

The Fruitless Branches (John 15:2a & 6) 4 Views  
Summarized by Dean Wertz (9/30/2018)

After identifying himself as the true vine and his Father as the vinedresser, Jesus says that some people are likened to branches who are “in me” yet because they do not bear fruit, the Father takes them away (v. 2a). Who are these people and what does Jesus mean by “takes away”?

There are four primary ways in which Jesus’ words in verse 2 are interpreted. All four views also grapple with the connection of verse 2 with verse 6. The first view is held by Arminians who believe Jesus is referring to true disciples (i.e. “in me”) who lose their salvation and are therefore, according to verse 2, cut off from Christ and his community. Clarke writes, “Every branch which has been in him by true faith – such as have given way to iniquity, and made shipwreck of their faith and of their good conscience: all these he taketh away.”<sup>1</sup> Regarding the Father’s actions in verse 6, this view believes “a person may as truly be united to him as the branch is to the tree that produces it, and yet be afterwards cut off and cast into the fire ... separated from God himself.”<sup>2</sup>

While “in me” can grammatically refer to true Christians, the idea that a true Christian could become apostate seems counter to the strong evidence seen throughout John’s Gospel in passages like 4:14, 6:37-40 and 10:28-29 and 18:9.<sup>3</sup> Since an equally valid grammatical interpretation for “in me” could be describing those who are associated with and in the company of Jesus, one’s conclusion on this issue will have to be resolved from other passages and applied accordingly here. “It is more satisfactory to recognize that asking the *in me* language to settle such disputes is to push the vine imagery too far.”<sup>4</sup>

The second, third, and fourth views are held by those who, unlike the Arminians, understand the passages in John mentioned above to support the eternal security of genuine believers. The approach that a second group of scholars take is like the first in that they believe “in me” refers to true Christians. Yet, rather than concluding that genuine disciples are removed from Christ, this view translates the Greek word (ἀίρω) as “he lifts up” rather than “he takes away.” This translation leads to an interpretation in which the “the heavenly vinedresser first encourages the branches and lifts them in the sense of providing loving care to enable them to bear fruit.”<sup>5</sup> Pink writes, “Never are these expressions (“in me,” “in him,” “in Christ”) used loosely; never are they applied to any but the children of God.”<sup>6</sup> Further Pink points out that ἀίρω is translated as “lift(s) up” in Luke 17:13, Acts 4:24 and John 11:41 and concludes, “we are satisfied that it would be more accurate and more in accord with ‘the analogy of faith’ to translate, ‘Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he lifteth up’ - from trailing on the ground.”<sup>7</sup> In addition to identifying another possible translation for ἀίρω this argument also points to Palestinian viticulture. “It would be better to see Jesus indicating what actually occurred during the spring, namely, certain non-fruiting branches were tied to the trellises along with the fruiting branches... Removing the non-fruiting branches from the ground and

---

<sup>1</sup> Clarke, *The New Testament with Commentary and Critical Notes*, 5:626.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 5:627–29.

<sup>3</sup> Armenians understand statements like “and they will never perish” and “no one will snatch them out of my hand” as referring to, “They who continue to hear Christ’s voice, and to follow him, shall never perish.” *Ibid.*, 5:595.

<sup>4</sup> Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 515.

<sup>5</sup> Dillow, “Abiding Is Remaining in Fellowship,” 51.

<sup>6</sup> Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1945), 399.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:400.

placing them on the trellis would allow the rows of plants to benefit from unhindered aeration, considered an essential element to proper fruit development.”<sup>8</sup> This agricultural perspective views the vinedresser in verse 2 carrying out a springtime activity of lifting up branches and in verse 6 he is believed to be carrying out a postharvest fall activity in which “fruitful as well as unfruitful branches” are removed. This removal is not viewed as judgment but as a description of the uselessness of pruned material. “A part of the discarding process at the end of the productive season is the burning of dry materials... Their uselessness, not their destruction, is being emphasized.”<sup>9</sup>

While this interpretation has been embraced by a few contemporary writers,<sup>10</sup> it has two weaknesses. First, in the twenty-four occurrences of ἀἶρω in John’s Gospel, the majority of times (16 out of 24) the most natural rendering is clearly to “take away” or “remove.”<sup>11</sup> None of the remaining eight appearances refer to lifting up for refreshment or blessing as Pink proposes.<sup>12</sup>

Second, and more importantly, the viticulture practices upon which this interpretation depend are debated. Shultz, who holds this view, acknowledges, “Most of the vines in Palestine trail on the ground, because it is believed that the grapes ripen more slowly under the shadow of the leaves.”<sup>13</sup> Further, it seems unlikely that thick and stiff wooden branches (in many cases three to five inches in diameter) would be able to be lifted without damage, to a more upright position.<sup>14</sup> Lastly, this view requires an unnatural distinction between verse 2 and verse 6 assuming, since Jesus did not say so, that these verses describe different branches experiencing different activities at different times of the year. As a result, the majority of New Testament scholarship has rejected this view.<sup>15</sup>

