

The Fruitful Christian

A study of the Vine metaphor – John 15:1-17

“Running the Sunday School outing this year”, said exhausted Mrs. Packer, “was like trying to steer cats through a field!” Whether she was referring to the children or her co-workers, I’m sure she did not mean that they were covered with hair and had tails! Metaphors are useful because they vividly represent reality in a memorable way. Yet great care is needed to correctly understand and not over-interpret these figures of speech. When our Lord Jesus taught, He made use of many metaphors.

In John 15 Jesus uses the metaphor of a vine and its branches: “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he trims clean so that it will be even more fruitful” (John 15:1-2). Those who were listening to Jesus, would be accustomed to see vineyards, vines and grapes – and probably familiar with hearing these used in a figurative way. Some of their old prophets compared Israel with a vineyard or a vine, teaching them that the Lord wanted good grapes - such as justice and righteousness. (Isaiah 5:1-7; Hosea 10:1). Some listeners would remember hearing in their synagogues the parable of a vine talking to some trees (Judges 9:8-15). In the Old Testament, vines and fig-trees are usually pictures of blessing, happiness and prosperity.

Interpreting the metaphor

As He taught, the Lord Jesus gave the vine a new meaning: “I am the true vine.” What lessons did the Lord Jesus wish to communicate? One thing is very clear from this metaphor: that the vine should produce much fruit! But does this fruit represent? How is the vine pruned? What happens to the unfruitful person? Some use this metaphor to suggest that a Christian may lose his salvation if he does not bear fruit. Is this what Jesus was teaching?

Before we yield to the temptation of imposing our own views on this metaphor, it is wise to see how Jesus himself interprets some of its elements. He says, “I am **the vine**” (John 15:5). We are also told that **the gardener** is God the Father: “My Father is the gardener” (John 15:1). Further, we are told by implication that one of **the tools**

used to clean the branches is the Word of God: “You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you” (John 15:3). Finally, we are told that **the branches** were those listening to Him: “You are the branches” (John 15:5). Is the “you” referring to His disciples?... to all genuine believers?... to the mix of believers and unbelievers? We are not told. The metaphor contains other details which are not explained: What does “cut off” mean? What do the “fruit” and the “fire” represent? Again, we are not told. The possible meaning of the unknowns must be determined in such a way that its application agrees with other clear statements in the Holy Scriptures.

What is the Father looking for?

Fruit is what the Father is looking for. It represents that which God would like to produce through me. Broadly speaking, there are three areas where God expects fruitfulness in your life and mine: Christian character, worship and praise, and service or good works.

- 1. Christian character:** The Lord desires to see Christ’s character formed in us, that we should be “conformed to the likeness of his Son” (Romans 8:29). This means that the Father would like to see in us true humility and happy submission to His will, a genuine love and interest in others, as well as patience, flexibility, holiness in thought and actions, and self-control. What a challenge! Is our character becoming more like that of Jesus? The apostle Paul refers to these as “the fruit of the Spirit” (Galatians 5:22,23). If the Spirit of God is not free to move within us, we cannot produce this character fruit. Furthermore, unless our Christian character is growing, it becomes impossible to produce the other two types of fruit.
- 2. Worship and praise:** Through worship and praise we thank God for who He is and what He has done, is doing, and will do. Some call this the highest type of fruit we humans can produce: “True worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks” (John 4:23). “Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise - the fruit of lips that confess His name” (Hebrews 13:15). Are you a thankful Christian? Do you regularly worship and praise your Lord?
- 3. Service or good works:** Concerning service and good works, Paul urges us to “not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people” (Galatians 6:9-10). He prayed for the Colossians, that they would be “bearing fruit in every good work” (Colossians 1:10). He made an even stronger statement in Ephesians: “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (2:10). We have been redeemed in order to serve Him. Our God now prepares good works for us to do. Are we looking for them? Do we happily engage in them?

Once saved, always saved

Let us begin exploring the meaning of the following two statements: “He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit,” and “If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is... picked up, thrown into the fire and burned” (John 15:2,6)?

