

# THE CHRIST OF CHRISTMAS

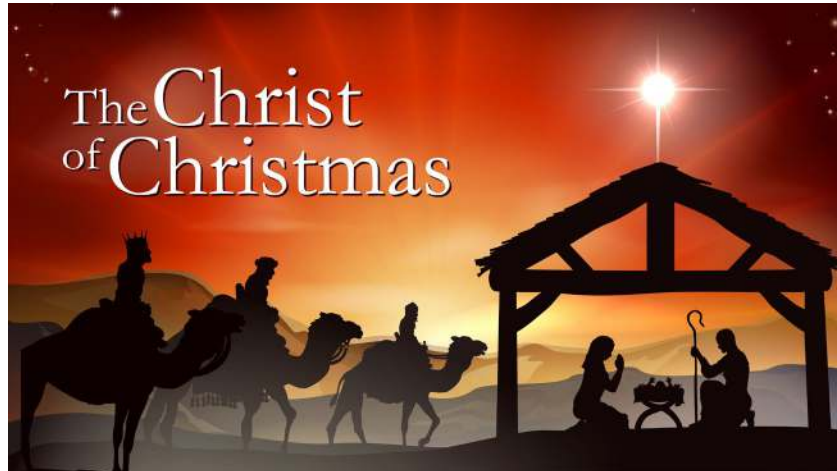
## Expositional Study Of Christ's "I Am" Statements

John 15

Written By

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Vineyards. They stretched for miles to the north of my house before I moved here from California. The well-manicured and groomed rows of vines pragmatically had only one goal: To produce grapes. Imagine a farmer being content with vines which produced nothing. No farmer in his right mind would be content with this agricultural outcome. A vineyard farmer, by definition, longs and looks for one thing: massive amounts of grapes hanging on his vines.

Jesus understood this concept well, only he made a spiritual application out of it. According to John 14, verse 31, Jesus told his disciples to get up from the lengthy Last Supper and get going. Walking in the moonlit streets of Jerusalem, they eventually came across a mature grape vine. As usual, the Lord didn't waste the opportunity to take an ordinary object of life to teach a deep, profound spiritual truth. Here the object was a grape vine. I'm sure they had walked by it, or one like it many times, without giving it much spiritual thought, but this night Jesus would stop them to give them one of His final spiritual messages prior to His earthly departure.

What was His message? A child couldn't miss it. As He contemplated His death on Passover Friday, He wanted His disciples to know what their responsibility was in light of His physical absence. In a word, He wanted them to produce fruit, spiritual fruit, and lots of it. He didn't want them to be content with just looking good, spiritually speaking. No. He wanted spiritual grapes to hang from their branches, their lives.

How did they do that evening and the next few days? Not too well. Fear, cowardice, unbelief, and sleep made them fruitless; however, after Christ's resurrection their lives were fruit-laden. Don't believe me? Then just read the book of Acts and you'll readily see what I mean. It took them awhile, but they pragmatically understood Christ's message about the vine and branches.



How about you? Are you fruitful for Jesus or fruitless? Are clusters of spiritual grapes hanging from your life, metaphorically speaking? Or, are you nothing more than a bunch of beautiful leaves with no fruit underneath? God knows what kind of branch you are today, and so do you, but just in case you need a little prompting to be a better producer for Him, I think we'd all do well to take to heart the message He gave the disciples in John 15. Sure, He spoke it to the twelve, but who would deny it has a wider, spiritual application to all saints? None, I would suppose.

So, here in this wonderful, memorable passage, we are all faced with one probing question:

## What Are The Steps To Being Fruitful For Jesus (John 15:1-17)?

Before we answer this question, I want to get a few theological items out of the way.

First, I don't believe Jesus is speaking here about salvation. He is speaking to the eleven minus Judas, who had left the Upper Room in order to hook up with the authorities to have Jesus arrested. The disciples were saved. Judas was not. So, it would be erroneous to make this a discussion on redemption. Further, if salvation is in view here, then, it is highly conditional based upon *your ability* to abide in Jesus based upon *your performance*, not His performance on the cross which redeems you. Does this not fly in the face of all other teachings about being saved by grace in the book of John (John 3:16; 5:23-25, etc.)? Sure it does. Salvation is an event which is uninterrupted by your performance. Discipleship, which is Christ's focus here, is, in my estimation, highly conditional based upon your desire to fulfill the conditional elements of it. Hence, the premise is true: All disciples are believers, but not all believers are disciples.

