

Do Fruitless Branches Go To Hell?

The Vine And The Branches: What It Means To Abide In Christ

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(John 15:1-6) “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.”

INTRODUCTION: This beautiful and profound analogy of the vine and the branches has encouraged believers throughout the centuries. It has also become a controversial passage regarding the eternal security of the saints.

Three approaches have been taken to this passage:

Some say the person who “does not bear fruit” cannot be a Christian because all true Christians bear fruit.

Others say the branches “in Me” that are taken away refer to Christians who lose their salvation. In this view when a believer stops producing fruit, he forfeits justification.

Still others say that this passage refers to Christians who do not produce fruit and who will therefore experience divine judgment in this life and loss of reward at the judgment seat of Christ.

- I. **The Meaning Of “Every Branch In Me”.** Most evangelicals agree that the branches that “bear fruit” and are pruned (or cleaned) to bear more fruit are true believers. But what about the branches “in Me (i.e. in Christ) that do not bear fruit?
 - a. Many commentators identify these as people who say they are saved but they are not because all true Christians bear fruit.
 - i. To justify this interpretation these commentators go to the analogy of the vine in Isa. 5:1-7; cf. Jer 5:10a; and Rom. 11:16-24. These passages definitely refer to branches who were not saved.

- ii. **However, Isaiah wrote of a covenant people. All Jews (saved or unsaved) are in Israel, but not all professing Christians are in Christ.**
- iii. **I would like to convince you that “in Me” does not refer to an “Israel within Israel (i.e., the truly saved within the professing company).**
- iv. **John’s writings consistently use the phrase “in Me” to refer to a true intimate fellowship relationship with Christ.**
- b. **The Phrase “in Me” is used 16 times in John’s Gospel (6:56; 10:38; 14:10 [twice], 11, 20, 30; 15:2, 4 [twice], 5-7; 16:33; 17:21, 23).**
 - i. **In each case it refers to fellowship with Christ.**
 - ii. **We must ask therefore, is it consistent then to say that the phrase in 15:2 refers to a person who merely professes to be saved but is not.**
- c. **If “in Me” means in fellowship with Christ, What kind of relationship is meant in these 16 appearances of this phrase?**
 - i. **If Jesus is referring to a life of fellowship, a unity of purpose, rather than an organic connection then this would be somewhat different from Paul’s emphasis..**
 - ii. **When Paul occasionally uses the phrase “in Christ” he did refer to the Christian’s organic connection to Christ (e.g., 2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 1:7) or to organic membership in Christ’s body (E.g., I Cor. 12:13).**
 - iii. **John, however, never used the phrase in that way. For him, to be “in Christ” meant to be in communion with Him.**
- d. **In John 14:30 Jesus stated that the ruler of this world has nothing “in Me.” This meant that Satan has no part with Christ, no communion of purpose with Him.**
 - i. **Thus, the experience of peace in the midst of persecution comes only to believers who are obediently walking in His commandments and aligned with His purposes. (Jn. 16:33) “These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace”.**
 - ii. **John’s writings and the rest of the NT confirm that salvation does not automatically result in an experience of peace in the midst of trials. Only when a believer is in Christ in the sense of walking in fellowship with Him does he have peace (Phil. 4:6-9) *Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from***

me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

- e. The view that “in Me” means oneness of purpose and not organic connection is also seen in John 17:21. Jesus prayed for the kind of oneness among the disciples that He enjoys with the Father, a oneness of love and fellowship: “that they may all be one; even as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee.”
 - i. If this “in Me” relationship referred to organic connection, Jesus would not have prayed for an organic connection between Him and believers because it already existed.
 - ii. Jesus desired that believers experience oneness of purpose because that observable unity will prove to the world that they are His disciples, models of Christian love (v. 23) ...
May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

Conclusion: Thus, the phrase “in Me” in John does not require the sense of organic connection often found in Paul’s epistles. To be “in Me”, according to John, is to be in fellowship with Christ, living obediently. Therefore it is possible for a Christian not to be “in Me” in the Johannine sense.

The command to abide in Christ is given to Christians and it is a call to remain in fellowship with the Lord.

If all Christians already remain “in Me,” then why command them to remain in that relationship? It must be possible for them not to remain.

This leads to the discussion of “abide,” one of John’s favorite terms.

The Meaning of “Abide”

The English word “abide” means : (1) to wait for; (2) to endure without yielding, to bear patiently, to tolerate, to withstand; (3) to remain stable or in a fixed state, to continue in a place.

These are also the meaning of the Greek word *MENO*. However, many English commentaries have mystically redefined this word to define saving faith.

