

The Wicked Useful in Their Destruction Only

By Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758)

Ezekiel 15:2-4

I. The Text Opened

A. Ezekiel 15:2-4

1. “Son of man, What is the vine tree more than any tree? Or than a branch which is among the trees of the forest? Shall wood be taken thereof to do any work? Or will men take a pin of it to hang any vessel thereon? Behold, it is cast into the fire for fuel; The fire devoureth both the ends of it, and the midst of it is burnt: Is it meet for any work?”

a) The visible church of God is here compared to the vine tree, as is evident by God’s own explanation of the allegory, in verses 6, 7, and 8.

b)

(1) *“Therefore thus saith the Lord God, As the vine tree among the trees of the forest, which I have given to the fire for fuel, so will I give the inhabitants of Jerusalem,” &c.*

c) And it may be understood of mankind in general.

(1) *We find man often in scripture compared to a vine.*

(2) *So in chapter 32 of Deuteronomy, “Their vine is the vine of Sodom, and of the fields of Gomorrah. Their grapes are grapes of gall.”*

(3) *And Psalm 53:8. “Thou hast brought a vine out of Egypt;” verse 14.*

(4) *“Look down from heaven, behold, and visit this vine.” And Song of Solomon 2:15.*

(5) *“The foxes that spoil the vines; for our vines have tender grapes.” Isaiah 5, at the beginning, “My beloved hath a vineyard, and he planted it with the choicest vine.”*

(6) *Jeremiah 2:21. “I had planted thee a noble vine.”*

(7) *Hosea 10:1. “Israel is an empty vine.”*

(8) *So in chapter 15 of John, visible Christians are compared to the branches of a vine.*

(9) *Man is very fitly represented by the vine.*

(a) *The weakness and dependence of the vine on other things which support it, well represents to us what a poor, feeble, dependent creature man is, and how, if left to himself, he must fall into mischief, and cannot help himself.*

(b) *The visible people of God are fitly compared to a vine, because of the care and cultivation of the husbandman, or vine dresser.*

(c) *The business of husbandmen in the land of Israel was very much in their vineyards, about vines; and the care they exercised to fence them, to defend them, to prune them, to prop them up, and to cultivate them, well represented that merciful care which God exercises towards his visible people; and this latter is often in scripture expressly compared to the former.*

2. In the words now read is represented,

a) 1. How wholly useless and unprofitable, even beyond other trees, a vine is, in case of unfruitfulness: “What is a vine tree more than any tree, or than a branch which is among the trees of the forest?” i.e. if it does not bear fruit.

- b) Men make much more of a vine than of other trees; they take great care of it, to wall it in, to dig about it, to prune it, and the like.
 - c) It is much more highly esteemed than any one of the trees of the forest; they are despised in comparison with it.
 - d) And if it bear fruit, it is indeed much preferable to other trees; for the fruit of it yields a noble liquor; as it is said in Jotham's parable, Judges 9:13, "And the vine said unto them, Should I leave my wine, which cheereth God and man?"
 - e) But if it bears no fruit, it is more unprofitable than the trees of the forest; for the wood of them is good for timber; but the wood of the vine is fit for no work; as in the text, "Shall wood be taken thereof to do any work? Or will men take a pin of it to hang any vessel thereon?"
3. 2. The only thing for which a vine is useful, in case of barrenness, viz. for fuel: "Behold, it is cast into the fire for fuel."
- a) It is wholly consumed; no part of it is worth a saving, to make any instrument of it, for any work.

II. The Doctrine from the Text

A. Doctrine: If men bring forth no fruit to God, they are wholly useless, unless in their destruction.

1. I. There are but two ways in which man can be useful, viz. either in acting or being acted upon.
 - a) If man is a useful sort of creature, he must be so either actively or passively: There is no medium.
 - b) If he be useful to any purpose, he must be so either in acting himself, or else in being disposed of by some other; either in doing something himself to that purpose, or else in having something done upon him by some other to that purpose.
 - c) If man does nothing himself to promote the end of his existence, and no other being do any thing with him to promote this end, then nothing will be done to promote this end; and so man must be wholly useless.
 - (1) *So that there are but two ways in which man can be useful to any purpose, viz. either actively or passively, either in doing something himself, or in being the subject of something done to him.*
2. II. Man cannot be useful actively, any otherwise than in bringing forth fruit to God, than in serving God, and living to his glory.
 - a) This is the only way in which he can be useful in doing; and that for this reason, that the glory of God is the very thing for which man was made, and to which all other ends are subordinate.
 - (1) *Man being the highest of this lower creation, the next step from him is to God.*
 - (2) *He therefore is made for the service and glory of God.*
 - (a) *This is the whole work and business of man; it is his highest end, to which all other ends are subordinate.*
 - (3) *If man is not made to serve and glorify his Creator, it is wholly to no purpose that such a creature is made.*
 - (a) *It is without a doubt the all wise God, who does all things in infinite wisdom, has made man for this end.*
 - (b) *All other ends of man are subordinate to this.*
 - b) If men actively bring no glory to God, they are, as to their own activity, altogether useless, however much they may promote the benefit of one another.

