

The Abiding Life

The Only path to Peace and Power in the Life of a Christian

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As we start a new year, we ask ourselves: what is it that we need to do this year? What are our most important goals for 2018? And as believers, we want to do great things for God. You're probably familiar with Bruce Wilkerson. He wrote the worldwide best seller "The Prayer of Jabez" and built the ministry "Walk Through the Bible." Well, at one point in his life he was working very hard in the ministry but just felt empty inside. He couldn't figure out what was wrong.

Dr. Charles Stanley had a similar experience. At one time he was trying to build a church in Florida and found that the harder he worked the smaller the church became. And the same thing happened to his son Andy, who discovered that, after college, his life had become a failure, and he couldn't figure out why.

So here you have these three very spiritual guys who found themselves baffled as to what to do. What exactly was the problem?

Today we live in a hectic world. As soon as we wake up, we go to our computer to see what deals are still alive, what's happening in the world of finance and politics, what our friends are saying or not saying about us. With the Internet and technology, the world is going 24 hours a day.

The Internet Fuels Four Basic Fears

The internet fuels our four basic fears:

- i. Rejection
- ii. Failure
- iii. Poverty
- iv. Death

Comparison - the Enemy of Contentment

Comparison is the enemy of contentment. And yet with all the speed and delivery of information, psychologists tell us we are the most anxious people in the history of the world. As one young extremely successful businessman recently told me, "Anxiety is controlling my life." He has an enormous amount of money and yet it does not bring him peace.

Internet Addiction

Teenagers spend 9 hours a day on the internet. Today they're referred to as "screenagers." They can instantly access news, music, Facebook, social media and all the data contained in a library. And yet teenage suicides are at a 40 year high. Children who are cyberbullied are three times more likely to commit suicide. Yesterday two of Apple's largest investors complained about the detrimental effect the iPhone is having on children and teenagers in what is being described as "device addiction" and are recommending tech-free days to spend as a family. This morning the Wall Street Journal reported that Facebook acknowledged for the first time the negative consequences of time spent on its service, saying consuming information on Facebook leads many users to report feeling worse. Facebook's problems are so severe, Mark Zuckerberg has dedicated the next year to saving Facebook.

The Fruitless Christian

Even Christians are at the end of their rope. Research shows that half of all Christians have little or no fruit in their Christian lives. Another 1/3 bear some fruit ... and only about 5% bear a lot of fruit.

I had a very good pastor friend who spent most of his ministry in disciplining men. Of the hundreds that he has disciplined, less than 1% had a daily quiet time with God.

Ephesians 6 says, "For we are not fighting against flesh and blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places."

Clearly, these rulers and authorities under the control of Satan have decided to attack us by keeping us busy, by keeping us preoccupied with the things of this world.

The Bible says, "Do not love this world nor the things it offers you, for when you love the world, you do not have the love of the Father in you. For the world offers only a craving for physical pleasure, a craving for everything we see, and pride in our achievements and possessions. These are not from the Father, but are from this world. And this world is fading away, along with everything that people crave. But anyone who does what pleases God will live forever."

In the parable of the sower, our Lord explains why many of us bear no fruit: "The seed that fell among the thorns represents those who hear God's word, but all too quickly the message is crowded out by the worries of this life and the lure of wealth, so no fruit is produced."

In the Bible, James chastises the businessman, saying "Come now, you who say, today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit. Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away."

Jesus said a man's life does not consist of the abundance of his possessions; He encouraged us to be rich toward God. In the parable of the rich man who was building bigger barns for himself, God said, "...this very night your life is required of you, now who will own what you have prepared? So is the man who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God."

God's Answer to the Problem (With Examples)

As Christians, we have the right answers. And yet so often we find that something's wrong, that something seems to be missing, something we can't quite put our finger on. Like Bruce Wilkinson, and Charles and Andy Stanley, we seem to be doing the right things. So what's the problem? Well, these men discovered the answer.

When Bruce Wilkison first started his ministry, he relied completely on Christ and spent hours alone with Him, but as his ministry grew he became a highly skilled speaker and began to rely on himself rather than God. He spent less time alone with God and was not abiding in Christ. The light bulb moment came when a friend of his explained to him what was happening. Bruce immediately started getting up at 5 a.m. to pray and read the Bible and maintain a journal ... in short, he began to abide in Christ. Soon after that, he bore fruit: he wrote the book "The Prayer of Jabez," which has helped Christians all over the world.

