

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN
15:1-6

1. I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman. 2. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away; and every *branch* that bears fruit he prunes it, that it may bring forth more fruit. 3. Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken to you. 4. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can ye, unless ye abide in me. 5. I am the vine, ye *are* the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, the same brings forth much fruit; for without me ye can do nothing. 6. If a man does not abide in me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and men gather them and cast *them* into the fire, and they are burned.

1.--[*I am...vine...Father...husbandman.*] In this and the following chapter, our Lord proceeds to give instruction rather than consolation. Having cheered and comforted the timid disciples (in the 14th chapter), He now presses on their attention certain great truths which He would have them specially remember when He was gone. And He begins by urging the absolute necessity of close union and communion with Himself by means of the illustration of a vine and its branches.

We must always remember that the passage before us is a parable, and as a parable must be interpreted. We must be careful not to press each sentence in it too far; and, in all parables, we must look at the great lesson that it contains rather than at each clause. The old saying is most true that no parable stands on four legs, and in all parables there are parts which are only drapery of the figure and not the figure itself. Neglect of this caution does much harm to the souls of Christians and is the cause of much crude and unsound doctrine. In the passage before us, we must remember that our Lord Jesus Christ is not literally a vine, nor are believers literal branches, nor is the Father literally a husbandman. We are dealing with figures and pictures, mercifully used in order to meet our weak capacities. And we must take care that we do not draw doctrinal conclusions from them which contradict other plain passages of Scripture.

Evan Maldonatus, the Romish commentator, here remarks: "All the several parts of a parable are not always meant to be fitted to the thing signified by the parable. Many things in parables are said to fill up or adorn the narrative." Toletus says just the same.

Burton remarks: "Instead of perplexing ourselves with minor details, let us bear in mind that in interpreting each of our Lord's parables the great *purpose* for which it was delivered is ever to be borne in mind, if we would understand it rightly."

Our Lord's reason for choosing the illustration of "a vine" has caused much speculation. Some think that He drew the figure from a vine trained over the walls and windows of the upper chamber which He and His disciples were leaving. Some think that He drew it from the famous golden vine which

ornamented the principal gate of the temple. Some think that He drew it from the vines which He saw by the wayside as He walked to the garden of Gethsemane. Some refer it to the "fruit of the vine" at the Lord's Supper. After all, these are only guesses and conjectures. It was night when our Lord spoke, and of course nothing could be seen very distinctly. Nor is it necessary to suppose that our Lord drew His illustration from anything but His own mind.

The expression "the true" applied to the vine is an argument much used by those who think our Lord founded His parable on a vine under His eyes. But is it not more likely that our Lord had in view those places in the Old Testament where the Jewish Church is compared to a vine? (See Ps. 80:8, Jer. 2:21, Ezek. 15:2, Hosea 10:1.) It would then mean: "I, and not the decaying Jewish Church, am the true source of spiritual life." This, to Jewish minds, would be a very useful lesson.

For the use of the word "true" in a precisely similar way, see John 6:32, "the true bread." It means the true, original type vine of which all other vines are only types and shadows.

Lightfoot says: "Hitherto Israel had been the vine, into which everyone who would worship the true God must be grafted. But from henceforward, they were to be planted into the profession of Christ."

The meaning of the verse seems to be this: "The relation between you and Me is that of a vine and its branches. I am the true source of all your life and spiritual vigor, and you are as entirely dependent on Me as the branches of the vine are on the parent stem. There is as close a union between you and Me as between a vine and its branches. My Father takes the same tender interest in you that the vine-dresser does in the branch of the vine and is continually watching over your health, fruitfulness, and fertility. Think not for a moment that my Father is not as deeply interested in your spiritual prosperity as I am myself."

The interpretation adopted by Alford and many others--that the vine means "the visible Church" of which Christ is the *inclusive Head*--appears to me thoroughly unsatisfactory. Our Lord is speaking specially to eleven believers and treating of their relation to himself. To apply all the language of this parable to so mixed and defective a body as the "visible Church" seems to me to lower and degrade the whole passage.

