



# SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

October 4, 2015

"Praying for Change" (The Vine Series) - John 15:7

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**H**ave you ever hung around a couple who have been married a very long time? A couple really intimate and really tuned in to each other as symbolized by these intertwined hands (picture of elderly couple's hands intertwined).

They're that couple who can complete each other's sentences, act before the other even asks or speaks. They read deeply the non-verbal clues of the other so well that they can subconsciously sense the anger or joy of the other in a microsecond.

It's like they breathe in and out each other's thoughts and feelings. It's like they know each other so well that their thoughts, needs, and desires, without being spoken, find their way into the other spouse's responses—and suddenly that need or desire gets met without much of a word.

My wife's grandparents were like that. Grandpa just had to turn his head and grandma was up heading off into the kitchen grabbing a drink or preparing some food, knowing exactly what to bring back into the living room—without any words spoken.

I thought, "Wow! That's impressive." I thought, "Well, maybe my wife has some of that in her bloodstream." So I decided to try

that at home. I tried turning my head and then pointing at the refrigerator, but I got nothing. All she said was, "Is there something wrong with your neck? Do you need to see a doctor?" 26 years of marriage and I get nothing! Maybe it will take another 26.

My wife's response aside, this is what happens when you "abide" with someone a long time.

For the past month we have been looking at Jesus' words in John 15 and reflecting on what it means to Abide in Christ; and what it means to live a vibrant and fruitful life as Christians in this world.

Our main text today is John 15:7 where Jesus seems to make this outlandish promise. Verse 7 reads: "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you."

Doesn't that sound like an unreal promise? If this were taken out of context Christians would flock to Vegas, hit the crap tables and pray like crazy: "Lord, I need a seven!"

Obviously there are parameters to this stunning comment. And the parameters are stated through the conditional language in verse 7: "**If** you abide

in me and My words abide in you...(then) ask what you will..."

The idea of a branch abiding in the Vine certainly denotes dependence. The branch is completely dependent upon the Vine for life and sustenance.

Without the life of the Vine in the branch it will wither and die.

But I also think part of what Jesus means by that metaphor is the idea of intimacy (like those elderly hands intertwined with each other) and infusion and permeation.

By using this metaphor Christ is intimating that living as a Christian means having His passions, His purposes, and His values infusing and permeating our wills, our desires, our actions, our viewpoints, our politics. Infusing every interaction, decision, or meeting, or activity we engage in.

As I have said on other occasions, the Christian life, the Christian question is not simply: "Is Jesus *more important than the various things* of my life?"

But are His passions, His purposes, and His values infusing and permeating *every aspect* of my life?

**F**or example, it is easy to truly believe (with all your heart) that God is *more important than* money. But are His passions, His purposes, and His values infusing and permeating the making and the spending of it?

It is easy to truly believe God is *more important than my* relationships. But are His passions, His purposes, and His values infusing and permeating the way you *listen to* and *make time* for those relationships? Because it doesn't really matter if you truly believe God is more important than these things, if He is not infusing and permeating then something is off.

So again, Abiding is Intimacy, Infusion, and Permeation.

Now let me be a little more specific about this issue of "Fruit" so we understand what Jesus wants us to ask for.

In the New Testament the word Fruit most often pertains to character issues as well as relational issues. That is, how we are going to live with and treat each other.

In the writings of Paul, and in the preaching of John the Baptist, you see the phrases the *fruits of righteousness* and *fruits of repentance*, as well as the *fruit of the Spirit*.

In a nutshell, the features of the fruits of righteousness and repentance as John and Paul lay them out are: Justice, Fairness, Generosity, Goodness, Righteousness, Holiness and Truth. Certainly these qualities speak to how we will live with each other and treat each other. There are lots of relational features to the meaning of fruit.

Now for many Christians we are most familiar with Paul's description of the Fruit of the Spirit. He lists it as: Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Gentleness, and Self-Control (Galatians 5.22-23).

Now just to be sure we are on the same page as to what they are all about, let me flesh out a little bit more detail of the fruit listed here.

*Love* – having a deep affection for others. *Joy* – living with an exuberance of life. *Peace* – a sense of emotional and relational serenity and wholeness. *Patience* – a state of emotional calm in the face of provocation and without complaint or irritation. *Kindness* – a sense of compassion in the heart.

