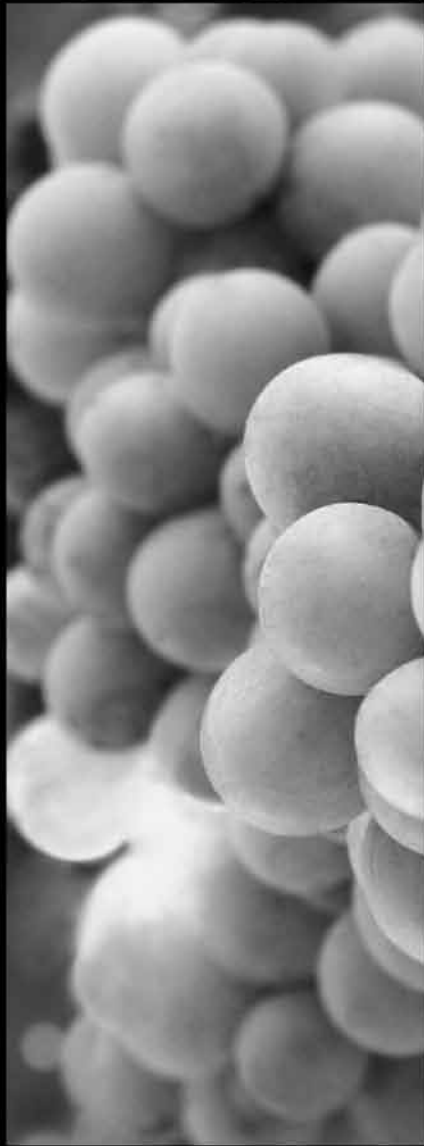
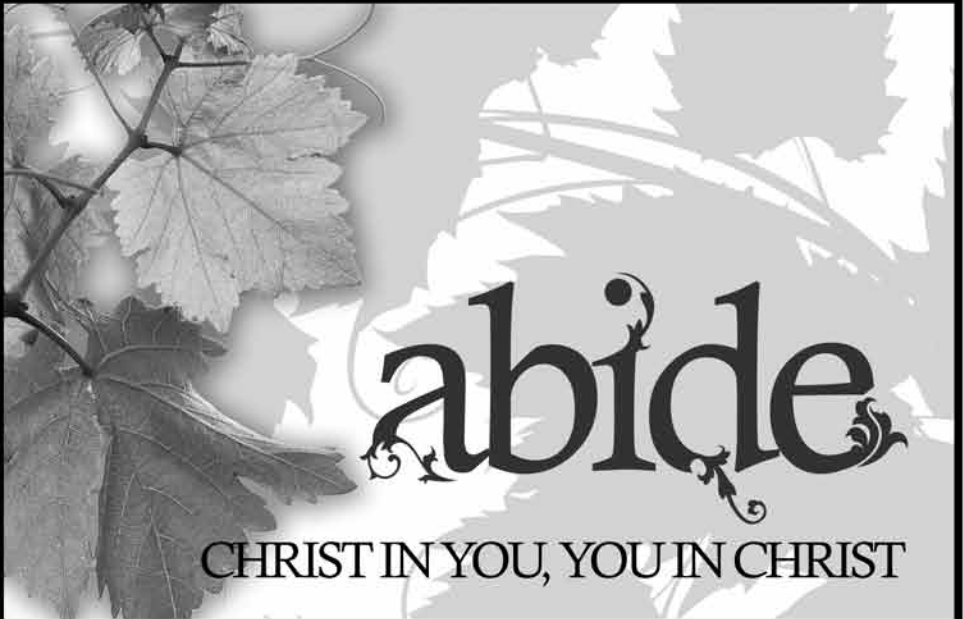




GOD'S WORD IS GOOD

SMALL GROUP BIBLE STUDY



LESSON 1

John 15:1-17

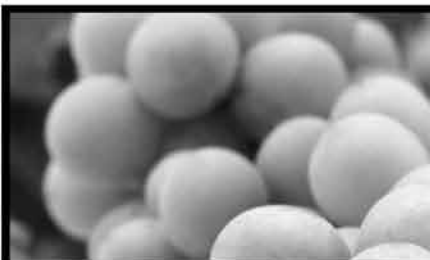
Overview of This Eight Week Series for Leaders

As Christ followers our mission is clear. We are commanded to make disciples of all nations. The last words that Jesus spoke to His disciples before He returned to heaven after His crucifixion and resurrection from the dead are recorded in Matthew 28:19-20. Jesus commands His followers to, "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."

