding in Jesus. As we face those challenges, we are to ask the Father through the Son and wait for God to respond.

Conclusion

I couldn't help but think about how this last verse applied to the life of Faith Church this week. We are trying to bear fruit by starting another campus. This is a huge endeavor. Let me tell you about this week. On Monday and Tuesday, we had a consultant in from Detroit to evaluate the Spencer auditorium and help us with the details. He is a great guy. Brilliant and very good at what he does. He was honest with us. The facility will not work. There are not enough first floor classrooms because we no longer have access to the adjoining Spencer Area Activity Center since another church is meeting in the facility. Still trying to figure a way to make it work, I walked into the Spencer Activity Center and asked the director to open the doors between the facilities to see if we could at least use the restrooms. A few moments later I learned the church is no longer meeting in the facility and, just like that, the doors were opened for our consultant to continue his work.

Later that day, Pastor Dave made the call to secure the needed rooms in the Activity Center. It turns out the Activity Center's board decided they no longer wanted to rent the facility to churches because they are too noisy. Thankfully they had a board meeting coming up on Friday where Pastor Jordan, Jerry Edwards, and Dave Ward from our Spencer campus could attend. We prayed God would open the doors to help us bear the fruit of another campus.

The meeting began with a lady voicing her concerns about there being too much noise in the activity center. One of the board members even commented, "Well, there is no point in hearing from the Faith Church group." It looks like we were shot down again. God opens doors when we come to him in prayer, just like this passage tells us. Pastor Jordan made his presentation. They had some Q&A and God opened the door. They gave us the needed space and even asked Pastor Jordan to help them with their noise problem. In addition, they are allowing us to name our own price for rental. God is good.

All this to say, as things continue to unfold, we need to continue to go before God in prayer over this. Making his God's famous is a project God is committed to so we keep coming before Jesus in prayer and watching him work.

As we close, I think it is appropriate for us to come before God in prayer and thank him for opening up the facility that was closed. We have other barriers. We are still about \$80,000 short in finances before we can open the doors, most of that being one time equipment costs. After our meeting with our consultant, we are in a great position to understand everything we need.

Also I think it is appropriate for us to come before God to talk to him about our abiding. Many of us are busy with life but we are not abiding in Christ. While it may look like we are making a big splash, according to the Bible, we aren't doing anything of eternal value. We just need to repent of that and reconnect to Christ.

Others of us need to talk to God about our pruning. We are bitter towards Christ for some of the hard stuff he has put in our life. We are questioning his motives and his love. This morning, we just need to thank God that we know that when he prunes us, even though he cuts deep, he never cuts too deep. In the end, he guarantees we will be more fruitful for him.

So as we go to prayer, let's first come before God asking him to continue to show his favor and remove barriers to opening the next campus. After a few a minutes of praying over this corporately, I will lead us in praying to God personally about our need to abiding in his in every day and every way.



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