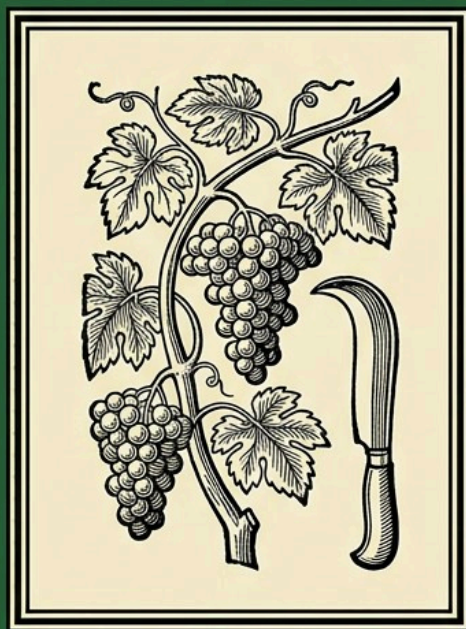


THE TRIAL OF A CHRISTIAN'S GROWTH IN MORTIFICATION

THOMAS GOODWIN



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ABOUT THIS BOOK



A penetrating Puritan case-of-conscience treatise built around Christ's parable of the Vine in John 15. Goodwin examines how believers can **discern genuine spiritual growth** — distinguishing true fruit from counterfeit, true branches from empty professors. Drawing on the imagery of purging and vivification, he addresses **mortification of remaining corruption**, the difference between hypocrites and true believers, and the marks of authentic dependence on Christ. Warm, searching, and pastorally rich, it is written for "young men" in grace still learning to judge their own condition before God.



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TITLE PAGE



The trial of a Christian's growth in mortification, or purging out corruption. Vivification, or bringing forth more fruit.

A treatise addressing this question: how to discern our growth in grace, offering some helps for rightly judging it — by resolving temptations, clearing up mistakes, and answering questions about spiritual growth.

Together with some observations upon the parable of the vine, John 15:1-2.

By Thomas Goodwin, Bachelor of Divinity.

2 Corinthians 7:1.

Let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.

London, printed by J. G. for R. Dawlman, 1650.

TO THE READER



This treatise — The Trial of a Christian's Growth — was previously printed while I was away from my home country. Because of that, it had many imperfections and inconsistencies in both style and content. Now that I have returned, by God's good hand upon me, I have worked to correct them. Through some changes to the method and structure, and by cutting out redundancies, I have brought it into better shape and made it more consistent with my other works.

The aim and approach of this subject — Growth — is not primarily doctrinal, nor is it simply an exhortation about the importance of growth in general (much has already been written by others on that). Rather, the proper goal of this work is to resolve a case of conscience, just as my two other preceding treatises have done: namely, how to discern our growth, and how to answer the most common temptations about it. Because these three treatises are of the same kind — all belonging to that branch of theology we call practical divinity — I have in this new edition placed them together, which is the only change I have made to the collection, though they were originally published separately.

If this work falls short of the deeper and more mature experience of growth found in those the Apostle John calls fathers — elderly Christians who, like Enoch, have walked long with God — I have still hoped that you who are young men (as he also calls the middle stage of Christian life) may find many things here that help you rightly understand and judge your own growth. This may free you from many mistakes and from the temptations that come with them, which are especially common at that stage of the Christian life (2 Corinthians 10:14). I do not claim to write to you fathers — that was never my intention. I wrote and preached this when I was young in years, and far younger still in grace and experience. And I would not, as even the great Apostle would not, stretch myself beyond the measure God has given me — a measure that may yet reach you who are young men, even if more mature Christians have long since grown beyond it.

May the God of grace and peace grant us and all His children the spirit to speak the truth in love — especially in these divisive times — so that we may grow up into Him in all things, who is the Head, even Christ (Ephesians 4:15).

April 26, 1643. Thomas Goodwin.

AN INTRODUCTION



John 15:1-2: I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman. Every branch in me that bears not fruit, He takes away: and every branch that bears fruit, He purges it, that it may bring forth more fruit.

This is a rich and fruitful parable, spreading out into many branches. Under the pleasant image of a vine — fitting, since the disciples had just shared in the fruit of the vine at the Last Supper — Christ elegantly describes Himself in relation to His visible church and the condition of His apostles. In them, He also speaks of all visible professors of faith until the end of the world, showing through this picture what His Father intended to do with Judas, who had just gone out to betray Him. As with all other unfruitful branches like Judas, the Father would cut them off and throw them into the fire. But He also encourages the remaining disciples, and all other fruitful branches, promising that they would continue to abide in Him and bring forth more fruit. The parable has three parts: 1. A vine — the fairest of all, in verse 1. 2. A husbandman — the most careful of all. 3. The purpose of planting this vine: fruitfulness. First, this vine, like all vines, has two kinds of branches: 1. Those that are green but bear no true fruit, producing nothing but leaves. 2. Those that bear fruit, in verse 2. Accordingly, the hus-

bandman has two distinct duties toward each kind — to cut off and to prune — which is a clever wordplay: to lop and to cut off. First, to cut off completely those that are entirely unfruitful, who are then cast out, wither, and are gathered and thrown into the fire — as described in verses 2 and 6. This is what He intended to do with Judas. Second, to prune — only to trim back the excess growth and overly long shoots of the fruitful branches, which they are prone to develop. Third, His goal in all of this is that fruit, and more fruit, would be brought forth. This is the purpose for which He planted this vine, and the purpose behind pruning its branches. Being frustrated of this in those unfruitful ones is why He cuts them off entirely. Urging the disciples toward fruitfulness was one of the main purposes for which Christ used this parable, and everything in the following verses points to that end, either as means or motives to fruitfulness. First, as means: He assures them of their standing in grace (verse 3) — assurance is a means of fruitfulness. He speaks of purging them by His word in the same verse: 'You are clean through the word I have spoken to you' — this is a further means He employs. 3. He impresses on them their inability to do anything without Him (verse 5). 4. Therefore, to abide in Him and draw from Him (verse 5). 5. And to let His word abide in them — by which He Himself will abide in them, through which they will continue to be purged, and so become fruitful. The motives are: 1. If not, they know their fate — into the fire (verse 6). 2. If they do, their prayers will be granted (verse 7). 3. Hereby His Father is glorified (verse 8). 4. They will show themselves to be His disciples (verse 8). 5. They will continue in His love, He loving them as dearly as the Father loves Him (verses 9 and 10). And so you have the summary of the whole parable. The main subject I am aiming

at in this passage is the central practical question that troubles many sincere souls: how a Christian may discern his growth, both in purging out corruptions and in the increase of grace and its fruit. Whatever other rich observations grow from this passage — and this vine does yield many — we will briefly note them as we pass, but only long enough to open up the imagery and draw from it the strength it lends to that main subject which I chiefly intend.

OBSERVATION 1: HOW CHRIST IS A VINE, AND ONLY THE TRUE VINE



First, Christ is a vine. Let me explain this. Adam was indeed a vine, planted in Paradise to bear all mankind upon him, but he turned wild — he proved not to be the true vine. God planted him (to use the language of Jeremiah 2:21) as a noble vine, a holy and pure seed, but he degenerated, and so has everyone grafted onto him, producing nothing but grapes of Sodom, as Isaiah says.

But second, God the Father had many branches of His chosen ones growing by nature on this cursed stock of Adam. Yet He had ordained them, as verse 16 indicates, to bring forth fruit — that is, to spring up and spread through the earth in every age, and then to be transplanted to heaven, the paradise appointed for them. The earth is only a nursery for them for a time. Therefore, the Father appointed His own Son to be a new root, into whom He would transplant them. He ordained Christ to be the trunk, the body, and the chief branch from which they would all grow. This is why He is called the root of David in Revelation 22, and that righteous branch in Jeremiah 22:6.

Third, the Father planted this root here on earth with us, clothing Him with a human nature — a weak and ordinary outer body like ours — so that both root and branches would share the same nature and be of one kind. This human nature He filled with His Spirit (as with juice and sap) without measure, so that Christ might bear fruit and grow into all those branches appointed to be in Him, by communicating that same Spirit to them.