2.--[*Every branch...does not...takes away.*] Perhaps no sentence in the parable is more perverted and wrested and misapplied than this. Many assert that it teaches that a man may be a real true branch of the vine, a member of Christ, and yet lose all His grace and be finally cast away. In short, the sentence is the favorite weapon of all Arminians, of all who maintain an inseparable connection between grace and baptism, and of all who deny the perseverance in faith of believers.

I will not urge in reply that this view of the sentence cannot be reconciled with other plainer texts of Scripture, which are not parts of a parable like this, and that we should always shrink from interpreting Scripture so as to make one part contradict another. I prefer saying that

the sentence before us will not bear the sense commonly put on it.

The plain truth is that this text is precisely that part of the parable which will not admit of a literal interpretation. As a matter of fact, it is not true that the Father "takes away" all unfruitful branches. When does He do it? When does He remove from the Church all graceless Christians? On the contrary, for 1800 years He has allowed them to exist in the Church and has not taken them away. Nor will He take them away until the day of judgment. If the expression "takes away" cannot be interpreted literally, we must beware of interpreting literally the expression "branch in Me." As the one phrase is figurative, so also is the other. In short, it cannot be shown that a "branch in Me" must mean a believer in Me. It means nothing more than "a professing member of my Church, a man joined to the company of my people but not joined to me."

The true meaning of the verse, I believe, to be this: "My Father deals with my mystical body just as the vine-dresser deals with the vine and its branches. He will no more allow any of my members to be fruitless and graceless than a vine-dresser will allow barren branches to grow on the vine. My Father will take care that all who are in Me give proof of their union by their fruitful lives and conversation. He will not tolerate for a moment such an inconsistent being as an unfruitful believer, if such a being could be found. In a word, fruitfulness is the great test of being one of my disciples, and he that is not fruitful is not a branch of the true vine."

Calvin remarks: "Many are supposed to be in the vine, according to man's opinion, who actually have no root in the vine."

Hengstenberg thinks that the Jewish Church is primarily meant here as a fruitless branch, compared to the Christian Church.

[*And every branch...prunes...more fruit.*] The meaning of this part of the verse is happily more easy than the other. "Just as a vine-dresser prunes and cuts all healthy branches of a vine in order to prevent it running to wood, and have it bear more fruit, so does my Father deal with all my believing members. He prunes and purifies them by affliction and trouble, in order to make them more fruitful in holiness."

Let us remember that this sentence throws light on many of the afflictions and trials of God's people. They are all part of that mysterious process by which God the Father purifies and sanctifies Christ's people. They are the "pruning" of the vine-branches, for good and not for harm, to increase their fruitfulness. All the most eminent saints in every age have been men of sorrows, and often pruned.

Clement of Alexandria, and many writers in all ages, remark on this verse that the vine-branch which is not sharply pruned is peculiarly liable to run to wood and bear no fruit.

After all, in leaving this difficult verse, we must not forget that a man may *appear* to us to be a "branch in Christ" and a true believer, and yet not be one in the sight of God. The end of that man will be death. He

will be "taken away" at last to punishment. "Everyone who seems and appears to be a branch of the true vine, and yet is not really one, will be lost." Two principles, in any case, we must never let go. 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.

3.--[*Now ye are clean, etc.*] Having described the relation between Himself and His people generally, our Lord now turns to His disciples and shows them their present position and immediate duty. "Now you are comparatively cleansed and purified by the doctrine which I have taught and you have received and believed. But do not be content with past attainments. Attend to the counsel that I am about to give you."

When our Lord calls His disciples "clean" or "pure" in this place, we cannot doubt that He uses the phrase in a comparative sense. Compared to the unbelieving Scribes and Pharisees, compared indeed with themselves before their Lord called and taught them, the disciples were a cleansed and purified people--imperfectly and very partially cleansed no doubt, but cleansed.

We should carefully note how our Lord speaks of His "Word" as the great instrument of cleansing His disciples. It is the same mighty principle that is found in Eph. 5:26 and 1 Peter 1:22. God's Word is God's grand means of converting and sanctifying souls.

