

Systematic Theology for the Local Church
#46—Christology—Part XII¹
The Vine and the Branches

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 June 8, 2008

The next study will be on the personal existence of the Holy Spirit. Helpful for that study is Reymond pp. 314-321 and House, Section 34.

One of the most overlooked areas of theology is that of the present work of the Lord Jesus Christ. We tend to think of his work on the Cross and of his future work to the exclusion of what he is doing now. While all of Jesus' works are ultimately linked, we should be able to separate in our thinking his present activities from his past and future activities.

Many of our Lord's past works (death, burial, resurrection, ascension and others) can be best treated in the section on soteriology. And his future works are best treated in the section on eschatology. There are many present works that fall into other theological categories: 1) Jesus is at the Father's right hand (eschatology); 2) Jesus is the giver of gifts (ecclesiology and pneumatology); 3) Jesus is the Chief Shepherd (ecclesiology); 4) Jesus is the Bridegroom and believers are the Bride (eschatology); 5) Jesus is the Chief Cornerstone (soteriology); 6) Jesus is our Great High Priest (covered in christology). In this study we are going to treat an ongoing work of the Savior that provides for believers.

From the time I was eight years old until I was 14, my family lived on property in northern New Jersey that had a row of grape plants—supported by horizontal wires—that was about 100 feet long. When we first moved there, we found that it had been neglected for many years. Every spring my mother spent several days pruning and cleaning the plants. Although I did some pruning, it was my job to gather, bundle and discard the branches that had been removed. To this day I remember the process as difficult and dirty work. Why did we have to do this? Why so much trouble? In the fall it became obvious. There were countless clusters of delicious purple, yellow-green and red grapes. Today we are going to look at *the* grape passage in the New Testament—John 15:1-17—and study the present work of the Lord Jesus Christ as the Vine.

The key and only text for Jesus as the vine is Jn. 15:1-17:

15 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ² He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. ³ You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴ Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

⁵ "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. ⁷ If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. ⁸ This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

⁹ "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. ¹⁰ If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. ¹¹ I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. ¹² My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. ¹³ Greater love has no one than this, that he

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lay down his life for his friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command. ¹⁵ I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. ¹⁶ You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. ¹⁷ This is my command: Love each other.

1. What is the vine?

The figure of the vine here is almost certainly drawn from the parable in Isa. 5, but with some obvious changes. Here is the Isaiah passage:

5 I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard: My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. ² He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well. Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit. ³ “Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. ⁴ What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it? When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad? ⁵ Now I will tell you what I am going to do to my vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it will be destroyed; I will break down its wall, and it will be trampled. ⁶ I will make it a wasteland, neither pruned nor cultivated, and briers and thorns will grow there. I will command the clouds not to rain on it.” ⁷ The vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are the garden of his delight. And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.

In Isa. 5 the vine is Israel (v. 7), and the owner of the vine is Jehovah. Verses 1-2 and 7 are spoken by the prophet. The material in between is spoken by Jehovah, who will “destroy” the vineyard. Since Israel has continued to exist to this day, this destruction must not mean total elimination. The destruction is described in v. 6: the vineyard becomes a wasteland, etc., but does not cease to exist. Overall, the vine in Isa. 5 is Israel viewed from the standpoint of her fruitfulness, not her belonging to God (existence versus non-existence).

While the vine in Isa. 5 is Israel, the vine in Jn. 15 is Jesus. In saying (Jn. 15:1) that he is the “true vine,” Jesus asserts that he is the Messiah who perfectly fulfills the will of the Father and reverses the failures of Israel the vineyard. But the vine is more than that here: it is Jesus along with believers in a relation to him that involves both living and service. Jesus is the vine, and believers are the branches attached to the vine. He is the believer's source of spiritual sustenance. The ‘branches’ here are actually long runners, since that is where the fruit grows. Since the branches represent something other than Jesus, he must correspond to the base, woody, thick part of the total plant. We will see that as with Isa. 5 the issue is not belonging to God but fruitfulness.

‘I am the vine’ is considered by most interpreters to be one of the “I am” statements in the gospel of John (along with 6:35: “I am the bread of life”; 8:12: “I am the light of the world”; 10:9: “I am the gate”; 10:14: “I am the good shepherd”; 11:25: “I am the resurrection and the life”; 14:6: “I am the way and the truth and the life”). ‘I am’ reflects Ex. 6:3, where God reveals “himself” as the self-existent one. Jesus is equating himself with a vine, but he is also asserting his deity. In effect, then, Jesus is saying that he is the vine and that he is God at the same time.

