

Exposition of the Gospel of John CHAPTER 51

CHRIST THE TRUE VINE

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Transcript

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John 15:1-6

The following is an Analysis of the passage which is to be before us:— 1. The vine and the husbandman, verse 1. 2. The fruitless branch cared for, verse 2. 3. The purging of fruitless branches, verse 2. 4. Clean through the Word, verse 3. 5. Conditions of fruit-bearing, verse 4. 6. The absolute dependency of Christians, verse 5. 7. The consequences of severed fellowship, verse 6. The passage which is to engage our attention is one that is, most probably, familiar to all of our readers. It is read as frequently, perhaps, as any chapter in the New Testament. Yet how far do we really understand its teachings? Why does Christ here liken Himself to a "vine"? What are the leading thoughts suggested by the figure? What does He mean when He says, "Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away"? What is the "fruit" here referred to? And what is the force of "If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch and is withered; and men gather them, and cast into the fire, and they are burned"? Now as we approach any portion of Scripture for the purpose of studying it, it is essential to keep in mind several elementary but important principles: Who are the persons addressed? In what connection are they addressed? What is the central topic of address? We are not ready to take up the details of any passage until we have first settled these preparatory questions. The persons addressed in John 15 were the eleven apostles. It was not to unsaved people, not to a mixed audience that Christ was speaking; but to believers only. The remote context takes us back to John 13:1. In chapters 13 and 14 we are taught what Christ is doing for us while He is away—maintaining us in communion with Himself, preparing a place for us, manifesting Himself to us, supplying our every need through the Holy Spirit. In John 15, it is the other side of the truth which is before us. Here we learn what we are to be and do for Him during the interval of His absence. In 13 and 14 it is the freeness and fulness of Divine grace; in 15 it is our responsibility to bear fruit. The immediate context is the closing sentence of chapter 14: "Arise, let us go hence. Christ had just said, "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you." He had said this while seated at the supper-table, where the emblems of His death—the basis of our peace—were spread. Now He gets up from the table, which prefigured His resurrection from the dead. Right afterwards He says, I am the true vine. Christ's symbolic action at the

close of 14, views Him on resurrection-ground, and what we have here in 15 is in perfect accord with this. There must be resurrection-life before there can be resurrection-fruit. The central theme then is not salvation, how it is to be obtained or the danger of losing it. Instead, the great theme here is fruit-bearing, and the conditions of fertility. The word "fruit" occurs eight times in the chapter, and in Scripture eight is the resurrection-number. It is associated with a new beginning. It is the number of the new creation. If these facts be kept in mind, there should be little difficulty in arriving at the general meaning of our passage. The figure used by our Savior on this occasion was one with which the apostles must have been quite familiar. Israel had been likened unto a "vine" again and again in the Old Testament. The chief value of the vine lies in its fruit. It really serves no other purpose. The vine is a thing of the earth, and in John 15, it is used to set forth the relation which exists between Christ and His people while they are on earth. A vine whose branches bear fruit is a living thing, therefore the Savior here had in view those who had a living connection with Himself. The vine and its branches in John 15 does not represent what men term "the visible Church," nor does it embrace the whole sphere of Christian profession, as so many have contended. Only true believers are contemplated, those who have passed from death unto life. What we have in John 15:2 and 6 in nowise conflicts with this statement, as we shall seek to show in the course of our exposition. The word which occurs most frequently in John 15 is "abide," being found no less than fifteen times in the first ten verses. Now "abiding" always has reference to fellowship, and only those who have been born again are capable of having fellowship with the Father and His Son. The vine and its branches express oneness, a common life, shared by all, with the complete dependency of the branches upon the vine, resulting in fruit-bearing. The relationship portrayed is that of which this world is the sphere and this life the period. It is here and now that we are to glorify the Father by bearing much fruit. Our salvation, our essential oneness with Christ, our standing before God, our heavenly calling, are neither brought into view nor called into question by anything that is said here. It is by dragging in these truths that some expositors have created their own difficulties in the passage. A few words should now be said concerning the place which our present section occupies in this Paschal Discourse of our Lord. In the previous chapter we have seen the apostles troubled at the prospect of their Master's departure. In ministering to their fearful and sorrowing hearts, He had assured them that His cause in this world would not suffer by His going away: He had promised that, ultimately, He would return for them; in the meantime, He would manifest Himself to them, and He and the Father would abide in them. Now He further assures them that their connection with Him and their connection with each other, should not be dissolved. The outward bond which had united them was to be severed; the Shepherd was to be smitten, and the sheep scattered (Zech. 13:7). But there was a deeper, a more intimate bond, between them and Him, and between themselves, a spiritual bond, and while this remained, increasing fruitfulness would be the result. The link of connection between the first two main sections of the discourse, where Christ is first comforting and then instructing and warning His disciples, is found in the dosing verses of chapter 14. There He had said, Hereafter, I will not talk much with you; for the prince of this world cometh, and hath nothing in me. But that the world may know that I love the Father; and as the Father gave me commandment, even so I do." In the light of this, chapter 15 intimates: Let My Father now (when the prince of this world cometh, but only as an instrument in the hands of His government) do with Me as He will. It will only issue in the bringing forth of that which will glorify the Father, if the corn of wheat died it would bring forth "much fruit" (John 12:24). Fruit was the end in view of the Father's commandment and the Son's obedience. Thus the transition is natural and logical. "I am the true vine" (John 15:1). This word "true" is found in several other designations and descriptions of the Lord Jesus. He is the "true Light" (John 1:9). He is the "true bread" (John 6:32). He is "a minister of the sanctuary, and of the true tabernacle" (Heb. 8:2). The usage of this adjective in the verses just quoted help to determine its force. It is not true in opposition to that which is

