

Abide in Me: Utter Dependence

John 15:4-5

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This morning, we're going to consider John 15. We'll turn there, John chapter number 15. And I'd like to read from verse 1 through to verse number 8, as we continue looking at this precious portion of Scripture. These are the words of the Lord Jesus Christ, who says, "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned. If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples."

As we consider this passage of Scripture this morning, I want us to focus in particularly on verses 4 and verse number 5. Last week, we looked at the how of fruit-bearing, that abiding in Christ, having communion with the vine, is how the branch bears fruit. And we saw the significance and the importance of our relationship with Christ, our relationship with God, our union, and how that union is strengthened in our communion, and that's where the life comes that bears fruit unto God from. And that's how the only way the Bible teaches that we can bear fruit. This is the only answer that Jesus gives us.

But I want us to consider why He gives us this truth to abide. Yes, it is so that we bear fruit, but Jesus stops here, or we should stop where Jesus emphasizes. Jesus seeks to emphasize something in verse 4 and 5 that we need to stop and consider. And in verse number 4 and 5, He mentions two "you cannot's" or "cannot's." Two "cannot's" which are the same. "You cannot bear fruit," but it's a double emphasis which should cause us to stop and really think about this. If He emphasizes it doubly, it should cause us to consider it doubly. And so, I want to spend a sermon today explaining

these phrases, if I could say, "without Me you can do nothing." And this is a very important part of this analogy, a very important part of this text.

It is one thing to say you must abide in the vine to bear fruit, but we will never consider the importance and the significance of abiding in the vine unless we realize that negatively, it is impossible for us to bear fruit except by that means of abiding. You see, communion is not one thing added in the process of bearing fruit. Jesus is saying that your relationship to Me is the very essence of your fruit-bearing. Without it, it is impossible. Impossible.

And so, lest we feel that approaching this text of Scripture, we say we can be united to Christ and commune with Christ, and also have communion with other things and maintain a life of fruit-bearing, Jesus puts a stop to that, if I could say, by doubly emphasizing the fact that you cannot bear fruit but by this one means of abiding in Me. What Jesus is trying to emphasize is the severity of our case. It could be likened to a paraplegic, who is one who cannot walk, one who is paralyzed, as it were, from the waist down and is impaired in his ability to walk, ability to have function in the legs, requires special assistance if there would be any chance of a paraplegic attempting to walk. He lacks power. He lacks strength. It doesn't matter how willing the paraplegic may be; apart from the assistance of another, walking is an impossibility, or moving is an impossibility to him. And so, what the paraplegic must do, and so must all who struggle or have a disability, what they must do is come to the acceptance and the realization that I cannot walk on my own. I cannot move. I cannot attempt to move.

And in a similar way, Jesus is trying to teach His disciples that they also are in a state of dependency. In fact, fruit-bearing, Jesus is describing to us, is an impossibility apart from Him. And what Jesus is emphasizing here is that there is a severe lack of strength. There is a severe inability within the disciples, in and of themselves, to bear fruit unto God. And Jesus doubly emphasizes this because He wants them to realize this very truth that without Me, you can do nothing.

And Jesus doubly emphasizes this. Look at verse number four and five. He says, "Abide in Me, and I in you, as the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing." Nothing. So Jesus emphasizes those things twice here. In verse four, He says it like this: a branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abides in the vine. And in verse five, He says it this way: without Me, you can do nothing.

The analogy itself reinforces exactly what Jesus is trying to teach. Jesus is

basically saying, essential to this analogy which you need to understand in regards to fruit-bearing, is that you are a branch, and the relationship to the branch and the vine is one of complete dependency. The branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abides in the vine, as Jesus says. And so, the analogy brings this out. The words of Jesus bring this out, and the analogy itself reemphasizes it. What Jesus is simply trying to say is this, something that is very common. If you want to do a scientific experiment, go ahead. Set your, if I could say, your hypothesis. Make an estimated guess of what may happen if you take a cut off a branch from a vine, lay it there in the back of your garden or wherever it is that you have cut it off, and observe what happens to the branch when it has been severed from the vine. Come back in a week or a few days. Come back in a month, if you will, and make some observations and see whether your hypothesis matches your observations.