Before going any further, we must be clear that Scripture teaches that a true believer cannot lose his salvation. Therefore, we are not free to interpret the unexplained elements in this metaphor to suggest that a true Christian may be thrown into the “lake of fire.” This would force Jesus’ metaphor to contradict His clear teaching: “I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish” (John 10:28). Jesus promised eternal security when He said: “I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life” (John 5:24). These promises do not depend on our behavior. It is Christ who saves and Christ who keeps: “Therefore He is able to save completely those who come to God through Him, because He always lives to intercede for them” (Hebrews 7:25). Christ will be interceding for us forever. Can anything make us safer? Are you enjoying this security? Memorise some of these promises and really believe them. Peace comes when we trust the words of God and not our own feelings. Remember that the redemptive work, the promises and the intercession of Christ settle the matter. Once saved, always saved. If you have been born-again, you shall remain a child of God forever.

The branches and the fire

If the branches represent true believers, then the fire can not represent Hell or eternal condemnation. Since the passage does not explain the meaning of “you” and “fire” we should avoid being too dogmatic as we seek to understand and apply these elements. Let us consider two possible interpretations. Each interpretation has a challenging application which is in line with Scripture:

- 1. The branches are those who call themselves Christians.** Some Bible students suggest that the branches could represent the Christian profession, that is, all those who come under the umbrella of “Christianity”. But only true Christians can produce fruit. Following the metaphor, the day will come when the Father will “cut off” those branches which pretend to be true Christians. The undeniable fact is that if we do not have a genuine relationship with Jesus-Christ, we cannot bear any fruit that is pleasing to God. The religious, the fake, the traditional, the pretend Christians, therefore, are those who are “thrown into the fire and burned.” Or in Jude’s words, such will “suffer the punishment of eternal fire” (Jude 7). In this interpretation “fire” would represent Hell.

Are you a traditional or a nominal Christian? Perhaps you go to church. You may be baptised and know your Bible quite well. But if you have not been born again, the day will come when the Father will cut you off: “If anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire” (Revelation 20:14). Do you desire a genuine relationship with Jesus-Christ? He loves you deeply and strongly desires such a relationship with you: “whoever comes to me I will never drive away” (John 6:37). Stop going through religious motions. Sincerely repent and give your life to Jesus today.

- 2. The branches are born again Christians.** A second way of looking at the metaphor is to see the branches as being only true Christians. Those who favour this interpretation point out that an unbeliever can never be part of the true vine. How can an unbeliever ever be attached to and nourished by Christ? They also point out that in Scripture, “fire” does not always mean Hell. For example,

sometimes “fire” is used as a cleansing or purifying agent, in other parts it is a tool or a symbol of judgment.

The Father is looking for fruit in the life of every Christian. There are, however, true Christians who do not live to please God, who make no attempt to bear fruit for Him. Some true Christians reach such a low level that there is no visible difference between them and the non-Christians, and at times their behavior may be even worse! These are the branches which bear no fruit. In this case, the “fire” would represent God’s judgment.

In the New Testament, we find a couple of very serious cases. In one, the apostle Paul exhorts Christians to “put out of your fellowship” such a person, and “hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord” (1 Corinthians 5:2,5). We also read of a situation where the Lord was so displeased with the behavior of some true Christians, that they were cut off from this life before they could do any more damage (1 Corinthians 11:30).

The lifestyle we develop as Christians really matters. The Lord looks carefully at the choices we make. What is your life building? “But let each see how he builds... the work of each shall be made manifest; for the day shall declare *it*, because it is revealed in fire; and the fire shall try the work of each what it is. If the work of any one which he has built upon *the foundation* shall abide, he shall receive a reward. If the work of any one shall be consumed, he shall suffer loss, but *he* shall be saved, but so as through *the fire*” (1 Corinthians 3:10-15 DBY).

