The Vine and the Branches
Scripture: John 15:1-3
Code: 1551

INTRODUCTION

The fifteenth chapter of John is one of the most important chapters in all the Bible. However it is at the same time a very difficult chapter because of some interpretive problems. This classic chapter contains one of the most meaningful analogies in the Bible. It is another one of those great "I am" passages recorded by John that points to the deity of Jesus Christ. The foundational principles for living the Christian life--abiding in Christ and bearing fruit--are recorded in this chapter and elucidated in the New Testament epistles.

A. Presenting the Problem

We're going to begin with a basic interpretation of the various features of a vine, its branches, and the one who cares for the vine. The key to the passage is the identification of the branches. There are two groups of branches in the passage: ones that bear fruit (vv. 2, 8), and ones that do not (vv. 2, 6). The branches that bear fruit are obviously Christians. The branches that do not bear fruit are not easily identified. Are they Christians or non-Christians? If they are Christians, why are they thrown into the fire and burned? Does that mean Christians can lose their salvation and perish, or that they are chastised for not bearing fruit? I believe the Word of God clearly identifies the fruitless branches, as we will see when we compare other passages with John 15.

B. Setting the Scene

1. The context

The events recorded in John 15 takes place on the night before the death of Jesus while He is speaking with His disciples. The context of the passage might cause us to wonder why Jesus used this analogy. I believe the thoughts of Jesus on that night involved what was happening among the group of disciples that He was with. There was a drama going on that night among the eleven men who sat with Him. The whole fourteenth chapter records that Christ spent His time comforting His disciples before His arrest and crucifixion. He knew He was going to be separated from the Father when He died the next day. Jesus also was aware that Judas, who had already been dismissed from the room, was plotting His betrayal. Jesus was thinking about all the characters involved in that final night's drama: the eleven disciples and the Father, who loved Him; and Judas, who did not.

Consequently, I believe that the key to understanding the metaphor in John 15 is related to the characters in the drama. Since Jesus claims to be the vine, and identifies the vinedresser as the Father, it is reasonable to conclude that the branches that bear fruit would be the eleven true disciples and the branches that do not bear fruit refer to Judas and any others who were never true disciples to begin with.

2. The cleansing

In John 13:10, Jesus said, "He that is washed needeth not except to wash his feet." Once you've been spiritually cleansed, or saved, you need only a little foot-washing periodically--a reference to the continuing forgiveness of God. You don't need to take the major bath of salvation again. Jesus then told His disciples, "Ye are clean, but not all of you. For he knew who should betray him; therefore said he, Ye are not all clean" (vv. 10-11). Jesus was well aware of a distinction among His own disciples regarding their salvation: the contrast between Judas and the eleven. I believe that contrast is carried into the fifteenth chapter, where Jesus talks about the two kinds of branches. All the disciples had contact with Jesus for roughly the same amount of time. Although Judas appeared to have been a believer and even had the privileged responsibility of maintaining the funds for the disciples, he was a branch that never bore fruit. God finally removed him from the vine to experience the eternal burning of hell.

3. The controversy

Some people would conclude that Judas lost his salvation, and that if any Christian fails to bear fruit, he also will lose his salvation. However, John 10:28 says, "I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand." The Word of God is absolutely clear about the security of salvation. In John 6:37, Jesus said, "All that the Father giveth me shall come to me." In chapter 17, He told the Father, "Those that thou gavest me I have kept, and none of them is lost, but the son of perdition" (v. 12). Those statements reveal that Jesus was not talking about a true believer who stops bearing fruit and loses his salvation. Rather, he is talking about a Judas-type of believer who is superficially attached to the vine, but never receives spiritual nourishment from it. Judas had a superficial relationship with Jesus, but he willingly walked away from that relationship and into the judicial condemnation of God. It seems natural that the metaphor of the vine and the branches would come out of Christ's intimate talk with the eleven disciples who believed in Him.

4. The contrast

In the upper room, Jesus talked with the disciples about branches that do not bear fruit and are taken away and burned, referring to men like Judas. There are people today who similarly stand in close connection with Jesus Christ, but are apostates and doomed to an eternal hell. They may attend church and go through some religious exercises, thinking that their superficial connection to Jesus

Christ is sufficient for salvation. But they are not legitimate believers. On the other hand, the eleven disciples and all like them who truly abide in Christ show the reality of their faith by the fruit they bear. That contrast between true and false disciples is common in the gospel of John.

