

Abiding

Guarding Our Inner Life #3

There is a moment in John 15 where Jesus says something so simple it almost slips past you

"Apart from me you can do nothing."

Not *less than you hoped*. Not *not as much as you planned*. Nothing. And yet that statement, rather than being a word of defeat, is one of the most liberating things Jesus ever said. Because if it is true — if apart from Him I genuinely can do nothing of lasting worth — then **the pressure to perform, to fix myself, to manage my own transformation, is not mine to carry**. It never was.

That is where John 15 begins. Not with a command, but with a relationship. ***"I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman."*** ([John 15:1](#)) Before Jesus asks anything of the branch, He establishes who is already at work. The Father. The Vinedresser. The One who tends, who watches, who knows exactly what each branch needs and exactly when it needs it.

The Three-Link Chain

It is worth pausing at that opening verse longer than we usually do, because embedded in it is a theological structure that everything else in this chapter depends on.

1. **The Father** is the husbandman — the farmer, the One who **plants and tends the vine**.
2. **Jesus is the vine**.
3. **We are the branches**.

That is a chain of three links, and it is not accidental. The branch depends on the vine; the vine depends on His Father. And what Jesus makes explicit in verse 5 — ***"apart from me you can do nothing"*** — He had already said about His own relationship to the Father:

- *"The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he sees the Father do."* ([John 5:19](#))
- *"I can of my own self do nothing... I seek not my own will, but the will of the Father who sent me."* ([John 5:30](#))
- *"I do nothing of myself; but as my Father has taught me, I speak these things."* ([John 8:28](#))

This is not incidental. Jesus was not merely being humble. He was describing the actual structure of His life — a life lived in continuous, moment-by-moment dependence on His Father. The same dependence He calls us to practice toward Him is the dependence He Himself practiced toward His Father. Paul makes the other side of this plain: ***"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."*** ([Philippians 4:13](#)) Dependence and power are not opposites. In the kingdom of God, dependence is the pathway to power.

This matters doctrinal and practically. We are not being asked to do something foreign to the nature of things — we are being invited into the same relational pattern that has existed between Father and Son. The branch is not asked to do more than the vine. ***"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you."*** ([John 15:9](#)) ***"Even as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love."*** ([John 15:10](#)) Our relationship to Christ is meant to mirror Christ's relationship to His Father — that is the design, and it is a design rooted in love, not law.

What Abiding Actually Means

"Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can you, except you abide in me." ([John 15:4](#))

That word — ***abide*** — deserves more attention than it usually gets. In the Greek it is *menō*, and it carries the sense of remaining, staying put, not departing. But the question is always practical: what does abiding actually look like?

Jesus answers it directly, though we often separate the verse from the question. In verse 7 He says: ***"If you abide in me, and my words abide in you..."*** The two are equated. **To abide in Christ is to have His words abiding in us**. And that connection becomes even more significant when we hold it alongside what Jesus says in John 6:

- ***"It is the spirit that gives life... the words that I speak to you, they are spirit, and they are life."*** ([John 6:63](#))

- And then Peter's response: "*Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.*" ([John 6:68](#))

The words of Jesus are not merely information about spiritual things. They are not a curriculum to complete or a set of propositions to intellectually affirm. **They are themselves *spirit and life*** — they carry something vital in them, **something that does its work in the person who receives and assimilates them.**

Consider what that means. When Jehovah spoke at creation, something came from nothing. Light existed because He said so. Order emerged from chaos because He commanded it. **The words of Jehovah do not merely describe reality — they *create* it.** And Jesus, who spoke only the words His Father gave Him ([John 5:19,30; 7:16; 8:26,28; 12:49; 14:10,24](#)), speaks with that same creative authority. When He says "*you are clean through the word which I have spoken to you*" ([John 15:3](#)), He is not offering an encouraging metaphor. He is describing something that actually happens — the same way it happened at creation, when [Father Jehovah](#) said it and it was so.

This is why Paul can write, without exaggeration: "*If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.*" ([2 Corinthians 5:17](#)) The person who abides in Christ — who lets His words take up residence and do their transforming work — is not merely an improved version of their former self. They are something genuinely new. The same creative word that brought the world into existence is at work in the interior life of the person who stays connected to the Vine.

This reframes what it means to abide. Abiding in Christ means continually receiving and assimilating His words the way the body receives and assimilates food — not merely admiring it, but taking it in and letting it become part of you. **The branch does not just study the vine. It stays connected to it, and the life of the vine flows through it naturally.** That is the picture. That is the practice.

The Pruning That Comes Before the Fruit

"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](#))

The Vinedresser prunes. That is His work, not ours. And pruning, anyone who has ever tended a garden knows, is not a gentle process. It looks like loss. It feels like loss. Branches that seemed productive get cut back. Growth that felt significant gets trimmed away. From the branch's perspective, the whole thing can seem backward — shouldn't more growth mean more fruit?