Second, I don't believe Jesus was talking here about the difference between professors (false Christians) and possessors (true Christians). Had Judas been present, this might be, at least plausible, but since he wasn't I don't think it's an interpretive option. Those who take this viewpoint typically say the vines which are cut off and thrown in the fire were never really Christians in the first place. They draw this conclusion because of the lack of fruit. No spiritual fruit in their minds equals a false profession. John MacArthur holds this position:

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 (Jas. 2:17). Fruit is the only possible validation that a branch is abiding in the True Vine."<sup>1</sup>

I take issue with this position. Is not the presence of a dead branch evidence that it was once vibrant and alive?

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<sup>1</sup>John MacArthur Jr., *The Gospel According to Jesus*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 168.

Christ's mere command here for the disciples to produce spiritual fruit by making sure they did their part in abiding in the true vine, Jesus, demonstrates, by default, He believed it was possible for them to be non-producers. To put it in other terms, Christ demonstrates it is possible for a believer to fail, which is a New Testament reality (Gal. 6:1ff; James 5:19-20). Was this not true of the carnal Corinthians (1 Cor. 3:1-5), who, according to Paul, also held a holy position before God despite their carnality (1 Cor. 1:30)? Indeed. Jesus, therefore, warns the disciples that they, viz., "anyone" means just that, can be pruned off the vine if they are non-productive in verse 6. Jesus is talking about productive versus non-productive saints, the former are blessed the latter are judged and disciplined. Also, regarding this "professor" concept I'd add one more thought: How could a false believer *ever* be a part of the true vine, Jesus? Theologically this is impossible!

Third, I don't believe that the non-productive branches which are cut off by the Vinedresser, i.e., the Father, are Christians who lose their salvation. Paul's daring statement in Romans 8:30, "...and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified," couldn't have been made if saints can lose their salvation based upon their lack of spiritual performance. Jesus emphatically taught that no one, not even the believer, can remove them from the position in the Father's hand (John 10:28-29). Jesus also said that He would lose nothing of what the Father gave Him (John 6:39-40), and that everyone who believes in the Son has uninterrupted eternal life and will be raised up the last day. Note, He didn't say that everyone who believes and perseveres will have eternal life and be raised. The non-productive branches of John 15 are then, in my view, believers who are disciplined by the Lord for their lack of production. Again, this is a concept which is not foreign to the New Testament (Heb. 12:4-12, plus Christ's messages to the seven churches in Asia (Rev. 2-3).

Fourth, the fruit the Lord is looking for here has everything to do with the internal work of the Spirit in transforming the believer's character to that of Jesus Christ. As Paul taught, "... *the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control*" (Gal. 5:22-23). Fruit is nothing short of Christlikeness in how you think, live, talk, react and dream.

Fifth, realize that the vine/vineyard motif is historically tied, in Jewish thinking, to God's chosen people (Psalm 80:9-16; Isa. 5:1-7; 27:2ff; Jer. 2:21; 12:10ff; Ezek. 15:1-8; 17:1-21; 19:10-14; Hos. 10:1-2). Israel's spiritual performance, as God's choice vine, however, was typically in question as she repeatedly produced evil, godless fruit. God repeatedly castigated her for her disobedience, and used various means, like fire, to discipline her (Isa. 5:5). His goal, of course, was to move His people toward obedience, and as we learn from prophecies like Jeremiah 30-31 and Zechariah 12-14, God never abandoned and wrote off His people entirely but looked toward the day they would be fruitful in the kingdom age.

Sixth, the vine imagery of John 15 stands in stark contrast with that of the Old Testament. Israel, as God's vine, failed miserably because of their love affair with sin, while Jesus represents the true vine, the obedient vine of God. Psalm 80:9-17, written around 722 B.C. after the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel . . . or some seven hundred years prior to Christ, prophetically pointed to His coming in this capacity.

<sup>4</sup> O LORD God of hosts, How long will You be angry with the prayer of Your people?

<sup>5</sup> You have fed them with the bread of tears, and You have made them to drink tears in large measure. <sup>6</sup> You make us an object of contention to our neighbors, and our enemies laugh among themselves. <sup>7</sup> O God of hosts, restore us and cause Your face to shine upon us, and we will be saved. <sup>8</sup> You removed a vine from Egypt; You drove out the nations and planted it. <sup>9</sup> You cleared *the ground* before it, and it took deep root and filled the land. <sup>10</sup> The mountains were covered with its shadow, and the

cedars of God with its boughs. <sup>11</sup> It was sending out its branches to the sea and its shoots to the River. <sup>12</sup> Why have You broken down its hedges, so that all who pass *that way* pick its *fruit*? <sup>13</sup> A boar from the forest eats it away and whatever moves in the field feeds on it. <sup>14</sup> O God of hosts, turn again now, we beseech You; look down from heaven and see, and take care of this vine, <sup>15</sup> Even the shoot which Your right hand has planted, and on the son whom You have strengthened for Yourself. <sup>16</sup> It is burned with fire, it is cut down; They perish at the rebuke of Your countenance. <sup>17</sup> Let Your hand be upon the man of Your right hand, upon the son of man whom You made strong for Yourself. <sup>18</sup> Then we shall not turn back from You; revive us, and we will call upon Your name (Psalm 80).

