

Unfruitful branches? Lift up! Lift up!
A series on Sanctification: part 1 (E. Radmacher)

Some biblical passages can be so difficult that they tend to gather a variety of interpretations of interpretations that are both different and contradictory; however, only one view can be right. This verse is one such example.

1. Study John 15:2. How do you interpret this verse? What are its implications to Christians?

Jesus describes two kinds of branches in the vine, fruiting and non-fruiting. Along with two kinds of branches are two actions taken by God the Father, the Vinedresser. The problem of interpreting this passage is made apparent by the different and conflicting interpretations revolving about the meaning of a key terms: *airei* and *kathairei*.

The first term *airei* can be translated as either "to lift up" or "to take away." (1) The practice of most translators has been to translate it as "take away" rather than "lift up." For example, the KJV uses "taketh away." NKJV, RSV, NASB translate it as "takes away." NIV uses "cut off." NSRV translates it as "removes."

The second term *kathairei*, which the KJV correctly translates as "He purges" or "He cleanses" is in contrast to many translations that translate it "He prunes."

Most commentators, accepting the "takes away" translation, see the farmer removing unfruitful branches while cleaning up the fruiting branches in order to make them more fruitful. (2) In interpreting the allegory to find the spiritual analogy, there are two views.

The **Justification**-Salvation view (3): The Vinedresser is taking two actions on the branches in verse two. The fruitless branches are removed while the fruitful ones are pruned. Symbolically the non-fruiting branches of verse two and removed branches of verse six are nonbelievers within the visible church who appear to be believers but whose lives are spiritually fruitless, immature or carnal Christians. (4) For example, one commentator says, "the healthy, fruit bearing branches...represent genuine Christians. ...We are not saved by works, but works are the only proof that faith is genuine, vibrant, and alive (James 2:17). Fruit is the only possible validation that a branch is abiding in the True Vine." (5) Thus the absence of fruit for him demonstrates the absence of life. And since abiding is necessary for fruitfulness, failure to abide means failure to believe, to "be saved," to possess life. (6)

The **Sanctification**-Salvation view: the unfruitful branches symbolize superficial Christians initially cared for by God and then eventually disciplined. (7) Chafer is an early proponent of this view and sees abiding within this passage referring to communion with God and not union because the passage's focus is on the believer's walk. Further, he does not see action on the branches in verse six as an issue of union (justification-salvation), but communion (sanctification-salvation). A believer's failure to abide, and thus bear fruit, leads to loss of fellowship and discipline from God that may include weakness, sickness, and even physical death (James 1:13-15; 5:20; 1 Cor 11:30-32). (8)

The unfruitful branch cannot be both a believer and an unbeliever. The branch that fails to abide cannot be a believer who gets disciplined and a superficial Christian who was never regenerate. The various meanings are not complementary and cannot be harmonized. Which view has the greatest probability of being correct?

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To fully examine the meaning of this passage, one needs to evaluate the cultural and textual data in light of first century viticultural practices. Listen to James Boice, a reformed theologian on the textual data.

"There are two things that the Father is said to do in His care of the vine. First, He is said to "take away" every branch that does not bear fruit. Generally this has been understood to be a purging away of dead branches in precisely the same sense that branches are said to be "cast forth" and "burned" in verse 6, but I am convinced that most translations have missed the true meaning of the term "take away" in this instance. Undoubtedly, their translation has been made to conform to what they know or believe is coming in verse 6, but the translation is not the best or even the most general meaning of the Greek word *airo* which lies behind it. The word *airo* has four basic meanings, which are, proceeding from the most fundamental to the most figurative:

- 1) to lift up or pick up,
- 2) to lift up figuratively, as in lifting up one's eyes or voice,
- 3) to lift up with the added thought of lifting up in order to carry away, and
- 4) to remove.

In translating this word by the verb "take away" the majority of translators have obviously chosen the fourth of these meanings, for the reason suggested above. But the verse makes better sense and the sequence of verbs is better if the first and primary meaning of the word is taken. In that case the sentence would read, "Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he lifteth up," that is, to keep it from trailing on the ground.

