

The Church Part 9: Fruitless and Fruitful Vineyards

Isaiah 5:1-7; John 15:5-11

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Dear congregation of Christ: Do you know the origin of the idiom “sour grapes,” a reference to a putting down or belittling of something after one has failed to attain it? For example, after the San Francisco 49ers lost the National Football Conference final to the Philadelphia Eagles, a few of the losers said they only lost because of the injuries to their quarterbacks. Some sports commentators called it “sour grapes.” And often, when our favorite team loses, we argue that we lost because of bad calls by the referees.

Who invented the term “sour grapes”? A 1760 English translation of an Aesop fable, “The Fox and the Grapes,” is credited with its origin. In the fable, a fox saw a beautiful bunch of grapes hanging from a branch of a vine. As hard as the fox tried to reach it, he failed. So the fox consoled himself by saying he didn’t want the grapes anyway because the grapes were “sour.” Isn’t this what we often do when we failed to get what we desperately wanted? More on “sour grapes” in a minute.

The last eight Lord’s Day, we have studied the biblical, theological, and historical aspects of the church, and the metaphors used to refer to the church. We began with Adam and Eve as God’s church worshipping in God’s temple, the **Garden of Eden**. Next, in Part 2, we looked at Noah and his family as the church saved within the **Ark of God**. In Part 3, we learned that Abraham and his household was the church dwelling in Canaan as **Pilgrims** who looked forward to their heavenly dwelling-place.

Fast forward to the Israelites in Egypt in Part 4, from where they were **Redeemed** by God from slavery. Next, in Part 5, God’s redeemed people were **Wanderers** in the wilderness through many temptations, sins and sufferings. In Part 6, we learned of the continuing unfaithfulness and rebellion of God’s people when they dwelt in the **Promised Land**. Part 7 was a study of how God dwelt with his people in the temple at **Mount Zion**, symbolic of his church. And last Sunday, in Part 8, we learned that the church is God’s **Flock**, whose shepherds were greedy and oppressive. But there is a final Good and Great Shepherd, Christ, who will lead his flock to salvation and righteous lives.

Today, we continue with Part 9, where we will study the church as the **Vineyard** of God. In Isaiah 5, we read that Israel was the vineyard that the LORD had planted, tended and protected.

But Isaiah 5 gives a totally different meaning of “sour grapes.” The vineyard produced “sour grapes,” instead of sweet grapes, so he destroyed the vineyard. So in John 15, God started planting a new vineyard, with our Lord Jesus Christ being the true vine. And those who abide in him produce good, sweet fruits, while those who do not abide in him produce bad fruits. Those branches that do not produce good fruits are pruned and thrown into the fire.

Therefore, our theme today is, **The Church Part 9: Fruitless & Fruitful Vineyards**, under four headings.

The Lord's Beloved First Vineyard

Isaiah introduces Chapter 5 as a song by God's "beloved," a Hebrew term of endearment usually applied to a romantic relationship (cf SoS 1:13ff). But here, the term is used by Isaiah for God, his "beloved friend." Our text is "love song" where Isaiah develops the story about the Lord's vineyard in the form of an allegory using symbolic characters and events to illustrate a message. At the end of the story, the symbolism is usually explained, as Isaiah does so in verse 7: the vineyard is Israel itself whom God loved, provided for, and protected all her days.

Isaiah describes how his beloved friend planted a beautiful vineyard. He chose a very fertile hill, dug it and cleared it of stones. He bought the best and choicest vines to plant his vineyard. The owner digs the ground, removes the stones, and then backfills it with fertile soil. To protect his vineyard, he builds a watchtower in the middle with the stones he removes, and surrounds it with a wall or a hedge. When the grapes appear, the owner will hire other workers to protect his vineyard from wild animals, birds, or even thieves from the watchtower. The owner also digs a winepress to get ready for the harvest of grapes. After the harvest, the workers would press out the grape juice by walking through the winepress barefooted.

A vineyard is the most common symbol used for Israel in Scripture. In Psalm 80:8-16, Israel is "*a vine out of Egypt*" whom God brought out and planted in the land where they prospered. In Jeremiah 2:21, God rebukes Israel in the same language he uses in Isaiah 5, "*I planted you a choice vine, wholly of pure seed. How then have you turned degenerate and become a wild vine?*" God condemned Israel's leaders because they "*have destroyed my vineyard*" (Jer 12:10). And Hosea 10:1 says Israel is "*a luxuriant vine,*" but sinned more and more with its prosperity.

How did God plant Israel as his choice vine? The historical Psalm 105 tells us of God's provision and protection for his chosen vineyard Israel. From the beginning, God called their forefather Abraham from a pagan land, brought him into the Promised Land of Canaan, and made a covenant with him and his descendants. In summary, the psalmist sings, "*So he brought his people out with joy, his chosen ones with singing. And he gave them the lands of the nations, and they took possession of the fruit of the peoples' toil, that they might keep his statutes*" (Psa 105:43-45).

This was Israel, the Lord's first beloved, chosen vineyard. Then came Jesus the True Vine of the Lord's second and final vineyard.

The True Vine of the Second and Final Vineyard

In the New Testament, Jesus transforms his Father's vineyard into a single vine: himself. In verses 8-11, Jesus says that the branches that abide in him and bear much fruit give God the glory. As he abides in the Father, and loves the Father, he keeps the Father's commandments. He kept the whole Law perfectly in order that he may be the perfect Redeemer of the people that his Father had given him from eternity past. The last work he had to do was willingly offer himself as the sacrifice in place of his sinful, rebellious people. On the night before he was arrested in Gethsemane, he considered his shameful death on the cross for his and his Father's glorification (John 17:1, 4; 13:31).

