

Choices for the Christian...and their consequences...
A Series on Sanctification: Part 4 (E. Radmacher)

In this study of John 15, there are benefits in abiding in Jesus: "bearing fruit, more fruit, and much fruit." But there are consequences to the Christian who chooses to stop abiding. This pattern of consequences for choices has always been God's procedure for disciplining His children. With respect to the covenant people under the Mosaic Law, God gave specific promises for obedience and disobedience.

Having commanded them to abide and affirm that, even though they have been made ready to bear fruit by the Father and have been cleansed by the word through the Son, they must abide in Him in order to be fruitful. Jesus now describes the danger of making the wrong choice, of failing to abide. He does this through an "if-then" construction: "*If anyone does not abide in Me, (this implies choice), then he is cast out as a branch...*" (1)

This verse (John 15:6) has occasioned a great deal of debate. (2) The difficulty for the interpreter is twofold: 1) Who is Jesus referring to in the use of "anyone" and "they" of the allegory? 2) What does the destiny of the non-abiding branches mean?

1. Who is Jesus referring to in the use of "anyone" and "they" of the allegory?

Some commentators believe that Jesus is making a distinction between nonbelievers from the disciples. But is this observable within the context of John 15? In verse 5, Jesus uses the plural "you" twice clearly in reference to the disciples. After saying "you are the branches", Jesus says "*he who abides in Me and I in him* (italics added). His use of "anyone" in verse six then logically follows the "he who" of verse five and does not distinguish nonbelievers from the disciples; Jesus is pointing to the individual choices the disciples must make to abide in Him if each wishes to be fruitful; even if one were theologically biased, Jesus' use of "anyone" does not exclude the disciples.

Who are "they"? In studying John 15:1-6, there is a progression of the pronouns from "He" (v. 2) to "you" (vv. 3-5) to "they" (v. 6).

- v. 2) Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, **He** takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, **He** prunes it so that it may bear more fruit.
- v. 3) **You** are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to **you**.
- v. 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.
- v. 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.
- v. 6) If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and **they** gather them, and cast them into the fire and **they** are burned.

When following the progression of pronouns, "they" clearly does not refer to God the Father nor to Jesus the Vine since both are singular. It does not refer to the Apostles, since they are "you" in verses 3-5. The only two options left are angels or people. If angels, then one must refer to Jesus' reference back to the Olivet Discourse; the weakness of this view is the need to reach out of the context to import "angels." In consideration of the more immediate context of that evening, the likely answer is that Jesus is referring to people.

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People?! How so? The context of this passage is set by the inclusion of John 13:34-35 and John 15:8-10. In John 13:35, Jesus pointed His men to the *world* as those who would judge them. "By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." Unbelievers look at the fruit (love) of believers toward one another and decide whether believers are for real.

2. What does the destiny of the non-abiding branches mean?

Some see this verse as a truth of justification; Jesus is distinguishing believers from nonbelievers. According to this view, the unfruitful branches that are "removed" in verse 2 are synonymous with the non-abiding branches in verse 6. (3) They believe their removal symbolizes the judgment of eternal damnation experienced by all the unregenerate (nonbelievers), whether they appear to be Christians or not. This doctrinal perspective teaches that all true believers will persevere in good works all the way to the end of their lives; thus, because of the doctrine of election, failure to do good works means that the person was never a believer. (4) In this viticulture analogy, failure to bear fruit would be failure to persevere in good works, and the conclusion, from this doctrinal perspective, is that being cast out describes the fate of a nonbeliever whose lack of salvation was demonstrated by his lack of perseverance.

What if this verse was meant as a truth of sanctification instead of justification? What if we were to accept this warning as addressed to the eleven men Jesus was addressing right then?