Meanwhile Dr. Charles Stanley was given the book "Hudson Taylor's Spiritual Secret," which explains in detail what happens when you leave your first love, Christ, and begin to rely on yourself for ministry and life. Since that time Dr. Stanley's entire ministry has been to preach the power of Christ living in our bodies and the importance of spending quality time with our Savior.

Dr. Stanley gave Andy the Hudson Taylor book, and it also changed Andy's life and the direction of his ministry. Today, Andy readily admits he must abide in Christ to receive the power of the Holy Spirit for his ministry. So yes, there was something missing in each of these examples, a common thread.

When we come to Christ, we know we are depending completely on Jesus to save us ... we are justified only by Him and we are, mercifully, given His righteousness. After

that, the Bible says, sanctification takes place. But something happens and we mistakenly believe we have to live the Christian life under our own power. Even the apostle Paul was guilty of this, as he explains in 2 Corinthians 1:8b-10a, "We were crushed and overwhelmed beyond our ability to endure, and we thought we would never live through it. In fact, we expected to die. But as a result, we stopped relying on ourselves and learned to rely only on God, who raises the dead. And He did rescue us from mortal danger."

The Fruitful Christian Abiding In Christ

This brings us to John 15:5, where Jesus says: "I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who abide in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing."

The Lord goes on to describe four levels of bearing fruit:

- i. No fruit
- ii. Little fruit
- iii. More fruit
- iv. Much fruit.

Verse five of John 15 describes the fourth level, much fruit, and explains how to get this level - by abiding in Christ. As Galatians 2:20 says, Christ must become your life. The two of you are in perfect union.

Andrew Murray says that one of the requirements of abiding is to recognize your total and complete weakness apart from Christ. He says abiding is for the weak because it is perfectly suited to their feebleness. It is not the doing of some great thing; no, it is simply weakness entrusting itself to a Mighty One to be kept - the unfaithful one casting self on One who is altogether trustworthy and true. Abiding in Him is not work that we have to do as the condition for enjoying His salvation, but a consenting to let Him do all for us, and in us and through us.

This is the key to fruitfulness: abiding in Him. If we look to Christ's life, as our supreme example, we see the importance of God being central. We see the critical importance of spending time with Him. The distractions of the world, particularly things in our time like email, the Internet and Facebook, are and have always been designed to draw us out of His presence. As in the parable, the cares and concerns of "the world" choke out the Living Word.

This is not to say that these are necessarily bad things in and of themselves. In their proper place, they can be beneficial. The ability to reach others in remote areas, or for church members from all over the world to meet in one place come to mind, for

example. But everything - everything - in this material reality that we call life must be ultimately subjected to Him, to His presence as being our central reality. We cannot bear fruit apart from the vine; it's as impossible as a grape branch lying separately on the ground sprouting grapes. Ultimately, it's not about us. We are channels for the awesome power of our God.

Our lives can be likened to a garden. If you plant a tree, a sapling, in a garden, do you have the power to make it grow? No, only to be a good gardener, to tend the soil, to create an environment, an atmosphere, that is conducive to the growth of the tree. And that is our purpose. We are stewards of our own gardens, tasked with fostering the conditions in our own lives that will allow God's power to be made manifest. And we do this by abiding in Him.

Looking again to Christ as our ultimate example - He was in perpetual submission to and communication with the Father. As we read in Mark 1:35, "Before daybreak the next morning, Jesus got up and went out to an isolated place to pray." This was His custom, and His life was the ultimate example of fruitfulness.

Consider someone like Brother Lawrence, a 17th century French monk. As a poor dishwasher and cook in a monastery kitchen, Brother Lawrence experienced so much peace and joy in God's presence that people were drawn to him. He developed a habitual, silent, and secret conversation of the soul with God as he went about his business. The idea is to work while praying and pray while working. In other words, everything matters to God, and every moment can be devoted to him; there's no need to separate the sacred and the secular. Brother Lawrence, through his example of abiding in Christ, has blessed countless people for more than 300 years.

