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10. Surrender Your Self-Effort

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10. Surrender Your Self-Effort

This Bible study lesson is based on Chapter 11 of *The Abiding Room*, a book by Kevin Seacat.

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“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest”
(Matthew 11:28 NIV).

Do you ever find yourself working to the point of exhaustion? Does it feel like you often check two things off your to-do list, only to find three more have been added, which leaves you feeling overwhelmed? Do you often feel hurried and worried? Do you feel the frustration of doing it well, but knowing it could have been done better? Do you have trouble saying no to the many good things you could do, and as a result, you don't have the energy to do the best thing? Do you find yourself irritated at others who, in your mind, aren't giving 100 percent to the cause?

You're not alone! Many well-intentioned followers of Jesus feel exhausted. We all need to continue to learn to put into practice the reality that following Jesus also means resting in Jesus.

If we know only striving, we are missing out on the abiding life. And if we aren't abiding in Jesus, sadly, we're very likely too familiar with exhaustion. Serving in our own strength will not only wear us out, it will also result in not bearing “much fruit” (John 15:5, 8 NIV). Thankfully, when we fully surrender our striving and self-effort, and our hearts are fully connected to Jesus, we can experience rest and the bearing of much fruit!

Doesn't that sound contradictory—less effort leading to more fruit? That's because, in many ways, the surrendered life is the opposite of what today's world teaches—if we want better results, we must try harder. This counterintuitive nature of the abiding, Spirit-filled life likely helps explain why a minority of Christians today are experiencing it.

When, however, by faith, we give Jesus our absolute surrender, He graciously reaches out, inviting us to abide in Him and receive the fullness of His life and Spirit! We discover Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life to not only eternal salvation, but to contentment in this life as well!

Martha the Tireless Worker

An excellent example of the contrast between abiding in Jesus and relying on self-effort is found in the story of Jesus with Mary and Martha. This is the same Mary we referred to as Mary the Abider of Bethany in chapter 7. Both Mary and her sister Martha were devoted followers of Jesus, but they demonstrated their loyalty in different ways. Let's look again at how Martha put her faith into action.

“As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, ‘Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!’ ‘Martha, Martha,’ the Lord answered, ‘you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her’” (Luke 10:38-42 NIV).

As we read this story, we need to understand Jesus wasn't condemning Martha. He was fully aware she was working hard out of her desire to serve Him in the best way she knew. Yet He was gently instructing her that there was a better way.

Martha was giving it her all. She was fully invested, all in, sold out. She fully recognized Jesus was the Son of God, and she was serving Him with all her heart. Because of how she was living out her faith, however, she was missing out on the very best of Jesus in her life. In spite of her passion, she was operating in the flesh and floundering in frustration in Level II. Her focus on the task was distracting her from being teachable.

Martha needed to embrace the rest found in abiding in Jesus by surrendering her self-effort. Jesus was telling her there was rest available in Him, and she could put aside all the world's ways of working in her own strength by instead choosing to simply abide in Him. Jesus was pointing Martha to abiding in Him rather than striving for Him.

Nothing on Our Own

“So Jesus said to them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise ... I can do nothing on my own’” (John 5:19, 30 NIV).

“Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works” (John 14:10 NIV).

Jesus described His life as letting God the Father live in and through Him. He was not only describing how He lived, but foreshadowing how we are to live—by letting the life of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit do in and through us what we cannot do ourselves.

Realizing we are operating in our own strength is not always easy. Similar to Martha, we may have good intentions, but our method is misplaced. While the deeds of the flesh (such as fits of rage, jealousy, and envy) may not describe your typical daily attitude, the fruit of the Holy Spirit (such as joy and peace) may not seem to describe your daily experience either. You may find yourself caught somewhere in the middle.

That middle is the wilderness of Level II living. Do contentment and restful satisfaction seem to elude you as you follow Jesus? Instead of experiencing the freshness of the fruit of the Spirit, do you find yourself fatigued, disillusioned, and, at times, even hopeless? Jesus, who knows your heart, compassionately lets you know He understands. He tenderly instructs you that, regardless of how hard you strive, feeble branches like you and me cannot bear fruit all alone. He says, “The branch cannot bear fruit by itself” (John 15:4 NIV). Even our best efforts cannot produce the authentic spiritual fruit such as joy and peace that come only from the life of Jesus flowing through us.

Thankfully, it does not have to be this way! Just like Martha, the solution is right next to you—Jesus. He invites you to surrender your reliance on your own strength and instead, rest, trust, and abide in Him. He will accept even your smallest act of faith in turning to Him, lovingly take your burden upon Himself, and walk alongside you.

Three Key Verses Regarding Self-Effort

Three verses taken from three letters written to three churches nicely fit together to encourage us to live by the Holy Spirit and guard against self-effort.

1. “So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him” (Colossians 2:6 NIV). You’re instructed to continue to live your life in Christ

Jesus just as you started. How did you start your life with Jesus? You received Jesus as Lord. You did not achieve salvation; you received it.

2. “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:8–9 NIV). How did you receive Jesus and were saved? It was by God’s grace, through faith, not by your works, that you received Jesus as your Lord and Savior. So, referring back to Colossians 2:6, you are to continue to live just as you started —by God’s grace, through faith in Jesus, not by your own self-effort (or works).
3. “Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” (Galatians 3:3 NIV). The phrase “not by works” means not by your own self-effort. Nevertheless, it is extremely easy for us to slip into doing works by self-effort. Remember, we said self and flesh are essentially the same. While it may not be intentional, it’s very common to try doing good works in the flesh. Self-effort is doomed to failure because your no-good flesh cannot bear much fruit. Apart from Jesus, we cannot bear as “much fruit” as we can when we are resting, or abiding, in Him.