This translation makes better sense of the passage in every way, and in addition it is much better theology." (9)

"It would be a strange vinedresser who immediately cuts off such a branch without even giving it a chance to develop properly. But it would be wise and customary for him to stretch the vine on an arbor or use some other means of raising it to the air and sun...to translate the word *airo* by 'lifteth up' gives a proper sequence to the Father's care of the vineyard, indicated by the verb which follows. Thus, He first of all lifts the vines up. Then He prunes away the unproductive elements, carefully cleansing the vine of insects, moss, or parasites which otherwise would hinder the growth of the plant." (10)

Dillow correctly interprets *airei* as "lifts up" in this verse. He notes that, in at least eight out of its twenty-four uses in John, this same term is used with the sense of lifting, and not in a judgmental way. (11) He notes that Harrison reported how fallen vines in Palestine "were lifted 'with meticulous care' and allowed to heal." (12) Further, in a footnote he remarks that Harrison states that *airei* has air has air, in a footnote he remarks that Harrison states that *airei* has *airō* (to lift) as its root rather than *aireō* (to catch, take away). (13) He concludes from this that if "lift up" is the meaning, "then a fruitless branch is lifted up to put it into a position of fruit-bearing."

This is not only better theology, but would be in agreement with the Psalmist David (Psalm 3:1-3). We express this vividly in the words of the song, "Love lifted me! Love lifted me! When nothing else could help, love lifted me!" And if one carefully considers the immediate context, this lifting is precisely what Jesus is doing with Peter and the other disciples (all of whom would fail that night) in chapter 14. This is the "word" that Jesus is referring to in John 15:3 that caused them to be "clean".

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A major problem this view faces is Jesus' description of both branches being "in Me." (14) This is complicated by the need to determine the significance of Jesus' use of "in Me" in light of Paul's frequent use of the concept ("in Christ") and the meaning he gives it. In the Gospel of John, Jesus uses the phrase sixteen times, six times in the analogy of the vine and the branches. (15) Only once outside of the upper room does Jesus use the phrase to describe a person's union or spiritual position with Him. In John 6:56 He is clearly describing what they must do to become born again. But, even so, this use of "in Me" still reflects the aspect of relationship as well as a believer's position.

The remainder of His uses of the phrase communicates a relational concept more than referring to a spiritual position (a positional truth such as we find in Paul's use of "in Christ"). For example, in John 10:38; 14:10, 11; 17:21 and 23 it is the Father who is "in" Christ and Christ "in" Him. This certainly has nothing to do with "salvation," but speaks of their communion. Granted, their spiritual union is still contained in the phrase. But, spiritual position is not the point of Jesus' statements. His is talking about their unity of purpose and mind, not essence but function, in these verses. That it does not describe their metaphysical union is evident in that Jesus uses the same phrase in the same way in John 14:20 to describe His relationship with the disciples.

In contrast to John, Paul uses "in Christ" ("in Him") with a broad range of meanings, including both the positional truth of spiritual union with Christ and the conditional truth of communion with Him. (16) His most common use of the phrase, though, has to do with the positional truth of a believer's being placed into the body of Christ based on the Spirit's baptism (cf. Rom 12:5; 1 Cor 12:13), and thereby being "in Christ." Thus Paul can say things like, "Reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 6:11). He again says, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away, behold, all things have become new" (2 Cor 5:17). And, "In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins" (Eph 1:7). It is this sense of "in Me" that Jesus uses here in verse two. Many other places in Paul the phrase "in Christ" or "in Him" is used with the sense of "in the sphere of Christ" or "in His service." These are still basically positional statements because they speak more to the believer's position in Christ than to any communion between the believer and Christ. But, in His analogy of the vine, Jesus begins with a positional statement and then continues His discussion with the relational sense.

