

# How We Grow<sup>1</sup>

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*Grow Part 4 / John 15.1-17*

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*July 24, 2016*

## ***Move to Two Services Announcement***

Good morning Mercy Church! First let me say welcome to you if you are new here with us! One big announcement for you: Starting next week we will be shifting to two worship services at 9am and 11am. Same thing happens at both services. Mercy Kids will be up and running at both and we have the same service at 9 & 11. All along our plan was to move to two services in mid august when our college students came back and instead we are moving that timeline up about 3 weeks. Here's the great thing: Moving to two services is truly a mission minded move for us as it allows us to expand our capacity to reach people by opening up more seats. Last week we literally had the last row of chairs we could fit in the back of the room and it was full. Which is fun up here, but for our guests who are new,

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<sup>1</sup> The core of this message is the fruit of many years under the mentorship & teaching of J.D. Greear. I've attempted to cite his work specifically in portions but it is best to assume he is responsible for anything good in this message.

that isn't a great experience for them. We want them to feel loved and opening seats allows us to do that.

But I'm really excited because it expands our capacity to involve you in the life of our church. This is a fantastic opportunity for you who are new here to consider jumping in and serving on a volunteer team. We've had over 50 first time guest families in the last 5 weeks so I know there are plenty of you who are kind of watching and wondering if this is the church for you. You will never fully feel connected until you jump in and serve somewhere.

- Means this is a GREAT time for you to jump into volunteer team.
- [mercycharlotte.com/serve](http://mercycharlotte.com/serve)

## **Introduction**

We are in the middle of our series through John 13-17. And today I think is, in a lot of ways, the title track to the series. Because today we are going to look at one of the most important passages in the bible for talking about how people change. This is a question on everyone's mind: Is real change, real growth possible? And if so how does it happen? People want to grow & change

\* I want to get better at softball. I'm playing on a team and we are the bad news bears of charlotte city league. Main reason is we can't hit. I want to grow as a softball hitter. Because that's what my life has come to. Caring about city league softball. So what do I do? I go to the batting cage. And sheepishly ask if they have a softball cage. For most

things in life, if we want to change or grow, there is a book we can buy or a lesson we can take to help us grow. But when it comes to the spiritual things in life, which set the pace for everything else, I've found people want to see change, want to grow, but don't know how. More self-help books out there than you can fathom, but nothing soul satisfying that leads to real lasting change.

In the passage we are in today, John 15.1-11, Jesus is going to take us down to the depths of how people really change. In explaining this to you I want you to know that today will be centered around one of the core, driving truths Mercy Church is building itself on.

If you've been around a while and feel like you've heard this before, good! Because this is at the core of all we do and if we are going to have a unified culture as a church family, we need a working understanding of this.

**Here is the big idea: The gospel is not just how we begin in Christ, it is also how we grow in Christ.**

In the gospel are all the resources necessary for Christian growth. One of the ways we talk about it here is that you will never grow beyond the gospel, but instead you grow deeper into the gospel. For most people, the gospel is the front door of Christianity. They prayed a prayer and entered into the house and left the door behind.

Today I want you to see why the gospel is not just the door; the gospel is the whole house. And the more you live in the

gospel, and make your home in it, the more you grow as a Christian. This truth will take your entire life to fully embrace but will lead you to a closer, more joy-filled relationship with God than you ever thought possible. Let's get into it.

Now here's the deal. In this passage Jesus takes a really deep truth and wraps it in a metaphor. It's like a holy bible corndog. Here's the thing...we gotta walk through the passage and uncover this truth about how people grow. But you have to hang with me. Because its easy to get lost in this metaphor. We'll walk through it and pull out key truths along the way. Then put them all together at the end to make it really clear how we grow & change.

John 15.1-17<sup>2</sup>

[1] "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. [2] Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.

Jesus opens this passage with a gardening metaphor to talk about our relationship with him and with God. It's the

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<sup>2</sup> The structure and many thoughts in the exposition of this passage are sourced from my friend and mentor J.D. Greear whose teaching through this passage nine years ago revolutionized my view of the gospel. That teaching and more is captured in his book *Gospel* which articulates the transformative power of the gospel better than I ever could.

zoomed out picture for the rest of the passage. God the father is taking away fruitless branches and pruning fruitful ones. The point Jesus is going to make is that our purpose, as the branches, is to bear fruit. That's where this passage is heading.