- (1) *It may perhaps be objected, that a wicked man may, by being serviceable to the public, be useful to many who do bring forth fruit to God, and thus glorify him.*
- (2) *Answer 1. If he is so, he is no further useful than he brings glory to God.*
- (3) *Answer 2. If he is, wicked men are useful only accidentally, and not designedly.*
- (a) *The usefulness of such a man, being not designed, is not to be attributed to him as though it were his fruit.*
3. III. If men bring not forth fruit to God, there is no other way in which they can be useful passively, but in being destroyed.
- a) They are fit for nothing else.
- (1) *1. They are not fit to be suffered to continue always in this world.*
- (2) *God suffers them to live for the present, but it is only for a certain season.*
- (a) *They are here in a transitory state.*
- (b) *It is not fit that this world should be the constant abode of those who bring forth no fruit to God.*
- (c) *It is not fit that the barren tree should be allowed always to stand in the vineyard.*
- (d) *It is not fit that those who bring forth no fruit to God, should always be continued in partaking of these streams.*
- (i) ***The earth can scarcely bear wicked men during that short time for which they stay here, but is ready to spew them out.***
4. 2. If men do not bring forth fruit to God, they are not fit to be disposed of in heaven.
- a) Heaven, above all others, is the most improper place for them.
- (1) *Everything appertaining to that state is unsuitable for them.*
- (a) *The company is most unsuitable.*
- (i) ***The original inhabitants of that world are the angels.***
- (b) *The employments are serving and glorifying God.*
- (i) ***How unsuitable then would it be to plant barren trees in that heavenly paradise, trees that would bring forth no fruit to the divine glory?***
- (c) *The enjoyments of heaven are unsuitable.*
- (i) ***The enjoyments are holy and spiritual enjoyments, the happiness of beholding the glory of God, and praising his name, and the like.***
- (ii) ***But these enjoyments are as unsuitable as can be to the carnal earthly minds of wicked men.***
- (d) *The design of heaven is unsuitable to them.*
- (i) ***The design of God in making heaven was, that it might be a place of holy habitation, for the reward of the righteous, and not a habitation for wicked men.***
5. IV. Men who bring forth no fruit to God, yet in suffering destruction may be useful.
- a) Although they are not useful actively, or by any thing which they do; yet they may be useful in what they may suffer; just as a barren tree, which is no way useful standing in the vineyard, yet may be good fuel, and be very useful in the fire.
- b) God can find use for the most wicked men; he has his use for vessels of wrath as well as for vessels of mercy; as in an house there is use for vessels unto dishonor, as well as for vessels unto honor.
- (1) *2 Timothy 2:0. "In a great house there are not only vessels of gold, and of silver, but also of wood and of earth; and some to honor, and some to dishonor."*
- (2) *Proverbs 16:4. "The Lord hath made all things for himself; yea, even the wicked for the day of evil." I shall briefly take notice of what ends God accomplishes by it.*

(a) 1. Unfruitful persons are of use in their destruction for the glory of God's justice.

(i) *It was the will of God to glorify his justice, as well as his mercy, on his creatures.*

(b) *The glory of divine justice in the perdition of ungodly men appears wonderful and glorious in the eyes of the saints and angels in heaven.*

(c) *Here we have an account, that they sing praises to God, and extol his justice at the sight of the awful judgments which he inflicts on wicked men.*

(d) *Revelation 16:5, "Thou art righteous, O Lord, which art and wast, and art to come, because thou hast judged thus; for they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and thou hast given them blood to drink; for they are worthy."*

(e) *And Revelation 19:1, 2: "And after these things I heard a great voice, saying, Alleluia: Salvation, and glory, and honor, and power, unto the Lord our God; for true and righteous are his judgments for he hath judged the great whore, which did corrupt the earth with her fornication, and hath avenged the blood of his servants at her hand."*

c) 2. Unfruitful people in their destruction are of use for God to glorify his majesty upon them.

(1) *The awful majesty of God remarkably appears in those dreadful and amazing punishments which he inflicts on those who rise up against him, and contemn him.*

(2) *God glorifies his own majesty in the destruction of wicked men; and in this he appears infinitely great, in that it appears to be an infinitely dreadful thing to offend him.*

(a) *It is often spoken of God, that he is a terrible God.*

(b) *It is a part of the majesty and glory of God, that he is a terrible God.*

(i) *God tells Pharaoh, that for this cause he raised him up, that he might show his power in him, and that his name might be declared through all the earth, in his destruction.*

d) 3. The destruction of the unfruitful is of use, to give the saints a greater sense of their happiness, and of God's grace to them.

