

ABIDING LOVE

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

John 15:4-17

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

"I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing." (John

Daily Bible Readings

M	Nov. 2	God Is Disappointed with Israel	Isaiah 5:1-7
T	Nov. 3	God Will Redeem Israel	Isaiah 27:2-6
W	Nov. 4	Believers Continue God's Work	John 14:8-14
Th	Nov. 5	Jesus Freely Lays Down His Life	John 10:11-18
F	Nov. 6	Facing the World as Jesus Did	John 15:18-25
Sa	Nov. 7	Jesus Tends to His Vineyard	John 15:1-3

STEPPING INTO THE WORD

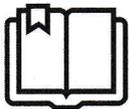
What constitutes life has long been a topic of discussion. In ancient China the elements of life were five: fire, earth, water, metal, and wood. In ancient Greece the list was altered to include earth, water, air, and fire. With some modifications, this list was basically agreed upon in ancient Babylonia, Japan, Tibet, and India.

According to modern science, the elements essential for life are carbon, oxygen, hydrogen, nitrogen, phosphorous, and sulfur. This set of six elements, drawn from the more than one hundred chemical elements classified by modern science, combine into atoms to create life. Life may take a number of forms, ranging from simple algae to human beings, but these essential elements have to be present.

Now, this introduction is not intended in any way to explain the how or why of life. Nor is the above intended as a clear exposition of a very complex subject that continues to occupy the talents and energy of numerous people around the world. The point is there are some things that have inseparable parts. There is no thunderstorm without lightning. An apple normally requires a tree. An internal combustion engine is composed of many parts, but it is not an engine until all the parts are fit together. Similarly, when we read Jesus' image of the productive vine, we are to understand the inseparable connection between the disciples, Jesus, and God.

Can you think of other examples? How are all examples limited?

Dear God, help us to understand who we are in relationship to you. Enable us to bear fruit worthy of the vine on which we absolutely depend. Prune us as necessary, but do not forsake us. For Jesus' sake we pray. Amen.



SCRIPTURE

John 15:4–17

15:4 “Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. ⁵I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. ⁹As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

¹² “This is my commandment, that you love one another as have loved you. ¹³No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. ¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. ¹⁶You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. ¹⁷I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

ASSURANCE AND CHALLENGE

As noted in lesson 9, the Gospel of John has two basic sections: 1–12 and 13–21. The first section mainly recounts part of Jesus’ public ministry that usually took place with many people

around. Apart from chapters 18–19 that deal with Jesus' death and resurrection, the second section shares intimate words and actions between Jesus and his disciples. The material in chapters 14:1–17:26 present what are sometimes called Jesus' Farewell Discourses.

After washing his disciple' feet and instructing them to love one another, Jesus spends considerable time exploring his close, inseparable connection with God. To give the disciples confidence, Jesus promises the coming of the Spirit of Truth, the Holy Spirit, who will be an Advocate and Helper. Speaking of his coming death, Jesus tells his disciples he is going away where they will not be able to follow, but he again assures them that they will be known by God just as Jesus has been known and thereby participated totally in God's love (John 14:15–31).

On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus passed a vineyard and used it to offer instruction once more. The disciples are the branches of the vine, and God is the vinegrower (15:1). God will care for them, pruning as necessary and enabling them to bear good fruit (v. 2). Jesus speaks of his disciples as friends and gives an example of what it means to love: to be willing to give one's life for a friend (vv. 13–17).

Jesus next turns to a very unpleasant fact. As the world hated Jesus, so it will hate his disciples. Further, it follows that the world will also hate God (vv. 18–15). When the Spirit—the Advocate—comes, the Spirit will testify on behalf of God and enable the disciples also to witness (vv. 26–27).

Before Jesus and his disciples reach Jerusalem and the passion narrative unfolds (18:1–19:42), Jesus speaks about the work of the Spirit and says that the sorrow that the disciples will experience with Jesus' departure will be replaced with peace. Jesus also prayed for his disciples and set up a model for prayer still used in the church today (17:1–28).

This section of John offers invaluable instructions to the early disciples (and to those of us who have come later) about the stakes of following Jesus. The blessing of a close relationship with Jesus and God is wonderful to contemplate, but it must be understood to be coupled with the clear and strong warnings of persecution that is likely to come.



Do you think it easy to love as Jesus loved? Why? Why not?

ABIDING IN LOVE

Jesus speaks the love commandment very dramatically after washing the disciples' feet. Now, again, Jesus returns to the subject of loving one another, reminding his disciples that this is his commandment.

Jesus employs an analogy drawn from the natural world. Everyone knows that the branches of a vine are sustained by the vine. The branches cannot bear fruit unless they remain connected to the vine. Branches that are unproductive are pruned away for the benefit of the productive branches that remain.