For the sanctification interpretation of the passage in which the imagery used by Jesus in the vine-branch analogy describes fellowship with God rather than spiritual position with Him, Zane Hodges argues well, "With John, the kind of relationship pictured in the vine-branch imagery describes an experience that can be ruptured (John 15:6) with a resultant loss of fellowship and fruitfulness," and so describes "the believer's fellowship with God." (17) And he notes further, "Unlike the salvation relationship, the relationship of a disciple to his Teacher can be lost." (18)

The idea that unfruitful branches cannot be either regenerated or abiding should be rejected. Ask yourself: Does any plant in God's kingdom have fruit instantaneously with life? How does this relate to Jesus' prediction in John 13:38 (note Jesus' words in Luke 12:8-9) that Peter would deny Him? Would the disciples, especially Peter, be considered fruit-bearers that night? Dillow responds to such an idea by asking,

"If the fruitless branches are only professing Christians, then what bearing did the passage have on the disciples?" He answers this by noting, "the passage gives every indication that it was addressed in its entirety to the disciples to tell them how they could bear fruit in their lives. Jesus said to them, 'If you [the disciples, not those to whom they would one day minister] abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you.'" (19)

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Cook is in agreement with him when he notes,

"Abiding in Christ is to be distinguished from being in Christ, although ideally there should be no practical difference between the two. We may observe the distinction by noting John 15:1-11, where the "in Me" branch of verse 2 is seen to be different from the "abide in Me" branch of verse 4. To be in Christ is to be born again, to be regenerated, to have had forgiveness of sins through Christ. Thus the disciples are in Christ (v. 2) because they have been cleansed of their sins (v. 3). To abide in Christ, however, is to be an obedient follower in fellowship with Christ the Savior and Lord (vv. 4-5,9-11). An examination of 1 John 3:24 will reveal that obedience is the condition for abiding. Moreover, in John 15:10 our obeying Christ and thus abiding in Him is compared to the Son's obeying the Father and thus abiding in Him; the Son was already in the Father by virtue of His sonship, but the Son abided in the Father by obeying Him. We see, then, that just as Christ's abiding in the Father was the maintenance of personal fellowship with the Father, so our abiding in Christ is the maintenance of personal fellowship with Christ."
(20)

And, central to this abiding relationship is believing in Christ. In John 6:29 Jesus identified this as the "work" that God required of all who wished to enjoy eternal life. "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent." In Jesus' thinking abiding, obeying, believing, and loving are all interrelated to one another. Thus the abiding relationship is one characterized by faith which, when developed (cf. 2 Pet 1:5), leads to keeping His commandments, particularly the commandment to love one another.

Understanding what Jesus intended to say in this passage is made easier by understanding the viticultural practices to which He referred. *Kathairei* was a legitimate viticultural term describing the process of removing suckers from a fruiting branch. *Kathairō* has at least one viticultural use given by Bauer, and when used in a literal sense does carry the idea of cleansing. (21) It has a figurative sense of spiritual cleanness and, building from its viticultural meaning, Jesus uses the term again in verse three. As an attested viticultural term, Jesus' use of it in this analogy must be consistent with its normal use and meaning. His use of parables to teach spiritual truths is based on analogies built from accurate portrayals of the natural world. Through analogies with the familiar world the listeners are then able to recognize the spiritual truths being taught.

It is not known if *airei* is a viticultural term or not. If it was not a term common to viticulture, Jesus may have chosen *airei* due to its similarity in sound to *kathairei* in order to make a play-on-words (paregmenon, or derivation) and communicate a truth to the disciples. (22) It is more likely that He was in fact using a term used by the farmers of His day to describe their own practice. Regardless, the use of *airei* within the analogy must correspond to a common practice which the disciples would know and understand. Since both *airei* and *kathairei* are used in conjunction with each other, they are better understood as being done simultaneously. Jesus is not putting together two tasks from separate seasons since serious pruning is not done during the spring growth, flowering, and fruit production. (23) Further, on the basis of the relationship of the action to fruiting, Jesus is most likely referring to the stage of seasonal care the vineyards were entering at the time He spoke, namely spring training and trimming.

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Jesus is indicating what actually occurred during the Spring, namely, certain non-fruiting branches were "lifted up": (to keep them from touching the ground and setting roots) and tied to trellises along with the fruiting branches while the side shoots of the fruiting branches were being "cleaned up." The non-fruiting 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 diameter of their stem where it connected to the vine and thus the greater ability for the flow of nutrients from the roots to the branches which would produce more fruit the following season. By removing them from the ground and placing them on the trellis the rows of plants would benefit from unhindered aeration that was considered an essential element to proper fruit development. (24) To see *airei* as removal (judgment or discipline) is to contradict the actual practice of the time.

