

The Church of the Servant King

Survey of the Bible Series – The Gospel of John **(SB_JN15A_Jesus is the True Vine)**

***Introduction**

The greater context of John 15 is Jesus' farewell address to His disciples which began in 13:31 and extends through 17:26. This farewell address consists of three major sections or stages:

- ❖ Stage 1 – (13:31-14:31) – Jesus' instruction of His disciples with interruptions for questions by His disciples:
 - Peter (13:36) – “Lord, where are You going?”
 - Thomas (14:5) – “Lord, we do not know where You are going, and how can we know the way?”
 - Philip (14:8) – “Lord, show us the Father, and it is sufficient for us.”
 - Judas (14:22) – “Lord, how is it that You will manifest Yourself to us, and not to the world?”
- ❖ Stage 2 – (chaps. 15-16) – Jesus' instruction to His disciples regarding their need for divine power – abiding and the coming of the Holy Spirit
- ❖ Stage 3 – (chap. 17) – Jesus' prayer for His disciples

In Jesus' farewell address, He prepares His disciples before leading them to the place of His arrest. Jesus' farewell address to His disciples contains instructions for His disciples regarding three vital relationships:

- ❖ to Jesus (vv. 1-10);
- ❖ to each other (vv. 11-17); and
- ❖ to the world (vv. 18-16:4).

The disciples have three sets of duties that correspond to these relationships:

- ❖ to abide;
- ❖ to love one another; and
- ❖ to testify.¹

In the previous chapter, Jesus had told the disciples that anyone who had faith in Him would not only do what He had been doing, but they would do even greater things than what they had seen Jesus do (14:12). In chapter 15, Jesus now proceeds to show the eleven how they could fulfill this charge in their lives. Jesus used the analogy of a vine to teach these men the secret of a fruitful ministry.

***John's Unique Perspective**

Jesus knew that His disciples (as well as others who believed in Him) would constitute a unique group of believers. Depending upon one's interpretive paradigm, this group of disciples whom Jesus was addressing in chapters 14 & 15 is usually identified as the church, i.e. the Church Age Body of Christ believer (the anticipatory view) or the believing Jew of Jesus' day. In the words of one writer –

Viewed from the standpoint of the writer and His time, this section previews the church and its development in the post-resurrection period, though the word 'church' does not appear here.²

¹ John F. Walvoord and Roy Zuck, editors, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament* (Wheaton, Illinois: Scripture Press Publications, 1983, 1985), 325. See also Frank E. Gabelein, *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, electronic version (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing, 1989-1998).

I believe that this statement reflects great insight *when properly understood and applied*, e.g. the Greek word for “church” means an “assembly” and John’s perspective as he penned his gospel towards the end of the 1st Century A.D. would have been panoramic. His retrospective panoramic view would have encompassed the Age of Israel, the transition period and the new Church Age.³ From this unique perspective, John was able to highlight aspects of Jesus’ teaching that presented spiritual similarities between the believer who was the focus of Jesus’ earthly ministry (i.e. the believing Jew anticipating entrance into the kingdom) and the believer of the newly inaugurated Church Age.

The spiritual principles that are emphasized in this passage are equally true of all post-resurrection believers, regardless of dispensation, i.e. Church Age, Israel’s last days (Tribulation period), and the kingdom age believer. Some traditional dispensationalists have focused upon the period of time that spans the Church Age and the Tribulation and referred to this period as the “interregnum” period of human history.⁴ The result is that they interpret Jesus’ teaching as directed to people who live in this “interregnum” period – both Church Age and Tribulation. It is passages such as John 15:1-10 which are interpreted as if Jesus was anticipating the Church Age in His earthly ministry that provide an interpretive precedent that is then followed in the interpretation of other passages.

According to this tradition of interpretation, Jesus anticipated the Church Age in His ministry and teaching, especially as His rejection by Israel became an increasingly likely possibility. There are probably two factors that contribute to the tendency among traditional dispensationalists to conclude that Jesus anticipated the Church Age: 1) the intercalation of the Church after Jesus’ death, i.e. the chronological order of events; and 2) the similar relation to the Holy Spirit that is enjoyed by the Church Age believer and which will be enjoyed by the believer of Israel’s last days.

Nevertheless, even though the message in this passage was directed to Jesus’ disciples who would have eventually become believers of the kingdom age aside from the intercalation of the Church, there is application to the believer of the Church Age due to the similar spiritual principles that are true of believers of both dispensations.⁵

In this passage, there are several metaphors that are used by Jesus to illustrate the spiritual principles at issue. They are summarized as follows:

- ❖ The true vine is identified as Jesus (v. 1, 5)
- ❖ The vinedresser is identified as God the Father (v. 1)
- ❖ The branch (or branches) is (are) identified as the disciples (v. 2, 5)

However, there have been several interpretations of this passage due to questions that surround the figurative language used by John in which the meaning of the figure of speech is not explicitly stated. For instance, consider the following:

² Gabelein, *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*.

³ See the introductory session notes to our study of the Gospel of John for more information on this topic – ‘SB_JN_Intro_Part1’ and ‘SB_JN_Intro_Part2.’

⁴ For instance, Alva J. McClain is one example of a dispensational theologian who applies this term to a period that encompasses the present dispensation of the Church. See Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books – BridgePoint Publishing, 1993), 40.