And fourth, although Christ was in Himself the most glorious of all who ever lived on earth, yet in relation to the vast number of branches He was to bear, He chose to be a vine. The vine is of all trees the lowest, the weakest, and the plainest in its outward form. But of all trees, it is the most abundant in branches, spreading out and running its trunk into branches more than any other. Those branches are, of all branches on any tree, the most fruitful. It is therefore called the fruitful vine (Psalm 128:3). For that reason alone Christ chose this comparison as fitting His purpose, and in doing so He showed His love: just as He humbled Himself to the lowest condition for our salvation, so He stooped to the most ordinary illustration for our instruction. And yet He makes clear that no vine on earth is worthy to be compared to Him or even used as a true likeness of Him.

He, and He alone, is the true vine — and that is the second observation.

Take those most excellent qualities of a vine for which the comparison is made — especially its fruitfulness in both branches and fruit — and it is only a shadow of what is in Him. Just as God alone is 'I Am That I Am,' and all other things have only a shadow of being, so Christ alone possesses in their true and full nature all the excellencies He is compared to. So in the same way He is called

bread indeed (John 6:55), and in verse 32, the true bread from heaven. Manna and all other food, and all the sweetness found in food, were only a shadow of what He provides. He surpasses and exceeds everything He is compared to, and they are all but shadows of Him (Hebrews 10:1).

First, then, no vine was ever so fruitful. All our fruit is found in Him (Hosea 12). If you abide in Me, you will bring forth much fruit. He has the nourishment to supply you with every grace, to fill you with all the fruits of righteousness. If the branches lack anything, it is for lack of faith in themselves to draw from Him — not for lack of sap in Him.

Second, He has been this way at all times and in every age — always flourishing. This root never withers; it is never dry or empty of sap; it is never winter with Christ. Every branch, as the second verse says — every one that has ever borne fruit in any age — bears all its fruit in Him. Branches in Him fear no drought (Jeremiah 17:8).

Third, for breadth of spreading, there is no vine like this one. As the Psalmist says (Psalm 80:11-12), He sends out His boughs to the sea and His branches to the rivers. All the earth is, has been, or will be filled with them.

This is meant to persuade us to take Christ alone and make Him our all in all — because in Him all excellencies are found in their fullness. All created things together are not enough to serve as comparisons to describe Him. Even when they do, in part, for some particular quality that is most excellent in them, they are still only shadows (Hebrews 10:1). He alone is the truth; He is the true light (John 1). John the Baptist, Moses, and every other light was

only twilight, only a shadow. So He is the true bread, the true vine — He possesses in full reality the sweetness, the comfort, and the excellencies that all these things suggest. The same can be said of all the relationships He has taken on. He alone is a true Father, a true husband, and so on. The love and tenderness found in all other fathers and husbands is only a shadow of what is found in Him.

OBSERVATION 2: HOW THE FATHER IS THE HUSBANDMAN



Just as Christ is a vine, so His Father is the husbandman — and as remarkable a husbandman as Christ is a vine.

First, the Father is the very root of the vine itself — which no human husbandman is to any vine he tends. This is why the one who is the vine calls the husbandman His Father: 'My Father is the husbandman.' This vine springs from the Father's own being by eternal generation, for as John 14:20 traces our origin: 'I am in My Father, and you in Me.' And John 5:26: 'The Father has life — original life — in Himself, and gives it to the Son, and the Son to us.' From there spring living fruits, the fruits of righteousness.

2. He is the one who grafts and plants all the branches into this vine. In Isaiah 60:21 He calls them His righteous people, 'the branch of My planting,' the work of My hands. Other husbandmen simply wait to see what branches their vines naturally produce, but God appoints who and how many shall be the branches, and gives them to His Son and grafts them into Him.

3. He appoints what fruit, and how much fruit these branches shall bear, and accordingly gives the increase — something no ordinary husbandman can do. 'Paul may plant, and Apollos may wa-

ter, but God alone gives the increase' (1 Corinthians 3:7). Though Christ merited it, the Father decreed each person's measure of fruitfulness.

4. He is the most diligent husbandman who ever lived, for He knows and daily observes every branch and all their fruit. As the text says, 'Every branch that brings not forth fruit, He takes away' — therefore He knows who bears fruit and who does not. He knows His own people personally (2 Timothy 2:19); not one person could slip in without a wedding garment without being noticed by Him.

5. He is the most careful — daily pruning His vine, as the second verse says. As Cato observed, 'No possession requires more labor' — vineyards need as much care as any other crop, and more. Grain, once sown, grows, ripens, and reaches perfection on its own, with the farmer sleeping or waking, knowing not how, as Christ says. But vines must be tended, supported, sheltered, and pruned nearly every day.

Of all trees, God gives the most care to His vines, and regards them more than all the rest of the world.

This is meant to lead us to honor the Father in all the works of our salvation as much as we honor the Son. If Christ is the vine, His Father means to be the husbandman. It also teaches us to honor all three persons in every saving work, for in each of them they hold a distinct office. The Father has a hand not only in election but also in sanctification, which is what this parable is about. If Christ is the root that supplies the sap from which all fruit grows, the Father is the husbandman who waters the vine, gives the increase, prunes the branches, and is the source of the life that

Christ channels to us. Then the Spirit also has His own work and influence — He is the sap itself. Though He is not explicitly named in this parable of the vine, He is implied, and He appears in all the fruits that are brought forth, which are therefore called 'the fruits of the Spirit' (Galatians 5). None of the three persons will be left out of any relationship or any work that is for our salvation. What an astonishing thing — that three such great persons should have a joint care for our salvation and sanctification, while we ourselves neglect it! That they should be so devoted, while we are so negligent and unfruitful! If they do so much for us, what should we not be doing for ourselves?

Be careful about your words, thoughts, ways, affections, and desires — all of which are the fruit of your souls. God takes notice of everything. He walks through His garden every day and looks closely to see how many raw, unripe, halfhearted performances hang on each branch — how many prayers and the like. He observes what gum of pride, what mere leaves, what excessive shoots are present, which are rotten boughs and which are sound. He goes up and down with His pruning knife in hand, cutting and trimming where He sees things amiss. He lifts up all your leaves and sees what fruit is underneath, and He deals with each person accordingly.

When the church is in distress or suffering, go to Him who is the husbandman, for such is the usual condition of this vine spread across the face of the earth. Complain as they do in Psalm 80:12: 'Why have You broken down her hedges, so that all who pass by may pluck her?' — 'the boar out of the wood does waste it.' Tell Him that the hogs are in His vineyard and are doing great damage and destruction. Remind Him that He is the husbandman, who

should be caring for it. So they go on to pray, 'Return, we beseech You, O God of hosts, look down from heaven, behold and visit this vine, and the vineyard which Your right hand has planted' (Psalm 80:14-15).

OBSERVATION 3: TWO SORTS OF BRANCHES — FRUITFUL AND UNFRUITFUL



This vine has branches of two kinds — fruitful and unfruitful — and that is the third thing to observe.

In this, our Savior follows the comparison accurately, for experience shows the same to be true of real vines. Writers on viticulture have observed it and accordingly distinguish vine branches into those that produce nothing but leaves and those that produce fruit.

The unfruitful branches are those who profess to be in Christ — to themselves and to others — and receive some outward life from Him, but no true fruit. Because of their profession, they are called branches; because of their emptiness, they are called unfruitful ones.

The only question is how those who prove unfruitful can be said to be branches and to be in Christ — 'Every branch in me,' etc.

