

John 15:1-8—Jesus' Teaching on Fruitbearing

J. Paul Tanner, ThM, PhD Mar 26, 2019

Context:

This passage is part of what is known as the Upper Room Discourse (John 13—17), Jesus' final teaching and encouragement for His disciples. Following the Passover meal, Judas left the group (Jn 13:30). The Lord then concentrated what He had to say on preparing them for His soon-to-be departure and the coming of the Holy Spirit to indwell them. Even though the Master was now departing physically, the disciples could continue to experience closeness of fellowship with Him and His inner strengthening for ministry . . . provided that they *abide in Him*.

15:1 "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser.

Jesus apparently drew on a parable from Isa 5:1-7 in which God had likened Israel to His vineyard (cf. Ps 80:8ff; Ezek 19:10ff; Matt 21:33ff), but He recrafts the imagery to make it fitting for His disciples. The metaphor would have been obvious to anyone living in the Middle East where grape vines were abundant, an everyday sight. Good grapes (fruit) were dependent on two main things: (1) the vine which sustained them and (2) a vinedresser that cared for the vines, giving them the needed water and pruning the vines to ensure they bore fruit as they should. Jesus' concern in these verses is not with the fate of unbelievers, but rather that His own disciples go on to bear fruit after His departure.

15:2 "Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away [or "lifts it up"]; and every *branch* that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit.

The branches are clearly defined as being "in Me," i.e., in Christ. The Father, as the perfect vinedresser, cares for the branches in two distinct ways. Just as a grape vine goes through a growth process to reach maturity and bear fruit, so it is with Christians. Whatever time may be involved for maturing, the Father closely cares for the child of God. The difficulty in this verse is in how to properly translate the Gk verb *airō* (αἶρω) in this case. Most Engl translations render this "take away/remove" (so ESV, NET Bible, NKJV; or "cut off" as the NIV)—see Jn 11:39, 11:48, 16:22, and 17:15 for examples of this nuance. Some scholars, however, would opt for translating this "to lift up" (for comparable examples, see Jn 5:8-12; 8:59). Theoretically, both nuances are possible. If "lift up" is the intended nuance, then the point would be that if fruit is delayed in coming, He will "lift up" that branch. That idea is very suitable, given that the Lord is speaking of branches that are "in Him," especially on a night like this . . . His last evening to be with and encourage these disciples that had been such an intimate part of His earthly ministry. This imagery of lifting up a branch is perfectly suited for vine dressing. The vinedresser had the responsibility of making sure branches did not lay on the ground where standing in water would be unhealthy—causing rot or insect infestation—and lifting up branches to get ample sunshine needed for growth and bearing fruit. But even if one insists on the nuance "take away/remove," this would be saying nothing more than what the Lord will say in Jn 15:6 (see notes there). Keep in mind that Jesus is talking about branches "in Me."

Even when the branch does bear fruit, the Father continues to work with it. He prunes it, so that it bears even more fruit. The word translated "prune" is the Gk verb *kathairō* (καθαίρω), a word which normally means to "clean" or "purify." This looks at the work of sanctification that the Father carries out in a child of God. Even when Christians are walking with the Lord and bearing fruit, the Father still disciplines them . . . training them to share in His holiness . . . an unending process while they remain on earth (cf. Heb 12:3-11). It is as believers progress in sanctification (growing in holiness) that they become better qualified to produce more fruit.

15:3 "You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you.

This verse calls to mind the scene that had so recently transpired when Jesus washed the feet of the disciples: "He who has bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you" (Jn 13:10; the final comment pertained to Judas). Hence this is a second major hint that true believers are in view. The emphasis of the whole passage is *fruit bearing*, not one's eternal destiny. Christ had previously spoken to them His "word" about receiving eternal life as a result of believing in Him (e.g., Jn 3:16, 36). The disciples had done that, and as a result of their faith in Him, they were now "clean" (equivalent to what we think of as being "saved" from the penalty of sin). The adjective "clean" (Gk *katharos* [καθαρός]) involves a wordplay with the verb *kathairō* in the previous verse (translated there as "prune"). The disciples were "clean" positionally because of faith in Christ, but they still had a need for practical cleansing (sanctification) that would render them more useful for bearing fruit.

15:4 "Abide in Me, and I in you.

As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither *can* you unless you abide in Me. Verse four begins with a command (an imperative verb). The disciples had believed and were "clean," but they still had a responsibility to "abide" in Christ. What does it mean to "abide" in Christ? The Greek word that is translated abide, *menō* (μένω), is used about 67 times by John in his gospel and epistles. Often the word is used in the literal sense, "to dwell at a certain place of residence," i.e., to live somewhere. Otherwise the word generally means to remain or continue on. Verses such as John 15:10, 1 Jn 2:3-6 and 3:24 clarify that obedience is the essential characteristic of *abiding*. 1 Jn 3:24 states, "The

one who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him.” Hence we “abide” in Christ by remaining in fellowship with Him (which involves confession of sin and repentance) and then walking in obedience to Him and His Word. To “abide” in Christ cannot be a depiction of every true Christian; otherwise Christ would not have stated this as a command for them to obey. This implies that “abiding” in Christ is not automatic. There is a choice to be made, which the following verses confirm. A Christian who wants to be rightly related to Christ and bear fruit to His glory will obey Christ’s command to abide in Him. The latter part of vs 4 makes clear that “abiding” is essential—not an option—to bearing fruit. We are deceiving ourselves if we think we can act religious and bear true spiritual fruit without abiding in Christ. Jesus says we cannot, so we should not play a game of acting spiritual and trying to serve the Lord without truly abiding in Him.