⁵ Jesus’ ministry was directed to the lost of the house of Israel (Matt 10:5-6) with an emphasis upon the gospel message that “the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt 10:7).

- ❖ What does John's use of the phrase "in Me" mean (v. 4, 5, 6, 7)? Is it the same as Paul's use of the phrase "in Christ" (1 Co 12:13)?
- ❖ What does "takes away" mean (v. 2)?
- ❖ What does the phrase "He prunes" mean (v. 2)?
- ❖ What does the phrase "you are already clean" mean (v. 3)?
- ❖ What does "abide" mean (v. 4-7, 9-10)?
- ❖ What is meant by the words and phrases "they" (v. 6), "to be cast out" (v. 6) and "thrown into the fire" (v. 6)?
- ❖ What (if any) is the significance of Jesus' progression of thought from "He" (v.2) to "you" (v. 4) to "they" (v. 6)?

*Different Paradigms

10.⁶ At least three different interpretations exist of Jesus' use of the vine analogy in John 15:1-

- ❖ Arminian interpretation – the unfruitful branches of verse 2 & the burned branches of verse 6 represent believers who lose their salvation.
- ❖ Lordship or Reformed interpretation – the unfruitful branches of verse 2 and the burned branches of verse 6 represent superficial, professing believers who never had salvation.
- ❖ Free Grace interpretation - the unfruitful branches of verse 2 and the burned branches of verse 6 represent unfruitful believers who are cared for by God, but who are eventually disciplined with death.

Background for the "True" Vine Analogy By Jesus (v. 1)

Jesus identifies Himself as the "true" vine (v. 1). Jesus qualifies His analogy with the adjective "true" for a reason. In Israel's history, the figure of a vineyard had been used to reveal God's purpose for the nation Israel. Consider the following:

- ❖ You have brought a vine out of Egypt; you have cast out the nations, and planted it.
- ❖ You prepared room for it, and caused it to take deep root, and it filled the land.
- ❖ The hills [south] were covered with its shadow, and the mighty cedars [north] with its boughs.
- ❖ She sent out her boughs to the Sea [west], and her branches to the River [Euphrates – east].
- ❖ Why have You broken down her hedges, so that all who pass by the way pluck her fruit?
- ❖ The boar out of the woods uproots it, and the wild beast of the field devours it.
- ❖ Return, we beseech You, O God of hosts; look down from heaven and see, and visit this vine
- ❖ And the vineyard [root-stock] which Your right hand has planted, and the branch that You made strong for Yourself.
- ❖ It is burned with fire, it is cut down; they perish at the rebuke of Your countenance.
- ❖ Let Your hand be upon the man of your right hand, upon the son of man whom You made strong for Yourself.
- ❖ Then we will not turn back from You; Revive us, and we will call upon Your name.
- ❖ Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; cause Your face to shine, and we shall be saved! (Psa 80:8-19)

⁶ See footnote in Derickson & Radmacher, *The DiscipleMaker*, 391.

In Psalm 80:8-19, Israel's journey from Egypt to Canaan is compared to transplanting a vine. The emphasis is upon God's relationship with the nation Israel as One Who cares for it. The vine grew so much that it filled the land and reached to the Mediterranean Sea in the west, the mountains in the south, the Euphrates River in the east and the cedars of Lebanon in the north (vv. 8-10). This occurred during the reigns of David and Solomon. Eventually, the Lord removed the protective hedges (v. 11) for the purpose of discipline and Israel became weak and subject to all kinds of assaults. The psalmist appeals to the Lord to observe the spiritual state of His vine and visit it (v. 12 – in mercy, not judgment). The psalmist laments over the “root-stock” (unique use of the Hebrew term for vineyard) that the Lord had planted and the “son” (branch) that had grown was now being cut down in discipline (vv. 13-14). (The word “son” – translated branch – is a literal rendering of the Hebrew and refers to the nation that sprang from the root. Therefore, it can be translated “branch”).⁷ Israel, the “son” or “branch,” had not been “true.”

Consider another example from the Old Testament:

- ❖ Now let me sing to my Well-beloved a song of my Beloved regarding His vineyard: My Well-beloved has a vineyard on a very fruitful hill.
- ❖ He dug it up and cleared out its stones, and planted it with the choicest vine. He built a tower in its midst, and also made a winepress in it; so He expected it to bring forth good grapes, but it brought forth wild grapes.
- ❖ And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, Judge, please, between Me and My vineyard.
- ❖ What more could have been done to My vineyard that I have not done in it? Why then, when I expected it to bring forth good grapes, did it bring forth wild grapes?
- ❖ And now, please let Me tell you what I will do to My vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it shall be burned; and break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down.
- ❖ I will lay it waste; it shall not be pruned or dug, but there shall come up briars and thorns. I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain on it.
- ❖ For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are His pleasant plant. He looked for justice, but behold, oppression; for righteousness, but behold, a cry for help. (Isa 5:1-7)

In Isaiah 5:1-7, Isaiah used the figure of the vineyard to convey God's purpose for the nation of Israel. The emphasis in this passage is upon the fact that the nation had been unfruitful and needs to be purged. God had chosen Israel as His vineyard and He had planted the vineyard in a fertile land. He provided protection (the watchtower) and a winepress had been built in anticipation of a crop of good grapes. The fruit that God expected was justice and righteousness (Isa 5:7). However, the vines in that vineyard did not fulfill their God-intended purpose as did Jesus. Jesus was the true vine because He properly displayed the justice and righteousness of God the Father.⁸

⁷ See John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, gen editors, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary – Old Testament* (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1985), 852-853 and Earl D. Radmacher, gen editor, *The Nelson Study Bible* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997), 962-963.