Israel had been the apostate vine for their failure to follow God at all costs, and God disciplined them by burning them with captivity (Psalm 80:16). They, in this psalm, called out to God, the gardener, to tend to the vine of Israel. They also pleaded with Him to restore them by sending the “son of man” who could/would lead the vine to spiritual fruitfulness. The prophet Ezekiel is called by this title no less than ninety times in his divinely inspired prophecy, while Daniel also bore this unique title (Dan. 8:17). Daniel 7:3-14 applied the term directly to the Messiah, or the one who would come and bring His kingdom of peace to the world upon His arrival. Jesus, of course, logically applied this term to Himself for He was a prophet after the order of Ezekiel and Daniel (Matt. 24:30; 26:64), and He was, in fact, the literal fulfillment of Daniel’s entire prophecy, especially chapter 7. He, therefore, in John 15 rightly portrayed Himself as the true vine, the vine which would do what the Father asked, and who would lead His people to spiritual fruitfulness. Thus, if Jews desired to be truly fruitful before God, they, by definition, had to be related to Jesus as the new vine of Israel. The same is applicable to Gentiles, as well. The question this Christmas, therefore, can’t be missed: Are you a part of the true religious/spiritual vine of Christ by placing your faith in Him (John 3:16-18; 5:38; 8:24; 9:36; 11:26 )?

Seventh, in John 15:1-8 we encounter a description of the true vine, Jesus, and His branches, or His people/saints, while in verses 9 through 17 we encounter a detailed commentary regarding the proper functioning of the vine. In other words, this second pedagogical section dives into the nitty gritty gardening reality of how branches can, and should be, productive. As you can readily see from our cursory reading of the passage, Jesus is all about His people being fruitful. Are you? Will you be?

Isn’t this all most interesting? Jesus is the bread of life which gives us life eternal and daily spiritual food to grow up in Him. He is also the light of the world which brings true spiritual light where there had only been darkness masquerading as light. To this Jesus added the vine metaphor to call each of us who know Him to maturity prior His return. What wonderful word pictures to describe the Christ of Christmas. His mission changed everything. Hopefully it has changed you into His follower. Now, we must come to terms with how His followers are called to spiritual producers. What, then, are the steps toward spiritual fruitfulness? Four concepts emerge from this context.

### Step #1: You Must Come To A Recognition (John 15:1)

Jesus is most emphatic here in Greek, saying “I” twice by employed the first person personal pronoun followed by the first person copula, “to be.” (Ἐγώ εἰμι ἡ ἀμπελος ἡ ἀληθινή και ὁ πατήρ μου ὁ γεωργός ἐστίν (Jn. 15:1). Literally, the translation could read: “I, I am ...” What He is stressing is that He, and He alone, is perpetually (denoted by the present tense verb), the one and only true spiritual vine. The article “the” before “vine” and “true,” underscores this.

Grammatically, we could tenably classify these as the monadic use of the articles, stressing the one and only nature of Jesus as “the vine,” and “the true.” There are many so-called spiritual vines in the world planted on the soil of various continents (Islam, Shintoism, Taoism, Baha’ism, Sikhism, Jainism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and so forth) however, they are not part of the true vine at all because they reject the true vine, Jesus. Only He is the true spiritual, life-giving vine one needs to attach his life to.

In order to produce real spiritual fruit for God you must, by definition, be rightly related to Jesus Christ, THE VINE, par excellence, by faith in Him. No other vine will do, and all other fruit produced by being related to false vines is just that, false. It may make you feel good to believe there are other vines, why it might even cause a smile to form on your face as you think how wonderful it is that a loving God gladly accepts all vines, be they Christ accepting or rejecting. You, on the other hand, stand corrected by Jesus here in John. Spiritual fruit only comes when you are faith-related to Him. And had Jesus actually believed there were other spiritual vines, He would not have claimed to be “the true vine.” At face value the statement suggests there are false vines, and His thinking is most logical for the Aristotelian law of non-contradiction tells us that two diametrically opposed concepts cannot logically be true at the same time. It is logically impossible. If Christ is “the true vine” (A), then there is no room for other vines (B) which claim truth status but are diametrically opposed to Him. If you struggle with this concept, then, perhaps rhetoric and feelings have caused you to forget about the superior important of reason as a test for truth.