What Jesus has said in the first two verses of this beautiful analogy is nothing short of pure encouragement. He has introduced us to a very special "TLC" rule of our Father. He has told the eleven that God the Father cares for them like a vinedresser cares for his grapes. Further, they are each a part of Jesus and draw their spiritual life from Him like branches draw life from the vine. Jesus has affirmed that among those who are believers, those who believe in Him and so belong to Him, those who are "in Him," some are ready to bear fruit and some are not.

God the Father is caring for both groups of believers. The ones not ready to bear fruit are being "lifted up" by Him with a view to future fruitfulness. Thankfully, the Father does not cut off all non-fruiting branches or the vine would never produce fruit. Though they are not fruitful now, they are still important to Him and recipients of His loving concern. The Father is also caring for the ones who are now ready to bear fruit, like the eleven. He is taking those loving actions that will insure their greater fruitfulness. Jesus' point to the eleven in this verse is singular. God the Father cares for all who belong to Jesus regardless of their fruitfulness.

References:

1. When you lift something up you take it "away" from its location. Thus, the term reflects the range of meanings involved in that action.
2. In contrast there have been many who have seen this positively rather than negatively. They will be named and their views given below.
3. Salvation has three aspects to it in a believer's life that are reflected in the three tenses. Justification is salvation *past*, something accomplished once by God when He delivered us from the condemnation and *penalty* of sin, which begins our possession of eternal life. Sanctification salvation is *present*, what God is doing in our lives today as He delivers us from the *power* of sin. It involves our present enjoyment of eternal life. Glorification salvation is *future*, what we will enjoy after God has delivered us from the *presence* of sin.
4. Laney, "Abiding is Believing: The Analogy of the Vine in John 15:1-6," 55; Robert A. Peterson, "The Perseverance of the Saints: A Theological Exegesis of Four Key New Testament Passages," Presbyterion, 17:2 (1991): 108; James E. Rosscup, Abiding in Christ (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1973), 42. Laney (John, 270) says that Jesus in this context "is referring to disciples, broadly defined as interested listeners. Some disciples bear fruit, and others, like the 'disciples' who turned away from Jesus' hard teaching (6:60, 66), bear none." Gruenler (The Trinity in the Gospel of John, 106) follows this same approach and says, "Abiding in him brings life and fruitfulness to the believer; not abiding in him means death and destruction for the unbeliever."
5. MacArthur, The Gospel According to Jesus, 168.
6. Robert Law, The Tests of Life: A study of the First Epistle of St. John. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1909. Reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1969); Rosscup, Abiding in Christ, 42; J. C. Ryle, Ryle's Expositor Thoughts on the Gospels, John 10:10 to End (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, n.d.), 328; Smith, "The Unfruitful Branches in John 15," 13-14.

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7. Proponents of this view include James M. Boice, Lewis S. Chafer, W. Robert Cook, Joseph Dillow, Zane Hodges, John G. Mitchell, A. W. Pink, and Charles C. Ryrie to name a few. As we have stated, salvation is a very broad term that includes physical and spiritual deliverance. For the believer, it has past, present, and future aspects. In the past we were justified, and thereby delivered from the *condemnation* of sin. We were made alive to God without cost by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit in us after God the Father declared us righteous by imputing our sin to Christ and His righteousness to us. Justification is a judicial declaration by God.

In the present we are also experiencing salvation. We are being delivered from the *power* of sin here and now. At the same time God is at work in our lives, conforming us to the image of Christ through a process we call "sanctification," the believer is at work obeying the commands of Jesus that bring His love and manifestation in our lives (John 14:15-24). Sanctification is the phase of salvation a believer experiences in this life as God prepares him for the life to come; it a *process* that the believer goes through. In sanctification the believer experiences all the benefits of his justification and "works" (Eph 2:10) to bring his life (experience) into conformity with his position in Christ. The Holy Spirit is at work conforming us to Christ as He prepares us to spend eternity with God in heaven.

The final phase of salvation is our coming glorification, when God's work in us will finally be completed and we will be like Christ. We will then be delivered from the second death and enjoy our eternal life that includes both *relationship* with and *rewards* from God forever. Thus it is legitimate for a believer to say, "I have been saved, am being saved, and will be saved." When we discuss various aspects of our salvation, we often need to use other terms than "saved" or "salvation" to describe what aspect of the multifaceted experience to which we refer. Thus in this book we have identified the *justification-salvation view* and the *sanctification-salvation view* in order to make clear what aspect of our salvation the two views focus on in their discussion of this passage. For further explanation see Radmacher, Salvation (Nashville: Word Publishers, 2000).

