



THE EXHORTER

“And with many other words did he testify and exhort, saying, Save yourselves from this untoward generation.” Acts 2:40

The Palmer Road church of Christ, Westland, Mi. (prchurchofchrist.org)

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Jump Start

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John 15:6 *"If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch, and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned up."*

A neighbor cut down a persimmon tree the other day. He started by cutting off many of the branches and then he cut the tree down. The branches were left in the yard and the trunk of the tree was cut up and hauled away. Very quickly, just a couple of days after all of this was done, the branches dried up, the leaves turned brown and it looked as if those branches had been on the ground for a year. It didn't take long for all life to leave those branches, once they were cut off from the tree.

This is what Jesus is illustrating in our verse. Rather than persimmon branches, he probably meant olive tree branches or the branches from a grape vine. Cut off from the source of life, they lose all life and they wither and die, quickly and immediately.

The same happens spiritually to a person who walks away from Jesus. It doesn't take long for the sins to start multiplying, and all spiritual life withers and they die spiritually. Things that they once opposed, they now embrace without any shame, guilt or regret. They don't fight temptation. They welcome it. And, a life of carefulness turns into carelessness. The attitude sours. The language becomes offensive. The dress more risqué and immodest. And, worse of all, to soothe any remaining guilt, the heart turns against Christ and His people. Everything that brethren ever did that was wrong is highlighted and brought to the front. The good is forgotten. And, the dying branch makes statements that were never said before, such as, "I always thought worship was boring." Or, "I never did agree with some of the things that they said."

And, the branch dies. My neighbor will be gathering up his dead branches and toss them away. For Jesus, the dead branches, are souls and lives that no longer care about the Lord. They are dead, even though they continue to live. Their future is bleak. While they laugh through this life, having the time of their lives, they are heading down a dead end street. The future for them includes the fire of punishment. So tragic, it didn't have to be this way.

(OVER)

Why, we ask. Why would anyone leave Jesus? Why would they walk away from forgiveness, grace, hope, and Heaven for the trinkets that Satan offers today? It's hard to understand. It doesn't make sense. And, it's harder still to get some to see what they have done and to come back. In the natural world, a cut off branch dies and that's it. It's a one way street. Biblically, a person can become reattached to Jesus. They can be forgiven and life can again spread throughout their soul. It's not fatal, until a person no longer has life in their body.

Some leave because the pull of sin is so strong. The call of the far country is constantly calling them. Some have never fully left the world of sin. They have kept one foot in there. Their friends, their choices have been a constant pull back to the world. And, so, they go, returning to the life that they left.

For others, they get discouraged. Someone in the church hurt them or disappointed them. I know a senior citizen who has been a Christian for close to seventy years. She is now in assisted living but comes out to worship when she can. She must carry oxygen with her. One Sunday she came, carrying her oxygen. A off-handed comment was made about how loud the oxygen tank was. That hurt her. Rather than praising her for coming and pointing out what an example she was, someone had to say something stupid and wrong. It was inappropriate. This older Christian must have her oxygen. She feels now as if she ought to stay home. Discouraged because of what others say, is why some quit. We love to tell others what they ought to do, while we give ourselves a pass and sit back and point the judgmental radar gun at folks.

Some never started right. This is what the parable of the sower tells us. Some seed started, but was choked out by the worries, riches and pleasures of this life. Some started and the sun scorched the tiny plant and it died. No roots. Little growth. Young faith. Some as quickly as they come to Christ, they leave Christ. They were disillusioned. They thought coming to Christ would solve every problem, find them a job, get them a mate, and end all of their worries. But troubles remained. Problems at home. Problems with health. Problems at work. Becoming a Christian didn't magically evaporate all of those problems. Their expectations weren't met and so, they left, sad and disappointed.

There are many reasons why some leave, but the results are the same. A branch is cut off. That branch withers and dies. It doesn't do well without Christ. And, it doesn't take very long at all, until a person would never recognize that they were once a Christian. All signs of Christ are gone. Bitter. Sinful. Selfish. Proud. Angry. But under the surface, lost, filled with worry, uncertain and fearful of death. Life without Christ is really no life. Paul told the Romans that the wages of sin is death. It's turning the lights out on the soul. It's welcoming back misery, unhappiness and a life without purpose, direction or benefit to others.

I understand why my neighbor cut off the branches. The tree was coming down. I do not understand why a person leaves the Lord. Jesus has never mistreated us. Jesus has always been kind to us. In Christ, we walk with hope, assurance and answers. Worry and fear flee when we stand close to Christ. Hope soars and our character, our attitude and our outlook all become brighter and better.

Getting cut off of Christ is our choice. God won't do it. Others can't do it. We can saw our own limb off of Christ or we can continue to receive life, nourishments, and purpose through Christ.

Without Christ, there is no life, there is no future and there is no purpose. Work through your questions. Get beyond those things that bother you. Put the saw away. You don't want to be cut off of the Lord.

It's great being a Christian. There is no other life.

Roger Shouse (used by permission)