Further, the fact He adds that His Father is the Vinedresser, underscores the fact a trinity is in action. We know this to be true because Jesus just talked in chapter 14:16 about “another Comforter,” using the Greek word for “another,” *allon* (ἄλλον), which meant another after the same kind, or another divine One just like Him, very God of very God, i.e., the Holy Spirit (καὶ ἐρωτήσω τὸν πατέρα καὶ ἄλλον παράκλητον δώσει ὑμῖν, ἵνα μεθ’ ὑμῶν εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα ᾗ). Had He used the Greek word *heteros* (ἕτερος), He would have meant One was coming who was altogether different from Himself.<sup>2</sup> But He didn’t say this and for good reason for the third member of the holy, mysterious trinity was coming to be with His people. Again, false vines reject this concept, and that is why they are patently false. Only the true vine operates within the mystery of the trinity and true branches understand and grasps this inexorable truth by faith.

This is the first step toward producing spiritual fruit for God, which is why He made you. Do you know Him by faith?

## Step #2: You Must Embrace A Reality (John 15:2, 3, 6)

If you are a believer and fruit bearing is not a key concern of your spiritual life, please realize the Vinedresser’s reaction to you because of His love for you. One, He will “take you away” (John 15:2). What does this mean? In Greek the term can denote two things, “to take away,” or “to

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<sup>2</sup> Friberg, *Analytical Greek Lexicon*, [Fri] ἕτερος, τέρα, ον with a basic meaning *other, different*; (1) qualitatively *another* of a different kind, *different, not identical* with what was previously referred to (RO 7.23; GA 1.6); (2) numerically, denoting a new member distinct in kind from those that preceded *another, someone else, something else* (1C 12.8-10); in lists *some . . . some* (LU 8.6-8); (the first) . . . *the second . . . the third* (LU 14.19, 20); (3) substantively ὁ ἕ. *one’s neighbor, the other fellow* (RO 2.1); τῆ ἑτέρα *on the next day* (AC 20.15); ἐν ἑτέρῳ *in another place, elsewhere* (HE 5.6); (4) as qualifying γλώσσαι (*tongues*) *foreign or different languages* (AC 2.4)  
ἕτερος A--NM-S ἕτερος

*lift up.*<sup>3</sup> I think the latter is in view here in light of the time of year it was in Israel. Jesus spoke here about how to make branches productive. If you were a Jewish vinedresser and you had a vine

<sup>3</sup>Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick William Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 28-29, αἶρω fut. ἄρω; 1 aor. ἤρα (ἤρα v.l.; TestAbr; GrBar); pf. ἤρακα Col 2:14. Pass.: 1 fut. ἀρθήσομαι; 1 aor. ἤρθην; pf. ἤρμαι J 20:1; Hs 9, 5, 4 (Hom.+; he, like some later wr., has αείρω).

① to raise to a higher place or position, *lift up, take up, pick up*

② lit., of stones (Dio Chrys. 12 [13], 2) J 8:59 (cp. Jos., Vi. 303); Rv 18:21; Hs 9, 4, 7. Fish Mt 17:27; coffin 1 Cl 25:3; hand (X., An. 7, 3, 6) Rv 10:5 (Dt 32:40). Hands, in prayer 1 Cl 29:1 (Ael. Aristid. 24, 50 K.=44 p. 840 D.; 54 p. 691; PUPS 8 p. 30 no. 14 [pre-Christian] Θεογένης αἶρει τὰς χεῖρας τῷ Ἡλίῳ; Sb 1323 [II A.D.] θεῶ ὑψίστω καὶ πάντων ἐπόπτη καὶ Ἡλίῳ καὶ Νεμέσεσι αἶρει Ἀρσεινόη ἄωρος τὰς χεῖρας). But αἶ. τὴν χεῖρα ἀπό τινος *withdraw one's hand fr. someone=renounce* or *withdraw fr. someone* B 19:5; D 4:9. Of snakes *pick up* Mk 16:18. κλίνην Mt 9:6. κλινίδιον Lk 5:24. κράβαττον Mk 2:9, 11f; J 5:8-12. Of a boat that is pulled on board Ac 27:17. Of a spirit that carries a person away Hv 2, 1, 1 (cp. TestAbr B 10 p. 115, 11 [Stone p. 78] of angels). Take up a corpse to carry it away AcPt Ox 849 verso, 8 (cp. TestAbr A 20 p.103, 20 [Stone p. 54]). αἶ. σύσσημον *raise a standard* ISm 1:2 (Is 5:26); αἶ. τινὰ τῶν ἀγκώνων *take someone by one's arms* Hv 1, 4, 3. For Ac 27:13 s. 6 below.—Pass. 2 Cl 7:4. ἄρθητι (of mountains) *arise* Mt 21:21; Mk 11:23. ἤρθη νεκρός Ac 20:9.

