

What Happens When You're Unfruitful?

by Bob Kerrey

Introduction:

Jesus teaches in John 15:1-7 the principles of bearing fruit. I'm going to share the guts of a message I gave a couple of months ago relating to assurance, and I'm going to weave into the message some comments about the ministry implications of grace and assurance at the church where I serve.

1. Hopefully, this will give you a glimpse of how one guy preached through a controversial text that seems to challenge assurance.
2. And I hope this will also give you a glimpse of how one church relates the theology of assurance to things like counseling and discipleship.

B. The title of this message is, "What happens when you're unfruitful?" It's one in a series of messages I gave based on the vine illustration Jesus gives in John 15.

Let me read through our text one time. There are two verses that talk specifically about what happens to people who are unfruitful. They are not hard to pick out. Just look for the verses that make you pucker. Jesus says, beginning in John 15:1,

^{NKJ} **John 15:1** "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. ²"Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every *branch* that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. ³"You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. ⁴"Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. ⁵"I am the vine, you *are* the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. 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. ⁷"If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. ⁸"By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples."

The two verses that talk about what happens to people who are unfruitful are Verses 2 and 6. Verse 2 says,

^{NKJ} **John 15:2** "Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away . . .

Verse 6 says,

^{NKJ} **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."

So, in one sense the answer to our question is pretty clear. If you're not fruitful, you will be taken away, cast out, withered, gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. Aside from that, you don't have anything to worry about! These are unsettling words.

What do they mean? Unfortunately, there isn't really a clear consensus among Bible scholars. Let's consider three alternative viewpoints. The first two viewpoints are probably held—one or the other—by the majority of Christians today. The third viewpoint is not as widely known. In fact, it may be the most logical explanation you've never heard.

I. Those who take the first viewpoint contend that the branches that are taken away in Verse 2 and the branches that are burned in Verse 6 represent Christians who lose their salvation. Their answer to our question, "What happens when you're unfruitful" is "you lose your salvation." You were once a true believer, adopted into God's family, and headed for heaven. But by your persistent unfruitfulness, God disowns you, condemns you, and you go to hell.

This is a viewpoint held by many good and sincere people, but I do not believe this is the correct interpretation of this passage. I believe that the moment a person trusts Jesus for everlasting life, his destiny in heaven is secure. It cannot be lost or taken away. We need go no further than the words Jesus spoke that Thursday evening before His crucifixion to see that this is true. In John 17, Jesus prays to God the Father in the presence of His eleven disciples who were with Him. You may recall that, according to John 13:30, Judas Iscariot, the twelfth disciple, is already gone.

A. At the beginning of the prayer, Jesus confirms that He has the authority to give eternal life. He says in John 17, Verses 1 and 2,

^{NKJ} **John 17:1** . . . "Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son also may glorify You, ² as You have given Him authority over all flesh, that He should give eternal life to as many as You have given Him."

This makes it very clear that Jesus has the authority to give eternal life. God the Father has given this authority to His Son, Jesus.

B. With this authority, Jesus promises to give eternal or everlasting life to anyone who simply believes Him for it. The disciples had heard this message from Jesus over and over again.

In John 3:16, Jesus says,

^{NKJ} **John 3:16** "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

In John 6:40, Jesus says,

^{NKJ} **John 6:40** "And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life . . ."

In John 6:47, Jesus says,

^{NKJ} **John 6:47** "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life."

So, Jesus promises this life to anyone who believes Him for it, and He describes it as *everlasting* life. He can make this promise because He paid the price necessary to back it up. He was crucified in payment for our sin, and He rose again in victory over sin. If the one who receives everlasting life by faith alone in Christ alone can lose it, then Jesus gave it the wrong name. If you can lose everlasting life once you've received it, then it's not everlasting life. It would be temporary life, or conditional life, or passing life, or provisional life. But not *eternal* life.

C. The eleven disciples who were with Jesus not only heard this message of salvation through faith alone in Christ alone, they also believed. Jesus confirms this in John 17:8, where He prays to the Father,

^{NKJ} **John 17:8** "For I have given to them the words which You have given Me; and they have received *them*, and have known surely that I came forth from You; and they have believed that You sent Me."

So the eleven disciples are true believers. Therefore, they have received everlasting life.

D. Jesus then prays that the Father would keep these eleven believers secure. In Verse 11, He prays,

^{NKJ} **John 17:11** ". . . Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as *We are*."