⁸ J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing, 1981), 441.

Thus, the Old Testament imagery of Israel as a vine repeatedly focuses on God's care for the nation in light of their failure. Where the nation had failed God, Jesus had been the complete embodiment of everything they should have been.⁹

Even though Jesus used the imagery of the vine, which had great significance to Israel and to Jews, the focus of Jesus' teaching in these verses in John 15 is upon the vitality of the disciples, not Israel. The focus upon the disciples as individuals is illustrated in the fact that grapes are more than an annual crop. They are like individuals – some more productive than others, they respond differently to different stimuli, and they need to be cared for individually.¹⁰

Other examples of Old Testament passages that use the vine to symbolize Israel include Jeremiah 2:21; 5:10; 12:10; Ezek 15:1-8; 17:1-24; and Hosea 10:1. The image of the vine was so well recognized that during the Maccabean period, a vine was stamped on coins minted by the Jewish nation.¹¹

The Meaning of “In Me” (v. 2)

The phrase “in Me” is used sixteen times in John's Gospel.¹² In John's Gospel, this phrase carries the sense of “commonality of purpose and commitment” as in fellowship.¹³ Therefore, it refers to experiential sanctification or phase 2 righteousness or experiential righteousness – all phrases and terms used to describe the spiritual vitality of the believer.

Those who interpret this verse from a Reformed or Lordship paradigm (i.e. that “in Me” refers to phase 1 salvation righteousness) attempt to defend their position with the argument that Jesus' parables about the kingdom indicate that the kingdom is composed of wheat and tares, good and bad, fruitful and unfruitful. Thus, the phrase “in Me” is tantamount to the kingdom, not Paul's later use of “in Christ.”¹⁴ This is a rather interesting argument from the Reformed perspective since it is in part an acknowledgement of a dispensational distinction. There is certainly merit to the position that the “kingdom” will consist of believers and unbelievers in the Messianic era. In addition, Israel, to whom the kingdom offer was extended and to whom belonged all of the kingdom promises of the Old Testament, consisted of both believers and unbelievers. However, Jesus is addressing His disciples in this passage, not the nation at large. The disciples were believers. If the fruitless branches are only professing believers (vs. possessing or true believers), then what bearing does Jesus' discourse have on the disciples? Furthermore, John's use of “in Me” in this verse would be an entirely different usage of the phrase than in the remainder of John's Gospel in order for the Reformed view to be correct.

⁹ Gary Derickson & Earl Radmacher, *The DiscipleMaker* (Salem, Oregon: Charis Press, 2001), 153.

¹⁰ Derickson & Radmacher, *The DiscipleMaker*, 152.

¹¹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, 2 volumes (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956), 2:201 cited in Laney, “Abiding is Believing: The Analogy of the Vine in John 15:1-6,” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 146:581 (January-March 1989): 55-66.

¹² Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings* (Hayesville, North Carolina: Schoettle Publishing Company, 1992), 402. The 16 uses consist of 6:56; 8:38; 14:10 (twice), 11, 20, 30; 15:2, 4 (twice), 5, 6, 7; 16:33; 17:21, and 23.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 402-05. See also Derickson & Radmacher, *The DiscipleMaker*, 158.

¹⁴ Derickson & Radmacher, *The DiscipleMaker*, 395. They cite Charles R. Smith, “*The Unfruitful Branches in John 15*,” *Grace Journal*, 9:2 (Spring, 1968), 10 as an example.

John's usage of "in Me" is different than Paul's use of the phrase "in Christ" in the sense that Paul used that phrase in a judicial sense to describe the spiritual reality of our organic membership in Christ's body. An examination of these uses in John's Gospel reflect the concept of fellowship and communion associated with the spiritual walk of faith verses the judicial concept of positional relationship. The two are certainly related, but in such passages as John 10:38; 14:10, 11; 17:21, & 23, the focus is upon unity of purpose and mind, not essence. Jesus uses the same phrase in the same way in 14:20 to describe His relationship to the disciples. The Lordship interpretation sees verse 2 as a reference to discipline by the Father. The Free Grace interpretation sees verse 2 in the context of the greater vine-branch analogy that describes fellowship (phase 2 sanctification), not union (phase 1 judicial imputation).¹⁵

This distinction becomes vividly clear for in chapter 17, if John was using the phrase "in Me" to refer to organic connection, He would not pray that organic connection be achieved as he prays for believers; it already had been.¹⁶ If all believers already remain "in Me," then why command them to remain in that relationship?¹⁷

That they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved hem as You have loved Me. (Jn 17:21-23)

John's use of "in Me" is not the same as Paul's use of "in Christ." Jesus begins His analogy of the vine with a positional statement (v. 1), then continues with a relational sense. This distinction between the two writers' approach is critical else the meaning of the passage is obscured and our foundation for interpreting this passage as instruction to believers in their phase 2 experience is shaken.

