GROWING CLOSER TO CHRIST

John 15:7-11

By

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John, Lesson 81  

**Growing Closer to Christ**  
**John 15:7-11**

Every Christian longs to know Jesus Christ more intimately. The apostle Paul said that he counted everything else as rubbish so that he could know Christ (Phil. 3:7-10). Although he had been a believer for about 25 years when he wrote that, he added that he had not yet obtained his goal, but he pressed on toward the mark. If Paul still needed to grow after 25 years as a believer, then certainly we all need to work at growing closer to Jesus Christ. 

That’s the topic that our Lord covers in our text on the night before He died. The overall theme is “abiding” in Him. We could call it dwelling in Him or making Him at home in our hearts. The idea is to grow closer to Christ, where we live daily in fellowship with Him. In John 15:1-5, Jesus used the analogy of the vine and the branches to teach that His true followers abide in Him and so bear much fruit. Now He fleshes out five aspects of how we can grow closer to Him:

**To grow closer to Christ, abide in Him, in His word, and in prayer; live to glorify the Father by bearing fruit; abide in His love; obey His commandments; and stay focused on His joy.**

1. **To grow closer to Christ, abide in Him, in His word, and in prayer (John 15:7).**

John 15:7: “If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” We saw Jesus’ similar promise in John 14:13-14, “Whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it.” To ask in Jesus’ name means to ask on the basis of who He is and what He has done for us on the cross. It assumes that we’re seeking to do His will and to promote His kingdom purposes.

In John 15:7, rather than asking in Jesus’ name, the condition that Jesus lays down is that we must abide in Him and His words must abide in us. While similar to asking in His name, the nuance is slightly different.
A. To grow closer to Christ, abide in Him.

In our last study, I cited this description of abiding in Christ (The New Scofield Reference Bible [Oxford University Press], p. 1148):

To abide in Christ is, on the one hand, to have no known sin unjudged and unconfessed, no interest into which He is not brought, no life which He cannot share. On the other hand, the abiding one takes all burdens to Him, and draws all wisdom, life, and strength from Him. It is not unceasing consciousness of these things, and of Him, but that nothing is allowed in the life which separates from Him.

Dr. James Rosscup wrote an entire book, Abiding in Christ [Zondervan]. He notes (pp. 106-126) that it includes both the concept of time and that of quality. The time factor means that this isn’t a quick fix to solve all your problems. It isn’t a remedy to pull off the shelf when things aren’t going well, only to be put back on the shelf once life is back on track. Abiding in Christ is a lifelong relationship with Him. You’re in it for the long haul.

The quality factor means that the relationship grows more intimate over the years. Just as marriage is a lifelong relationship where both partners should grow closer to one another over the years, so it should be with Christ. But as those who have been married for very long know, growing closer isn’t automatic. It requires purposefully spending time together. You have to keep working through issues that come up. If you don’t work at it, it’s easy to drift apart. The same is true of abiding in Christ. There will be times when you feel closer and times when you feel more distant. But the key is to keep coming back to Him and to keep working on your relationship with Him. You can’t put it on autopilot.

B. To grow closer to Christ, His words must abide in you.

“My words” refers to all that Jesus taught. But since all of the Old Testament was written to point to Christ (Luke 24:27, 44) and all of the New Testament points to Him, letting His words abide in us means being at home with the Bible. The primary way that Christ reveals Himself to us is not through dreams and visions, but through the written Word of God. If a dream or vision contradicts what the Bible says, then it is not from God. So if you want to grow closer to Jesus Christ, spend much time in His word, asking
the Holy Spirit to reveal more of Christ to you. To grow closer to Jesus Christ, read your Bible over and over until you are at home with it.

C. To grow closer to Christ, ask and receive from Him in prayer.

Jesus says that if we abide in Him and His words abide in us, then “ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” The context here is bearing fruit for His kingdom purposes. So “whatever you wish” is not a blanket promise that covers, “Lord, I wish for a million dollars! I wish for a happy, trouble-free life!” Rather, Jesus is talking about whatever we wish to help further His kingdom purposes through us.

