



abide = relax

by **Vic Black**
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Certain words may come front and center as you ponder the intricacies of abiding in Christ. “Relax” is one of those words for me. Relax into abiding.

Before jumping to conclusions about what I should do to abide, I can pause and consider what God has already done for me. Jesus made a standing offer, “Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly” (Matthew 11:28-30, MSG).

Some would say an admirable trait for Christ followers is to work hard to know Him better. Perhaps we work even harder to abide. But have we relaxed into abiding? Psalm 46:10 says, “Cease striving and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.” Footnotes and alternate translations for “cease striving” reveal *let go, relax, be still, do nothing, be quiet, stop, enough!* All these words point toward less work on our part, to the point of no work at all! What is the strong implication in such a statement from God? If God is telling us to do nothing, and the objective is to know Him better, what is the underlying message? Could we be so bold as to expect God Himself to do something?

Think about it.

Come to me. Get away with me. Take a real rest. Walk with me. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. Cease striving. Let go. Trust me. You are in me, now abide in me. I take up permanent residence in you. Take up permanent residence in me. No performance, no striving, no stress, no _____ (you fill in the blank). Just be with me, the Lover of your soul. You are my beloved. I paid the ultimate price in order to have relationship with you. Enjoy, drink deeply, be comfortable, be at home, be yourself. I love you with an everlasting, unfailing love.

Receive my love. Abide in my love. ◀

Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly. (Matthew 11:28-30, MSG)

translucent (continued from p. 1)

His day cursed and crucified Him. Still, in the midst of all the jeers and jerks, Jesus did not fall into self-rejection’s trap. In authentic vulnerability, Jesus translucently brought the colorful substance of His human experience into the light of His belovedness. Doing so both deepened His grasp of His belovedness and allowed the light of God’s favor and love to refract brilliantly through the vibrant colors of His humanity and life experience.

You too are God’s beloved. You too have a color-stained life. Will you live translucently? Will you allow His love for you to redemptively shine through the substance of your human story so He may vibrantly display His glory in the colors of you? There is no one who can display the light of belovedness like you, because no one has the same crazy combination of colors of who you are, where you are from, and what has been your story. In the redemptive light of belovedness, the authentic vulnerability of your person and life are uniquely awe-inspiring and far more vibrantly beautiful than any stained-glass window. ◀



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translucently beloved

by **Mark Looyenga**
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As Jesus came up from the waters of baptism, God’s words of love spilled over Him. “This is my beloved son, whom I love; my favor rests upon him (Matthew 3:17).” Can you imagine how keenly heartening this was for Jesus? Can you see the Spirit’s peace and joy resting in Jesus’ countenance? Is this your experience of your belovedness?

If you are like me, belovedness can become just an idea believed.

While I was in college, seeing the rich-colored refraction of sunbeams streaming through the stained-glass windows of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris both silenced my reverent heart and quickened it to worship God. I was amazed by how something as common as glass could shine and dance with such brilliance and captivating beauty. But then, this was not common, clear glass. This glass, stained with color, was translucent. That is, its color gave it a substance that, while allowing light to pass through, also brilliantly refracted the light in colorful vibrancy.

Living into belovedness, amidst the color stains of life, is much more of a struggle. Henri Nouwen, in his must-read book *Life of the Beloved*, concludes that the sly persistence of self-rejection keeps the reality of our belovedness separated from our experience. Thus, we can believe the idea of being beloved by God and still wonder, *If people really knew me, would they value and accept me?* The voice of self-rejection echoes, *I am not good enough; I’m worthless; I’m a shameful Navigator—unless I perform.* When we minimize our value and identity as God’s beloved in self-rejection, we lose touch with ourselves and our story. We feel a growing insecurity in being increasingly see-through—even transparent—on the inside and so become increasingly opaque to a life lived in the light of belovedness.

