

A new year is a time for new beginnings, and many of us want to commit to working on and improving our relationship with the Lord. But what does that mean? We can decide that we want to develop new spiritual habits, or improve at this or that in our relationship with God.

John 15

- **Consider this simple question: How is your relationship with Jesus?**
- **How you answer this question speaks volumes.**
- Often the temptation is to answer in terms of things that we do. Bible study, prayer, church attendance, small group, serving, giving, the list goes on and on. That is how we describe our relationship with God.
 - Are any of these things bad? Of course not! In Scripture it is clear that as a result of our relationship with Jesus, we will live out his commands. Even Jesus says this in John 14, “if you love me you will keep my commandments.” However, that does not mean that our relationship with Jesus is based on the amount or quality of our activity for him.
- **Consider how it would sound if someone described their relationship with their significant other that way.** Assuming you have a good relationship, but you describe it by talking about how often you went on dates, how long you’ve gone without arguing, how many times you’ve been intimate, it would just sound like you were describing a business partnership, not a relationship!
- But then imagine if your eyes lit up when someone asked you about your relationship. And you could describe how they bless you and encourage you, you could point out specific things about their character and personality that you love and appreciate, it would sound like you actually knew them!

Main point: If you define your relationship with Jesus primarily in terms of activity, you have missed the point of what it means to have a love relationship with Jesus.

If activity is not what should primarily define our relationship with Jesus, then what should? The answer from Scripture is clear: abiding in a love relationship with Jesus. What does that look like?

Abiding in Christ

- Something that many people smarter than I am have spent years trying to figure out
- What it is NOT: trying to “earn” our way into God’s favor, filling up our lives with religious activity, filling our heads with doctrinal knowledge.
- **In Scripture that it boils down to this: knowing God.** Over and over in Scripture we see people from OT figures, to Jesus to Paul pleading that followers of Christ would know God, that God would reveal himself to his people, that his people would pursue the knowledge of God.
- **The foundation of abiding in Christ is knowing him and our place as children of God.**
- 1 John 2:28 - 3:2

28 And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming. **29** If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him. **1** See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. **2** Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears[a]

we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. **3** And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.

Some translations say that the God has “lavished” his love on us. From this foundation we see that the love of God has not only allowed you to have a relationship with him, but also to be called his children! And not “shrink from him in shame.” We know him! This is the kind of intimate relationship that you have been called to.

Further into 1 John there is a more detailed description of abiding in Christ:

- 1 John 4:7 - 21

7 Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. **8** Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. **9** In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. **10** In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. **11** Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. **12** No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. **13** By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. **14** And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. **15** Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. **16** So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. **17** By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world. **18** There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. **19** We love because he first loved us. **20** If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot^[a] love God whom he has not seen. **21** And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.

There is rich detail here on how we are to abide in Christ.

- Metaphor of the vine and the branches started by Jesus
 - The branches are not able to do anything of themselves
 - The branches receive their ability to grow from the vine
 - The vine provides nourishment and the ability to grow
 - The branches will die without the vine
 - The branches can try as hard as they can to produce fruit, but to no avail
- We can associate abiding with complacency. However, nowhere in Scripture is that the case! It is INCOMPATIBLE with Scripture to think we are commanded to head off on our own and participate in religious activity in order to better our relationship with God. It ALWAYS starts with abiding in him. And abiding is not a passive word! It means to accept and act in accordance with something.
- **So abiding in Christ means to accept that what Jesus says is true and act in accordance with that truth.**
 - Including the truth that we cannot produce fruit on our own! It is the work of the Spirit, which is how we can know that we are in Christ.
 - However, in our lives and the lives of others, it can be so easy to not trust that the Holy Spirit is working, or at least not working fast enough for us.

- Weaved throughout this metaphor of the vine and branches is the acknowledgement that as we abide in Christ, our heart and our behavior changes. Not because we are trying to earn favor with God, but simply because of the transforming power of our relationship with him! So the basis of our transformation, our ability to abide in Christ, is our relationship with Jesus.

Put simply, if you want to abide in Christ and experience a change in your heart, mind, and behavior, cultivate your affection for Jesus in 2019.

What is affection for Jesus? What does it look like?

- Affection for Jesus results in a stirring of your emotions
 - The truth of the gospel and what Christ has done for us should stir in us an emotional response
 - Yes this response needs to be based in truth
 - We do see truth in Scripture resulting in an emotional response
 - Sometimes our emotional response may not be based in truth, but emotions can exist alongside truth and can be used by the Spirit
 - Meditating on the truth of the gospel should result in an emotional response
 - We see this in the writings of Paul
 - Romans 11:33-36 is one example - context talking about God's plan of redemption specifically through the Hebrew people

33 Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

34 "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?"

35 "Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?"

36 For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

- All through Scripture there are examples of emotions walking hand in hand with the truth of God's word. Even sadness over sin and lost people.
 - Psalms
 - Paul at different points specifically Romans 9 wishing he would be accursed and his brother saved
 - Jesus in Matthew 23:37-39 where he grieves over Jerusalem

37 "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! **38** See, your house is left to you desolate. **39** For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

- Difference is these are deep emotions of the soul, orchestrated by the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5 fruits of the Spirit)
- **You want the fruits of the Spirit? Cultivate an affection for Jesus**

Affection for Jesus causes us to talk about him

- A concern is that if we are "just" abiding in Christ, how will ever share the gospel?
 - Consider how difficult it is to not share about the most important relationships in your life - they just come up!
 - We develop all kinds of "ways" to share the gospel because we don't know how to share out of a genuine love for the one who saved us