Natural follow up questions you may have are: what in the world is "spiritual" fruit & how do I "bear" it! Great questions guys. In fact, an excellent way to read your bible is to do it with pen and paper beside you and write out questions you don't know the answer to. I told a guy I led to Christ years ago to do that with the first chapter of John. He came back with 2 pages single-spaced of questions on the first 10 verses. Ummmm, let's read Mark. But he learned the bible this way! Ok, back to your questions:

First what is this fruit: We know from other places in the bible that Spiritual fruit is the product of the Spirit of God working in you and it produces love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self control (Gal 5.22). Can you imagine if those were all yours all the time? Now how do you bear it? Now that question Jesus is going to answer through the rest of our passage today.

[3] Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.

This "clean" doesn't mean bathing, The word means to cleanse or strip away. <sup>3</sup>He's talking about pruning. He's saying his word has already taken a lot of bad things away from them that would keep them from bearing fruit. For example, by showing them their need for forgiveness he's pruned away their pride.

All of our lives are the vinedresser (The father) pruning away useless pursuits we've given ourselves to. Pruning away what we love more than him that will choke the life out of us so that we will depend more on him and bear more good fruit. And pruning can hurt! Some of you have experienced the pain of God's pruning in your life. But the good gardener only removes those things which are a loss to keep or a gain to lose. If you've ever seen a rose bush just after it's been pruned...it looks so cut down you might mistake it for dead. But the gardener was just removing things that would keep it from really growing. Some of you need to know that is what God is doing in your life right now. Some of your friends have been praying for God to prune that boyfriend. He would be a gain to lose cause he ain't bringing you any closer to Jesus.

[4] Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me.

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<sup>3</sup> Strong's exhaustive concordance 2513 "Katharos." In Thayer's Greek Lexicon

Here is the heart of it. Our first question was **how do we bear fruit?** The answer is one word. The key word of this whole passage and the key word to Christian growth. **Abide.** And it appears 10 times in verses 4-10. Jesus is trying to get a point across. Abide means to “remain in” or to “make your home in” something. It is where you rest. Jesus is saying “make yourself at home” in his love for you.

The branch has no life on its own. Its life source is the vine. Apart from the vine, it is just a stick. It needs the vine. It is only when you graft your life into Jesus - when he becomes the full source of your life - that you will start to grow. The key to growing in the Christian life is resting in Christ like a branch rests its growth securely on the vine it's attached to. Watch...

[5] I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

Again, abide in him. That's how we bear fruit. Sprinkled into the next few verses are a few ways we abide in him. This isn't going to be as formulaic as you want it to be, but it is really good. I want to show you **how you abide in Christ: You graft your life onto Jesus so that you are wholly dependent on him for strength and for satisfaction.** See the vine metaphor simplifies the human heart we think is so complex. The branch has ONE source of life. The vine. The vine is primary. No vine, no branch. The branch grows as the vine supplies it. Is your life in any way marked by a dependence on God's love for you? Is the gospel something

that gives you daily joy? Or is your life dependent on other things for acceptance? For soul-level satisfaction? For joy? Is your career more life giving to you than the gospel? Sports? Relationships? What makes you come alive? Until it is Christ...you will, he says, do nothing.

We'll get back to this in a minute because this is huge. First, Jesus gives a pretty concerning warning. Listen to this:

[6] If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

I can't not talk about this because if I skip it our community group leaders will call me out. Cause you will ask them about it this week. Here's the thing. In Verse 2 he said **“Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away.”** Then here he says anyone that does not abide...since abiding is how you bear fruit...is thrown away. So, can a person who is in Christ then somehow be thrown out? The short answer is NO.

The key is to realize that in the Gospel of John there are *believers* who are not true believers (2:23). Judas is an example. He is with Jesus, but he doesn't really believe Jesus is the Son of God. He doesn't lean on him. And his true beliefs show up when he betrays Jesus. There are other “disciples” in John who turn out not to be true disciples. They are “in me,” but not truly “in me.” This was a “belief” that provided a kind of attachment to Jesus, but not a true

one. They weren't true disciples. How do you know if you are truly his disciple? John 8.31 – if you abide in my word, you are truly my disciple. *Abide* in him. Look at verse 7.

