

# THE VINE AND THE BRANCHES

*By*  
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There are many Christians, struggling to live the Christian life, who have never discovered where the strength to live that life is to be found. There are many earnest believers, young and old, who are continually being disappointed and cast down because they are finding their own resources so inadequate to meet the demands of real Christian living. There are hundreds of Christians of all ages who are hungering and thirsting after a fuller, deeper life than that which they now experience. What they need to know, and to know *experimentally* as well as mentally, is that *all the resources of the Christian life are in CHRIST, and in Him ALONE, and that He lives in them by the Holy Ghost*. Perhaps there is no better and no simpler illustration of these truths than the Lord's parable of the vine and the branches in **John 15**. We shall look together at some of the great lessons which this parable teaches, with the prayer that God will use these messages to bring great blessing into the lives of each of us.

## **I. A USELESS BRANCH**

"I am the Vine," said the Lord Jesus, "ye are the branches" (verse 5). Every true Christian is "in Christ," a branch in the vine, joined to the Lord, a partaker of His nature.

"I am the True Vine, and My Father is the Husbandman. Every branch in Me that beareth not fruit, He taketh away.... 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."

The first lesson we learn from this parable of the vine and the branches is that a branch is useless if it does not bear fruit. We need to be careful, when trying to understand the teaching of a parable such as this, not to press the details of the parable too far. There are those who teach that these words show that it is possible for a man to be "in Christ" and out again; to be saved and then lost; to have eternal life and then lose it. This cannot be. There are clear statements in Scripture to the contrary. We must remember that no

earthly parable can fully express all sides of eternal truth. Yet these words of the Lord Jesus are very very solemn words. Perhaps we shall more clearly understand the truth contained in them if we compare them with some words of St. Paul which teach similar truth. "Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire" (I Corinthians iii. 13-15). The apostle is writing about Christian service and he likens it to a building. It is possible he teaches, for a servant of Christ, whilst building on the One True Foundation (verse 11), to fail to put into his building such materials as can stand the test of fire with the result that one day all his life work will be burned up, proving that he has been utterly useless, and all his work completely wasted. This is what the Lord Jesus is teaching under the figure of the branch that does not bear fruit. A branch that does not bear fruit is a useless branch; its existence is a wasted existence; it is only fit for the fire.

How tremendously solemn this is. What a terrible, what a tragic thing it must be to be a Christian who is not bearing fruit! What a tragedy is the life of the careless Christian the lukewarm Christian, the sinning Christian, the idle Christian, the worldly Christian, the prayerless Christian! How very seriously concerned we all should be as to whether we are branches that are bearing fruit, or whether we are fruitless, useless branches.

### **WHICH ARE YOU?**

These words are certain to be read by many a fruitless Christian. Are you one of them? Do you know, as you read these words, that your Christian life has been a fruitless life? It is not necessary to explain to you what is meant by -"fruitless"; you simply know that you are not fulfilling the purpose for which God saved you, just as a branch that is not bearing fruit is not fulfilling the purpose for which it is in the vine. Probably you judge your condition by certain indications in your life some sin that has dominion over you, a failure to witness, a lack of prayer, a distaste for Bible Reading, no power in service, a love for worldly things. This may not be due to your carelessness or indifference. You may have made great efforts to become a fruitful Christian, to witness, to pray, to overcome sin. Yet you look back on failure. You know there has been no result. On the other hand, it may be that you have just not let "fruit-bearing" concern you very much. You are a Christian (you tell yourself), your sins are forgiven, you will go to heaven. That is the most important thing. You have not felt that these other things matter very much. Your life is fruitless because you have not been particularly concerned whether you bear fruit or not. But whether your life is fruitless because of your carelessness and indifference, or in spite of much deep concern, and longing, and striving, you know it is fruitless.

## THE TRAGEDY OF A FRUITLESS LIFE

Before we go any further with the study of this parable, will you read again those words of the Lord Jesus about the fruitless branch, and in His Presence think for a moment *of the tragedy of such a life*.

What a tragedy it is *in the sight of God*. What a disappointment and grief to the husbandman is the branch that bears no fruit, that completely fails to fulfill the purpose for which it is in the vine. What a grief to the heart of the Great Husbandman must your fruitless Christian life be, a continual frustration of the wonderful purposes of grace He had in mind when He placed you in Christ.

