

The Greater Commandment

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Abiding in Jesus

There is much more to the Christian life than the first acceptance of Christ Jesus as Saviour. Listen to what Christ Himself said about the life that is possible through faith in Him.

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

This clearly states the necessity for living in communion with Christ Jesus, day by day and moment by moment. He spoke these words to His disciples as He was explaining to them that their spiritual life would come from Him, that there was no such thing as living, walking, and serving in the will of God apart from Him. He told them plainly that they would be unable to do the will of God in their own strength.

A further step beyond the initial acceptance of Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord will involve even more than having the Holy Spirit actually living in the life of the individual Christian, although it includes that. This will be the obedience of walking in the will of God, following the guidance of God, being inwardly led by Christ Jesus and motivated by the Holy Spirit.

Jesus of Nazareth was aware He was soon to be crucified, and knowing that He had only a short time left with His disciples, He took this time to prepare them for the experience they must face after He was gone from them in the flesh. When His bodily presence was once taken away, what could they do? They were accustomed to turning to Him day by day for answers to their questions. He would never again sit with them at the table, sharing mutual fellowship as they shared the food. So the Lord Jesus took this time to teach them what life would be like and what resources would be available to them when His personal presence was no longer with them.

Christ Jesus began His explanation by using a simple figure of speech: "I am the true vine and my Father is the husbandman." The word *husbandman* is not common in today's vocabulary. It is an old English term easily understood. Today men say *farmer*, or possibly *gardener*.

By using this term Jesus of Nazareth indicated how God the Father would watch over souls that believed in Christ Jesus, and how He would control what happened in them and to them so that they would be blessed. It would be essential that they obey the will of God since there is no other way to have blessing. But in their human natures they would be unwilling and unable to obey God. So God would by His Holy Spirit put into their hearts the disposition and the strength to obey Him. "For it is God that worketh in you to will and to do of His good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13).

To carry out this figure Christ Jesus spoke of Himself as the main vine and of His disciples as branches. In this way He emphasizes that the disciples are entirely dependent upon Him. The vine holds up the branches, gives them the sap which keeps them green and makes them fruitful. Thus they were held in place by the Lord, and are indwelt by His Spirit that they might bear fruit (Galatians 5:22-23).

By referring to God the Father as "the husbandman" Christ Jesus went on with His figure of speech to point out that God had a personal interest in the disciples as "branches of the true vine". The owner of the vineyard wants as much of the best fruit it is possible to produce. With his knowledge of how the

vine produces fruit, he cultivates and nurtures the vine that more fruit will be produced.

The Necessity of Pruning

Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit (John 15:2).

Careful pruning is necessary in any successful fruitgrowing, and Jesus of Nazareth is making use of His disciples' knowledge of that here. An unfruitful branch will simply be cut off.

Young Christians can easily have an inadequate idea of what to expect as they enter into their new life and because of that may allow situations to develop which cannot possibly produce fruit. They may feel that now nothing should distress them, there surely should be no serious problems: life should be a glad time of continuous triumph.

But anyone who has walked the pilgrim way for any length of time knows that such is not the case. The Christian may be called upon to face experiences which are hard to bear. He may, for example, be called upon to give up something which he considers precious. When this treasure is removed, he may feel the Lord is against him. But the Lord may be merely pruning, that the believer might bring forth more fruit to His glory! By taking away the thing which was engrossing the attention and absorbing the heart's affection, God was actually pruning so that the energies of the believer may more completely be used in accord with His will. Pruning is done again and again as the gardener sees a certain tree of plant which needs this treatment in order that it may produce the very best fruit.

Jesus of Nazareth continued His teaching to point out what happens after the pruning has taken place. "Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you" (verse 3). "Cleansed" means that the believer has been "pruned." ". . . the word which I have spoken to you," meaning the Scriptures, is useful in pruning. Reading and thoughtful study of the Bible will actually have the effect of cleansing out some things in the life of a Christian which are not in accord with the will of God. This is a necessary and natural process in growth. Many habits and ways, some of which may not be evil in themselves nor harmful in other persons, are not fruitful and do not help toward Christian character. God wants these to be cut out.