Interestingly, we are not commanded to make converts, or Christians, but disciples. In fact, the word "Christian" is found only three times in the Bible, but the word "disciple" is found 269 times. The New Testament is a book about disciples, by disciples, and for disciples of Jesus Christ. Jesus knew that the need for disciples to become disciple-makers and carry on His ministry of reconciliation on earth was imperative; and 2,000 years later, the need for disciples carry on Christ's ministry is just as important as it was then.

Most Christ-followers are familiar with "The Great Commission" found in Matthew 28:19-20. However, many of us leave out an important phrase after this command. It is found at the end of Matthew 28:20 where Jesus says, "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." In this passage, Jesus has just laid out the challenging task of making disciples of all nations, baptizing and teaching others all that He has spent three teaching His disciples.

He is saying, "Take everything I have taught you and modeled for you and then reproduce it in others all over the world." He is reminding His disciples that what He has taught them is not only for the but for the whole world. And the very last words that Christ says to these disciples that He so dearly loves, that He even dies for, is this: "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."



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Never Alone

What a paradoxical statement, just before the disciples watch Jesus ascend into heaven, physically leaving earth. He is reminding them that they are not and will not be alone. Even though He is leaving them physically, His power and presence will be with them always through the coming Holy Spirit. And His power and presence in the lives will be the only way they can accomplish the command to make disciples of all nations.

The same is true of us today. The only way we can accomplish Christ's command to make disciples of all nations is through His power and presence at work in us and through us. The questions and problems we face, with respect to Jesus' command, are usually not theological in nature, but are of a "practical" nature. These practical issues are what this study series is going to address.

The Key Question

"How?" is the key question that we struggle with the most. "Now that I'm a Christ-follower, how do I live out my faith? At work? At home? All the time?" "How do I obey Christ's command to make disciples of all nations?" "How does this look in my life on a day to day basis?" "How do I begin?" "How do I grow up and become an effective disciple?" "How do I tap into His power and strength?" These are practical questions. And the good news is we serve a practical God! His Word does address and apply to everyday living.

Throughout this study, we are going to uncover the truths in God's Word about that last phrase in the Great Commission ("...and surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age") and how developing an intimate relationship with Christ is the key to our day to day lives as disciples and disciple-makers. If we can grasp and understand practically that Christ is always with us, and learn to abide in that relationship, we will discover God transforming our lives. And as He transforms our lives to look more like Christ, our lives will bear the fruit that Christ's life bore—disciples. We will find ourselves free from trying to "do" what makes us feel "Christ-like" and instead of "being" who God created us to be. This is the abundant life that Christ died in order to give us.

Additional Background for This Series

Our study will focus on John 15:1-17. This passage is a great parallel to that key statement in Matthew 28:20 because in John 15, Jesus paints a word picture (a parable) of the truth that He will be with His disciples and bear fruit through them always. Jesus' work on earth was almost complete and He was heading to the cross. He had spent three years teaching, modeling and training the future leaders of the church. He was entrusting to these imperfect leaders the future of the ministry He began on earth. He had spoken to them clearly at the Last Supper about what was about to happen. He was on the way to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray for them and for all of us who would believe as a result of their faithfulness to the mission He laid out for them.

Christ wanted to be sure they understood the importance of total dependence upon Him to complete their mission even though He would no longer be physically present with them. He wanted them to know that everything hinged on a deep, intimate relationship with Him, where they gave up trying to please God in their own human strength, and relied on His power at work in them. So Jesus stopped on the way to the Garden to give them a parable, a story picture, so they would not forget about intimacy and dependence upon Him.

He told them the "Parable of the Vine" in John 15:1-17. The theme of this parable is best summarized in one statement in John 15:5. It says, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains (abides) in Me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from Me you can do nothing." In this parable is the secret of abundant living and fulfilling the Great Commission. According to this verse above, it is not by concentrating on bearing fruit, or trying really hard to bear fruit, but by remaining, or abiding, in Christ.

This study will concentrate on the absolute necessity of continuously abiding in the Vine, and how to do that all day everyday so we can bear much fruit for the glory of God. It is our hope that everyone who participates in this study will re-teach it to others as they seek to make disciples of all nations.