There are many comparisons of Christ, each one corresponding to a different relationship He holds with His church. Some serve to express one thing about Him, some another. The image of a vine

presents Him only in relation to how He spread Himself into a visible church on earth through the profession of His name. Considered in this way, He may have many branches that are unfruitful. But the image of a head over all the family in heaven and earth expresses His relation only to that invisible company — His mystical church — which together makes up that general assembly spoken of in Hebrews 12, called His fullness in Ephesians 1. In keeping with the vine comparison — which applies to Christ in this broader sense as a root to both true and false professors — the language about the Father's role also fits. He is not called a vine-dresser or vineyard tiller in the strict sense, as in Luke 13:7, but simply the husbandman, meaning at large. This indicates not only that specific care He has for true believers who are real branches of this vine (though it includes that), but also the more general providence He exercises over others. This is because some of these branches of the vine are, to God, no more than anyone else outside the church, and of no greater standing with Him. The Father's relationship to such branches runs parallel to Christ's: those to whom Christ is Head, the Father is a Father; those to whom Christ is merely a vine, the Father is merely a husbandman — whose role involves cutting off such branches just as much as pruning and caring for the others.

Christ does not count the unfruitful branches as true branches, for in verse 5 He addresses the disciples present with Him — after Judas had gone out, as John 13:30 makes clear — and calls only them the branches. He repeats it there with the added emphasis: 'I am the vine, you are the branches.' This implies that just as He is the true vine, these only are the true branches. The others He calls only 'as a branch' in verse 6 — 'He is cast forth as a branch' — giv-

ing them the title to better illustrate what the Father does with such people, just as a vine-dresser does with useless branches. But they themselves are only like branches, not truly and actually such.

The expression that most seems to support their being real branches is in verse 2, where He says, 'Every branch in me that bears not fruit.' But the phrase 'in me' can just as well — and more naturally — be understood as referring to not bearing fruit in Him, rather than to truly being a branch in Him. The meaning would then be: they are branches that do not bring forth fruit in me. Though they do some good, it is not fruit; if so, it is not fruit in me — though it may be from me and from my assistance. So His point is not so much to declare that they are branches in Him as to say they do not bring forth fruit in Him. This is indeed one of the key distinctions between true and unsound branches, and one of the main points of the parable. The Syriac translation supports this reading: 'Every branch which in me brings not forth fruit.' There is also this reason why He never counted them as true branches at all: the very difference God makes between them and the fruitful ones is that the fruitful ones He purges so they will bring forth more fruit. He does not let true branches run so far into sin as to become entirely unfruitful. But the unfruitful ones He takes away entirely — so true branches were never permanently unfruitful.

The practical use of this is to urge everyone who professes to be in Christ to examine whether they are truly genuine branches of this true vine. In this land, Christ is spread out into a visibly fair and flourishing vine. But if we ministers were able, like this husbandman, to lift the leaves of formal profession and look with His eyes, we would find only a few truly genuine branches even in the most flourishing congregations — just as Isaiah foretold there

would be in Israel (Isaiah 17:5-6). Like the gleaned grapes — two or three at the top of the highest bough, four or five on the outermost fruitful branches.

As a general guide to discerning whether you are a true branch, consider this: it is union with Christ that makes a person a branch. People are counted branches of Christ because of some kind of union with Him. Whatever the nature of their union with Him, such also is their communion with Him — and accordingly such branches they are, and such is their fruit.

1. Some — and indeed most — are united to Him only by the external tie of the outward ordinances, such as the obligation made in baptism. They are attached to Him by no more than many grafts are to their stocks when they fail to take hold: merely bound there by a thread, never actually growing. Their communion with Him is entirely external — they keep partaking of the outward ordinances but receive no sap or inward influence, no inward work of the Spirit, no stirring of genuine affection. Their fruit matches accordingly. What you find on them is nothing more than what grows in the wilderness among unbelievers — the fruit of natural decency, modesty, and moral honesty produced by an awakened conscience. But there is nothing that an inward sap from Christ would normally produce. Merely civil people are not true branches. Look at Christ the root and see what fruits most abounded in Him — fruits of holiness. Therefore, if such people were true branches, the same would abound in them, for every tree produces according to its kind.

2. There are some — living within the church — into whose hearts Christ begins to send some sap of His Spirit, quickening them with good impulses and stirring up some warmth of affection

through the word and sacraments. This causes them to bud out into good inner intentions and outward good beginnings. But since this is not a communication of the Spirit that sanctifies and transforms the branch into the same nature as the root, it ends up being nipped in the bud, as happened with the stony ground, and the sap is pushed back in — like early blossoms that appear in the February sun only to be killed by an April frost. Many people, while young and their affections are still fresh and tender, are worked upon and begin to bud. But the mockery of others nips them, and their own desires draw the sap a different direction — toward hopes of advancement and the pleasures of sin. So these buds wither and fall off, and the Spirit withdraws Himself entirely back into the root.

Again, 3. there are some — like the thorny ground — in whom this inward sap is communicated not in a spiritually renewing way, but in a greater measure than in the previous group. It remains longer, spreads further, and these become very green branches. They are recognized as true by the people of God themselves, just as Judas was by the apostles. This is why they appear outwardly like genuine believers — for how else could they be said to be cast out in verse 16, having had some fruit that commended them to God's people and gained them acceptance? God's people judge trees by their fruit. Nor is their fruit merely outward — like ornamental golden apples in silver frames, purely for show. They have a sap that puts genuine life into what they do, through which they actually bear fruit. Otherwise, how could they be said to wither in verse 6, which describes a decay of inward moisture and outward vitality? These also have some kind of union with Christ as with a Lord (2 Peter 2:1), since He ascended to bestow gifts even on the

rebellious (Psalm 68:18), enabling them to render Him some service in His vineyard. But they are not united to Christ as to a Head. Nor is the spirit they receive from Him the spirit of adoption. Judas was such a branch — recognized by the disciples who did not know he was false, and who surely had at first some inward sap of gifts from Christ to fit him for the ministry, having been sent out as an apostle to preach. Christ had him especially in view in this passage.

For a more specific comparison of these branches and their fruits — it is not my purpose here to develop a comprehensive treatment of all the differences between temporary believers and true believers. This root is not large enough to bear all of those distinctions, which are many. I will only explain the differences the text itself affords, because they are directly in our path and will further open the words.

1. What the unfruitful bring forth is not true fruit — the Holy Spirit does not give it that name. They are said here not to bring forth fruit. Hosea 10:1 throws clear light on this and gives the reason: Israel is there called an empty vine that brings forth fruit to herself. There is an apparent contradiction in calling it an empty vine while also saying it brings forth fruit. And these unfruitful branches do not produce merely leaves or good words — they produce good works and good actions, and those with life in them. This is why Jude 12 says their fruit withers, just as they themselves are said to wither in verse 6. In the same way that Israel is called an empty vine despite having fruit, these branches are said to bring forth no fruit at all. The meaning in both cases is the same: a thing is called empty when it lacks what is proper to it and ought to be in it — just as wells are called empty when they are not full of

water, even though they may be full of air. So they are called an empty vine, and these branches are said to have no fruit, because what they produce is not the kind that should grow on them — not the kind that is proper to the root they seem to be connected to. This is why Hebrews 6:7 adds the phrase 'fitting herbs,' or fitting fruit — meaning such as should grow there. So Luke 3:8 calls for fruit 'worthy' of repentance, or they would be cut down — meaning fruit suitable to true penitents, answerable to what genuine repentance requires. As we say a man carries himself worthy of his office when he lives up to what is required of him. The passage in Hosea further explains the real reason why their fruits — though outwardly alive, even called goodness in Hosea 6:4 — are not counted as fitting fruit, and therefore not as fruit at all. It is this: all their fruit, whether good or bad, is brought forth to themselves. That is, the purposes that draw up the sap and push it out into fruit are entirely self-directed — they do not bring forth fruit principally to God and for Him. All their prayers, all their affections in holy duties, if examined — all the motives that drive everything they do — will be found to come from themselves. Though the assistance they receive to do what they do is more than their own, their ends go no higher than themselves, and so they employ whatever God gives them entirely for themselves. The end for which a true branch bears fruit is that God might be glorified. Romans 7:8 says that when we are married to Christ we bring forth fruit to God — which stands in contrast to bringing forth fruit for oneself. Christ presses this same point as the great motive to fruitfulness in verse 8: 'Hereby is My Father glorified, that you bring forth much fruit.' Now, whom will this move? Into whose affections will such an argument draw up sap and quicken them? Only those whose hearts