We would say this is a ridiculous experiment. Of course, everyone knows that if you sever a branch from a vine, there is no hope for the branch to prosper. There will be no life, only death. There will be no fruit, but only that which will perish and fade and really just vanish and deteriorate. And Jesus is saying exactly this very simple truth that His disciples needed to understand. But what Jesus is saying to them is simply this, that the relationship that you have with Me makes it impossible for you to bear fruit apart from Me. He's basically saying that My union with you, which you must commune with Me and abide with Me, is the only way of the possibility of fruit-bearing. And He does this by not leaving us without any hope because He says, "a branch cannot bear fruit of itself, but it is as this, unless it abides in the vine."

So He's not saying there's no hope for fruit-bearing for My disciples. There is hope for fruit-bearing, but the only hope for fruit-bearing exists within the union and within the communion that they have with the vine as branches. Jesus is emphasizing this very much so. And you say, well, why emphasize that which is obvious? Well, here's the point. Jesus is trying to convey a message. He's not trying to be simplistic for the sake of being simplistic. The problem is this: Yes, we are branches, but we are branches that have wills, branches that resist, branches that are humans, if I could say. We are not physical branches, as it were. And so, the emphasis must be laid upon the inability of the branch so that we, as receiving this as disciples, understand our inability. Because if the truth be known, that's the last thing that we want to think about, isn't it? That we are unable to do something apart from the assistance of another.

What Jesus is saying to His disciples, "Listen, it's Me or nothing. You want to unite yourself to the world? No fruit. You want to unite yourself to Me and to pop psychology? No fruit. You want to unite yourself to the opinions

of men and not to the wisdom of God? No fruit. But if you abide in Me, and you learn to abide in Me, I will abide in you, and that channels will be opened by which there will be union and communion expressed within the life so that you will bear fruit unto God." But He's saying this is the only way. He is essentially saying that it is impossible for us to bear fruit apart from Him.

The message that Jesus is trying to convey to His disciples is a message of utter dependence. He's trying to doubly emphasize the reality of the inability so that they might come to the realization that I am utterly dependent upon another if there is any hope of bearing fruit unto God. He doubly emphasizes this so that they can cultivate a mindset where this will be a reality as they go about walking through life, that as Jesus ascends to heaven and sends the Holy Spirit down to His disciples, that they would never forget that even though Jesus may not be here physically, I still need Him as much as I needed Him when He was walking with me.

You know, the disciples, any problem, they used to say, "Lord, what do we do here? What do we do there? Not enough bread. What do we do? What do we do, Lord? You got the answer for everything." And Jesus says, "Listen, that's the attitude you must maintain when I'm going. One of utter dependence. Even though I may not be here in terms of the physical, you cannot see Me with your eyes, you will know Me by the spirit of God indwelling you, and unless you realize that you are utterly still dependent on Me, you may think that the spirit will come, and it's all in your hands now. No, no, no. A branch cannot bear fruit of itself," Jesus says, "unless it abides in the vine."

You see, Jesus is reminding His disciples of the need to abide in Him, and everybody that is confronted with a disability has to come to a place in their life where they come to, if I could say, call this, the humility of dependency. The humility of dependency. Anyone who has a disability or inability to do some particular activity must come to the acceptance, which could be described as the humility of dependency. This is the acceptance of assistance. This is the acceptance of the fact that I cannot do something of myself, and I require the help of another.

And Jesus wants His disciples to realize that kind of humility of dependency, that you need Me that desperately. Every one of us probably knows some older people that are struggling to come to grips with old age. I see that in my father-in-law, particularly. He just doesn't want to be helped. He just feels that he can do everything that he once did. But uncle, you can't do this. "No, I'm fine. There's nothing wrong with me." But the doctors... "Don't worry about the doctors. I'm all right." And you know, falling and things like that, all happening, don't want to walk, these kinds of stuff.

But slowly by slowly, he has to come to grips with the reality that the legs are failing. And he requires assistance.

And many Christians are like that. Just like old people that struggle to come to grips with the deterioration of their own abilities, many Christians are like that. We lose sight of the reality that we are utterly dependent. That our lives are not a life where we live on our own. And just from time to time, when we need something, we come to God. What Jesus is saying is no, your entire life is utterly dependent on Me. The branch's whole existence is dependent upon the vine. This is not just a matter of, "Hey, when I'm in trouble, I'll call upon God just to get me out of a situation." He's saying no, no, your entire existence is dependent. One of dependence. One of utter humility. One of utter dependence. And what has to happen is that the Christian must come to grips with the reality that we are utterly in need of Jesus every moment of our existence. Utterly dependent.