This Week's Lesson:

Abide—Know Your Position

Key Passage: John 15:1-8; cross-references

Lesson Goal: That we might be sure we are "in Christ" and that He is "in us." To understand that our new position "in Christ" gives us anew identity that is eternally secure. Therefore, we do not have to live in guilt, fear, and shame anymore.

Opening Activity Choices

Option One: Man's Best Friend. Bring a photo of a dog (your own dog if you'd like) and display it so the group can see it. Lead your group in a discussion of some reasons why dogs are considered "man's best friend." You may discuss things such as companionship, loyalty, obedience, fun to play with, protection, etc. Ask the group to discuss what makes a dog a good pet. How does a "good dog" relate to its owner?

Use this discussion to illustrate how well-trained dogs are constantly watching and responding to their master. Well-trained dogs know and understand the commands of their master and respond to his leadership. Explain that this is a simple illustration of what it means to remain (abide) in Christ.

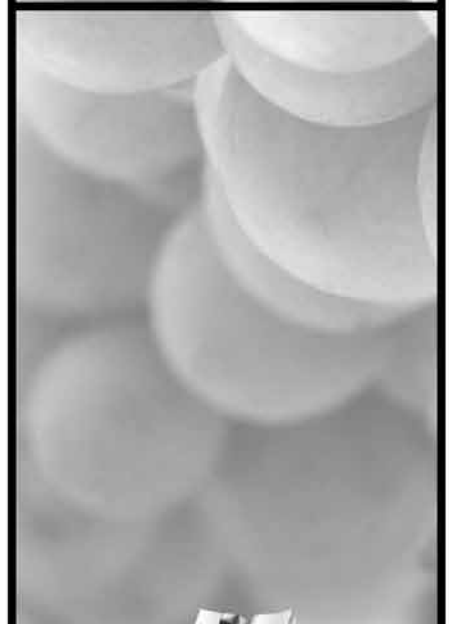
Option Two: For Newer Groups. If your group is new, divide your group into 3 or 4 couples, or 3 or 4 single adults, and have them share something about their family or self, how long they have been at Brook Hills, why they are attending Brook Hills, and what they hope to get out of the study. Remind everyone of the importance of mutual acceptance, respect, trust, confidentiality, and engagement with the study as you grow together.

Opening Prayer

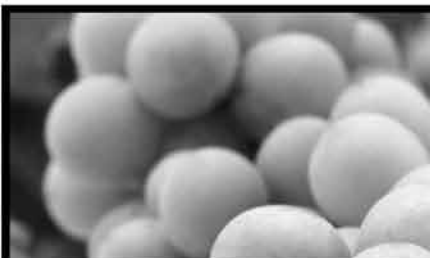
Begin your time in study of God's Word by praying for your group. Pray that God will open the hearts of every person and reveal Himself to you all in a new way as you study and discuss His Word together. Pray that the Holy Spirit will guide you into the truth and show you all how to apply what you learn to your lives in a practical way. And pray that God will be glorified through your discussion today.

This Week's Study

Using the series introduction at the beginning of the lesson, explain to your group the background and foundation for the "abide" series you are beginning today. Have your group open their Bibles to John 15:1-17. Explain that this passage is the basis for our study for the next 8 weeks. Have a volunteer read this passage aloud. Using the Lesson One Background at the beginning of the lesson, explain the context of this parable to the group.



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Now, explain that today's lesson will focus on verses 1-8. Have a volunteer read verses 1-8 aloud again as the group follows along.

The Key Characters

The first thing we need to do in order to properly interpret and apply this passage is to identify and define the key "characters" in this parable. It is important to remember that Jesus is telling this story to His disciples so it is written in first person. So every time a personal pronoun such as "I" or "Me" is used, Christ is referring to Himself. In verse 1 Jesus says, "I am the true vine, and My Father is the gardener." Then in verse 2, Jesus begins to discuss "branches" that are "in Me." The branches are intended to "bear fruit," and the passage explains how the Father (the gardener) prunes and cuts off (which literally means "to lift up") these branches to cultivate fruit bearing through them.