The idea that unfruitful branches cannot be either regenerate or abiding should be rejected. Ask yourself: Does any plant in God's kingdom have fruit instantaneously with life? How does this relate to Jesus' prediction in John 13:38 (note Jesus' words in Luke 12:8-9) that Peter would deny Him? Would the disciples, especially Peter, be considered fruit-bearers that night?¹⁸

The Meaning of "Takes Away" (v. 2)

In verse 2, Jesus uses the phrase "takes away" (*eiro*). This word can be translated "lifts up" or "take away."¹⁹ Many translators have adopted the 2nd meaning in their translation, e.g. the KJV, NKJV, RSV, and NASB. The NIV translates it as "cuts off." This tendency to translate the phrase in such a fashion is probably due to two major reasons: 1) the phrase is sometimes used in the NT in association with judgment on some occasions, e.g. Mt 24:39; Lk 23:18 cf. Acts 21:36 & 22:22; Jn 19:15; and 2) the imagery of verse 6 must be reconciled with verse 2. Thus, most

¹⁵ Ibid., 160.

¹⁶ Ibid., 396.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 160.

¹⁹ Fritz Rienecker, *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976, 1980), 252.

commentators accept this translation. Their interpretation sees the farmer removing the unfruitful branches (professing, but not true believers) while cleaning up the fruiting branches (true believers) in order to make them more fruitful. This category of interpreters includes the Arminian influenced interpreter who would see the non-fruiting branch as a believer who loses his salvation due to unfaithfulness as well as the Reformed influenced interpreter who would see the non-fruiting branch as a mere professor of the faith, but whose lack of fruitfulness indicated that he was not really a believer. This category of interpreters could be classified as the “**justification**” or “**positional sanctification**” view.²⁰ Therefore, their interpretation of the passage relates it to Phase 1 of the believer’s spiritual journey.²¹

In contrast, R. K. Harrison indicates that fallen vines were lifted into position with meticulous care and allowed to heal.²² Harrison is an example of the second category of interpreters who do not associate verse 2 with a judgment. Rather, verse 2 is associated with encouragement to produce spiritual fruit. This category of interpreters could be classified as the “**experiential sanctification**” view.

The **experiential sanctification** view is more consistent with the viticultural practices of the Jewish vinedresser during Jesus’ day. There were basically two types of pruning that were practiced in the Middle East during this period of history. **Dormant pruning** occurred in the late fall. Dormant pruning did remove all unwanted branches as well as unwanted leaves and sprouts. **Growing season** pruning occurred in the spring and resulted in the removal of selected succulent sprigs from the fruiting branches, dead and diseased wood, and adventitious buds (suckers) on the trunk of the vine. However, not all non-fruiting branches were removed.²³

It was a common practice to lift fallen vines and allow them to heal. If this is indeed the meaning, then a fruitless branch in fellowship with Christ is lifted up to put it into a position of fruit bearing. This is in contrast to verse 6 where Jesus indicates that the branch that does not abide is “cast out” (*ekballo*). This is an entirely different word.

This [the two words used in verses 2 and 6] would suggest that the heavenly vinedresser first encourages the branches and lifts them in the sense of loving care to enable them to fruit. If after this encouragement, they do not remain in fellowship with Him and bear fruit, they are then cast out.²⁴

²⁰ Derickson and Radmacher use the title “**justification-salvation**” view for this category and distinguish it from the “**sanctification-salvation**” view. Thus, their titles distinguish between two different categories of “salvation” or deliverance; however, their titles do not allow for a distinction between positional sanctification, experiential sanctification and ultimate sanctification since the term “sanctification” in their usage always refers to experiential of Phase 2 sanctification.

²¹ I use the phrases “Phase 1,” “Phase 2,” and “Phase 3” to distinguish the three phases of the believer’s spiritual journey through life and the Biblical truths related to each phase. Phase 1 relates to salvation and the soteriological passages that explain salvation. Phase 2 relates to the believers’ day-to-day experience or walk and the passages that relate to the spiritual life of the believer. Phase 3 relates to the believer’s experience in eternity and the eschatological passages that explain death, judgment, and the eternal state. These three phases correspond to three separate phases of sanctification, i.e. positional, experiential and ultimate.

²² R. K. Harrison, s.v. “Vine,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (4 vols. Revised ed. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986) 4:986 quoted in Derickson and Radmacher, *The DiscipleMaker*, 155, 392-3.

²³ Derickson and Radmacher, *The DiscipleMaker*, 155, 159-160. See also *Appendix 7*, “Viticultural Practices in First Century Judea”, 326-329.

²⁴ Dillow, *The Reign*, 409.

A Comparison of the Two Categories of Interpretations of Verse 2 – “eio”		
Item	Positional Sanctification View	Experiential Sanctification View
Focus	Union – Phase 1	Communion – Phase 2
Relation to v. 6	Judgment in v. 6 = judgment in v. 2 for non-fruiting branches	Encouragement in verse 2; rejection by the unbelieving world (“they”) of verse 6 because they haven’t continued to “abide” in Christ by keeping Jesus’ commands to love one another. Should the branch (believer) continue to not be “in Me” or have an abiding relationship with Jesus, then SIMWID ²⁵ might eventually result.
Identity of non-fruiting branches	Ranges from 1) specific identification of such disciples as Judas ²⁶ to 2) unbelievers in the visible “church” who appear to be believers, but who are actually unbelievers ²⁷ to 3) disciples who were just interested listeners and who turned away from Jesus’ teaching (Jn 6:60, 66) ²⁸ to 4) believers who have lost their salvation. ²⁹ They are equated to superficial Christians.	In verse 2, these are believers who have not yet borne fruit in their lives. In context, this appears to be the immature believer since communion (abiding) is the focus of the passage. Thus, these unfruitful branches are initially cared for by God and then eventually disciplined. ³⁰
Actions of the Vinedresser in verse 2	Fruitless branches are removed and fruitful branches are pruned. The unfruitful branches of v. 2 are the cast-out branches of v. 6. ³¹	This view allows for the possibility that an unfruitful branch in v. 2 could become a “cast out” branch of v. 6 if that disciple fails to respond to the “lifting” encouragement of Jesus in v. 2 and abide in Jesus. However, it is not a foregone conclusion that this will occur.