It should also be recognized that in some cases the pruning may be done in some act of providence, some calamity, or disaster, or perhaps some trouble with other persons may make it necessary or at least advisable to cease from certain practices. The believer may not even be aware that this change in his way of living was actually important for his growth in spiritual living. The result can be more fruit to the glory of God who brought such change or changes to pass through His providence in order that the believer might be more blessed.

Christ Jesus speaks of being "the vine", and of believers as "the branches," and says, "Abide in me, and I in you. . . ." He notes that no branch can bear fruit by itself, it must be a part of the vine. Thus the relationship between the believer and Christ is clearly set forth. They are members of Christ as the branches are members of the vine; and just as it is true that the branch bears the fruit, even so do believers when they abide in Him. The words ". . . for without me ye can do nothing," simply means "separate from me you cannot bear fruit." This does not mean that the believer cannot do a day's work, putting in a full eight hours in the office or shop to earn a decent living for his family. Nor does it mean he cannot drive a car or engage in any ordinary forms of activity. But it does mean that he can do nothing to bear fruit in the will of God apart from the Lord Jesus Christ. The believer cannot live the full

Christian life apart from the strength of God operating in him, that is to say, without "abiding in the vine."

As a master teacher, Jesus of Nazareth repeated His idea by further use of this figure of speech.

If a man abideth not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned (John 15:6).

Everyone has seen plants like that, even bushes and trees, when a certain portion was dead, dry, brown, withered up. Such sections could be still on the main stem or trunk. The gardener will come along and prune, or cut off, those dead twigs or branches and burn them. The truth is to be seen in the spiritual realm when the professing believer who is not abiding in Christ and bearing fruit to His glory is cast forth as a withered branch. Such a life shows no joy, no self-denial, no love for God or for others, no service — in short, no fruit.

The teacher now states this truth more positively.

If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you (John 15:7).

If the believer will put this trust in God to allow the word of God to abide in his heart so that he yields himself to conform to the Lord's guidance and will live entirely in the will of God, obeying the Scriptures in following the leading of the Holy Spirit, he will find that he can ask what he will and God will grant his request. Obviously this does not mean he can ask *anything, everything*. His petitions will be guided by the Spirit, if he is truly abiding in Christ. He will discover that what he wants will in some way have come to be what the Lord wants! What really makes the difference is whether the Lord is working in the heart of the believer according to His Word.

Jesus of Nazareth then goes on to point out that in bearing fruit the believer is doing just what God had in mind when He sent His Son to redeem the lost.

Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples (John 15:8).

It is the purpose of God to produce fruit in the lives of those who accept Christ Jesus. God is getting this result on earth, through believers, through all those who abide in Christ and let the Holy Spirit guide and inspire them. To say they will "bear much fruit" is just another way of expressing the full achievement of God's purpose, and "so shall ye be my disciples."

Full Joy

There are still deeper meanings in the fellowship with God through Christ Jesus as He Himself went on to point out:

As the Father hath loved me, so have I loved you: continue ye in my love. If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in his love. These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy

might remain in you, and that your joy might be full (John 14:9-11).

It would seem incredible to us that Christ Jesus would love believers as the Father loves Him. This is a remarkable tribute to the grace of Jesus Christ and lays a heavy responsibility upon the Christian to respond with all the dedication that he is able to give. Here is the source of whatever joy the believer may have: it is the joy of the Lord in his own heart: "that my joy might remain in you." This joy is not grounded in the response in service on the part of the believer, but in the fact that God in Christ loves him.

This wonderful truth means that Christians should trust completely in their Lord. They should look to God for building up in the faith and for guidance day by day and should yield their lives to Him. The result will be that their lives will manifest characteristics pleasing to God, such as ". . . love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance [self-control] . . .", which are the fruit of the Spirit outlined by Paul in Galatians 5:22, 23. The Lord will be pleased and satisfied, and thus the believer shall glorify the Father!

Jesus Prepares His Disciples

It is important for Christians to note how Jesus of Nazareth was preparing His disciples for living in this world without His bodily presence. Believers today live without seeing Him, except by the eyes of faith. They cannot see His face, nor hear His voice; they cannot reach out to touch Him, though they depend utterly upon Him. Because the Christian believes in His teaching and His promises as recorded in Scripture, and has the witness of the Holy Spirit in his own heart, he knows Jesus Christ is alive, loves him and speaks to him daily through His Word.