In verse 4, Jesus makes clear that His followers are these branches when He says, "No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in Me." You is always plural in this study. So in this parable we see that Christ is the vine, God the Father is the gardener, Christ's disciples are the branches, and the purpose of the branches is to bear fruit so that God's name will be glorified among the nations.

Throughout our study, it will be important to remember who the "characters" are in this parable. Jesus outlines specifically for us who the vine, gardener and branches are for a reason. Each "character" has a purpose, role and position in fruit bearing. If the vine begins to act as the branch, or the branch tries to act as the gardener or the vine, no fruit will result. And according to verse 16 in this passage, the purpose of our lives (the branches), is to bear fruit that will last so God will receive glory.

Lead your group in a discussion of the key "characters" in this passage using the information provided above and the following questions. You may want to make a list on the board as your group identifies each "character."

1. How does Jesus identify and describe Himself and His Father in verse 1?
2. In verse 2, Jesus identifies branches. Where are these branches according to verse 2?
3. Who do the branches represent in this parable?
4. Do the branches hold themselves in place, or does the vine hold the branches in place?
5. What is the comparison Jesus makes in verse 4 between the branches and His disciples? How are they alike?
6. According to verse 4, what is the purpose of a branch?
7. According to verse 16, what is God's purpose for His followers?

Our New Position

In John 15, Jesus supplies the answer to an unstated question that every believer is likely to ask himself at some time in his life, "how is my life going to be different now?" "What do I have now that I have placed my faith in Christ that I did not before?" When someone comes to faith in Christ, many times the focus is on how his behavior should change instead of how his position has changed. The inner changes that take place when we surrender our lives to Christ leads to our outer changes in behavior; but many times we think it is the other way around. We place too much emphasis on "doing or not doing" certain things.

In this illustration from nature, Jesus tells us that the Christian life is based on a relationship, not religious rules, regulations, or things we do. It is simply a relationship between Christ and the individual disciple. In this parable, there is little focus on the disciples “doing” anything except abiding in Christ at all times. He illustrates this truth by using the example of a vine and its branches. Just as the vine and its branches have an inner relationship in which the sap of the vine flows through the branch and gives it life; the disciple of Christ should have a life-receiving intimate relationship with Jesus Christ. This relationship should be the absolute focus of every disciple’s life.

As Christ followers, we have a new position in life. The phrase “in Me” or “in the vine” is used seven times in the parable to describe our position in Christ if we have confessed Him as our Lord and Savior and received His grace and forgiveness. The phrase “in you” or “in him” is used twice to describe the presence of Christ and the Holy Spirit in us after we trust in Christ for salvation. According to Ephesians 1:13-14, the moment we put our faith in Christ for our salvation the Holy Spirit seals us in Christ and enters our bodies as a deposit guaranteeing our new position “in Christ.”

Continually Reminded

Notice what Christ says in verse 3. He says, “You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.” Then He says in verse 4, “Remain (abide) in Me and I will remain (abide) in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain (abide) in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain (abide) in Me.” Throughout the rest of the passage, Jesus states over and over, “I am the vine and you are the branches.” He continually reminds them of their position “in Him.” Verse 3 helps to explain that position.

Notice that Jesus says, “You are already clean.” The word “already” indicates a past, completed action by Christ and the current position of the new believer in relation to Christ. If we place our faith in Christ and confess Him as our Lord and Savior He forgives our sins and makes us clean (see 1 John 1:9). Christ is reminding His disciples that it is not their job to make themselves clean with a list of rules and regulations. Christ has already made them clean.

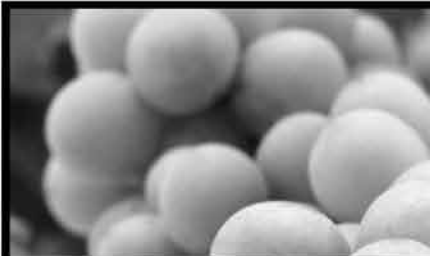
Then, in verse 4, He tells them to abide in Him just like a branch abides in the vine so they can bear fruit. At this point, it will be helpful to understand how a vine and a branch relate to one another in nature since this is the example Christ gives us of how we are to be in relationship with Him. In his book, *The True Vine*, Andrew Murray discusses the branch and its relationship to the vine. Murray points out that a branch is simply a piece of wood, produced by the vine for one purpose—to bear fruit.