Not only does Jesus pray this for the security of the eleven believers but for the security of all future believers as well in Verse 20. And, notice here in Verse 11 that we believers are a gift from God the Father to God the Son. Jesus refers to us as those whom the Father has given Him. Jesus is using familiar language here. Back in John 10:27-29, Jesus uses similar words to describe how absolutely secure believers are in Him. He says,

^{NKJ} **John 10:27** "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. ²⁸ And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. ²⁹ My Father, who has given *them* to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch *them* out of My Father's hand. ³⁰ I and *My* Father are one."

The message here seems quite clear. Those whom the Father gives to the Son will never be snatched away. Those to whom Jesus gives eternal life through faith will never perish. "Never" means never. You can't lose eternal life once you've received it. No one can snatch you out of God's hand. How much more secure can a believer be? It doesn't depend on you, the believer; it depends on God, the Father, who "is greater than all."

Therefore, the branches taken away and burned in John 15 cannot refer to believers who lose their salvation, because such a loss is not possible.

E. Someone may ask, "Well, what about Judas Iscariot? Didn't he lose his salvation?"

No. I would argue that Judas never had eternal life because he never believed. Let me show you. Jesus speaks to his disciples back in □ John 6:64 saying,

^{NKJ} **John 6:64** "But there are some of you who do not believe." . . .

The last part of Verse 64 explains,

^{NKJ} **John 6:64** . . . For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who would betray Him.

And just a few verses later, the unbelieving one is revealed. Verses 70 and 71 say,

^{NKJ} **John 6:70** Jesus answered them, "Did I not choose you, the twelve, and one of you is a devil?" ⁷¹ He spoke of Judas Iscariot, *the son* of Simon, for it was he who would betray Him, being one of the twelve.

Judas continued in unbelief until the end. That's why Jesus says to His disciples in the upper room, during the foot-washing,

^{NKJ} **John 13:11** . . . "You are not all clean."

Judas is the exception among the twelve disciples, not because he lost his salvation, but because he never received it. So, whatever else it means for the branches in John 15 to be taken away, cast out, withered, gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned, it cannot mean that they are believers who lose eternal life. It's not possible. If you are a believer in Jesus, you cannot lose eternal life. You are absolutely secure. Jesus guarantees it.

II. There is a second viewpoint we need to consider. It's the view that the branches taken away in Verse 2 and the branches burned in Verse 6 represent counterfeit believers. In answer to the question, "What happens when you are unfruitful?" the answer is, "You prove to be a counterfeit Christian." You are merely a professing believer who may appear to be genuine because you hang out with true believers and say you believe. But because you do not abide in Christ and do not bear fruit, you prove that you are not really a true believer at all. The idea here is that true faith will always yield fruit, and the lack of fruit is evidence of a false or deficient faith. According to this view, these counterfeit believers will be taken away and burned in hell. In this way of thinking, abiding is the same as believing. If you don't abide, then you don't believe.

Let me give you an example of this thinking. In commenting on John 15:2, one source says this: "No branch that is Christ's can be wholly fruitless. But branches that belong to Christ will bear fruit." That's a key tenet of this viewpoint: true believers will persevere in bearing fruit. Moreover, this same source says of John 15:6: "Those that do not remain [or abide] show that they never had a saving relationship with Christ. Their destiny is described in the language of damnation" (*The New Geneva Study Bible*).

This is a viewpoint held by many godly, intelligent people. But, I don't believe that this

is the correct interpretation of this passage. Let me explain.

A. First of all, our text seems to make it very clear that the branches are true believers, not counterfeits. The branches in the vine illustration are defined for us in John 15:5. Jesus says,

^{NKJ} **John 15:5** "I am the vine, you *are* the branches. . . ."

Who, specifically, is Jesus addressing with the word, "you"? It's the eleven disciples. Are the eleven disciples true believers in Jesus? Absolutely. We've already proven that they are. Therefore, it seems inescapable that the branches are true believers; they're not counterfeits.

B. If the branches are true believers, then believers may or may not abide in Christ. And because believers may or may not abide in Christ, then they may or may not be fruitful.

1. Jesus makes the point in John 15:2. He says,

^{NKJ} **John 15:2** "Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away . . ."

Here, Jesus testifies to the existence of a branch "in" Him that "does not bear fruit." So, it is quite possible to be "in Christ" and, at the same time, "not bear fruit."

2. This possibility is also reflected in the words of Verse 7. There Jesus says,

^{NKJ} **John 15:7** "If you abide in Me . . ."

