

# John 15: The Dilemma of an Old Covenant Jew

by Michael W. Adams

<sup>1</sup>I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>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. <sup>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup>If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. <sup>8</sup>This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. (*John 15:1-8 NIV*)

## **The Traditional Approach to John 15**

Much has been written about John chapter 15:1-8 and the allegory of the vine and the branches. For the most part, the interpretation of this text has been confined to the responsibility laid upon the Christian to bear fruit. It is correctly reasoned that the fruit of this allegory is the result of a saving relationship with Jesus Christ that produces evidence in the form of a faithful and obedient Christian life. Merrill C. Tenney makes this point by saying; "*Fruitfulness appears in obedience, which is a sure mark of the believer as disobedience is a mark of the unbeliever.*"<sup>1</sup> A. W. Pink echoes the same sentiment when he says; "*Here we learn what we are to do for Him during His absence. In 13 and 14 it is the freeness and fullness of Divine grace; in 15 it is our responsibility to bear fruit... The central theme then is not salvation, how it is to be obtained or the danger of losing it. Instead, the great theme here is fruit-bearing, and the conditions of fertility.*"<sup>2</sup>

It is true that the bearing of fruit is the mark of a believer and every believer gives evidence of the new birth (*Romans 8:12-17; Galatians 5:22-23*). While all of the above is true, the question we must ask is, "Is that what was intended in the allegory, or are we stopping short in our interpretation and in so doing, missing its main point?" If we view the primary focus of the allegory as Christian fruit bearing apart from any consideration of its historical context, two questions raised in the text become difficult, if not impossible to answer. First, how can a branch that is "in" Jesus Christ (assumed to be any Christian in the traditional approach) be without fruit (*vs. 2*)? The allegory itself won't allow this to be a believer who is temporarily caught in sin, because the fruitless branch is burned, which is a reference to condemnation (*vs. 2, 6*), and there is no condemnation for those in Christ (*Romans 8:28-30*).

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<sup>1</sup> Merrill C. Tenney, *John: The Gospel of Belief* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), 228.

<sup>2</sup> Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John, Volume 2* (Grand Rapids, MI: The Zondervan Corporation, 1975), 393.

## **The Historical Context of John 15**

The allegory of John 15 takes us in a different direction. When considered in its historical context, the primary focus of the allegory isn't a broad, general statement that a Christian bears fruit. The discussion in John 15 is limited in its scope and its historic setting and immediate audience must be considered. The allegory of the vine and the branches is a dialogue with Old Covenant Jews about Old Covenant Jews. The primary focus of the allegory is that an Old Covenant Jew must give evidence (bear fruit) of his or her profession in light of the New Covenant revelation of Jesus Christ. The language of the allegory is not unique, nor did it first originate in John 15. John the Baptist employed very similar language more than three years earlier as he prepared the Jews for the arrival of the Messiah. Matthew's account reads:

<sup>7</sup>But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? <sup>8</sup>Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. <sup>9</sup>And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. <sup>10</sup>The ax is already at the root of the trees, and *every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.* <sup>11</sup>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. <sup>12</sup>His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire." (*Matthew 3:7-12, Emphasis Added*)

The parallels between Matthew 3:10 and John 15:2 are striking. Both passages speak of imminent judgment that is limited in its extent to Old Covenant Israelites. Nothing in either passage is stated or implied that would cause us to look beyond Israel for our interpretation. In light of the coming of Christ – the pinnacle of redemptive history – an Old Covenant Jew faced a huge dilemma. He could no longer take safe refuge in his ethnic descent as part of the Old Covenant people of God.<sup>3</sup> Because of the coming of Jesus Christ in redemptive history, judgment and condemnation awaited every Old Covenant unbelieving Jew (*John 14:6*). The Jews could no longer claim, "We have Abraham as our father" (*Romans 3:21-26*), taking what they thought to be safe refuge in their ethnic heritage. The true people of God, the church, (*1 Peter 2:9-10*) transcend ethnic race (*Revelation 5:9*). The people meeting that qualification (the church) are comprised of both Jew and Gentile. We can use Paul's argument in Romans 9 to state it another way: "*For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel*" (*Romans 9:6ff*).