But, as I pointed out when I spoke on John 14:13-14, these seemingly blanket promises that Jesus repeats (also, John 15:16; 16:23-24; Mark 11:24) are not easy to understand and apply, even if we limit them to prayer for His kingdom purposes. I’ve prayed for the salvation of some who died without Christ. I’ve prayed for healing for Christian marriages that ended in divorce. I’ve prayed for restoration for believers who are sinning, but they haven’t come back to Christ. In that message (12/14/14, on fcfonline.org), I offered the following thoughts on how to wrestle with this problem:

First, the tension we experience stems from the fact that we can know God’s will of desire, but we can’t know His will of decree. While God desires the sanctification of all believers (1 Thess. 4:3), He also permits sin and can even use our sins for ultimate good. Jesus prayed for Peter, not that he wouldn’t fall, but that his recovery from that fall would be used to strengthen others (Luke 22:31-32). We should pray that God would further His kingdom purposes, but we also need to submit to the fact that we don’t know His will of decree in any situation.

Second, Jesus’ promise to do whatever we ask does not negate the many Scriptures that exhort us to wait on the Lord. Jesus doesn’t say when He will do it. Paul’s longing and prayer for his fellow Jews was for their salvation (Rom. 10:1), but he never saw that prayer answered.

Third, God often accomplishes His purposes in ways that seem backwards to us. We pray for the gospel to spread, so God sends persecution. We pray for power, so God makes us weak (2 Cor. 12:9).
Fourth, we do not understand all that God is doing, so we may go to our graves not knowing why He seemingly didn’t answer our prayers. We only see a tiny fraction of what God is accomplishing in His eternal purpose. Somehow, though, He uses our prayers in that process, even when we don’t know how to pray as we should (Rom. 8:26).

But Jesus’ point in John 15:7 is that if we live closely with Him and His word governs our requests, we should be asking and receiving answers from Him on a regular basis. One of the most helpful treatments of prayer that I’ve read is that of John Calvin in The Institutes of the Christian Religion [Westminster Press]. Here is one rich quote that you can chew on for a long time (3:20:1):

But after we have been instructed by faith to recognize that whatever we need and whatever we lack is in God, and in our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom the Father willed all the fullness of his bounty to abide [cf. Col. 1:19; John 1:16] so that we may all draw from it as from an overflowing spring, it remains for us to seek in him, and in prayers to ask of him, what we have learned to be in him.

So to grow closer to Christ, abide in Him, in His word, and in prayer.

2. To grow closer to Christ, live to glorify the Father by bearing much fruit (John 15:8).

John 15:8: “My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples.” As we saw in our last study, the purpose for which God saved us is that we would bear much fruit. The point of planting a vineyard is not to grow pretty leaves, but to grow fruit. While God has given each of us different gifts, we are to use those gifts to bear fruit for His kingdom.

I’m not much of a gardener or botanist, but I can identify some types of trees. We were driving in Phoenix recently and I saw a tree loaded with round orange things and I concluded, “That’s an orange tree!” I’ve seen trees with round red things on them and I correctly concluded, “Those are apple trees!” You say, “Well, duh! Anyone can identify a tree by its fruit.” Yes. As I recall, Jesus said something like that (Matt. 7:20; Luke 6:44). It’s true, but it’s also kind of convicting! Someone should be able to look at your life and
say, “Aha! That’s a Christian!” They should know by our fruit that we follow Jesus.

Since God saved us so that we would be fruitful for His purposes, it’s important to know what fruit is. Generally, fruit is Christlikeness produced in us as we rely on the Holy Spirit. Just as an orange tree bears oranges, not thistles, so a Christian produces Christlikeness. At the root of this is not just going to church or serving in the church or being a moral or religious person, but having Christ dwell in you through the new birth. If you haven’t trusted in Christ to save you from your sins, you can’t bear fruit in your life that glorifies Him.