What a tragedy is such a life *as far as others are concerned*. There are weary, fainting, thirsty, bitter lives in this wilderness world of ours; these lives are coming into contact with yours every day. It is God's purpose that they should be refreshed and strengthened and sweetened by the fruit which you shall bear. And because you are a fruitless branch, these weary, thirsting, perishing ones have passed you by unrefreshed, unblessed. Oh, the tragedy of it! Little have you realized the harm you have been doing; the love and joy and peace of which others have been robbed because you have borne no fruit.

What a tragedy such a life is *from your own point of view*. It is a wasted life. A branch is only in the vine for one purpose, to bear fruit. If it fails to do that, its existence is wasted. As far as its usefulness is concerned, it might as well not be there. It is no use at all. Your fruitless life is a wasted, useless life. At the judgment seat of Christ you will suffer loss. All the produce of those wasted years will be burned up. What awful, solemn mystery surrounds those words of the apostle, "But he himself shall be saved, yet so as by fire".

This then is the first lesson we must learn from this parable, that if our life is a fruitless life it is a tragically wasted life, useless to God, useless to man, and an irreparable loss to ourselves. Oh, let us ask God to teach us how we may bear fruit to His satisfaction and glory, to the blessing of others, and to the full salvation of our own souls.

## II. "THE BRANCH CANNOT . . ."

Now we come to a second lesson of the utmost importance.

"As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine, no more can ye, except ye abide in Me . . . for without Me (or, severed from Me), ye can do nothing."

So we learn that *a branch cannot bear fruit by any effort of its own*. Severed

from the vine the branch can do nothing. That fact is so obvious that we are inclined to pass it by without further thought, and so miss the far-reaching implications of this part of the parable. Think of it for a moment. There is a branch, severed from the vine, lying before you on the ground. How utterly helpless it is to produce any fruit! If a branch could have feelings and understanding it might be deeply conscious of its uselessness, and the danger in which it lay of being cast upon the fire. It might be full of the deepest longings after a life of fruitfulness. It might make mighty resolutions to do all in its power to produce fruit. But it would be utterly powerless to make any move towards satisfying those longings, or carrying out those resolutions. That severed branch is a picture of the most complete helplessness.

"As the branch cannot . . . NO MORE can ye." Will you sit still a moment now, and let those two words "no more" sink deep into your heart? *You can do no more towards producing the fruit which God requires in your life than can that severed branch.* NO MORE. You may be deeply convicted of your useless, fruitless, Christian life. You may be stirred up to a great longing that things should be different you may have been planning and contriving and resolving in order that your life may be different in future. But you can do nothing. No stirring up, no effort, no determination, no strength of will, can make your life what God wants it to be. " As the branch cannot . . . no more can ye."

### **UTTER HELPLESSNESS**

Do not misunderstand this teaching of the Lord Jesus. Many Christians who think that they have received this truth have not even got a glimpse of the depth to which it goes. Unconsciously they are placing upon it limitations imposed by their own preconceived ideas of the possibilities that are in human nature. The Lord Jesus is not teaching that, because of your natural weakness, you need help to bring you up to a standard of life which you cannot reach yourself; that by your own goodness and strength and courage you can get so far, but not far enough to reach God's standard; that if you made an immense effort it would help a great deal, but because of your natural limitations that effort needs to be supplemented by His power. That a better, stronger, braver man than you are could get further than you can get. That is not what He is teaching at all. This statement goes far, far deeper than that.

Go back to the parable again and ask yourself the question, How much can a branch do toward producing fruit? Can a branch have some part in the production of the fruit? Is it conceivable that if we found a branch clever enough and strong enough it could produce fruit of itself? The answers are obvious. *The branch does not possess in itself even the smallest glimmerings of fruit-producing life.* The best branch is as helpless as the worst; the strongest as helpless as the weakest, the most beautiful as helpless as the

ugliest. The branch whatever its natural condition, cannot....

"No more" can you. It is not a question of whether you are strong or weak; good or bad, brave or cowardly; clever or foolish; experienced or inexperienced. Whatever your natural condition you are absolutely helpless to begin to live the life God requires. Whatever your gifts, accomplishments virtues, experience may be, they are of no more help to you in producing fruit than is natural beauty in a branch. In you (that is, in your flesh) dwells no good thing, not the first faint flickerings of the life that produces fruit.

Hundreds of Christians never find that out. They spend their lives fighting against the admission of it. They know they come short, but they think it is not so short but that a greater effort, backed up by the Holy Spirit's power, will put them right. And so they ask His help, and try again.

