

# Never Abandoned

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



## Prayer of Illumination

Come Holy Spirit, our Helper and Advocate:  
Open our hearts and minds this day,  
Draw us into your presence.  
Ignite us with a word of life—  
a message that we may share with others  
as we seek to live out Christ's love in the world.  
Amen.

## Scripture: John 14:15-21 (NRSVue)

<sup>15</sup> "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. <sup>16</sup> And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. <sup>17</sup> This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him because he abides with you, and he will be in you. <sup>18</sup> "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. <sup>19</sup> In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. <sup>20</sup> On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. <sup>21</sup> They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me, and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."

*The grass withers and the flower fades,  
but the Word of God endures forever.*

## SERMON – “Never Abandoned”



In 2012 Simone Clarke completed the London Marathon in six and a half hours—over three times as long as the first-place finisher, yet Simone’s finish may have been more impressive. Simone Clarke has epilepsy. She ran to raise money for the Epilepsy Society.

Simone usually has about four seizures a day, but that didn’t stop her. But she knew she couldn’t run the marathon alone. She trained and ran side by side with her friend Tally Hall. Tally was there to catch Simone every time she fell and care for her until she could get back on her feet again and continue running.

The first eight miles were challenging, but then the seizures started happening—a total of twenty over the last fifteen miles. For each seizure, Simone was unconscious for at least thirty seconds. Tally was right by her side, catching her each time, easing her to the ground, protecting her, encouraging her, until she was able to get up and continue running.

Simone finished the race and was able to raise nearly \$1000 for the Epilepsy Society.

Asked about her amazing feat she said, “I owe my success to my friend. Without Tally I would have never been able to do it.”

Tally was Simone’s helper, her advocate, her comforter. Her paraclete.

Jesus says in our passage that after he returns to the Father, he will give us *another* Helper. One who will help us to love and obey. One called alongside us to run with perseverance the race of faith. This Helper is the Holy Spirit.

We couldn’t do it without the help of the Holy Spirit.



The Greek word for Helper is *Paraclete*, meaning “*One called in to help.*”

- Someone called in... to give a witness on our behalf.
- Someone called in... to plead our case.
- Someone called in... to give us counsel or comfort.
- Someone called in... to help in a time of need.

In fact, a *paracletos* in ancient times could be someone called in to encourage the troops that might be feeling defeated, discouraged, or battle weary. The *paracletos* would visit and lift the troops' sagging spirits and give them an inspiring halftime locker room speech. *Paraclete* is an amazingly rich word that can refer to: defense attorneys, companions, helpers, friends, protectors, advocates, counselors, advisors, strengtheners, mediators, intercessors, spokesmen, teachers, and witnesses. What's really cool is this—Jesus says that he will send **ANOTHER** Paraclete—who will never leave us. A second paraclete. Who is the first paraclete? **Jesus**.

**Jesus** is the One sent by God. God's authorized agent. To believe in Jesus is to believe in the One who sent Him. He's on our side, like God is. He's our "Tally." He not only stands by us, He runs with us. But now, in our passage, Jesus has to run—He's leaving. This passage is part of Jesus' "Farewell Discourses." Jesus will be gone for a bit, then return after his resurrection. Then he will return to the Father in heaven.

But Jesus won't leave us alone. Jesus will send ANOTHER Encourager—the **Holy Spirit**. The **Spirit of Truth**. And who is the truth? Jesus! "**I AM the TRUTH**," says Jesus. The **Holy Spirit** is the Spirit of Christ. The Spirit is Christ's presence to us—always with us, always inside us. Dwelling with us, making his home in us.

Paul also tells us in Romans,

"God's love has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit."

So because we're filled with God's love, we're then equipped to love.

"If you love me," says Jesus, "you will keep my commandments."

Jesus gives us love; therefore we can love and obey Him.

One of the names for God is our **First Love**. We love because God **FIRST** loved us. Our love is love, but it is a **SECOND** love. We receive it second hand from God—it's a gift. And the more we respond to God's love, the more God will be revealed to us because God *is* love. God reveals Himself to those who seek after Him. The more we obey God, the more we understand Him. The more we walk in God's ways, the more He walks with us. It's a gracious circle of interdependence and interplay. We're not independent and we're not co-dependent in our relationship with God. It's interdependence. The more you invest and sacrifice in your faith, the more real and meaningful God will become in your life. So we need to linger in God's presence. Invite Him into our lives and open up. Abide with Him, commune with Him, and remain fully present to God—all of us. Christ's resurrection reminds us of this beautiful relationship we have:

"I am in the Father, and you are in Me, and I in you."