The phrase ‘in me’ in v. 2 has been interpreted in three different ways, in part because of the apparent problem that the branches are “cut off,” an action that seems to be (but is not) parallel to the branches in v. 6 that are thrown away and wither, are picked up and burned.

1) The branches are those who have made a profession of faith in Christ. This includes those who are really saved and those who are pretenders in the faith. While there are many interpreters who hold to this view,

here is a statement of this position from the section on John's Gospel written by Ed Blum in the *Bible Knowledge Commentary*²:

Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit **He cuts off**. The phrase "in Me" does not mean the same thing as Paul's words "in Christ." Here it is part of the metaphor of the Vine and seems to mean, "every person who professes to be My disciple (a branch) is not necessarily a true follower." A branch **that bears no** fruit is obviously dead. Therefore, like Judas, it is cut off. (See comments on John 15:6.) Every year in Palestine gardeners prune their vines. They cut off the dead wood which has no life in it and trim the living branches so that their yield will be greater.

So, according to this view, the branches that represent saved people bear fruit. What about the branches that are cut off? According to Blum, they have two characteristics: 1) they represent unsaved people and 2) they do not bear fruit. But this interpretation has strange implications.

- No one can disagree that overall the passage is an exhortation to bear fruit. According to Blum, if a person doesn't bear fruit, he is unsaved. Therefore, the passage ends up being an exhortation to be saved by demonstrating that one is a fruit-bearer. I do not believe that the passage is an exhortation to be saved. It is an exhortation to bear fruit.
- Suppose that the branch in 2a is a false Christian and substitute 'false Christian' for 'branch.' This would yield "He cuts off every false Christian in me that bears no fruit." This is, of course, nonsensical, because Jesus knows that no unbeliever can produce fruit!
- Also, the sentence "Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me" is, under this view, a tautology, since bearing fruit and being saved are synonymous in this passage (according to this view) and remaining in Christ means to be saved. So Jesus would be saying, "You can't be saved unless you are saved."
- Verse 2 says that branches that bear fruit are pruned so that they can bear fruit. Under this interpretation pruning would have to mean that when God prunes the unfruitful branch he also saves it, since the branch starts to bear fruit, i.e. changes from a mere professor to a genuine believer. But where in the Bible do we have the idea that God's pruning equals God's saving work?
- Finally, this view means that there are no Christians who do not bear fruit, since the ones that don't bear fruit are unsaved. This contradicts passages that teach that Christians can be carnal (e.g. 1 Cor. 3:1-4). This position, however, is espoused explicitly by proponents of Lordship salvation, because they are committed to the position that no believer can be carnal since every true believer has committed himself to obedience to Christ at salvation.

The most significant problem for this view is the fact that the passage was not spoken to unbelievers but to the disciples as part of the upper room discourse—after Judas had left! The issue is not salvation. 'You are the branches' has to mean that the branches—all of them—are Jesus' true followers. Notice that these branches can bear fruit or not bear fruit and can remain in Christ or not remain in Christ. We will come the meaning of 'remain' in our discussion below.

2) A second view is that the branches are true believers, but, because they do not bear fruit, God takes away their salvation—he 'cuts' them off and they are 'burned,' Besides introducing the terrible and unbiblical doctrine of conditional security, this view, as the previous, makes salvation (in this case remaining saved) dependent on bearing fruit. To look at it another way, the view makes salvation dependent on our effort to remain in Christ (v. 6), i.e. we have to strive to remain in Christ and then we will bear fruit and keep ourselves saved.

² Libronix Digital Library System version.

3) The only view that is theologically sound and makes sense of this passage is the view that the branches are true believers. Notice that the branches are said to be ‘in me,’ that is, in Christ. Blum has absolutely no support for his view that ‘in me’ does not equal ‘in Christ.’ Since the speaker, the Lord Jesus Christ, is also the ‘me’ of v. 2, then the branches are connected to Christ. Furthermore, there is absolutely no biblical support for saying that unsaved people can be ‘in Christ.’ No, this passage is an exhortation to true Christians to bear fruit. They are people who fall under Paul’s description in 1 Cor. 5:17:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!