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<sup>3</sup> Israelites never could take safe refuge in their ethnic heritage to provide them acceptance with God. Being an Israelite did guarantee participation in the physical people of God in the Old Covenant era, but the difference is that in the Old Covenant era you could be included in God's people, the nation of Israel, and still be under His wrath and condemnation. That's the point in Matthew 3:7-12. The truth that ethnicity does not automatically imply saving faith is a major emphasis in the New Testament in light of the coming of Christ. John 8:31-59 is one of many examples of this emphasis.

Pink's earlier statement, "*The central theme then is not salvation*",<sup>4</sup> needs to be reexamined. I believe salvation is the central issue of John 15. Specifically, the salvation of an Old Covenant Jew: "*The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.*" The remainder of this paper will concentrate on what I believe to be the primary focus of John 15:1-8: the dilemma facing an Old Covenant Jew in becoming a part of the true people of God in light of the coming of Christ.

## ***The Old Testament Background of John 15***

"*I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener.*" Verse 1 identifies the main characters in the allegory. Jesus identifies Himself as the "true vine," while the Father is the "gardener." This is partially restated in verse 5, with the additional identification of the "branches": "*I am the vine; you are the branches...*" Understanding the Old Covenant background to John 15 is essential in interpreting the allegory. John 15 is immersed in Old Covenant imagery. Because it is, it would quickly draw the disciple's attention to Old Covenant Israel since up until this time, Israel alone is called God's vine or vineyard. A few examples will help us see this. The Psalmist makes clear reference to the Exodus under Moses when he writes: "You brought a *vine* out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it, and it took root and filled the land. The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches." (*Psalms 80:8-10, Emphasis Added*). The prophet Isaiah uses vine/vineyard imagery in his description of God's faithful care for Old Covenant Israel:

<sup>1</sup>I will sing for the one I love a song about his *vineyard*: My loved one had a *vineyard on a fertile hillside*. <sup>2</sup>He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest *vines*. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well. Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, *but it yielded only bad fruit*. <sup>3</sup>Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and *my vineyard*. <sup>4</sup>What more could have been done for *my vineyard* than I have done for it? *When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad?* <sup>5</sup>Now I will tell you what I am going to do to *my vineyard*: I will take away its hedge, and it will be destroyed; I will break down its wall, and it will be trampled. <sup>6</sup>I will make it a wasteland, neither pruned nor cultivated, and briers and thorns will grow there. I will command the clouds not to rain on it. <sup>7</sup>*The vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are the garden of his delight*. And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress (*Isaiah 5:1-7, Emphasis Added*).

Concerning the desolation of Israel that would accompany the Babylonian captivity, Jeremiah writes: "Many shepherds will ruin *my vineyard* and trample down my field; they will turn my pleasant field into a desolate wasteland. It will be made a wasteland, parched and desolate before me; the whole land will be laid waste because there is no one who cares." (*Jeremiah 12:10-11, Emphasis Added*). Earlier, Jeremiah

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<sup>4</sup> Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John*, Volume 2, 393

noted, “I had planted you like a *choice vine* of sound and reliable stock. *How then did you turn against me into a corrupt, wild vine?*” (*Jeremiah 2:21, Emphasis Added*) Ezekiel also refers to Israel’s desolation in Babylon with these words:

<sup>10</sup>Your mother was *like a vine* in your vineyard planted by the water; it was fruitful and full of branches because of abundant water. <sup>11</sup>Its branches were strong, fit for a ruler's scepter. It towered high above the thick foliage, conspicuous for its height and for its many branches. <sup>12</sup>But it was uprooted in fury and thrown to the ground. The east wind made it shrivel, it was stripped of its fruit; its strong branches withered and fire consumed them. <sup>13</sup>Now it is planted in the desert, in a dry and thirsty land. <sup>14</sup>*Fire spread from one of its main branches and consumed its fruit.* No strong branch is left on it fit for a ruler's scepter. (*Ezekiel 19:10-14, Emphasis Added*)

Hosea adds: “*Israel was a spreading vine*; he brought forth fruit for himself. As his fruit increased, he built more altars; as his land prospered, he adorned his sacred stones.” (*Hosea 10:1, Emphasis Added*).

