

Does God See You As An Unfruitful and Worthless Branch?

We will begin our study of Ezekiel 15:1-8 by turning first to John 15:1-6. This passage is about a vine, its branches, and its fruit. Jesus says,

I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. John 15:1 (NASB)

Jesus is the true vine! Acts 4:12 echoes this truth that salvation can be found only in Jesus Christ and no one else. It says,

And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved. Acts 4:12 (NASB)

Only Christ can save us from the penalty of our sinful behavior. Only He can forgive our sins and save us from an eternal life in hell. That is what Jesus described in John 15:1 when He said “I am the true vine.”

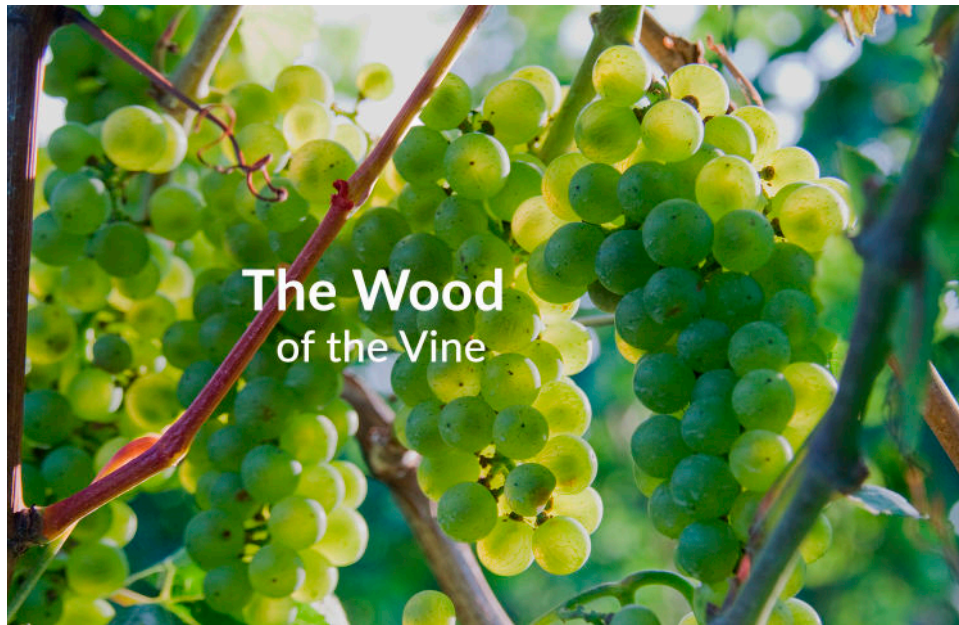
Then He added, “My Father is the vinedresser.” Every vineyard needs an owner who cares for it. The owner plants it, prunes it by cutting off the dead branches, and prunes the healthy branches so they will produce more grapes. That is Jesus’ message in verse 1.

In verse 2, Jesus takes the illustration to the next logical point. He says,

Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit. John 15:2 (NASB)

Now Jesus says that there are two types of branches in Him. In a real vineyard, every vine has branches that are alive and some that are dead. The branches that are alive produce fruit, but the dead ones never produce fruit. So, a wise vinedresser removes them. Jesus described what happens in the real world.

In this illustration, Jesus includes everyone who identifies with him! He includes believers and unbelievers. Earlier in John 6:60-66 we are told that many of Jesus’ disciples complained about a statement He made in the preceding verses. We will skip those verses and look at verse 60. It says,



The Wood of the Vine

Therefore many of His disciples, when they heard this said, “This is a difficult statement; who can listen to it?” But Jesus, conscious that His disciples grumbled at this, said to them, “Does this cause you to stumble?” John 6:60-61 (NASB)

Some of the disciples did not like what He said. Then in verse 64, Jesus said that not all of these disciples were real disciples. He said,

“But there are some of you who do not believe.” For Jesus knew

from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who it was that would betray Him. John 6:64 (NASB)

This is an important statement. Jesus knew that some did not believe in Him from the very beginning. The Greek tense also tells us that these unbelieving individuals were continuously not believing. That is, they were never believers. But notice verse 60 called them disciples. They had been spending time with Jesus, listening to Him, and following Him. When Jesus said that some betrayed Him, He did not just refer to Judas. Notice that verse 66 says that many left Him and stopped walking with Him. So, many were never real disciples. This means one can appear to be a real disciple of Jesus but not be a Christian or a true believer in Him.

