

EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE,
And many Explanatory Notes.

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JOHN XV. 1-6.

1 I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman.

2 Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every *branch* that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit.

3 Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you.

4 Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in

the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me.

5 I am the vine, ye *are* the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.

6 If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned.

THESE verses, we must carefully remember, contain a parable. In interpreting it we must not forget the great rule which applies to all Christ's parables. The general lesson of each parable is the main thing to be noticed. The minor details must not be tortured and pressed to an excess, in order to extract a meaning from them. The mistakes into which Christians have fallen by neglecting this rule, are neither few nor small. We are meant to learn first, from these verses, that *the union between Christ and believers is very close*. He is "the Vine," and they are "the branches."

The union between the branch of a vine and the main stem, is the closest that can be conceived. It is the whole secret of the branch's life, strength, vigour, beauty, and fertility. Separate from the parent stem, it has no life of its own. The sap and juice that flow from the stem are the origin and maintaining power of all its leaves, buds, blossoms, and fruit. Cut off from the stem, it must soon wither and die.

The union between Christ and believers is just as close, and just as real. In themselves believers have no life, or strength, or spiritual power. All that they have of vital religion comes from Christ. They are what they are, and feel what they feel, and do what they do, because they draw out of Jesus a continual supply of grace, help, and ability. Joined to the Lord by faith, and united in mysterious union with Him by the Spirit, they stand, and walk, and continue, and run the Christian race. But every jot of good about them is drawn from their spiritual Head, Jesus Christ.

The thought before us is both comfortable and instructive. Believers have no cause to despair of their own salvation, and to think they will never reach heaven. Let them consider that they are not left to themselves and their own strength. Their root is Christ, and all that there is in the root is for the benefit of the branches. Because He lives, they shall live also. Worldly people have no cause to wonder at the continuance and perseverance of believers. Weak as they are in themselves, their Root is in heaven, and never dies. "When I am weak," said Paul, "then am I strong." (2 Cor. xii. 10.)

We are meant to learn, secondly, from these verses, that *there are false Christians as well as true ones*. There are "branches in the vine" which ap-

pear to be joined to the parent stem, and yet bear no fruit. There are men and women who appear to be members of Christ, and yet will prove finally to have had no vital union with Him.

There are myriads of professing Christians in every Church whose union with Christ is only outward and formal. Some of them are joined to Christ by baptism and Church-membership. Some of them go even further than this, and are regular communicants and loud talkers about religion. But they all lack the one thing needful. Notwithstanding services, and sermons, and sacrament, they have no grace in their hearts, no faith, no inward work of the Holy Spirit. They are not one with Christ, and Christ in them. Their union with Him is only nominal, and not real. They have “a name to live,” but in the sight of God they are dead.

Christians of this stamp are aptly represented by branches in a vine which bear no fruit. Useless and unsightly, such branches are only fit to be cut off and burned. They draw nothing out of the parent stem, and make no return for the place they occupy. Just so will it be at the last day with false professors and nominal Christians. Their end, except they repent, will be destruction. They will be separated from the company of true believers, and cast out, as withered, useless branches, into everlasting fire. They will find at last, whatever they thought in this world, that there is a worm that never dies, and a fire that is not quenched.

We are meant to learn, thirdly, from these verses, that *the fruits of the Spirit are the only satisfactory evidence of a man being a true Christian*. The disciple that “abides in Christ,” like a branch abiding in the vine, will always bear fruit.

He that would know what the word “fruit” means, need not wait long for an answer. Repentance toward God, faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ, holiness of life and conduct, these are what the New Testament calls “fruit.” These are the distinguishing marks of the man who is a living branch of the true Vine. Where these things are wanting, it is vain to talk of possessing dormant grace and spiritual life. Where there is no fruit there is no life. He that lacketh these things is “dead while he liveth.”

True grace, we must not forget, is never idle. It never slumbers and never sleeps. It is a vain notion to suppose that we are living members of Christ, if the example of Christ is the only satisfactory evidence of saving union between Christ and our souls. Where there is no fruit of the Spirit to be seen, there is no vital religion in the heart. The Spirit of Life in Christ Jesus will always make Himself known in the daily conduct of those in whom He dwells. The Master Himself declares, “Every tree is known by his own fruit.” (Luke vi. 44.)

We are meant, lastly, to learn from these verses, that *God will often increase the holiness of true Christians by providential dealings with them*.

"Every branch," it is written, "that beareth fruit, He purgeth it, that it may bear more fruit."