### ***The Vine: Picture and Fulfillment***

While an analogy of the vine and vineyard would be quickly recognized by the disciples as a reference to Israel, the way in which it is stated here is new revelation. Jesus Christ is the *true vine* and Israel was only a temporary picture of the vine. Additionally, a common thread in the Old Covenant references to the vine of Israel is Israel’s constant failure to produce acceptable fruit of any kind. As a temporary picture of the vine, Israel was a barren, fruitless vine. D.A. Carson notes:

In the Old Testament the vine is a common symbol for Israel, the covenant people of God...Most remarkable is the fact that whenever historic Israel is referred to under this figure it is the vine’s failure to produce good fruit that is emphasized, along with the corresponding threat of God’s judgment on the nation. Now, in contrast to such failure, Jesus claims, ‘I am the true vine’, i.e. the one to whom Israel pointed, the one that brings forth good fruit.<sup>5</sup>

With the words, “*I am the true vine*,” Jesus both sets aside and fulfills that which preceded Him. The Old Covenant picture of Israel as God’s vine or vineyard has rightfully yielded to its New Covenant fulfillment where Jesus Christ alone is the true vine. Carson continues:

The true vine, then, is not the apostate people, but Jesus Himself and those who are incorporated in Him. The theme would prove especially telling to

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<sup>5</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 513.

diaspora Jews: *if they wish to enjoy the status of being part of God's chosen vine, they must be rightly related to Jesus.*<sup>6</sup> (Emphasis mine)

The New Covenant fulfillment replaces the Old Covenant picture. Carson notes this “replacement motif” in John when he says,

Two factors decisively decide the issue in favor of an Old Testament background: (a) the frequency of John's appeals to the Old Testament, both in allusions and in quotations; (b) the dominance in the Fourth Gospel of the ‘replacement’ motif, for that motif strongly operates in this passage.<sup>7</sup>

Verse 1 comes to us, then, in the larger context of an Old Covenant picture/fulfillment theme evident throughout John's gospel. On several occasions, Jesus is portrayed by John as fulfilling something that was only presented in picture form in the Old Testament or Old Covenant. In other words, Jesus replaces something that could only be promised or pictured prior to His arrival. Jesus is the true vine in the same way that He is the true manna that came down from heaven (*John 6:30-66*), the good shepherd who gives His life for the sheep (*Jeremiah 12:10; John 10:11-18*), and the true light of the world (*John 8:12-17*). What was pictured in the Old Covenant is fulfilled by Jesus Christ in the New. Jesus is the true vine and Israel was a temporary physical picture. (*Romans 16:25-27*)

### ***Two Different Branches: Two Different People***

This has implications that we must address as we look at verses 2 and 3. If Jesus is the true vine, then He has always been the true vine. Just as there could not have been a time when Jesus was not the good shepherd, not the true manna that would descend from heaven, or not the light of the world, there could not have been a time when Jesus was not the true vine. The historical progression of God's revelation of Himself in no way implies that these things weren't true prior to that revelation. Jesus' rightful place as the true vine wasn't historically revealed until John 15, but that does not mean that He wasn't the true vine prior to that moment. It simply means that prior to His coming, such information remained veiled or hidden (*1 Corinthians 2:7-10*). The true vine could not be acknowledged as the true vine until He revealed Himself. This was new information for the disciples to grasp, but not a new role that began for Jesus in John 15. If He was ever the true vine, He has always been the true vine (*1 Corinthians 10:4*). Israel's role was that of a temporary, physical picture until the age of fulfillment arrived.