And if anyone should understand this best, it should be the Christian, should it not? Come back with me in your minds to the day before you were converted. To the time where you did not know the Lord, if you can remember that far back. But if you can't, the Bible tells us exactly who we were. That our situation was one of impossibility. That we were alienated from the life of God, separated from God, in darkness, walking in the lust of our own flesh and the sinfulness of our own hearts. The Bible taught us very clearly that we were in utter helplessness apart from the grace of God. That the possibilities of our pleasing God were not there apart from God. That the Bible teaches us very clearly in Scripture that we were unable to come to the Father except to the Son unless it was granted of the Father. The Bible so clearly says in John 6 that no one could come to the Son unless the Father which sent Him drew him to the Son. And the Bible reemphasizes this right throughout Scripture, even in the book of Romans, where Paul says that they that are in the flesh, listen, cannot please God. That they are not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be.

Now, the Bible doesn't shy away from saying that we cannot do certain things. It teaches us that our state before conversion was one of utter inability, one of utter dependency, in the sense that we could not, in and of ourselves, apart from the grace of an almighty God, be saved.

When we were converted, perhaps people congratulated us on the changed life and said, "You've done a really good job." And the first thing we probably uttered to them is, "Not of myself; it is a gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast." The first thing we probably said, "Yet not I, but Christ that lives in me." If you're seeing anything of me, you better realize you should have seen me before I met Jesus. There's nothing on me that exists apart from the grace of God. We came to understand that we were blind,

but now we see, but we don't see because we wanted to see necessarily. We came to realize that it was the light of the glorious gospel which shined in unto us. That God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, He shined into our hearts. We didn't even desire to grab the torch and turn it on us to expose all our ugliness, but our blindness was overcome by the gracious loving kindness of God. Our inability was overcome by grace, and we cried, "Jesus, thou Son of David, have mercy on me."

No one comes to Christ apart from a recognition that they must be saved by grace through faith. This is the essence of our Christian experience, and as believers in Jesus, it should not be foreign to us to understand our inability. It should not be a strange phenomenon to think of the fact that we can't do certain things for ourselves. In fact, the very essence of our salvation was rooted in our inability to come to God apart from the grace of God. How much more now that we have come via the grace of God, now that we have believed because of grace, how much more should we then live in that grace and live in that utter dependency upon which we first came to know the living God?

But what goes wrong? What goes wrong with the Christian is that we often, many for many of us, we view salvation as rehabilitation, not as a relationship. What do you mean by that? Rehabilitation is the process of getting someone back on his feet so they can do by themselves the things that they couldn't do prior. A lot of people that go in and out of prisons look at salvation this way. "My life going in my own way has stuffed up itself. I just need to get back on course. I need to turn over a new leaf. God, you turn over the new leaf, and I'll write the book." Isn't that how people think of salvation so often? That I'm in a bad situation, God deliver me. Yes, that's salvation. Deliver me, but you deliver me so that I can do for myself what I once couldn't. That's the wrong view of salvation.

Salvation is not a matter of rehabilitation. Salvation is a matter of reconciliation. It's a matter of redemption, and it's a matter of our union with Jesus Christ. It's a matter of our relationship. What God does in saving the sinner is that He doesn't just put him on his feet so that he can go on his own. He joins the sinner to Christ in an unbreakable union whereby that sinner must depend on his Savior all the breathing days of his life if he would ever see that he would go on to live for the glory of God. If he wants to know the power that saved him remaining in his life to sanctify him, he must continue in union and communion with his Savior. Because God is not in the business of rehabilitation. He's in the business of salvation and uniting to Himself a glorious church, a bride, one who is in living communion with her husband.

And the problem with many people today as Christians is we just view

Christianity as a "get out of jail free" card to help us on our way. But we have to realize more than that. That when God saves us, He saves us for a relationship with Him whereby we live in utter dependence on Him all the days of our lives. And therefore, the analogy of the vine and the branches exists to that end. It shows us that the branch must always be in communion with the vine if there must be life, if there will be fruit.

Now, what I'm suggesting to us today has been the fundamental problem of the people of God. You can browse through the entire Bible, Old Testament, New Testament, and you will find a reoccurring theme. That the people that once trusted in God for their deliverance, after their deliverance, forgets the God who saved them. Consider the children of Israel. Delivered with a mighty and outstretched arm from the clutches of their enemy, the Egyptians that were pursuing them. Their enemies drowned in the Red Sea. They cross over the Red Sea, and they rejoice in the goodness of Almighty God. They sing His praises, Moses, Miriam, and the people of God, praising Him for His great salvation, for His grace, for the fact that they depended on Him, and He came through.