make God's glory their ultimate end — and so all true branches do. Otherwise Christ would have offered this motive to them in vain. And as this end makes their works true fruit, so where this end is missing, nothing brought forth deserves the name of fruit. It is not worthy fruit, as the Baptist says — not fitting fruit for the husbandman to receive, as Hebrews indicates — not such as ought to grow on that tree. They should be trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that He might be glorified (Isaiah 61:3). Moreover, it is not fruit fitting for the root it appears to grow upon — that is, it is not like what Christ Himself brought forth, since He did all things that His Father might be glorified. This is why He says in exhorting them to fruitfulness in verse 8: 'If you do likewise, you will be My disciples.' And further: it is not fitting fruit for the husbandman's taste, since it is only right that 'he that plants a vineyard should eat of the fruit of it' (1 Corinthians 9:7). In fruit, above all things, we value the taste and prize the flavor. Eve first considered that the fruit was good for food, and then that it was pleasant to the eye (Genesis 3). It is not just the sap inside fruit that makes it acceptable — crab apples are as full of sap as good apples. It is not the greenness, the color, or the size, but the flavor that is the chief excellence, though those other qualities, when joined with a good flavor, make it more desirable. So even if your performances are full of life and feeling, and frequent and lengthy, yet if they taste of nothing but self-serving ends, God does not value them. It is the end that gives the flavor, making them true fruit and acceptable to God.

The second difference this text presents is that the unfruitful do not bring forth their fruit in Christ. The Syriac translation reads it this way, making the sense: they bring not forth fruit in Me. So

the phrase 'in me' refers not so much to their being branches in Him as to their not bearing fruit in Him. This appears to have been Christ's meaning, since His scope in this parable is to show that He is the root of sanctification — that not only the habitual capacity for grace, but every act of grace and every performance of it, comes from Him: 'Without Me you can do nothing,' verse 5. He therefore urges His disciples to draw all from Him and to abide in Him. When He speaks of the unfruitful branches in verse 6, what He here calls not bearing fruit in Me He expresses there as not abiding in Me — treating that as the cause of their not bringing forth fruit in Him. Indeed, the primary meaning of the phrase 'Abide in Me,' as is evident from verses 4 and 5, is to depend upon Him for the bringing forth of fruit and to draw strength from Him by faith. There is therefore this essential defect in the work of such people: they do not do everything in that dependence upon Christ — the kind of dependence a branch has on the root in bearing its fruit. For, my brethren, you must understand this: just as it is essential to true sanctification to do all for another as your end — namely, for God — so it is equally essential to do all in the strength of another as your sole helper, namely Christ, who works all in you. Through His strength, Paul says, I am able to do all things — and nothing without it. The life we live is by faith, and it is not I, but Christ who lives in me. Therefore we find both these joined in Philippians 1:11: 'The fruits of righteousness by Jesus Christ, to the praise and glory of God.' The latter — to the glory of God — is the final cause; the former — by Jesus Christ — is the efficient cause. Both are necessary to true sanctification. For just as we honor the husbandman by making Him our end, so we honor the root by doing all in Him and from Him. Temporary believers do all primarily

for themselves and all as though it were from themselves. Just as they do not make God their end, so they do not make Christ their root. Some explain the phrase in the parable of the stony ground (Luke 8:13), when it is said they have no root — though I think it also means a lack of the habits of grace infused within, since it adds 'no root in themselves,' and Job calls the root of the matter that was in him — as meaning they do not draw their strength to do what they do from Christ by faith and from their union with Him. The reason is this: they are never emptied of themselves — which is the root we all grow upon by nature — whether in terms of their own ends or their own sense of ability. We must all be brought to nothing in ourselves, both in regard to self-serving aims and in regard to confidence in our own ability to work. Until our hearts are inwardly taught the lesson that we are not sufficient in ourselves, we will not go outside ourselves to do all in Christ. Nothing Christ pressed more earnestly on His disciples' hearts than this principle at His departure, as verses 4 and 5 show. And it is as hard for our nature to live outside itself and draw everything from another, as it is to not live for itself but for another. We are full of our own strength just as we are full of our own ends. Though these unfruitful branches do in fact receive all their strength from Christ — so that everything they do that is good is from Him — they do not honor Christ in receiving it by doing all as in His strength. They do not do it as though they were in Him. They receive everything, yet they work with it as if it were their own stock, and so they boast, as the Apostle says, as if they had not received it. And so though the sap and vitality that stirs them is truly and fully from Christ in an efficient sense, they may still be said to bring forth fruit in themselves. They neither draw it nor receive it

by faith, nor do they act in faith upon the strength they have received, as those who are moved by Christ and work all in Christ. Instead they act as if everything flows from their own root. It is like the ivy: though it wraps around the oak and receives much sap from it, which it draws into itself, it produces all its berries by virtue of its own root rather than as in the oak that sustains and supplies it. But a true believer brings forth fruit in Christ as a branch that is in and of the oak itself as its own root. From Him all their fruit is found (Hosea 14:8). They draw their assistance from Him. By contrast, the inward activity of an unsound branch is strengthened and supported by pride and self-confidence in one's own gifts and abilities, not derived by faith and maintained by trust in Christ's strength to act in them. As was said of the Corinthians that they reigned without us, says Paul, so I may say: temporary believers perform duties and pray, but as though without Christ. But all true believers are first emptied of their own strength and ability, and so they walk as those who can do nothing without Christ, as those unable to love or believe for one more moment without Him. Philippians 4:13: 'I am able to do all things, but through Christ who strengthens me.' This they lay down as a principle they live by in their hearts. This is what Christ presses on His disciples here as the main requirement and foundational principle of true sanctification: 'Without Me you can do nothing.' Therefore such a person is sensitive to that accursed self-sufficiency within him. He humbles himself for it and rebukes himself for it as though it were as serious a sin as any other. He humbles himself not only for the lack of life and energy that fell short in the duty performed, but also for having failed to honor Christ in the strength he received to do it with. But another person does not do

this. If he finds strength, energy, and vigor to perform and quickness in the performance, he asks nothing further. That poor man in the Gospel, recognizing his lack of faith and seeing that much unbelief remained in him, went to Christ for help: 'Lord, help my unbelief' — for he knew that Christ was to be the one who worked every degree of faith in him. A true believer, being thus aware of his own inability, also attributes everything to Christ when he has done something well. He honors Christ as the author of it within himself. He confesses in his heart, between Christ and himself, that it was not he but Christ who strengthened him: 'It is not I,' says the Apostle, 'but the grace of God in me — though I have labored more than they all.' But another person, though he receives everything, not being emptied of himself, boasts as though he had not received it. Like the Pharisee, who thanked God in words but in his heart attributed everything to himself. Such a person feels more full and elevated after he has done something, but the true branch feels more empty and humble. A true believer does not glory of himself as being in himself, but only as a man in Christ. He glories in what, as a man in Christ, he did — as Paul did, and no otherwise. So 2 Corinthians 12:2: 'I knew a man in Christ,' etc., 'of such a man I will glory, but of myself I will not glory.' And yet it was himself he was speaking of — but not as himself in himself, only as he was in Christ.

But if it is asked whether a Christian does this in every single act —

I answer: this is parallel to that other matter of making God one's end. Just as a man does not have to consciously think of his final destination at every single step of a journey — while still habitually keeping it in mind and staying on the road toward it — so

it is with doing all in Christ. It cannot be expected that in every act a person has such a distinct conscious turning to Christ. But at the beginning and start of more significant actions, he does exercise faith in this way. He also renews it often in the course of an action, and when he has finished, he honors Christ in his heart by giving Him the credit for all of it.