Most Greek lexicons suggest that *MENO* simply means “to remain.” In the Gospel of John, *MENO* always means “to remain, to stay, to reside, to continue, to endure” (1:32, 38-39; 2:12). For this reason the NIV translates the word “remain.” In 15:4 Jesus told His disciples to, “Abide in Me,” that is, “Remain in Me.”

- I. What does it mean “to remain”? When the Lord said, *He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides [remains] in Me*” (6:56), He meant that

such an individual continues in close relationship to Him. When a person first believes in Christ, he comes into a close relationship with Christ. The continued richness of that fellowship is determined by the believer's obedience (15:10) *If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love.* One thing is certain, John's idea of *remain* requires obeying the commandments which mandates works. Salvation is by the crucifixion of Christ and not by works (Gal. 2:16).

- a. However, even though he has believed in Christ, and presently remains in fellowship, he might at some time in the future not continue in that fellowship. Hence the command to stay in fellowship is given.
- b. Jesus knew that some Christians would not continue their fellowship (John 15:4) *Remain in me, and I will remain in you.*
- c. Question: If it is not possible to lose fellowship with Christ, why would the Lord warn about this possible failure?
 - i. A warning regarding a danger no Christian would ever face and against an action no Christian would ever commit is pointless.
 - ii. (John 6:56) *Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him.* "Remains" present, indicative, participle. It is a fellowship that occurs at that moment.
 - iii. There is no basis for equating "remaining" with "believing" as some commentaries do. The word "remain" cannot mean "to accept Jesus as Savior."
 - iv. If remaining and believing are equated, then believing means obeying the commandments of God (Jn. 15:10) *If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love.* This is a thought far removed from the truth of the Gospel by grace through faith alone.

II. So, the first condition of abiding in Christ, or being in fellowship with Him, is to have believed on Him. However, a number of other conditions for remaining in fellowship with Christ are mentioned in John's writings:

- a. Love of other believers (I John 2:10; 4:12) *Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble... No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.*
- b. Walking as He walked (I Jn. 2:6) *Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.*
 - i. If Jesus did not save us by the way He walked but by the way He died, how can a Christian save himself eternally by walking the way Christ walked?
- c. Being strong in the faith (I Jn. 2:14) *I write to you, fathers, because you have known him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God lives in you, and you have overcome the evil one.*

- d. **Doing the will of God (I Jn. 2:17)** *The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.*
- e. **Holding on to the truth learned at salvation (I Jn. 2:24)** *See that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you. If it does, you also will remain in the Son and in the Father.*
- f. **Not hating one's brother in Christ (I Jn. 3:15)** *Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him.*
- g. **Keeping the commandments of God (I Jn. 3:24)** *Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us. (John 15:10) If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love.*
- h. **Publicly confessing Christ (I Jn. 4:15)** *If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God.*

III. I Jn. is primarily about fellowship with the Son rather than initial salvation.

- a. **(I Jn. 1:3, 4)** *We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete. (VV. 6, 7) If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.*
 - i. **In II Peter 2:5-9** Peter discusses a cleansed believer who is walking in darkness (*blindness*) because he is *unfruitful*.
- b. **(Phil. 2:1-4)** *If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.*

IV. The rewards for meeting these conditions are great.

- a. **Believers will truly be the Lord's disciples (John 8:31)** *To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.*
- b. **But more important, such a life will enable them to stand before Him with confidence and not be ashamed when He returns (I Jn. 2:28)** *And now, dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming.*
- c. **Only if believers keep Christ's commandments and love one another does the love of God remain richly within them (I Jn. 4:12)** *No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.*

- i. As elsewhere in John's writings, "remain" never signifies the initial event of saving faith in Christ but the enduring relationship of walking in fellowship with Him.
- ii. The word "remain" implies staying in a position already obtained, not entering for the first time.
- iii. If a nonbeliever should ask, "What must I do to be saved," it would be wrong to answer, "Remain in Christ." The believer remains in fellowship with Christ by keeping His commandments.
- iv. The Holy Spirit is the source from which the child of God draws strength to sustain that fellowship (I Jn. 3:24) *Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.*
- v. This same Spirit not only energizes love and obedience but also public confession of Christ (I Jn. 4:15) *If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God.*

Conclusion: It is preferable to hold that the analogy of branches abiding in a vine depicts a relationship that mature and growing Christians sustain with Christ because of remaining in close relationship to Him, rather than a relationship that all Christians have because of salvation.

Fellowship, rather than organic union is pictured. A branch "in Me" is a branch that is deriving its sustenance from Christ, living in fellowship with Him (as a literal branch derives sustenance from a literal vine), and thus bearing much fruit.