false; but Christ was the perfect, essential, and enduring reality, of which other lights were but faint reflections, and of which other bread and another tabernacle,, were but the types and shadows. More specifically, Christ was the true light in contrast from His forerunner, John, who was but a "lamp" (John 5:35 R.V.), or light-bearer. Christ was "the true bread" as contrasted from the manna, which the fathers did eat in the wilderness and died. He was a minister of "the true tabernacle" in contrast from the one Moses made, which was "the example and shadow of heavenly things" (Heb. 8:5). But in addition to these instituted types of the Old Testament, there are types in nature. When our Lord used this figure of the "vine," He did not arbitrarily select it out of the multitude of objects from which an ordinary teacher might have drawn illustrations for his subject. Rather was the vine created and constituted as it is, that it might be a fit representation of Christ and His people bringing forth fruit to God. "There is a double type here, just as we find a double type in the 'bread,' a reference to the manna in the wilderness, and behind that, a reference to bread in general, as the staff of human life. The vine itself is indeed constituted to be an earthly type of a spiritual truth, but we find a previous appropriation of it to that which is itself a type of the perfect reality which the Lord at length presents to us. We refer to the passages in Psalms and prophets where Israel is thus spoken of" (Waymarks in the Wilderness). In Psalm 80:8-9 we read, "Thou hast brought a vine out of Egypt: Thou hast cast out the heathen, and planted it. Thou preparedst room before it, and didst cause it to take deep root, and it filled the land." Again, in Isaiah we are told "Now will I sing to my well-beloved, a song of my beloved touching his vineyard. My well-beloved hath a vineyard in a very fruitful hill: And he fenced it, and gathered out the stones thereof, and planted it with the choicest vine, and built a tower in the midst of it, and also made a winepress therein: and he looked that it should bring forth grapes and it brought forth wild grapes . . . For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah his pleasant plant" (Isa. 5:1, 2, 7). These passages in the Old Testament throw further light on the declaration of Christ that He was "the true vine." Israel, as the type, had proved to be a failure. "I had planted thee a noble vine, wholly a right seed: how then art thou turned into the degenerate plant of a strange vine unto me?" (Jer. 2:21): "Israel is an empty vine, he bringeth forth fruit unto himself" (Hos. 10:1). In contrast from this failure and degeneracy of the typical people, Christ says "I am the true vine"—the antitype which fulfills all the expectations of the Heavenly Husbandman. Many are the thoughts suggested by this figure: 'to barely mention them must suffice. The beauty of the vine; its exuberant fertility; its dependency—clinging for support to that on which and around which it grows; its spreading branches; its lovely fruit; the juice from which maketh glad the heart of God and man (Judg. 9:13; Psalm 104:15), were each perfectly exemplified in the incarnate Son of God. "And my Father is the husbandman" (John 15:1). In the Old Testament the Father is represented as the Proprietor of the vine, but here He is called the Husbandman, that is the Cultivator, the One who cares for it. The figure speaks of His love for Christ and His people: Christ as the One who was made in the form of a servant and took the place of dependency. How jealously did He watch over Him who "grew up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground" (Isa. 53:2)! Before His birth, the Father prevented Joseph from putting away his wife (Matthew 1:18-20). Soon after His birth the Father bade Joseph to flee into Egypt, for Herod would seek the young Child to destroy Him (Matthew 2:13). What proofs were these of the Husbandman's care for the true Vine! "And my Father is the husbandman." The Father has the same loving solicitude for "the branches" of the vine. Three principal thoughts are suggested. His protecting care: His eye is upon and His hand tends to the weakest tendril and tenderest shoot. Then it suggests His watchfulness. Nothing escapes His eye. Just as the gardener notices daily the condition of each branch of the vine, watering, training, pruning as occasion arises; so the Divine Husbandman is constantly occupied with the need and welfare of those who are joined to Christ. It also denoted His faithfulness. No branch is allowed to run to waste. He spares neither the spray nor the pruning knife. When a branch is fruitless He tends to it; if it is