Certain definite guidelines for all believers were given in His teaching by Christ Jesus, and John has recorded those for all to read and to learn:

This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you. Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you. Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his Lord doeth: but I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you. Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain: that whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in my name, he may give it to you. These things I command you, that ye love one another (John 15:12-17).

Here we have a wonderful description of the way of life the Lord Jesus was setting forth for all who accept and seek to serve Him. There can be no question that He has this in mind for each believer who comes to Him. He wants His disciples to know this is His will so that each one can expectantly obey and see these very ways of living appearing in his own conduct. He leaves no doubt in any mind when He says explicitly, "This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you." Certainly this is a high standard, but it must be kept in mind this was never designed to be something that any human being could perform in his own strength. This whole manner of life depends on the indwelling Holy Spirit of God. When the believer "abides in" Christ and thus has Christ Jesus "abiding in" him, the Holy Spirit operates to take the things of Christ and "show" them unto the believer. In this way he is

motivated and activated to obey the will of God from within his own heart, and his conduct then will truly glorify God. This is a high standard.

"Love One Another"

By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another (John 13:35).

The word "love" should be closely noted for it has a variety of meanings. In the New Testament "love" is scarcely a matter of the *emotions* at all. It is more a certain *attitude* which governs thoughts, impulses, and actions towards others. As Christians strive to do things on behalf of their brothers, they seek to contribute to the blessedness and happiness of other Christians. It is not that any believer considers his fellow Christians to be perfect, but in any time of need the Christian comes to them to help, to bring encouragement or advice. The love of God fills the heart of the believer and makes him considerate of others so that one can say when he is so concerned for the experiences of others that he tries to help them he is actually showing them an expression of God's grace.

It is not easy to describe all that is meant by the word *love*. It cannot be seen with the physical eye, any more than one can see the wind which stirs the leaves of the trees. Love is a descriptive term to designate the way in which a person acts toward others. A mother expresses love for her child in the care she gives it; a young man gives things to the girl of his choice and thus shows his love; a husband loves his wife in the way he provides for her welfare, her needs, and by his consideration of her plans and desires, as well as his own. Any person can say "I love", but it is conduct that will disprove or prove the statement, even as it is demonstrated in action.

The basic meaning of "love" in the New Testament use of the word is to be interested in the welfare and the happiness of the person loved. To "love" anyone is to make the person's welfare a special concern, and to try to make him happy as he lives in this world. "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." This is what Jesus of Nazareth did for men. No one can give more than his life. That is the ultimate offering on the altar of love.

Friends of Jesus

Christ Jesus carried this discussion of relationship a step further. He told His disciples that they are no longer servants, but friends. They will be acting not only to obey Him, but they are to have fellowship with Him, for He says ". . . I have called you friends. . . ." He gives them to understand that He will keep them advised as to what He is going to do so that they can willingly cooperate with Him in getting His work done.

Not only did Jesus of Nazareth show His grace by emphasizing that His disciples were His friends, but He went further with a most amazing and challenging statement, "Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you. . . ." Their friendship with Him was not something they had achieved by their wisdom or strength, but something He had given to them. The truth was He sought them out, He chose His friends! This means He comes to believers today that He might have fellowship with them, and then ordains them to go out and become fruit bearers.

The word *ordained* does not refer to a church ceremony in which a minister or an elder is "ordained." The word as used here really means to *prepare*: to prepare for a given task or service. Christ Jesus told

them that He had not only chosen them but also prepared them for the very work He wanted them to do. And this is what He continues to do with His own: He prepares the field in which they work. He gives an assignment for each of them.

As one grows in grace and knowledge as a Christian, one becomes conscious of the fact that any good he has done was — and is — all the Lord's idea, not his own. It is not that the Christian gropes around blindly and seeks Christ; it is rather that the Lord seeks and finds the believers: "I have chosen you, and ordained you, that you should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain. . . ."

It is sometimes hard for a believer to grasp this, particularly when he is young in the Christian life. Perhaps it could be more readily seen if this statement were paraphrased using the name of *Tom Andrews*. (If by chance a real Tom Andrews reads this book, may he be blessed by this illustration in full measure!) Then the passage would read: "Tom Andrews did not choose Me, but I have chosen Tom Andrews and prepared him by ordaining him, that Tom Andrews might bear fruit, and that his fruit might remain: that whatsoever Tom Andrews asks of the Father in My name, He will do for Tom Andrews."

