

ESV STUDY BIBLE NOTES

JOHN 15:1-17

15:1–17 Jesus' allegory of the vine and the branches is at the very heart of the Farewell Discourse (13:31–16:33). The OT frequently uses the vineyard or vine as a symbol for Israel, God's covenant people, especially in two "vineyard songs" in Isaiah (Isa. 5:1–7; 27:2–6). However, Israel's failure to produce fruit resulted in divine judgment. Jesus, by contrast, is "the true vine," and his followers abide in him and produce fruit.

15:1 This is the last of Jesus' seven **I am** sayings in this Gospel (see note on 6:35). **True** contrasts Jesus with OT Israel (see previous note), reinforcing John's theme that Jesus is the true Israel. The **vinedresser** refers back to Isaiah's first vineyard song, where God is depicted as tending his vineyard, only to be rewarded with wild grapes (Isa. 5:1–7; cf. Ps. 80:8–9). The fruitfulness of those in Christ contrasts with the fruitlessness of Israel.

15:2 The divine vinedresser does two things to ensure maximum fruit production: (1) he removes unfruitful branches, and (2) **he prunes** all the others (cf. Heb. 6:7–8).

Does not bear fruit seems to indicate that the person symbolized by such a branch is not a true believer (see John 15:6, 8). In that case, **in me** is just a loose connection needed to make the metaphor of a vine work, reflecting a claim to be Christ's that is not genuine and not implying actual regeneration or true belief. This then would be one of several verses in John showing that not all who follow Jesus for a time and hear his teaching are genuine believers (cf. 6:66; also 13:10–11 on Judas). Others understand these branches to represent true believers who are "unfruitful" for various reasons. In favor of this view is the fact that Jesus says such branches are "in me," and that seems parallel to being "in Christ," as only believers are. However, these unfruitful branches appear to be the same branches that are "thrown away" and "burned" in 15:6, which seems clearly to be a picture of final judgment. **Fruit** is an image for good results coming from the life of a believer, probably in terms of bringing benefit to the lives of others and advancing the work of God in the world (see Matt. 13:8; cf. Gal. 5:22–23 for a different image of "fruit" as changed character). **he takes away**. The Greek verb *airō* can also mean "lifts up" in certain contexts, and some use this to argue that this means God "lifts up" unfruitful branches from the ground so that they will become more fruitful. This interpretation is taken by those who think the branches represent true believers who are not fruitful. But this sense seems less likely because the unfruitful branches in John

15:6 are “thrown into the fire, and burned,” which is an image of final judgment. “He prunes” gives a picture of painful but necessary removal of some interests and activities in order that the remaining branches may bear even more fruit. The word translated “prunes” (Gk. *kathairō*) often means “to clean,” and has the same root as the adjective *katharos*, translated “clean” in 15:3.

15:3 clean. See 13:10–11.

15:4 Abide in me means to continue in a daily, personal relationship with Jesus, characterized by trust, prayer, obedience (see v. 10), and joy. **And I in you** is a phrase without an explicit verb, but it probably is an abbreviated way of saying, “See that I abide in you”; that is, “Safeguard your relationship with me so that I continue to abide fully in you.” (See notes on 8:31; 1 John 2:6.) The “in” terminology in the present passage refers back to OT covenant theology, including prophetic texts regarding a future new covenant (see Ex. 25:8; 29:45; Lev. 26:11–12; Ezek. 37:27–28; 43:9). The repeated references to fruit bearing (also John 15:5, 8) underscore that this is God’s primary purpose in creation (Gen. 1:11–12, 22, 28) and in redemption (cf. John 15:8, 16). The OT prophets envisioned a time when God’s people would “blossom and put forth shoots and fill the whole world with fruit” (Isa. 27:6; cf. Hos. 14:4–8).

15:5 Apart from me you can do nothing does not mean “nothing at all,” for unbelievers of course carry on their ordinary activities of life apart from Christ. Rather, it means “nothing of eternal value,” or an inability to produce spiritual fruit.

15:6 The person who **does not abide in me** is an unbeliever who does not have a personal faith in Christ (see note on v. 4). The verse echoes Ezek. 15:1–8, where a vine failing to produce fruit is said to be good for nothing but the fire (see Heb. 6:7–8). **Fire** is a common Jewish and biblical symbol for divine judgment (e.g., Isa. 30:27; Matt. 3:12 par.; 5:22; 18:8; 25:41). Some take this “fire” to imply loss of reward for true believers, not eternal judgment for unbelievers, but this does not fit as well with the image of branches being entirely burned up by a fire. See also note on John 15:2.