²⁵ This acronym stands for **S**elf-Induced **M**isery, **W**arning, **I**ntensified **D**iscipline, and the sin unto **D**eath. The Biblical principle of SIMWID is found when the following passages are compared – 1 Co 11:30-32; Jas 1:13-15; 5:20; and 1 Jn 5:16.

²⁶ Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (6 vols., Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1932, 1960), 5:257.

²⁷ Derickson and Radmacher, *The DiscipleMaker*, 155-6. Derickson and Radmacher cite John MacArthur and Robert Law as examples of those holding this view.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 393. Derickson and Radmacher cite Carl Laney as a proponent of this view.

²⁹ Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, 410.

³⁰ Derickson and Radmacher, *The DiscipleMaker*, 156. Derickson and Radmacher cite James M. Boice, Lewis S. Chafer, W. Robert Cook, Joseph Dillow, Zane Hodges and Charles Ryrie as examples of those who hold this view. See footnote 18, page 393. It is interesting to note that James M. Boice, a Reformed theologian, deviates in his interpretation of this passage from the majority of those of the Reformed persuasion. See page 157.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 395. See footnote 22.

Greek Terms	Translate <i>airei</i> (3 rd , pers., sing., present, active, indicative of <i>aireo</i>) as “takes away” or “cuts off.”	Argues that the 3 rd , pers., sing., present, active indicative of <i>airo</i> is identical to <i>aireo</i> ; therefore, it is impossible to know for certain which verb was intended. The verb <i>airo</i> can be translated “lift” as opposed to “takes away.” Furthermore, John could have used <i>kopto</i> and <i>apokopto</i> (Jn 18:10) for “cut off” or <i>epairo</i> for “take out” (Jn 17:15). ³²
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These views are obviously contradictory to each other. The branch (disciple – v. 5) cannot be both a believer and an unbeliever. The branch that fails to bear fruit cannot be both a believer who gets disciplined and a superficial Christian who was never regenerate. So, in verse 2, we see that every believer who is not bearing fruit is encouraged by God the Father to remain in fellowship and bear fruit.³³ After this encouragement, if the believer does not remain in fellowship with Him and bear fruit, he is then “cast out” (v. 6). We will examine the meaning this terminology in verse 6 shortly.

The Meaning of “He prunes” (v. 2)

The Greek word translated “he prunes” is *kathairei* which is the 3rd, person, singular, present, active, indicative of *kathairo*.³⁴ The basic meaning of this word is “to make clean.”³⁵ It was used in a viticultural sense to describe the process of removing suckers from a fruiting branch. As a viticultural term, Jesus’ use of it in the analogy or parable of John 15 must be consistent with its normal use and meaning. Jesus used accurate portrayals of the natural world as the basis for his teaching illustrations. It is quite possible that Jesus chose *airei* (*airei*) due to its similarity in sound to *katharei* (*katharei*) in order to make a play on words and communicate a truth. Since the two words are used in conjunction with each other, they are better understood as occurring simultaneously.³⁶

What this means is that Jesus is not combining two tasks from two different seasons since the more drastic pruning takes place as the vines enter their period of dormancy. Jesus is most likely referring to the stage of seasonal care the vineyards were entering at the time he spoke, i.e. spring trimming.³⁷ This is at variance from the approach of most exegetes who base their interpretation upon the assumption that the practice referred to in verse 2 is the same as that referred to in verse 6.

It would be better to see Jesus indicating what actually occurred during the Spring, namely, certain non-fruiting branches were “lifted up” (to keep them from

³² Ibid., 155, 157.

³³ This is the interpretation supported in several references, i.e. Charles F. Baker, *Understanding the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Grace Publishing, 1978), 257; Dillow, *The Reign*, 409-410; Pentecost, *The Words and Works*, 441.

³⁴ See Fritz Rienecker, *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, 252 and Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 5:257.

³⁵ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), 386.

³⁶ Derickson and Radmacher, *The DiscipleMaker*, 164.

³⁷ Ibid.

touching the ground and setting roots) and tied to the trellises along with the fruiting branches while the side shoots of the fruiting branches were being “cleaned up.” The non-fruiting branches were allowed to grow with full vigor and without the removal of any side growth or leaves since the more extensive their growth the greater the diameter of their stem where it connected to the vine and thus the greater ability for the flow of nutrients from the roots to the branches which would produce more fruit the following season. By removing them from the ground and placing them on the trellis the rows of plants would benefit from unhindered aeration that was considered an essential element to proper fruit development. To see *airei* as removal (judgment or discipline) is to contradict the actual practice of the time.³⁸

Therefore, to deny that the unfruitful branch of verse 2 is attached to the vine violates the reality of the world from which the description arose. It is best to interpret verse 2 as a reference to the Father’s care for both groups of believers. The ones not ready to bear fruit are being “lifted” by Him with the expectation that there will be fruitfulness in the future. The ones which are bearing fruit are “cleansed” so that they might bear more fruit.