If the question is secondly whether every true believer, from his first conversion, consciously and knowingly draws all his power from Christ in this distinct way, doing everything in Him —

The answer is: 1. It may be that for all believers this principle of turning to Christ to enable their sanctification is not immediately as clearly understood as it has been for some. What is common and absolutely necessary to all believers as such is that their faith should look to Christ and take Him for salvation in the broad and general sense — embracing everything under that heading that must be done to save them. Many who are less instructed do this, even when they have not yet explicitly learned to turn to Him in each particular aspect of their salvation. It is quite likely that these very disciples — who were genuinely believers — did not have this particular principle of bringing forth all their fruit of holiness in Christ as their root so clearly revealed to them until this very sermon. They were ignorant of and inattentive to having recourse to Christ in many other particulars of equal importance. They had not yet distinctly and explicitly prayed in Christ's name, as it appears: 'Until now you have asked nothing in My name' (John 16:24). Nor had they exercised faith on Christ in all things as they had on God. That is why in John 14:1 He calls on them: 'You believe in God, believe also in Me.'

2. Many principles may be at work in a believer's heart that they habitually practice, yet those principles may be very much hidden from their own awareness — as was also the case with these disciples. In John 14:4, Christ says, 'The way to heaven you know,' yet in verse 5 Thomas says, 'How can we know the way?' And in verse 7, Christ says again that they knew both Him and the Father, yet in verse 8 Philip says, 'Lord, show us the Father' — speaking as though ignorant of Him. Christ rebukes him in verse 9 and tells him he had seen both Him and His Father. Those principles of atheism and unbelief that the Scriptures speak of so much — such as the silent conviction in the heart that there is no God — are the principles that drive and energize all the actions of wicked and worldly people. They are the encouragers and advisors behind every sin those people commit, and yet they are the least discerned of all corruptions in those people. They are rarely or never drawn out into clear, conscious thoughts or deliberate reflections. Instead they lie as assumed background beliefs, guiding people in their ways without their notice. So it can be with some of the opposing principles of faith — they may work quietly in the heart for a long time without being clearly discerned, until they are brought to the surface by the ministry of the word or some distinct instruction that makes that practice more clearly evident.

3. Union with Christ is not immediately made clear to all believers. While it remains dim and uncertain in their understanding, their communion with Him in this regard — their drawing of strength from Him in every act — likewise remains unclear and unperceived by them. Of these disciples Christ says in John 14:20 that in that day — when they received the Comforter more fully, of whose promise He had been speaking — they would know that

they were in Him and He in them. But this had not yet been clearly grasped by them. Similarly, that ongoing exchange between Christ and them — both for grace and for comfort — was not yet clearly discerned by them, though He continually maintained it by dispensing all grace and power to them.

And yet, 4. in the meantime, take even the lowest and most struggling believer, and he does these five things — which taken together are truly and effectively a bringing forth of fruit in Christ, even if he does not perceive it as such.

1. Their hearts are trained in a continual awareness of their own inadequacy and inability for any good thought or word in themselves. Poverty of spirit — seeing one's own nothingness in this respect — is the first evangelical grace (Matthew 5:1). If the opposing thought were to arise — that through the habits of grace already received they were able in themselves to do good — it would be quickly checked and disproved by their own experience. They know that whenever they were confident in their own strength, as Peter was, they were left to themselves and failed. They also experience the various stirrings of the Spirit moving in them as He pleases. When their sails are filled with His wind, they can do anything; but when He withdraws, they are wind-bound — all the habits of grace hoisted and ready, yet unable to move under their own power. This principle of self-emptiness — of habitually living by it — no worldly heart has or lives by.

And 2. for this assistance, they are likewise trained from the beginning to maintain a continual dependence on a power from above — without which they find they can do nothing. This power comes from God and from the Spirit of Christ. They renounce their own strength entirely, which is implicitly the same as this direct

intercourse with Christ and is really equivalent to it — even if they have not yet come to express it in exactly those terms, perhaps not having been taught it through the ministry of the word or by other means in that distinct way that some have. Yet in honoring the Spirit of Christ dwelling in them, they honor Christ, who sends that Spirit into their hearts. Just as in honoring the Son, Christ says we also honor the Father, even though our thoughts may sometimes be directed more distinctly toward one of the three persons than toward another.

And third, when they are once taught from the word that it is the duty of a Christian — and part of the life of faith — to live in Christ this way, bringing forth everything in Him, they come to recognize it clearly as essential to true fruitfulness. At that point their hearts instantly close with the truth of it, finding it perfectly consistent with the holy disposition of their own spirits, which are evangelically shaped to glorify Christ in every way that is revealed to them. There is an instinct, a readiness in their faith to make Christ their all in all in every particular respect as it is made known to them. So once this is revealed as one way to honor Christ, if they have previously gone on in confidence in their own graces, they do so no longer. They humble themselves as much for having robbed Christ of glory — or for having neglected Him by not explicitly turning to Him — as for any other sin.

And 4. though even after all this their union with Christ may still not be clear to them — so that their communion with Him in this respect remains dark as well — and they can neither discern that they have any real communion with His person nor explain how strength comes from Him, yet having been taught to draw all from Him as explained above, they maintain a continual renuncia-

tion of their own strength. They refuse every offer of assistance from any other source — including the kind their own gifts and abilities would provide — just as they refuse sinful desires or selfish ends. Their eyes remain fixed on Christ to work in them both the will and the deed. So by a faith of resting, or casting themselves on Him for strength in all things — just as they exercise faith toward Him for justification (Galatians 2:16) — they live by faith on the Son of God and maintain a continual recourse to Him in this way. Upon these acts of true faith being exercised toward Him, He — as it pleases Him to dispense grace — moves them, works in them, and acts all in them. Yet this is still not sensible enough to their awareness that they can clearly see the connection between cause and effect. They cannot trace it — cannot know that this strength comes from Christ — because their union with Him is still uncertain to them. Also because the power that works in believers is secret, like the influence of the heavens upon our bodies. That influence is as strong as medicine, yet so gently and secretly blends with the natural principles within us that its conveyance is imperceptible and hardly distinguishable from the ordinary workings of nature. This is why the Apostle prays for the Ephesians that their eyes may be opened to see the power that worked in them (Ephesians 1:18-19).

Yet even so, 5. their souls walk all this while by these two principles firmly rooted in them: first, that all good that is to be done must and does come from Christ, and from Him alone; and second, that if any good is done by them, it is worked by Him alone. These two convictions set their souls longing for nothing more than to know Christ in the power of His resurrection. And having walked in this self-emptiness and dependence on Christ — in a

kind of dark resting on Him — when their union with Him is at last made clear to them, they then acknowledge, as those in Isaiah 26, that He alone has worked all their works in them, that they are nothing and have done nothing. Before this clearer revelation of Christ — as Christ said to Peter, 'What I do now you do not know, but you shall know hereafter' — they did not know that Christ had been working all in them. But when they do come to know and discern it, they acknowledge it with the greatest exaltation of Him. They had reserved the glory for Him alone all along throughout that earlier period of emptiness — waiting, as Joab waited for David, until Christ comes more fully and sensibly into their hearts to place the crown of all upon His head.

I thought it worthwhile to add this, to make the point clear, lest any struggling souls be troubled by it.

DOCTRINE 4: IN THE MOST FRUITFUL BRANCHES THERE REMAIN CORRUPTIONS UNPURGED



The fourth doctrine is that in the most fruitful branches there remain corruptions that still need to be purged out.

This is only assumed in the text rather than directly stated, and I will only treat it as far as it prepares the way for what follows. What need is there to quote much Scripture to prove it? Turn to your own hearts — the best among you will find enough proof there.

Reasons.

First, so that God might more clearly display and confirm His justifying grace through Christ's righteousness, and make the truth of it plain to all our hearts. When the Apostle, long after his first conversion, was in the midst of that great and famous spiritual battle described in Romans 7 — being taken captive by a law and an army of sin within him, warring against the law of his mind — immediately after that agonized cry of 'Oh, wretched man that I am!' he breaks out in wonder at the grace of justification through Christ. His first words after the battle: 'Now there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ.' Notice that word now — that even

after such deep wounds and struggles, there should still be no condemnation. This greatly exalts this grace. He reasoned: if there was ever a moment I was in danger of condemnation, it was when these corruptions rose up and took me captive. And yet I find that God still forgives me and accepts me as fully as ever when I return to Him. Therefore I declare with wonder to all the world: God's justifying grace in Christ is exceedingly rich and abundant. Though there are many corruptions in those who are in Christ, there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ and walk after the Spirit — even though the flesh remains in them. This at once both confirms and magnifies our justification by Christ's righteousness alone.