I. THE VINE (v. 1a)

"I am the true vine"

In speaking to the eleven remaining disciples in the upper room, Jesus chose the metaphor of a vine because of its manifold significance. A vine planted in the ground speaks of the humility of One who came in the form of a man planted in the earth. The figure of a vine pictures an intimate union with branches that are totally dependent upon it. A vine is a classic illustration for showing fruit-bearing as evidence of spiritual productivity.

A. Its Illustration in the Old Testament

Israel was identified as God's vine in the Old Testament. God was "the husbandman" (John 15:1; KJV) who operated through His people. He cared for Israel, cutting off branches that were not bearing fruit. Although faith was necessary for salvation, just being Jewish brought great blessing. Isaiah 5:1-7 illustrates that: "Now will I sing to my well-beloved [God] a song of my beloved touching his vineyard [Israel]. My well-beloved hath a vineyard in a very fruitful hill. And he dug it, and gathered out the stones, and planted it with the choicest vine, and built a tower in the midst of it, and also made a winepress in it; and he looked for it to bring forth grapes, and it brought forth wild grapes. And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem, and men of Judah, judge, I pray you, between me and my vineyard. What could have been done more to my vineyard, that I have not done in it? Why, when I looked for it to bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes? And now, I tell you what I will do to my vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it shall be eaten up; break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. And I will lay it waste; it shall not be pruned, nor digged, but there shall come up briers and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel." Israel forfeited God's blessing by its failure to bear fruit. The nation even experienced God's judgment by being taken captive by other nations for having failed to bear fruit.

The vine had become so much a symbol of Israel that it appeared on coins minted during the Maccabean period, which was between been the Old and New Testaments. During the time of Christ, Herod's Temple had a tremendous vine on it overlaid with gold that some have estimated was worth $12,000,000. Israel had always been God's vine, but it had become unproductive, so a new vine was established.

B. Its Realization in the New Testament

No longer would a man receive blessing through a covenant relationship to Israel, but through the new vine, who is Christ. With the coming of the New Covenant established by Christ, a man would have to be intimately connected to Jesus Christ to receive spiritual life and bear fruit.

The word "true" (Gk. alethinos) is used here in the sense of "eternal," "heavenly," or "divine," a common usage in Scripture. (That means Christ is the perfect heavenly reality of which Israel was a prophetic picture in the Old Testament.) Israel was a type of God's messianic servant and Jesus Christ was the fulfillment (Isa. 41:8-9; 53:11). Hebrews 8:2 speaks of "the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched and not man," showing the contrast between an earthly picture and the spiritual reality. The Lord has planted Christ as the perfect vine. All that could possibly be symbolized in a vine comes to fulfillment in Christ. Perhaps that is why Paul said in Colossians 2:7 that Christians are "rooted and built up in him."

Christ is the true vine in the sense that He is "the true Light" (John 1:9). There have been many times when God revealed His truth before, but Christ is its perfect revelation. All that could be conceived in the concept of spiritual light is realized in Christ. He is the highest essence of spiritual light, as opposed to physical light and to believers, who are lights in the world (Matt. 5:14). Similarly, Jesus called Himself the "true bread" (John 6:35). The physical sustenance of the Israelites by the manna in the desert (v. 31) was a type of Christ. So all that the metaphor of a vine could possibly claim of spiritual value is true of Jesus Christ.

What is your vine?

It's amazing how many people who claim to be Christians have other vines in their lives from which they seek their resources. I have tried to determine if there are any other vines than Christ in my life. Ask yourself, "How many things do I attach myself to for my well being? Some people think their vine is their bank account, education, sexual relationships, popularity, skills, connections, possessions, or social relationships. Some people even think the church is their vine. They attach themselves to a system of religion. But their vine should be Jesus Christ, not the church. Merely attending a church is not necessarily evidence of a vine- branch relationship. In fact, it can be a parasitic relationship--sometimes people are like parasites because they attend church only for what it will do for them. You as a branch must grow with Christ as your vine. Not even a Bible-study group or a church can be a substitute for Jesus Christ as your sustenance for living.