In turn, those branches that abide in him glorify God by bearing much fruit, their godly lives. Bearing much fruit is the sure spiritual by-product of being attached to the True Vine. God calls us as individuals and as a community of believers together to glorify God and Christ (Rom 15:6, 9). Not only are our many good fruits a spiritual by-product of abiding in the True Vine; they are also our witness to our families, friends, co-workers and classmates so they too would glorify God. So Peter exhorts us to behave honorably among unbelievers, so they also believe, and in believing, they may also glorify God (1 Pet 2:12).

Those who remain attached to the True Vine are fruitful. Those who do not are thrown away.

Unfruitful Branches are Thrown Away

Back in Isaiah 5, the owner of the vineyard did all the careful and diligent work of building, planting and protecting his vineyard for a plentiful harvest. But when harvest came, the owner tasted the grapes, and alas! The grapes were “stinking” or “sour,” which describes its bad smell and taste inconsistent with the planting of the best vines in a fertile, cultivated land. They were like unattended “wild grapes” growing in the wilderness, and so tasted and smelled bad.

In return for all of God's love, Israel rebelled against God, resulting in their ruin. In what ways did they rebel against God? In Isaiah 5:8-24, God lists six charges against them: greed, self-indulgence, disregard for God, moral perversion, disobedience, and social injustice. Because of these sins, God judged Israel with the invasion and destruction of Israel by Babylon, *“I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste.”*

So in the New Testament, Jesus warns that those who are at first attached to the True Vine but bear no good fruit will be cut off, thrown away, and burned. In the Parable of Wheat and Weeds, we see a similar text where Jesus says that at the end of the age, he will separate the weeds from the wheat, and throw the weeds into the fire (Matt 13:40-42, 50; cf 15:13).

At the end of another vineyard parable, Jesus tells the Jews that because of their unbelief and unfruitfulness, they are “wretches” who will be removed from the vineyard and thrown into *“a miserable death.”* And the ultimate condemnation is this: *“the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits”* (Matt 21:41-43). This is not what some calls “replacement theology,” but covenant theology, wherein Israel is merely a foretaste of the church, the one, true *“Israel of God”* (Gal 6:16).

This judgment leads us to another point: the nation Israel from the time of Jesus' first coming ceased to be God's chosen, holy people and kingdom (1 Pet 2:9). The kingdom of God has been given only to those who believe in Christ, whether Jews or Gentiles. These are those whom God has chosen to be fruitful branches because they are connected to the True Vine. This is why Jesus says in verse 16, *“I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit.”*

In Romans 11, Paul uses a cultivated olive tree to illustrate the kingdom of God. The Jews are the natural branches, but those who were faithless and rebellious were cut off from the olive tree. So God grafted into the tree Gentiles like the Romans. But this knowledge should not result in pride, because Gentiles who were grafted in but do not produce fruits will also be cut off from the tree (Rom 11:21-22). They will suffer the same judgment that unfruitful Jews suffered.

But be assured that no Christian who is attached to the True Vine and bears fruit will be cut off. True believers will never be *“thrown into the fire, and burned,”* a symbol of eternal judgment (Isa 30:27; Matt 3:12; 5:22; 18:8; 25:41). Or are these branches true believers, but are just not bearing fruit because of immaturity? Absolutely not. These are not truly connected to the life-giving True Vine to begin with, of whom John says, *“They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us”* (1 John 2:19). Being truly attached to the True Vine means bearing much fruit.

Fruitful Branches are Pruned

Branches that produce much fruit are “pruned” by God the vinedresser. Pruning a tree is a common procedure done by farmers and gardeners: they remove those branches that would harm the tree. Branches that are dead, damaged, or diseased are cut off and thrown away. For true believers, this implies that God does away with desires, habits, and activities that are harmful to them. Sometimes, God cuts off things in our life that are in the way of loving and serving God and our brethren more fully. This may be in the form of painful trials, discipline, suffering, or even persecution.

The Greek verb “to prune” comes from the same root translated “clean.” When Jesus washed his disciples' feet, he told them that they are already “clean” (John 15:3). So our sins are cleansed by God's “pruning” work, thereby increasing our yield of good fruit. Painful “pruning” in our life—such as discipline—will result in joyful and more steadfast abiding in the True Vine and a righteous life (Heb 12:10b-11).

Abiding in Christ means continuing in a close communion with him daily through meditating on God's Word, prayer, and partaking of the spiritual nourishment given of the Holy Communion. But we also abide in Christ in our close communion with God's people who build up one another in the faith. We who abide in him are now his “friends,” not his “servants.”

What are the benefits of all this “pruning” work and abiding in Christ? Jesus mentions two here. First, his joy will be our joy, and our joy will be full, true joy that only the Spirit can give (11). Second, we have the assurance that God will hear our prayers (7, 16). But notice two conditions attached to this promise, contradicting the prosperity gospel teachers: abiding in Christ, and abiding in his words. We abide in his words by *knowing and obeying* his commandments.

Dear friends, abiding in Christ and abiding in his words also have this lasting result: your joy will be complete. Sufferings, sickness, trials, despair, persecution, even death, may come, but you will still have an inner joy in the knowledge that you are connected to Jesus Christ the True Vine. You will never be cut off from the life-giving, nourishing True Vine.

We still rejoice when God “prunes” us, because he assures us that this “pruning” is for us to bear much good fruit. We know that Christ abides in us and we in Christ. Even when God “prunes” our lives, we still have complete joy; we still pray in his name when the answer is wait or even no; we still do everything for his glory; we still cling to the promises in his Word even in life's many disappointments; we still love our church community in spite of its faults, disunity, and jealousies because we know we are all connected to Jesus Christ, the True Vine.