bearing fruit, He purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit. "My Father is the husbandman." This is very blessed. He does not allot to others the task of caring for the vine and its branches, and this assures us of the widest, most tender, and most faithful care of it. But though this verse has a comforting and assuring voice, it also has a searching one, as has just been pointed out. "Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away" (John 15:2). This has been appealed to by Arminians in proof of their view that it is possible for a true Christian to perish, for they argue that the words "taketh away" signify eternal destruction. But this is manifestly erroneous, for such an interpretation would flatly contradict such explicit and positive declarations as are to be found in John 4:14; John 10:28; John 18:9; Romans 5:9-10; Romans 8:35-39, etc. Let us repeat what we said in the opening paragraph: Christ was not here addressing a mixed audience, in which were true believers and those who were merely professors. Nor was He speaking to the twelve—Judas had already gone out! Had Judas been present when Christ spoke these words there might be reason to suppose that He had him in mind. But what the Lord here said was addressed to the eleven, that is, to believers only! This is the first key to its significance. Very frequently the true interpretation of a message is discovered by attending to the character of those addressed. A striking example of this is found in Luke 15—where a case the very opposite of what we have here is in view. There the Lord speaks of the lost sheep and the lost coin being found, and the wayward son coming to the Father. Many have supposed that the Lord was speaking (in a parable) of the restoration of a backslidden believer. But the Lord was not addressing His disciples and warning them of the danger of getting out of communion with God. Instead He was speaking to His enemies (Luke 15:2) who criticised Him because He received sinners. Therefore, in what follows He proceeded to describe how a sinner is saved, first from the Divine side and then from the human. Here the case is otherwise. The Lord was not speaking to professors, and warning them that God requires truth in the inward parts; but He is talking to genuine believers, instructing, admonishing and warning them. "Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away." Many Calvinists have swung to the other extreme, erring in the opposite direction. We greatly fear that their principal aim was to overthrow the reasoning of their theological opponents, rather than to study carefully this verse in the light of its setting. They have argued that Christ was not speaking of a real believer at all. They insist that the words "beareth not fruit" described one who is within the "visible Church" but who has not vital union with Christ. But we are quite satisfied that this too is a mistake. The fact is, that we are so accustomed to concentrate everything on our own salvation and so little accustomed to dwell upon God's glory in the saved, that there is a lamentable tendency in all of us to apply many of the most Pointed rebukes and warnings found in the Scriptures (which are declared to be "profitable for reproof and correction," as well as "for instruction in righteousness") to those who are not saved, thus losing their salutary effects on ourselves. The words of our Lord leave us no choice in our application of this passage—as a whole and in its details—no matter what the conclusions be to which it leads us. Surely none will deny that they are believers to whom He says "Ye are the branches" (John 15:5). Very well then; observe that Christ employs the same term in this needed word in John 15:2: "Every branch in me, that beareth not fruit." To make it doubly clear as to whom He was referring, He added, "Every branch in me that beareth not fruit." Now if there is one form of expression, which, by invariable and unexceptional use, indicates a believer more emphatically and explicitly than another, it is this:—"in me," "in him," "in Christ." Never are these expressions used loosely; never are they applied to any but the children of God: "If any one be in Christ (he is) a new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17). "Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away." If then, it is a real believer who is in view here, and if the "taketh away" does not refer to perishing, then what is the force and meaning of our Lord's words? First of all, notice the tense of the first verb: "Every branch in me not bearing fruit he taketh away" is the literal translation. It is not of a branch which never bore fruit that the Lord is here speaking, but of one who is no longer "bearing

