

John 15:2

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit.

Analysis

Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away (πᾶν κλῆμα ἐν ἐμοὶ μὴ φέρον καρπὸν αἶρει αὐτό/pan klēma en emoi mē pheron karpon airei auto)—This clause has prompted considerable theological debate. The phrase "in me" (ἐν ἐμοὶ/en emoi) appears to describe those united to Christ, yet they "bear not fruit" and are "taken away." Several interpretations exist:

1. **Professing but not possessing believers**—Judas exemplifies this: externally connected to Christ, present among the disciples, yet never truly regenerate. Jesus said of him, "Have not I chosen you twelve, and one of you is a devil?" (John 6:70). Such branches appear connected but lack vital union, eventually revealed by their fruitlessness and removal. As John later writes, "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us" (1 John 2:19).

2. **Divine discipline leading to physical death**—Some Reformed interpreters see this as God's severe discipline of genuine but disobedient believers. Paul speaks of God delivering believers to Satan "for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved" (1 Corinthians 5:5) and notes that some Corinthians became weak, sick, or died due to unworthy participation in the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:30). The "taking away" would be physical death, not loss of salvation.

3. Lifting up for cleansing—The Greek αἶρει (airei) can mean "lift up" as well as "take away." Vinedressers lift trailing branches from the ground to expose them to sunlight and prevent rot. This interpretation sees divine care, not judgment—God lifts struggling branches for their benefit.

And every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it (καὶ πᾶν τὸ καρπὸν φέρον καθαίρει αὐτό/kai pan to karpon pheron kathairei auto)—The verb καθαίρει (kathairei) means to cleanse, prune, purge. This is the vinedresser's skilled work: cutting away dead wood, excess growth, and unproductive shoots so the branch concentrates energy on fruit-bearing. God's pruning is purposeful and loving, not arbitrary.

That it may bring forth more fruit (ἵνα καρπὸν πλείονα φέρῃ/hina karpon pleiona pherē)—The goal is increased fruitfulness. God doesn't prune to harm but to maximize productivity. This pruning comes through trials (James 1:2-4), discipline (Hebrews 12:5-11), and sanctification (Romans 8:28-29). The "fruit" includes Christlike character (Galatians 5:22-23), gospel witness (Romans 1:13), and good works (Colossians 1:10).

Historical Context

Jesus spoke this allegory in the Upper Room after the Last Supper, as the disciples prepared to walk to Gethsemane. Vineyards dominated Judean agriculture and provided familiar imagery. Every disciple understood viticulture: vines required constant, careful attention, and pruning was essential for fruit production.

Palestinian vineyards operated on annual cycles. After harvest in September-October, vinedressers pruned vines in winter (December-February), removing up to 90% of the previous year's growth. This severe pruning shocked novices but was necessary—unpruned vines produced abundant foliage but little fruit. Experienced farmers distinguished between fruitful branches (thick, vigorous, with developed buds) and unfruitful shoots (thin, weak, drawing resources but producing nothing).

Old Testament Israel was frequently depicted as God's vineyard (Isaiah 5:1-7,

Jeremiah 2:21, Ezekiel 15:1-8, Hosea 10:1, Psalm 80:8-16). But these passages emphasized Israel's failure and God's judgment. Isaiah's vineyard song concludes: "He looked for judgment, but behold oppression; for righteousness, but behold a cry" (Isaiah 5:7). Ezekiel declares vine wood worthless except for burning (Ezekiel 15:2-5).

Jesus transforms this imagery. He doesn't call Israel the vine but declares, "I am the true vine" (15:1). He is the faithful Israel, the true Son who perfectly fulfills God's purposes. Union with Him, not ethnic descent or religious heritage, determines fruitfulness.

For John's late first-century readers, this teaching addressed critical issues. False teachers had infiltrated churches, claiming Christian identity but denying fundamental doctrine (1 John 2:18-19, 2 John 7-11). Some believers faced persecution and wavered. Others grew comfortable, their initial zeal cooling. Jesus's words distinguished genuine from counterfeit faith and encouraged believers to endure God's pruning process.

Related Passages

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Study Questions

1. How do we distinguish between branches that are truly 'in Christ' versus those merely externally connected to the church?
2. What does God's 'pruning' look like practically in believers' lives, and how should we respond to it?
3. Why is fruitfulness essential evidence of genuine faith, and what 'fruit' should characterize true believers?
4. How does understanding God's purpose in pruning (more fruit, not harm) transform our response to trials and discipline?
5. What warning does this verse give regarding mere profession of faith without genuine spiritual life and fruit?

Interlinear Text

πᾶν	κλῆμα	ἐν	ἐμοὶ	μὴ	φέρη	καρπὸν	αἶρει	αὐτὸ
Every	branch	in	me	not	beareth	fruit	he taketh away	it
G3956	G2814	G1722	G1698	G3361	G5342	G2590	G142	G846
καὶ	πᾶν	τὸ	καρπὸν	φέρη	καθαίρει	αὐτὸ	ἵνα	πλείονα
and	Every	G3588	fruit	beareth	he purgeth	it	that	more
G2532	G3956		G2590	G5342	G2508	G846	G2443	G4119
καρπὸν	φέρη							
fruit	beareth							
G2590	G5342							

Additional Cross-References

Matthew 3:10 (Parallel theme): And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.

Matthew 15:13 (Parallel theme): But he answered and said, Every plant, which my heavenly Father hath not planted, shall be rooted up.

Revelation 3:19 (Parallel theme): As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent.

John 15:8 (Parallel theme): Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples.

Matthew 13:12 (Parallel theme): For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath.

Matthew 3:12 (Parallel theme): Whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.

Matthew 21:19 (Parallel theme): And when he saw a fig tree in the way, he came to it, and found nothing thereon, but leaves only, and said unto it, Let no fruit grow on thee henceforward for ever. And presently the fig tree withered away.

Job 17:9 (Parallel theme): The righteous also shall hold on his way, and he that hath clean hands shall be stronger and stronger.

Luke 8:13 (Parallel theme): They on the rock are they, which, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, which for a while believe, and in time of temptation fall away.

Hebrews 12:15 (Parallel theme): Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled;

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