Verses two and three continue, “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.” The Father's task in the allegory is that of cutting off fruitless branches. The destination of these branches is judgment and hell, “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

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<sup>6</sup> Carson, *The Gospel of John*, 514

<sup>7</sup> Carson, *The Gospel of John*, 513

burned.” (vs. 6) If we interpret the allegory to refer to a broad category of fruitless believers in the church today, we face the problem that I raised earlier: these branches experience God’s judgment and condemnation, not His grace. Pink attempts to overcome this obstacle by claiming:

Now there are three things which cause the branches of the natural vine to become fruitless: either through running to leaf, or through disease, or through old age, when they wither and die. The same holds good in the spiritual application. In 2 Peter 1:8, we read: “For if these things be in you and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The inescapable inference from this is that, if the “these things” (mentioned in 2 Peter 1:5-7) do not abound in us, we shall be “barren and unfruitful” . . . In such a case we bring forth nothing but leaves – the works of the flesh. *Unspeakably solemn is this: one who has been bought at such infinite cost, saved by such wondrous grace, may yet, in this world, fall into a barren and unprofitable state, and thus fail to glorify God.*<sup>8</sup> (*Emphasis Added*)

One problem with Pink’s interpretation is that there is no biblical category for a “barren and unprofitable” recipient of saving grace. The fuller context of the passage cited by Pink reveals that it is a warning against apostasy – falling away from the faith. Verses 9-11 continue,

For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins. Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to make your calling and election sure, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. (*2 Peter 1:9-11, ESV*)

The footnotes from the ESV Study Bible on 2 Peter 1:10 give us a helpful description of meaning of Peter’s words,

Christians should be diligent to make their calling and election (Gk. eklogē) sure (Gk. bebaios, “reliable, unshifting, firm”). God calls believers to faith through the gospel (2 Thess. 2:14), but he has also chosen (elected) them “before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4). But God’s grace in salvation should not be taken for granted. Growing in the Christlike virtues mentioned in 2 Pet. 1:5–7 will give believers increasing confidence that God really did call them and really did elect them to salvation before the foundation of the world. Thus their election becomes “sure,” as a sure foundation. Those who practice these qualities . . . will never fall, probably meaning apostasy (falling away from the faith). Good works are evidence of and give assurance of salvation, though they are never the basis for it. Peter’s wording does not imply that true followers of

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<sup>8</sup> Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John*, Volume 2, 399

Christ can ever apostatize; those who do so were never really “called,” “elected,” or born again (cf. notes on John 6:39; 6:40; 10:26–29; 1 Thess. 1:4; Heb. 6:4–8). (*ESV Study Bible, Notes on 2 Peter 1:10*)

In the context of 2 Peter 1, the “barren and unprofitable” are those who apostatize or abandon the faith. Such people can operate for a time with false assurance of salvation (*Matthew 7:21–23*) but their lack of perseverance in the faith is an indication of unbelief and evidence that they were never really called in the first place.

Another problem with both Pink’s view and the traditional view is that both the fruitful and the unfruitful branches are assumed to be the same group of people. The reason they are interpreted to be the same group of people is because all of the branches, without exception, are “in” Jesus. It is reasoned that since all of these branches are “in” Jesus, they all fall into a broad definition of being Christians. As Pink has illustrated, the conclusion that is drawn is that there must be a category for both a fruitless and a fruitful believer. The traditional view, represented by Pink, would have us believe that such a category exists. But there is a major difficulty for those who hold to this interpretation: If all of the branches without exception are true believers, how can the final destination of any of them be the condemnation of verse 6? We must immediately rule out any interpretation that would tell us the fruitless branches of the allegory are believers, because there is no condemnation for all those who truly believe (*Romans 8:1ff*). This forces us to conclude that the fruitless branches have to represent unbelievers. William Hendriksen agrees: “In no sense whatever do such passages as 15:2 and 15:6 suggest that there is a falling away from grace, as if those who were once actually saved finally perish. This allegory plainly teaches that the branches which are taken away and burned represent people who never once bore fruit, not even when they were ‘in’ Christ.”<sup>9</sup>