Dillow does not see a justification focus in verse 6. He rather says that,

"The point of the figure of the vine and the branches is not to portray organic connection but enablement and fellowship. This casting out then is not from salvation but from fellowship." (5)

Further, he sees the fire of 1 Corinthians 3:15 as the same as this verse, "The apostle obviously saw an intimate connection between the believer and his work. To apply the fire of judgment to the believer is the same as applying it to his work. Indeed the believer's works are simply a metonymy for the believer himself....The believer who does not remain in fellowship because of disobedience is cast out in judgment and withers spiritually, and faces severe divine discipline in time and loss of reward at the judgment seat of Christ." (6)

One difference between the two analogies, though, is that Jesus is looking at the person (the branch) while Paul is looking at the person's works. The fire of 1 Corinthians tests the quality of a believer's work in building up the body of believers in a local church, such as at Corinth, or in your local church. Where there is a connection between the two analogies is the relationship between bearing fruit and building quality material into the body of Christ. Only by abiding, and thereby bearing fruit, will anyone be able to build gold, silver, or precious stones onto the foundation of the church, which is Christ. And, in line with Paul's illustration, the non-abiding believer is not going to build anything worthy of reward. His works will be burned up before Christ, though "he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire" (1 Cor 3:15). The judgment is not a pleasant one. But, again, Jesus is not talking about the works themselves, but the branches, including the eleven men listening to Him at that time. Thus it becomes important to see that this branch is neither a nonbeliever nor one who loses his eternal salvation.

For the trained horticulturist, especially the viticulturist, verses 2 and 6 are not looking at the same time of the year; verse 2 looks at the Spring while verse 6 looks at the Fall. Verse 2 is preparing for the vine for fruiting before the fruit develops; verse 6 is preparing the vine for dormancy *after* the fruit has been harvested.

Rather than being a warning of discipline or judgment, verse 6 is an illustration of uselessness. Jesus wanted the disciples to see the importance of abiding itself. The uselessness of the branches, not their destruction, is being emphasized.

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If one takes the fire to represent the judgment of nonbelievers in hell as most who hold to the justification being the issue of the passage, it must be based on the branch's failure to abide, not on its failure to bear fruit. Fruitfulness is not mentioned in verse 6, only non-abiding. And, Jesus' excluding it from this verse *is* significant. The one who wants to say the burned branches represent nonbelievers must explain how one can be attached to Christ as a branch, and then become detached without ever having been a believer on the one hand or without losing one's salvation on the other hand.

3. What application(s) come to mind when you hear the phrase "bear fruit"?

It is important to keep in mind that John 15:6 is not a warning of discipline or judgment; it is an illustration of uselessness where a Christian is not abiding. It is a powerful testimony when one believer loves another believer.

Charles Colson tells of this kind of love being expressed toward him as a new believer and while he was still in prison following Watergate. He says,

"I'll never forget the day one of them-Al Quie-called to say, "Chuck, because of your family problems, I'm going to ask the President if you can go home, while I serve the rest of your prison term." I gasped in disbelief. At the time, Al was the sixth-ranking Republican in the House, one of the most respected public figures in Washington. Yet he was willing to jeopardize it all out of love for me. It was a powerful witness that Jesus was real: that a believer would lay down his life for another."

As a consequence of this love between believers, Colson notes the response of the reporter who learned of this.

"As I retold the story for the cameras, the interviewer broke down and waved her hand, saying, "Stop, stop." Tears mixed with mascara were streaming down her cheeks. She excused herself, repaired her make-up, and injecting confidence back into her voice-said, "Let's film that sequence once more." But hearing the story again, she could not hold back her tears. Later, she confessed that Al's willingness to sacrifice had touched her deeply, and she vowed to return to church she had left years earlier." (7)

Similar testimonies could be cited over and over down through history. In the third century, a man named Cyprian wrote a letter to a friend, telling him of his decision to convert to Christianity:

"This seems a cheerful world, Donatus, when I view it from this fair garden, under the shadow of these vines. But if I climb some great mountain and look out over the wide lands, you know very well what I would see. Brigands on the high rocks, pirates on the sea, in the amphitheaters men murdered to please applauding crowds. It is a sick world, Donatus, an incredibly sick world. Yet, in the midst of it, I have found a quiet and holy people. They have discovered a joy which is a thousand times better than any pleasure of this sinful world. They are despised and persecuted, but they care not. They have overcome the world. These people, Donatus, are the Christians, and I am one of them."

Jesus Christ made clear to the disciples that love (i.e. fruit) would be the key to success (the addition of new believers); however, that which seemed to be the normal response for those early believers, even under persecution, is fairly rare among those who name the name of Christ in our generation in our country.