Now notice the following things that this passage teaches about the believer that does not bear fruit. The believer that does not bear fruit:

- Is clean (v. 3), since all the occurrences of ‘you’ in the passage refer to believers (v. 5—‘you are the branches’). I do not see that being ‘clean’ can be connected with anything other than being born again by the work of the Holy Spirit, who does a cleansing work as part of the work of regeneration. This also must be the same thing that Jesus was teaching in Jn. 13:10, where he showed the difference between positional cleansing (at salvation) and practical cleansing (during life), with the latter pictured in Jesus’ washing the disciples’ feet. Also relevant are Jn. 3:5 and Eph. 5:25-27.

Jn. 13:10-11: ¹⁰ Jesus answered, “A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you.” ¹¹ For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean.

Jn. 3:5: Jesus answered, “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit

Eph. 5:25-27: ²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ²⁶ to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, ²⁷ and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.

- Attempts to serve on his own (5b).
- Will get ‘cut off’ (v. 2; we will discuss what this means below) (v. 2).
- Is like a branch that is thrown into the fire and burned (v. 6).

The last two characteristics about the believer who does not bear fruit seem to be problematic, i.e. how can a believer be cut off or thrown away? We need to explain these. But first let’s look at two other key concepts in the passage: fruit and remaining.

2. What does ‘fruit’ mean?

Understanding the meaning of ‘fruit’ here helps to confirm that the branches are true believers. While vv. 1-8 speak the most about fruit, verses 9-17 are also part of the exhortation to bear fruit. For example, v. 16 explicitly mentions fruit. So vv. 9-17 must also be about bearing fruit, telling us how to do it. We observe the following things about fruit in this and related passages:

- Fruit involves doing and going (v. 16). Presumably this means stepping out in faith in the world.
- Fruit lasts (v. 16), presumably forever.
- Fruit should exist in abundance (vv. 5, 8).
- Giving to others is a fruit (Rom. 15:28).
- Fruit can consist of causing the spiritual growth of others (Rom. 1:13). If you help someone else grow in

But how do we get fruit? We get the answer to this when we understand the concept of remaining in Christ.

3. What does 'remain' mean?

To understand what the passage teaches about fruit, we need to understand what creates it. It is remaining in Christ that leads to fruit. Here, then, is what we see in the whole passage about remaining:

- We should have little doubt that remaining in Christ's love in v. 9 is somehow equivalent to remaining in the vine in v. 4: 'remain in me'/'remain in my love.' Verse 10 then tells us how to remain in Christ's love: by obeying his commands. This is simple obedience. It is doing what Scripture tells us to do. This is confirmed by v. 14: "You are my friends if you do what I command." So if remaining in Christ and remaining in his love are equivalent, and remaining in his love comes through obedience, then remaining in him must also come through obedience.
- Remaining also involves the fellowship with Christ that results from doing what he tells us to do. Notice that the model for obeying Christ is his obedience of what the Father has told him to do ("just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love"). The Christian who obeys experiences the joy of fellowship with the Savior that leads to fruit.
- Since this passage is about believers, v. 4 must be saying that it is possible for a believer not to remain in Christ. If remaining in Christ's love means obeying Scripture, not remaining means not obeying Scripture. We know that it is possible for a Christian to disobey Scripture. Such failure to obey Scripture will lead to failure to remain in Christ's love.
- A branch's attempt to live on its own (v. 4: 'bear fruit by itself') is a failure to remain in Christ.

There are positive and negative consequences connected with remaining/obeying:

- Remaining/obeying will bring glory to God (v. 8), since it leads to fruit.
- Remaining/obeying brings fruit and even much fruit.
- Remaining/obeying brings power in prayer (v. 7).
- Remaining/obeying brings great joy (v. 11).
- Remaining/obeying shows we belong to Christ (v. 14).
- Remaining/obeying results in fruit that lasts (v. 16).

In a physical grape vine fruitlessness can be due to 1) the absence of fruit-bearing sections (the vine just produces leaves), 2) plant diseases and 3) plants that have not been cultivated, pruned and fed. There are specific consequences if we do not remain in Christ by obeying.

- Not remaining/obeying results in a failure to produce fruit.
- Not remaining/obeying can lead to great loss (v. 6).
- Not remaining/obeying leads to the Father's vine-tending work (vv. 2, 6).