Hendriksen is correct. If we interpret the allegory in the way it was intended, we find a biblical category for someone who is “in” Christ, and yet unbelieving. The only person who can fit such a category is an Old Covenant unbelieving Jew. In light of this, I believe the branches in the allegory have to represent two distinct groups: those bearing fruit represent believing Jews under the Old Covenant. Likewise, the fruitless branches of the allegory represent unbelieving Jews under the Old Covenant. Both groups are faced with the reality of the Old Covenant coming to its historical end. No longer can the Old Covenant unbelieving Jew say, “*We have Abraham as our father*” because in this age of fulfillment, the true people of God know Jesus Christ, the true vine, by name. In the traditional view, this interpretation is impossible, but it is the best fit for both the historical context of the allegory and Scripture as a whole. An Old Covenant unbelieving Jew is the only biblical example of a person who can be “in” Jesus within the context of John 15, and still not believe. Let me explain.

### ***Unbelievers “in the Vine?”***

The question, “How can an unbelieving Jew be ‘in’ Jesus?” is best answered by looking at both Israel’s reliance upon the Old Covenant Scriptures and Jesus’ fulfillment

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<sup>9</sup> William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of John* (Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI), 296

of those same Scriptures. The Jew's reliance upon their Old Covenant relationship with God had become their profession of faith. An Old Covenant Jew trusted in his association with Moses (*1 Corinthians 10:1-5*). The Jew's reliance upon their Old Covenant relationship with God had become their profession of faith, but the Old Covenant anticipated Jesus Christ, its fulfillment, which Israel missed. The Jews of the Old Covenant trusted in the Law of Moses to save them and they thought they were safe. Their profession was in Moses and the Old Testament Scriptures, yet Jesus pressed their claim and revealed their false profession earlier in John by saying:

<sup>37</sup>And the Father who sent me has himself testified concerning me. You have never heard his voice nor seen his form, <sup>38</sup>nor does his word dwell in you, for you do not believe the one he sent. <sup>39</sup>You diligently study the Scriptures *because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me,* <sup>40</sup>yet you refuse to come to me to have life. (*John 5:37-40*)

He then adds:

<sup>45</sup>But do not think I will accuse you before the Father. Your accuser is Moses, on whom your hopes are set. <sup>46</sup>*If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me.* <sup>47</sup>But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say? (*John 5:45-47, Emphasis Added*)

The Jew's profession of faith in Moses and the Scriptures was ultimately a profession of faith in Jesus Christ because both Moses and all of the Old Testament pointed to Jesus. They did not believe Jesus Christ, which was evidence that they never really believed Moses. Their profession of faith was false because this age of fulfillment has revealed that their identification with Moses was really identification with Jesus Christ, the One Moses wrote about, and yet they did not believe in Jesus Christ. They were holding to a false profession and stood condemned! But that false profession is only brought to light with the coming of Jesus, the true vine. Then and only then, is their false profession of being "in the vine" brought to light because apart from saving faith, they are only in the picture of the vine, Israel, not the true vine, Jesus. The same truth applies in the way the Jews relied on their physical heritage in Abraham in John chapter 8:

<sup>39</sup>"Abraham is our father," they answered. *"If you were Abraham's children," said Jesus, "then you would do the things Abraham did.* <sup>40</sup>As it is, you are determined to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did not do such things. <sup>41</sup>*You are doing the things your own father does.*" "We are not illegitimate children," they protested. "The only Father we have is God himself." <sup>42</sup>Jesus said to them, *"If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now am here. I have not come on my own; but he sent me.* <sup>43</sup>Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say.

<sup>44</sup>*You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.” (John 8:39-44, Emphasis Added)*

The Jew's claim to be “in” Moses or of having Abraham as their “father” was really a claim of being “in” Jesus Christ, to whom all these things pointed (*Galatians 3:29*). In the same way, their profession of being “in” the vine of Israel was ultimately a false profession of being “in” Jesus Christ, the true vine, made clear by his coming into the world. Theirs was a false profession made evident by the fullness of God's revelation in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the true vine. He always has been, but it took His incarnation to fully reveal it. Any profession on the part of the Jews of trusting in the Law of Moses or identifying with the Old Covenant people of God, apart from a saving faith, is a false profession because they were trusting in the picture. William Hendriksen agrees:

That this relation of having been in the vine (or, by dropping the metaphor, in Christ) does not have to refer to the spiritual, saving union with Christ is easy to see...Not all of those who were baptized into Moses were saved (1 Cor. 10:1-5).<sup>10</sup>

What was a picture under the Old Covenant has now given way historically to its fulfillment in the New. In the process, Israel's false professions are brought to light because to trust in the picture and not the fulfillment, is to remain fruitless and experience ultimate condemnation (*vs. 6*). Every Old Covenant Jew identified with, or was “in” the vine of Israel by birth. Ultimately, that identification was with Jesus Christ because He is, and always has been, the true vine and all who profess to be “in” Him, but give no evidence of experiencing saving grace, are destroyed. The fruitless branches of the allegory are Old Covenant unbelieving Jews, and Jesus is revealing their false profession of faith, now that he has come.

### ***The Meaning of “Clean”***

The remainder of verses 2 and 3 read, “...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.” The word translated “prunes” in verse 2 is repeated by a similar word in verse 3 where it is translated “clean.” The word John used in verse 3, translated “clean,” is the same word used in Matthew 5:8 when Jesus said, “blessed are the *pure* of heart” (*Emphasis added*). According to the *Expositor's Greek Testament*, it can have the implied meaning, “free from inward stain.”<sup>11</sup> There is good reason to interpret the cleansing of verse 3 as a reference to the salvation of the eleven, instead of spiritual growth or maturity. This cleansing is a reference to their conversion and the role of God's word in justification. Hendriksen notes, “By faith in the word of Christ, the eleven

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<sup>10</sup> Hendriksen, *The Gospel of John*, 295

<sup>11</sup> W. Robertson Nicoll, ed., *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, Volume One, (WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI), 829.

had become clean, that is, had been justified. This grace they had received already.”<sup>12</sup>  
D.A. Carson adds,

The cleansing power of the word Jesus has spoken to his disciples, then, is equivalent to the life of the vine pulsating through the branches. Jesus’ word (logos) is not assigned magical power. What is meant, rather, is that Jesus’ ‘teaching’ (as logos is rendered in 14:23), in its entirety, including what he is and what he does (since he himself is the logos incarnate, 1:1, 14), has already taken hold in the life of these followers.<sup>13</sup>

We find similar wording about Christ’s cleansing of the church from sin in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians:

<sup>25</sup>Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her <sup>26</sup>to make her holy, *cleansing her by the washing with water through the word,* <sup>27</sup>and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless (*Ephesians 5:25-27, Emphasis Added*).

Paul made a similar statement to Titus:

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, 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,* whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life (*Titus 3:4-7, Emphasis Added*).

In both of these passages the cleansing and washing refers to the salvation that Christ gives to His people, cleansing them from their sins. It is this cleansing that is in view in John 15:3. It is salvation – some of the branches believe and some do not. Those that do not are cut off and burned – a picture of judgment, while those who believe experience cleansing from sin

### ***Judas Iscariot: A Severed Branch***

We see warning of John 15 clearly demonstrated in John 13. In John 13 the disciples witnessed firsthand the very thing taught in the allegory of John 15; they had seen an unfruitful branch in the person of Judas Iscariot, cut off from the true vine. In Judas, they had seen for themselves the false profession of one of their own countrymen and in many ways, the allegory of John 15 is a commentary on that event. It is while Judas was still with Jesus and the eleven that Jesus tells them all,

<sup>10</sup>“A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean. *And you are clean, though not every one of you.*” <sup>11</sup>For he

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<sup>12</sup> Hendriksen, *The Gospel of John*, 299

<sup>13</sup> Carson, *The Gospel of John*, 515, 516

knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean. (*John 13:10-11, Emphasis Added*)

Judas serves as a living illustration for the disciples of the truths taught in this allegory. In John 13, Judas is described as not “clean” in comparison to the eleven, who were “already clean.” Judas is not a part of the true people of God, but as a Jew under the Old Covenant, he was part of Israel, the picture of the people of God, and he held to a false profession, which was revealed by his evil behavior. As revealed in the allegory of John 15, he is masquerading as a true believer (a fruit-bearing branch), and following the progression of the allegory, he is about to be cut off and burned because he is a fruitless branch.