What happened after a short while? Moses goes up the mountain to receive the very law of the God that saved them. And they say, "What happened to Moses? What has become of this man? What of God? Let's go back. Let's get back to Egypt. Someone make a golden calf, and let us go and worship this golden calf. We don't need God anymore, as it were. Or let's just revise what is the worship of God and worship God in our own image." What did they do? They started to turn their attention away from their Savior to an idol.

And when God destroyed that entire generation in the wilderness, and in Deuteronomy, Moses repeats to that new generation that are about to go into the promised land, Moses reminds them that they make sure that when you get into that promised land and God blesses you, that you don't forget the Lord your God. It says in Deuteronomy chapter 8, verses 17 to 19, he says, "When you're prospering and things are going well," he goes, "then you're going to say in your heart, listen to this, 'My power and the might of my hand have gained me this wealth.' And you shall remember the Lord your God, for it is He who gives you power to get wealth. Then it shall be, if you by any means forget the Lord your God and follow other gods and serve them and worship them, you shall surely perish."

You know what he's saying to them? If you forget the God that gives you power to get wealth and think by your own hand and your own might you have accomplished these things, you remember this: you're going to perish. You're going to perish. This was the problem of the children of Israel time and time again. And you can fast forward all the way to the book of

Revelation, and we can look at the church of Laodicea. And the church of Laodicea, Jesus said of them this, this is what He had against them. He said, "Because you are lukewarm," He said, "I'll spew you out of My mouth. You're neither cold nor hot." He goes, "I'll vomit you out of My mouth." Why? Why? Why? Because you're lukewarm. What does lukewarmness look like? What He says here, "Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and listen to these words, and have need of nothing.'"

"And do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked." Just understand this for a moment. Here is a church that thinks that they are something that they are not. In their own strength, "we are wealthy, we are rich, we are well, we have need of nothing." And Jesus says, "I have a commentary about this church, and I want the church to understand this, that you think you're in need of nothing. In fact, you are in need of everything. You are poor, miserable, wretched, blind, and naked. How is it that you think you need nothing?"

And beyond that, you know what Jesus points them to? He doesn't point them to this person or that person. You know what He says? He says, "Buy of Me." Jesus says, "I will supply that which you lack, but you must come to Me, but you will never come to Me unless you first realize that you have need of Me." What happened to the church of Laodicea? They got to the point in their Christian experience where they thought that we have all the mechanics and the machinery, God has given us all the things, we understand these things, we got these things, and it's just about us. We do what we want, when we want, how we want, as long as we attach God's name to it. God says, "That's not how it works. You're poor, miserable, blind, and naked. You need Me. So come to Me, buy of Me. I'll supply you everything you need." In other words, what He's telling to them, in one way or another, is "abide in Me."

The self-sufficiency of the church of Laodicea stunk in the nostrils of Almighty God. He didn't want that. He wanted to vomit them out of His mouth because He was offended by the fact that they thought that they could live and move and have their being apart from God. That they thought that they could get on with the Christian experience without God. That they thought that the Christian life was in their hands. But Jesus reminds them it is not that way in My economy. It's not like that in My kingdom. It's not like that as My church. You must abide in Me. You need Me.

And this, my friends, is the essence of what the Bible refers to as the spirit of Babylon. This is the Babylonian way, the way of the world. All you have to do is think about Genesis chapter 11, don't you? When they come and they said, "Let us make for ourselves." Look at the self-sufficiency of these people. "We're going to make for ourselves a tower that will reach up to

heaven." God says, "Spread, multiply, replenish the earth." They say, "No, let's stay together. Let's build a tower up toward heaven." Why? Because we can be like God. It was the spirit of self-sufficiency, the spirit of the power and strength of man. This was the spirit of Babylon. This was the spirit of the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar when he looked upon his kingdom, and he looked, and he said, "Is not this great Babylon that I have built for a royal dwelling by my mighty power and for the honor of my majesty?" And the Bible says the Lord spoke to him that day, and he was humiliated and ate grass like an ox for seven years.

Was it not the essence of the fall of Satan? This is the spirit of Babylon. This is the spirit of Babylon that has self-sufficiency, that can do what it wants to do apart from God. And it creeps into the church where we think we can do what we want for God apart from God. And Paul tackles it right in the midst of the Corinthian church. They're gifted, and they're doing this, and they're doing that, and they're boasting in what they have. You know what Paul says to them? He says, "And what do you have that you did not receive?" And then he says, "And if you indeed received it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?" The spirit of Babylon moving into the church, self-sufficiency. "It's all of us. We've got it. We've done it. We've done this." And Paul says, "Hang on a minute. What do you have that you haven't received? Tell me one thing. The air that you breathe is received from God."