And as we saw earlier with the Apostle Paul when he was "crushed and overwhelmed" and learned to rely only on God, abiding in Christ becomes critically important when tragedy strikes in our lives.

When I was 19 years old, my brother and best friend, Jimmy, was killed in automobile accident. I was devastated ... our precious Savior came to me in my despair and I experienced the unlimited riches of Christ. I have here a letter that I wrote my wife, Billa, 53 years ago, one week after he was killed. I share this not to claim any great spiritual capacity in myself, but to show the power of God as a young 19 year old faces the worst possible tragedy.

January 25, 1965:

"Things don't always work out the way you want them to. However, this is no time to become sad or discouraged. For truly now I know who I am and where I'm going, and, more important of all, I have peace in my heart. For you see, I have entered that inner circle with My God and Master. I have prayed and searched for Him with all my heart,

and He has heard. As a matter of fact, He sits with me at this very moment, waiting for me to go to His house with Him.

“Please don’t misunderstand me. The hurt, sadness, emptiness are still here, but now I’m not facing them alone. They are fighting a losing battle, for surely, ‘If God be for us, who can be against us.’ Romans 8:31

“Billa, nothing else matters. Nothing will ever come first in my life again. I must follow Him at all costs. For even as I write you now, my seconds on earth are ticking away as are yours and everyone else’s. We must not be conformed to this world but transformed to the next world. I must abandon all the follies of this life and follow my Christ. I mustn’t let a day go by without talking secretly with Him and reading His words of comfort.”

The Commitment Required

So as we look to the new year, as people traditionally come up with their New Year’s resolutions, we find that we really only need to have one goal, one all-encompassing resolution, and that is to abide in Him. While it’s fine to have goals, what are they worth apart from Him? How great is a ministry, however large, if God is not behind it, does not permeate it, is not leading it moment by moment? If His power is not flowing through it? It’s of no worth at all, of no ultimate, eternal significance, about as useful as a lone branch on a heap, only good for burning in a fire. No, our one ultimate goal must be to surrender to Him daily. To delight in Him. To abide in His presence. And as we do, He will produce the fruitfulness in our lives, while we, His humble servants, watch in gratitude and awe.

In a recent trip to India, a missionary asked me how it would make me feel if my son had a problem and I found out he went to everyone but me for a solution ... that is the way our Heavenly Father feels when we go to everyone but Him with our problems. And yet, the Bible points out that the world and all it contains belongs to Him. The Bible teaches us to go to God with every issue we have in our lives.

When Solomon became king, there was a tremendous celebration followed by a beautiful prayer from Solomon. It was clear Solomon loved the Lord and God asked him what he wanted from Him. Solomon said he was God’s servant and wanted to serve His people. Yet he felt so inadequate that he felt like a little boy who did not know what to do. He prayed for wisdom and a discerning heart. God told Solomon that He would grant his request. But God also said that since Solomon did not ask for wealth, a long life and the destruction of his enemies. God would also grant those things as well. We need to learn to pray prayers like Solomon prayer that move God’s heart. When we delight ourselves in Him, He changes our desires so that our desires match God’s desires. We become servants created to serve God’s purposes.

The decision to abide in Christ is the decision we must make not only with the coming of each New Year, but with the coming of each New Day.

I am challenging myself, along with you, to reprioritize our lives in the next 12 months and meet the goal of abiding in Christ. And when we accomplish this goal of abiding in Him, we should be able to see the fruit of our lives reflected in our answers to the following questions:

What role is God playing in my life?

Have I grown this year?

What fruit can I celebrate?

What have I learned this year?

What do I know that I didn't know a year ago?

What do I believe that I didn't a year ago?

How have I changed?

In what ways did God stretch and grow my faith this year?

What prayers did I see God answer this year?

What did I sacrifice this year?

Who is closer to Jesus this year because of my influence?

What bold steps of faith or leaps of faith did I take this year?

In what ways did I see God make me more generous and giving this year?

Are you willing to commit to memorize a verse a day (or even a week) and pray that verse back to God each night? The Bible is the language of God and He loves to hear it.

Can you see specific instances where the fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22 are being displayed in your life: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control?

Are you maintaining a journal of insights God is showing you as a result of abiding in Christ?

Let's abide in Christ and be amazed at the fruitfulness of our lives.