I trust that you know: the chief end of man is that we glorify God and enjoy Him forever. Jesus says that we will glorify God when we bear much fruit. As others see what God produces in and through us as we live closely with the Lord Jesus, they will get a glimpse of what He is like. More specifically, when people see the fruit of the Holy Spirit, “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control,” in us (Gal. 5:22-23), God will be glorified.

To bear fruit that glorifies God, it’s important to keep two things in mind: First, check your motives. Why do you want to bear fruit? It’s easy to fall into the trap of serving the Lord so that others will say nice things to you and about you. If you feel hurt when people don’t give you enough praise, it probably indicates that you were not serving for God’s glory, but for your own glory. Or, if you want to build an impressive ministry so that others will say, “What a great man of God!” your motives are wrong, because you’re seeking your own glory, not God’s glory.

Second, check your source of power. If you’re serving the Lord in your own strength and just asking Him for a little help now and then, you’re not serving in His power. Serving in His power doesn’t mean that you don’t work hard, but rather that you work hard as you rely on God’s power. Paul put it (Col. 1:29), “For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me.” If you feel burned out, it may be that you were serving in your power, not in God’s power.
But there’s a benefit when you glorify God by bearing fruit: Jesus says (John 15:8b) that you “so prove to be My disciples.” J. C. Ryle applies it (Expository Thoughts on the Gospels [Baker], p. 105), “Fruitfulness in Christian practice will not only bring glory to God, but will supply the best evidence to our own hearts that we are real disciples of Christ.” He means, when you see God work through you and you realize that the results are not because of your cleverness or hard work, but rather, because God worked through you, it assures your heart that you are a true disciple of Jesus Christ.

Thus, to grow closer to Christ, abide in Him and in His word, asking and receiving from Him through prayer. Live to glorify the Father by bearing much fruit.

3. **To grow closer to Christ, abide in His love (John 15:9).**

John 15:9: “Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love.” What a staggering statement! Just as the Father has perfectly loved the Son throughout all eternity, never wavering in His love, so Jesus loves His people! That’s the greatest motive for why we should want to grow closer to Christ: He loves us with infinite, inexhaustible love! As the hymn puts it, “O, the deep, deep, love of Jesus!” Or as Paul puts it (Gal. 2:20), “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.”

Abiding in Christ’s love is absolutely essential if you want a genuine, fresh, and fruitful Christian life. If your experience of His love fades, His commandments will seem burdensome, serving Him will become drudgery, and you’ll become vulnerable to all sorts of temptations. Remember how the Lord confronted the church at Ephesus? They were serving Him. They were persevering under persecution. They were upholding sound doctrine. But the Lord said, (Rev. 2:4), “But I have this against you, that you have left your first love.” He was probably referring to their love for Him. But the way you keep your love for Christ fresh is to remember His great love for you. Never get over the wonder that the eternal Son of God loved you and gave Himself for you! As Paul prayed for the Ephesians (Eph. 3:17-19):
... that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.

But we need to think this through a bit more carefully. Often Christians doubt Christ’s love when they go through difficult trials. They mistakenly think, “If God really loved me, He wouldn’t allow these awful things to happen to me!” But Jesus says here that just as the Father loved Him, so He loves us. Did the Father’s perfect love for the Son mean that He spared Him from trials? No, He came to do the Father’s will, namely, the cross. So, does the Lord’s perfect love for you mean that He will spare you from all trials? No, because it’s usually through such trials that we come to know Him more deeply. It’s what Paul called “the fellowship of His sufferings” (Phil. 3:10). So as someone has said, “Never interpret God’s love by your circumstances; rather, interpret your circumstances by God’s love.”

4. To grow closer to Christ, obey His commandments (John 15:10).

John 15:10: “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.” Jesus doesn’t let us think that abiding in His love is just a warm, fuzzy feeling. He plainly states that to abide in His love, you must keep His commandments. The flip side is, you’re not abiding in His love if you’re living in disobedience to His commandments.