[7] If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. [8] By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.

Abiding is the key. The key to truly being a disciple is to abide. And when you do, you will prove to be true disciples (v.8). This is another sign you are abiding in Christ: You desire the word of God

What that means for letting the words of Jesus abide in us is that we do not just read the Bible, and do not just memorize and meditate on the Bible, and do not just listen to preaching and teaching from the Bible. It means that we seek the words of Jesus as living words — words that come not in the abstract but come from the heart and on the lips of a living Person whom we love more than any other person in the world.<sup>4</sup> Do you desire the word of God? When you do, it starts to become life giving to you

[9] As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love.

Set your eyes on that. That statement is one you & I will never fully comprehend but will bring you more and more

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<sup>4</sup> John Piper “if my words abide in you” sermon preached at Bethlehem Baptist church January 3, 1993.

joy the more you dwell on it. Think about the great love the Father has for the Son! We cannot comprehend it. Parents I want you to think about how much you love your kids. That love, maybe the most powerful earthly love there is, is just a pale reflection of his love. We don't have the capacity to love as fiercely or as deeply as God loves. And Jesus says that love is the love he has given to us. So we are to make our home in *that*.

I think this is the best place to pause and reinforce what abiding *means*. We've said it a lot and we are looking at signs you are doing it, but I want to be clear on what it means. It is easy to sound like a Christian-y word. We've already defined it right? He's saying REST, to make your home in, his love for you.

This is, for so many, the hardest part of Christianity for people to learn and experience. You don't earn God's love, you rest in it. God's acceptance is not a reward for a job well done following his laws, his acceptance of you is a gift freely given to you!

So many of us, especially Christians, think we become righteous in God's sight by acting a certain way. Which makes sense. If I obey God's commands, Then God now owes me. But the gospel doesn't work that way. The gospel says you will never do enough to be acceptable before God. Because if you break just one command, you've broken all of them. Even one sin has permanently stained all of you forever. People think, I obey 95% of God's commands. That's an A at any school. And that's how most people view their standing with God. They need to do well enough, be

morally good enough, to get a passing grade. Then God will accept them. But that's not the gospel.

Think more of a glass of milk. If I were to hand you a glass of milk and say its 95% milk, only 5% urine, would you drink it? Outside of a few teenage guys, no. Because the little bit of urine has spoiled the whole thing. Same idea with your sin. Which is what makes the gospel such good news. Though you are entirely ruined and unworthy of God's acceptance, he *gives* it to you not according to your performance, but based on what Christ did for you! Good way to remember GRACE. God's Righteousness at Christ's Expense.

He says to make your home in that! Rest in that. And when you do, his life will start to flow into you and you will start to change from within.

See in the NT believing rightly always precedes behaving rightly! Ok on to verse 10. Told you it builds...

[10] If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.

Here's the next **sign you are abiding in God's love: You obey his commands**. At first glance, this seems like a contradiction. "Spence You just said all that stuff about resting in the gospel is the way to get God's grace and now it sounds like Jesus says we have to work for it." That

abiding in him is conditional on keeping his commandments. What's the deal?

Well look closely. He's not contradicting himself. He's not saying abiding in his love is a reward for keeping the commandments, he's saying keeping the commandments is an access point into his love. In fact several verses in this passage bring that out:

Verse 7 – Commanding his followers to read & memorize their bible & pray. Now, is he saying that when we do that God will love us more? No. Christ has already done everything to fully earn God's love for you. There is no way you can add to it with your puny exercises.

But, when you read the bible and pray, you are reminded of God's love for you. You start to think on it again. You start to make your home in it again.

The way my pastor used to say it is that **the challenge isn't earning God's love, the challenge is living in constant awareness of God's love**. It's living constantly out of God's love for you.

Does that make sense? Because it brings up a huge point. The commands of God do not have power in themselves. But are more like power lines connected to the power source: which is God's love. So the more you obey, the more you are connected back to God's love for you, which is where the power for real change and growth comes from.

V 12 – love each other. How? As I have loved you. Loving the other is an access point back to experiencing again the love of God for us.