15:7 Two conditions are given for answered prayer: abiding in Jesus, and his words abiding in believers (thus transforming their thinking). Elsewhere Jesus says that believers must ask in his name (i.e., in accord with his character and for his glory; see 14:13–14; 16:23–24). If God’s people truly **abide in** Jesus (see note on 15:4),

they will desire what he desires and will pray according to his words, and those prayers will be pleasing to him.

15:8 God is **glorified** not by praise and worship alone but by his followers also bearing **much fruit** for the advancement of his kingdom on earth. Here again, fruit bearing is evidence of being true believers, or being Jesus' **disciples**.

15:9 Abide in my love. Mutual love between believers and Christ is another element of this “abiding” relationship (see note on v. 4).

15:10–11 Obedience is not to be equated with drudgery; it is all about **joy**. The OT prophets envisioned a period of great end-time rejoicing (e.g., Isa. 25:9; 35:10; 51:3; 61:10; 66:10; Zeph. 3:14–17; Zech. 9:9). God threatened judgment if his people would not serve him “with joyfulness and gladness of heart” (Deut. 28:47–48). **that my joy may be in you**. Just as Jesus had great joy in obeying his Father even in the midst of opposition, so Christians will have joy in obedience.

15:12 love one another. On Jesus’ “love commandment” (vv. 12–17), see note on 13:34–35.

15:13–14 You are my friends implies a stunning level of comfortable personal interaction with one who is also the eternal, omnipotent Creator of the universe (see 1:1–3, 10). In the OT, only Abraham (2 Chron. 20:7; Isa. 41:8) and by implication Moses (Ex. 33:11) are called “friends of God.” Here Jesus extends this privilege to all obedient believers.

The Work of the Trinity

Though the word “Trinity” does not appear in the Bible, by presenting the Father, Son, and Spirit all doing what no one else ever does, the Gospel of John gives us the raw material on which this doctrine is based. Observing what God says and does helps us to know him, and observing which actions are done by which members of the Godhead helps us to see which roles they play.

Action	Father	Son	Spirit
Give life	5:21, 26; (6:33); 17:3	5:21, 25–26, 40; 6:33; 17:3	3:6, 8; 6:63

Proclaim future	1:33	13:19, 26, 36–38; 14:3, 29; 16:1–4, 16– 28, 32; 20:18	16:13
Indwell believers	14:23	14:20, 23; (15:4–7); 17:23, 26	14:17
Teach	6:45; 7:16, 17; 8:28	7:14; (8:2); 8:20; 13:13–14	14:26
Testify to Jesus	5:32, 37; 6:27; 8:18	8:12–14, 18	15:26
Glorify Jesus	5:22–23; 8:50, 54; 13:31–32; 17:1, 22	(1:14); 2:11; 13:31– 32; 17:5, 24	16:14

Actions Common to Father and Son

Action	Father	Son
Glorify the Father	4:23; 12:28; 13:31–32	(2:16); (9:3–4); 11:40; 12:28; 13:31–32; 14:13; 17:1, 4–5
Give the Spirit	3:34; 14:16	(4:10–14); (7:37–39); 20:22
Send the Spirit	14:26	15:26; 16:7

Actions Common to Son and Spirit

Action	Son	Spirit
Be given by the Father	3:16	(4:10–14); 14:16
Be sent by the Father	3:17; 4:34; 5:23–24, 36; 6:29, 57; 7:28–29, 33; 8:16, 26, 29, 42; 9:4; 10:36; 11:42; 12:44–45; 13:20;	14:26; 15:26

	15:21; 17:3, 8, 18, 23, 25; 20:21	
Speak not from himself	(5:19); 5:30; (6:38); 7:16; 12:49–50	16:13
Speak only what he hears	3:32; (3:34); (5:30); 8:26, 40; 12:50; 15:15	16:13
Convict	3:19–20; 4:16, 18; (5:27); (8:7); 8:34, 40; 11:40; 12:7– 8; 13:8	16:7–11
Be received	1:12 (cf. 1:10–11)	7:39 (cf. 14:17)
Disclose what belongs to God	1:18	16:13–14

15:16 You did not choose me does not negate the disciples’ willing decision to follow Jesus when he called them. Jesus is emphasizing that the ultimate factor in determining who would follow him was Jesus’ own choice. The Greek *eklegomai* has the sense of “to choose or pick out from a group,” and it clearly has that sense also in v. 19. **That you should go and bear fruit** implies that the purpose of Christ’s choosing people is not merely that their sins be forgiven and they have eternal life but also that their lives be fruitful and productive in fulfilling God’s purposes. For key passages on the doctrine of election, see Romans 9 and Ephesians 1.¹

¹ Crossway Bibles, [The ESV Study Bible](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 2054–2056.