The Meaning of “You are already clean” (v. 3)

The disciples had already been “cleansed” (*kathairo*); therefore, they should be immediately fruitful. The “cleansing” that the disciples had received is a reference to the effect that the instruction of Jesus should have had upon them, especially the words He had spoken to them in chapters 13 and 14. It is the Word which cleansed them as Jesus affirms in verse 3. This is not a reference to their salvation. Jesus is teaching a phase 2 principle in verse 3. This “cleansing” had prepared them for service and fruit-bearing, not heaven.³⁹

It is likely that this verse has the concept of Old Testament ceremonial cleansing in view. At the beginning of this discourse in 13:31, the disciples were still egotistical and self-centered – not ready to serve. Their Messiah, Jesus, had washed their feet and given them an example of humble service to follow. He then instructed them with encouraging principles related to the ongoing ministry that God the Holy Spirit would have in their lives after His departure. The foot-washing may have served as a parallel to the priest’s washing as he entered the temple to serve. As the priests were chosen by God to serve in God’s program, so too, the disciples had been chosen by Jesus (v. 16). As the priests needed to be cleansed before entering into service, the disciples needed to be cleansed by Jesus’ instruction including His washing of their feet.⁴⁰ However, their effectiveness in service or fruit-bearing was dependent upon a personal choice to “abide” in Him.

The Meaning of “Abide” (v. 4-7, 9-10)

This word is often used by John (e.g. 1:32, 38, 39; 2:12) and it means to remain, to stay, to continue, or to endure.⁴¹ The question that surrounds the interpretation of this word in this

³⁸ Ibid., 165.

³⁹ Ibid., 169.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 170.

⁴¹ Ibid., 406. Edwin A. Blum notes that the Greek word for remain (*meno*) occurs 11 times in this chapter of John’s Gospel, 40 times in the entire Gospel, and 27 times in John’s epistles. See Edwin A. Blum, “John” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary – New Testament*, John F. Walvoord and Roy Zuck, editors (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1983), 325. In none of the cases in which this word is used in John’s Gospel is there a compelling reason to equate the word with accepting Christ as Savior. Blum presents this as one possible meaning in his analysis

passage is whether it is to be equated with “believing” (phase 1 – trust in Christ for salvation) or does it refer to “fellowship” (phase 2 – experiential sanctification). Experimental predestinarians⁴² (or Calvinists or Reformed theologians or Lordship salvation theologians) and those who have been influenced by their thought would tend to interpret the word “remain” as a reference to believing in Christ.⁴³ In other words, the true believer (vs. the professing believer) must “remain” in the sense of continuing to manifest faith by his works. This is not that far from the Arminian who contends that the believer can lose his salvation. Therefore, the Arminian would be inclined to interpret “remain” or “abide” in a manner that allows for a loss of salvation if the believer doesn’t “remain.”

The Lordship (Experimental Predestinarian or Reformed) interpretive approach to Johannine literature considers John’s statement of purpose in John 20:30-31 to relate to Phase 1 salvation “belief;” therefore, they see the main purpose of the book as evangelistic.

And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.

The result is that Jesus’ teachings are seen in terms of justification or positional sanctification truths rather than in terms of Phase 2 experiential sanctification truths. On the surface and when read in isolation, many of the passages in John’s Gospel can be interpreted as related to Phase 1. Certainly, some passages should be considered in view of Phase 1 or Phase 3 of the believer’s existence (e.g. Jn 6:40 and 10:27-30). However, the message of the Gospel is not just an explanation of how to be born again. Far more is being accomplished in the Gospel.

First, in the Prologue (1:1-18) to the Gospel, select themes are introduced that have no relationship to justification truths. For instance, Jesus is introduced as the Revealer of the Father. John spends a significant portion of His Gospel devoted to Jesus’ dialogues and works that were designed to affirm Jesus as the revealer of the character and person of God the Father.

Second, eternal life is defined as knowing God the Father (17:3). Eternal life is not just something to possess in the future; eternal life is described as something experienced by the believer in the present (Jn 10:10). The descriptions that Jesus gives throughout the Gospel of the experience of eternal life involve abundance of spiritual life in the present (Phase 2), not in the future. For example, the water of life (Jn 4:13-14) is later described in terms of spiritual production empowered by the Holy Spirit (Jn 7:37-39).

Jesus answered and said to her, “Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life. (Jn 4:13-14)

of John 15 and cites John 6:54 & 56 in support, but Dillow refutes it. See Dillow, *The Reign*, 407. The use of the term “abides” in John 6:56 could be seen as a general maxim used by Jesus to illustrate the principle of fellowship in the lives of those who have believed which is illustrated by the use of the figure of speech of eating My flesh and drinking My blood.

⁴² This is a term used by Dillow to describe the Calvinist position which he defines as “those who feel that one who is born again cannot lose his salvation and will necessarily and inevitably continue in good works until the end of life.” See Dillow, *The Reign*, 20.

⁴³ Edwin A. Blum (see earlier footnote) would probably be an example of this category in the sense that he is likely influenced by Calvinistic thought when he presents the option of “believing in Christ” as one option for interpreting the word “abide” in John’s Gospel (Jn 6:56).