It confirms our justification: how powerfully does the remaining of corruptions provide our theologians that great proof against the Catholics that we are not justified by works, and that our works are not perfect — which they so boldly claim, against their own experience — precisely because corruption taints even our best efforts, and our finest righteousness is but as a filthy cloth.

And as it confirms our justification, so it also magnifies it. How grace is magnified when not only all the sins and debts a person brought to Christ at first conversion are forgiven, but after many relapses and fresh bankruptcies, we are still set up again by free grace with a new supply. Though we run up new accounts every day, they are still paid. There is enough love, enough merit, to hold out and pardon us, even if we remained in this mixed condition of sinning to eternity. This greatly displays the overflowing abundance of this grace.

2. It greatly illustrates the grace of perseverance and the power of God in it, for perseverance is wholly attributed to the power of God. 1 Peter 1:5: 'You are kept — as with a garrison, as the word means — through the power of God to salvation.' If there were no serious danger of failing, such a mighty guard would not be needed. Nothing puts us in danger except the corruptions that remain in us, which fight against the soul and strive to overcome and destroy it. To be kept in spite of all these; to have grace sustained — a spark of grace in the middle of a sea of corruption — this honors the power of God in keeping us. It honors Him as much, in view of our dependency on Him in that condition, as He would be honored by our perfect service if we were completely free from those corruptions. How will the grace of God under the Gospel triumph over the grace given to Adam in his innocence? Adam had his heart full of inherent grace, with nothing inwardly in his nature to seduce him, and the temptation he faced was a small matter — satisfying curiosity and pleasing his wife — yet he fell. Meanwhile, many poor souls under grace, who have only small measures of grace compared to worlds of corruption, are kept not only from needless pleasures of sin in prosperity, but hold out against all the threats and cruelties of wicked persecutors in times of persecution — threats to strip them of all the earthly good they possess. Though God's people are often defeated, yet the fact that there remains a seed within them (1 John 3:9) illustrates the grace of Christ under the Gospel. One act in Adam expelled all grace from him, when his heart was full of nothing else. If our hearts were perfectly filled with grace at first conversion, this power would not

be seen. The angels are kept with far less care, effort, and power than we are, because they have no bias, no weights of sin hung upon them to pull them down and drag them sideways, as we have.

3. Nor would the devil's confusion in the end be so great, and the victory so glorious, if all sin were expelled at first conversion. As it stands, the devil has in his assaults against us a greater advantage — genuine competition, one might say — because there is already a large faction within us as ready to sin as he is eager to tempt. Yet God powerfully carries on His own work begun, though slowly and by degrees, sustaining and maintaining a small party of grace within us — to the devil's great confusion. In God's outward government of His church on earth, He allows a great party — and by far the greater one — to stand against His church, and yet He upholds it and rules in the midst of His enemies (Psalm 110). He does the same in every individual believer's heart. When grace is in us only as a spark, and corruptions as much smoke and moisture damping it; grace but as a candle nearly burned down in its socket, in the midst of many great winds — then to bring judgment forth to victory, that is a victory indeed.

Lastly, just as God does this to advance His own grace and confound the devil, He also does it for holy ends that concern the saints themselves, such as:

1. To keep them from spiritual pride. God entrusted the fallen angels with a full and complete supply of grace from the beginning. They, though raised from nothing only a short time before, fell into such self-admiration that heaven was not a good enough place for them. As the text says, 'They left their own habitation and first estate' (Jude 6). Pride was the condemnation of the devil (1 Timothy 3:6). But how much more would this have been an occasion of

pride to a soul who was nothing but sin the day before, to suddenly be made perfect? To be fully justified on the first day by the righteousness of another carries no such danger, for it is a righteousness outside of us, and not so easily boasted of vainly. The faith that grasps it first empties us of ourselves and reaches out to another for it. But sanctification is a work worked within us, and we are prone to become too attached to it — to dwell on our own inner excellence. How much trouble do poor believers already have keeping their hearts from fixating on their own righteousness and dwelling on it, when it is, as God knows, very little? They must therefore have something within them to humble their spirits, so that when they look at their feathers, they may also look at their feet, which Christ says are still defiled (John 13:10).

2. Even if there were no such danger of spiritual pride from so sudden a rise — as indeed it does not threaten infants or souls who die immediately after regeneration, as the thief on the cross — God still sees fit to use remaining corruption as a means of humbling His people. He left the Canaanites in the land to trouble and humble the Israelites. To have been thoroughly humbled for sin here on earth will do the saints no harm before they reach heaven. It will keep them lowly in their own eyes forever, even when they are filled to the brim with grace and glory.

For 1. nothing humbles like sin. It made Paul cry out, 'Oh, wretched man that I am!' He who never flinched at outward hardships, and never considered himself wretched because of any of them — indeed who gloried in them (2 Corinthians 12) — when he came to be taken captive by the sin remaining in him, cried out, 'Oh, wretched man!'

And 2. the sins of a past unregenerate life are not sufficient to accomplish this thoroughly on their own. Those sins might be looked back on as past and gone, and in some ways might even make the grace that followed conversion all the more glorious by contrast. But present experience humbles most naturally and most deeply, because it is fresh. This is why Paul says, 'Oh, wretched man that I am' — present tense. Moreover, we are not able to know the full depth and extent of our corruptions all at once. We must come to know them gradually. Corruption is therefore left in us so that after we have been given a spiritual eye, we might measure its depth by experience and continue to be humbled for sin by first-hand knowledge. Humbling from experience is the most genuine kind, just as compassion born of experience is.

And 3. God would have us humbled by seeing our dependence on Him for the grace within us. How quickly we are prone to forget that we have received it, and that no good dwells in our own nature. We would not remember that our nature is a hostile environment for grace and a natural home for sinful desires — were it not for the fact that we see weeds still grow on their own without any planting.

And 4. God would have us not only humbled by our dependence on Him, but by a continual sense of our liability to judgment and of being in His debt. He therefore leaves corruption still in us, so that we might always acknowledge that our necks lie on the chopping block — that He could justly cut us off — and so that we might see that in Him we should not only live and move as creatures, but that He would be fully just in destroying us at any moment. This humbles the creature deeply (Ezekiel 36:31-32).

3. As God uses this to humble them, so also to give them occasion to deny themselves. Self-denial is more acceptable to God than far greater service without it, and therefore the great promise of receiving a hundredfold is attached to that grace. It was the greatest grace that Christ above all others exercised. Now if we had no corruption to entice and solicit us, what opportunity would we have for this kind of self-denial? Christ had an infinite store of glory to lay down — we do not have that. Unless there is a self in us to solicit us, and another self to refuse those solicitations, we would have no occasions for self-denial or the exercise of such grace. Adam was not capable of any such grace because he had no corruption to seduce him. Therefore a small measure of grace in us that denies a great deal of corruption is, in that respect, more acceptable than his obedience. Though we have less grace, yet in this respect it is of a higher kind in its exercises.