The teaching preserved here involves reflection on that image with the use of a Greek term, *meno*, that has a wide range of meaning. English terms such as “continue,” “be permanent,” “inhabit,” “endure,” “persevere,” and “await,” are all used to express *meno* and some of its nuance. This is important, for in the exploration of the image of the vine and the branches the word *meno* appears repeatedly.

The disciples (the “you” throughout the passage is plural, referring to the group and not to individuals) are assured that they will produce much fruit *if* they abide in Jesus and he abides in them (15:5). Prayer will be answered *if* they abide in Jesus and Jesus' words abide in them (v. 7). And how is this to be done? To abide in Jesus' love is to keep Jesus' commandments. As Jesus has kept God's commandments, so are the disciples to follow Jesus' example (vv. 9–10).

A striking implication is that as the vine and branches are intimately connected, so Jesus' disciples must also be connected with him and one another. No longer referred to as servants, Jesus now calls the disciples “friends” (v. 15). They will demonstrate that they are Jesus' friends if they do what he has commanded, namely loving one another (v. 14) and showing the ultimate mark of friendship—the willingness to lay down one's life for friends (v. 13).

Two things to consider here: the term “friend” (*phileo* in Greek) has a richer meaning than “friend” in contemporary English. A closer translation might be a child's use of BFF, Best Friend Forever. There is a deep connotation of love for a friend in Greek. Further, dying for a friend was not an abstract idea to the Christians John addresses in his Gospel. At times, persecution became real and heated. Though put to the test, friends should not betray friends. Abiding in the love of Jesus prohibited such behavior. Abiding in Jesus' love called for endurance and perse-

verance for sustaining the relationship established by Jesus, even to the point of suffering and death.

? How can we “abide” in the love of Jesus? What does loving one another mean today?

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

Being a Christian in the United States or Canada is relatively safe. Few of us are attacked and killed because of our faith. But this is not true in many parts of the world. In Latin America, Africa, Asia, and even in some parts of Europe, Christians are persecuted and face severe hostility because they follow Jesus. In reflecting on Jesus’ figure of the vine and branches we must remember the health of the whole body of Christ, not just our small branch.

The branches do not decide which branches are to be pruned. That is up to the gardener and is done for the health of the whole vine. The objective is good fruit. Each branch is intended to produce its share, and each branch can produce good fruit only so long as it is closely connected to the vine.

For us, then, there are two clear implications. We are only part of a much larger reality. The health of the connected vine affects us all. We are enjoined to love all the branches, not only those close to us. We do not direct the grower how to care for the vine, when or what to prune. Some branches we know well may be cut away, to our sorrow. But our role as branches is to produce good fruit and care for all. Part of such care certainly involves sharing our abundance to help relieve those without. It may mean working to improve our nation’s treatment of aliens and welcoming refugees into our community.

The second implication is related to the first. We must regularly take a close look at the fruit we are producing. Is it good fruit or not? Does our life together as assemblies of Christ’s disciples reflect the love of God? Will the work we do endure? For us, keeping the love commandment involves little risk, but it does require close attention.

As stated above, growing good fruit is the goal, so we must be well informed about what is going on around us. Good fruit is shared when a real need is met: when love is expressed by visiting the elderly, when hot meals are taken to rescue workers, when a child is cared for in the absence of parents, or when the needs of

another congregation are recognized and appropriate steps are taken to render whatever help is desired. Such acts reflect good fruit. The list is endless, but informed help is necessary.

? **The aim of Jesus was that his disciples would genuinely care for one another. What does a close look at our fruit tell us about the character of our love?**

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes provide additional information about today's Scripture that may be helpful for your study.

1. Jesus sometimes used a vineyard as a metaphor for the kingdom of God and the workers of the vineyard for those working for that kingdom (Matt. 20:1–16).
2. Some parallels exist between John 15:1–6 and Isaiah's song of the vineyard (Isa. 5:1–7). Whereas Isaiah bemoaned the fact that Israel strayed from God and became a fruitless vineyard, Jesus promised that his disciples would be a thriving vineyard as long as they stayed connected with him.
3. "Abide in me as I abide in you" (v. 4)—Jesus teaches that abiding is necessary for fruitfulness. Fruitfulness includes everything that results from a vital union with Christ and shows through our love for one another.
4. Various forms of the Greek word meaning "I abide/remain make my home" (*meno*) appear ten times in the first ten verses of John 15. Earlier in John, Jesus uses the same word in connection with those who partake of his body and blood (6:56), with his own connection with God (14:10), and with the presence of the Holy Spirit with his disciples (v. 17).
5. The promise of complete joy for Jesus' followers who are united with each other and with Jesus (John 15:9–12) is echoed by Paul (Phil. 2:1–4) and John (1 John 1:1–4).