③ fig. αἶ. τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς ἄνω *look upward* (in prayer, as Ps 122:1; Is 51:6 al.) J 11:41. For 10:24 s. 5 below. αἶ. φωνὴν *raise one's voice, cry out loudly* (1 Km 11:4; 30:4; 2 Km 3:32 al.) Lk 17:13. πρὸς τινα Ac 4:24.

② to lift up and move from one place to another

③ *take/carry (along)* lit. w. obj. acc. σταυρόν Mt 16:24; 27:32; Mk 8:34; 15:21; Lk 9:23. ζυγόν (La 3:27) Mt 11:29. τινὰ ἐπὶ χειρῶν 4:6; Lk 4:11 (both Ps 90:12). Pass. Mk 2:3. αἶ. τι εἰς ὁδόν *take someth. along for the journey* 6:8; Lk 9:3, cp. 22:36. Of a gambler's winnings Mk 15:24.—Fig. δόξαν ἐφ' ἑαυτὸν αἶ. *claim honor for oneself* B 19:3.

④ *carry away, remove* lit. ταῦτα ἐντεῦθεν J 2:16 (ins [218 B.C.]: ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΑ 7, '34, p. 179, 15 ταῦτα αἰρέσθω; Just., D. 56, 3 σκευῶν ἀρθέντων). Crucified body of Jesus 19:38; cp. vs. 31; 20:2, 13, 15; of John the Baptist Mt 14:12; Mk 6:29. A stone from a grave-opening J 11:39, 41; pass. 20:1. οἱ αἶροντες οὐκ ἀνέφερον *those who took something (a mouthful) brought nothing (to their mouth)* GJs 18:2 (not pap). τὸ περισσεῦον *the remainder* Mt 14:20; 15:37; cp. Lk 9:17. περισσεύματα Mk 8:8. κλάσματα *fragments* 6:43; *baskets* 8:19f. ζώνην *take off* Ac 21:11; *take: τὸ σὸν what belongs to you* Mt 20:14; τὰ ἀρκοῦντα *what was sufficient for him* Hs 5, 2, 9. αἶ. τι ἐκ τῆς οἰκίας *get someth. fr. the house* Mk 13:15; cp. vs.16 and Mt 24:17; cp. 24:18; Lk 17:31; take (a body) from a tomb J 20:2, 13, 15; *take τινὰ ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου* 17:15.

⑤ to take away, remove, or seize control without suggestion of lifting up, *take away, remove*. By force, even by killing: abs. ἄρον, ἄρον *away, away* (with him)! J 19:15 (cp. POxy 119, 10 [Dssm., LO 168; LAE 188 n. 22]; Philo, In Flacc. 144; ἄρον twice also La 2:19 v.l., in different sense). W. obj. αἶρε τοῦτον Lk 23:18; cp. Ac 21:36; 22:22. ἄραι τὸν μάγον AcPI Ha 4, 35f; αἶρε τοὺς ἀθέους (s. ἄθεος 2a) MPol 3:2; 9:2 (twice); *sweep away* Mt 24:39; ὡς μελλούσης τῆς πόλεως αἰρεσθαι *as though the city were about to be destroyed* AcPI Ha 5, 17; cp. κόσμος ἔρεται (=αἶρεται) ἐμ πυρὶ 2, 26f. W. the connot. of force or injustice or both (Epict. 1, 18, 13; PTEbt 278, 27; 35; 38 [I A.D.]; SSol 5:7): τὸ ἱμάτιον Lk 6:29; cp. vs. 30; D 1:4. τὴν πανοπλίαν *all his weapons* Lk 11:22; τάλαντον Mt 25:28; cp. Lk 19:24. Fig. τὴν κλεῖδα τῆς γνώσεως 11:52. Pass.: Mt 13:12; Mk 4:25; Lk 8:18; 19:26. *Conquer, take over* (Diod S 11, 65, 3 πόλιν) τόπον, ἔθνος J 11:48. For Lk 19:21f s. 4 below. αἶ. τὴν ψυχὴν ἀπό τινος J 10:18 (cp. EFascher, Deutsche Theol. '41, 37-66).—Pass. ἀπό τῆς γῆς Ac 8:33b (Is 53:8; Just., D. 110, 6). ἀφ' ὑμῶν ἡ βασιλεία Mt 21:43.—Of Satan τὸν λόγον τὸν ἐσπαρμένον εἰς αὐτοὺς Mk 4:15; cp. Lk 8:12. τὴν χαρὰν ὑμῶν οὐδεὶς αἶρει ἀφ' ὑμῶν *no one will deprive you of your joy* J 16:22. ἐξ ὑμῶν πᾶσαν ὑπόκρισιν *rid ourselves of all pretension* B 21:4; ἀπό τῆς καρδίας τὰς διυχνίας αἶ. *put away doubt fr. their heart* Hv 2, 2, 4. αἶ. ἀφ' ἑαυτοῦ *put away fr. oneself* Hm 9:1; 10, 1, 1; 10, 2, 5; 12, 1, 1. αἶ. ἐκ (τοῦ) μέσου *remove, expel* (fr. among) (Epict. 3, 3, 15; Plut., Mor. 519d; BGU 388 II, 23 ἄρον ταῦτα ἐκ τοῦ μέσου; PHib 73, 14; Is 57:2) 1 Cor 5:2 (v.l. ἐξαρθῆ); a bond, note, certificate of indebtedness αἶ. ἐκ τοῦ μέσου *destroy* Col 2:14. Of branches *cut off* J 15:2. Prob. not intrans., since other exx. are lacking, but w. 'something' supplied αἶρει τὸ πλήρωμα ἀπὸ τοῦ ἱματίου *the patch takes someth. away fr. the garment* Mt 9:16; cp. Mk 2:21. *Remove, take away, blot out* (Eur., El. 942 κακά; Hippocr., Epid. 5, 49, p. 236 pain; cp. Job 6:2; IG II, 467, 81 ζημίας; Epict. 1, 7, 5 τὰ ψευδῆ; SIG 578, 42 τ. νόμον; Pr 1:12; EpArist 215; Just., D. 117, 3) τὴν ἁμαρτίαν τ. κόσμου J 1:29, 36 v.l.; 1 J 3:5 (Is 53:12 Aq., s. PKatz, VetusT 8, '58, 272; cp. 1 Km 15:25; 25:28). Pass. Ac 8:33a (Is 53:8); Eph 4:31. Fig. *take*, in order to make someth. out of the obj. 1 Cor 6:15.