The meaning of this language is clear and plain. Just as the vine-dresser prunes and cuts back the branches of a fruitful vine, in order to make them more fruitful, so does God purify and sanctify believers by the circumstances of life in which He places them.

Trial, to speak plainly, is the instrument by which our Father in heaven makes Christians more holy. By trial He calls out their passive graces, and proves whether they can suffer His will as well as do it. By trial He weans them from the world, draws them to Christ, drives them to the Bible and prayer, shows them their own hearts, and makes them humble. This is the process by which He "purges" them, and makes them more fruitful. The lives of the saints in every age, are the best and truest comment on the text. Never, hardly, do we find an eminent saint, either in the Old Testament or the New, who was not purified by suffering, and, like His Master, a "man of sorrows."

Let us learn to be patient in the days of darkness, if we know anything of vital union with Christ. Let us remember the doctrine of the passage before us, and not murmur and complain because of trials. Our trials are not meant to do us harm, but good. God chastens us "for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness." (Heb. xii. 10.) Fruit is the thing that our Master desires to see in us, and He will not spare the pruning-knife if He sees we need it. In the last day we shall see that all was well done.

NOTES. JOHN XV. 1-6.

1.—[*I am...Vine...Father...husbandman.*] In this and the following chapter, our Lord proceeds to give instruction rather than consolation. Having cheered and comforted the timid disciples in the fourteenth chapter, He now presses on their attention certain great truths which He would have them specially remember when He was gone. And He begins by urging the absolute necessity of close union and communion with Himself, by means of the illustration of a vine and its branches.

We must always remember that the passage before us is a parable, and as a parable must be interpreted. We must be careful not to press each sentence in it too far; and, in all parables, we must look at the great lesson which it contains, rather than at each clause.—The old saying is most true, that "no parable stands on four legs;" and in all parables there are parts which are only the drapery of the figure, and not the figure itself. Neglect of this caution does much harm to the souls of Christians, and is the cause of much crude and unsound doctrine.—In the passage before us we must remember that our Lord Jesus Christ is not literally a vine, nor are believers literal branches, nor is the Father literally a husbandman. We are dealing with figures and pictures, mercifully used in order to meet our weak capacities; and we must take care we do not draw doctrinal conclusions from them, which contradict other plain passages of Scripture.

Even Maldonatus, the Romish commentator, here remarks: "All the several parts of a parable are not always meant to be fitted to the thing signified by the parable. Many things

in parables are said to fill up or adorn the narrative.” Toletus says just the same.

Burgon remarks, “Let us, instead of perplexing ourselves with minor details, bear in mind that in interpreting each of our Lord’s parables, the great *purpose* for which it was delivered is ever to be borne in mind, if we would understand it rightly.”

Our Lord’s reason for choosing the illustration of “a vine” has caused much speculation. Some think that He drew the figure from a vine trained over the walls and windows of the upper chamber which He and His disciples were leaving.—Some think that He drew it from the famous golden vine, which ornamented the principal gate of the temple.—Some think that He drew it from the vines which He saw by the wayside as He walked to the garden of Gethsemane.—Some refer it to the “fruit of the vine” at the Lord’s Supper.—After all, these are only guesses and conjectures. It was night when our Lord spoke, and of course nothing could be seen very distinctly. Nor is it necessary to suppose that our Lord drew His illustration from anything but His own mind.

The expression “the true” applied to the vine is an argument much used by those who think our Lord founded His parable on a vine under His eyes. But is it not more likely that our Lord had in view those places in the Old Testament where the Jewish Church is compared to a vine? (See Psalm lxxx. 8; Jer. ii. 21; Ezek. xv. 2; Hosea x. 1.) It would then mean: “I, and not the decaying Jewish Church, am the true source of spiritual life.” This to Jewish minds would be a very useful lesson.

For the use of the word “true” in a precisely similar way, see John vi. 32; “the true bread.” It means the true, original, type vine, of which all other vines are only types and shadows.

Lightfoot says, “Hitherto Israel had been the vine, into which every one that would worship the true God must be grafted. But from henceforward they were to be planted into the profession of Christ.”

The meaning of the verse seems to be this:—“The relation between you and Me is that of a vine and its branches. I am the true source of all your life and spiritual vigour; and you are as entirely dependent on Me, as the branches of the vine are on the parent stem: and there is as close union between you and Me, as between a vine and its branches. My Father takes the same tender interest in you that the vine-dresser does in the branch of the vine; and is continually watching over your health, fruitfulness, and fertility. Think not for a moment that my Father is not as deeply interested in your spiritual prosperity as I am myself.”