This statement implies so much more than the natural mind would expect. Doubtless it seems only right that any soul looking to God for blessing should strive in any and every possible way to do what would please God. So often we are inclined to think this means we should plan what we will do and design it to be what we think He would approve. No doubt the Lord would appreciate any such good intentions, but this is not what He wants us to do.

Actually our ideas are not good enough. We are not that good, nor that wise. Whatever we can think of is sure to be less than the will of God. The truth of the matter is that God who knows all much better than we could ever think, knows what would be best for us to do. And it is His way to guide us into doing what He wills for us to do. Thus what we do will be wise and good, and He can be pleased with our humble obedience.

In this statement the Lord is telling His disciples that in His grace He will prepare the situation for what He wants done, and He will by His Holy Spirit work in the heart of the believer who abides in Him "to will and to do of His good pleasure." Thus the result will be a blessing to all that are involved, and God the Father will be pleased and glorified.

In setting forth the truth of this vital relationship between the Lord and the believer, Christ Jesus pointed out also the hatred of the world toward Christians.

If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you (John 15:18-19).

This can express itself in many ways: the shop, the school, the office, even in the home, or among one's own circle of friends. James tells us that ". . . whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God" (James 4:4). But the same thing is true in reverse, it can be said that whosoever will be the friend of Jesus Christ will find enmity from the world active against himself.

In many ways this is truly astonishing. Any Christian led by the Holy Spirit will manifest such a manner of life as would actually be helpful to all men. The Christian will be unselfish and will actually seek to help other people. Yet he will often find that his conduct is misjudged and he can be accused of seeking his own advantage even in the service he renders to others.

How often it will happen that when a Christian is patient and meek in the home or among the family

she will be accused of being a hypocrite, or of seeking to win favor of others so that she can have her own way. The Christian may seek to have the community help the poor and will find that he is falsely accused of seeking his own advantage.

The Christian may not share in the worldly activities of the ungodly and find that he is accused of being proud or snobbish. He may observe the rules and regulations of his school and draw bitter criticism and ugly insinuations that he is seeking the personal favor of the teacher or the authorities.

We may remember that Joseph was hated by his brethren for no other reason than that he was honest and won the confidence of his father. His honesty made their deceit and dishonesty look so bad that they hated him enough to sell him as a slave.

Christ Jesus chooses believers out of the world, and calls them unto Himself. When John uses the term "the world" he is referring to the way of life which is based on human interests, desires and purposes. It is natural living in the will of man as over against spiritual living in the will of God. The world can be any place where people are living according to their own ideas and seeking their own good by their own efforts. Thus the world is composed, in this particular use of the word, of those who either oppose or are indifferent to the Gospel of Christ, and with all that is involved in His call and anointing for service. (I John 2:15-17).

What Believers Can Expect

Having described the close relationship that exists between the believer and His Lord, Christ Jesus went on to point out the treatment the believer may expect since he is now openly identified with Christ.

It is a sobering fact that Christ Jesus left the public proclamation of His love, His sacrifice, His redeeming grace to His disciples after His return to the Father. Therefore this is the task of all believers who accept Him and serve Him with faithful and loving hearts.

This will mean that the Christian is associated in the mind of the public with the name of Jesus Christ. And because of this the Christian will receive something of the reaction which the world has toward the Gospel.

He pointed out to them that

. . . The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also (John 15:20).

Thus He warned them that they need expect no better treatment than He had received and would receive, and He was facing Calvary in the immediate future. He went on to say that He was suffering rejection, and He warned His disciples that rejection would be their lot for the very reason that they were His disciples.

This is something Christians need always to keep in mind. If believers intend to be faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ in their personal relationship with Him, and faithful in their witnessing for Him before the world, they can expect that the same world that rejected Him will turn a deaf ear to their testimony and will reject them. This the people of the world will do, not because of the Christians themselves personally, but because these witnesses are setting forth the things of God, and it is true now as it was then, ". . . now they have no cloak for their sin" (verse 22). Hostile rejection and violent opposition are to be expected.