Without the branch, the vine would bear no fruit. The branch has only one purpose for existence—to bear the fruit that the vine produces. The branch gives itself wholly to this purpose. In the same way, the Christ follower has one reason for being a branch—one reason for existing on this earth—that the True Vine may bear fruit through his life.

That is why Christ continues to remind His followers of their position “in Him.” In Christ’s example in nature, the branch is in the image of the vine. They are alike. The only difference is that the vine is great and strong, and the branches are small and feeble, constantly needing and receiving strength from the vine. The vine has stored up sap and strength, not for itself, but for the branches.

The branches have nothing except what they receive from the vine. They are kept in place by the vine and are totally dependent upon the vine for





strength and nourishment. So we see in Christ's example a picture of total dependence upon Him to provide all we need for life. This is what it means to be "in Christ." This is the position of every believer. Here are a few cross-references that teach us about our new position in the True Vine.

2 Corinthians 5:17

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"

Ephesians 4:22-24

"You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness."

John 10:27-29

"My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can ever snatch them out of my hand. My Father who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand."

So if someone is not "in Christ," where is he? In order to truly grasp our new position in Christ, we must understand our position outside of Christ. The following cross-references explain our former position, and why being "in Christ" is so vital for every believer.

1 Corinthians 15:21-22

"For since death came through a man (Adam), the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man (Christ). For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive."

Romans 6:23

"For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Ephesians 2:4-5

"But because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved."

In these six references, we see a stark contrast between life outside of Christ, and life "in Christ" after salvation.

Using the commentary above on the vine and the branch, explain the relationship of the vine and branch in nature. Then, using the following questions, lead your group in a discussion about what it means that as believers we gain a new position "in Christ."

1. According to this parable in John 15, what is the believer's new position in life?
2. Using Jesus' example of the vine and the branch, what does this mean practically that a believer is "in Christ?"
3. How does this truth of being "in Christ" affect our lives in the same way that the vine affects the life of the branch? Be specific in your discussion in order to help your group begin to see the practical application of being "in Christ."
4. How does Jesus describe His disciples in John 15:3?

5. Why do you think Jesus says that they are “already” clean? What might this indicate about their relationship with Him?
6. Do you think Christians today could use a good reminder that they are “already” clean? In other words, do you think many believers live their lives in an attempt to “clean” themselves, not understanding their position as “already clean” in Christ?
7. After reminding them that they are “already clean,” what instructions does Jesus give His disciples in verse 4?

Share with your group that Jesus uses the term “in Me” or “in the vine” seven times in this parable to describe our relationship with Christ. Explain that they are going to spend a few minutes in smaller groups taking a deeper look at Scripture on what it means to be “in Christ,” and outside of Christ. Divide your group according to size and assign the cross-references to different groups. Give them a few minutes to discuss these verses together and then bring the group back together to share and discuss what they learned. As they share what they learned, list the characteristics of life “in Christ” in one column on the board, and the characteristics of life outside of Christ in another column.

Cross-Reference Verses:

2 Corinthians 5:17

Ephesians 4:22-24

John 10:27-29

1 Corinthians 15: 21-22

Romans 6:23

Ephesians 2:4-5

Ephesians 1:4-8

1. In nature, which produces fruit, the vine or the branch?
2. What is the difference between producing and bearing fruit?
3. Why then, is it so important that as believers we “abide in the Vine” in order to bear fruit?
4. If we don’t “abide in the Vine” will there be any fruit for us to bear? How do you know based on Jesus’ example in this parable?
5. Do you think that most Christians understand and live to bear fruit, or are they striving to produce it?
6. Discuss how living to produce fruit as a “branch” leads to weariness, frustration, etc.

