

Does John 15 Contradict Eternal Security?

Abiding, Fruit-Bearing, and the Believer's Service in the Parable of the True Vine

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ABSTRACT

Advocates of conditional security appeal to John 15:6, where an unfruitful branch is cast forth, withered, gathered, and burned, as evidence that a genuine believer can forfeit salvation. This study argues that such a reading conflates two distinct biblical questions, how a person is justified before God and how a justified person serves God, and thereby violates a foundational rule of interpretation: clear passages must govern obscure ones. Beginning from the plain and repeated testimony of Scripture that salvation is received through faith alone in the finished work of Jesus Christ (John 3:16; Romans 4:5; Ephesians 2:8-9) and is possessed as a present, irrevocable reality (John 5:24; John 10:28-29; Romans 8:38-39), the paper reads the vine-and-branches discourse in its own context. It shows that the audience of John 15 is already regenerate ("clean," John 15:3), that abiding is a fellowship term describing the believer's experience rather than the ground of justification, and that fruit denotes the spiritual reproduction and Christlike character produced when a believer walks in the Spirit. The burning of verse 6 is identified as temporal chastisement and loss of reward at the judgment seat of Christ, consistent with the wider biblical use of fire for divine discipline (Psalm 104:4; Hebrews 12:29; 1 Corinthians 3:10-15) and with Christ's use of severe language to provoke believers to fruitfulness (Matthew 5:13). John 15, it concludes, does not contradict eternal security but presupposes it, addressing the believer's service, communion, and reward rather than the possession of everlasting life.

Keywords: *eternal security; once saved always saved; conditional security; John 15; the true vine; abiding in Christ; bearing fruit; soteriology; judgment seat of Christ; sanctification; assurance*

1. Introduction

John 15:6

If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned.

Proponents of conditional security, the soteriological position that a believer can lose salvation, appeal to John 15, and specifically to verse 6, as a passage that overturns the biblical teaching of eternal security: that believers are saved eternally and cannot lose their salvation. They argue that this passage contradicts the doctrine commonly summarized as Once Saved Always Saved. This article examines that claim in detail.

The reader will learn what it means to abide in Christ and to bear fruit. Believers, compared here to branches, cannot bring forth good fruit unless they abide in Jesus Christ, who is presented as the true vine in verse 1. The Parable of the True Vine describes the significance of the Christian being connected to the vine in order to bear spiritual fruit, and the nature of that fruit is treated thoroughly below. Before the passage is examined comprehensively, some foundational matters

are set in place, so that the common objection to the eternal security of the believer can be answered on solid ground.