The third interpretation views verse 2 and verse 6 representing true Christians who are fruitless and are therefore taken away to heaven as the Father’s final step in their divine discipline. “God reserves the right to remove them from their place in this world (cf. I Cor. 11:30; I John 5:16), directly to heaven’s glory.”<sup>16</sup> There are two weakness with this view. First, throughout John’s Gospel genuine saving belief is united with a life of obedience (i.e. “fruit”) (see, for example, John 3:36 and the inclusio of Jesus call to “follow me” in chapters 1 and 21). Second, 15:6 “indicates that the removal of the fruitless branches is a prelude to judgment, not of blessed fellowship with Christ in heaven.”<sup>17</sup> Jesus’ reference to branches being “cast into the fire” and “burned” reminds the reader of the frequent warnings of the destruction awaiting

---

<sup>8</sup> Gary W. Derickson, “Viticulture and John 15,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 153 (1996): 14–15.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>10</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John: An Expository Commentary*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 228; Earl D. Radmacher, *Celebrating the Word* (Portland: Multnomah, 1987), 22–23; Bruce Wilkinson, *Secrets of the Vine: Breaking Through to Abundance* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2001), 33–35.

<sup>11</sup> Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 518.

<sup>12</sup> For example, 5 of the 8 other occurrences appear in 5:8–12 in which Jesus instructs a man, whom he has just healed, to lift up (and carry away) his mat.

<sup>13</sup> Merrill C. Tenney, ed., *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 882–84, s.v. “Vine, Vineyard,” by A. C. Schultz.

<sup>14</sup> Laney, “Abiding Is Believing,” 60.

<sup>15</sup> C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1978), 395–96; Laney, “Abiding Is Believing,” 55; Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 518; Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 669; Beasley-Murray, *John*, 268.

<sup>16</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 7 (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), 4.

<sup>17</sup> Laney, “Abiding Is Believing,” 61.

unbelievers (Matt. 3:12; 5:22; 18:8-9; 25:41; 2 Thess. 1:7-8; Rev. 20:15) rather than the gift of graduation into the presence of God.

The fourth view holds that when Jesus describes branches as “in me,” he does not necessarily mean genuine believers as Paul does in his letters. Rather, non-fruit-bearing branches “in me” is a reference to people who live in the presence of Jesus and his community. They have, “an external association with Christ that is not matched by an internal, spiritual union by personal faith and regeneration.”<sup>18</sup> “The branch that has no fruit has no life because it has no real union.”<sup>19</sup> This view is preferred for several reasons.

First, the theme of eternal security for genuine disciples in John’s Gospel has already been observed in the plain reading of 4:14, 6:39, 10:28–29 and 18:9 above. Further, if Jesus is speaking in 15:2 of professing Christians who are severed from a superficial connection with Jesus, this provides consistency between verse 2 and verse 6 in which the branch is said to be “thrown away (ἐβλήθη from the root βάλλω), gathered, thrown into the fire and burned” while also remaining consistent with 6:37 (another verse affirming eternal security) in which Jesus says, “All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out” (ἐκβάλλω from the same root βάλλω).

Second, the theme of a divided response to Jesus who “came to his own” (1:11) yet some “did not receive him” (v. 11), while others “did receive him” and “believed in his name” (v. 12), also informs this interpretation of the two differing branches. This divided response has been observed throughout John’s Gospel among the Jews in which some (including his disciples, Joseph of Arimathea and many others) genuinely believed in Jesus and others did not.

Third, the theme of pretenders among those in proximity with Jesus is evident among those who are said to have “believed in his name” and yet Jesus did not “entrust himself to them” (2:23-25), as well as those who are called “his disciples” yet “turned back and no longer walked with him” (6:66). So, in 8:31, “Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, ‘If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples.’” Most significantly, Judas’ departure has been forecasted throughout John’s Gospel and has now taken place just moments before. “If we must think of ‘branches’ with real contact with Jesus, we need go no further than Judas Iscariot (13:10).”<sup>20</sup>

Fourth, this interpretation is consistent with what vine dressers do. “Jesus presses the idea, using the time-honored skills of viticulture. Vine dressers both trim branches so that they will produce more fruit and cut away dead branches that have no life in them. In each case the assumption is that fruit-bearing is the test of life-giving attachment to the vine.”<sup>21</sup>

Fifth, the theme of genuine belief producing transformation is positively portrayed in John’s Gospel as vividly as water changing into wine. Genuine change in true believers is displayed in the lives of the eleven disciples, the Samaritan woman (ch. 4), and the man born blind (9). These and other examples demonstrate, “If there be any real union there will be some life, and if there be any life, there will be some fruit.”<sup>22</sup>

Finally, this view is relevant in the context in which Jesus is speaking. He is preparing his disciples for the difficult reality of defection. He is teaching his disciples that not all who

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Alexander Maclaren, *Maclaren’s Expositions of Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 75.

<sup>20</sup> Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 515.

<sup>21</sup> Burge, *John*, 417–18.

<sup>22</sup> Maclaren, *Maclaren’s Expositions of Holy Scripture*, 75.

identify as “believers” or “disciples” nor all who live in community with Jesus in his new community are true disciples. He is preparing them to expect that what they have seen in the previous years and most recently with Judas need not deter them from abiding in Jesus themselves.