Israel was the vine of the Old Testament, but Christ is the vine in the New Testament. Israel, however, was usually referred to as a degenerate vine. By a marvelous contrast, Jesus Christ is "the same yesterday, and today, and forever" (Heb. 13:8). He is a vine that will never wither--the kind of vine I want to be attached to.

II. THE VINEDRESSER (v. 1b)

"My Father is the vinedresser."

A. The Analogy of a Farmer

The vinedresser was the one who cared for the vines in a vineyard. As a farmer, he was responsible to cut off the branches that bore no fruit because they tended to sap the energy from the fruit- bearing branches. That increased the productivity of the other branches. The vinedresser also constantly pruned the branches that could bear fruit to enable the vine to concentrate its energy on maturing so that it could bear more fruit. Verse 2 says the Father as the vinedresser purges the vine "that it may bring forth more fruit." Verse 8 tells us He wants the branches to "bear much fruit." The one who cared for the vine chopped off the branches that bore no fruit and threw them away. The vine's soft wood made it useless--it couldn't even be burned as firewood. Therefore, the branches of the vine were thrown away and consumed in a bonfire.

B. The Application to the Father

1. His work of punishing

The Father "taketh away" the branches that fail to bear fruit. Verse 2 doesn't say He fixes them up; it says He cuts them off. Verse 6 says that those branches are gathered, thrown into a pile, and burned. The Father deals with them with finality. Now if that refers to a Christian, we've got some problems. I believe that the fruitless branches refer to people who profess to have a relationship to Jesus Christ--who apparently are in the vine as a follower of Christ--but are like Judas and have never been saved. That is obvious because they never bear spiritual fruit. At a certain point in the Father's timing, the fruitless branches are cut off for the life and health of the vine and the other branches. Professing Christians who aren't really saved and therefore don't bear fruit will be cast away and burned in an act of divine punishment.

2. His work of pruning

The second work of the Father in verse 2 is to purge "every branch that beareth fruit." That phrase refers to the true Christian. The Father has some work to do on Christians also. But it's not a final work; it's the continuing work of purging. The word purge means "to cleanse" or "to prune" in the context of the analogy of a vine. The Father purges or prunes a branch that bears fruit (a Christian) so that it might bear more fruit (become spiritually mature).

III. THE VINE BRANCHES (vv. 2-3)

The branches on the vine grow rapidly. They must be tended to carefully, which requires drastic pruning on a regular basis. To have a fruitful vine, a vinedresser must cut off the fruitless branches for the sake of the vine's health and productivity. He must also carefully prune away all the shoots and other things that gather on the fruit-bearing branches that tend to sap the strength of the vine. Jesus said that some of His followers are like branches who bear fruit but need to be pruned. Others are like branches that don't bear fruit and are ultimately eliminated by being cast them into a fire.

A. The Professing Branches (v. 2a)

"Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away."

1. The lacking requirement

I believe a fruitless branch cannot represent a Christian because there is fruit in every Christian's life. With some Christians you've got to look a long time to find a couple of lingering grapes, but there will be fruit in their lives. The essence of new life in Christ is its productivity.

a. Ephesians 2:10

"We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them." The fruit of salvation is good works.

b. James 2:17, 22

"Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead" (v. 17). A life that has no evidence of fruitful works does not have an active faith. Legitimate saving faith is productive, even if it's only in a minimal sense. Verse 22 says, "Seest thou how faith wrought with [Abraham's] works, and by works was faith made perfect?" That doesn't mean you're saved by works; it means your works are the end product or evidence of salvation.

c. Matthew 7:16-17, 20

"Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so, every good tree bringeth forth good fruit .... Wherefore, by their fruits ye shall know them." The attitudes and actions of a person reveal whether an individual is a believer or not. There is no such thing as a believer who doesn't bring forth some good fruit.

d. Matthew 12:33

"Either make the tree good, and its fruit good, or else make the tree corrupt, and its fruit corrupt; for the tree is known by its fruit."

e. Matthew 3:7-8

"When [John the Baptist] saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth, therefore, fruits befitting repentance"--that is, fruits that are connected with salvation.

f. Romans 6:20-22

"When ye were the servants of sin, ye were free from righteousness. What fruit had ye then in those things of which ye are now ashamed?" (v. 21). The implied answer is none, because they weren't saved. And fruit they had was the fruit of sin. The contrast comes in verse 22: "But now being made free from sin, and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life." Every believer has everlasting life, which is the culmination of a righteous life. Therefore, people who don't bear fruit cannot be believers.