fruit." Now there are three things which cause the branches of the natural vine to become fruitless: either through running to leaf, or through disease (a blight), or through old age, when they wither and die. The same holds good in the spiritual application. In 2 Peter 1:8, we read: "For if these things be in you, and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ." The unescapable inference from this is that, if the "these things" (mentioned in 2 Peter 1:5-7) do not abound in us, we shall be "barren and unfruitful"—compare Titus 3:14. In such a case we bring forth nothing but leaves—the works of the flesh. Unspeakably solemn is this: one who has been bought at such infinite cost, saved by such wondrous grace, may yet, in this world, fall into a barren and unprofitable state, and thus fail to glorify God. "He taketh away." Who does? The "husbandman," the Father. This is conclusive proof that an unregenerate sinner is not in view. "The Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment unto the Son" (John 5:22). It is Christ who will say, "Depart from me" (Matthew 25). It is Christ who shall sit upon the Great White Throne to judge the wicked (Rev. 20). Therefore it cannot be a mere professor who is here in view—taken away unto judgment. Again a difficulty has been needlessly created here by the English rendering of the Greek verb. "Airo" is frequently translated in the A.V. "lifted up." For example: "And they lifted up their voices" (Luke 17:13, so also in Acts 4:24). "And Jesus lifted up his eyes" (John 11:41). "Lifted up his hand" (Rev. 10:5), etc. In none of these places could the verb be rendered "taken away." Therefore, 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. Compare with this Daniel 7:4: "I beheld till the wings thereof were plucked, and it was lifted up from the earth, and made to stand upon the feet like a man." "And every branch that beareth fruit he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit" (John 15:2). The words "branch in me," though dearly understood, are not expressed in the Greek. Literally, it is "And every one that fruit bears," that is, every one of the class of persons mentioned in the previous clause. How this confirms the conclusion that if believers are intended in the one case, they must be in the other also! The care and method used by the Husbandman are told out in the words: "He purgeth it." The majority of people imagine that "purgeth" here is the equivalent of "pruning," and understand the reference is to affliction, chastisement, and painful discipline. But the word "purgeth" here does not mean "pruning," it would be better rendered, "cleanseth," as it is in the very next verse. It may strike some of us as rather incongruous to speak of cleansing a branch of a vine. It would not be so if we were familiar with the Palestinian vineyards. The reference is to the washing off of the deposits of insects, of moss, and other parasites which infest the plant. Now the "water" which the Husbandman uses in cleansing the branches is the Word, as John 15:3 tells us. The thought, then, is the removal by the Word of what would obstruct the flow of the life and fatness of the vine through the branches. Let it be clearly understood that this "purging is not to fit the believer for Heaven (that was accomplished, once for all, the first moment that faith rested upon the atoning sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ), but is designed to make us more fruitful, while we are here in this world. "And every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit." "It is that action of the Father by which He brings the believer more fully under the operation of the 'quick and powerful' Word. The Word is that by which the believer is born, with that new birth to which no uncleanness attaches (1 Pet. 1:23). But while by second birth he is 'clean,' and in relation to his former condition is 'cleansed,' he is ever viewed as exposed to defilement, and consequently as needing to be 'cleansed.' And as the Word was, through the energy of the Spirit, effectual in the complete cleansing, so in regard to defilement by the way and in regard to the husbandman's purging to obtain more fruit, the purging is ever to be traced up to the operation of the Word (Ps. 119:9; 2 Corinthians 7:1). Whatever other means may be employed, and there are many, they must be viewed as subordinate to the action of the 'truth,' or as making room for its purging process. Thus when affliction as a part of the process is brought