which wasn't being productive, one of the first things you would do was "lift it up," and secure it in a new location, hoping to move it into a fruit bearing mode. A "lifted" branch would get much more air than it would on the ground, thus keeping mold and disease from attacking it, and also putting it in a position to be productive. Concerning this technique, Gary Derickson observes:

When the stems were trained along the ground the grape clusters were propped up to keep them from contacting the soil and being ruined. Trellising of vines seems to have been introduced by the Romans as one of their advancements in viticulture and was used extensively in Palestine. It allowed air to flow through the branches to dry the dew more quickly. Pliny described five approaches to training grapevines "with the branches spreading about on the ground, or with the vine standing up of its own accord, or else with a stay but without a cross-bar, or propped with a single cross-bar, or trellised with four bars in a rectangle." Thus when Jesus related His analogy, the disciples would probably have been familiar with both trailing and trellising practices.<sup>4</sup>

This procedure would have been known to the disciples, and they would have understood its theological import.

Isn't this a perfect picture of what God does to non-productive vines which are located "in" Jesus, i.e., "in Me." Again, I ask, "How could they be "in Me," or a vital part of Jesus if they weren't possessors? Point is, they couldn't (Eph. 1:7, 13). When your spiritual life is all sight and no substance, the Father grabs you (sometimes by the scruff of the neck!) and ties you in a different, higher and possibly harder location. Or in other words, He does things in your life to arrest your attention so you will be productive. He may cause you to lose a job, or even gain a job. He may cause you to have a fender bender. He may cause a competitor to move ahead of you. He may remove a friend, or cause you to gain a good one. Mark well, He will work to lift you up from the dirt of the world so you can get on with what He called you to, and that is fruitfulness. Is this not what Jesus did when Peter became unfruitful and apostate by denying Him three times on the night of His betrayal? Indeed. Later He came and propped up, or lifted up, His wayward disciple by challenging him so he could have the potential for fruitful spiritual living (John 21:15-19).

Isn't this just what happened to the disciples in the Upper Room? I think so, and think John 15:3 addresses this:

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

Jesus had just spent an evening around the table teaching the disciples. What was His word which propped them up and/ or cleansed them? They who were prone to argue who was the

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④ to make a withdrawal in a commercial sense, *withdraw, take*, ext. of 2 αἶρεις ὃ οὐκ ἔθηκας Lk 19:21f (banking t.t.: JBernays, Ges. Abh. I 1885, 272f; JSmith, JTS 29, 1928, 158).