Just as you received, not achieved, the gift of salvation, so do you continue to bear fruit, not produce fruit. The bearing of much fruit is not accomplished through your well-intentioned reliance on yourself. Bearing fruit is accomplished by trusting God, surrendering your self-effort, and letting the Holy Spirit do His work in and through you as you abide in Jesus.

As we connect these three sets of instructions from Paul, we see they give us guidance for how we’re to restfully follow Jesus.

Living in the Spirit vs. the Self-Effort of the Flesh

Too often in our desire to carry out good works, we do so while forgetting the One who inspired us to do them in the first place—Jesus. If we begin with the abiding relationship with Jesus, we can trust the Holy Spirit to guide, direct, and empower us to complete our work.

God created us for a life of purpose that flows from our relationship with Him. If our priority becomes more focused on obedience rather than on the relationship, we end up getting less of both. But as we abide in our relationship with Jesus, the Holy Spirit fills us (The Great 2 for 1), and we discover that, not only does the will of God become clearer to us, but the work of God becomes easier for us too.

It's as C.S. Lewis wrote: "Put first things first and we get second things thrown in; put second things first and we lose both first and second things." Meaning, if we make our relationship with Jesus our top priority, the good works flow naturally from that relationship. However, if we get things out of order, and thrust forward into attempting to carry out the work in our own strength, we'll experience less of both Jesus and fruit.

Let's compare the difference between attempting to exhibit the fruit of the Spirit through our self-effort and watching it appear naturally as we trust in the power of the Holy Spirit.

First, what does it look like to attempt to live out the fruit of the Spirit in the flesh of self-effort? If you get up in the morning and effectively say to yourself, *Today I'm going to do all I can to be loving and joyful and peaceful and patient and kind and good and faithful and gentle and self-controlled*, you may find (1) at some point you'll stumble, and (2) at some point you'll be exhausted. Why? Because you can't produce those things in the flesh.

The tree of the flesh can produce some meager levels of fruit for a while through self-effort, but eventually a storm will arise that washes away the topsoil and reveals the root of these things is the flesh. You may discover the fruit vanishes, and the deeds of the flesh such as anger, frustration, harsh criticism, and their accompanying fatigue and discouragement appear.

On the other hand, if you get up in the morning and acknowledge, *Lord, I surrender this day to you. You know what is ahead, and I know I can't exhibit the fruit of the Spirit in my own strength, so I am trusting you to do it*, then you can likely count on three things: (1) that the fruit of the Spirit that appears is genuine, (2) at some point you may still stumble, and (3) if at the point of stumbling you quickly acknowledge to Jesus that you messed up and simply start over by surrendering again, you can trust you're back on track, abiding in Jesus.

We will mess up, and Jesus will not be surprised because He knows we're in constant training. The Holy Spirit will let us know when we're off-track, but Jesus is not waiting to condemn us. Rather, He's eager to encourage and guide us. At this point, our faithful friend Jesus will gently say to us what He said to the apostle Paul: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9 NIV).

As you begin each day, isn't it comforting to know that Jesus' grace is constant? His grace is present at the start, the middle, and the end of the day. His grace is present during both your successes and failures. We can rest during the events of the day, knowing it's no longer us attempting to do things for God in our own strength, but Jesus living out His life through us by the Holy Spirit. The secret is to remain connected to Jesus, not to chase perfection.

Life in the Spirit doesn't eliminate the problems and difficulties the fallen world brings into our lives, but if somebody else is doing the work, we won't become nearly as exhausted. By consistently living by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, we have Jesus' assurance of bearing much fruit. That's because it's not us striving to produce the fruit; it's Jesus living in us who is doing the work.

Surrendering our self-effort doesn't mean we spend all day napping and expecting things to get done. God didn't save us for leisure and laziness but for kingdom purposes. As we live by the power of the Spirit, we can know what to do and can enthusiastically embrace God's plan for us, experiencing the Spirit's presence and power throughout the day.

Here's how Paul described the transforming work of the gospel in and through him: "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me" (1 Corinthians 15:10 NIV).

Abide during the process, obey at decision points, and trust God for the results. Over time, you will have fewer and shorter detours in the flesh. And what is even more exciting is that as you increasingly walk in the Spirit, you can be confident that, step-by-step, you are becoming more like Jesus!

The Love You Had at First

"I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first" (Revelation 2:2-5 NIV).

Jesus gives us an invitation, saying, “Come to me, all you who are weary” (Matthew 11:28 NIV). Does this describe you? If so, He invites you to surrender your self-effort and rest in Him.

Do you remember the freshness of your faith when you first came to Jesus? You knew so little; yet you knew all you needed to know because you knew Jesus. You knew your childlike faith alone was enough. Jesus says everyone, no matter their gifts or experiences, must come to Him as a child.

When Jesus calls you friend, He gently invites you to leave behind your self-effort and enjoy His company. Friends don’t require our performance; they just enjoy our presence. When you’re with your best friend, you’re relaxed, rested, smiling, laughing, and enjoying their company. Your friend Jesus is inviting you to throw away your attempts at pleasing Him with your self-effort and simply come alongside Him and abide.

ABIDING TRUTH: To experience the fullest blessings of the Spirit-filled life, surrender your self-effort and rest in Jesus.

Reflection Question

How did Jesus describe the contrast in how Martha and Mary lived out their faith?

Write down your answer to the box below (“Your Response or Question”) and send it to us. It will appear in Messages.