into view, it is only as a means to the end of the soul's subjection and obedience to the Word. So the Psalmist said, 'Before I was afflicted, I went astray: but now have I kept thy word... It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes' (Ps. 119:67, 71). It will, we think, be apparent, that all means which Divine wisdom employs to bring to real subjection to the Word, must be regarded as belonging to the process of 'purging' that we may bring forth more fruit. "It would be interesting to pursue our inquiry into the course of our purging but our present limits forbid this. We may just remark that much that may be learned on this point from such passages as those of which, without any extended remark, we cite one or two. Here is one which suggests a loving rebuke of all impatience under the operations of the Husbandman's hand: 'For a season if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold trials' (1 Pet. 1:7). Then we have a text in James, which calls for joy under the Father's faithful purging: 'My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers trials; knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing,' (John 1:2-4). Once more, we take the words of Christian exultation which declare our fellowship with God in the whole process and fruit of our purging: 'And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; and patience, experience; and experience, hope. And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit which is given unto us' (Rom. 5:3-5). O that we might learn from these revelations of the Father's work, upon us and in us, quietly and joyfully to endure; and rightly to interpret all that befalls us, only desiring that He may fulfill in us all the good pleasure of His will, that we may be fruitful in every good work" (Mr. C. Campbell). "Now (better, 'already') ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you," (John 15:3). The purging or cleansing of the previous verse refers to the believer's state; the cleanness here describes his standing before God. The one is progressive, the other absolute. The two things are carefully distinguished all through. We have purified our souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit (1 Pet. 1:22), yet we need to be purifying ourselves, even as Christ is pure (1 John 3:3). We are washed" (1 Cor. 6:11), yet there is constant need that He who washed us from our sins at first should daily wash our feet (John 13:10). The Lord, having had occasion to speak here of a purging which is constantly in process, graciously stopped to assure the disciples that they were already clean. Note He makes no exception—"ye": the branches spoken of in the previous verses. If the Lord had had in mind two entirely different classes in John 15:2 (as almost all of the best commentators argue), namely, formal professors in the former part of the verse and genuine believers in the latter, He would necessarily have qualified His statement here. This is the more conclusive if we contrast His words in John 13:10: "Ye are clean, but not all"! Let the reader refer back to our remarks upon John 13:10 for a fuller treatment of this cleanness. "Abide in me" (John 15:4). The force of this cannot be appreciated till faith has laid firm hold of the previous verse: "Already ye are clean." "Brethren in Christ, what a testimony is this: He who speaks what he knows and testifies what He has seen, declares us 'clean every whit.' Yea, and He thus testifies in the very same moment as when He asserts that we had need to have our feet washed; in the very same breath in which He reveals our need of cleansing in order to further fruit-bearing. He would thus assure us that the defilement which we contract in our walk as pilgrims, and the impurity which we contract as branches do in nowise, nor in the least degree, affect the absolute spotless purity which is ours in Him. "Now in all study of the Word this should be a starting-point, the acknowledgement of our real oneness with Christ, and our cleanness in Him by His Word. It may be observed that He cannot 'wash our feet' till we know that we are cleansed 'every whit'; and we cannot go on to learn of Him what is needful fruit-bearing unless we first drink in the Word, 'Ye are already clean.' We can only receive His further instruction when we have well learned and are holding fast the first lesson of His love—our completeness in Him" (Mr. C. Campbell). "Clean every whit," Thou saidst it, Lord! Shall one suspicion lurk? Thine surely is a faithful Word, And Thine a finished

Work.