The interpretation adopted by Alford and many others, that the vine means “the visible Church,” of which Christ is the *inclusive Head*, appears to me thoroughly unsatisfactory. Our Lord is speaking specially to eleven believers, and treating of their relation to himself. To apply all the language of this parable to so mixed and defective a body as the “visible Church,” seems to me to lower and degrade the whole passage.

2.—[*Every branch...not fruit...taketh away.*] Perhaps no sentence in the parable is more perverted, and wrested, and misapplied than this. Many assert that it teaches that a man may be a real true branch of the vine, a member of Christ, and yet lose all His grace, and be finally cast away. In short, the sentence is the favourite weapon of all Arminians, of all who maintain an inseparable connection between grace and baptism, and of all who deny the perseverance in faith of believers.

I will not urge in reply that this view of the sentence cannot be reconciled with other plainer texts of Scripture, which are not parts of a parable like this; and that we should always shrink from interpreting Scripture so as to make one part contradict another. I prefer saying that the sentence before us will not bear the sense commonly put on it.

The plain truth is that this text is precisely that part of the parable which will not admit

of a literal interpretation. As a matter of fact it is not true that the Father “taketh away” all unfruitful branches. When does He do it? When does He remove from the Church all graceless Christians? On the contrary, for 1800 years He has allowed them to exist in the Church, and has not taken them away. Nor will He take them away till the day of judgment. If the expression “taketh away” cannot be interpreted literally we must beware of interpreting literally the expression, “branch in Me.” As the one phrase is figurative, so also is the other. In short it cannot be shown that a “branch in Me” must mean a believer in Me. It means nothing more than “a professing member of my Church, a man joined to the company of my people, but not joined to me.”

The true meaning of the verse I believe to be this: “My Father deals with my mystical body just as the vine-dresser deals with the vine and its branches. He will no more allow any of my members to be fruitless and graceless, than a vine-dresser will allow barren branches to grow on the vine. My Father will take care that all who are in Me give proof of their union by their fruitful lives and conversation. He will not tolerate for a moment such an inconsistent being as an unfruitful believer, if such a being could be found. In a word, fruitfulness is the great test of being one of my disciples; and he that is not fruitful is not a branch of the true vine.”

Calvin remarks, “Many are supposed to be in the vine, according to man’s opinion, who actually have no root in the vine.”

Hengstenberg thinks that the Jewish Church is primarily meant here, as a fruitless branch compared to the Christian Church.

[*And every branch...purgeth..fruit.*] The meaning of this part of the verse is happily more easy than the other. “Just as a vine-dresser prunes and cuts all healthy branches of a vine, in order to prevent it running to wood and have it bear more fruit, so does my Father deal with all my believing members. He prunes and purifies them by affliction and trouble, in order to make them more fruitful in holiness.”

Let us remember that this sentence throws light on many of the afflictions and trials of God’s people. They are all part of that mysterious process by which God the Father purifies and sanctifies Christ’s people. They are the “pruning” of the vine-branches, for good and not for harm, to increase their fruitfulness. All the most eminent saints in every age have been men of sorrows, and often pruned.

Clement of Alexandria, and many writers in all ages, remark, on this verse, that the vine-branch, which is not sharply pruned, is peculiarly liable to run to wood and bear no fruit.

After all, in leaving this difficult verse, we must not forget that a man may *appear* to us to be a “branch in Christ,” and a true believer, and yet not be one in the sight of God. The end of that man will be death. He will be “taken away” at last to punishment. “Every one that seems and appears to be a branch of the true vine, and yet is not really one, will be lost.”—Two principles in any case we must never let go. One principle is that no one can be a branch in Christ, and a living member of His body, who does not bear fruit. Vital union with Christ not evidenced by life is an impossibility, and a blasphemous idea.—The other principle is that no living branch of the true vine, no believer in Christ, will ever finally perish. They that perish may have looked like believers, but they were not believers in reality.

3.—[*Now ye are clean...word...unto you.*] Having described the relation between Himself and His people generally, our Lord now turns to His disciples, and shows them their present position and immediate duty. “Now you are comparatively cleansed and purified by the doctrine which I have taught, and you have received and believed. But do not be content with past attainments. Attend to the counsel which I am about to give you.”

When our Lord calls His disciples “clean” or “pure” in this place, we cannot doubt that He uses the phrase in a comparative sense. Compared to the unbelieving Scribes and Pharisees, compared indeed with themselves before their Lord called and taught them, the disciples were a cleansed and purified people,—imperfectly and very partially cleansed no doubt, but cleansed.