Two Distinct Questions

John 15 answers the right-hand column, never the left

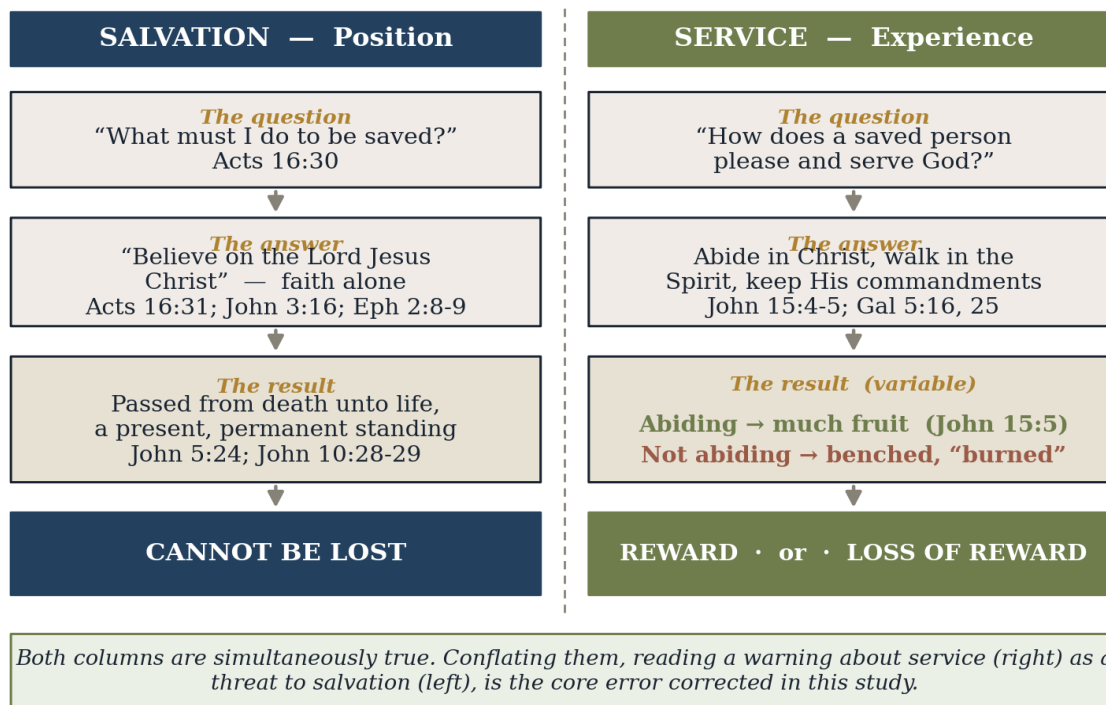


Figure. Salvation and service are answers to two different questions. Reading a warning about service (right) as a threat to salvation (left) is the interpretive error this study corrects.

2. Salvation

The Bible is clear about salvation. Salvation comes through faith alone in Jesus Christ (John 3:16; Romans 4:5; Ephesians 2:8-9). More than one hundred verses teach that the sole condition for salvation is faith in Jesus Christ. Faith alone is sufficient for salvation, because Jesus did all the work. The question of what a person must do to be saved, and its answer, are found in the book of Acts, specifically in Acts 16:30-31:

Acts 16:30-31

30 And brought them out, and said, Sirs, what must I do to be saved? 31 And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house.

The unregenerate, those not born again, are told to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ in order to be saved. In John 19:30 Jesus said, “It is finished.” The only acceptable response from us, therefore, is to believe in Jesus Christ for everlasting life. What does it mean to believe for eternal life? Scripture interprets Scripture, and to believe is to trust:

Ephesians 1:13-14

13 In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise, 14 Which is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of his glory.

3. Saved by Faith or by Faithfulness?

Notice in Ephesians 1:13 how the words *believe* and *trust* are used interchangeably. Those who have believed in Jesus Christ have trusted Him. Again, to believe is to trust. Once a person believes on the Lord Jesus Christ and is passed from death unto life (John 5:24), that person is saved eternally. John 5:24 declares that there is no condemnation, future tense, for the regenerate. John 3:18 plainly states that those who are condemned are those who “hath not believed”. This means there is no condemnation for those who have believed. Eternal life is life that never ends. If this life could be lost, it would not be eternal life; it would be temporary life.

Advocates of conditional security argue that we are not really saved until death, a supposed final justification. This is a serious error. The Bible says that we are presently sons of God and have already been passed from death unto life. John 5:24 does not say *passing*; it says *passed*. Believers are in that life now. If the claim that faith really means ongoing obedience and faithfulness were correct, the language of John 5:24 would need to read *passing*. The passage does not read the way the conditional-security system would require. To reiterate: Jesus states that those who have believed have no condemnation (John 5:24), will never die (John 11:25-26), never thirst (John 4:14; John 6:35), and never hunger (John 6:35). He also assures believers that no man can pluck them out of His hand or His Father’s hand (John 10:28-29). This is a double eternal security. Nothing can separate the believer from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:38-39). After a person is born again, passed spiritually from death unto life, that person is commanded to bring forth good fruit. The next section explores the meaning of good fruit in the life of a believer.

4. What Is Biblical Fruit?

Fruit is the product of something. God commanded Adam and Eve at creation, and Noah’s family after the Flood, to be fruitful, to multiply, and to fill the earth. The command was to reproduce physically and have children to fill the earth, which is analogous to expanding God’s Kingdom through evangelism:

Genesis 1:28

28 And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.

Genesis 9:19

And God blessed Noah and his sons, and said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth.