8. Chafer, "The Eternal Security of the Believer," Bibliotheca Sacra 106 (October-December 1949): 402-3.

9. James M. Boice, The Gospel of John (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), 4:227-28.

10. *Ibid.*, 228.

11. Dillow, "Abiding is Remaining in Fellowship: Another Look at John 15:1-6," 50. He lists John 5:8-12; 8:59; 10:18, 24 as examples.

12. *Ibid.*, 50-51. See footnote #1 for Harrison's discussion on ἀίρω

13. *Ibid.*, 51, footnote #6.

14. Smith reflects the justification salvation approach to the passage and rejects the sanctification interpretation of "in Me" in verse two. He argues ("The Unfruitful Branches in John 15," 10),

"Those who hold that the unfruitful branches represent Christians base their interpretation largely upon this phrase and allow it to determine their view of the rest of the passage. Most commentators, however, have felt that the rest of the passage is so clear that this one phrase should be carefully weighed in the light of the whole context... The familiar technical usage of the phrase "in Christ," as it is found in Paul's prison epistles, was not until many years later. At the time when Jesus spoke these words no one was "in Christ" in this technical sense because the baptism of the Holy Spirit did not begin until Pentacost. When these words were spoken, to be "in Christ" was not different from being "in the kingdom." Jesus parables about the kingdom being composed of wheat and tares, good and bad, fruitful and unfruitful, are very familiar."

Laney ("Abiding is Believing: The Analogy of the Vine in John 15:1-6," 63), though also taking a justification approach to this passage, invalidates Smith's argument by noting that the phrase clearly refers to salvation (justification) elsewhere in the Gospel of John. Even so, he (63-64) attempts to refute the argument that "in Me" in verse two indicates that the unfruitful branches are believers by making it an adverbial phrase modifying the verb "bearing" rather than as an adjectival phrase modifying "branch." The difference in translations is such that, instead of saying, "Every branch in Me not bearing fruit" (adjectival, "in Me" modifies "branch"), Jesus would be saying, "Every branch not bearing fruit in Me" (adverbial, "in Me" modifies "bearing"). Thus for Laney bearing fruit occurs "in the sphere" of Christ and emphasizes the "process of fruit-bearing" rather than the "place."

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Dillow notes Smith's argument that "in Me" is only a general reference to people being in the Kingdom rather than to the Pauline concept of being in Christ since both the present Kingdom and future millennial Kingdom contain a mixture of true and false believers (Smith, "The Unfruitful Branches in John 15," 10). He responds ("Abiding is Remaining in Fellowship: Another Look at John 15:1-6," 45) by pointing out that professing Christians are not in Christ. He says that "it is unlikely that 'in Me' can refer to an 'Israel within Israel' (i.e., the truly saved within the professing company) in view of the consistent usage of 'in Me' in John's writings to refer to a true saving relationship." He asserts that the phrase "in Me" always refers to fellowship with Christ in its sixteen uses in the Gospel (The phrase, "in Me," occurs in John 6:56; 8:38; 14:10 (twice), 11, 20, 30; 15:2, 4 (twice), 5, 6, 7; 16:33; 17:21 and 23.). Dillow concludes, "It is inconsistent then to say the phrase in 15:2 refers to a person who merely professes to be saved but is not." Further, "The preposition 'in' is used ;to designate a close personal relation.' It refers to a sphere within which some action occurs. So to abide 'in' Christ means to remain in close relationship to Him" (cf. John 13:8). Jesus' use of the phrase refers to "a life of fellowship, a unity of purpose, rather than organic connection" which is distinct from the Pauline concept of "in Christ" (22). He argues well from the use of the term to describe the relationship of Christ and the Father and His non-relationship with Satan (John 14:30) that it does not speak of "organic connection or commonality of essence, but of commonality of purpose and commitment." Its use in John 17:21 indicates a unity of purpose rather than organic connection. "If this 'in Me' relationship referred to organic connection, Jesus would not have prayed for an organic connection between Him and believers because it already existed" (23). He concludes from this, "To be 'in Me' us to be in fellowship with Christ, living obediently." Therefore it is possible for a Christian not to be "in Me" in the Johannine sense. This seems evident from the command to "abide in Christ." Believers are to remain in fellowship with the Lord. If all Christians already remain "in Me," then why command them to remain in that relationship? It must be possible for them not to remain" (23-24). Wescott (The Gospel According to St. John, 217), though not a proponent of the sanctification view, concurs in part when he notes, "Even the unfruitful branches are true branches. They also are "*in Christ*," though they draw their life from Him only to bear leaves.