We should carefully note how our Lord speaks of His “Word” as the great instrument of cleansing His disciples. It is the same mighty principle that is found in Eph. v. 26 and 1 Peter i. 22. God’s Word is God’s grand means of converting and sanctifying souls.

Henry remarks here, “Those who are justified by the blood, and sanctified by the Spirit of Christ, are in Christ’s account clean already, notwithstanding many spots and manifold imperfections.”

4.—[*Abide in Me....I in you.*] Now comes the direct instruction which our Lord desired the disciples to receive:—“Abide in Me. Cling to Me. Stick fast to Me. Live the life of close and intimate communion with Me. Get nearer and nearer to Me. Roll every burden on Me. Cast your whole weight on Me. Never let go your hold on Me for a moment. Be as it were rooted and planted in Me. Do this, and I will never fail you. I will ever abide in you.”

This word “abide,” or “remain,” is used no less than ten times in the first eleven verses of this chapter. It implies a constant remaining or continuing in one spot or place. A true Christian must be always “in Christ,” as a man dwelling always inside the walls of a fortified city.

[*As the branch...abide in He.*] Here our Lord returns once more to the figure of the parable:—“Just as the branch of the vine cannot bear fruit separately and of itself, and must keep up living union with the parent stem, and out of it draw life and strength, just so you cannot bear Christian fruit and walk in Christian ways, and live a Christian life, except you keep up constant union and communion with Me.”

5.—[*I am...Vine...ye...branches.*] Once more our Lord repeats the leading idea of the parable, in order to impress the lesson He is teaching on the disciples’ minds:—“I repeat the assertion I made. The relation between you and Me must be as close and intimate as that between a vine and its branches.”

[*He that abideth...much fruit.*] Here our Lord gives encouragement to the disciples to keep up the habit of closest union with Him. This is the secret of bearing “much fruit,” and being an eminently holy and useful Christian. The experience of every age of the Church proves the truth of this saying. The greatest saints have always lived nearest to Christ.

Do we not see here that there is a difference in the degrees of fruitfulness to which Christians attain? Is there not a tacit distinction here between “fruit” and “much fruit”?

[*For without Me...do nothing.*] The marginal reading gives our Lord’s meaning more completely: “Severed from Me, separate from Me, you have no strength, and can do nothing. You are as lifeless as a branch cut off from the parent stem.”

We must always take care that we do not misapply and misinterpret this text. Nothing is more common than to hear some ignorant Christians quoting it partially, as an excuse for indolence, and neglect of means of grace. “You know we can do nothing,” is the cry of such people.—This is dragging out of the text a lesson it was never meant to teach. He that spoke these words to His eleven chosen Apostles, is the same Lord who said to all men who would be saved,—“Strive to enter in;”—“Labour for the meat which endureth to everlasting life;”—“Repent and believe.”

6.—[*If a man abide not...burned.*] The consequence of not abiding in Christ, of refusing to live the life of faith in Christ, are here described under a terrible figure. The end of such false professors will be like the end of fruitless and dead branches of a vine. Sooner or later they

are cast out of the vineyard as withered, useless things, and gathered as firewood to be burned. Such will be the last end of professing Christians who turn their backs on Jesus, and bear no fruit to God's glory. They will finally come to the fire that is never quenched in hell.

These are awful words. They seem, however, to apply specially to backsliders and apostates, like Judas Iscariot. There must be about a man some *appearance* of professed faith in Christ, before he can come to the state described here. Doubtless there are those who seem to depart from grace, and to go back from union with Christ; but we need not doubt in such cases that the grace was not real, but seeming, and the union was not true, but fictitious. Once more we must remember that we are reading a parable.

That there is a hell, and that God can punish, seems plainly taught in this verse.

It is noteworthy that the Greek would be more literally rendered, "He has been cast out," and "Has been withered," in the past tense. Alford thinks that this is because the whole is spoken as if the great day of judgment were come.—Also the word "men" is supplied in our translation. Literally it would be, "They gather," "They cast," without referring to any person in particular. This is a Hebraism which will be found in Matt. v. 15; Luke xvi. 9; Acts vii. 6.

After all, the final, miserable ruin and punishment of false professors, is the great lesson which the verse teaches. Abiding in Christ leads to fruitfulness in this life and everlasting happiness in the life to come. Departure from Christ leads to the everlasting fire of hell.