I knew a man years ago who faithfully attended the church I pastored. He seemed to be very committed. He loved Jesus, sang the Christian songs, and listened to the sermons. He preached Christ and passed out water bottles and Christian literature to the homeless. But one day he told me that he was leaving the church because he did not believe Jesus was God. He had not been a true disciple of Christ. That man was a good example of those described in John 6:60-66. A person can appear to be a follower of Jesus but not actually be one.

Now let us go back to John 15:2. This helps us understand that the dead branches are apostate or unbelieving followers. They have no spiritual life. So the Father takes them away. The verse says, “every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit.”

Then in verse 3, Jesus tells the disciples, who were listening to Him, that they were already clean. They were already forgiven. They were real believers. Next, in verses 4-5 He said,

Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. John 15:4-5 (NASB)

What was Jesus’ message in these verses? True believers will produce fruit. Verse 5 says that true believers produce much fruit—not a little.

We know this is true from Philippians 1:5-6 which reveals the apostle Paul is speaking to Christians. Then verse 6 says,

... He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus. Philippians 1:6 (NASB)

That is, when God the Father saves us, He begins a good work and will continue working on us until the day of Christ Jesus. That is, once a person is a true Christian, they remain a true Christian. They will produce much fruit.

So, what have we learned? We have learned that a person can call themselves a Christian and yet be a dead branch on the vine, just like the man who did not believe Jesus was God. Then John 15:6 says that God the Father will cast that dead branch into the fire where it will be burned.

If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned. John 15:6 (NASB)

They will go to hell for eternity. It is with great sorrow that I must say that. But that is the message from our God. This gives us an important principle. God the Father will remove unbelievers, even unbelievers who have been exposed to His blessings and the Scriptures and cast them into hell. The proof they deserve punishment is that they do not produce fruit, which means they never believed in Christ.

THE ILLUSTRATION IN EZEKIEL 15. Now we are ready for the study in Ezekiel 15. The chapter can be divided into two sections. Verses 1-5 provide the illustration, and verses 6-8 give us the application. Here is verses 1-2,

Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying, “Son of man, how is the wood of the vine better than any wood of a branch which is among the trees of the forest? Ezekiel 15:1-2 (NASB)

The prophet Ezekiel was given another word from the Lord. It begins with an illustration. It is about a vine that was compared to a tree. Yahweh asked if the wood of a vine is better than the wood of a tree in the forest.

Yahweh suggests the answer by asking another question,

Can wood be taken from it to make anything, or can men take a peg from it on which to hang any vessel? Ezekiel 15:3 (NASB)

Yahweh's question is simple. Can the wood or stem of the vine be made into anything? Can men make a peg from the wood of a vine? The Hebrew word for vessel is *keli*. In the Old Testament, it refers to things that have significant weight such as a pot, gold jewelry, bags of grain, or a sword. That is, *keli* refers to items that have significant weight. That helps us answer the question, "Can vessels that have significant weight be held up by a peg made from the wood of a vine?" The answer is no. Why? Because the wood of a vine is too soft to make anything of value or hang anything on it. So, Yahweh is asking, "What is it good for?"

Verse 4,

If it has been put into the fire for fuel, and the fire has consumed both of its ends and its middle part has been charred, is it then useful for anything? Ezekiel 15:4 (NASB)

The next question is what if the wood of the vine is put into the fire in order to create a fire: the ends are burned but the middle is charred. Is it useful for anything?