For Christianity, love is the basis for everything. The Son loves the Father and the Father loves the Son. We're to love God and to love our neighbor. God loves us and God loves the world. God *is* love. And here Jesus challenges *us* to love Him. To love Him is to obey Him. To heed His words. To obey his commands. For Jesus the one true test of love is obedience. Our love is revealed, our love is made manifest by the fruit of our obedience. Not by speeches, soliloquies, or songs. Christian love is gentle, but it isn't sentimental or gushy. Christian love is practical, down to earth, and revealed most clearly in our faithful actions.

The kind of love Jesus is talking about here is devotion, not obligation or slavery or tit for tat living. It's a mutual love dedicated to giving and receiving, being a blessing and being blessed. Love never fails—we fail. We say we love our brothers and sisters, but we often hurt them. We say we love our spouse or significant other, yet we belittle them. Jesus knows that, and so He commands us to love, but He gives us some help to carry out His agape love. He doesn't leave us hanging or high and dry. It is like a vine and branches.

"Apart from Me, you can do—*what?*, says Jesus—"Nothing!" (15:5).

"Let not your heart be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in Me." (14:1) The Hebrew root word for faith is "firmness." Enter into God's firmness—be at peace. I will never desert you. "I will not leave you orphaned." (14:18)

James E. Ryan is the president of the University of Virginia. Several years ago he gave a commencement speech at Harvard University that went viral. He expanded his talk in the book "*Wait, What?*" about life's five essential questions. In it he tells the story of his adoption through a Catholic adoption agency. James' adoptive parents got a call one day that a baby was ready for them and they should come and pick up the newborn in a few days from a hospital near them. When his parents came in, a nun brought in baby James Ryan. He was wearing a hand-knit sweater and a necklace with a medallion of St. Christopher—the patron saint of travelers. His mother asked the nun where the sweater and medallion came from. Because it was a closed adoption the sister could only say that it came from someone who loved the baby very much.

James Ryan had a very special relationship with his adoptive parents, so he never thought to ask more questions about his story or his birth mother. But by 2012, both of his parents had passed away—he was an orphan. A friend challenged James to find out about his birth mother. A few internet clicks and phone calls later, he was able to get a full-report sent to him about his adoption—including all the details except for last names.

It turned out his mother was a young Irish immigrant. A number of circumstances required her to temporarily live in a home for unwed mothers to be. She spent her time knitting the sweater and talking with the nun about whether she should keep her baby or not. She finally decided that she couldn't provide for the child and needed to give the baby up. After giving birth, she stayed with her child right until the adoptive parents arrived. The three-page note from the adoption agency said that the young mother left the hospital brokenhearted.

After discovering the details of his newfound history, James knew he needed to call his birth mother. When he did, her husband picked up the phone. James first words were words of assurance: I'm not crazy, I'm not looking for money, I'm not emotionally needy (for the most part), and I just wanted to say I'm OK. Her husband said that she'd been waiting a long time for this phone call—and that she prayed every single day that they would meet in heaven. Her prayers were answered, and then some. They were also able to meet in person. It turns out she lived only fifteen minutes away from where James grew up. He also got to meet his four half-brothers and sisters. He now calls his birth mother every other week. And she wouldn't mind if he'd call her a little more often.

"I will not leave you orphaned," says Jesus. Without the Holy Spirit being our advocate, we would be destitute and alone in this world. Jesus comes to us in a whole new way, as the Holy Spirit. He gives us his new, alternative presence, an Advocate, that will be with us always as our constant companion and guide.

The Spirit of Truth is literally the Spirit of Jesus who is "the way, the truth, and the Life." And He is the way home to God's forever family.

Amen.

Sermon Art: "*Our Heart of Gold*" by Tanner Lawley (2018), [artsy.net](https://www.artsy.net)

---

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition Bible, copyright © 2021 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.