According to the text, being fruitful is to replenish the earth. This has everything to do with reproduction. The product, or fruit, of a human is another human. In Genesis, God states plainly that plants and animals reproduce after their kind: humans produce humans, dogs produce dogs, and apple trees produce apples. Again, fruit is the product of something. Humans are born into this world as creatures of God; our physical birth is our first birth, born of the water. We are then told to be born again, born of the Spirit, born from above. When we are regenerated by faith in Jesus Christ, we are instructed to bring forth good fruit. In other words, believers are commanded to reproduce spiritually by preaching the Gospel to the lost and giving them the information necessary to be saved as they trust in the finished work of Jesus Christ:

Proverbs 11:30

30 The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life; and he that winneth souls is wise.

Believers are righteous through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, justified because of His imputed righteousness (Romans 4:5). According to Proverbs 11:30, the product of a believer is more believers. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the power of God unto salvation:

Romans 1:16

16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.

Those in an unregenerate state must be saved by faith, and faith alone, in the finished work of Jesus Christ. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God. Believers are commanded to preach the Word of God to the world:

Romans 10:17

17 So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.

It is important to understand rightly what is meant biblically by Christian fruit. Fruit is the product of something, and the product of the believer should be more Christians, more converts. The fruit of our labor is more believers. We should be striving to win the lost and working hard to pull them out of the fire:

Jude 23

23 And others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire; hating even the garment spotted by the flesh.

God justifies, sanctifies, and glorifies, as Romans 8:29-30 teaches. For a person to believe the Gospel, that person must first hear the Gospel. As soldiers of Jesus Christ, we are to go into the world making believers and disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19-20). Paul urges the regenerate to walk in the Spirit. When believers walk in the Spirit (Galatians 5:16; Galatians 5:25), they manifest the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23): love, joy, peace, and the rest. By walking in the Spirit, abiding in Christ, and doing the work necessary to reach the lost with the Gospel, the justified will be fruitful. Believers will excel in their spiritual education as their condition conforms more and more to their position in Christ, and they will fully conform to that position at glorification, the redemption of the body.