But **the husbandman sees what the branch cannot.** He knows which growth is drawing energy away from the fruit. He knows which patterns, which habits, which long-comfortable ways of living are actually limiting what the branch was created to produce. And He cuts — not in anger, not in punishment, but in the patient, purposeful love of **Someone who knows exactly what He is cultivating.**

This is the God who meets us in our honest moments of self-examination. When we take a clear-eyed look at our lives and find things there that should not be — patterns we have defended, behaviors we have rationalized, wounds we have allowed to calcify into character — **the Vinedresser** has already seen them. He **has been waiting, patiently, for us to become willing** to let Him work.

The branch does not prune itself. It cooperates with the One who does.

The Truth That Does the Freeing

In John 8, Jesus is speaking to people who believed in Him — at least provisionally — and He says something that follows directly from everything John 15 makes explicit:

"If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." ([John 8:31-32](#))

If you continue. There again is the same sustained posture — the abiding life, expressed now not just as connection to a vine but as continued immersion in His word. Not a one-time decision but an ongoing practice: disciples who keep going, day after day, season after season, through the pruning and the growth and the pruning again.

And **what is the fruit of that continued abiding in His word?** Truth. Specifically, the kind of truth that sets free.

But what truth is Jesus talking about? Here is where [John 7:17](#) opens the passage from the inside:

"If anyone is willing to do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God." ([John 7:17](#))

This is a remarkable statement. Jesus does not say: understand the doctrine first, then decide to obey. He says the knowing comes *through* the doing — through the willingness to align your life with what God has revealed. Doctrinal clarity is not the prerequisite for commitment; it is the fruit of it. The person who stays in the word and keeps orienting their life toward what Christ teaches finds, over time, that the teaching becomes personally verified. They know it not merely as information they have accepted but as truth they have walked.

This is why the truth that sets us free is largely doctrinal truth — not doctrine in the cold, academic sense, but the living body of Christ's teaching received and practiced over time. **The word is spirit and life** ([John 6:63](#)). When you continue in it — when you let it abide in you rather than just passing through — it does something in you. It clarifies. It exposes. It reorients. It frees.

And it can only be faced safely in the presence of Someone who already knows it, and who will not be surprised by it, and who loves you anyway. **"I am the way, the truth, and the life."** ([John 14:6](#)) The truth that sets us free has a name. It is not an abstraction. It is a Person — and specifically, it is the Person in whom the Father planted the vine, through whom all life flows, and in whom the branch finds everything it needs -- Jesus, our Messiah.

The Fruit of Staying

Jesus tells His disciples why He has said all of this: **"These things I have spoken to you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full."** ([John 15:11](#))

Full joy. Not manufactured happiness, not the brittle cheerfulness of someone who has simply decided to look on the bright side — but the deep, settled joy of a life that has learned to remain in Christ through every season. It is the joy of a branch that has stopped trying to produce fruit on its own and has discovered what happens when it simply stays connected.

And what is that fruit, exactly? It is a changed life — changed behavior, changed desires, changed responses to the pressures and provocations of daily living — accompanied by a settled sense of peace that does not depend on circumstances. This is not self-improvement. This is the natural result of a branch connected to the right Vine. The fruit does not come from straining; it comes from staying. And over time, as His words are genuinely assimilated, the person who abides begins to recognize what Paul describes: the old things have passed away, and something new has taken their place. A new creation, bearing the fruit of the Vine it is connected to.

Paul described this transformation as something learned rather than given all at once: "I have **learned**, in whatever state I am, to be content." ([Philippians 4:11](#)) Learned — through seasons of abundance and seasons of need, through the pruning and the growth, through the long slow work of abiding in Christ until His sufficiency becomes the air you breathe rather than a doctrine you hold at arm's length.

And Paul, a few verses earlier, names exactly what that sufficiency feels like from the inside. He writes:

"Rejoice in the Lord Jesus Christ always; and again I say, rejoice. Let your moderation be known to all men. The Lord Jesus Christ is at hand. Be anxious for nothing, but in everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus." ([Philippians 4:4-7](#))

That phrase — **surpasses all understanding** — is worth sitting with. Paul is not describing a peace you can reason your way into. It is not the calm that comes from having figured everything out or resolved every uncertainty. It is something else entirely: a peace that the human mind cannot produce and cannot fully account for, a peace that stands guard at the door of your heart and mind like a sentry who was not posted there by you. It is the fruit of staying connected to the One through whom *"all things were made"* ([John 1:3](#)) — the same Jesus who is the Vine, in whom the branch finds everything it needs when it simply remains.

And notice the condition Jesus gives for bearing fruit that remains: *"You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that you should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain."* ([John 15:16](#)) We did not initiate this. He did. The choosing, the ordaining, the original planting of the vine — all of that belongs to Father Jehovah and His Son. What belongs to us is the staying. The continuing. The daily returning to His word and letting those words — which are spirit and life — do what only they can do.

That is what the abiding life produces over time. A person so thoroughly connected to the Vine that the fruit of that connection — love, joy, peace, the freedom that comes from honest living — begins to show up naturally, as the overflow of a life that has learned to stay. A person who has continued in His word long enough that the doctrine has become personal experience.

Jehovah does not ask us to transform ourselves. He asks us to remain in His Son, to continue in His word, to stay close enough to be pruned and tended and shaped by hands that know exactly what they are doing.

The branch that stays connected does not have to worry about the fruit. The Vinedresser tends to that.

"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 15:5](#)