(1) *The wicked will be destroyed and tormented in the view of the saints, and other inhabitants of heaven.*

(2) *When the saints in heaven shall look upon the damned in hell, it will serve to give them a greater sense of their own happiness, seeing how vastly different their case is from their own.*

(a) *When they shall see how dreadful the anger of God is, it will make them the more prize his love.*

(b) *When they shall look upon the misery of the damned, and consider how different their own state is from theirs, and that it is only free and sovereign grace that makes the difference, what a great sense will this give them of the wonderful grace of God to them! And how will it heighten their praises!*

(i) *With how much greater admiration and exultation of soul will they sing of the free and sovereign grace of God to them!*

III. The Text Applied

A. What do we learn from this?

1. I. Here we may learn, how just and righteous God is in the destruction of those who bring forth no fruit to God.
 - a) Seeing there is no other way in which they can be useful, or in which the end of their being can be obtained, certainly it is most just that God should thus dispose of them.
 - b) Why should God be frustrated of his end through their perverseness?
 - (1) *If men will not do the work for which he has made and fitted them; if they, through a spirit of opposition and rebellion against God, refuse; yet why should God suffer himself to be disappointed of his end in making them?*
 - (2) *It does not become the infinite greatness and majesty of God, to suffer himself to be disappointed and frustrated by the wickedness and perverseness of sinful worms of the dust.*
 - (a) *Surely, therefore, it must be just and righteous that God should destroy them.*
 - (3) *If they will not be useful to glorify his love, it is very just that God should make them useful in the only remaining way in which they can be useful, viz. in their destruction.*
 - (a) *Consider how just it would be if God should utterly destroy you, and glorify himself upon you in that way; and what a wonder of patience it is, that God has not done it before now.*

B. This subject ought to put you upon examining yourselves, whether you be not wholly useless creatures.

1. You have now heard, that those who bring forth no fruit to God, are, as to any good they do, wholly useless.
 - a) Inquire, therefore, whether you have ever in your lives brought forth any fruit to God.
 - b) Have you ever done any thing from a gracious respect to God, or out of love to God?
 - c) By only seeking your worldly interest, you do not bring forth fruit to God.
 - (1) *Hosea 10:1. "Israel is an empty vine; he bringeth forth fruit unto himself."*
 - (2) *There is no fruit brought forth to God, where there is nothing done in any wise from love to God, or from any true respect to him.*
 - (3) *God looks at the heart.*
 - (a) *Inquire, therefore, whether you ever in your lives did the least thing out of love to God.*
 - (b) *1. How much God has bestowed on you, in the endowments of your nature.*
 - (c) *2. How much God has done for you in the creation of the world.*
 - (d) *3. How much is done for you in the course of God's common providence!*
 - (e) *4. How much is done for you in the use of the means of grace.*
 - (i) *How great a thing has God done for you, to give you opportunity and advantage to be useful, in that he has sent his own Son into the world!*
 - (ii) *He who is really and truly God, united himself to the human nature, and became a man, to be a prophet and teacher to you and other sinners.*
 - (a) *Yes, he laid down his life to make atonement for sin, that you might have encouragement to serve God with hopes of acceptance.*

c. God's Honor or God's Hell

1. What an honor it will be to such poor creatures as you are, to bring forth fruit to the divine glory.
 - a) He will richly reward you for it.
 - b) In requiring you to bring forth fruit to him, he does but require you to bring forth fruit to your own happiness.
 - (1) *You will taste the sweetness of your own fruit.*
2. If you remain in this way unprofitable, and be not actively useful, surely God will obtain his end of you, in your destruction.
 - a) He will say concerning the barren tree, "Cut it down, why cumbereth it the ground?"
 - b) Christ, in John 15:6, tells us, "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."
 - c) This is spoken of the barren branches in the vine.
 - (1) *God will have his end; he will accomplish it.*
 - (2) *Though all men and devils unite their endeavors, they cannot frustrate God in any thing; and "though hand join in hand, the wicked shall not be unpunished;" Proverbs 11:1.*
 - (3) *"The ax lieth at the root of the trees; and every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit, is hewn down, and cast into the fire;" Matthew 3:10.*
 - d) If you continue not to bring forth any fruit to the divine glory, as you have here done, hell will be the only fit place for you.
 - (1) *It is a place prepared on purpose to be a receptacle of such persons.*
 - (2) *In hell nature ceases to labor any more for sinners.*
 - (a) *There they will have no opportunity to consume the fruits of divine goodness on their lusts.*
 - (b) *There the faithful servants and ministers of God will no longer spend their strength in vain upon them.*
 - (c) *In hell they will no more have opportunity to clog and discourage the flourishing of religion, and to destroy much good, as they often do in this world.*
 - (d) *In hell they will no more have opportunity to corrupt others by their ill example.*
 - (e) *In hell they will no more have it in their power to offend the godly; they may hurt and torment one another; but the godly will be out of their reach.*
 - (f) *In hell there will be no ordinances, no Sabbaths, no sacraments, no sacred things, for them to profane and defile by their careless and hypocritical attendance.*
 - e) Hell, therefore, if you remain unfruitful and cumberers of the ground, will be the fittest place for you, and there you will surely have your portion assigned you.
 - (1) *There God will get himself honor upon you; there he will magnify himself in your ruin, in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb; and will be praised upon that account by the saints, at the day of judgment; and by all the host of heaven throughout everlasting ages.*