Since this passage must be addressed to believers, it teaches that a Christian who does not obey Scripture will *certainly* experience the Father's pruning work. Not remaining/obeying leads to no fruit, which leads to pruning. God will not leave the disobedient Christian alone. He continually works to conform us to the likeness of Christ (Rom. 8:29).

Jesus repeatedly says that his followers have a choice of obeying or not obeying:

- According to v. 5-6 there are two kinds of Christians: those that remain/obey and those that don't. These conditions result from conscious choices.
- The passage contains several commands that point to the right path: 'remain in me' (v. 4), 'remain in my love' (v. 9), 'love each other' (vv. 12 and 17).
- There are five occurrences of the conditional 'if' (v. 5, 6 7, 10 and 14). These all imply choice points—facing an alternative and selecting the right one.

We are now in a position to answer the questions of the meaning of the cutting off in v. 2 and the burning of branches in v. 6.

4. What happens to the branches in v. 2?

Recall that we said that the branches in this passage must be Christians. They cannot anywhere in the passage represent 1) people who have professed Christ but are not genuine or 2) Christians who lose their salvation. The second verse sounds as if something drastic happens to the branches that do not bear fruit. But whatever it is, it is something that happens to believers.

I consulted about ten sources concerning the interpretation of this verse. All except two said that these branches are false believers whom the Father unmasks so that, like Judas, they come to be seen for what they are. They see the verse as saying that the Father's pruning equals an unmasking. But this simply will not fit the context or even the verse itself.

How then can we understand the cutting off? The NIV translation 'cuts off' represents αἶρει (*airei*) from αἶρω (*airo*, 'I lift up'). However, the most likely meaning of the word here is 'lift up.' During seasonal care for vineyards, branches that are running along the ground are picked up and put onto horizontal supports. Lifting up the branches from the ground keeps them from disease and insects on the ground and from rotting due to moisture.

It is true that αἶρει (*airei*) can mean 'cut off.' However, if Jesus meant that here, he would be saying that a person who is not bearing fruit would be kept from *ever* bearing fruit. This cannot be what he is saying.

Jesus employs a play on words in v. 2 in describing the Father's actions for the two types of branch: 1) as we have seen, for the unfruitful branch he performs the action described by αἶρει (*airei*); 2) with respect to the fruitful branch, his work is described by καθαίρει (*kathairei*; 'cleanse' or 'cleanse by pruning away dead tissue'). Putting the transliterations of these words together helps us to see the parallel:

airei
kathairei

While there is no great theological significance to this word-play, it does suggest that Jesus sees these actions as parallel in some sense. The Father does two things in tending to the believer-branches: he lifts up some and he cleanses others. He is the perfect tender of the vineyard; he knows what each believer-branch needs. The parallelism in the two terms must point to the unity of the Father's work: all believers get tending, but in his wisdom the Father tends in a perfect way for each one to make it bear fruit as he wills. Some need lifting up or repositioning so that they start bearing fruit, some need cleaning so that they bear even more.

After I had done the exegetical work on this passage I came across an article that brought me much satisfaction. It came at the passage from a different, although overlapping, viewpoint. Written by Gary

Dereckson, who holds degrees in agriculture, it shows from the perspective of viticulture—the care and tending of grape vines—what the meaning of the passage is. Here is what Gary says about v. 2³:

The approach of most exegetes is to see in Jesus' words a process by which farmers pick off the adventitious sprigs from the fruiting branches (cleanses them) and cut off nonfruiting branches (takes them away). This interpretation of *airei*, however, contradicts the evidence from Pliny that nonfruiting branches were preserved and nurtured for use the following season. It would be better to see Jesus indicating what actually occurred during the spring, namely, certain nonfruiting branches were tied to the trellises along with the fruiting branches while the side shoots of the fruiting branches were being "cleaned up." The nonfruiting branches were allowed to grow with full vigor and without the removal of any side growth or leaves, since the more extensive their growth the greater the diameter of their stem where it connected to the vine, giving greater ability to produce more fruit the following season. Removing the nonfruiting branches from the ground and placing them on the trellis would allow the rows of plants to benefit from unhindered aeration, considered an essential element to proper fruit development. To see *airei* as removal (judgment or discipline) is to contradict the actual practice of the time.