15:5 “I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.

Although it was apparent from the outset, Christ restates what is obvious from the metaphor: He is the vine and we are branches completely dependent on Him. If a believer is worried that he/she might not produce fruit and so be found unpleasing to the Lord, all such worrying should cease. Focus, rather, should be on one’s responsibility to abide in Christ. A Christian who does that will bear much fruit. That’s Christ’s promise! Believers might do many religious activities apart from abiding in Christ—though it might appear to others as commendable spiritual service—but this will not result in what the Lord would appraise as true lasting fruit. Apart from Him (i.e., abiding in Him), we simply cannot do this. As the Book of Acts attests, these eleven disciples did go on to “abide” in their Lord, and as a result there was lasting fruit approved by God. What was true for the eleven can be just as true for the child of God today. Abiding is essential, but abiding is not possible apart from obedience to Christ and His Word as one relies upon the Holy Spirit for His enabling power.

15:6 “If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away [or “discarded”] as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned.

The command to “abide” in verse 4 implies that a Christian may or may not do that. Verse 5 considered the positive choice to abide in Christ—such a one will bear fruit. Now verse 6 considers the negative choice. What is the result if a Christian does not heed Christ’s command to abide in Him? Sadly, he is *discarded* as a branch. [The translation “thrown away” is based on the Gk verb *ballō* (βάλλω) meaning to “throw” and thus to move something, followed by the adverb *exō* (ἔξω) meaning “out” or “outside.” This same combination of *ballō* and *exō* occurs in Lk 14:35 in regard to the salt that had become tasteless and unable to be seasoned any longer. “It is useless either for the soil or for the manure pile; it is thrown out (i.e., *discarded*).” The context of that verse had to do with Christ’s clarification of what was demanded for someone to come after Him and be His disciple. The discipleship He called for was *costly*; it was very demanding.

In Jn 15:6, Jesus does not clarify at what point the decision is made that a believer has failed to “abide” in Him. In light of the rest of the Bible (especially passages like Heb 12:3-11), we can deduce that this is not simply at the first instance of disobedience in a believer’s life. The Christian life normally is beset with failures and sin. As long as the believer truly confesses his sin and repents of it, the Lord graciously forgives him, restores him, and continues to use him. The situation described in Jn 15:6, then, probably has in mind a believer who has rebelled and made a decisive choice to live in disobedience and/or to pursue the things of the world apart from abiding in Christ (like the seed among the thorns in the parable of the sower). While this may be too difficult for us as humans to judge when one has gone too far, this is not too difficult for the Lord. He sees all things clearly, and He judges fairly. If He decides a believer has rejected Christ’s command to abide in Him, we can be assured that such an evaluation is accurate. In this case, a believer is *discarded as a branch*. This does not mean loss of salvation. A branch has a purpose to bear fruit, and God can abandon the use of a believer to bear fruit. He will still spend eternity in heaven, because God is faithful to His promises (note esp. 2 Tim 2:13), but he has spoiled God’s plan for his life of being “His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works” (Eph 2:10).

Not only is such a disobedient believer “discarded”, but he “dries up.” That is, he withers spiritually, and as he does, he reaps the consequences of what he has sown. His life—like a house of cards—will begin to crumble. The calamity of a “dried up” life is a somber reminder of why it is important for us to obey Christ’s injunction to “abide” in Him.

In the second half of verse six, the pronouns are suddenly in the 3rd person plural. Who are “they”? At this point, the metaphor is resumed. In earthly life, dead branches that are cut away from a vine or picked up by workers in the vineyard and hauled off to a burn pile. Personally, I don’t think this is speaking of hell or even of the burning of a believer’s works as depicted in 1 Cor 3:12-15. [Regarding the 1 Cor 3 situation, all believers face that burning, but John 15:6 is describing something for those who reject “abiding”]. John 15:6 is simply the imagery consistent with the vineyard metaphor. The point is not so much judgment (though of course that does eventually come) but to depict how worthless and useless is the life of one who rejected his responsibility to abide in Christ and was thus discarded for fruit-bearing purposes.

15:7-8 “If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples.

There is a special promise for those who respond positively to Christ’s command to abide in Him. Answered prayer is directly related to abiding and walking in obedience to God’s Word. Since the context is concerned with fruit bearing, the promise pertains primarily to God’s response in answering prayers related to ministry and efforts to bear fruit.