Producing fruit that pleases the Father

“No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me” (John 15:4). Our Lord’s point is very clear: we cannot produce true Christian character by our own efforts. We need to draw continually from the strength Christ Himself provides. “If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). In my teens I used to dislike this verse. I felt the word “nothing” was a serious exaggeration. To lead a friend to faith definitely requires God’s help, “but look,” I would think, “I can move my hand without God’s help!” The teaching here is that apart from Christ we cannot produce anything pleasing to the Father. If I am not living in communion with Christ, my worship is empty and my praise hypocritical. If I am not walking with Christ, my service in the church and personal sacrifices are just acts of my flesh. God the Father is not impressed. He finds no fruit in my efforts. I may be a creative Sunday School teacher, I may have a doctorate in Biblical counseling, I may be a popular evangelist, I may be a well traveled Bible teacher - we may produce abundant fruit that pleases fellow believers - but if we desire to please the Father, we must work in communion with Christ. “No branch can bear fruit by itself... Apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15: 4,5).

Fruit, more fruit, much fruit

Sometimes we may feel satisfied with the fruit we think we are producing. We compare ourselves with those around us and feel comfortable: "I work harder for the Lord than James." "I am more patient than Sharon." "My financial contributions are larger than Mike's." The Father sees things differently. He not only sees the fruit we are producing but also the fruit we could produce. As a good gardener, He is committed to work on us to produce "more fruit," "much fruit," and a type of "fruit that will last" (John 15:2,5,16). Our heavenly Father is not interested in comfort and the status-quo. His goal is that each branch will produce its full potential.

What does the Father do with a fruitful Christian? "Every branch that does bear fruit He prunes so that it will be even more fruitful" (John 15:2). A branch may produce good fruit and at the same time have some unnecessary growths. These place a limit on the size of existing fruit and limit the possibility of more fruit. Some of these extra little twigs and leaves may be sinful – like gossip, pornography or betting. Other growths simply absorb our time, energies, finances and creativity – like addiction to newspapers, computers or TV; like being unhealthily absorbed in some sport, study, job or hobby. The apostle Paul referred to these two categories as "sins" and "weights" (Hebrews 12:1). Both hinder our potential for God. Our loving Father knows what He could produce in you and me - if only we were a bit more focused, less distracted, more balanced. Therefore He works at pruning every fruitful Christian.

The needed pruning process

How does the Father "prune" and clean the Christian? Usually through His Word: as we read, study, listen and meditate on it, we become aware of distracting and unnecessary growths. The Holy Spirit within, urges us to reflect on how we use our time and our resources. In order to produce more fruit, we may need to stop doing something good and devote more energy on something better. When we choose to obey such promptings and act on the Word, unnecessary growths are removed (John 15:3,14).

The process of pruning has its own dangers. The fact is that the Lord may choose to prune something in your life which may be very acceptable in the life of another believer. If we forget this, we shall turn specific guidance into general principles and join the ranks of the religious legalists. The "Father is the gardener." He knows the potential of each branch. He knows what hinders more fruit. He will do the pruning.

Are you allowing the gardener to prune you? Have you noticed that in time some pruned growths may reappear? Based on the Word, the Father has a number of pruning techniques. He may use a difficult Christian or relative to teach us to be more loving and patient. He may use an illness to draw us closer to himself or simply to "prune" our tendency to be proud or to feel indispensable. He may use a financial crisis to "prune" our materialistic tendencies or to weaken us so that we may rely less on our own strength or resources and more on His. However painful the pruning process may be, we should never doubt "that in all things God works for the good of those who love him" (Romans 8:28). He only allows the pain He can use.

Conclusion

In the metaphor of the vine and the branches, the Lord Jesus does not teach that a genuine Christian may someday find himself burning in Hell. Once the Lord has saved us, we shall remain saved for all eternity. Our salvation rests secure on Christ's work, His promises, and His eternal intercession - and does not depend on our efforts or behavior. Having our destiny assured, we are now called to yield fruit here on earth: "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last" (John 15:16). Life is too short and too precious to spend it producing twigs and leaves!

A life in communion with Christ is indispensable to yield the fruit the Father expects from us: a growing Christian character, true worship and thankful praise, good works and sacrificial service. Knowing the type of fruit you and I are able to produce, our loving Father is working at removing from us anything that hinders or detracts. Over the last few weeks, is the Father trying to prune something in your life? Is your response to His promptings radical enough? Whether we produce "fruit," "more fruit," or "much fruit" depends on our response.

Philip Nunn
London, England
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