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## FRUITFULNESS: THE REJECTED BRANCHES

**In Jn. 15, there are two verses in the allegory of the Vine and the branches which cast a somber, admonitory tone over the passage.** They are somewhat difficult to understand, and the lessons and implications which people have drawn from them are greatly varied, usually according to the reader's theological orientation. In any study of fruitfulness, and certainly in any honest study of Jn. 15, these verses must be dealt with. Diligent students of the Bible, moreover, will not be satisfied with merely receiving and accepting an answer because it fits in with their position. They will want to investigate the study procedure involved in coming to such a conclusion. They will want to understand and evaluate the position to determine why they believe what they believe. **These verses, of course, are verses 2 and 6, which refer to the branches which are rejected for their fruitlessness.**

Before attempting to make any conclusions, we must first gather whatever data we can. On the surface, what information are we given which helps to identify who or what these branches are? What do we know about them?

**(1.) Jesus said, in vs. 2, that these branches are "in" Him, the True Vine.** That is, **they are somehow joined to, or identified with, Him.** The preposition used here can be variously translated as "in, on, at, by, near, before, among, within, or with". The idea communicated by this word is the relationship of location of the branches to the Vine. These branches are somehow in the Vine, i.e., they have a relationship to the Vine such that they are joined to Him in some way. In vs. 5, we are told that the disciples themselves are branches, i.e., they also have a relationship to Jesus. They are also "in" Him in a similar way. How did these branches come to be in Him? We are not told. We are left, at this point, with the fact that they are identified with Him, associated with Him, in some kind of relationship.

**(2.) These branches are not bearing fruit.** Not only do they not have mature fruit, **there is no sign of the process of fruit-development in them at all.** The word in Greek is a present tense active participle, meaning that the branch is continually not bearing fruit. The emphasis is upon the lack of even the process of fruitbearing. Fruitbearing is the main purpose for the branch's existence in the Vine (vss. 4,8,16). Furthermore, it is the mark of the true disciple (vs. 8). It is the demonstration of the reality of the life-relationship of the branch to the Vine. The *absence* of the fruitbearing process, conversely, is the mark of a defective relationship between branch and Vine. It shows the lack of life-flow between the Vine and the branch. **Finally, fruitlessness is the reason given for the removal of the branch** (vs. 2). It is contradictory to the purpose for its very existence as a branch of the Vine. Hence, it is removed.

**(3.) A branch is rejected if it is one which does not abide in Jesus** (vs. 6). Abiding in Jesus is the relationship which is necessary for producing fruit (vss. 4,5). The fruitbearing ability of the branch is directly related to this continuing dependence upon the Vine. It is because this branch does not abide in, dwell in, remain in, continue in, or live in the Vine that it does not bear fruit. Somehow it is not living or dwelling in the True Vine, and yet somehow it is still "in Him". **Because it does not abide, and consequently bears no fruit, it is rejected, gathered up with other cast-off branches, and thrown into the fire.**

There are several variables which, when thought to be open to opinions of interpretation, make a definite, clear explanation of the passage elusive, at best. The first is the concept of being "in" Jesus. Is this referring to a Christian or a non-Christian? Is it possible to be a Christian and then fall away? This latter question immediately brings passages such as Heb. 6:4-12 and II Pet. 2 to mind. These passages also have been interpreted variously by different theological camps. Some interpret these passages as referring to actual born again Christians who fall away. Others explain these as ones who had a great familiarity with the truths and power of Jesus Christ, ones who even identified themselves as Christians because of an intellectual persuasion or emotional experience, but ones, however, who never were actually

regenerated themselves. These passages do not really solve the difficulty of Jn. 15. Rather, they are passages very much like this one. Because they, too, have a long history of being variously interpreted and debated, they do not necessarily add clarity to this particular passage. We may profit more in examining the passage more closely, or in looking at other passages that may shed some light on what Jesus could have meant.

**On a practical level, the message is quite clear: It is not beneficial to be a branch that is rejected.** It is also quite clear that, no matter how one comes to be a cast-off branch, **the safest course is to concentrate on deepening your relationship with Jesus.** Staying with Him, drawing your life and purpose from your interaction with Him, will produce “much fruit” (vs. 5). Be certain to act on the leadings and promptings of the Spirit within you. The essence of the fruitbearing process is the flow and expression of the inner life.

Father, the reality of individuals, families, and even nations being rejected by You is difficult to understand, yet it is there in Scripture. We know it happens. O God, keep us close, so that we might not dry up and wither, and seem to become fruitless.

#### **FOR MEDITATION: John 15:2.**

“Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it, that it may bear more fruit.”

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### **Freedom to Change Under the Leadership of the Spirit**

**“We must speak where the Scripture has spoken. But let us notice that we must also respect the silences.** God could have added one more chapter to the book of Acts and given us much more detail. He did not. We must believe not only that what is said is -- by God’s will and inspiration -- final, but also that *where there is silence we are granted freedom under the leadership of the Holy Spirit.*

**“If the church will allow freedom for changing situations, churches will be here until Jesus comes back.** But let us not mistake historical accidents and what is sociologically comfortable out of our past for God’s absolutes in the *forms* that individual churches take in individual situations. **Can we not believe that the Holy Spirit will lead us in the area of the silences?** Is it not true that we Bible-believing Christians often cease being Bible-believing when we begin to teach that what is sociologically comfortable is equal to God’s absolutes? I suggest that many of us do it all the time.

“The church has a place, but not if it ossifies. I think too often we are killing ourselves. **We fail to distinguish between the things that are open to change from those that are not.** We must make ourselves available to the existential leading of the Holy Spirit. Often that is not the way we think, especially those of us who are conservative. **Refusal to consider change under the direction of the Holy Spirit is a spiritual problem, not an intellectual problem.** There is a bad concept of old-fashionedness and there is a good concept. The good concept is that some things never change because they are eternal truths. These we must hold to tenaciously and give up nothing of this kind of old-fashionedness. But there is a bad sense. **If we evangelicals become old fashioned in the bad sense, we must understand the problem is not basically intellectual, but spiritual.** It shows we have lost our way, we have lost contact with the leading of the Holy Spirit. **There must be a freedom under the leadership of the Holy Spirit to change what needs to be changed, to meet the changing needs in that time and in the moment of that situation.** Otherwise, I do not believe that there is a place for the church as a living church. We will be ossified, and *we will shut Christ out of the church. His Lordship and the leadership of the Holy Spirit will become only words.*”

Abridged and adapted from The Church At The End Of The 20th Century by Francis A. Schaeffer (Crossway Books:IL 1970) Pp. 73-76. Bold face and italics added for emphasis.