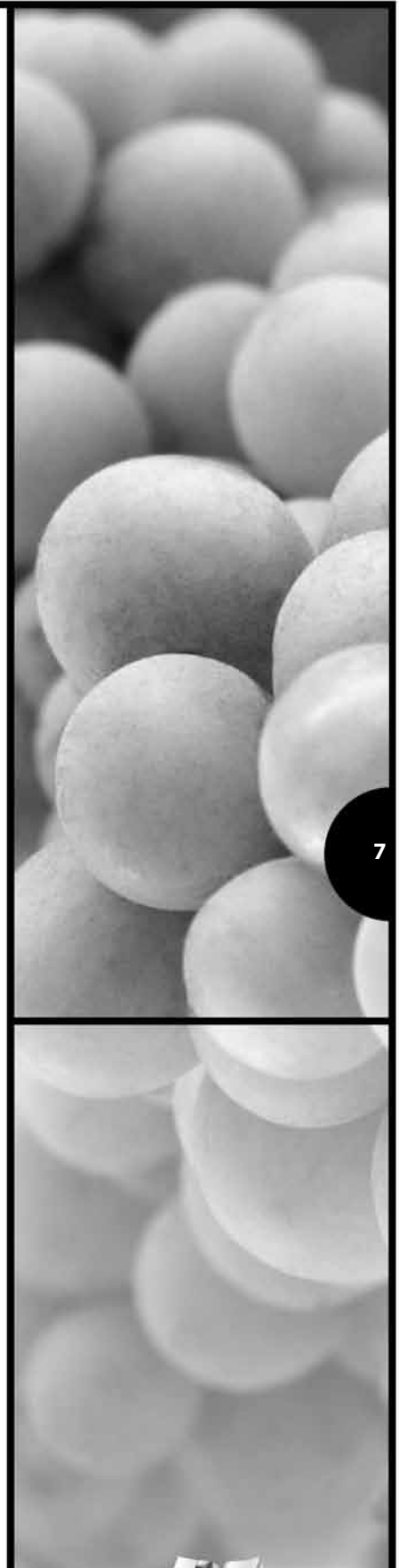
“Abide In Me”

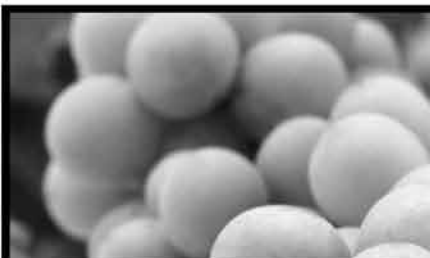
It is important Jesus’ command to “abide in Me” in John 15:4 not be misinterpreted. The instruction to remain (abide) in Christ, and He will abide in you does not refer to our position regarding salvation. We have seen that when we place our faith in Christ, He forgives us, cleanses us, and the result is that our position is no longer “in Adam,” but “in Christ” for all eternity! This is a secure position that will never change. Jesus is not teaching His disciples how to become “in the Vine.”

He is reminding them that they are already “in the Vine.” The command in verse 4 to “abide in Me” is not referring to losing salvation. It is reminding us how to bear fruit in our salvation because this is the purpose for which Christ saves us—so that He can produce His fruit through our lives. Christ is encouraging complete dependence upon Him. Only then will we bear fruit that will last.

The True Vine

Jesus describes Himself in John 15:1 as the “true vine,” not one of many vines. This reference presupposes that there must be untrue, or false vines. The





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following cross-references take a closer look at the importance of Christ being the true vine and how this assures every believer that he is eternally secure in his relationship with Christ.

John 10:8-9

"All who ever came before Me (Christ) were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through Me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture."

Acts 4:12

"Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."

John 14:6

"Jesus answered, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.'"

Using these cross-references and the following questions, lead your group in a discussion of why Christ is the true vine and what this means for everyone who places his faith in Christ.

1. Why do you think Jesus used the word "true" to describe Himself in John 15:1? What might this tell you about other religious leaders in the disciples' time?
2. Do we today face "false" vines? Explain your answer.
3. According to Acts 4:12, where is salvation found? Is this the only place it is found? Has anyone else ever conquered sin and death then rose to life?
4. According to John 14:6, what is the only way to come to the Father for eternal life?
5. How does Jesus describe other religious leaders in John 10:7-10?
6. How do these verses assure a person that he is eternally secure in his relationship with Christ?
7. Do you think many Christians struggle with assurance of salvation? Why is that the case?
8. Why can we have confidence in our new position in Christ? Is this confidence found in anything we ourselves do? If not, in what is it found?

Depending On God

We have established the key "characters" in John 15. We have examined God's Word to understand what Christ meant when He taught His followers that they were "in Him," and commanded them to remain (abide) there. We have seen that Jesus is the true vine; therefore, our salvation and position as His child are eternally secure. The role of the vine is to hold the branch in place. The branch simply abides (remains) where the gardener put it. The vine bears the branch, strengthens the branch, supports the branch, gives life to the branch, and lives through the branch making it fruitful.