Verse 5 is the conclusion of the illustration.

"Behold, while it is intact, it is not made into anything. How much less, when the fire has consumed it and it is charred, can it still be made into anything! Ezekiel 15:5 (NASB)

The message is that the wood of the vine cannot be made into anything of value before it was burned in the fire, nor after it was burned in the fire. So, Yahweh answered the question, "Is the wood of the vine good for anything?" The answer is, "No!" The wood of the vine was good for nothing both before and after it was in the fire. It is useless. That is the illustration.

THE APPLICATION. Then in verse 6 Yahweh begins to explain the meaning of the illustration in greater depth. The message He wanted the prophet Ezekiel, the elders, the Jews in exile, and us to know is that the wood of the vine was useless. He said,

"Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD, 'As the wood of the vine among the trees of the forest, which I have given to the fire for fuel, so have I given up the inhabitants of Jerusalem; and I set My face against them.'" Ezekiel 15:6-7a (NASB)

Yahweh repeats the part of verse 3 which compared the wood of the vine to the wood of a tree in the forest. But this time He adds that the vine is in the forest among the trees. His point is the vine in the forest is a wild vine. Next, He emphasized that the vine was given to the fire just as He had already given up the people living in Jerusalem to the fire. Then Yahweh reminded them that He was against them. Wow, who would want Yahweh to be opposed to them? How foolish!

This is a significant verse because it reveals that the wood of the vine is symbolic of the people in Jerusalem. In the Old Testament, a vine frequently symbolized the nation of Israel. For example, in Psalm 80:8-9, Asaph, the choir director, referred to Israel as a vine,

You removed a vine from Egypt;
You drove out the nations and planted it.
You cleared the ground before it,
And it took deep root and filled the land.
Psalm 80:8-9 (NASB)

Clearly, the statement "You removed a vine from Egypt" refers to Yahweh having rescued Israel from Egypt. Then He planted the vine, cleared the ground and Israel took root in Palestine. Isaiah 5:1-7 also refers to Jerusalem and Judah as a vine. Verse 1 says,

Let me sing now for my well-beloved
A song of my beloved concerning His vineyard.
My well-beloved had a vineyard on a fertile hill.
Isaiah 5:1 (NASB)

Then in verses 3-5, the vineyard is connected to Israel,

And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah,
Judge between Me and My vineyard.
What more was there to do for My vineyard that I have not done

in it?

Why, when I expected it to produce good grapes did it produce worthless ones?

So now let Me tell you what I am going to do to My vineyard:

I will remove its hedge and it will be consumed;

I will break down its wall and it will become trampled ground.

Isaiah 5:3-5 (NASB)

When Yahweh referred to the wood of the vine in the forest, the elders and those in exile would have understood that He referred to Jerusalem and Judah. Jerusalem was a wild vine. It did not produce any good fruit. Righteousness was missing. They were not a positive witness to the nations around them (Deuteronomy 7:6-7; Isaiah 43:10; Ezekiel 5:5-6). Instead, they ignored Him and chased after the gods in their hearts. They were unbelievers. What does one do with a wild vine?

This reminds me of my teenage years. We lived out in the country. We had a large number of fruit trees, wild blackberry vines, poison oak, and other wild growing vegetation. My dad told me and my brothers to cut down the trees and clear the land. So, we created a big pile with the tree branches, tree stumps, and wild vines. Then my dad threw kerosene on the pile and threw a couple of matches into the pile. That made a tremendous fire. It was hot and the black smoke lifted up into the sky. That is a good illustration of what is done to wild vines and vegetation. That was Israel. Yahweh had given up Jerusalem for destruction to the Babylonian army.

Then verse 7b adds,

Though they have come out of the fire, yet the fire will consume them. Ezekiel 15:7b (NASB)

Now Yahweh added that Jerusalem had not been completely destroyed by the first two Babylonian invasions! So, Yahweh announced that it will be completely consumed by the third invasion. It was going to happen.