- Maybe it is “awkward” and “uncomfortable” because we don’t know anything about Jesus!
- **If we aren’t able to just talk about our relationship with God because it’s like talking about someone we don’t know.** We can read and read and study and have all the right answers but we don’t KNOW him. Maybe because we have never had him revealed to us

Affection for Jesus leads us to obey his commandments

- There is always a concern with this topic that there isn’t enough focus on what we should be doing. I believe this concern is misplaced and the reason we struggle to abide in Christ.
- Tim Keller quote - context he is talking about Pharisees - describes this tension better than I can:

There is, then, a great gulf between the understanding that God accepts us because of our efforts and the understand that God accepts us because of what Jesus has done. Religion operates on the principle “I obey - therefore I am accepted by God.” But the operating principle of the gospel is “I am accepted by God through what Christ has done - therefore I obey.” Two people living their lives on the basis of these two different principles may sit next to each other in the church pew. They both pray, give money generously, and are loyal and faithful to their family and church, trying to live decent lives. However, they do so out of two radically different motivations, in two radically different spiritual identities, and the result is two radically different kinds of lives. The primary difference is that of motivation. In religion, we try to obey the divine standards out of fear. We believe that if we don’t obey we are going to lose God’s blessing in this world and the next. In the gospel, the motivation is one of gratitude for the blessing we have already received because of Christ. While the moralist is forced into obedience, motivated by fear of rejection, a Christian rushes to obedience, motivated by a desire to please and resemble the one who gave his life for us.

- We are constantly trying to rush back to being motivated by fear (1 John 4)
- As long as we are motivated by fear and refuse to recognize our place as branches on the vine, we will struggle to live fruitful lives because we have no affection or loving relationship with Jesus.

How do we cultivate an affection for Jesus?

- Cannot be formulaic - not a one size fits all
- Example: some of you have decided to read the Bible in a year - good! I have many times. Maybe rethink the goal. Read the Bible in a year vs read the Bible FOR a year. Possible for you to religiously read the Bible every day and end this year in the same place you are now or worst
- Understand that the goal is a relationship - not checking off a box.
- Be honest with the Lord, and ask him (book of James)
- Use resources (experiencing God)
- Spend *time* with God, learning about him, getting to know him, not just a bunch of facts about him. Talk to him, let him minister to you. Take time to be quiet, to meditate, reading one passage of scripture might be more beneficial then reading an entire book of the Bible if the Lord uses it to minister to you
- Adjust your mindset from “how much can I do,” to focusing on the quality of what you do
- Stop being so busy that you don’t have time to have a relationship with the Lord. Stop medicating and lay yourself bare before God
- **Starting point: believe that the Lord wants a relationship with you.**

As we close...

We don't always think accurately about God, can be hard to believe that God wants a relationship with us based on what he has done not what we have done. One big stumbling block may be the OT. Tempted sometimes to think, well, yeah I know the truth but what about the OT? You know all those sacrifices and stuff. Sometimes we see the OT as Adam and Eve, skip ahead, Moses, skip ahead, Jesus. Seems like two different gods. **There is a richness in the OT that fills out our picture of God as desiring a relationship - does not detract from it**

Consider these excerpts from the book of Deut...one of the "stuffy" books of the bible. Listen to the kind of language God uses.
Deuteronomy 6:4-5, 9:6, 10:12-22

4 "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. **5** You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. (all encompassing, not just one thing or another)

6 "Know, therefore, that the Lord your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness, for you are a stubborn people. (grace)

12 "And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, **13** and to keep the commandments and statutes of the Lord, which I am commanding you today for your good? **14** Behold, to the Lord your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it. **15** Yet the Lord set his heart in love on your fathers and chose their offspring after them, you above all peoples, as you are this day. **16** Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn. **17** For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. **18** He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. **19** Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt. **20** You shall fear the Lord your God. You shall serve him and hold fast to him, and by his name you shall swear. **21** He is your praise. He is your God, who has done for you these great and terrifying things that your eyes have seen. **22** Your fathers went down to Egypt seventy persons, and now the Lord your God has made you as numerous as the stars of heaven. (love relationship based on the heart)

This is not the language of a God that doesn't care about a relationship with his people. It is the language of a God that cares deeply about a personal love relationship with those he has called.

Hosea 11:1-10 - Hosea a picture of God's love and faithfulness to his people despite their rebellion

1 When Israel was a child, I loved him,
and out of Egypt I called my son.
2 The more they were called,
the more they went away;
they kept sacrificing to the Baals
and burning offerings to idols.
3 Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk;
I took them up by their arms,

but they did not know that I healed them.
4 I led them with cords of kindness,[a]
with the bands of love,
and I became to them as one who eases the yoke on their jaws,
and I bent down to them and fed them.
5 They shall not[b] return to the land of Egypt,
but Assyria shall be their king,
because they have refused to return to me.
6 The sword shall rage against their cities,
consume the bars of their gates,
and devour them because of their own counsels.
7 My people are bent on turning away from me,
and though they call out to the Most High,
he shall not raise them up at all.
8 How can I give you up, O Ephraim?
How can I hand you over, O Israel?
How can I make you like Admah?
How can I treat you like Zeboiim?
My heart recoils within me;
my compassion grows warm and tender.
9 I will not execute my burning anger;
I will not again destroy Ephraim;
for I am God and not a man,
the Holy One in your midst,
and I will not come in wrath.

**It has ALWAYS been about the heart. God has ALWAYS been merciful in spite of sin.
Salvation has ALWAYS been by faith. God has ALWAYS desired a love relationship with
his people.**

What is your response?