Be gentle and charitable toward those who fall into sin, knowing that corruption is not yet fully purged from yourself. This is the Apostle's counsel on this very ground (Galatians 6:1): 'If a man be overtaken in a fault' — he speaks generally, that it could happen to anyone — 'if it is only an overtaking, not a willful and stubborn sin, but a falling by occasion, through rashness, suddenness, and the force of temptation, you who are spiritual, restore such a man with the spirit of meekness, considering yourself, lest you also be tempted.' He would have every person be gentle in judging and reproving such a one, and restore him and set him right again — as the word means — for he may still be united to Christ, as a bone out of joint is still part of the body, though for the time made useless. Do this with tenderness and compassion, with the spirit of meekness, which a person will not have unless he is aware of his

own frailty and liability to corruption. He must reflect on himself — and seriously, too, as the word 'considering' implies. It is not a passing thought of 'I might also fall someday,' but a genuine weighing of what material for falling exists in your own heart, if God were to leave you to yourself for even a little while. This is what produces a spirit of meekness toward the one who has fallen. Meekness and compassion are most genuine when we feel our own likeness to the one who fell and make their situation our own. He addresses this to the most spiritually mature Christians — not to those who are still in some ways carnal, as the Corinthians were — those newly converted who, finding their corruptions temporarily stunned by the first blow of mortification (though only partly killed, and for a time mostly put to sleep), have not yet experienced the fresh temptations and dangers a person faces in the ongoing progress of the Christian life. Such new converts are therefore prone to imagine they will remain free from assaults and do not expect their sinful desires to rise again. So they are inclined to be more critical of the failures of others. But you who are more spiritually mature — I speak to you, says the Apostle — for you have been most softened by a sense of your own weakness. Even you, he says, if you reflect on what you are in yourselves, have reason to think that you too may be tempted.

Never set yourself any fixed limit or measure of mortification, for there is always more to purge out. You must never stop taking medicine all your life. Do not say, 'Now I have enough grace and enough spiritual health' — but rather, as that great Apostle said, 'Not as though I had already attained' — for indeed you have not. Press on continually for more virtue from Christ. If you have conquered the outward act, do not rest — but work to have the rising

impulse of the lust also mortified, and that turning of it over in your imagination. Get your heart deadened toward it as well. And do not stop there — work to hate it, and the very thought of it. The body of death must not only be crucified with Christ but buried as well, and left to decay (Romans 6:4-6). It is crucified in order to be destroyed, says the Apostle there — meaning to continue gradually breaking down after that first death blow.

OBSERVATION 6: THAT BRANCHES WHICH HAVE BROUGHT FORTH TRUE FRUIT, GOD DOES NOT TAKE AWAY



The sixth doctrine is that those who are true branches and bear any true fruit pleasing to God — though they have many corruptions in them — God does not take away or cut off. The contrast implies this: He speaks of taking away the unfruitful ones, but not these. Instead He purges them. The Holy Spirit employs an elegant wordplay here.

As an example to prove this — while staying with the metaphor used here — I turn to Isaiah 27, where God's care for fruitful branches, with the very same distinction between His treatment of them and of the unfruitful ones, is beautifully set forth. God declares Himself the keeper of His vineyard, His church (verses 2-3): 'I the Lord do keep it,' and verse 6: 'He shall cause them that come of Jacob to take root, Israel shall blossom and bud, and fill the earth with fruit.' But Israel, having corruption that would hinder his growth, must be pruned and cut. So in the following verses God is said to deal with him — but not by cutting him off, as He does with those who are both God's enemies and Israel's enemies. Has

He struck them as He struck those who struck Him? No. 'In measure, when it shoots forth, You will debate with it.' When Israel is only a tender plant just beginning to grow, God deals with it only in measured proportion — enough not to destroy it or cause it to wither, but enough to make it blossom more. He measures out afflictions to them, but holds back His rough wind, as the text goes on to say — that is, the kind of affliction that would shake and uproot that tender plant. He allows only what will make it fruitful and blow away its premature blossoms and excess leaves. So much and no more will He release from His treasury — He who holds the winds in His fists and can moderate them as He pleases. His purpose and intention is never to cut off Jacob, root and branch, despite the corruptions and sins that cling to him. 'But this is all the fruit — to take away the sin,' says He in verse 9. That is, this is the only fruit of that wind and of all His dealings with them: all He intends is to purge them.

But does He deal this way with others? No — for the boughs of the most fortified city wither and are broken off and burned (verses 10-11).

First, because in Christ God accepts a little good, and it pleases Him more than sin in His own displeasure. Therefore, just as He would not destroy the righteous along with the wicked in a nation, so He will not throw away the righteousness He finds in a person merely because of some wickedness. Rather, He will purge out the one and preserve the other. This is expressed under the same metaphor in Isaiah 65:8: 'Thus says the Lord, as the new wine is found in the cluster, and one says, destroy it not, for a blessing is in it.' Picture a man about to cut down a vine, his axe already at the root, when someone standing nearby spots a cluster

that still has new wine in it — evidence that there is sap still in the root, which may yet bring forth more fruit. 'Oh,' says the bystander, 'destroy it not.' So God says this of nations and individuals who fear Him. Of nations where He has many holy people, He follows with, 'So will I do for My servants' sake — I will not destroy them all.' And He likewise says of particular individuals, 'There is a blessed work in this person's heart, though mingled with much corruption — destroy it not.' Take away the sin if possible, but do not cut off the person. Why should his grace perish along with his wickedness? Every drop of grace is precious — it cost the blood of Christ, and He will not allow it to be destroyed.

Because He has ordained that all the fruit of His children shall remain (John 15:16). If they were cut off, their fruit would wither and their work perish with them. Yet no one's work done in the Lord will prove to be in vain (1 Corinthians 15). Though the world, and all worldly works and desires, will come to nothing along with those who made them, 'yet he who does the will of God endures forever' (1 John 2:17). Just as Christ's works in Himself are eternal, so His works in us are eternal too, for they are the fruit of what He did. 'He who sows generously and gives to the poor — his righteousness remains forever.'

Third, because He loves the person and hates only the sin. Therefore He preserves the one and destroys only the other. As He says, 'This is all the fruit — to take away the sin.' Psalm 99:8 expresses this: 'He forgave the persons and took vengeance only on their inventions.' The covenant made with us in Christ is not a covenant with works but with persons. Therefore, though our works are often hateful, He goes on loving the persons. In order to keep loving them, He destroys what He hates but does not cut

them off. A man loves a diseased or ulcerated limb as his own flesh (Ephesians 5:29), even though he is disgusted by the corruption and decay in it. He does not immediately cut it off but tends to it daily, applying treatments to eat away the corruption. But a wart or growth that has attached itself to a man's body he cuts off, because he does not regard it as his own flesh.

Fourth, in this God shows His skill — that He is able to deal with a branch deeply infected with corruption so skillfully that He can cut out the corruption and let the branch remain. To cut everything down and destroy it all requires no great skill. But to prune the branches in the right place and at the right time and season, so that they become more fruitful — that comes from the skill of the husbandman. Go to an unskilled surgeon with a diseased leg or arm, and he, seeing it beyond his ability, will talk of nothing but cutting it off. He will tell you it has gone too far and there is no other way. But go to one who is truly skilled — who sees that it has not perished beyond recovery — and he will try his art on it. So God does with branches and members that have much corruption in them. He tries His skill on them, performing a great cure on a leg or arm where He discerns some sound flesh beneath the corruption. He can cut out the dead flesh and leave the sound, and in the end makes the whole limb whole.

This brings comfort to those who are true branches, continuing to bear fruit in the midst of all their trials: God will not allow them to be cut off by their corruption. If anything in them could provoke God to do it, it would be sin. Yet for that, you see how Christ promises that God will deal with it — He will purge it out of them. In Psalm 89:28-30, this is the covenant made with David — and, as he was a type of Christ, this same covenant is made firm with

Christ — that 'if his seed forsake My law and walk not in My judgments,' what then? Would God immediately throw them out and cut them off, as those He intended to have nothing more to do with? Nothing but complete rejection? Is there no means of reclaiming them? No rod in the house? No — 'Then I will visit their transgressions with a rod, and their iniquity with stripes' — I will discipline and correct their stubbornness and sinfulness — 'but My loving kindness I will not take from him, as I took it from Saul' (1 Chronicles 17:13).

Let the saints consider this, so that when they fall they may return to Him, submit to Him and His purpose, and allow Him to do with them what He will. Endure the cutting and lancing and burning, so long as He does not cut them off. Endure His discipline and all His dealings, knowing that all the fruit of it is simply to take away the sin and make them partakers of His holiness. And let the means be whatever they must be, as Paul speaks of himself in Philippians 3 — it does not matter. And if God at any time seems to cut you off, it is only as the immoral man at Corinth was cut off — so that the flesh might be destroyed and the spirit saved.