Let’s look briefly at verse 2b before moving on: *while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful*. If we are correct in saying verse 3 is a reference to our salvation, then verse 2b is a reference to the believer’s perseverance and sanctification. Hendrickson agrees:

Those who bear good fruit are cleansed more and more... This grace they had received already. The process of gradual cleansing (sanctification) would be continued.<sup>14</sup>

Part of the Father’s continuing role in the allegory, is to continually “clean” the fruitful branches. It may be a rewording of the illustration spoken in John 13:10. These words reminds us of God’s faithfulness not only in saving a people, but in guaranteeing their continued sanctification.

### ***A Parallel Passage***

Before proceeding any further, I want to look at another important passage that is parallel to John 15:1-8 in several ways. The parable of the tenants in Mathew 21:33-45 reads,

<sup>33</sup>“Listen to another parable: There was a landowner *who planted a vineyard*. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented *the vineyard* to some farmers and went away on a journey. <sup>34</sup>When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants *to collect his fruit*. <sup>35</sup>The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. <sup>36</sup>Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. <sup>37</sup>Last of all, he sent his son to them. ‘They will respect my son,’ he said. <sup>38</sup>But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, ‘This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him and take his inheritance.’ <sup>39</sup>So they took him and threw him out of the *vineyard* and killed him. <sup>40</sup>Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” <sup>41</sup>“He will bring those wretches to a wretched end,” they replied, “*and he will*

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<sup>14</sup> Hendriksen, *The Gospel of John*, 298-299

rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time.”<sup>42</sup> Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures: ‘The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes’?”<sup>43</sup> “Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.”<sup>44</sup> He who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed.”<sup>45</sup> When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus’ parables, they knew he was talking about them. (Matthew 21:33-45, Emphasis Added)

In this parable, many of the same word pictures are employed. The vineyard represents Old Covenant Israel and the tenants are individual Old Covenant Jews. The servants are no doubt the Old Testament prophets, and the son is an obvious reference to Jesus Christ who is rejected by the evil tenants, Israel. This results in the kingdom of God being taken away from the evil tenants and given to a different people (the Gentiles) who will produce fruit – a picture of the transition from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant. The parallels to John 15 are striking even though the context and style differ. In both analogies, individual Old Covenant Israelites fail to gain what they thought they had. In both analogies, only those individuals who bear fruit, or give evidence of election and saving grace, inherit the kingdom. Both metaphors, while different in style, share the same result: “Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit...” “When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus’ parables, they knew he was talking about them.”

### **Perseverance and Lordship**

<sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>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. <sup>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup>If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. <sup>8</sup>This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples (John 15:4-8).

The allegory closes with both a warning and a command to persevere. Every believer perseveres to the end and never stops bearing fruit: *If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit.* As we’ve already discussed, there is no biblical category for a fruitless or unprofitable believer, or as it is stated in the verses above, a believer who does not “remain” or “abide” in Jesus. Every believer gives evidence of the gift of grace and faith that they have received (Galatians 5:22-26). This section of Scripture is not about a higher life that believers can attain if they simply “let go and let God.” This allegory is about saving faith in Jesus Christ that perseveres to the end. To remain or abide in Jesus is synonymous with bearing fruit and is a declaration of one’s salvation. John uses the identical language near the close of the first century:

<sup>24</sup>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. <sup>25</sup>And this is what he promised us--even eternal life (*1 John 2:24-25*).

It is clear that remaining in Jesus or bearing fruit is not an option for a Christian, but it is part of the gift of salvation that we've been given in Jesus. This point is of central importance because it pertains to the two parts of our salvation that Jesus purchased on behalf of all those for whom He died. First, He purchased our justification – the declaration in the court of heaven that our sins (past, present, and future) are perfectly forgiven. Second, He purchased our sanctification- a work of the Spirit of God that guarantees our perseverance and ultimate inheritance (*2 Corinthians 5:5*).