⑤ to keep in a state of uncertainty about an outcome, *keep someone in suspense*, fig. ext. of 1 αἶ. τὴν ψυχὴν τίνος J 10:24 (Nicetas, De Manuele Comm. 3, 5 [MPG CXXXIX 460a]: ἕως τίνος αἶρεις, Σαρακηνέ, τὰς ψυχὰς ἡμῶν; The expr. αἶ. τὴν ψυχὴν w. different mng. Ps 24:1; 85:4; 142:8; Jos., Ant. 3, 48).

⑥ to raise a ship's anchor for departure, *weigh anchor, depart*, ext. of 1, abs. (cp. Thu. et al.; Philo, Mos. 1, 85; Jos., Ant. 7, 97; 9, 229; 13, 86 ἄρας ἀπὸ τῆς Κρήτης κατέπλευσεν εἰς Κιλίκιαν) Ac 27:13.—Rydbeck 155f; B. 669f. DELG s.v. 1 ἀείρω. M-M. TW.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Gary W. Derickson, "Viticulture and John 15:1-6," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (Spring 2005): 23-43.

greatest received a powerful word from Christ when He lovingly washed their feet and challenged them to go and do likewise as true servants (John 13).

For those who don't respond well to the Father's gentle propping up technique to move them onward and upward toward fruitfulness, He the Vinedresser, will move to stage two, which is disclosed in verse 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.”

Again, note the conditionality of the verse. Any believer can choose to be productive or non-productive. Those who are unfruitful will not abide in Him in the sense they will not have communion, or fellowship with Him. Let me remind you, to see these branches as Christians who lose their salvation and are tossed into the fires of hell is highly dubious based upon what the rest of the New Testament says about the doctrine of eternal security. Since these branches are/were part of the vine, Jesus, their pruning, casting, and burning, must be seen in a different light; namely, the light of divine discipline (A concept clearly taught in the Bible, Psa. 79:5; 89:46; Isa. 10:17-19; Jer. 4:4; 7:20; 15:14; 17:27). Nor can these be unbelievers who simply professed faith and then wound up in hell, as is proposed by MacArthur, “. . . the imagery of the burning suggests that these fruitless branches are doomed to hell.”<sup>5</sup> Again I ask, how could an unbeliever be part of the vine of Christ?

Further, just because the unfruitful branches are burned doesn't mean hell is in view or literal fire for that matter. Fire is, as a matter of record, used by Jesus at the Judgment Seat of believers to consume their sinfully tainted works, resulting in their good works being left for proper evaluation and reward (1 Cor. 3:10-15). Because we are talking about a metaphorical vine and branches, chances are good we're talking about figurative fire as well, leaving plenty of room for divine discipline.

Christ words here are a stern, solemn warning to all believers: Should the Vinedresser not get your attention on the first go round, He will eventually take radical action, action which, I believe can occur in this life (as in the case of Ananias and Sapphira, Acts 5), or in the next life (at the Judgment Seat of Christ, 1 Cor. 3; 2 Cor. 5). Did not David experience the pruning of the Vinedresser when he sinned with Bathsheba? He sure did, but he was still God's child. Can you put your finger, right now, on something the Lord has disciplined you for so you would become more productive? I can.<sup>6</sup>

Some of you, however, are sitting here right now content with showing us your green foliage, while underneath there is an absence of fruit. God is not fooled, and many times neither are fruitful disciples around you. Wake up and let the life force of the Vine, Jesus, make you fruitful so He won't have to come as a disciplinarian. Confess your sin, as we are directed to in 1

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<sup>5</sup>MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, 171.

<sup>6</sup> Additional insight: Every vinedresser, divine and otherwise, knows the intrinsic value of pruning. A vineyard farmer I talked to years ago told me that you must prune the vines to keep them somewhat compact so there will be more fruit. Permitting them to grow unrestrained causes the branches to pull much needed life from other parts of the branch, thus truncating the potential and sizeable growth of grape clusters. Pruning also keeps the grapes and branches dry, thereby alleviating moisture which is a harbinger of mold and disease. Pruning buds on branches also assures you'll have a better, larger grape. Some grape vinedressers leave clusters of 150 buds per area and cut off the rest. Some wine vinedressers only leave six to seven buds on the branch. The theory is the buds closer to the branch produce the better, finer, tastier fruit. I ask, “Could there be a spiritual analogy in this?”



John 1:9, and you'll be restored as a branch, something the limited metaphor didn't teach but is factually taught elsewhere.

This is the second step to fruitfulness, dealing with your sin. There is yet a third.