Belovedness is, however, core to our identity, and without its tangible embrace, our souls wear thin in restlessness. We were made for it. In belovedness, God sees us, knows us, and welcomes us home as family—as His sons and daughters (1 John 3:1, Luke 15:20-24). Belovedness secures, steadies, and soothes. Belovedness also redemptively illumines, allowing us a growing freedom to engage ourselves and our stories with honesty and grace. When the color stains of our humanity and story are allowed to come into the light of our belovedness, we light up with beauty and brilliance like a stained-glass window.

Jesus’ life was color-stained with the real experiences of His humanity. Many of these spoke self-rejection to Him in hostility to His belovedness. He grew up a third-culture kid. His neighbors dismissed Him. His followers tried to manipulate Him to perform. His siblings taunted Him. His friends betrayed and abandoned Him. The powerful of

translucent (continued on back)

hard to be loved

by Lyndi Markus
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“You’re pretty great. I love you,” I told my friend.

“I don’t know why,” she said with a deep wince of self-loathing. I don’t understand her lens for love. She’s bright, engaging, and she impacts her world in delightful ways. Why wouldn’t she feel lovable?

What I do understand is this: Sometimes “I love you” is a hard, hard phrase to hear or believe.

Those three simple words can remind you of times when love was withheld, disordered, not what you needed, insufficient, linked to trauma, proven unsafe.

Maybe you’ve never experienced a sufficient love, and the thought of allowing the love of God to be important, necessary, and experienced in your life is terrifying. The kind voice of Jesus might even become distorted and sound like the voice of an abuser.

Oh, dear friend. If that’s you, these lies creep in to destroy this deepest facet of your identity in Christ. If you can’t see your belovedness, it’s hard to see why Jesus died to redeem the world that has broken you. Why should He even care?

If there’s one thing the gospel shows us time and time again, it’s the transformational power of love. When we truly love, and can receive love from someone else (sounds a little like a fairy tale, doesn’t it?), we find ourselves deeply and inexplicably changed.

In *Surrender to Love* (InterVarsity, 2015), David G. Benner says, “Genuine transformation requires vulnerability. It is not the fact of being loved unconditionally that is life-changing. It is the risky experience of allowing myself to be loved unconditionally.... [It] always calls us to deeper places of trust and connection” (74, 81).

Love is still worth it. You’re still worth it. This hard “working out your salvation”—accepting your identity as beloved of God—will lead you to green pastures by still waters, where God will restore your soul. ◀

competing voices



by Wanda G. Anderson
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“I’m sorry, but it looks like you should choose another career path. Your chances of getting into a 4-year college are pretty slim. Have you thought about industrial work?”

I was 16 years old when I heard these words from my high school guidance counselor. Had I not known Jesus as my Savior and learned to discern His voice, I would have taken this to heart and believed the limitations being spoken over my life.

Knowing the voice of the Good Shepherd changes everything! John 10:27 (NLT) says, “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.” John 10:5 (NLT) says, “They won’t follow a stranger; they will run from him because they don’t know his voice.” Learning the distinctive voice of Jesus comes through relationship. I’ve learned to recognize Jesus’ voice by its gentle tone and the reassuring words He speaks.

The scriptural filter I use to discern God’s words from those of the enemy comes from Philippians 4:8 (NLT): Am I hearing the truth? Is the message filled with honor and righteousness? Does it come from a pure place and bring about lovely and admirable thoughts? Does it promote excellence, and is it worthy of praise? If the answer is a resounding “no,” I must redirect my thoughts and recognize that I was being influenced by the voice of the thief and not that of the Good Shepherd.

Having been a victim of identity theft, I can tell you it’s no fun when someone impersonates you to gain access to your bank accounts, credit cards, and personal information. When this happened to me, I felt violated. Everything I’d worked hard for was taken by someone who had no right but had somehow gained access. The enemy of our souls has no legal right to our spiritual inheritance, but I can give the thief access to my mind and have my spiritual identity stolen by what I allow into my heart.