You can't see it in English, but in Greek, the original language in which this was written, this is something called a third-class condition. A third-class condition indicates something that may or may not happen. The action of abiding may or may not occur. And once again, who is the "you" of this verse? It's the eleven disciples who are true believers. The point is, true believers may or may not abide, and therefore, may or may not be fruitful.

3. Also notice that Jesus issues this command in Verse 4:

^{NKJ} **John 15:4** "Abide in Me . . ."

This command certainly applies to us today, but to whom did Jesus give this command originally? To the eleven disciples who are true believers. Why did Jesus command them to abide? Because not abiding is possible for them. This is significant because, remember, the second viewpoint we're talking about contends that true believers will always abide. But, why would Jesus command His disciples to abide if it were impossible for them to do otherwise? That would be like commanding a person to be a person. It would be a rather meaningless command because the person has no choice.

It seems clear, then, that Jesus commands His disciples to abide because true believers

may or may not do so. Believing and abiding are not the same. Unfruitfulness does not prove that you are a counterfeit Christian.

4. Doesn't our own experience tell us that this is true? In a previous message, I showed that being fruitful is loving one another the way Christ loved us. Do true believers always do that? Of course not. In a previous message I showed that abiding in Christ is maintaining a close relationship with Him. Do true believers always do that? No. It is quite possible to be a true Christian and not be abiding, and as a result, not be fruitful. It is possible to be in Christ positionally, but not *abiding* in Christ relationally. That is, it is possible to believe in Christ for eternal life, but not be in fellowship with Christ for daily living.

I assume all of you in this room today are believers. You are therefore in Christ. But, you believers may not be *abiding* in Christ.

C. Why did I spend so much time refuting the first two alternative interpretations? Because they are common misconceptions that rob true believers of the assurance that I believe God wants you to have. Both perspectives dangle believers over the pit of hell. The first perspective says, if you're not fruitful, you lose your salvation. The second perspective says, if you're not fruitful, you never had salvation to begin with. I believe both are unhealthy perspectives for God's adopted children. The first perspective is like a father telling his adopted son, "If you screw up, I'll disown you." The second perspective is like the father saying, "If you screw up, you prove that I never really adopted you." Both perspectives rob God's children of the loving security they need to flourish.

This has very significant implications for counseling and discipleship.

1. Consider a woman I know who struggles with dissociative identity disorder. She has multiple personalities. She's a believer. As a child she was the victim of horrific sexual abuse from her father and other family members. Her multiple personalities are probably her way of trying to deal with the pain of being abused.

As do many abuse victims, this woman has struggled with self hatred for years. She often feels so badly about herself that she thinks maybe she's not good enough to be saved. God's grace couldn't possibly be big enough to include someone as bad as her. Every father figure she's ever had has abused and abandoned her and she fears that maybe God will, too. She blames herself, and an untruthful message still echoes in her soul: You are an irredeemable person.

How do we demonstrate love and grace to this woman? Because she still struggles, do we threaten the loss of salvation if she doesn't shape up? Do we tell her that her faith is deficient or counterfeit? I suspect very few people from any theological camp would be so brutally direct. It's usually more subtle. It can be implied by what is not said, by assurance that is not given.

I don't want to oversimplify, but I believe one of the tasks of the church is to help this woman to renew her mind with the truth about her assurance in Christ. To rob her of

that assurance is to re-victimize her. It would be a form of continued abuse.

2. This woman may seem like an extreme case. But we are finding in our ministry that many, many believers have been abused or are otherwise very insecure about who they are. Apart from a message and atmosphere of grace and assurance, many will not take the risk of entering a discipleship program. Those who do enter discipleship programs can have such a distorted view of grace and assurance that their growth is stunted unless and until they come to grips with these truths.

One of the things we have begun to use as a first step in discipleship is a new workbook titled, *Living in the Family of Grace*. It's written by a grace guy named Charlie Bing. It does a good job of laying a foundation of grace and assurance.

III. Well, getting back to our text, there is another view I want to present. A third view—and I believe the correct view—is that the branches taken away and the branches burned are true believers who experience God's encouragement and discipline, respectively, as a result of their unfruitfulness. In the face of unfruitfulness, God, the Vinedresser, first encourages His fruitless child, and, in the event of continued unfruitfulness, He disciplines him. In the analogy of a father and his adopted child, this view has the father saying to his child, "Be assured you will always be my son. I adopted you because I love you, and nothing will ever change that. As my son, I will encourage you to obey the family rules. And if you disobey, I will discipline you for your own good and the good of the family."