CONCLUSION. Now Yahweh explains why He would destroy Jerusalem. There are two parts to His answer. The first part of the answer is given in verse 7c,

Then you will know that I am the LORD, when I set My face

against them. Ezekiel 15:7c (NASB)

Yahweh said then they would “know I am the Lord.” That is the first reason. Sixty-seven times in the book of Ezekiel, Yahweh uttered this phrase “Then you will know that I am the LORD.” He repeated it because they ignored His warnings. So, after the city of Jerusalem and the temple were burned to the ground, they would finally understand that He had spoken. But by then it would be too late! Sadly, that is also true of unbelievers today who reject Jesus Christ. That is the message of John 15:1-5. Someday after they die and are in the fires of hell, they will know Yahweh is the Lord and He had warned them. This was a warning to believe in Yahweh. He does not make empty threats.

The second reason for the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple is given in verse 8.

Thus I will make the land desolate, because they have acted unfaithfully, declares the Lord GOD. Ezekiel 15:8 (NASB)

Yahweh said He would make the land desolate because the people had been unfaithful. He had rescued Israel from Egypt and blessed them in so many ways. But the citizens of Jerusalem had abandoned Yahweh, and the proof was that they had idols in their hearts. They were like a wild vine. They could not produce any spiritual fruit or be of service to Yahweh. So, they were unfruitful and worthless to Him. They were good for nothing. So the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the city, and the temple would be destroyed. That is the meaning of the chapter. Only the remnant was fruitful and of worth.

We began this study with a brief review of Jesus’ illustration in John 15 where He said that He is the true vine. That illustration was applied to Christ’s disciples and to those who claim to be His disciples today. That illustration and Ezekiel 15 give us the first principle that applies to people today. That principle is: God the Father knows those individuals who are the wood and the branches that do not produce fruit. So just as Ezekiel 15:6 says the wood of the vine will be destroyed in fire, John 15 says God the Father will cast the fruitless branches into the fire of hell. Neither the wood nor the fruitless branches are good for anything that counts for eternity. God cannot use them

due to the idols in their hearts and the inability for the Holy Spirit to use them.

The second principle is that those who are not good for anything are the unfaithful. We have already been told here in Ezekiel 15 that because the worthless wood is not good for anything, it will be cast into the fire. We have already discovered these people had rejected God. So, they were not committed to Him. They did not accomplish anything for Him. The proof was they had idols in their hearts. Then in verse 8 the climax is reached. We are told they were the unfaithful. So, they would be destroyed, except for a remnant.

In John 15:4, we are told the unfruitful and worthless branches do not abide in Christ. That is, the unfruitful are unbelievers. Consequently, they cannot do good deeds (Ephesians 2:8-10). So, the second principle is that those who are not good for anything are the unfaithful—the unbelievers. It is sad that many of the ancient Jews in Israel did not believe Yahweh and are now suffering in the fires of hell. The same is true for so many Gentiles.

A third principle is their behavior revealed that God the Father acts righteously when He cuts them off. His action is justified. Their attitudes, thoughts, and behavior reflected the evil condition of their hearts. Just as Jesus said in Matthew 7:16, “You will know them by their fruits,” their behavior was proof that Yahweh was justified in sending them to hell. That is one of the reasons Revelation 20:11-14 says that the books will be opened at the Great White Throne Judgment. The books will contain a record of the evil deeds of unbelievers that will prove they deserve hell, which means they never gave themselves to Christ.

The fourth principle is that Yahweh always warns unbelievers to believe in Him and to repent. The prophets warned people and so does 1 John 3:23-24.

This is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as He commanded us. 24

The one who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. We know by this that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us. 1 John 3:23-24 (NASB)

we are believers is that we strive to keep His commands, and that His Spirit dwells within. We want to be faithful to Him from the depths of our hearts.

We can rejoice that we believe in Jesus Christ! The proof that