It is significant that in v. 3 there is a third related word that describes all believers: καθαροί (*katharoi*; 'clean'). All Christians are positionally clean, as we mentioned above in the section on the meaning of the branches. So we have three related words that describe the branches:

airei
kathairei
katharoi

The significance of the third term in relation to the first two is that while some believers need one kind of care (lifting up) and others need another kind (cleansing), all the branches are positionally clean to start with. Some get the work described by *airei*, some the work described by *kathairei*, but all are *katharoi*.

5. What happens to the branches in v. 6?

In v. 2b the first branch that the Father tends is one that *does not bear fruit*. In v. 6 the branch that the Father tends is one that *does not abide in Christ*. In v. 6 the branch that does not remain/does not obey faces a frightening consequence. Here is the text again:

If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.

Since we have solidly established that this passage concerns true believers, the throwing away and burning cannot represent loss of salvation. So what is being described here? Paying careful attention to the text resolves the apparent problem. Notice that the text says that the person who doesn't abide is 'like' a branch that eventually gets burned. Jesus changes the branch/believer analogy here. Earlier in the passage believers are equated with branches. But here in v. 6 believers are said to be *like* certain branches. 'You are the branches' is a metaphor, where one thing (believer) is described in terms of another (branch). 'He is like a branch' is a simile, where the word like is used to establish a comparison. The change in the type of figure of speech signals that we should view the branches differently here. The believer/branch doesn't get thrown into a fire; he is *like* a branch that gets thrown into a fire. In the physical care for the vineyard, some

³ Gary W. Derickson, "Viticulture and John 15:1-6." Gary is an Associate Professor of Biblical Studies at Western Baptist College in Salem, Oregon. The article can be found at <http://www.faithalone.org/journal/2005i/derickson.pdf>

branches are no longer useful for producing fruit and so they are set aside. That was part of my job in taking care of our vines: I picked up the waste material and put it elsewhere. Yes, I may have even burned the branches, but remember that the simile ('like') prevents us from demanding that the people represented by the branches are burned up, either physically or spiritually.

But even if this does not mean that some true believers are destroyed, how can this extreme treatment be applied to them? The answer lies in the different terms used in vv. 2 and 6. Notice that v. 6 speaks of remaining, while v. 2 speaks of bearing fruit. Failure to abide has a different consequence from failure to bear fruit.

Recall that we said that remaining means obeying Christ. Remaining/obeying leads to fruit. Not remaining/obeying leads to not regularly bearing fruit. But there can be other causes for not bearing fruit. A person can remain/obey and still not bear fruit. Perhaps he is timid or needs teaching. Such a person is lifted up, as indicated in v. 2.

But not abiding is more serious. It is a main cause for not bearing fruit but it is also a sign of rebellion. If a Christian demonstrates this heart attitude, the Father as the vinedresser will deal harshly with him. Perhaps he will even put him in a place where he is useless to God for some period of time. This would be an extreme act of discipline like what happened to John Mark after his division from Paul. After a period where he was not of value to Paul, there came a time when Paul could say of him "Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry." (2 Tim. 4:11). The word 'helpful' could also be translated 'useful.' I believe that God set John Mark aside during a time of chastisement until he was once more useful to Paul. The Father is treating the branches in the same way here.

We were told in v. 2 that unfruitful branches are simply lifted up. But the branches in v. 6 are treated in an extreme way and so fall into a different class. Their repeated failure to remain/obey leads to chastisement from God that puts them on the shelf for a time as far as service is concerned. Whether they are ever brought back to service is not indicated in this passage. But we can see from other places in the NT that, unlike John Mark, some believers fail so significantly in their obedience to God that he takes them home because of their sin, as seen in 1 Jn. 5:16-17:

¹⁶ If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death. There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that he should pray about that. ¹⁷ All wrongdoing is sin, and there is sin that does not lead to death.

The sin that leads to death here is an unknown sin that is grave enough to bring about death. Whether or not the disobedience/sin in v. 6 is this grave, we are not told. But we should not rule it out.