Let me explain how this interpretation fits the biblical data very well.

A. Let's begin with John 15:2. Jesus says,

^{NKJ} **John 15:2** "Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away . . ."

This is one of those instances where the meaning of an original Greek word is crucial. The Greek word translated "takes away" is *airo*.

1. Let me list for you the possible meanings of this word straight out of a Greek lexicon or dictionary. There are three general possibilities.

a. The first possible meaning is, "to raise up; to raise from the ground."

b. The second possible meaning is, "to take upon oneself and carry what has been raised, to bear."

c. The third possible meaning is, "to bear away what has been raised, carry off" (*Thayer's Greek Lexicon*).

2. Every English translation of the Bible that I know takes the third alternative meaning. It's rendered by the New King James Version, "takes away." But I think Jesus had the first meaning in mind, specifically, "to raise from the ground." Why? Because it fits perfectly with the vine illustration. A big part of a vinedresser's job is to raise or lift

branches to promote fruitfulness in those branches.

a. One Bible scholar says this in the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*:
"Because of the delicate structure of the vine, damage was easily sustained by the plant, whether from storms, animal depredations, or the destruction caused by trespassers or pillagers. Fallen vines were lifted . . . into position with meticulous care and allowed to heal (R.K. Harrison in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* under "Vine.")

b. Another Bible scholar, my seminary mentor, Earl Radmacher, explains another way in which vinedressers lift branches. He says,

One time in Israel, as our group was going by bus from Bethlehem to Hebron, we were driving past many miles of vineyards. Unlike our vineyards in the United States, which are kept up all year on wires or trellises, the grapevines in Israel, especially the southern part, lay on the ground during the cold winter months. But when the spring comes, the vinedressers begin to lift up the stocks. They put a rock under the top of each stock to hold it up off the ground. As we were driving, we came to a section of ground where all of the vines were "lifted," and I saw for the first time what Jesus was talking about.

We pulled the bus to the side of the road, and the workers in the vineyard gave us a lesson in Israeli viticulture. They explained that in the spring they carefully lift the branches to allow the heat of the sun to envelop them and thus control the ripening of the fruit. They said that if they allowed the branches to lay on the ground, hundreds of little tiny roots would sink into the surface of the soil where there would not be sufficient moisture to produce anything but little sour grapes. But if the workers lifted the branches up off the ground, then they would get their moisture from the main roots that went deep into the soil. What a picture of our divine Vinedresser. God lifts the branches (believers) so they will produce spiritual fruit (Salvation, 192).

c. This not just the vivid imagination of some Bible thumper. It is corroborated by Dr. Gary Derickson, who not only holds a Ph.D. in Bible exposition, but also holds an advanced degree in viticulture, which is the study of growing grapes (*Salvation*, 270; and Derickson website).

3. So, I do not believe John 15:2 is talking about damnation for unfruitful branches. On the contrary, Jesus is speaking of the loving, tender care of the Vinedresser in lifting His branches up into positions where they can be fruitful.

B. You may be thinking, "That's all well and good for Verse 2, but what about Verse 6. How are you going to sugarcoat that!?" I'm not going to sugarcoat it at all. Verse 6 says,

^{NKJ} **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."

1. The first part of this verse speaks of branches being cast out and withered. I think this speaks of the divine discipline of the Lord. When we believe in Jesus, our position as children in God's family can never be severed. But, when we fail to abide, our

fellowship with the Father can definitely be severed, and we are cut off from the power to be fruitful. We dry up and wither.

God disciplines believers who do not abide in Him. Hebrews 12:5-6 says,

^{NKJ} **Hebrews 12:5** . . . "My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD, Nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; ⁶ For whom the LORD loves He chastens, And scourges every son whom He receives."

I believe the "casting out" and the "withering" of John 15 are closely connected to the "chastening" and "scourging" in Hebrews 12. If you do not abide, God will take you to the proverbial woodshed, and it's not going to be pleasant. There's no way for me to sugarcoat the word, "scourge." It means to whip. It the very same word used in John 19:1 that says,

^{NKJ} **John 19:1** So then Pilate took Jesus and scourged *Him*.

If you've seen *The Passion of the Christ*, you have an idea of how painful scourging can be. How is this possible? It happens all the time. Many believers have surrendered to alcoholism, or sexual addiction, or workaholism, or materialism instead of God. They've lost their families, their health, their dignity, perhaps even their will to live. Ask them if it's painful.