On that last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water." But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified. (Jn 7:37-39)

In John's Gospel, eternal life is described as something possessed (Phase 1 – positional sanctification) and experienced (Phase 2 – experiential sanctification). The eternal life of which John speaks in his purpose statement means more than justification (Phase 1). John's use of believe means more than just Phase 1 trust in Christ for salvation. Eternal life in John's Gospel is the life of God experienced in the life of the believer.⁴⁴

The prevalent Lordship or Reformed influenced view would not accept this reasoning and would interpret Jesus' use of the term "abide" as equivalent to "union" rather than "communion" with Christ. However, several points argue against that interpretation and in favor of "abiding" as a Phase 2 truth:

- ❖ To interpret "abide" as a reference to the Phase 1 truth of union verses the Phase 2 truth of communion stresses the text beyond its context and the figurative analogy used.
- ❖ In verse 5, the action of "abiding" is a two-way street – "He who abides in Me, and I in him" – the disciple abides in Jesus and Jesus abides in the disciple just as Jesus said that He was "in the Father" and the Father was "in Him" (14:11).
- ❖ The relationship that is pictured by the term "abide" in the context can be disrupted through a volitional action of the branch (15:6). This is not true of the Phase 1 truth of union with Christ according to the Reformed understanding of salvation or according to the free-grace understanding of salvation.
- ❖ "Abiding" in Christ (v. 4) is tantamount to being "in Me" (v. 2). Abiding is the result of a continual volitional choice on the part of the disciple.
- ❖ To view "abiding" as a Phase 2 truth is more consistent with Johannine thought such as that found in 1 John 3:24 – "Now he who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. And by this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us." See also 1 John 2:6.
- ❖ In order for the believer to obey, the believer must "believe." This is Jesus' point in 14:1-4. In order for the believer to experience the joy of eternal life during the Phase 2 experience, the believer must "believe."
- ❖ Jesus considered it possible for His Own disciples to not remain or endure in Christ; otherwise, He would not have commanded them to remain in relationship to Him. If "abide" in this passage is equated with believing in Jesus, then it certainly presents a difficulty if one carries that understanding into one's interpretation of such passages as John 14:2 – "I go to prepare a place for you." Did Jesus prepare a place for those who chose not to abide? If abiding is a product of being regenerate and automatic, then Jesus would not have commanded His disciples to "abide" (v. 4).
- ❖ Jesus uses the imperative mood in verse 4 – a mood of command. If true believers always abide, then this would have been a ridiculous command. "A warning regarding a danger which no true Christians will ever face and against an action which no true Christian will ever commit is nonsense."⁴⁵
- ❖ We remain in Christ's love by obeying commandments (vv. 9-10). If remaining and believing are the same, then believing (Phase 1) is obeying commandments. This is a concept totally contrary to John's theme of faith alone for salvation.
- ❖ If "abide" means "believe" (Phase 1), then the verse would be reduced to the conceptual absurdity of "He who believes (Phase 1) in Me believes (Phase 1) in Me."⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Ibid., 334-5.

⁴⁵ Dillow, *The Reign*, 406.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 407.

- ❖ Even if “abide” in one passage in John’s Gospel (e.g. 6:56) is interpreted to refer to believe in Christ, that cannot be the basis for determining its meaning in another passage.

The Meaning of “They” and “Cast Out” (v. 6)

Up to this point in the narrative, Jesus has promised blessing for abiding; however, in verse 6 He deals with the consequences of not abiding. Note the progression in personal pronouns that is found in this passage:

- ❖ “He” (the Father) in verse 2 is said to do the “lifting” and the “cleansing”
- ❖ “You” (the eleven disciples) in verses 3-5 are the subject of Jesus’ instruction.
- ❖ “They” (not yet identified) in verse 6

The “they” of verse 6 is most likely a reference to the world who would be evaluating and judging them. The context of the passage spans back to chapter 13:31 where Jesus begins His discourse to the eleven disciples in the upper room. In 13:35, Jesus indicates that the disciples would be judged by the world.

By this **all** [the world by interpretation] will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another. (Jn 13:35)

Unbelievers (and even non-abiding believers) look at the fruit of believers toward one another to determine whether they are for real or not. A failure to abide in the true vine (Jesus) results in a fruitless life. The world discards them (*ekballo* – throw out) as inconsequential or useless. With respect to the “they” (the world) of verse 6, the non-abiding disciples have failed in Christ’s command of John 13:34-35. They have failed in their love for Jesus Christ (14:15-24).

The non-abiding believer of verse 6 is described as “withered” in reference to its non-productive status. To build a fire from branches as described in verse 6 would require that grown wood would have to be removed. Grown wood is removed during the severe pruning that occurs at the beginning of the dormant season after all fruit had been harvested. Whereas verse 2 focused upon activities associated with the Spring, verse 6 focuses upon activities associated with the Fall of the year. Only at the end of a growing season would branches be removed, piled up and burned. These branches have rejected the “lifting” and “pruning” (*kathaireo*) actions of the Father and have become unfruitful. The world only takes note of such believers in a negative sense.