### Step #3: You Must Maintain A Relationship (John 15:4-5, 10, 12-15)

These verses illustrate why salvation is not in view here because they stress our work at maintaining an abiding status with Jesus, a thought which is foreign and heretical to the rest of New Testament teaching on the doctrine of salvation. Salvation is His work, not ours. Sanctification, on the other hand, is our responsibility, our daily choice. Follow Christ's words here closely:

<sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> 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.

Abiding is a command, not a suggestion, not an option. We are to work at it so we can be fruitful. Yet if we are honest, some among us might not have a clue as to what it means, so I'll help you with a little clarification.

Abiding, sometimes translated "remaining," means you have an active responsibility to expose yourself to Jesus and to His teachings, thereby creating intimacy.

- You must commune with Him.
- You must carve out time to be alone with Him.
- You must get yourself to church to worship Him.
- You should get yourself in a Bible study.
- You should read your Bible, which is nothing less than fertilizer for the branch.
- You should memorize Scriptures.
- You should plan times to talk with Him.
- You should have spontaneous moments with Him.
- You should deal with your sin before Him.
- You should obey His commands. As He says in verse 10: "If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love." Translated, when you hear the Word and are convicted by it to the point of doing something about it, you are placed in an abiding status.

What happens when you abide in Him, when you stay close to Him? Verse 5 tells you. You will bear not *some fruit* but *much fruit*. By myself I can really do nothing which pleases Him or has the slightest resemblance to spiritual fruit. Yet, as I come to the daily realization that He, and He alone is the source of my fruit, I can then, in turn, produce fruit to His glory, not mine.

If the fruit is looking pretty scarce on your branch, I think you know now what to do, don't you? Read the rest of this passage and you'll see the amazing results of a life rightly related to and

dependent on the vine, Jesus. Verses 7-9 and 11 give us four identifiable results, or should I say fruits?

One, you will have answered prayer in your life. Verse 7 puts it this way:

<sup>7</sup> If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

Now, let's not go off the deep-end here, thinking God is giving you a green light to have anything you want and desire. Once more, 1 John 5:14 brings us back down to earth:

This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.

You can and will ask for many things in your walk with God, however, you'll only receive those things which dovetail with His will. And I might add, a godly person learns what that divine will is the longer he abides with Him, so in his later years he asks less for things he knows are meaningless to God and more for things he knows excite and thrill Him.

Want a more powerful prayer life? Then, start abiding like a good branch!

Two, you will demonstrate you're a disciple and thereby glorify God. Zero in on verse 8 here:

<sup>8</sup> My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples.

Want to make God happy? Want Him to smile when He thinks about you? Abide in the vine and produce much fruit and it will be so. And God won't just be happy with you and praised by your fruit, others around you will know for sure you belong to Him because your fruit is so other worldly.

Three, you will have joy, joy that can't be touched by life events, joy which is internal and unscathed by the storms which blow past you.

<sup>11</sup> These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and *that* your joy may be made full."

Joy doesn't come when I get the right drug to level out my serotonin level, nor does it arrive when I pay for a session with a psychiatrist. Lasting joy comes when I stay close to Jesus and produce fruit which honors Him.

Four, you will have a greater love for people.

<sup>12</sup> This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. <sup>13</sup> Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends. <sup>14</sup> You are My friends if you do what I command you. <sup>15</sup> No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you.

If you abide in Jesus by your commitment to His commands, you will, by default, love each other like He did: sacrificially. You'll see your husband's strengths and weaknesses in a different light. Your wife and all of her idiosyncrasies will be viewed differently. You'll see people in a whole new light. You'll love them in a whole new way. You'll even be prepared to do what you need to do to express your love for them, even if it demands a major sacrifice on your part. Most certainly Jesus showed us on the cross what these verses meant, didn't He? He loved us with a love we are still talking about, and this is all because He stayed close to the will of the Father.



I don't know about you, but I at least want these fruits in my life. How about you? We have here before us a grapevine. It has fruit, beauty and growth. It is a perfect picture of what God wants from each of our lives, but maybe it's not a picture of your life. You know the fruit isn't what it should be. Could you muster the courage today to come forward, lay hold of this vine and say, "Lord forgive me, forgive my

barrenness. I promise you that I will be a fruit bearer."

Others might be buckling and grumbling while the Vinedresser is dressing the vine. Could you step up here and grab this vine and say, "Lord, forgive me for my bitter, angry, unbelieving spirit. Thank you for loving me enough to prune me. May my life give you all the glory."

Others might be all right with the work of the Vinedresser in your life. Sure, times have been tough, but you see now what He was accomplishing. Could you give Him the glory right now by saying, "Lord, thank you for pruning me at the right time, so that fruit could follow" ?

Still others might need to say, "Lord, I know I am not part of this vine. Make me, by faith, part of it today." Is that something God is laying on your heart? If so, then do something about it.