Branches are made secure in the vine by the gardener as he grafts them into the vine. The process of grafting is when a gardener takes the bud or shoot of a plant or tree and inserts this new bud into the stem or trunk of another where it continues to grow, becoming a permanent part. Notice in this parable that before Christ ever tells His followers to remain (abide) in Him, He directs their attention to God, the gardener, in John 15:1. The vine is dependent on the gardener, and the branches are dependent on the vine. Christ is teaching us that ultimately, it is God the Father who is working in and through our lives.

At the root of this parable is the truth that the Christian life comes down to one simple truth. We are to leave our lives in God's hands, living in total dependence on Him, trusting that He will give us all that we need. Remember, Christ came to bring us to God. Christ the vine points to God the gardener. Scripture describes how God has grafted us in to the Vine in several different ways.

Let's look at some cross-references that will help us to further understand the work of God the Gardener in our lives as "branches" in Christ the Vine.

Ephesians 1:4-5

"For God chose us in Him (Christ) before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight. In love, He predestined us to be adopted as His sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with His pleasure and will."

Ephesians 1:13

"And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the Gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in Him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit."

Romans 3:22-24

"This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."

Look for the key words in these verses that describe the "grafting" work of God the Father. Words such as "chose," "adopted," "included," "marked," "sealed," and "justified." These words show us the work of God as the gardener who grafts us in to Christ, the only True Vine.

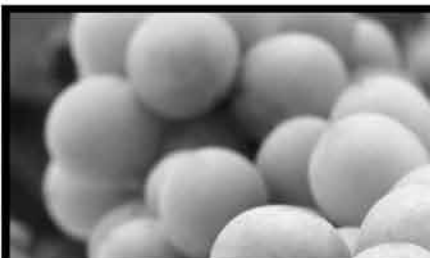
Using the information above and the following questions, lead your group in a discussion about how God is the gardener who grafts us in to our new position in the Vine.

1. In Christ's example in nature, what is the role of the gardener in relationship to the vine and the branches? What does he do? How does his work affect the vine and the branches?
2. How does this illustrate the work of God in the lives of Christ's disciples?

Have your group turn to the cross-references listed above and ask three volunteers to read the verses aloud. Then, lead a discussion of these verses and how they illustrate the work of God as the one who grafts us in to Christ. Remember to point out the key words that describe this work that are listed in the commentary above. You may even want to list these key words on the board to help focus their attention on the work of God in our lives.

1. When you look at these key words, what does it make you think about your salvation? Are you secure in Christ?
2. In Jesus' example in nature, discuss the roles of the gardener, the vine and the branches. Who does the work in fruit being produced by the vine and borne by the branches? Ultimately, whose work determines the outcome of fruit? Where does the responsibility ultimately lie?
3. Following Jesus' word picture and example in this parable, who does the work of salvation, the branches or the gardener? How do the cross-reference verses we just read teach this truth?





4. How does this simple truth from nature apply to our lives "in Christ" once we have received God's grace and forgiveness? Who does the work of making us fruitful? What is our role in the process?
5. In daily life, what does it mean to "remain in the Vine?"
6. How will this truth change the way we understand and live our lives as Christ followers? Be specific in your answer.

Conclusion

Christ is the true vine. God is the gardener. All disciples of Christ are the branches, and their sole purpose is to bear the fruit of the vine. As believers, our position is "in Christ." God put us there, and He keeps us there. We must surrender our old identity "in Adam" in order to be grafted into the Vine and given new life, a new identity, and a new purpose. Only as we willingly give control over to the Gardener and submit to the Vine can we experience this new life the way it is intended to be lived. Since we now are secure in the Vine, there is no need to live in guilt, shame or fear in relation to God. We have been chosen, adopted, included, marked, sealed and justified freely by God's grace. We are in Christ, a new creation, re-created by the Gardener in the likeness of the Vine. Now we are free. We are free to remain (abide) where God has placed us, to surrender, to bear fruit for the glory of God. And remember Christ's last words on earth, "And surely I am with you, even to the end of the age."

Additional Application

- 1) This week, daily thank God for your new and secure position in Christ.
- 2) Seek to read Ephesians 1 and John 15 a couple of times this week. Ask God to continue to teach you more things about what it means to be "in Christ" and "abiding in Him."