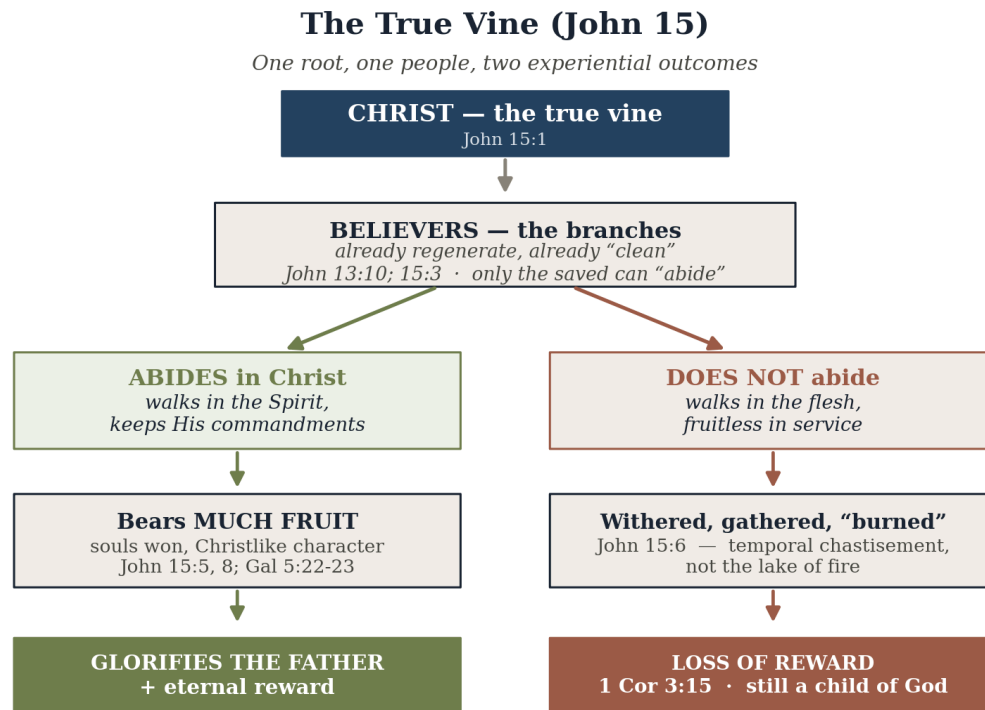
5. The True Meaning of John 15

Having established what a person must do to be saved, and what a saved person is to do in the Christian experience, we may now examine the passage so frequently misused against the clear teaching of Scripture. A significant rule of biblical hermeneutics is to avoid overturning clear teaching by means of passages that are more difficult to understand. Salvation is simple; how to be saved and enter the family of God is stated plainly. We must therefore be careful not to undermine the clear teaching of salvation with the meat of the Word. This is why the Bible must be read knowing first that salvation is by faith alone in Jesus Christ and that eternal life cannot be lost.

Bearing fruit as a believer is conditioned upon abiding in Jesus Christ (John 15:5). To abide, a person must first be saved; one cannot abide in Christ without being spiritually born again. This is precisely why those addressed in John 15 are already saved. They are called “clean” (John

13:10; John 15:3) and are commanded to abide, something only a believer can do. As Christians, we can do nothing for God apart from God working in our lives.

John 15 is about being in service to God. Jesus is speaking to the saved, because the unsaved have no new man according to which they might walk. Since abiding is a fellowship term, remaining in close communion with God, it is essential to recognize first that the audience of John 15 is composed of believers. To have the power to abide, and to serve God in one's Christian walk, one must first be saved. There is nothing a believer can do in the flesh to please God and expand His Kingdom. Believers possess both the flesh and the Spirit.



In neither outcome is everlasting life removed; the difference is fruitfulness, fellowship, and reward.

Figure. The vine-and-branches discourse traces one root and one regenerate people to two experiential outcomes. In neither outcome is everlasting life removed; the difference is fruitfulness, fellowship, and reward.

6. The Old Man and the New Man

Genuine Christians are given a new nature according to which they may walk; unbelievers have only the flesh, for they have not been given a new nature in which to live. This is why the unbeliever is positionally in the flesh, while the believer is positionally in the Spirit. The unbeliever cannot walk in the Spirit, not having been born again. The believer has been born again and can therefore choose the Spirit over the flesh. We are to put on the new man, walk in the Spirit, and abide in Christ; and when we abide in Christ, we please God.

The reason we still sin after being saved is that we still possess the unregenerate flesh. God did not do away with the old man, and we will struggle with him until physical death. At death the old man dies for good, and the new man, the regenerated spirit, goes to be with God, awaiting new bodies at the first resurrection. This is what we are predestined for, to be conformed to the image of His Son. Since there is no reforming the old man, it is vital that we choose to walk in the new man. By walking in the Spirit we can do good and be productive Christians, provided we abide in Jesus Christ.

Table 1. *Position and capacity of the unbeliever and the believer.*

	The Unbeliever	The Believer
Nature possessed	Flesh only	Flesh and Spirit; a new man is given
Position before God	In the flesh	In the Spirit
Capacity	Cannot walk in the Spirit	May choose the Spirit over the flesh
Standing	Under condemnation (John 3:18)	Passed from death unto life (John 5:24)
The old man	Is the whole man	Remains until death, then dies for good
The call	Believe the Gospel	Put on the new man; walk in the Spirit; abide

7. Severe Language Addressed to Believers

John 15 is not about salvation; it is about the capacity to produce for God. God wants us to produce good fruit. Jesus wants us to follow Him in the Christian experience so that He can make us fishers of men (Matthew 4:19). If every Christian were shining in that experience and excelling in discipleship, then all believers would be fishers of men, which would imply that the whole planet should already be evangelized and that we should be living in a golden age of Christianity. This is plainly not the case, and our doctrine must fit reality. The observation indicates that unfruitful believers do not lose their salvation, nor does John 15 prove that unfruitful believers were never really saved. Believers who are not producing good fruit, because they are not abiding in Christ, can be benched, set aside, and thus not used by God. Not being used by God can result in being “burned.” Figuratively, this means that Christians can experience destructive consequences owing to their poor choice not to walk in the Spirit and abide in Christ.