Surrender to anything but God and you're headed for divine discipline. God will allow you to suffer the consequences of your own failure to abide. Why does God do it? To punish you? No. To restore you to fruitfulness. Hebrews 12:11 says,

^{NKJ} **Hebrews 12:11** Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

God wants us to be fruitful.

2. Well, what about the last part of John 15:6—the part that says,

^{NKJ} **John 15:6** ". . . they gather them and throw *them* into the fire, and they are burned."?

That sounds even worse. What's up with the fire and burning? That sounds hellish. Let me explain.

I want you to notice one little pronoun that is so easy to miss. And it's critical to understanding what Jesus is talking about. It's the pronoun, "they" as in . . .

^{NKJ} **John 15:6** ". . . they gather them and throw *them* into the fire, and they are burned."

It is the "they" who gather the branches and throw them into the fire. Who are "they"?

It's not Jesus, the Vine; He would be singular. It's not the Father, the Vinedresser; He would also be singular. It's not the branches because they wouldn't be gathering and throwing themselves into the fire. Who are "they"?

Well, the vine illustration in John 15 comes in the middle of an *inclusio* or sermon that really began back in John 13:34-35. There, Jesus launched the sermon with this overall thesis statement:

^{NKJ} **John 13:34** "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. ³⁵ By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

I believe the "they" in John 15:6 refers back to the "all" of John 13:35. The "all" represents all the unbelievers in the world who are looking at believers, checking for fruit—checking for signs of love. If they see no fruit in a believer or branch, then they throw it into the fire.

What does it mean to be thrown into the fire? It cannot be the fires of hell because unbelievers have no authority to throw us there, and we believers are secure in Christ. I think to be thrown into the fire means to be counted as useless or good for nothing in the eyes of unbelievers. Withered, detached branches—branches that are not abiding in the vine are commonly thrown on the trash heap and burned because they are worthless. Withered, detached branches say, "Come to Jesus," and unbelievers respond, "Why would I ever want to be like you?"

Let me illustrate this by telling the tale of two believers or two branches.

a. One branch is abiding in Christ. Because he is abiding, he is fruitful. That is, he is loving others as Christ loved him. As a result, this branch proves to the unbelieving world that he belongs to Christ. As a result, God is glorified in the eyes of these unbelievers. This is what Jesus is talking about in John 15:8 when He says,

^{NKJ} **John 15:8** "By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples."

The word, "be" carries the idea of "prove to be," and is, in fact, translated that way in some Bibles (See Radmacher, *Salvation*, 214). This abiding branch is engaging his world with acts of love that show off Jesus. This extraordinary love shocks his neighbors, his coworkers, and his friends into wondering what this Jesus thing is all about because the abiding branch has proven that Jesus makes a difference. The unbelieving world is drawn to this remarkable, extravagant love. It's an irresistible magnet that draws unbelievers into Christ's church. God is glorified.

b. But there's another branch. This branch is not abiding in Christ. Because he is not abiding, he is not fruitful. He is not loving others as Christ loved Him. As a result, this branch provides no evidence to the unbelieving world that Christ is the real deal. In fact, by his failure to abide, this branch portrays Jesus as silly and irrelevant in the eyes of unbelievers. As a result, God is not glorified, but trivialized. So, even though this

branch has a fish on his car, even though this branch goes to church every Sunday, even though this branch is a true believer, the unbelieving world blows him off as a whiney, moralistic, bigoted, self-righteous, merciless, hypocritical, brain-dead blowhard who is cast on the trash heap and burned along with all the other subgroups of society who have their own worthless, self-serving agendas. That's exactly what unbelievers do with believers who do not abide, who do not love, . . .

^{NKJ} **John 15:6** “. . . they gather them and throw *them* into the fire, and they are burned.”

I suspect that's exactly what's happening in America. We believers can cluck our tongues at the bad press Christians get, and we can shake our fingers at how antagonistic our culture is becoming toward Christians, all the while ignoring the possibility that just maybe we're being burned for our own failure to abide.

c. So, which branch are you? Abide or fried? Which branch will you choose to be today? Abide or fried? You decide. Abide or fried.

d. You see, the message of grace and assurance does not remove a healthy fear of God from the Christian life. It merely puts it in its proper perspective. As believers, adopted into God's forever family by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, our membership in God's forever family is never at risk. But there are still consequences associated with abiding by the family rules.