

The Fate of Fruitless Followers in John 15:6

If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned.

What do the branches represent in John 15:6 and what is their fate? One popular interpretation says the branches are superficial followers of Jesus Christ who never go on to do good works. These unsaved individuals are burned in hell. This interpretation makes fruit a test of true faith and an indicator of who is truly a Christian. Another interpretation sees this passage relating to true believers and hell is not in view.

The argument for superficial followers

Those who say this passage refers to unbelievers and their fate interpret the word “abide” as a synonym for “believe.” They interpret the term “takes away” (*airō*) in verse 2 as a removal to judgment in the fire of hell described in verse 6. It is assumed in this interpretation that “fruit” refers to visible and measureable works. In summary, this view says that those who have only a superficial relationship with Jesus Christ and do not show fruit prove that they are not Christians and will perish in hell.

Making fruit (works in their understanding) a test of true faith is problematic since faith is simply the confidence or persuasion that something is true. According to the Bible there cannot be any infringement of works on faith itself (Rom. 4:4-5; Eph. 2:8-9), although faith *should* produce works (Eph. 2:10). But that is different from saying that faith *must* produce works, *and* that those works will be visible or measureable. An examination of the passage and context yields a better interpretation.

Contextual observations

It is easily recognized that chapters 13-17 form a distinct unit in John. After His evangelistic presentation to the world in chapters 1-12, Jesus has an intimate conversation with His saved disciples (Unsaved Judas has departed; 13:30). The commandment to love one another frames the discourse of 13:31-15:17. Fruitfulness in the context seems related to the command to love. Clearly, the subject of 15:1-10 is fruitfulness, not salvation or eternal condemnation. In light of His imminent absence, Jesus’ purpose is to encourage the disciples to keep this commandment to love and thus bear the fruit that love engenders.

Jesus would not tell his disciples that they are in danger of losing their salvation or that they were never really saved. On the contrary, He implies that they are in Him as branches of the true vine (v. 2). This speaks of their union and close relationship to Him. They are also “already clean,” which speaks either of their justification (cf. Peter in 13:8-11), or possibly their sanctification experience (pruning, v. 2) as they continue to sit under Jesus’ Word (cf. 17:17). Either way, it confirms that they are saved.

Lexical considerations

Abiding leads to fruit-bearing (15:4-5). Some take *abide* as a synonym for *believe*. But why would Jesus tell his saved disciples that they need to believe in Him? And if Jesus means *believe*, why doesn’t He use the word *believe* as He does so many times in this Gospel in relation to salvation? That *abide* can’t mean *believe* is clear by the statements that Jesus abides in the disciples (v. 4, 5) and that His words can abide in them (v. 7). That it speaks of a deeper relationship for those already saved is indicated by the fact it is a condition for answered prayer in verse 7 and is a result of obeying Christ’s commandments in verse 10.

To abide means to *continue* or *remain* and refers to a close relationship with Jesus Christ. It is a term of intimate fellowship and is a condition of discipleship not salvation. In John 8:31 Jesus tells believers to abide in His Word in order to become true disciples. Abiding is a Christian responsibility. The fact that it is commanded allows the possibility that a believer may not comply (vv. 4, 5, 6).

Those who say verse 6 speaks of the judgment fire of hell interpret “takes away” (from the Greek verb *airō*) in verse 2 as a taking away to judgment. But *airō* is better translated “lifts up” (used similarly in John 5:8-12; 8:59; 10:18; 11:41) describing the tender care of the Vinedresser who lifts the fruitless branches off the ground so they can absorb more sun, are less susceptible to damage, and thus become fruitful. This is more consistent with the practice of viticulture, the caretaking responsibility of the Vinedresser mentioned in verses 1-3, and the desire for fruitfulness in verses 2 and 6. Verse 2 goes on to say that once fruit arrives, the branch is pruned to produce more fruit. God’s responsibility is to care for His people in a way that encourages fruitfulness (vv. 1-3), but the Christian’s responsibility is to cooperate by abiding (vv. 4-8).

Interpretational assumptions

Too often when fire is mentioned in the Bible, the reader assumes it speaks of hell fire. But fire is used more often literally of temporal judgment or figuratively of God’s discipline, anger, zeal, or jealousy (see GraceNotes no. 34, “Hebrews on Fire”). Fire is also used of God’s future revealing judgment of a Christian’s life at the Judgment Seat of Christ where good works are rewarded and unworthy works are burned up (1 Cor. 3:12-15; 2 Cor. 5:10).

The fire that burns the non-abiding branches in verse 6 is in an allegory or figurative story that illustrates a point. Jesus is comparing some branches of a vine that are not abiding (implying they are not fruitful) to the possible fate of believers who do not abide. Jesus does not say that all unfruitful branches are burned, because all branches (Christians) are at some time unfruitful (because some must be “lifted up” to become fruitful; v. 2). Vine branches that continue to be barren have no practical purpose, so they are gathered and burned. We do not need to find an antecedent for who “they” are. That is trying to make too much of the details of the allegory at the expense of the main point. The main point is that non-abiding fruitless branches are useless. In verse 6 it is not people who are burned, but branches (signified by the neuter pronoun *auta*). Neither is it necessary to interpret the fire as literal, because the vine, branches, and fruit are all figurative. Jesus’ point is that Christians who do not abide and bear fruit are useless. This is similar to the illustration in Ezekiel 15:1-8 of Israel as a useless vine that is burned. If significance is attached to the fire in verse 6, it may compare to the burning of useless works at the Judgment Seat of Christ (1 Cor. 3:15).

Practical implications

If someone argues that a Christian must bear fruit to prove his or her salvation, then there must be a way to measure that fruit. But of course, that is impossible given our human inability to know for certain what comprises genuine fruit (See GraceNotes no. 28, “Can Good Works Prove Salvation?”). It also assumes that all fruit is observable when that is not always true.

In the context, fruit seems to refer to loving one another. The command to love forms bookends for this section, and 1 John 3:24 also relates loving to abiding. Nevertheless, love is not a proof of salvation, but an indication of intimate fellowship with Jesus Christ and of discipleship (13:35).

Conclusion

In John 15:6 Jesus is not teaching that fruitless superficial followers will be cast into hell. The interpretation that makes fruit-bearing a test of salvation in John 15:1-8 ignores the larger and immediate contexts as well as how words are used in the context. The result is a vague interpretation that can’t actually be applied without defining objectively what fruit is and how much fruit is necessary to pass the test. A better interpretation yields a passage that deeply challenges Christians to become more intimate with the Lord Jesus Christ as a condition for bearing much fruit for His glory.