Henry remarks here: "Those who are justified by the blood and sanctified by the Spirit of Christ are in Christ's account clean already, notwithstanding many spots and manifold imperfections."

4.--[*Abide in Me, and I in you.*] Now comes the direct instruction that our Lord desired the disciples to receive: "Abide in Me. Cling to Me. Stick fast to Me. Live the life of close and intimate communion with Me. Get nearer and nearer to Me. Roll every burden on Me. Cast your whole weight on Me. Never let go your hold on Me for a moment. Be as it were rooted and planted in Me. Do this and I will never fail you. I will ever abide in you."

This word "abide," or "remain," is used no less than ten times in the first eleven verses of this chapter. It implies a constant remaining or continuing in one spot or place. A true Christian must be always "in Christ" as a man dwelling always inside the walls of a fortified city.

[*As the branch...abide in Me.*] Here our Lord returns once more to the figure of the parable. "Just as the branch of the vine cannot bear fruit separately and of itself, and must keep up living union with the parent stem and out of it draw life and strength, just so you cannot bear Christian fruit and walk in Christian ways and live a Christian life unless you keep up constant union and communion with Me."

5.--[*I am the Vine, ye are the branches.*] Once more our Lord repeats the leading idea of the parable, in order to impress the lesson He is teaching on the disciples' minds. "I repeat the assertion I made. The relation between you and Me must be as close and intimate as that between a vine and its branches."

[*He who abides...much fruit.*] Here our Lord gives encouragement to the disciples to keep up the habit of closest union with Him. This is the secret of bearing "much fruit" and being an eminently holy and useful Christian. The experience of every age of the Church proves the truth of this saying. The greatest saints have always lived nearest to Christ.

Do we not see here that there is a difference in the degrees of fruitfulness to which Christians attain? Is there not a tacit distinction here between "fruit" and "much fruit"?

[*For without Me ye can do nothing.*] The marginal reading gives our Lord's meaning more completely: "Severed from Me, separate from Me, you have no strength and can do nothing. You are as lifeless as a branch cut off from the parent stem."

We must always take care that we do not misapply and misinterpret this text. Nothing is more common than to hear some ignorant Christians quoting it partially as an excuse of indolence and neglect of means of grace. "You know we can do nothing" is the cry of such people. This is dragging out of the text a lesson it was never meant to teach. He who spoke these words to His eleven chosen Apostles is the same Lord who said to all men who would be saved, "Strive to enter in," "Labor for the meat that endures to everlasting life," "Repent and believe."

6.--[*If a man does not abide...burned.*] The consequence of not abiding in Christ, of refusing to live the life of faith in Christ, are here described under a terrible figure. The end of such false professors will be like the end of fruitless and dead branches of a vine. Sooner or later they are cast out of the vineyard as withered, useless things and gathered as firewood to be burned. Such will be the last end of professing Christians who turn their backs on Jesus and bear no fruit to God's glory. They will finally come to the fire that is never quenched in hell.

These are awful words. They seem, however, to apply specially to backsliders and apostates, like Judas Iscariot. There must be about a man some *appearance* of professed faith in Christ before he can come to the state described here. Doubtless there are those who seem to depart from grace and to go back from union with Christ; but we need not doubt that in such cases the grace was not real but seeming, and union was not true but fictitious. Once more we must remember that we are reading a parable.

That there is a hell and that God can punish seems plainly taught in this verse.

It is noteworthy that the Greek would be more literally rendered in the past tense: "He has been cast out" and "has been withered." Alford thinks that this is because the whole is spoken as if the great day of judgment

were come. Also the word "men" is supplied in our translation. Literally it would be, "they gather," "they cast," without referring to any person in particular. This is a Hebraism which will be found in Matt. 5:15, Luke 16:9, and Acts 7:6.

After all, the final, miserable ruin and punishment of false professors is the great lesson, which the verse teaches. Abiding in Christ leads to fruitfulness in this life and everlasting happiness in the life to come. Departure from Christ leads to the everlasting fire of hell.