This is the spirit of the worldling, that they do not see that they are dependent on the Almighty. They feel that they are the strength of their own soul, that they are the ones who are in control, and they do what they want, when they want, and no one can stop them. Isn't that right? That's the world. That's the worldly way. But you know what Paul says to those people on Athens? He says, "In Him, you live and move and have your being." And he says to them, "Realize and recognize this, that even your boundaries of the land in which you have are appointed by God. Do not think that you are where you are by your own strength."

This is the spirit of Babylon that creeps into the church that thinks that we can do things for God apart from God. And God will have none of it. Let us be reminded, as the prophets remind the children of Israel of old, that it is not by might nor by strength, but by My Spirit, says the Lord of hosts. Brothers and sisters in Christ, the grace that saved you is the grace that you must continue in for you to bear fruit unto God. And it is a grace of utter dependency upon God. And we must come to the realization that we are utterly dependent on Him for fruit-bearing. That we can do nothing, listen to these words, without Him. Nothing of fruit-bearing, nothing of Christ-exalting works, apart from the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Have you come to grips with this reality? Think about it. Is your walk with God built upon such an attitude and a conviction? Is the works that you perform in His name flowing from a heart that is deeply convinced of our inability to bear fruit apart from Him? Or do we feel that we're a part of a rehabilitation program, as it were? Or do we sense our utter need for the intervention of God on a day-to-day basis?

If the voice of Babylon says to us, "Without Him, you can do everything," God help us to reply, "No, no, no, without Him, I can do nothing." Let us remind ourselves that I cannot, I cannot bear fruit of myself, except I abide in the vine. It's not enough to simply say "Amen" to these truths in agreement with them. There must be a deep conviction that this is who we are. I am, you are, a branch. That's it. We're a branch. We are utterly dependent upon the grace of God if we would seek to ever do anything that's going to exalt His name, that will glorify the Father, that will hang fruit on our branches. It must come via this utter sense of our dependency.

I'm not asking do we know it; I'm asking do we feel it? Do you sense the utter helplessness of our own state, of our own condition without the Lord? You say, "How can I really judge this? How can I really understand this?" Well, one of the ways in which this is mostly manifested in our hearts is by our lack of prayer, our prayerlessness, isn't it? What is prayer but the expression to God that we need you? What is prayer but the crying out for, calling on of the name of God to come and help, to support, to assist? And maybe the lack of prayerlessness is a good reflection of how much we really feel that we can do nothing without Him.

How often do our mind and our thoughts, before we engage in activity for God or even before we go about our daily activities, how much of our mind is engaged toward heaven, saying, "I need you, Lord, or there's no hope for me here"? How much of our existence and our experience and our works are rooted in a deep conviction that without you, I can do nothing? Our prayerlessness marks the confidence of our own soul, that we are utterly confident, we are utterly dependent on ourselves, and so we do not pray, we do not seek Him. In fact, it also is reflected in the fact that we don't need others to help us, isn't it? The Christian community is centered around the reality that we are needing one another, that God through others ministers and edifies us. And so it's reflected in our prayerlessness, but it's also reflected in our inability to ask people, "Could you help me with this? I need to understand that, or I don't know this, or I don't know that, or I need to be spoken about this in my area, or I'm open to receive correction, to receive rebuke, because I have not arrived. I need assistance. I need assistance."

But the essence of pride is, "I need no assistance. Don't tell me what to

do. Don't correct me. Don't even suggest to me that there's something I must do otherwise." Especially if it means that I need the help of another. And so, may the prayer of Jehoshaphat be ours. When Jehoshaphat had to come to the army, and the armies of Judah were confronted by their enemies, you know what Jehoshaphat said? He said this: he said, "For we have no power against this great multitude that is coming against us, nor do we know what to do," he said, "but our eyes are upon You."

Hezekiah said the same, confronted by the Sennacherib and his armies. "What do we do, oh Lord?" You know what you do? You get into the temple of God, and you start praying. "Behold their threatenings, oh God, help us, help us, help us. For without you, we can do nothing." If ever we want to bear fruit unto God, let that be our deep conviction, that without Him, we can do nothing. I know it goes against our natural grain and against the voices of the world, but the doctrine of inability is a biblical doctrine that shakes the pride of man to the very core. And it's not just in our salvation; it's also in our Christian experience. So let us come to Him, needing His help for fruit-bearing.

Let us pray.