V 13 – be generous. How? Like Jesus was generous for you and gave up his life. Universal principle you all have heard: tis more blessed to give than to receive. But let's say I come into an extra \$300... I instantly go into a battle. I could give this to someone I know who needs it, or to God's work through the church, OR I could get another ipad because the 50 screens we have in our house aren't enough. In that moment I say "you know what, Jesus commanded me to be generous." And so I give, contrary to my desires. But as I give, my desires start to change and I start to love generosity more! There is something about giving that God uses as a means of grace in your life!

So the commands, daily quiet time, generosity, community, they have no power in themselves but they act like power lines that connect us to the power source...God's love for us. And your desire to know & experience God's love for you *more* will compel you to obedience. This is called gospel-motivated obedience and it is a sign you are abiding in God's love for you.

Now watch this final step in this thought progression we've been observing...

[11] These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

What is the point? JOY! I'm telling you these things....what are these things? To Abide in me...and how do you abide in me? Rest in what I've done for you and obey what I'm calling you to. And when you rest in me and obey my commandments what will you have?

Right here he says you will have JOY! Here's my question: would you describe your life right now as joyful? Not just happiness but a deep sense of soul satisfaction, peace, delight that is unshakable come what may? Is that you? Or are you tired, or apathetic, or frustrated, or angry as a Christian? Now I know here in the south we put on our smiley face when we come to church so I won't know the state of your soul when I talk with you, but is your life marked by deep joy?

Our College & Missions director Scott said this verse has been the single most influential verse on his life & ministry the past year. Here's why: for a lot of Christians, they would not describe their Christian life as joyful. Many would describe it as hard. And far too often I see Christians get "tired" in their faith. Scott told me he encounters a lot of college students that were just not experiencing any joy following Christ and so he began to ask them this question:

**"What step of radical obedience to Jesus have you taken recently?"** Here's what he found: the Christians who were struggling with joy were the ones who weren't obeying Christ's commands. They weren't sharing their faith, they weren't being generous, they weren't serving their friends or loving the poor.



Do you see the connection? Because it seems counterintuitive unless you see the connection to abiding. The commands of God are power lines back to the source of God's love for you. So when you obey Christ, you are connecting back to that power source and *you* will change. Your heart will change.

Then, you will bear fruit. And what is the fruit? Well the fruit of the Spirit abiding in you is **Galatians 5.22-23** [22] But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, [23] gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

This sounds like the life you want! And what Jesus is saying here is obedience to God's commands will connect you to God's love that you are abiding in and will increase your joy! **If you obey his commands in response to his love, not to earn his love, you will find joy.**

Listen, some of the most miserable people in the world are disobedient Christians.

This is why I stand up here and implore you to uncompromising obedience to Christ. It's not because God is a taskmaster you need to fear. It's because I want you to finally find joy in Christ! And that JOY comes when you first rest in what he did for you and then live as he instructs you!

To have joy you need to rest in the gospel. That rest will lead you to obedience. When you obey you will have joy! And that will lead you back to resting in Christ!

I want you to see what this means for how you experience real change. There are two ways people try to use religion to change. It's the difference between Mechanical and organic growth. Let me explain.

Mechanical growth is Growth by external compulsion: I see this often in Counseling: The man who only changes to make his wife stay around.

- His actions are motivated by Fear: doesn't want wife to leave him
- Pride: doesn't want the stigma of divorce
- Desire for something else: a stable home.
- In all these things, he is not loving her, he is loving himself

Religious activity can be motivated by all those same things: fear of punishment, pride, desire for blessing.

It may look like love for God, but it is not. And as soon as you remove the external pressures, you go back to the way you were.

We're talking about bearing fruit right? Well, how do you get an apple tree to bear fruit?

The mechanical way: I can get a bunch of apples from the store and duct tape and go tape those apples to the dead apple tree branches. Boom. That's apples on an apple tree right? The tree is showing fruit right? Who wants to eat those after a couple days? If in your head you have a dead tree with no leaves and rotting apples dangling by duct tape...good. It looks absurd doesn't it?



That is exactly how you look to God when you try to get busy with religious activity without every changing from within. You are a dying tree trying to mask your internal death by taping “fruit” onto your branches. So that hopefully the vinedresser will think you are a worthy tree. And soon enough those fruits will fall off and you’ll go back to the way you were. And some of you have been taping dead fruit onto your dead branches for a long time and you are tired. Time to stop.