### **AN " UP AND DOWN " EXPERIENCE**

What is the result? The result is what is sometimes called an "up and down" Christian experience. When they appear to be advancing in the Christian life; when they receive indications that God is blessing their service; when they get some definite, unmistakable answer to prayer; when they overcome some temptation; when they discover within themselves some thought of holiness, some virtue, some desire for the things of God, then they are "up". On the other hand, when they are conscious of failure and lack of progress; when they see no blessing in their work; when prayer is apparently unanswered; when sin gets the better of them; when they get some glimpse of the corrupt, sinful state of their natural hearts, then they are "down." They are "up" when they appear to be producing fruit, and "down" when they can see no fruit; ever battling against the admission of the truth that "as the branch cannot . . . no more can" they. They know nothing of the rest which remains for the people of God, and which can only be entered by ceasing from their works. Their life is one continual effort to produce fruit for God's glory, to prove to themselves and to God that the branch can, after all, do a little to help itself.

There are many earnest Christians who have lived like this for years, and have become more and more disappointed with their Christian experience. There are many young Christians, who, having begun well, have gradually slipped back, as they have proved by bitter experience how utterly unable they are to reach the standard which God requires. Are you like that? You know your life is fruitless, but it is not because you do not care. You are tremendously concerned that your life should bear fruit; you have tried your hardest to be the best for God, and you have failed. "It is no good," you say, "I cannot be a keen Christian." Is that what you say? Is it? Do you see what you are admitting? You are admitting the very thing that God has been asking you to admit! The Lord Jesus said, "As the branch cannot . . . *no more* can ye," and you didn't believe it; so He has been letting you find it out by

experience. And now, at last, you say, "It's no good. I cannot..." You are admitting at last what He has been trying to tell you all along. *You have come to the place where He can begin to do His work in you.*

Troubled Christian, lately you have said often, almost in despair, "I cannot." It is true; yet if you could but see, that is no reason for despair, but rather for joyful expectancy that your barren days are past, for now God is going to show you what HE is waiting to do in those who "cannot," and who admit it. You cannot. Consent fully to that position of complete powerlessness. Do not be afraid to let go every hope of being able to make the smallest contribution towards the production of real fruit. Turn your back on self, and refuse to expect any good thing from it any more. And now listen as He tells you of the Life which is going to do through the branch what the branch can never do by any effort of its own.

### III. "I IN YOU"

"I am the vine, ye are the branches: he that abideth in Me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit." "Abide in Me, and I in you."

We have thought of the tragedy of the fruitless branch, and seen how impossible it is for a branch to produce fruit by any effort of its own. Now the vine and the branches have another lesson to teach us a lesson which only those are prepared to learn who have in some degree mastered the former lessons.

If God expects me to bear fruit in my Christian life, and if I cannot produce that fruit by any effort of my own, how then does He intend that fruit to be produced? We have the answer in this parable. *The fruit is produced by the life of the vine in the branch.* God intends that the fruit in my life should be produced by the Life of the Lord Jesus living in me. "I live," said the Apostle Paul, "yet not I, but Christ liveth in me" (Gal. 2. 20). "Not I," not by any strength or goodness of my own, no more than there is any life in the branch because of anything the branch has done, "but Christ liveth in me," His life is working in me the things which are pleasing to God, just as the life of the vine works in the branch to bring forth fruit.

This is God's plan for every Christian that the Lord Jesus, Who lives in us by His Holy Spirit, should work in us all things that are pleasing to God, bringing forth fruit in us to God's glory. When you have seen that, you have seen the greatest secret of the life, which God wants you to live. The Holy Spirit dwells in every Christian, and His purpose is to do all the work that God requires, all the work, which is necessary for the production of the fruit for which God is looking. Only those who have learned the lesson of the utter helplessness of the branch can fully appreciate this wonderful truth. Just in so far as you have grasped the great fact that you are utterly helpless even to begin to live

a life which is well-pleasing to God will you understand the meaning of this, that God has given you the Holy Spirit to do ALL the work. His plan is not that the Holy Spirit should help you to bring forth fruit, any more than the vine helps the branch. It is not even that the Holy Spirit should work, and that you should help Him all you can. The branch cannot help the vine in any way. No. Christ must do ALL in you, even as the vine must do ALL in the branch.