While not taught in this passage, it is certainly taught in Scripture that should this believer continue to not “abide” and to be unfruitful, then he will eventually be subject to the discipline of the Father in time and the loss of rewards in eternity. Lewis S. Chafer is an example of theologians who have embraced this view.⁴⁷ Eventually, the lack of abiding in Jesus by any believer will result in a loss of reward at the bema seat judgment (1 Co 3:15; 2 Co 5:10) based upon a failure to produce works of eternal value. The difference is that Paul focuses upon the works of the believer; whereas Jesus in this passage is focused upon the individual disciple although certainly, there is little room for distinction for all intents and purposes.⁴⁸ Jesus may have chosen to refer to post-harvest viticultural practices specifically because He did not want the disciples to mistakenly link fruitfulness or non-fruitfulness to divine discipline. The greater context demands that we see Jesus’ purpose this last night prior to His crucifixion to be that of encouraging or lifting up the disciples.

⁴⁷ See Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology, 8 volumes* (Dallas, Texas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), vol. 7, 4.

⁴⁸ Derickson and Radmacher, *The DiscipleMaker*, 177-8.

According to the Lordship or Experimental Predestinarian view, the unfruitful branches of verse 2 are the same as the non-abiding branches of verse 6. They believe that their removal symbolizes the judgment of eternal damnation that is experienced by all unbelievers, whether they “appear” to be believers or not. The Reformed doctrinal paradigm includes the concept of the perseverance of the saints – the belief that all true believers will persevere in good works until the end of their lives. A failure to do so is an indication that one was not really a believer anyway. As usual, the Reformed doctrinal paradigm reveals its inherent contradictory nature upon further examination. For example, Peter, one of the eleven, certainly didn’t persevere (Lk 22:54-62). However, he never stopped belonging to Jesus (Phase 1).

The Benefits of “Abiding” (vv. 7-8)

Verse 7 provides perhaps the most convincing case against the Reformed or Lordship view of this passage. We take note of those whom Jesus addresses in verse 7, i.e. the disciples. It is possible for the disciples to choose not to abide if Jesus’ words are to be interpreted in their normal, literal sense.

However, the more important lessons to be learned from verse 7 are the parallels that are found between Jesus’ instruction to His disciples and Paul’s instructions to the Church Age believer in regard to the spiritual life. The following chart provides a comparative analysis:

Key Concept	Jesus’ Instruction	Passages	Paul’s Instruction	Passages
Know	“Keep My commandments”	Jn 14:15 cf. 13:34-35; 15:12, 17	We are to “know” that our old man was crucified with Jesus	Ro 6:6, 9
Believe or Trust	“Believe also in Me”	Jn 14:1, 10-11	We are to “reckon” (consider it to be true or believe it or trust it) ourselves to be dead to sin and alive to God in Christ	Ro 6:11
Apply the Word of Truth	“If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word”	14:23-24	Present (“yield”) our members as instruments of righteousness	Ro 6:13 cf. Ro 12:1-2
The Results – the character of God manifest	“All will know” <u>and</u> “I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you” <u>and</u> Jesus will make His home with that disciple <u>and</u> you will bear much fruit	13:35; 14:20, 23; 15:5 cf. Jn 1:14-18	“Be filled by means of the Spirit with the character of Christ”	Eph 5:18 cf. Col 3:16

Herein we find great similarity between Jesus’ teaching regarding the spiritual life to be pursued by His disciples then destined for the kingdom and the spiritual life of the believer to be lived in the power of the same Holy Spirit in the present Age of the Church. The similarity should not be overlooked or dismissed even though we are often focused upon the dispensational distinctions present in Scripture. Neither should the similarity be overemphasized to the point that

Church Age truth is injected into this passage. This passage seems to provide us with a heightened understanding of just how great the similarities will be between the spiritual life of the kingdom age believer/disciple and the Church Age believer.

The principles of the spiritual life that emerge from this passage indicate that what Jesus was saying to His disciples (which seems to be equally true for us) is that only as His word finds response in us are we truly abiding in Him and producing fruit and experiencing answered prayer. "As His word influences us, it is alive and active and an integral element in our decision making process and it thereby 'abides' in us (Heb 4:12). In so doing the Holy Spirit is using Jesus' word to affect our motives and worldview."⁴⁹ The more the disciples and we know of His Word, the more we are able to believe (trust) Him. As we trust Him, our character is changed as our value system changes to conform to eternal realities verses temporal superficialities. As our character begins to reflect the character of Christ, we begin to ask for those things that reflect His desires and values in the world and in our lives. We also then have the capacity for "love" for other believers and for the world. The process of growing Christ-like character is a process that none of us can ever say is fully complete in time and we would have to agree with Paul's assessment of this fact.

But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord. (2 Co 3:18)

The "fruit" to which Jesus refers in verse 8 is the love for one another that would accomplish the effect of evangelism first mentioned by Jesus in 13:35. The heavenly Father would be glorified as they loved one another (13:34-35 cf. Matt 5:16).

Let your light so shine before me, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven. (Matt 5:16)

As the disciples bore fruit (loved each other), they in effect participated in that part of Jesus' mission which involved revealing the Father.⁵⁰ "Fruitfulness" was the method or means through which they would evangelize; "fruitfulness" (in context) was not the result of evangelism, i.e. converted souls. Nevertheless, others (the "all" of 13:35 and the "they" of 15:6) would be drawn to Christ through the "fruit" of the disciples.

⁴⁹ Derickson and Radmacher, *The DiscipleMaker*, 185.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 188.