I’ve learned to recognize Jesus’ voice by its gentle tone and the reassuring words it speaks.

With all the negative messages in the world, I can become distracted from the voice of Jesus. If I’m not careful, I’ll focus more on the words of the stranger telling me who I am not and what I will never be able to accomplish. His voice will grow more familiar as I grant greater access to his influence. The reassuring voice of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, can become obscured by doubt, fear, pride, selfishness, and unforgiveness that I allow to reign in my heart.

As a 16-year-old, I could easily denounce a voice that was not in alignment with God’s plan for my life. As an adult, I sometimes allow barriers in my heart to block the Holy Spirit’s influence so the voice of the Good Shepherd can barely be heard above the noise.

As I continue to abide in Jesus and stay connected to Him, rooted in Him, and tethered to Him, His voice becomes easily recognizable. I no longer guess whose words I’m hearing when the path I’m on leads to peace, joy, goodness, faithfulness, kindness, humility and self-control. I am led in the way of love as the beloved of the Good Shepherd. My identity is assured. ◀

a father’s love



by Alice Matagora
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I’ve always had a complicated relationship with my earthly father. I don’t doubt that everything he said and did came out of love and protection for me. But it hasn’t always felt that way.

My parents immigrated from Taiwan as graduate students among the best and brightest on full scholarship. As non-Christians, they believed the outcome of their lives depended on perfect performance, no mistakes. My father parented the way he’d been parented: he pushed, he criticized, he compared, he withheld praise to motivate me to keep striving, he demanded perfection. Even if this meant damaging our relationship, my growing up to be financially secure would mean he’d loved me well.

I spent much of my life before Christ demanding perfection of myself, attempting to prove I was worthy of love. But I never could be perfect, which led me into a season of depression. If I couldn’t be perfect, I would never be worthy of love. And if I could never be worthy of love, what was the point of living?

Blessed be the God who brings light into the darkness and redeems all things for His glory, even the most painful seasons of our lives. As a newcomer to youth group in high school, I listened as my peers sang the worship song “Beloved” (Vineyard, 1996):

*I am Your beloved, Your creation,
And You love me as I am
You have called me chosen for Your kingdom
Unashamed to call me Your own
I am Your beloved.*

Are these people for real? Do they really believe these things about God and how God feels about them? I don’t even know God, yet He created me and chose me?

In my questioning, Jesus was calling me to believe this. Soon after, I accepted Him as my Lord and Savior and was adopted as God’s own beloved. Over the past 20+ years, God has continued to take what began as head knowledge into the deeper places of my soul.

To my earthly father, I would be beloved if only I were perfect. To my Heavenly Father, I am beloved because He is perfect.

To my earthly father, I would be beloved because of what I do, produce, or achieve. To my Heavenly Father, I am beloved simply because of who He delighted to create me to be.

To my earthly father, revealing my sin, brokenness, and shortcomings would bring shame and dishonor to the family. To my Heavenly Father, even in my sin, brokenness, and shortcomings I am still ridiculously beloved and ridiculously His. Especially then.

This terrifying, life-giving journey of abiding in my identity as God’s beloved has required me to lay down all that my belovedness had depended on—my striving, my producing, and my achieving—and rest in faith in the work God has already done. As I do, I find that God’s grace in me frees me to better love others in light of their belovedness by God, affirming their identity as beloved.

Even my father. ◀

Being the Beloved

“One of the enormous spiritual tasks we have is to claim that [we are the beloved of God] and to live a life based on that knowledge.” —Henri Nouwen

Watch the video below, and consider these questions:

- Which of the most common mistaken sources of identity listed by Nouwen is easiest for you to spend your energy trying to maintain??
- What obstacles do you face in accepting your identity as beloved?
- If you understood your belovedness, how could it change how you think about yourself?
- Where can you choose to respond out of your belovedness today?



<https://bit.ly/2SQZffz>
YouTube: “Being the Beloved: Henri Nouwen full”