### **WHAT CAN YOU DO?**

Let me emphasize that, for it is a truth that we are so slow to learn. How much does the vine life do towards producing the fruit? Everything. How much does the branch do to help? Nothing. How much must the life of the Holy Spirit do in you? Everything. How much must you do to help? Nothing. Just as Christ in His death and resurrection did everything for your justification, and you did nothing, but simply accepted the benefits of a work finished nineteen centuries before you were born so Christ in you must do everything for your sanctification, and you must do nothing, but simply accept the benefits of a work which He will complete as surely as He has begun it.

"But," you ask, "must I not do anything?" No, nothing. "Oh, but now you are going too far. You can't carry things to that length. Of course I must do something. Mustn't I read my Bible and pray; mustn't I witness for Christ; mustn't I surrender everything to Him; mustn't I do good works whenever I get the opportunity?" Do you know what you are like? You are like a branch saying, "It's no good you telling me that I mustn't do anything in order to produce fruit. That's going too far. Of course I must do something. Mustn't I produce fruit?" I should say to that branch, "Yes, of course you must produce fruit, but you'll never produce fruit by trying to. It is not the fruit you need to be concerned about, but the *life*. If once you have got *that*, the fruit will come all right." And so I reply to you, "Yes, of course you must read your Bible and pray and witness and do good works; of course you must surrender completely to Christ, but don't you see, all these things are part of the *fruit*. You cannot do them by trying to do them; you can only imitate them; you can only be like a branch tying on artificial fruit, because it does not understand that real fruit must be the result of the vine life within." Leave the fruit for the moment. Apart from Him you can do NOTHING; and prayer and witness and surrender are all included in that "nothing." Every single bit of fruit has to be the result of the life of Christ in you. It is the Life you need to be concerned about; if you have got *that*, the fruit will surely follow.

## HIS PERFECT WORK

So leave the fruit just now. Forget, just for the moment, about the need for Bible reading, prayer, witness, and all the other things, and concentrate your thought on the Life which must be the source of all these things. That Life is Christ in you. He lives in you by the Holy Spirit. He waits and longs to do His perfect work in you. He cannot do it while you try to do it for Him. Is that what has been wrong with your Christian life-you have been trying to do His work for Him? You have read the Bible and tried to understand its meaning. You have succeeded in getting quite a lot of it into your head, and perhaps can give very nice addresses from it, but it does not live to you. You have tried to pray, but it has been a burden, and you know little of real fellowship with God. You have witnessed but there has been little power. You have tried to surrender everything to God, but more and more you are finding that your sinful heart does not want His will. *You are trying to do His work for Him;* that is your trouble. You have taken upon yourself the responsibility of a work for which He wants you to cast the responsibility on Him. It is His work to make His Word live to you, to open the eyes of your understanding to behold wondrous things out of His law. It is His work to witness with your spirit that you are a child of God, till prayer becomes to you the glad fellowship of a child with an infinitely loving Father. It is His work to give you power for service, filling you with Himself, and making perfect His strength in your weakness, so that, as you lean on His strength, things happen as a result of your witness that are worthy of His power. It is His work to bring you to that complete surrender which He requires, shining the light of His Presence upon the things displeasing to Him, filling you with His love till you see that it is best for Him to have His way with you. This is all His work. You cannot do it for Him. You cannot in any way prepare yourself for His working. You must stop your futile efforts and look for Him. He is in you, God's full provision for all you need. He waits to do His work, if you will let Him. He will work so surely, so wonderfully, if you will give up your feeble trying and cast yourself on Him. He will perfect the work which you cannot even begin. Will you not look to Him now, tell Him that you are not going to interfere with His working any more, and ask Him to complete in you the work which He has begun?

*"Work on then Lord, till on my soul  
Eternal light shall break,  
And in Thy likeness perfected,  
I satisfied shall wake."*

## IV. "ABIDE IN ME"

We come now to a critical point in our studies of the Parable of the Vine. We have seen how necessary it is that we should bear fruit to the glory of God;



we have seen that we cannot bear this fruit by any effort of our own; and we have seen that God's way is for the fruit to be produced by the Life of Christ in us. The questions that naturally come to our lips at this point are: But how is all this to become real in my experience? How can I enter from a life of fruitlessness and failure into this life in which Christ, by His Holy Spirit, is working in me? How can my nothingness be connected with His fullness? How is this wonderful prospect, of having the Holy Ghost working in me, making Christ real, making the Bible a new and living Book, making service fruitful and prayer a joy-how is it to change from a wonderful prospect to a personal reality? What must I do in order that all this may be real in my life?