*Goodness* – to provide something beneficial for someone as an act of kindness. *Faithfulness* – loyalty to relationships, as well as being trustworthy and dependable in relationships. *Gentleness* - not needing to force our way in life. *Self-control* – the ability to recognize and understand our emotions and direct them in a positive manner to benefit you and other people.

Please note that there is nothing in these lists that mention the fruit of the Spirit is being in full-time Christian ministry. You don't need seminary or ordination to have a tremendously fruitful life. I can guarantee there are doctors, and carpenters, and bricklayers that are lot more fruitful than a lot of people in ministry.

So when you give to Compassion International and

sponsor a child; or when you serve at a Do Justice Saturday; or drop by the prayer room and pray for our world, you create a little more fruit of Justice, Generosity, Goodness, and Righteousness in this world.

When you are busy and your kid or spouse calls for your attention and asks, "Can we talk?" And you actually close the computer or put away the iPhone or shut off the TV, and you turn your full attention to truly listen—just think of the fruit you are creating. You are creating joy in the heart of that person; showing goodness toward that person, you are displaying love and self-control, you are creating peace in your family. You see you don't need a seminary degree for that. You just need to be filled with the Spirit of Jesus.

Now as you look at the NT's view of Fruit, can you imagine a people characterized by such things; a spouse; a group of friends; a church; a business; a politician; a doctor characterized by such things; what would life be like? It would be mind blowing. What a powerful witness we would be.

You see folks, when we are living fruitfully, not only are we more 'moral', but we are more filled with what life was meant to be. This is the life that is rich, that is deep, and that is powerful – when we live the fruitful life. And by the sheer force of our lives and the wisdom of our words the people and systems around us *change*.

So when Jesus says, "ask what you will and it shall be done unto you, He is saying, ask for more of this life changing fruit in your life and I will provide it.

**G**o for it!! Ask like crazy for more of this stuff and He will provide power and opportunities to make that happen.

Do you hear His eagerness in His language: “Ask what you will.” That’s eager language. He is not saying this begrudgingly. In other words, He is saying I am eager to bless you to live like this because I want your soul to be bigger; I want your character to be greater; I want your impact for the kingdom of God to be deeper.

I am eager to help you live in such a way where you shape and change the nature of justice in the world; where you shape and change the nature of peace, of suffering, of marriage, and parenting; where you change the nature and shape of the workplace and politics, of society itself because the life of Christ is infusing, is permeating, is saturating your life so that it oozes out of your pores so that no matter what you do you do all to the glory of God.

Isn’t that incredibly exciting?!

So here is a tough question. If you asked somebody who knows you to come up with three or four adjectives that most characterize your life, would at least one of those adjectives be love, or joy, or peace, or patience, or generosity, justice, etc.?

Now that’s not to send some major guilt trip, but these are serious verses and we need to soberly sit with them. We need to take them seriously because if we get these verses, if we live into them they are so life changing, so family changing, business changing, politics changing and world changing.

As you consider all the qualities of fruit that I spoke of, what fruit are you asking God to bear/grow through your life? What would you pray more for given your work or family situations?

Now here is where I need to point something out. If we want to see Jesus answer our prayers for such fruit to show up in our lives, then we need to put ourselves in places where answers are possible.

What do I mean by that? For example, if I pray for more peace and joy in my life, and I pray this while keeping a jammed packed, busy calendar, overcommitting my time, etc.; I end up making peace, patience, joy, nearly impossible to be real in my life no matter how much God wants to bless me. If I’m living like these people (picture of people overwhelmed with busyness) and praying for peace, it’s not going to happen.

It’s really important to understand that God blesses prayers for *fruit*, not for *foolishness*.

I think the scriptures show that Jesus is assuming a kind of synergy in praying. He provides the life source to our branches and it will be Him and only Him, who will bring about the deep soul-change in our lives to be more like Him. But our part is to alter our lives so that we are in a place where His work can be done in us.

So if we are asking God: “Lord, please help me sleep better”, but we turn on all the lights and jack up the sound on the TV and radio, I’m not sure God’s going to let us be this foolish AND answer our prayers

at the same time. Again, God blesses prayers for fruit, not for foolishness. Make sense?

This is where Jesus’ ‘ifs’ in verse 7 are really important to understand. More fruit evolves from a life *if* it is abiding in Christ AND from a life where His Word abides in us.

What does that mean to have Jesus’ words abide in us?