John 15:6 is not the only place where Jesus uses severe language toward believers to provoke them to be productive and pleasing to the Lord. Now that we have been baptized into the body of Christ, God wants us to be valuable assets to that body. In Matthew 5:13 Jesus tells believers who lose their savor, for believers are the salt of the earth, that they are “good for nothing,” fit to be “cast out” and “trodden under foot of men”:

Matthew 5:13

13 Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men.

Jesus is perfectly capable of using intense language toward believers as a means of motivating them to good works and good fruit. If John 15:6 were describing hell or eternal condemnation, we would expect qualifiers such as “everlasting” and “eternal” to signal it. Those words are absent. The context does not dictate a loss of salvation, and the lake of fire is not in view.

8. Does Fire Always Refer to Hell?

Plainly, John 15:6 describes temporal judgment. Genuine believers can and do experience divine chastisement, and this discipline results in temporal consequences, and even the loss of reward at the judgment seat of Christ, at which all believers will appear. It is not even contested that the word fire can denote temporal judgment for disobedient Christians. Psalm 104:4 refers to angels as flaming fire, which is clearly not a reference to hell.

Hebrews 12:29 calls God a consuming fire; this does not make God a consuming hell. There are numerous instances of the word fire in Scripture that have nothing to do with hell or the lake of fire. Fire is likewise used in 1 Corinthians 3:10-15 of the burning of useless works at the judgment seat of Christ.

Table 2. *Representative uses of “fire” in Scripture that do not denote hell or the lake of fire.*

Passage	What “fire” denotes	Hell / lake of fire?
Psalm 104:4	Angels described as “flaming fire”	No
Hebrews 12:29	God as “a consuming fire”	No
1 Corinthians 3:10-15	Testing and burning of a believer’s works at the judgment seat	No
John 15:6	Temporal chastisement of the unfruitful branch	No

Believers can do nothing apart from abiding in Him. This is why Paul presses fellow believers not only to live in the Spirit, which is their position, but also to walk in the Spirit, which is their experience. When we walk in the Spirit, we produce good fruit. How do we walk in the Spirit? We follow His commandments. In following His commandments we are friends of God and His active disciples. Believers are not positionally in the flesh; we are positionally in the Spirit. But in our experience we may be in the Spirit or in the flesh, and we must choose, moment by moment, which it will be. When we are in the flesh we cannot please God. We please God by choosing the Spirit, following His commandments, and abiding in Him. Without Him we can do nothing, for the good in the believer is the God in the believer.

9. Producing Much Fruit

Believers who abide in Christ will produce much fruit, expanding God’s Kingdom by helping to make converts. Believers who refuse to walk in the Spirit and to excel in their spiritual education will be fruitless. John 15 has everything to do with fruitful versus unfruitful Christians. Fruitless Christians will face consequences; they will bear the penalty of their carnality. But those consequences do not include the lake of fire. Eternal condemnation is not a concern for a fruitless believer; it is an impossible outcome for a saved Christian, because Christians have been passed from death unto life. That life is theirs now, spiritually, and they are presently the sons of God. The outcome of being unfruitful is temporal consequence, and a loss of rewards at the judgment seat of Christ.