When the world at large does not see a different value system from their own among those who profess a unique love relation to Jesus Christ, the believers are belittled, disparaged, maligned, and degraded. They are useless to God and seen as hypocritical by the world.

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References:

1. This is another third class conditional sentence which assumes for the sake of argument that the "if" clause may or may not be true and that the "then" clause then is true if the first clause is true and false if the first clause is false.
2. The justification salvation interpretation identifies the burned branches in verse six as unbelievers who are destroyed in Hell (Peterson, "The Preservation of the Saints: A Theological Exegesis of Four Key New Testament Passages," 108). MacArthur (The Gospel According to Jesus, 171) is typical when he says, "the imagery of burning suggests that these fruitless branches are doomed to hell." Laney ("Abiding is Believing: The Analogy of the Vine in John 15:1-6," 62) points to John 6:37 and Jesus' promise not to cast out any who come to Him as proof that the branches being cast out cannot be believers. But, the Greek terms for "cast out" in 6:37 and this verse are not identical. The use of different terms, though somewhat synonymous, limits the similarity. Laney says further, "Belief is the connection that unites the vine and branches. Without belief there is not abiding. The absence of abiding indicates deficient (transitory or superficial) belief.... There is not fruit without faith, and there is no faith without fruit.... While Reformation theology affirms that faith alone saves, it affirms with equal conviction that the faith that saves is not *alone* (65-66). Laney rejects the idea that burning refers to discipline on believers on the basis that the removal of the branches is "a prelude to judgment, not of blessed fellowship with Christ in heaven" (61). Smith ("The Unfruitful Branches in John 15," 17) concurs and says, "But if these branches be taken as Christians, what can the removal signify? The taking to heaven of sinning believers, as suggested by Chafer, does not remove them from Christ or from profession in Christ. If Jesus wanted to teach the truth that sinning believers may be removed to heaven it does not seem likely that He would have chosen this figure. What happens to dead and removed branches is not good." Peterson and Smith note that when Jesus refers to unfruitful, removed, and burned branches He uses the third person. But He refers to the disciples in the second person. Peterson ("The Perseverance of the Saints: A Theological Exegesis of Four Key New Testament Passages," 109) concludes from this that Jesus "carefully distinguishes his disciples from the unfruitful branches which are headed for God's Judgment."
3. Laney ("Abiding is Believing: The Analogy of the Vine in John 15:1-6," 60, 65) points to the "natural flow" of the context that Jesus is referring to the same people. MacArthur (The Gospel According to Jesus, 166) looks to the context and key players, including Judas, to argue for false believers, being represented by "barren branches" which are judged. He later posits, "Every gardener understands this principle. Fruitless branches are detrimental to the vein. They take sap away from the fruit-bearing branches. Wasted sap means less fruit. Even after careful pruning these branches will remain barren. There is no way to make them bear fruit" (170). He also points to Romans 9:6 and 11:17-24 to argue, "A person can be in the family tree but not to be a true Israelite. Likewise, one can be a branch on the True Vine without really abiding in Christ." He relates the "cutting off" to 1 John 2:19 and the departure of the antichrists from the apostolic fellowship (171). In a similar vein, Ryle (Ryle's Expositor Thoughts on the Gospels, 335) argues against unfruitful believers and says, "One principle is that no one can be a branch in Christ, and a living member of His body, who does not bear fruit. Vital union with Christ not evidenced by life is an impossibility, and a blasphemous idea. The other principle is that no living branch of the true vine, no believer in Christ, will ever finally perish. They that perish may have looked like believers, but they were not believers in reality."
4. This is different from the doctrine of eternal security. That teaches that all believes remained regenerate, saved, for eternity apart from any effort on their part because God saves them completely.
5. Dillow, "Abiding is Remaining in Fellowship: Another Look at John 15:1-6," 53.
6. Ibid.
7. Charles Colson, "Wanted: Christians Who Love," Christianity Today (October 2, 1995), 112.

This article was adapted from The Disciplemaker: What Matters Most to Jesus by Gary Derickson and Earl Radmacher (Salem: Charis Press, ©2001) and used by permission from its authors. Drs. Derickson and Radmacher, in their concern about the process of Christian spiritual growth (discipleship), provide much food for thought in this under-emphasized area of Christian living. How do you choose to live for the Lord?

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