

Intersection...divine sovereignty and human responsibility...

A series on Sanctification: part 3 (E. Radmacher)

1. Study John 15:4-5. Do you have a choice to abide or not?

To be fruitful, we must abide in Jesus. This is Jesus' plain teaching in these two verses. As we move from the comforting words of the Father's care in the first few verses (John 15:1-3), we now enter that portion of the analogy of the vine and branches that stresses the responsibility of the individual believer who wishes to be fruitful for the Lord. Here divine sovereignty and human responsibility come together. Again, we see this in the shift in pronouns from "He" to "you." These are things that the individual believer must choose to do. They are not automatic. But they are our responsibility.

To understand these verses we need to see how they relate to the fruiting branch of the second verse (v. 5) and how we abide. And, also, we need to see what He means by bearing fruit.

It is the fruiting branch (i.e., the branch that will bear fruit that growing season though it has not done so yet), cleansed by the Father through Jesus' words, which is ready to bear fruit. Thus, these verses are describing the response required from the fruiting branch of verse two for fruitfulness to occur. Though they are ready to bear fruit, such fruitfulness will not be automatic.

Rather, we see the interplay of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility. Typically believers misuse verses like Philippians 1:6 and 4:13 and 19 by minimizing human responsibility in spiritual growth and service. (1) We sometimes encounter this form of evangelism that emphasizes God's sovereignty to the exclusion of human responsibility. Rather, Jesus says here that the eleven (us, too; cf. John 17:20-21) have a part to play in the fruiting process. They (we) have a responsibility to "abide." We might say it this way. As God works sovereignly through us, He sovereignly chooses to work only through those of us who are working (abiding)!

As fruiting is not automatic, abiding, again, is not automatic either. Jesus' command for us to abide indicates that it is possible for a believer to choose not to abide, even one who is ready to bear fruit and has been "cleansed." Peter is a classic example of this. He was clean (John 13:10) and cleansed (John 15:3) but he was still arrogant (John 18:10-11). He still failed to abide in Christ in the crisis of that night. Remember, we are listening in on a conversation between Jesus and His disciples. This command is being given to *them* first, and us second. *They*, by definition of the nature of biblical commands, can *choose* not to abide. Otherwise it does not make sense for Jesus to command *them* to do so.

If abiding is a product of being regenerate, is automatic, then Jesus would not have commanded them to abide. Rather, He would have said something to the effect of, "You will now bear fruit as evidence of your regeneration which I will now describe as abiding since the Holy Spirit will be indwelling in you." Or, if He was to speak as some evangelicals, He would have said, "You will now bear fruit because I am at work in you to accomplish My purposes whether you intentionally do anything in particular or not." But that is not what Jesus says. He commands them to abide if they are to bear fruit; thus, it had to be possible for them to fail to abide and fail to bear fruit. This is even more evident when we see that Jesus defines abiding in terms of obedience in verse ten.

We should ask ourselves, then, what has to happen to cause us to obey? Believe! You cannot *do* more than you can believe! That is the whole point of what Jesus said about believing in 14:1! You are what you do. And the three-fold principle that we elaborated previously is knowing, believing, receiving. We can only believe as much as we know and we can only receive as much as we believe. Once again, the classical gospel hymn says, "Trust and obey, for there is no other way..."

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Yet, even though Jesus tells the eleven this now, as a matter of fact all of them failed to abide (keep believing unto fellowship and sanctification) that night, especially Peter (cf. Luke 22:55-61). As a matter of fact, all of them failed to understand His additional teachings that kept them from truly loving and rejoicing in Him ("You don't love Me."). That night they did not stop believing that Jesus was Messiah and Son of God, but they were thinking more of themselves than what He was teaching. He is telling them what they need to know, but they aren't hearing it. Later, after His arrest, Peter and John kept following Him after all others fled. But even Peter did not make it through the night. He eventually denied knowing Him. But things would get better for Peter. We see this in Acts and John 21:15-17.

Though some might attempt to see in the idea in this verse of Jesus' abiding in us a reference to the indwelling ministry of the Holy Spirit, it may be better to see it otherwise. (2) This will be discussed in greater detail later. The "bottom line" is that our motivation for abiding, and the absolute necessity of abiding, is given by Jesus. This is a metaphor He is using to describe a spiritual relationship. Jesus uses many metaphors in His teaching to enable us to relate spiritual truths to our human experiences. Abiding is a metaphor for relationship. It describes a relationship of submission and dependence on our part and a relationship of nurture and enablement on His. And, Jesus has made clear here that without our abiding in Him and His abiding in us there is no fruitfulness for the believer. The reason: We cannot do anything apart from Jesus' enablement and He will only enable those who "abide" in Him and let Him "abide" in them.

Branches that really get their sustenance from the vine have greater potential than most other plants. That is likely why the grape became a symbol for Israel in prophetic literature. The promise of God in the Mosaic Covenant was fruitfulness in return for obedience. We see this illustrated in the lives of Caleb and Joshua who chose to trust God when the other ten spies rejected Him. They not only out-lived the men, but entered the promised land and received their reward, the lands they had spied out forty years earlier. God planted them in the land of promise as He planted the nation there and made it fruitful.

We see this same principle in Pauline literature when He talks about Jesus being the head and we being members of His body, the church. The body is absolutely dependent upon the head for direction. But the head is dependent on the body for implementation of its directions (cf. Eph 4:15-16). In that picture we see the relationship Jesus has chosen to have with us, and His choice to work out His purposes through us as we abide in Him by believing Him and keeping His commandments, especially to love one another. This is also why John turns from the issue of fellowship with God in 1 John 1 to abiding. He tells us that if we are abiding in Christ we will also walk "just as He walked" (1 John 2:6). This same concept is described by Paul as imitating God.

But, what if a believer chooses not to abide? What is the consequence for the believer? Jesus addresses that issue next.

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References

1. John F. Hart (Does "Does Philippians 1:6 Guarantee Progressive Sanctification?" Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society, 9:16 [Spring 1996]: 37-58) notes that misuse of this verse as a promise of progressive sanctification which is to be culminated in our glorification, when in reality it points to the Philippians' personal involvement in Paul's ministry through giving. Rather than being a promise of God's faithfulness in their sanctification, it promises God's involvement in making their participation if Paul' ministry effective.
2. Cook, The Theology of John, 123.

This article was adapted from The Disciplemaker: What Matters Most to Jesus by Gary Derickson and Earl Radmacher (Salem: Charis Press, ©2001) and used by permission from its authors. This book gives to the readers a considerable number of gems, often overlooked or minimally discussed in most works dealing with these chapters. Especially well done is the study of John 15. Dr. Derickson's professional expertise in viticultural studies (M.S. in horticulture at Texas A&M) hopefully puts to rest the notion that "cut off" is a correct translation of the Greek term *airo*, to lift up. A plethora of information is provided to understand this often wrongly understood portion of Scripture.

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