Table 3. *Christ’s severe language to believers is temporal and reward-related, not a threat of damnation.*

Passage	Audience	Severe language	Referent
Matthew 5:13	Believers (“the salt of the earth”)	“good for nothing ... cast out ... trodden under foot”	Lost usefulness and testimony
John 15:6	Believers (branches, “clean,” 15:3)	“cast forth ... withered ... cast into the fire ... burned”	Temporal chastisement; loss of reward
1 Corinthians 3:15	Believers	“he shall suffer loss ... saved; yet so as by fire”	Loss of reward; the person still saved

10. Soulwinning

Soulwinning is continuing in the love of God. If you are a believer today, you would never have been saved had someone not continued in the love of God by bringing you the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ. Is that not remarkable, and is it not incredible motivation to go out and witness to the lost? It is not worth it to walk in the flesh and fail to produce good fruit. There are eternal implications, for the one who walks in the flesh will miss the opportunity to reap life everlasting in the sense of eternal rewards, including souls won and fruit produced. God has chosen us for service, that we should be active disciples, following Him and bringing forth fruit by reproducing spiritually. When a believer leads someone to the Lord, that is fruit which extends into eternity. Thieves cannot break in and rob you of such rewards; they have eternal value. We have the opportunity, on this earth, to reap life everlasting by walking in the Spirit, putting on the new man, abiding in Christ, and winning the lost to the Lord Jesus Christ.

11. Eternal Security Has Been Established

Salvation cannot be lost, and John 15 does not contradict this reality. If salvation could be reversed, then everything that accompanies salvation would be reversed with it: regeneration, justification, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, our predestination to glorification, our baptism into the body of Christ, the forgiveness and removal of our sins, and so much more. The Bible is clear that eternal life cannot be lost. What can be affected is our communion, friendship, and fellowship with Jesus Christ. Trusting Jesus Christ as Savior is what saved us; following His commandments is what makes us a friend of God. How do we live in the Spirit, our position? We believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. How do we walk in the Spirit, our experience? We follow His commandments. Following His commandments and walking in the Spirit is how we maintain communion with the Lord, and how we expand His Kingdom to eternal benefit. John 15 is a powerful motivator to follow the commandments of Christ, to walk in the Spirit, to abide in Jesus Christ, and to win souls to the Lord.

12. Conclusion

Jesus is not removing the eternal life of the believer in John 15. Fruitless believers are benched for temporal chastisement. Genuine Christians who crash and burn in their experience will be “burned,” reaping the negative consequences of their choices. The branch is taken away for discipline, so that it may begin to abide again and become useful. Temporal discipline is in view. The goal of these consequences is to bring the believer back to fruitfulness, for God wants every branch to be productive, and a good product requires good workers. The issue in John 15 is not eternal condemnation; it belongs to the temporal vantage point and describes the experience of believers in this present life.

It is important that we have the mind of Christ. We have been given power to overcome sin, and we should do our best to see and to do things God’s way, desiring to please the Lord, for this is what we were created for, to please God. If we allow the Spirit to guide us and live as God would have us live, we will be pleasing to Him and enjoy lives of abundant joy. But if we choose to live contrary to God’s way, we will reap the negative consequences of our fleshly choices, consequences harmful both to us and to those around us. A godly testimony matters as we seek

to glorify God by our works; walking in the flesh and failing to abide in Christ only injures our testimony and hurts the cause of Christ. This is why a believer may be benched, so that God may feed spiritual nourishment to those who seek to walk in the Spirit and abide in Him. A believer who crashes and burns in this life through carnal choices will fail in his spiritual education and will not be called a friend of God. He will still be a child of God, and nothing can change that; but he will bear the consequences of his refusal to abide in close fellowship with the Savior.

Scripture Index

Genesis 1:28; 9:19 · Psalm 104:4 · Proverbs 11:30 · Matthew 4:19; 5:13; 28:19-20 · John 3:16, 18; 4:14; 5:24; 6:35; 10:28-29; 11:25-26; 13:10; 15:1-8; 19:30 · Acts 16:30-31 · Romans 1:16; 4:5; 8:29-30, 38-39; 10:17 · 1 Corinthians 3:10-15 · Galatians 5:16, 22-23, 25 · Ephesians 1:13-14; 2:8-9 · Hebrews 12:29 · Jude 23.

Scripture quotations are from the Authorized (King James) Version.