The writer of the book of Hebrews may help us here. It says in Hebrews 4:12 – “For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the *heart*.”

What exciting qualities of the word of God—Living... Active...Sharp.

You know what makes it living and active? When we let it penetrate; when we let it judge (critique) our inner life—the thoughts and attitudes of our heart.

Today in modern western thought, we think of the heart as the seat of emotions; the place where you really feel stuff. But in the Bible it’s much broader and deeper than that.

The heart in the Jewish and early Christian thinking pertained to that part of us where we thought about things and weighed things and decided on things. It was the place from which we interpreted life and responded to things.

The heart is sometimes referred to the totality of one’s character and nature.

**S**o when Hebrews emphasizes the Word of God penetrating our hearts, it is talking about interacting with the Word of God in such a way where it tangibly affects the way we view, interpret, think about, experience and respond to life around us—where we are allowing it to tangibly affect and forge our character and nature.

The Word of God is not there simply to help you improve your bad habits. It is there *re-make you* from the inside out.

This is why I love the Thai word for “understand” (Kow Jai). My family and I were missionaries in Thailand for a number of years. And early on one of the most frequent phrases I said was: “Did you understand (kow jai) me?”

And what’s interesting is that the word, Kow Jai, literally means “to enter the heart.” That’s a great biblical view of what biblical understanding really entails. It’s all about entering our hearts. We don’t really understand the Word of God until it gets into our hearts; until it gets into where we weigh things, where we interpret things, where we respond to things.

Pastor Dan did a great job last week teaching us about some of the things that help the Word of God enter our hearts. For example, reading the Bible everyday, journaling, taking the small opportunities to pray throughout your day, like at a meal. Memorizing verses wouldn’t hurt either.

Let me just add one more thing that help Jesus’ words abide in our lives. And that’s the whole notion of Meditation.

Meditation is one of those things we do that puts us in a condition where the life of Christ, the life of the Vine might infuse and penetrate and saturate our inner life.

When I use the word “meditation” I wonder if some of us picture a saffron robed monk in the Himalayas sitting in the Lotus position saying something like “ohm. ” Or maybe some folks see it as something super spiritual, something we do when we become a more mature Christian, something that is *bonus* to the Christian life, not *basic* to it.

But the reality is for millennia meditation was *basic* to a life with God, not *bonus*.

In fact, we find it encouraged by God from at least the time of Joshua who probably lived somewhere around 1,300 B.C. So meditation is very much a long-standing part of the journey of the people God. Let’s look at something that was stated by God to Joshua after Moses had died and he was about to lead the Jewish people into the Promised Land.

Joshua 1:8 - “This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall **meditate** on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then (after you have meditated much) you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success.”

When you hear talks on “success” have you ever heard that a big piece to that was through meditating on God’s Word? But God seems to be insisting that Joshua lead and speak to and guide his people

from a heart that is infused, permeated, and saturated with the words and wisdom of God.

When Joshua makes a decision for justice or war or peace or about how to organize his people, or to plan the allocation of food, or whatever it is that he needs to do as a leader, God wants those decisions to come from a heart that has meditated deeply on His Word.

And when the Bible uses that phrase “to meditate on it day and night”, I think what that means, in part, is that throughout his day Joshua is to look for new ways to live the words of God.

It’s a picture of a person who wants the Word of God to show up in all that they do during a full day—not just for 15 minutes in the morning. Again the idea of infusion, permeation, and saturation play in here.

So what does all of this look like on a very practical level?

In a nutshell, meditation is like sucking on a lozenge. It is the slow digestion of God’s Word into our lives; its letting the Word of God “coat our souls” with God’s heart, passions, purposes, and values.

One doesn’t simply chomp on a lozenge when their throat is sore because it renders the medicinal aspect completely ineffective and useless. So it is with God’s Word. We don’t just blitz through it, but let it linger.

Or to put it another way, we let it linger in order to let His story interrupt our story to make a better story. We let the Word of God “interrupt” our values, our typical ways of thinking or our way of living.

**W**e let it interrupt our defenses, which we use to resist the purposes of God.

So practically speaking, we just let the words of Scripture sit with us like a lozenge in our mouths, gently turning it around in our hearts for a while. After sitting with it for a while, we can then begin to turn the word in on ourselves by using reflective questions in silence.

