

John Lesson 17 Articles

It is important to remember that not everything in a parable must mean something. A parable teaches one main truth, and to try to make a parable “stand on all four legs” is often the first step toward misinterpretation. The main truth Christ is teaching in this parable is the importance of abiding in Him in order to bear fruit. The word “fruit” is used six times, and “abide” at least fifteen times (but it is not always translated “abide”). The main point of the teaching here is fellowship, not sonship.

To use v. 6 to teach that a Christian loses his salvation and is burned in hell if he fails to bear fruit is to twist the meaning of the parable. In the first place, such a teaching contradicts the plain teaching of other verses—John 6:27; 10:27–29; etc. Furthermore, note that the branch Christ speaks of in v. 6 withers after it is cast forth! If this branch pictures a backslidden Christian who loses his salvation, he should “wither” first, then fail to bear fruit, then be cast out. To abide in Christ does not mean to keep ourselves saved. It means to live in His Word and pray (v. 7), obey His commandments (v. 10), and keep our lives clean through His Word (vv. 3–4). The Christian who fails to abide in Christ becomes like a useless branch, like the salt that loses its taste and is good for nothing. First Corinthians 3:15 teaches that our works will be tested by fire. The Christian who fails to use the gifts and opportunities God gives him will lose them (Luke 8:18 and 2 John 8).¹

In post-Old Testament Jewish writings the identification of the vine with Israel continued, and Josephus reported that one of the significant items that adorned the Second Temple was a tall, golden cluster of grapes. This ornament in the Temple has been a traditional symbol of the land of Israel, which had its roots in the report of the spies who were sent to evaluate the land. Although they brought back a huge cluster of grapes that had to be carried on a pole between two men, the pleas of Joshua and Caleb could not convince the majority to take the land (cf. Deut 13:17–14:10).

The church in its humanity has generally had difficulty dealing with lack of productivity in disciples. The main reason is that it lacks the wisdom and purposiveness of God. But more importantly, *it is God who does the pruning and removal*. Yet the church does not usually wish removal to take place because of its attachment to numerical size and a worldly sense of what is important. In other words, the boundaries of the church have often become fuzzy today and almost nonexistent. That is not the case in some parts of the world, where it can be very costly to be a Christian—one’s life can be at stake. In those places the boundary lines are much clearer.

The question of the meaning of fruitful and unfruitful is also important. Today it is often understood primarily as how many “testimonies” can be made and how many commitment cards can be signed. For some who eschew evangelism it amounts to how consistent is one’s life in caring for others. But these alternatives would have been completely foreign to Jesus, who taught and healed and who forgave sins and fed the multitude. They would also have been an unreal dichotomy for John, who called readers to believe (20:30–31) and to love others as a mark of being intimately united with a genuinely loving God (1 John 4:7–8, 20–21).

Accordingly, the “true” Vine, who is pictured here as steadfast and authentic, expects his followers to be truly fruitful in communicating the authentic message and life to the inauthentic and hostile world.²

¹ Wiersbe, W. W. (1992). *Wiersbe’s expository outlines on the New Testament* (pp. 251–252). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

² Borchert, G. L. (2002). *John 12–21* (Vol. 25B, p. 139; pp). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.