This also encourages us to keep bearing more fruit for God. If you do, God will not cut you off. He will spare you as a man spares a son who serves him — He will not seize on every fault to discard someone. It was His own law (Deuteronomy 20:19) that when they entered an enemy's land, they were not to destroy trees that produced food. Does God care for trees? No — it was to teach us that if we bear fruit, He will not destroy us, provided it is truly fruit, fit for food. Oak trees produce fruit of a kind — acorns — but they are not fit for food. Such trees might be cut down. So if you do not produce fruit that is satisfying to God, in which you do not honor God

and Christ in your heart, you may and will be cut down. But if you do produce such fruit, you will not be. If you are betrothed to Christ and He has brought forth children through you, do not fear a bill of divorce — He will not lightly cast you off. It is a good argument to bring to Him — ask Him to spare you for the sake of all the children He has begotten through you. Children increase love between husband and wife, and so it is between Christ and us.

Doctrine 6: that unfruitful branches God in the end cuts off, and the several stages by which He cuts off professors who are unfruitful.

That God ultimately takes away unfruitful branches — as He did with Judas, who was especially in view here. For proof, consider Psalm 125. It is a psalm composed specifically to show the different condition of those who profess religion. Of those who are upright (verse 4), God will continue to bless them, and they will stand firm at Mount Zion — all the gates of hell cannot remove one of those mountains. But there are many who, like planets, follow the same general path as the other orbs yet have their own secret deviation running alongside. Of these, He says: 'Those that turn aside into crooked ways, God will lead them forth with the workers of iniquity.' That is, He will eventually expose them for what they are. Though they move among the company of professors like sheep, God will reveal them — either in this life or in the life to come — to be goats. Though they did not appear to be workers of iniquity, God will lead them out with those who are.

Reasons why God deals this way with them.

First, because they dishonor the root they profess to be grafted into. They profess themselves to be in Christ. He is a fruitful root, full of sap, and for any branch to be unfruitful in Him is a dishonor to Him. When you see unfruitful branches on a tree, you blame the root. So the world blames the grace of Christ, the profession of Christ — indeed, the root itself — for the unfruitfulness of the branches. Therefore, so that they may dishonor the root no more, He takes them away, cuts them off from the root they seemed to stand in. And then they run out into all manner of wickedness.

Second, because the husbandman gets no benefit from them. Hebrews 6: 'The ground that brings forth thorns and not fruit fit for him that tends it is near to cursing.' In Song of Solomon 8, Solomon is said to have had a vineyard and let it out to keepers. He speaks this of Christ, of whom Solomon was a type, and of His church. The comparison stands like this: Solomon, being a king with many vineyards that formed part of his royal wealth — for the riches of ancient kings lay largely in farming — let them out to vine-dressers. They had some profit from them, but Solomon must receive a thousand and they only two hundred — the chief gain was to return to Solomon. So the vineyard God has planted here below He lets out to people, and they will have some profit. You will all receive wages for the work you do. Yet the chief gain must return to God — He must have a thousand for your two hundred. But when people take all the profit for themselves, pursue only their own ends, and leave nothing for the husbandman, He takes such branches away. It is established as a rule of fairness (1 Corinthians 9:7): 'He that plants a vineyard should eat of the fruit of it.'

Because of all trees, a vine is good for nothing except to bear fruit. As we see expressed in Ezekiel 15: it is fit for nothing but the fire when it becomes unfruitful. Other trees are useful for building — you can make pegs and pins from them — but not the vine. God chose this illustration to show that of all people, professors who are unfruitful are good for nothing. Their end is to be burned.

Now if you ask how God takes them away, the stages are set down in verse 6: 'If a man abide not in me,' etc. — that is, if he falls away — then: 1. they are cast out, 2. they wither, 3. they are gathered, 4. they are burned.

First, they are cast out — out of the hearts of God's people, out of their company, out of their prayers, and indeed out of their fellowship by excommunication. Often too they cast out themselves, being given over to such errors as reveal them to be unsound. Hymenaeus and Philetus were forward professors, and their fall was serious enough to have shaken many of the fruitful branches. The Apostle was compelled to offer reassurance about their fall: 'Nevertheless the foundation of God remains sure' (2 Timothy 2:18). God gave them over to such beliefs and heresies as exposed their hearts to be rotten and unsound. So He also gives worldly professors over to sins that will expose them. This was the case with Cain. He brought forth some fruit, for he made offerings. But because it was not sincere, he envied his brother and was given over to murder him. After this it is said, 'He was cast out from the sight of the Lord' (Genesis 4:16) — cast out from his father's household and from the ordinances of God there enjoyed, made a wanderer over the face of the whole earth. Of all curses, that is the greatest. Or else, as was said, they of their own will forsake the gatherings of the saints. The Apostle treats this as a step toward

the sin against the Holy Spirit (Hebrews 10:25). When people forsake the assemblies and company of God's people — both public and private — and no longer desire to encourage and stir up one another, or begin to pull away from those they once kept company with, they have drawn close to what follows in the next verse: sinning willfully after having received the knowledge of the truth.

Second, being thus cast out, they wither. The sap of their former abilities begins to decay. That vitality in holy duties and holy speech begins to withdraw. Their leaves begin to fall — they can no longer pray or speak of holy things as they once did. Jude 12 says of such professors that their fruit withers, even in the sight of other people. When God casts them out, He withdraws His Spirit from them. Though they may still come to the ordinances, they have no breath, no life in them. They come to prayer and the Spirit of God has departed. By degrees God draws back the sap until they are completely dead. This is what happened with Saul. After he revealed himself by sparing the Amalekites and persecuting David, the Spirit of God departed from him and he withered ever after. All his gifts vanished, and the spiritual frame of heart he once had left him. Similarly, those who had not profited from their talents (Matthew 25:26) had their talents taken from them even in this life. The Spirit of God, which had rested upon them, rested instead upon others who were more faithful.

Third, lying long unfruitful, in the end they are gathered. Our translation reads 'Men gather them,' which may refer either to a punishment in this life — when they are cast out from the society of God's people, wicked men gather them in. They fall into the company of those who are corrupt: ungodly people, popish persons, or profane atheists take them in, as the Pharisees did with

Judas when he cast himself out of the fellowship of the apostles. Or it may serve as a metaphor for the life to come. The angels are the reapers — they gather such people in the last day and bind them in bundles for the fire.

So finally, they are cast into the fire, and they burn. One might think there was no need to add that, since being thrown into the fire they must necessarily burn. But His meaning is that of all people, they make the fiercest and hottest fire, because they are the most thoroughly dried out and fully seasoned fuel — as the prophet describes it.

You who profess the name of Christ — take heed that you are truly fruitful branches. I say to you what the Apostle says in Romans 11:19-20: 'Because of unbelief they were broken off; you stand by faith. Be not high-minded, but fear.' Take care that what you produce is true fruit. Do all things for God, make Him your end in everything. Bring forth more fruit every day. Let your fruit be riper and more spiritual day by day. Work to spread and root yourself as deeply downward in inward holiness as you do upward in outward profession. Continually purge yourself, lest what is threatened here befall you — things that are fearful to speak of, and yet press upon many a soul. The Apostle compares such people to trees twice dead and pulled up by the roots. You were born dead in Adam. Since then you may have had some connection to Christ through common graces. But if you wither again, you are twice dead and therefore fit for nothing but to be pulled up and thrown into the fire. If any soul begins to forsake the gatherings of the saints, or is cast out from them, let him take heed lest he wither in the end, become twice dead, and never have life put into him again — that is, never repent and return. Know this: if being

cast out by the church and people of God breaks your heart, so that you mourn for your sin as the immoral man at Corinth did, it is a sign that you are the kind of branch God will yet make fruitful. But if being cast out you begin to wither, as described here, the end will be burning.

THANKS FOR READING



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