Thus, "in Me" means "in fellowship with ME".

The Meaning of the Fruitless Branches

John 15:2, 6

- I. Four views have been proposed by English commentators on the destiny of the fruitless branches.
 - a. They are lifted up and encouraged: R.K. Harrison points out that the word translated "takes away" (*airo*) is best rendered "lifts up."
 - i. It is used this way in at least 8 of its 24 occurrences in the Gospel of John (5:8-12; 8:59; 10:18, 24).
 - ii. R. K. Harrison says that fallen vines were lifted "with meticulous care" and allowed to heal. If that is the meaning, then a fruitless branch is lifted up to put it into a position of fruit-bearing.
 - iii. This does not contradict verse 6, which states that the branch that does not abide is "thrown away," literally "cast out".
 - iv. This would suggest that the heavenly Vinedresser first encourages the branches and lifts them in the sense of providing loving care to enable them to bear fruit.

- v. **If after this encouragement, they do not remain in fellowship with Him and bear fruit, they are then cast out.**
- b. **The second view is that the fruitless branches lose their salvation. However, knowing that abiding requires works of personal righteousness, this would make salvation by works (Titus 3:5) “he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit...**
- c. **The third view is that they are separated from their superficial connection with Christ. They are only professing Christians and not Christians in reality.**
 - i. **However, if the fruitless branches were never really saved, then what bearing did this passage have on the disciples?**
 - ii. **The passage gives every indication that it was addressed in its entirety to the disciples to tell them how they could bear fruit in their lives (John 15:7, 8) *If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.*⁸ *This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.***
 - iii. **Then Jesus told them of his love for them and how He wanted them to complete His joy (15:9-16) *“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name....***
 - iv. **Thus, when a Christian is bearing fruit, in that act he is becoming a disciple (vs. 8) *This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.***
 - v. **When Jesus said, “*you are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you* (15:3) He was not speaking to mere professing Christians.**
 - vi. **He was speaking of those in fellowship with Him who are not yet producing much fruit, and those in fellowship with Him who are bearing fruit.**
 - 1. **The former need to be lifted up by the Vinedresser so they can become fruitful.**

2. **The latter need to be pruned so they will bear more fruit.**
 3. **The disciples were now given instruction on how they could continue to bear fruit if they abide in Him or remain in fellowship with him.**
- vii. (15:4) *Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. Here Jesus was apparently warning His hearers about the danger of their removing themselves, by disobedience, from His influence and enablement. Not only are they not unbelievers, they are commanded to remain in that sphere of influence and enablement because they are in it already.*
- d. **The fourth view of the destiny of the unfruitful branches is that they receive divine discipline in this life (possibly including physical death) and loss of rewards at the judgment seat of Christ. (15:6) *If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.***
- i. **To what does the fire refer? It is most commonly used in the Bible for God's judgment on His people in time. It is used less frequently with reference to the fires of hell.**
 1. (Nu. 21:6) *Then the LORD sent venomous (KJV fiery) snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died.*
 2. (Isa. 5:24, 25) *Therefore, as tongues of fire lick up straw and as dry grass sinks down in the flames, so their roots will decay and their flowers blow away like dust; for they have rejected the law of the LORD Almighty and spurned the word of the Holy One of Israel. Therefore the LORD's anger burns against his people*
 3. (Isa. 9:18, 19) *Surely wickedness burns like a fire; it consumes briers and thorns, it sets the forest thickets ablaze, so that it rolls upward in a column of smoke. By the wrath of the LORD Almighty the land will be scorched and the people will be fuel for the fire; no one will spare his brother.*
 4. (Isa. 10:17-19) *The Light of Israel will become a fire, their Holy One a flame; in a single day it will burn and consume his thorns and his briers. The splendor of his forests and fertile fields it will completely destroy, as when a sick man wastes away. And the remaining trees of his forests will be so few that a child could write them down.*
 5. (Isa. 29:5-7) *But your many enemies will become like fine dust, the ruthless hordes like blown chaff. Suddenly, in an instant, the LORD Almighty will come with thunder*