"Abide in me," "To be" in Christ and "to abide" in Him are two different things which must not be confounded. One must first be "in him" before he can "abide in him." The former respects a union effected by the creating-power of God, and which can neither be dissolved nor suspended. Believers are never exhorted to be "in Christ"—they are in Him by new creation (2 Cor. 5:17; Ephesians 2:10). But Christians are frequently exhorted to abide in Christ, because this privilege and experience may be interrupted. "To 'abide,' 'continue,' 'dwell,' 'remain' in Christ—by all these terms is this one word translated—has always reference to the maintenance of fellowship with God in Christ. The word 'abide' calls us to vigilance, lest at any time the experimental realization of our union with Christ should be interrupted. To abide in Him, then, is to have sustained conscious communion with Him" (Mr. Campbell). To abide in Christ signifies the constant occupation of the heart with Him—a daily active faith in Him which, so to speak, maintains the dependency of the branch upon the vine, and the circulation of life and fatness of the vine in the branch. What we have here is parallel with that other figurative expression used by our Lord in John 6:56: He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth (abideth) in me, and I in him." This is but another way of insisting upon the continuous exercise of faith in a crucified and living Savior, deriving life and the sustenance of life from Him. As the initial act of believing in Him is described as "coming" to Him, ("He that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst": John 6:35), so the continued activity of faith is described as "abiding in him." "Abide in me, and I in you" (John 15:4). The two things are quite distinct, though closely connected. Just as it is one thing to be "in Christ," and another to "abide in him," so there is a real difference between His being in us, and His abiding in us. The one is a matter of His grace; the other of our responsibility. The one is perpetual, the other may be interrupted. By our abiding in Him is meant the happy conscious fellowship of our union with Him, in the discernment of what He is for us; so by His abiding in us is meant the happy conscious recognition of His presence, the assurance of His goodness, grace and power—Himself the recourse of our soul in everything. "As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abides in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me (John 15:4). "Thus our Lord enforces the necessity of maintaining fellowship. He is not only the source of all fruit, but He also puts forth His power while there is personal appropriation of what He is for us, and in us. And this, if we receive it, will lead us to a right judgment of ourselves and our service. In the eyes of our own brethren, and in our own esteem, we may maintain a goodly appearance as fruitbearing branches. But whatever our own judgment or that of others, unless the apparent springs from 'innermost fellowship and communion' the true Vine will never own it as His fruit. "Moreover, all this may, by His blessing, bring us to see the cause of our imperfect or sparse fruit bearing. Thousands of Christians are complaining of barrenness; but they fail to trace their barrenness to its right source—the meagerness of their communion with Christ. Consequently, they seek fruitfulness in activities, often right in themselves, but which, while He is unrecognized, can never yield any fruit. In such condition, they ought rather to cry, 'Our leanness! Our leanness'; and they ought to know that leanness can only be remedied by that abiding in Christ, and He in them, which 'fills the soul with marrow and its fatness.' 'Those that be planted in the house of the Lord (an Old Testament form for "abiding in Him") shall flourish in the courts of our God. They shall bring forth fruit in old age; they shall be fat and flourishing' (Ps. 92:13, 14). We are surely warranted to say, Take heed to the fellowship, and the fruit will spring forth" (Mr. C. Campbell). "I am the vine, ye are the branches: he that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit" (John 15:5). This is very blessed, coming in just here. It is a word of assurance. As we contemplate the failure of Israel as God's vine of old, and as we review our own past resolutions and attempts, we are discouraged and despondent. This is met by the announcement, "I am the vine, ye are the branches." It is not a question of your sufficiency; yea, let your insufficiency be admitted, as settled once for all. In your self you are no better than a branch severed from

the vine-dry, dead. But "he that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit." "No figure could more forcibly express the complete dependence of the believer on Christ for all fruit-bearing than this. A branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine. In itself it has no resources though in union with vine it is provided with life. This is precisely the believer's condition: 'Christ liveth in me.' The branch bears the clusters, but it does not produce them. It bears what the vine produces; and so the result is expressed by the Apostle, 'to me to live is Christ.' It is important that in this respect, as well as with reference to righteousness before God, we should be brought to the end of self with all its vain efforts and strivings. And then there comes to us the assurance of unfailing resources in Another" ("Waymarks in the Wilderness"). "For without me (better 'severed from me') ye can do nothing" (John 15:5). Clearly this refers not to the vital union existing between Christ and the believer, which shall never be broken, either by his own volition or the will of God, through all eternity (Rom. 8:38-39); but to the interruption of fellowship and dependency upon Him, mentioned in the immediate context. This searching word is introduced here to enforce our need of heeding what had just been said in the previous verse and repeated at the beginning of this. "Severed from me ye can do nothing." There are many who believe this in a general way, but who fail to apply it in detail. They know that they cannot do the important things without Christ's aid, but how many of the little things we attempt in our own strength! No wonder we fail so often. "Without me ye can do nothing". "Nothing that is spiritually good; no, not any thing at all, be it little or great, easy or difficult to be performed; cannot think a good thought, speak a good word, or do a good action; can neither begin one, nor when it is begun, perfect it" (Dr. John Gill). But mark it well, the Lord did not say, "Without you I can do nothing." In gathering out His elect, and in building up His Church, He employs human instrumentality; but that is not a matter of necessity, but of choice, with Him; He could "do" without them, just as well as with them. "Severed from me ye can do nothing." Urgently do we need this warning. Not only will the allowance of any known sin break our fellowship with Him, but concentration on any thing but Himself will also surely do it. Satan is very subtle. If only he can get us occupied with ourselves, our fruit-bearing, or our fruit, his purpose is accomplished. Faith is nothing apart from its object, and is no longer in operation when it becomes occupied with itself. Love, too, is in exercise only while it is occupied with its beloved. "There is a disastrous delusion in this matter when, under the plea of witnessing for Christ and relating their experience, men are tempted to parade their own attainments: their love, joy and peace, their zeal in service, their victory in conflict. And Satan has no more effectual method of severing the soul from Christ, and arresting the bringing forth of fruit to the glory of God, than when he can persuade Christians to feast upon their own fruit, instead of eating the flesh and drinking the blood of the Son of man. But shall we not bear witness for Christ? Yes, verily, but let your testimony be of Him, not of yourself" ("Waymarks in the Wilderness"). "If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast into the fire, and they are burned" (John 15:6). This is another verse which has been much misunderstood, and it is really surprising to discover how many able commentators have entirely missed its meaning. With scarcely an exception, Calvinistic expositors suppose that Christ here referred to a different class from what had been before Him in the three previous verses. Attention is called to the fact that Christ did not say, "If a branch abide not in me he is cast forth," but "If a man abide not in me." But really this is inexcusable in those who are able, in any measure, to consult the Greek. The word "man" is not found in the original at all! Literally rendered it is, "unless any one abide in me he is cast out as the branch" (Bagster's Interlinear). The simple and obvious meaning of these words of Christ is this: If any one of the branches, any believer, continues out of fellowship with Me, he is "cast forth." It could not be said of any one who had never "come" to Christ that He does not abide in Him. This is made the more apparent by the limitation in this very verse: "he is cast forth as a branch." Let it be remembered that the central figure here employed by the Lord has reference to our sojourn in this