2. The limited relationship

There are two words in verse 2 that seem to contradict what I've just said: "in me." That sounds like the people who don't bear fruit are Christians because of their association with Christ. But I don't think they are, and a few scriptural illustrations will show why.

a. Luke 8:18

"Take heed, therefore, how ye hear; for whosoever hath, to him shall be given; and to whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken even that which he seemeth to have." Some relationships to Christ are in appearance only.

b. Romans 11:20

Paul pictured Israel as an olive tree. However some of the branches of that tree weren't saved. God broke off the branches that weren't connected to the tree and deriving their life from it. Verse 20 says, "Because of unbelief they were broken off." The branches in the vine of John 15 present the same analogy.

c. 1 John 2:19

"They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us; but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us." An individual can apparently seem connected to Jesus Christ, but, in fact, not be connected at all.

The apostle Paul warns against being superficially attached to Christ. If you come to church merely out of a superficial allegiance to Jesus Christ, heed Paul's warning: "Examine yourselves, whether you are in the faith; prove yourselves. Know ye not yourselves how Jesus Christ is in you, unless you are discredited?" (2 Cor. 13:5). He exhorts us to check our lives to make sure our salvation is real. It's a stern warning!

Were the branches to be burned once believers?

Jesus is talking about two kinds of branches: the branches that are true disciples, and the Judas branches--ones that hang around Him with a facade of faith. The latter appear to believe because they are superficially attached. When the Father removes them, they are never able to come back. People who say the branches that are burned refer to Christians, put themselves in a very difficult position. The burning of the branches would seem to imply that if you lost your salvation, you could never get it back again. People who believe that support it with Hebrews 6:6, which says it's impossible "to renew [those who have fallen away] again unto repentance." However, people who hold to such a position often think they can be saved more than once. But according to every passage that talks about falling away, there is no chance to come back in faith. Actually, those passages refer to apostates who superficially attach themselves to Christ, yet who were never real to begin with.

B. The Possessing Branches (vv. 2b-3)

1. The intention of pruning (v. 2b)

"Every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit."

Every believer in Christ gets purged because "whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth" (Heb. 12:6). If you can look at your problems as a divine procedure for becoming more fruitful, you might even be tempted to pray for trouble! (I haven't started doing that, but I could!) The Greek word translated "purgeth" (kathairo) means "to clean." Although it was used in only one other place in the New Testament, extra-biblical Greek literature used it to refer to cleansing corn (separating the corn from the waste material), and cleansing the soil of weeds before planting a crop. Using that word, the first century Jewish philosopher Philo said the superfluous shoots that grow on plants are a great injury to the genuine shoots, which the vinedresser cleanses (kathairo) by pruning.

In the case of spiritual pruning, the Father removes things like sin or worldly distractions that would hinder our fruit- bearing because He wants us to operate at maximum capacity. Suffering is one of the best methods of purging. It has a way of cleaning out the life whose growth has been stunted. Although spiritual pruning can be painful and may not seem to be necessary from our perspective, the Father knows what He is doing. His valuable lessons of suffering can identify what is not necessary in our lives and needs to be removed. The Father's pruning may take the form of sickness, hardship, loss of material goods, slander and persecution, loss of loved ones, grief in relationships, or war. God ordained troubles to prune off the things in our lives that drain away our energy and rob us of our capacity to bear fruit. But it is wonderful to know that the Father cares that we bear much fruit. Don't think God is up in heaven snapping a big whip and saying, "Bear fruit, or I'll get you!" No. He is carefully helping us to bear fruit. Aren't you glad that God is involved in your life for that purpose? Do you look at your trials like that, or do you fall into lapses of self-pity, fear, or complaining? But if you realize that God desires to increase your productivity, then the pruning process can be a joyful experience.

Hebrews 12 says, "If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not?... For they verily for a few days chasteneth us after their own pleasure, but he for our profit, that we might be partakers of his holiness" (vv. 7, 10). We are purged by God that we might partake of His holiness. The divine pruning knife may hurt a little bit, but it is worth it.

2. The instrument of pruning (v. 3)

"Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you."