### ***What About Romans 11?***

Romans 11:17-24 is further evidence that our interpretation of John 15 is correct. The text reads:

<sup>17</sup>If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, <sup>18</sup>do not boast over those branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you. <sup>19</sup>You will say then, “Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in.” <sup>20</sup>Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. <sup>21</sup>For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either. <sup>22</sup>Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off. <sup>23</sup>And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. <sup>24</sup>After all, if you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree! (*Romans 11:17-24*)

In Romans 11, Paul employs the “branch” language in ways similar to John 15. Like John 15, these branches represent ethnic Jews who were a part of the physical people of Israel. Using the terminology of Romans 11, they are the “natural branches.” Also analogous to John 15, Paul’s description of these branches is that they are unbelieving and therefore, “broken off” from the true people of God. Unlike John 15, Paul reminds us that these unbelieving Jews can be “grafted in again” if they repent and believe. Elect Jews will be “grafted into their own olive tree” by repentance and faith just like the elect Gentiles. Also dissimilar to John 15, Paul brings the Gentiles into his discussion as additional branches who were “wild by nature,” but now “grafted into” the people of God. These “grafted in” branches now “share in the nourishing sap of the olive root” and have become a part of the true people of God, the church, which is comprised of both Jew and Gentile, both “wild” and “natural” branches. Paul’s inclusion of the

Gentiles shouldn't surprise us because his words give us a more complete understanding of the church than those spoken in John 15.<sup>15</sup> To summarize, Paul's point in this section of Romans 11 is similar to John 15 and supports the interpretation of John 15 that I have proposed in this paper. In both texts, we see individual unbelieving Jews (branches) being "broken off" from inclusion in God's family as a result of the fullness of God's revelation in Jesus Christ.<sup>16</sup>

Before we leave Romans 11, we must consider more closely some of the language employed by Paul in addressing the Gentile believers. In verses 20 and 21 Paul warns us, "Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either." In verse 22 he continues, "Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off." In these verses, Paul is using the historical example of unbelieving Israel as a caution to Gentile believers to persevere. Unbelieving Jews under the Old Covenant had a profession of faith that proved false and was evidenced by their lack of perseverance. Paul is using their example as a warning and reminder that if a professed believer fails to persevere to the end in loving Jesus Christ, he or she will be "cut off" just like unbelieving Jews were "cut off." Douglas Moo puts it this way:

Paul now explains why the Gentile Christian should fear: "if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you." A failure to continue in faith – thus a failure to display an appropriate "fear" of God – has led to judgment for many Jews. And if God so judged Jews, who had a natural connection to the tree and its sustaining root, he will surely judge those who have been grafted in as alien branches.<sup>17</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The allegory of the vine and the branches is best understood in the context of the movement in redemptive history from type to antitype: from picture to fulfillment. The imagery employed is best suited to an allegory of redemptive history as it moves from the Old Covenant era to the New, where Israel, as a picture of the vine gives way historically to the revelation of the true vine, Jesus Christ. In redemptive history, the Old Covenant people of God – those whose profession is in the picture of the vine – gives way historically to the New Covenant people of God – those abiding in the true vine, Jesus.<sup>18</sup> Viewed from the point of view of fulfillment, John 15 becomes a snapshot of what it meant to the Jew of Jesus' day to be a part of the true people of God in light of the soon to be inaugurated New Covenant. Participation in the true people of God is not

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<sup>15</sup> See Ephesians 3:1-12. We must not lose sight of the fact that the events contained within the Gospels occurred in the historical setting of the Old Covenant. This side of Pentecost, we have the fullness of God's revelation in the New Covenant Scriptures.

<sup>16</sup> Romans 16:25-27

<sup>17</sup> Douglass Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans – The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 706.

<sup>18</sup> I am not suggesting that no one in Old Covenant Israel believed. While not all Israel is Israel, there was always a believing remnant.

dependent upon ethnic background as pictured by the vine of Israel under the Old Covenant, but upon a persevering faith that is a gift insured by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the true vine, as revealed in the New Covenant. John 15:1-8 describes the dilemma facing an Old Covenant Jew in Jesus' day.