Rejection and Persecution

Despite the certainty of such rejection and such persecution the Gospel must be preached. Christ Jesus died for men that are lost. He came to do all that was necessary to reconcile sinners to God. Because this is true, the Gospel must be preached in all the world. Christ Jesus Himself gave the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20). Missionaries must go out everywhere and preach the good news that Jesus died for the sins of men.

It is most important to realize, to accept, and to act upon, the solemn fact that such preaching is what parents do in the home; what a preacher does in the pulpit and in his daily life; what a Sunday School teacher does in the Sunday School class and during the week. At all times and in every place Christians are either preaching the Gospel or they are hindering this truth about salvation. Some people who do not know Christ develop their opinion of Him by noting the actions and attitudes of His followers. A human being is born with the capacity for faith, just as he is born with an innate readiness to worship, but he needs to be told about the love of God as this is manifested in Jesus of Nazareth.

No doubt the reason many do not know Christ Jesus is that no one has ever told them the story of Jesus and His love. There is a real responsibility to witness upon each believer in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Teaching about Christ, telling the message of the Gospel, is not sufficient. There must be an invitation to come, to believe and to accept. It is not only the giving out of information, it is the personal and immediate concern that the person or persons listening shall respond and commit themselves to the Saviour, that is important. No one is truly preaching the Gospel unless his hand is outstretched with an invitation to sinners to come. Unless there is an urgent appeal in the message, until there is a sincere personal concern that the hearer should come and turn to the Lord, whether from a pulpit or in a Sunday School class, or in a casual encounter in school, office, barbershop, dress shop, the Gospel has not really been preached.

It has been noted above that Jesus warned His disciples that Christians who go out to tell of Jesus and His love must accept one fact: they will face opposition from certain elements of the world's population. The Christian is to be His witness, he is to share in His life, and so he can expect to find acceptance or rejection, even as He did and still does.

When people receive the Word of God, they are apt to consider the man preaching it a wonderful friend; if they reject the message, they are apt to speak of the preacher in the most unkind terms. This is equally true for the man in the pew who testifies to the grace of God in his life. He may find many new friendships in Christ, or he may find himself called a fanatic, or a man unworthy of friendship. The same is true with a parent who stands out in the midst of a family for the Word of God. A father may find his son or daughter opposing him, and even expressing hatred for him. The same thing can happen to a Sunday School teacher who is truly teaching the Word of God and attempting to lead pupils to know Christ as Saviour. The Lord Jesus has one word for all who suffer shame for His Name.

But all these things will they do unto you for my name's sake, because they know not him that sent me (John 15:21).

What Jesus was actually saying was that when people reject the Christian because of his witnessing, they are not really rejecting him, they are rejecting Christ: it will not be the believer personally, but what he is saying about Christ Jesus and the sin of the world. This makes the rejection not personal, but

actually spiritual, since it is inspired by an aversion to God.

Why Christians Are Rejected

In His explanation Jesus went still deeper into the explanation of the opposition of the world. He tells His disciples that because He had come, sinners now have "no cloak for their sin." This means they will hate to be brought out into the open, they will dislike having their opposition brought into the light. It is possible to find such a condition among church members, and even among teachers in the Sunday School. It is not at all unusual to have someone in a church who really seems to know the Lord show aversion and perhaps even resentment if another should venture to present deeper things of Christ to him. This hostility to Christ has a deep origin: "He that hateth me hateth my Father also." This is a useful insight for those who witness for Christ, for it helps to understand the conduct of others: it is when men hate Christ that they express that hatred in their attitude toward those who are witnessing for Him.

Jesus Himself understood very well why men hated Him!

If I had not done among them the works which none other man did, they had not had sin: but now have they both seen and hated both me and my Father (John 15:24).

One of the reasons why sinners will hate the witnessing Christian today is because the Gospel's power has been shown, and the Lord Jesus has been presented over and over again as the only Saviour, Keeper, and Friend. Christian witnessing has made a tremendous impression around the whole world. When people in pagan lands find Christ, the results are even more striking than here in our land. Such consequences are manifest to all, and put those who reject Christ in the position of being wrong in their attitude. This they resent. This is what Christians — and their Lord — must bear.