

## John 15 and the Removal of the Branches

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Many times throughout the gospel records Jesus warns about the danger of false profession and superficially following Christ without any real attachment to Him (Matt. 7:13-14, 16, 20-22; 10:32-33; 13:30; Luke 6:43-44; 9:24; 17:33; John 6:60, 66; 8:31). There are those who claim to have a relationship and connection with

Christ but who are not His genuine followers. We see Jesus giving another warning about false profession in John 15:2 and 6 with the removal of the branches.

People claim to be followers or disciples of Christ, but they are fruitless and bear no marks of genuine transformation, which confirms their unregenerate state as Jesus taught elsewhere (Matt. 13:19-22). Therefore, in the end those represented by the dead branches will meet their doom and judgment in hell because they never possessed a saving attachment to Christ who is here pictured as the Vine. In John 15:2 Jesus is dealing with those who are allegedly and superficially attached to Him but who are not genuinely His children and followers. John's Gospel shows the departure of Judas happened at the start of the evening in Chapter 13.

Jesus is certainly drawing a connection with Judas Iscariot (an apostate) in His remarks of John 15:2 and 6. "When Jesus had thus said, he was troubled in spirit, and testified, and said, Verily, verily, I say unto you, that one of you shall betray me" (John 13:21). Judas was not abiding in Christ but was only superficially associated with Jesus. He was not a genuine believer and follower of Christ. He did not remain associated with Christ but would commit a terrible act of apostasy, departing from Christ and never again walking with Him (Matt. 27:5).

John 15:1-3 relates the believer's position in Christ to abiding and fruitful living to determine if they possess a genuine or counterfeit relationship with Him. Jesus

states: **“I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman. Every branch in me** (which is allegedly attached to Christ, here referring to unbelieving and false disciples, those who claim to have a relationship with Christ, a superficial attachment to Christ – not those who are actually positioned in Christ and possess a true saving relationship with Him) **that beareth not fruit** (because it is improperly attached to the vine – like Judas who was a sham believer who did not bear genuine fruit) **he taketh away** (to judgment as verse 6 teaches): **and every branch that beareth fruit** (which is properly attached to the vine – a saved believer bearing fruit), **he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit** (the Father prunes the true branches to bring forth more fruit). **Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you.”**

When saying “Every branch in me” Jesus was stating that a relationship may or may not exist with Him. The individual must be a believer through faith in Him and confirm this by his fruit bearing works and transformation of living. In other words, Jesus is saying that a person who claims to be abiding “in me” but bears no fruit is a sham disciple or follower of Me and will be taken away in judgment.

It seems clear that Jesus is creating a dichotomy between those who are genuinely related to Him in a saving way which is proven through their fruit bearing life and those who are temporarily related to him but unfruitful in their living, possessing no genuine and lasting works of transformation (Mark 4:19; Luke 8:14). Jude says the unbelievers are “without fear,” “without water,” and “without fruit” (Jude vs. 12). In other words, the branches that are taken away were never properly attached to the vine, demonstrated by the fact that they did not bear fruit. There is no such thing as a fruitless Christian for they will bear fruit in keeping with repentance (Matt. 3:8; Matt. 7:17-20). A Christian may be barren and unfruitful for a period of time (2 Pet. 1:8) but there will be varying amounts of fruit throughout his life that relate to good works and transformed living.

Homer Kent correctly summarizes:

“The fruitless branches represent the mere professed believer who is finally severed from his superficial connection with Christ. This had actually happened earlier in the evening with the removal of Judas from the group.”

The lexical evidence for **“taketh away”** (airo) can mean to take away, take up, pick up, raise, life up, carry off, sweep away, move from its place, to take off or away

what is attached to anything. The word “airo” can certainly have the idea of being removed (Matt. 13:12; 21:21, 43; 24:39; Mark 2:21; 4:15; 11:23; John 1:29; 11:41; 19:31) and this seems to be the case here. The counterfeit disciple (John 6:60, 66) who does not abide (remain) in Christ and therefore bear fruit is removed or taken away to judgment. The cutting off the dead, useless, and unproductive branches and gathering them together to be burned (John 15:6) depict the judgment of being “cast into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched” (Mark 9:45, 47) as Jesus repeatedly spoke about during His earthly ministry (Matt. 10:28; 23:15).



Some suggest that the judgment is referring to Christians being judged at the Judgment Seat of Christ. One writer summarized: “When the Christian fails to abide in Christ, he withers, dries up, and his fruit or works will be judged by fire (1 Cor 3:12–15).” This is backreading the epistles into the gospels. We should be careful about doing this for Jesus does not talk about the Judgment Seat of Christ for Christians (Church Age saints) in the gospels. But He does repeatedly speak of the fiery judgment of wrath that unbelievers face.

James Montgomery Boice (among others) believes that the ancient Greek verb airo, translated here as “takes away” is more accurately translated “lifts up.” The idea is that the Father lifts up unproductive vines off of the ground (as was common in the ancient practices of vineyard care). They lifted them up off the ground that they might get more sun and bear fruit better.” However, Carl Laney says, “It is yet to be proved that this was the ancient practice in Israel.” Furthermore, this conclusion does not fit the repeated imagery Jesus gave in the gospel accounts of burning and judgment that awaits all those who were never saved. Nor is “airo” more accurately translated “lifted up” since in many places it is correctly translated removed or taken away.