Verse 6, then, is describing the Christian whose existence is characterized by a life of disobedience. Verse 2a describes the believer who does not do acts of fruit bearing, but who is not confirmed in the disobedience that causes this. Dereckson confirms this conclusion from both an exegetical and viticultural standpoint, as he makes a distinction between tending to the vine in the spring (v. 2) versus in the fall (v. 6):

The nonabiding branches of v 6 are not the same as the unfruitful branches of v 2. Verse 6 does not raise the issue of fruitfulness reflected in v 2 and is not looking at the same time of year. Sprigs cleaned from the vines in the spring would be too small and succulent to do more than wither away. They would not have enough wood in them to form a pile and make a fire. There also would not be any adventitious "branches" with sufficient time to develop woody stems, but only succulent sprouts. Even a two-foot long sprout would wither to practically nothing in the spring. To build a fire as described in v 6, mature wood would have to be removed. This happens in the severe pruning at the

beginning of the dormant season after all fruit has been harvested, and all branches look alike. It happens to fruitful as well as unfruitful branches. Rather than warning of discipline or judgment, v 6 illustrates uselessness in light of dormant-season pruning. Within the vine-and-branch analogy, the best illustration of the uselessness resulting from a failure to abide could come only from the postharvest pruning. Everything pruned in early spring was either growing from a branch (sprigs and suckers), the branch not being removed, or from an undesired location on the trunk. Only at the end of the season would “branches” be removed, piled up, and burned. In fact Jesus may have chosen to allude to postharvest cultural practices specifically because He did not want His disciples mistakenly to link fruitfulness or fruitlessness to divine discipline. Rather, He wanted them to see the importance of abiding. In a vineyard anything not attached to the vine is useless and discarded. A part of the discarding process at the end of the productive season is the burning of dry materials. The burning need not describe judgment; it is simply one step in the process being described. It is what happens to pruned materials. Their uselessness, not their destruction, is being emphasized. The two verses following this illustration help clarify Jesus’ point. He was clearly addressing His believing disciples. He linked answered prayer to abiding (v 7) and His Father’s glory to their fruit bearing (v 8). Both abiding and fruit bearing, developed and defined in vv 4 and 5, are related directly and conditionally to the men standing in Jesus’ presence. Both vv 6 and 7 begin with third-class conditional clauses, indicating that it was possible for the disciples, undeniably identified by “you” in v 7, to fail to abide. If they could fail to abide in v 7, they could also be described by and subject to the warning in v 6. When the fruitfulness that results from abiding demonstrates their relationship to Christ as His disciples (v 8) and is seen in light of the promises of vv 5 and 7, their usefulness as His disciples must be in view in the warning in v 6. This is especially true since the focus of the whole passage is on what they were to experience in this life following Jesus’ departure, not the one to come.

6. What should we do in response to this passage?

If you look at a physical grape vine at harvest time, you will see four types of branches. Some have no fruit on them. Some have rotten, diseased or distorted fruit (things that don’t look like grapes). Some have good fruit, but the size and amount is just average. But some branches are weighed down with good fruit. Spiritually, the last kind is what the Father wants—bearing much fruit (v. 10). No allowable alternatives are given in this passage! ‘Much fruit’ is the main thing God wants, and it shows that we are Jesus’ disciples.

Perhaps some of us need to examine our fruit bearing. We need to look at our trials and see if they have come because we have not been bearing fruit. We need to determine if we have been bearing fruit or have just been busy. Even more importantly, do we have a heart inclined to disobedience that may lead to the severe pruning of v. 6, with likely loss of usefulness to God? Do we want to bear fruit, or are we living for ourselves with disobedience to Scripture.

May I add another personal note? My father loved grapes. I remember during the grape harvest season when he would stand near the vines and pick off cluster after cluster of big, healthy grapes and pop one grape after another into his mouth. The vines had produced what they were pruned to do. He was more than pleased with the results. The analogy is imperfect, of course, but you get the point. Is your heavenly Father pleased with what you are producing in your obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ?

Study questions

1. What are the important features of the comparison between Isa. 5 and Jn. 15?
2. What do the branches represent? How do we know? What views are there?
3. How do we know what 'fruit' is?
4. What does 'remain' mean? How do we know?
5. How are vv. 2a and 2b different from vv. 6 and 7? Why is this important?
6. What does knowledge of viticulture contribute to our understanding of this passage?
7. Why can the treatment of the branches in v. 6 not refer to loss of eternal life?