world, and the bringing forth of fruit to the glory of the Father. The "casting forth" is done by the Husbandman, and evidently had in view the stripping of the believer of the gifts and opportunities which he failed to improve. It is similar to the salt "losing its savor" (Matthew 5:13). It is parallel with Luke 8:18: "And whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken even that which he seemeth to have." It is analogous to that admonition in 2 John 8: "Look to yourselves, that we lose not those things which we have wrought, but that we receive a full reward." But what is meant by, "Men gather them, and cast into the fire, and they are burned"? Observe, first, the plural pronouns. It is not "men gather him and cast into the fire, and he is burned," as it would most certainly have been had an unbeliever, a mere professor, been in view. The change of number here is very striking, and evidences, once more, the minute accuracy of Scripture. "Unless any one abide in me, he is east forth as a branch, and men gather them and cast into the fire and they are burned." The "them" and the "they" are what issues from the one who has been cast forth "as a branch." And what is it that issues from such a one—what but dead works: "wood, hay, stubble"! and what is to become of his "dead works." 1 Corinthians 3:15 tells us: "If any man's work shall be burned (the very word used in John 15:6!), he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire." Lot is a pertinent example: he was out of fellowship with the Lord, he ceased to bear fruit to His glory, and his dead works were all burned up in Sodom; yet he himself was saved! One other detail should be noticed. In the original it is not "men gather them," but "they gather them." Light is thrown on this by Matthew 13:41, 42: "The Son of man shall send forth his angels and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity: And shall east them into a furnace of fire: There shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth." Note the two distinct items here: the angels gather "all things that offend" and "them which do iniquity." In the light of John 15:6 the first of these actions will be fulfilled at the session of the judgment-seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10), the second when He returns to the earth. Here then is a most solemn warning and heart-searching prospect for every Christian. Either your life and my life is, as the result of continuous fellowship with Christ, bringing forth fruit to the glory of the Father, fruit which will remain; or, because of neglect of communion with Him, we are in immense danger of being set aside as His witnesses on earth, to bring forth only that which the fire will consume in a coming Day. May the Holy Spirit apply the words of the Lord Jesus to each conscience and heart. Studying the following questions will prepare for our next lesson:— 1. What is the connection between verse 7 and the context? 2. How is "ye shall ask what ye will" in verse 7 to be qualified? 3. What is meant by "so shall ye be my disciples," verse 8? 4. What is the relation between verses 9-12 and the subject of fruit-bearing? 5. What constituted Christ's "joy," verse 11? 6. What is suggested by "friends," verses 13-15? 7. Why does Christ bring in election in verse 16?

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