In John 15:6, Jesus goes on to interpret what He said in verse two about taking away the unproductive branches: “**If a man abide not in me** (*does not remain in fellowship with Christ relationally and continue to be a follower of Christ, proving he is only superficially attached to Christ*), **he is cast forth as a branch, and is**

**withered** (*depicting spiritual death*); and men gather them, and cast **them** into the fire, and they are burned” (*depicting spiritual death – Rom. 6:23; Heb. 9:27; Rev. 20:12-15*).

The interpretation of John 15:6 can be the cause of heated debate among believers. Some have suggested that those who “abide not in me” are believers who have been unfaithful and have lost their salvation, that the Vinedresser decided they should be cut off and thrown away. But Jesus said that no one can be saved and then unsaved (John 10:27–29). We are eternally secure in Christ when we believe on Him and receive His free gift of eternal life (John 6:47). **The understanding of John 15:2 and 6 relates to the many other images of fruitless trees and branches which are cut down and thrown into fiery judgment, which Christ presents as referring to unbelievers who possess only a superficial association with Him but are not truly related to Christ in a saving way. They will face judgment in the future.**



Lenski observes that it is probably best to regard v. 6 as expounding v. 2 and for this reason the effort to retranslate “taketh away” to “lifteth up” is not convincing. The one not bearing fruit (v. 2) is the one not remaining/abiding in Christ (v. 6). And a branch that bears no fruit is obviously dead. Therefore, like Judas, it is cut off. Jesus spoke here of dead branches; such a branch is thrown away and withers. The farmers would take the dead branches

and put them on a pile to be burned. In other words, the branches are gathered to be destroyed. Jesus is teaching that the severed branches are carefully distinguished from the real ones and the branches that are removed are burned which speaks of judgment.

In John 15:6 Jesus is giving a vivid illustration of eschatological judgment for those who reject Christ as Savior and therefore manifest no genuine signs of regenerating life. It’s similar to what Jesus taught about the unsaved Pharisees and Sadducees, when He



said, “Whose fan *is* in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (Matt. 3:12). These are explanations that can only be understood in the framework of severe punishment and judgment, as it relates to God’s wrath being meted out on unbelievers at the Second Coming.

Matthew 25:41 declares:

“Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels.”

There are many similar fiery expressions of judgment and punishment in the context of Christ’s kingdom offer and His Second Coming (Matt. 3:10-12; 8:12; 13:30, 42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:41, 46).

Matthew 13:30 brings out the same End Time apocalyptic imagery:

“Let both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn.”

Matthew 13:40 adds:

“As therefore the tares are gathered and burned in the fire; so shall it be in the end of this world.”

When following the repeated imagery of Jesus in the gospel records, the “burned” branches obviously refer to professing disciples who, like Judas, are not genuinely saved and therefore are judged. Like a dead branch, a person without Christ is spiritually dead (Eph. 2:1-2) and therefore will be punished in eternal fire.

Like John 15:6, Jesus repeatedly used this same imagery of cutting down and burning fruitless trees which is another clear depiction of future judgment.

Matthew 3:10

“And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.”

By stating that the ax is laid to the root of the trees, John was saying that a work of divine judgment was about to begin. Christ’s arrival and presence would test all

men, even the religious people of His day. Those found fruitless would be destroyed just as a fruitless tree is cut down and thrown into the fire. Unless there was productive fruit in keeping with repentance (Matt. 3:8), God would remove the tree. Jesus was comparing unbelieving Israel to trees that were rooted in the ground but did not bring forth good fruit. He warns how the axe would be laid to the root of the tree and how the tree would be hewn down and judged. Not all root systems are healthy and yield fruit.

Matthew 7:19

“Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.”



In this instance, the dead tree is compared to the destiny of the false prophets who will be thrown into the fire. The doom of false teachers and prophets is “swift destruction” (2 Pet. 2:1). Matthew compares false prophets to trees that are rooted but which do not bring forth good fruit (Matt. 7:17-19). The issue is not just the root but also the fruit since the fruit will tell the story of the root system - whether it’s healthy or unhealthy (“Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them” - Matt. 7:20). In Matthew 15:13 Jesus said, “Every plant, which my heavenly Father hath not planted, shall be rooted up.”

**These are all scenes of related judgment which are like Christ’s analogy and teaching that is found in John 15:2 and 6. Those who do not bring forth fruit are eventually judged as unbelievers.** The repeated fiery and burning imagery that Jesus presented in the gospel records refers to God’s wrath and judgment (Matt. 3:12; 5:22; 13:42; 50) upon those who were fruitless and therefore unsaved. Judas was with Jesus; he seemed like a “branch.” But he did not have God’s life in him, and his destiny was like that of a dead branch that could not bear fruit.

Leon Morris concludes:

“There is no life apart from Christ. And this is brought out with the grim warning for anyone who ‘does not remain in me’ (v.6). We should not understand this to

mean that Christ will ever cast off anyone who is a genuine disciple. We might take Judas as an example. He had had very close contact with Jesus, had indeed been an honored member of the apostolic band, for he had been entrusted with the financial affairs (12:6). But in the Upper Room Jesus said that this man was not 'clean' (13:10-11), using the very word he has just used to characterize his followers (v.3). Despite outward appearances, Judas was not really a disciple. Such a man 'does not remain" in Christ (how could he?), and we should be in no doubt that the ultimate fate of such a person is horrific."

The choice that faces every person is clear. To abide or remain in Christ as a genuine disciple will produce righteous behavior (fruit) which becomes a confirmation of one's genuine salvation (John 8:31). But those whose profession of faith is false and who are *superficially attached to Christ*, like Judas, will be fruitless and ultimately cast into eternal torment in hell.