It’s relatively easy to obey the Lord when things are going well. But the test of obedience is when He takes you through difficult trials. At such times, you may not understand why these trials are happening, but like Abraham walking to Mount Moriah to sacrifice Isaac, you have to trust Him and obey.

Elisabeth Elliot lost her first husband, Jim Elliot, to Auca Indian spears. She lost her second husband, Addison Leitch, to cancer. In an address to the Urbana Missions Conference (December, 1976), she told of being in Wales and watching a shepherd and his
dog. The dog would herd the sheep up a ramp and into a tank of antiseptic where they had to be bathed. The sheep struggled to climb out, but the dog would snarl and snap in their faces to force them back in. Just as they were about to come up out of the tank, the shepherd used a wooden implement to grab the rams by the horns, fling them back into the tank, and hold them under the antiseptic again for a few seconds.

Mrs. Elliot asked the shepherd’s wife if the sheep understood what was happening. She replied, “They haven’t got a clue.” Mrs. Elliot then said, “I’ve had some experiences in my life that have made me feel very sympathetic to those poor rams—I couldn’t figure out any reason for the treatment I was getting from the Shepherd I trusted. And He didn’t give a hint of explanation.” But, she pointed out, we still must trust our Shepherd and obey Him, knowing that He has our best interests at heart. It’s through obedience in times of suffering that we grow closer to our Savior, who suffered and died for us.

So, to grow closer to Christ, abide in Him, in His word, and in prayer; live to glorify the Father by bearing much fruit; abide in Christ’s love; and obey His commandments. Finally ...

5. **To grow closer to Christ, stay focused on His joy (John 15:11).**

John 15:11: “These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full.” If I were to ask, “What word pops into your mind when I say, ‘obedience’?” what would you say? Duty? Drudgery? Rules? No fun? What about, “joy”? What about “fullness of joy”? Jesus associates obedience with our experiencing full joy in Him (John 15:10-11). If you don’t associate obedience and fullness of joy, maybe you need to change your thinking!

It’s interesting that in John’s Gospel, the word “joy” has only been used once so far (in John 3:29 by John the Baptist). But in the upper room as Jesus faces the cross, He uses it seven times (twice here; John 16:20, 21, 22, 24; 17:13; Leon Morris, The Gospel According to John [Eerdmans], p. 674). The world can only offer joy when things are going well. It’s relatively easy to be full of joy when you
have a happy marriage, beautiful children, a satisfying, well-paying job, and good health.

But it’s only those who know Christ who can say (Rom. 5:3), “We exult in our tribulations”; or (James 1:3), “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials”; or (1 Pet. 4:13), “To the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation.” This doesn’t mean putting on a happy face when you’re hurting inside. Hebrews 12:11 realistically says that God’s discipline for the moment does not seem joyful, but sorrowful. The Bible acknowledges that there is a time for tears and grieving (Rom. 12:15; 1 Thess. 4:13; John 11:35). But John Newton said it well (“Glorious Things of Thee are Spoken”):

Fading is the world’s best pleasure,  
All its boasted pomp and show;  
Solid joys and lasting treasure  
None but Zion’s children know.

Conclusion

I want you to think about your relationship with Christ. If you don’t have one, you can begin by coming to the cross as a repentant sinner and believing in His death and resurrection for you. If your love for Jesus has grown lukewarm or cold, get back into His Word and prayer this week. Make it a daily priority. Make it your aim to live to glorify the Father by bearing much fruit. Dwell in Christ’s love; obey His commandments; and stay focused on His joy. These are Christ’s prescription for you to grow closer to Him.

Application Questions

1. Someone says, “I tried reading the Bible, but I didn’t get anything out of it.” How would you help him?
2. How can you know whether you’re trusting in God’s power or your own power when you’re serving Him? Does burn out mean that you weren’t trusting in His power?
3. Why is a person who is not abiding in Christ’s love more vulnerable to temptation than one who feels His love?
4. What does it mean to be “sorrowful, yet always rejoicing” (2 Cor. 6:10)? Where is the balance between joy and sadness?

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