What is the Father's knife? Although He may use things like suffering in the purging process, I think the divine pruning instrument is the Word of God. Jesus told the disciples that they were spiritually purged, or cleansed, through "the word." Affliction is only the handle of the knife where God gets His grip. Have you ever noticed how much more sensitive you are to the Word of God when you're in trouble? The Spirit of God applies Scripture to your heart in adversity. Trouble opens our eyes to receive the divine surgery performed by the Word. A trial puts pressure on us and helps us to develop spiritual muscles, but the Word is "the two-edged sword" that does the cutting (Heb. 4:12). Spurgeon, the great nineteenth century English preacher, said this: "It is the Word that prunes the Christian, it is the truth that purges him, the Scripture made living and powerful by the Holy Spirit--effectually cleanses the Christian. Affliction is the handle of the knife-- affliction is the grindstone that sharpens the Word--affliction is the dresser that removes our soft garments and lays bear the diseased flesh, so that the surgeon's knife may get at it-- affliction merely makes us ready to feel the Word--but the true pruner is the Word, in the hand of the Great Vinedresser."

When Jesus told those disciples who were the true branches that they had been cleansed through the Word, He was indicating that their initial salvation came through the Word. Similarly, their continual pruning would be done by the Word as well. When you're being afflicted you focus more on the Word and see how it applies to you. As you experience affliction, the Word cuts away hindrances to your spiritual growth.

Are you aware of the Father's purpose in pruning you? Do you know what's going on in your life when you have trouble? God's purpose in pruning is so you will bear more fruit. Are you a fruit-bearing branch--a real believer? Or are you superficially just hanging on to Christ? If so, you're in great danger of hell because some day the Father will remove you. I hope you know your only source of life is the true Vine, which is Jesus Christ.

Focusing on the Facts

1. What two foundational principles for living the Christian life that are recorded in John 15?

2. In the analogy of the vine and its branches, who are the branches that bear fruit?

3. Describe the scene during which John 15 takes place.

4. Explain how the context of John 15 is the key to understanding the metaphor of the vine and the branches.

5. According to John 13:10-11, what type of cleansing does a Christian need once he's been saved? In what sense were eleven of the disciples clean?

6. What verses reveal that the eleven true disciples could not lose their salvation?

7. What is a common contrast in the gospel of John?

8. Identify God's vine in the Old Testament.

9. How did Israel forfeit God's blessing? What did the nation experience as a result?

10. Rather than through a covenant relationship to Israel, how does a person receive a blessing under the New Testament?

11. What was the vinedresser responsible to do? Why?

12. Who are the fruitless branches in the vine?

13. Differentiate between the Father's works of punishing and pruning the branches.

14. Why can't a fruitless branch represent a Christian? Support your answer with Scripture.

15. In what sense are the fruitless branches "in" Christ (John 15:2)?

16. How did the people in 1 John 2:19 reveal they were not Christians to begin with?

17. What is one of the Father's most effective ways of cleaning out the life of a person whose spiritual growth has been stunted? What are some of the forms that the Father's pruning may take?

18. Why does the Father chasten us, according to Hebrews 12:10?

19. What is the divine pruning instrument (John 15:3)?

Pondering the Principles

1. Although Christ is the Christian's only source of sufficiency, many believers have substituted other things for the true Vine. Since you've become a Christian, have you gravitated toward trusting more in your education, career, abilities, relationships, popularity, bank account, or possessions than in the Lord? Although most of those things are important, our security needs to be in the Lord. Read Luke 12:13-34; 2 Corinthians 12:7-10; and Philippians 4:10-19. As you evaluate your life in light of those verses, determine if you would still be content should any of the things that you have placed too much value on be taken away. When God allowed Job to lose his wealth and his sons, he replied, "Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there. The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21). Pray that you might reflect Job's proper perspective when a loss occurs in your life. Although you might experience sadness because of the loss, an undergirding of trust in the sufficiency of the Lord will carry you through.

2. Are you sensitive to what the Holy Spirit is doing in your life through discipline or suffering? Are you in regular communication with the Father by praying to Him and reading His Word so that you can grow spiritually as you are being pruned? Thank God that though His purposes may cause us to experience pain, He is mindful of our frailty (Ps. 103:14) and seeks to make us bear more fruit (John 15:3, 6).

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