For example, we might ask ourselves questions like: How have I experienced and/or lived into the *goodness* of this truth? How have I experienced and/or lived out the *violation* of this truth? (It's very important to ask ourselves this hard question).

And then, before we end, because there is always a 'so that' to our meditation, we might reflect on a *response* to what God is showing us through His Word. So we might ask something like, "Lord in light of what You are showing me is there something you want me to say? *Do? Or change?*"

Try not to walk away from your meditation until you ask those questions. We don't meditate simply to get warm fuzzies, but to be changed.

We're not trying to see how we can meet the minimal standard, but trying to imagine how we can meet the next highest standard of that truth or that directive or the point of this story we just read.

By the way, feel free to use your imagination to see or viscerally feel these words.

Now something is really important to understand here. *Before* we meditate we need to *prepare* to meditate.

Remember what I said about creating an environment where God can actually answer our prayers? Well, we also want to create an environment where He can actually be heard or felt; where we can actually be moved by His words.

This is important because many of us have what people call "Monkey Minds". We have our thoughts jumping from one thing to the other thing in rapid succession ("I have that important meeting today at 10am. Oh man, I forgot to do that homework," etc.). When our minds are doing this, the Word of God just seems to fall to the floor. Thus, we have to do something to discipline us to stay focused on His Word and on His Spirit's leading.

Through the years many saints, and now through much scientific research, we know that one of the handy ways to do this is simply to slow down and focus on your breathing. It is difficult to breathe slowly and have your mind be busy. When you breathe slow and focus on it, your mind tends to calm down.

There's nothing really mystical here. It's just a physiological law that when you slow down and focus on and get intentional about breathing, it simply helps to center your mind and brings you fully into the present moment.

There is something really important here. Meditation is not simply a soul experience, but it is a Soul-Body experience. What we are trying to do here is to have the body and soul work together. One will affect the other. And from my experience when we settle the Body and Mind, the Soul is better able to listen.

Because we are not used to doing something like this with our body it may help to count to yourself as you breathe. As you *breathe in* slowly count to 6 or 7, then *exhale* by counting again.

And by the way, when you get distracted while meditating (and you will get distracted: e.g. "did I turn off the stove? I need to finish up that paper by tomorrow," etc.) simply go back to breathing and counting—focusing again on the numbers.

When you have a nice easy rhythm use a brief verse or prayerful phrase to get you Christ-focused. Some folks call this a Centering Prayer. For example, simply breathe in and out "Lord Jesus, speak to my heart" or simply, "Lord Jesus, speak." Let these words almost drip from your mouth or heart. Do this for a minute or so (or even more if you need to).

Once you are centered on Christ begin to read a SMALL portion of Scripture. Don't try meditating on the entirety of Psalm 119. Just use about 4 to 6 verses, if possible. And then read it a few times with periods of silence in-between each reading. So the pathway looks like this:  
Read → Silence and Reflection.  
→ Read a second time → Silence and Reflection → Read a third time → Silence and Reflection.  
→ Final Prayer.

By the way, what is also important is that you sit in a way that is attentive and responsive (e.g. sitting straight up with your hands on your lap with your palms up). Try not to slouch or lay down, or else the next sound you will hear might be snoring.

Today I will use just a few verses from Psalm 23 (vv. 1-3).

**L**et's practice. Sit in an attentive yet comfortable position. Begin to breathe in/out–slowly. Just count to 6 or 7 each way.

Let's now move to a Centering Prayer: "Lord Jesus speak to my heart." (slowly and gently repeat that; stay focused and keep your breathing slow).

**Read two times.** "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, 3 he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake."

**Reflect in silence.** What words stand out to you? (keep breathing slowly). What images come to mind as you hear these words? When have you experienced this in your life?

**Read** verses again.

**Reflect in silence.** What may be going on in your life that makes it hard to experience these truths about your life with God?

**Read** verses again.

**Reflect in silence.** Lord, in light of what you are saying, is there something you want me to say/do/change?

How did that go? Ready to join a monastery?

Online–there are a couple of web sites that can lead you through this:

Pray As You Go - <http://www.pray-as-you-go.org/>

Sacred Space - <http://www.sacredspace.ie/>

Remember that the point of all of this is to have the Word of

God abide in our lives; to infuse, penetrate, and permeate ALL aspects of our being, so that His fruit grows in us, and His life flows through us into our relationships, our workplaces, our communities, and our world—all to the glory of God.