15. John 6:56, "He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him." 10:38, "...believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in Me, and I in the Father." 14:10, "Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on My own initiative, but the Father abiding in Me does His works." 14:11, "Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me; otherwise believe because of the works themselves." 14:20, "In that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you." 14:30, "I will not speak much more with you, for the ruler of the world is coming, and he has nothing in Me;" 15:2, "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." 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." 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." 15:6, "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." 15:7, "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you." 16:33, "These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world." 17:21, "that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me." 17:23, "I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me."

16. He uses "in Christ" in Rom 3:24; 6:11, 23; 8:1, 2, 39; 9:1; 12:5; 15:17; 16:3, 7, 9, 10; 1 Cor 1:2, 4, 30; 3:1; 4:10, 15, 17; 15:18, 19, 31; 16:24; 2 Cor 2:17; 3:14; 5:17, 19; Gal 1:22; 2:4, 17; 3:14, 26, 28; Eph 1:1, 3; 2:6, 7, 10, 13; 3:11; 4:32; Phil 1:1, 13, 26; 2:1, 5; 3:3, 14; 4:7, 19, 21; Col 1:2, 4, 28; 1 Thes 2:14; 4:16; 5:18; 1 Tim 1:14; 2:7; 2 Tim 1:1, 9, 13; 2:1, 10; 3:12, 15. He uses "in Him" in 2 Cor 1:19, 20; 5:21; 13:4; Eph 1:4, 9, 11; 2:15; Phil 3:9; Col 1:17, 19; 2:6, 7, 9, 10; and 2 Thes 1:12.

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17. Hodges, "1 John," in The Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1983), 888-89. Others who take the "lifts up" view include James Boice in The Gospel of John, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978) 4:228; A. W. Pink, Exposition of the Gospel of John, 3 vols. (Ohio: Cleveland Bible Truth Depot, 1929), 3:337; and John Mitchell, An Everlasting Love, 286-87. George Vanderlip (Christianity According to John [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975], 31) notes that in the Gospel of John "life" occurs thirty-two times from chapters one through twelve and then only three times from chapters thirteen to twenty because Jesus was then with His disciples who had "come to possess life and therefore the subject matter of the book advances to other themes."
18. Hodges, The Epistles of John: Walking in the Light of God's Love (Irving, Tx.: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999), 81.
19. Dillow, "Abiding is Remaining in Fellowship: Another Look at John 15:1-6," 51-52.
20. Cook, The Theology of John, 133-34.
21. BAGD, 386.
22. E. W. Bullinger, Figures of Speech Used in the Bible (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1968), 304. He describes this figure as a repetition of words "derived from the same root," and "are similar in origin and sound, but not similar in sense."
23. Once fruit gets on the vine, the greatest problem is bugs and disease. And a diseased branch *may* be pruned, but not because it is not producing fruit. It would be pruned *in spite* of its bearing fruit!
24. Pliny, Natural History, 17:35.

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 give an important corrective to interpretive confusion relating to connecting justification with sanctification. This confusion has caused some to reject the clear teaching of Scripture that we are saved by God's unmerited favor, not through any deeds that we may do or not do. The contemporary idea that a believer cannot know if he or she is truly eternally redeemed until the end of life is a theological error perpetrated in part by a misunderstanding of the teaching of grace that is expounded by Drs. Derickson and Radmacher.

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Some biblical passages can be so difficult that they tend to gather a variety of interpretations of interpretations that are both different and contradictory; however, only one view can be right. This verse is one such example.

1. Study John 15:2. How do you interpret this verse? What are its implications to Christians?