The gospel changes you in a totally different way. Organically (that’s the other kind of growth). It gives you life within. The gospel changes your desires. • How? By abiding in His love. • The gospel saturates you with the reality of His love. Specifically, the announcement about what Christ has done for you, so that the desires of your heart change. Loving God flows out of your nature. • 1 John 4:19, “We love Him because He first loved us.” Then like a living apple tree, you will bear beautiful delicious granny smith apples. Because no other apple compares. The internal life of the tree produces fruit. That’s organic growth.

I want to finish today introducing you to a tool that I believe will help you live with a gospel-motivated heart in your daily life. My old pastor and mentor J.D. Greear taught this tool to me years ago and it has really helped me. It is called the Gospel Prayer and for a couple of years I prayed

this every single day. I encourage you to pray it daily as you are beginning to understand the freeing power of the gospel

#### Gospel Prayer<sup>5</sup>

**In Christ there is nothing I could do to make you love me more, nothing I have done to make you love me less**

This is resetting your heart against a works righteousness. And I need this all the time. I’m so quick to slip back into a mindset where I am trying to earn God’s approval. WR constantly reappears in our hearts; we’re like a car severely out of alignment that always veers into the ditch of performance Christianity. We have to continually remind ourselves of the gift righteousness of the gospel so that we think in line with the gospel. Unless your hands are on the wheel, you will drift back into performance mentality.

#### **You are all I need today for everlasting joy**

This part of the prayer fights against our desire for lesser gods. We might know “God loves us” in our heads, yet we still pursue other things for satisfaction and security. Is the love of God the weightiest thing in your life? Does it hold more value than anything else to you? Have you found that joy we are talking about? John Calvin said the human heart is an idol factory. Which means we keep coming up with things we need besides God

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<sup>5</sup> This tool created by Greear, J.D. This tool first came as a teaching in a sermon series in 2011 at Summit Church and later in his book *Gospel*.

to satisfy us. Money, relationships, reputation, approval, and they don't ever ultimately satisfy so we go to the next thing

I want everyone to like me. I do. I hate the idea of you not liking me. I've told you I'm messed up. Nowhere does the Bible say pastors aren't sinners too. This part of the prayer reminds me that I don't need your approval for my joy. I have Christ's approval! That's all I need! This is what so many of you need. The cure for sin and for suffering is abiding in the deep, deep love the God of the universe has lavished upon YOU.

#### **As you have been to me so I will be to others**

This begins to redirect my eyes beyond myself. I want to be generous, radically generous, to others because I have experienced radical generosity. Courtney and I have a goal that we will build a culture in our family of being radically generous. In fact, more important than a savings goal to us is a giving goal. We want to one day give a large amount away at one point and we want to give away a lot over the course of our lifetime. Because we know we aren't here to hoard God's blessings but to leverage them to bless others! I hope that will be Mercy Church. I hope we are generous not because we are commanded to be but because we want to be! When we see a need, I hope you jump to meet it. And the way to have that kind of heart is to abide in the generosity God has given to you.

Lastly: **As I pray, I'll measure your compassion by the cross and your power by the resurrection.**

First this reminds me that God has a white-hot love for people. His compassion is seen in the cross. He died for them! Of course he loves them! That drives me to believe no one is too far gone for God to save. So I begin to pray more boldly because I know he is compassionate.

And then I look at the resurrection and think...I know he CAN save! He can do ANYTHING. He can raise from the dead. What if God's compassion for sinners was measured by the cross and His power to save by the resurrection? Wouldn't that change your prayers for people? Wouldn't that drive you to ask big, huge things of God for other people? Your family? Our city? Unreached people groups.

Also, This reminds me when God doesn't answer my prayer, I know that is not because He doesn't love me or is not fully in charge of the situation and working all things for good. How He feels about me was forever settled at the cross. "So in my dark hour of unanswered questions I hold on to the God whose feelings about me and commitment to me was revealed in the cross and resurrection."

What if you prayed this prayer each day? I want to challenge you to pray it each day this week. Let me lead you through it now to close out our time.