### **A VERY SIMPLE STEP**

Before we look at the answer, which the Lord Jesus gives to these and similar questions, let me emphasize one thing. The step from a life of striving and struggling and emptiness, of failure and feebleness, into a life of fullness and power and satisfaction, is a *very, very simple one*. I want to lay great stress on that point. It is very important. Will you accept it and believe it before we go any farther? You can begin to enjoy all the blessings we have been thinking of *by a very simple step*.

*"Oh, how unlike the complex works of man,  
Heaven's easy, artless, unencumber'd plan."*

Satan will try to make you think it is complicated. He will tell you of all sorts of things that you ought to be and do. Do not listen to him. Leave alone, for the moment, all the things that you ought to be and do. As we have already seen, they are the fruit. "I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtlety, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ" (II Cor. 11:3). The way to this life of fullness is very simple indeed.

Now listen to the words of the Lord Jesus:

"Abide in Me, and I in you. He that abideth in Me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit" (John 15:4, 5).

Here, then, is the simple lesson that we have to learn now. We can put it like this. *All that the branch has to do is to remain in the vine, and so the life of the vine will remain in the branch.*

"Abide in me and I in you." "Abide" simply means "remain." The branch is in the vine. In order to have life flowing through, it has to remain there, that is all.

When you received the Lord Jesus, God forgave your sins and placed you in Christ. In order that His life may flow through, *you have only to remain*

*where you have been placed.*

"Yes," you say, "but what exactly does that mean?"

Let me answer with another question. *What did you do in order to have your sins forgiven, and to be placed in Christ?* Think back to the time of your conversion. You heard that the Lord Jesus had died that you might be forgiven. And you just trusted Him to save you because He had died. Very simple, wasn't it? Forgiveness was there for you all the time. It became yours when you took it. That taking is called FAITH. Then *God placed you in Him.* So all you did in order to be placed in Christ was simply to trust in Him.

### **HOW TO "ABIDE"**

Now, how are you to remain, to "abide" in Him? In exactly the same way as you were placed in Him. Listen while He tells you that you are a branch in Him, the True Vine. And then *just simply trust Him that His life is flowing through you.*

So many people make the mistake of thinking that they got placed in Christ by trusting, and that after that they must bear fruit by trying. No. You remain in Christ in the same simple way that you were placed in Him. BY FAITH.

Faith is hearing God's word and acting on it. That is how you abide in Christ. You hear His word that you are a branch. Then you take Him at His word. You say, "Lord, if I am a branch and in Thee, I thank Thee for it. I thank Thee, that just now I am in Thee, and Thy life flowing through. So I shall no more bother and try and struggle to be a Christian, but live my ordinary life counting that Thou art living through me."

### **TAKING YOUR POSITION**

You see, it is just a matter of *taking a position that is already yours.* So many Christians will not take the glorious position, which is theirs in Christ, and so they miss all the blessing. It is as if a very rich man owning a great mansion and a vast estate became possessed with the idea that he was poor, and shut himself up in a small attic at the top of his mansion, and wished all day that he was rich. He dressed in the shabbiest clothes, and ate the scantiest fare, and sat on the floor because he thought he could not afford a chair, and made baskets in order to earn a living. And all day long he wondered how he could get enough money to buy a big mansion and own a vast estate. There

he would be, living in a little, cramped room with scarcely enough food to eat, and dressed almost in rags, existing like a pauper. Why? Simply because he had a position which he would not take.

But it would be a very simple thing for him to change his method of living. He would need first to have his eyes opened to the fact that he was actually living in a great mansion and that it was all his. Once he had seen that, it would be the simplest thing to change his whole life. He would only have to act on the knowledge that he had. He need not even leave the room to begin with; he need not change his ragged clothes. There and then, sitting on the floor of that attic in all his apparent poverty, he could take the step that would be the entry into a new life. He need only say, "Why, I see it now. I have all that I have been wanting. All that I have most desired is mine. From now on I will live as if I had it, and be a fool no longer."

The devil has filled the minds of many Christians with the delusion that they are poor, and in their poverty they must work and grind and toil in order to buy the blessings which are already theirs in Christ. Perhaps he has deluded you in that way, and now you are just beginning to see that *all that you need you have in Christ*. That is the fact. There is no need of yours which is not fully met in Him. You cannot name a need which He does not fill. All you need you have-now-in Him. And you are in Him. *You only need to take the position which is already yours.*

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