



CHRISTIAN EDUCATION: LESSON 203

Though God's immutable election absolutely affirms the perseverance of His people, God brings this to pass through the means which He has ordained, which include the warnings found in the Bible. With this doctrinal background we can now look at some of the passages which critics claim that warn of the possibility of believers losing their salvation, or even teach that some did actually fall away from Christ.

The vine and the branches – A commonly cited passage is John 15:1-8. On the one hand, Arminian theology affirms that Jesus is teaching that true believers who do not bear fruit will be cut off, that is, can lose their salvation. But as we have seen, such a view contradicts the clear teaching of the Bible that genuine believers will not lose their salvation, for it is God who preserves them. Some of the strongest statements on this are found in the Gospel of John (vv. 6:39-40, 54; 10:27-29).

On the other hand, some who agree that verse 2 is talking about believers, in an attempt to defend the eternal salvation of believers suggest that the verb translated as "takes away" means "to raise up," so in reality the Father is not removing or cutting off these fruitless branches, but is simply lifting them up, encouraging them, perhaps out of the dirt, to bear fruit. They refer to such branches as those who have life, for they are in the vine, but without fruit, being disobedient believers. However, in the context of John 15 and with respect to what Jesus has taught elsewhere about being a true disciple, the meaning of the verb in verse 2 is not to elevate but to cut, to remove. All those who belong to Christ will bear fruit, albeit in varying degrees, for there cannot be a true disciple of Christ who is wholly fruitless. Christ teaches that fruitlessness is abnormal, a sign that there is no spiritual life (Mark 4:3-8, 14-20; 11:13-14).

The mistake that many make is to think that being in the vine is a reference to being saved. But that is not Christ's point here; rather, being in the vine refers to being in the visible church, that is, all those who claim to be believers. Some of them are true believers, while others are not, who outwardly seem to have life, but inwardly have no relationship with Christ, and thus are without any fruit (Matthew 7:21-23). This is the same metaphor we see in the Old Testament. Israel was the vine of God, but that did not mean that every Israelite was a true believer. Israelites according to their ethnicity were Jews, however many of them according to their spiritual state were not true Jews (John 8:39; Romans 2:28-29; 9:6-8; Galatians 3:7; 29). Thus, in John 15 the real believers are not these branches, the so called insubordinate believers which need to be lifted to bear fruit; rather, true believers are the ones that do bear fruit, and the Father prunes all of them, which can be better rendered as "cleans" or "purifies." This action of the vinedresser here is not a cutting of the branches but the cleansing of the branches, the purifying and nurturing of them, removing insects or disease, so that they bear even more fruit (James 1:2-4).

In verse 3 Jesus says, "Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you." Jesus is talking about true believers, who are already clean, referring to justification or positional sanctification (John 13:8-10; 1 Corinthians 6:11; Hebrews 10:10, 14). Jesus does not say this about the unfruitful branches, for they are not clean. Then in verse 4 He says, "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me." This verb means to remain, to dwell, to stay; it conveys closeness, endurance, and permanence. Here Christ is talking about believers, for only they will abide in the vine; and their abiding is evidence of their salvation. The fruitless branches are the false pretenders, who prove that they never belonged to Christ, and whose end is condemnation (v. 6; Matthew 3:10-12; 13:40-42; 25:41; Revelation 20:10-15).

Jesus taught the disciples these truths to comfort them and to give them joy (v. 11; John 14:1). The possibility of losing one's salvation or of being a wholly fruitless believer would have had the opposite effect. However, the truth that genuine believers will abide in Christ, will bear fruit, and will be cleansed to be more fruitful gives us tremendous assurance and joy, during our good times as well as our trials.