Running compilation of key definitions

1. Systematic theology: The organized presentation of all that the Bible teaches about God and His works.
2. Exegesis: The actual practice of studying or interpreting a document or other message to determine its meaning.
3. Context: Context in a document or utterance is the surroundings of a portion of a word, a word, or a group of words.
4. Bibliology: The doctrinal study of the nature of the Bible.
5. Biblical authority: The quality inherent in Scripture by virtue of which human beings are completely answerable to its content.
6. Revelation: The information about Himself given by God to human beings.
7. General revelation: God's disclosure of Himself, available directly to everyone, given through means other than dreams, visions, direct words and Christ Himself.
8. Special revelation: The disclosure of information from God that is not available directly to all human beings.
9. Inspiration: A term applied to the Bible denoting that it is the product of God's creative activity, figuratively breathed out from Him (2 Tim. 3:16); applies to the process of recording Scripture, not specifically to the people involved; actually, *expiration* would be a better term to reflect the concept of 2 Tim. 3:16; the result is *inerrancy*.
10. Textual criticism: The science and art of attempting to discover the original text of a literary work for which the original document does not exist. It is especially important for biblical studies, and the foundational endeavor to all subsequent investigation of the Scriptures.
11. Canon: Transliterated from a Greek Word meaning "standard"; as used of the Bible, it refers to books authenticated as possessing divine origin and therefore authoritative; the Jewish canon consists of thirty-nine books, the Protestant of sixty-six and the Catholic of eighty (including apocryphal books).
12. Inerrancy is a term applied to the Bible, although not specifically found in it; it denotes that the Bible, as originally written, possessed no humanly induced deviations from the message God intended to be recorded and that it is true in every respect; 2 Tim. 3:16; 1 Cor. 2:13; 1 Pet. 2:19.
13. Infallibility: Although some assert that this term has a different meaning from inerrancy, the two terms are, for purposes of biblical study, synonymous; the Bible is infallible because inerrant, and inerrant because infallible.
14. Illumination is the teaching ministry of the Spirit of God that imparts understanding of the message of Scripture to the believer; not to be confused with inspiration, which in the Bible is used of the work of God in giving Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16); 1 Jn. 2:20; Jn. 16:13.
15. Spirituality: God is not physical, but immaterial, incorporeal, invisible and alive.
16. Self-existence/Aseity: God exists independently of anything else. He is self-existent.
17. Immensity: God is infinite in relation to space.
18. Eternality: God is infinite with regard to time.
19. Simplicity: God is not a plurality and cannot be looked at as divisible into parts.
20. Pure actuality: There is nothing about God that is potential. He is not unfinished in any way.
21. Necessity: God is uncaused and exists because he must exist.
22. Immutability: God is unchanging and unchangeable.
23. Impassibility: God is incapable of being changed or disturbed by what he experiences and is incapable of suffering.
24. Transcendence: God and the world are distinct; he is not part of the world, and the world is not part of him.
25. Immanence: God is present in the world.
26. Infinity: There are no limits to God's person and his perfections.
27. Omnipotence: God can do whatever he wills.
28. Omniscience: God knows everything there is to know.
29. Omnipresence: God is present everywhere in his creation

30. Holiness: God is morally pure and separated from all moral evil and sin.
31. Goodness: A quality that describes or includes his love, benevolence, mercy and grace
32. Truth: God's person, actions, knowledge and revelations correspond to reality
33. Love: God's continual communication of himself to his creatures.
34. Benevolence: God's goodness toward his creatures.
35. Mercy: God's goodness toward those who are helpless.
36. Grace: God's goodness toward sinners.
37. Glory: The greatness of God's perfections.
38. Trinity: There is only one true God, existing as a single Being comprised of three Persons who are equal in every way, yet distinct in their tasks and relations to humanity.
39. God's decree: The decree of God is his plan for the universe that includes all things and is certain to come to pass.
40. Providence: God's care for and upholding of his creation.
41. Sovereignty: God's control over his universe.
42. Christology: The study of the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.
43. Incarnation: The joining of deity and humanity in one person forever. The word is based on the Latin word for flesh: the Lord Jesus Christ is God joined with human flesh.
44. Pre-existence: Used of the Son, it means that he existed before Bethlehem.
45. Theophany: An appearance of God.
46. Christophany: An appearance of Christ.
47. Priesthood: The system that God established to remedy the problem of alienation between a holy God and sinful human beings.
48. Son of God: A name for Jesus that describes his deity and his approval by the Father at the resurrection.
49. Messiah: A transliteration of a Hebrew word meaning 'anointed one'; used of the expected national deliverer of Israel; the linguistic equivalent of Greek *christos*, 'Christ'.