- and earthquake and great noise, with windstorm and tempest and flames of a devouring fire.*
6. (Ps. 21:8-9) *Your hand will lay hold on all your enemies; your right hand will seize your foes. At the time of your appearing you will make them like a fiery furnace. In his wrath the LORD will swallow them up, and his fire will consume them.*
 7. (Ps. 79:4, 5) *We are objects of reproach to our neighbors, of scorn and derision to those around us. How long, O LORD? Will you be angry forever? How long will your jealousy burn like fire?*
 8. (Ps. 89:46) *How long, O LORD? Will you hide yourself forever? How long will your wrath burn like fire?*
 9. (Ps. 97:2-5) *Clouds and thick darkness surround him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne. Fire goes before him and consumes his foes on every side.*
 10. (Jer. 4:4) *Circumcise yourselves to the LORD, circumcise your hearts, you men of Judah and people of Jerusalem, or my wrath will break out and burn like fire...*
 11. (Jer. 7:20) *“Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: My anger and my wrath will be poured out on this place, on man and beast, on the trees of the field and on the fruit of the ground, and it will burn and not be quenched.*
 12. (Jer. 15:14) *I will enslave you to your enemies in a land you do not know, for my anger will kindle a fire that will burn against you.”*
 13. (Jer. 17:27) *But if you do not obey me to keep the Sabbath day holy by not carrying any load as you come through the gates of Jerusalem on the Sabbath day, then I will kindle an unquenchable fire in the gates of Jerusalem that will consume her fortresses.”*
 14. (Jer. 21:12) *O house of David, this is what the LORD says: Administer justice every morning; rescue from the hand of his oppressor the one who has been robbed, or my wrath will break out and burn like fire because of the evil you have done— burn with no one to quench it.*
 15. (Amos 1:4, 7, 10, 12, 14) *I will send fire upon the house of Hazeal that will consume the fortresses of Ben-Hadad... I will send fire upon the walls of Gaza... 10. I will send fire upon the walls of Tyre... I will send fire upon Teman I will set fire to the walls of Rabbah*
 16. (Daniel 7:10) *A river of fire was flowing, coming out from before him. Thousands upon thousands attended*

- him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him. The court was seated, and the books were opened.*
17. (Matt. 3:11) *“I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. (cf. Lk. 3:16)*
 18. (Matt. 5:22) *But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.*
 19. (Lk. 12:49,50) *“I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed! Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division.*
 20. (Lk. 17:29) *But the day Lot left Sodom, fire and sulfur rained down from heaven and destroyed them all.*
 21. (Acts 2:3) *They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them.*
 22. (Acts 2:19) *I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke.*
 23. (Acts 7:30) *“After forty years had passed, an angel appeared to Moses in the flames of a burning bush in the desert near Mount Sinai.*
 24. (Rom. 12:20) *“...“If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.”*
 25. (I Cor. 3:15)
 26. (Eph. 6:16) *In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.*
 27. (Heb. 1:7) *In speaking of the angels he says, “He makes his angels winds, his servants flames of fire.”*
 28. (Heb 10:26-27) *If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.*
 29. (Heb. 11:34) *quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies.*
 30. (Heb. 12:28-29) *Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so*

*worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our
“God is a consuming fire.”*

31. *(James 3:5, 6) Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.*
32. *(I Pet. 1:6-7) In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.*
33. *(I Pet. 4:12) Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful (KJV fiery) trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you.*

Conclusion: Believers out of fellowship with Christ are cast into divine judgment this side of the grave (Gal. 6:7, 8) *Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction...*

According to John 15, when a believer is not bearing fruit because of sin or spiritual immaturity, the Lord lovingly lifts him up so he can bear fruit.

The believer who is in fellowship with Christ and who is bearing fruit is pruned so he can bear more fruit.

The believer who does not remain in fellowship because of disobedience is cast out in judgment and withers spiritually, and faces severe divine discipline in this life and loss of reward at the judgment seat of Christ.

It is God’s will for us all that we be not just fruit bearing Christians but that we all bear much fruit and become His disciples indeed.

Nothing in John 15:1-6 demands that it pictures loss of salvation in eternal hell.

Nor does the passage suggest that all believers will always bear fruit...(II Pet. 1:8, 9) *For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But if anyone does not have them, he is nearsighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins.*

It is only believers who remain in fellowship with Christ who will bear much fruit.

Like all illustrations, even the vine/branch illustration has its limits. What this metaphor does not do is speak of restoration. In a literal vineyard a severed and withered branch cannot be restored to its place in the vine. Still less can it do so after being burned. But in the experience of Christian disciples, restoration to fellowship with Christ remains open to all who are alive and seek it (I Jn. 1:9). This is true because all eleven disciples broke contact with the True Vine that very night. However, all eleven were also restored and their remaining lives were abundant with good fruit (Lk. 22:31-33). Contact with the True Vine is broken as Peter and the rest desert their Teacher. Peter did in fact repent and that's what the Laodiceans need to do (Rev. 3:19, 20) *Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me, and that's what the Ephesians needed to do (Rev. 2:4, 5) Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.*

INVITATION: Christian, if you have broken fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ you are in danger of Devine chastisement but the good news is that you can be restored to fellowship with Him this very moment.