

The Parable of the Vineyard

Isaiah 5:1-7

Isaiah 5:1-7 - *Now let me sing to my Well-beloved - a song of my Beloved regarding His vineyard. My Well-beloved has a vineyard on a very fruitful hill. ² He dug it up and cleared out its stones, and planted it with the choicest vine. He built a tower in its midst, and also made a winepress in it. He expected it to bring forth good grapes, but it brought forth wild grapes. ³ “And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, ‘Judge, please, between Me and My vineyard. ⁴ What more could have been done to My vineyard that I have not done in it? Why then, when I expected it to bring forth good grapes, did it bring forth wild grapes? ⁵ And now, please let Me tell you what I will do to My vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it shall be burned; and break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. ⁶ I will lay it waste; it shall not be pruned or dug, but there shall come up briars and thorns. I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain on it.” ⁷ For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are His pleasant plant. He looked for justice, but behold, oppression; for righteousness, but behold, a cry for help.*

Background Notes

Because of Israel's sins of rebellion, injustice, idolatry, and immorality, God pronounced judgment on the nation of Judah and Jerusalem, its capital city. In fact, here in Isaiah 5, six “**woes**” are pronounced upon the nation for its various sins. But in verses 1-7, before the woes were pronounced, Isaiah gave a well-known illustration - the parable of the vineyard.

In the parable, God planted a vineyard. The vineyard was Israel – specifically, the kingdom of Judah. “*For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are His pleasant plant*” (v7). God had done everything possible to ensure that His vineyard would produce good grapes. He chose fertile soil on a hill, where there would be plenty of sunshine.

He cleared away the stones - and that's a big job in the land of Israel! If you think clearing stones here at home is work, go to Israel. A Jewish legend says that when God decided to divide up the rocks on earth, He gave three angels huge bags of stones to scatter around the earth - but one angel dropped his whole load on the land of Israel!

The Lord started His vineyard with the choicest vines – Abraham and the patriarchs. He built a watchtower, speaking of protection, in the center of the vineyard. And He carved out a stone wine vat, in anticipation of good wine from the good grapes from the choice vines. But the nation produced only wild grapes! The vine of Israel produced worthless fruit.

In the parable, the vineyard keeper allowed the vineyard to go to waste, removing the protective hedge and breaking down the wall. The vineyard would no longer be cultivated, and it would become overgrown with briars and thorns.

Certainly this part of the parable is predictive of what was coming for the nation of Judah. God would allow the people to be removed from the land of Israel and taken into captivity by the Babylonian forces.

In verse 1 we see that this parable was actually a song: “*Now let me sing to my Well-beloved; a song of my Beloved regarding His vineyard.*” We don’t know if Isaiah actually sang this song, but in any case, the song has three stanzas: stanza #1 (v1-2), stanza #2 (v3-6), and stanza #3 (v7). Some Bibles indicate this by spaces between the stanzas.

Doctrinal Points

1. God expects His people to produce fruit.

Isaiah 5 is not the only passage in the Old Testament in which Israel is likened to a vineyard. In all the Old Testament passages where Israel is likened to a vineyard, Israel is expected to produce fruit. After all, that’s the purpose of a vine!

In every single one of these Old Testament “vineyard passages,” Israel and Judah did not produce fruit! The leaders of the nation were not providing moral leadership, and as a result, the nation was characterized by the sins of rebellion, injustice, idolatry, and immorality. Thus God would have to discipline and judge His people, and remove them from the Land.

Let’s look at some of these other “vineyard passages.” Isaiah had already referred to the nation as a vineyard in chapter 3, verse 14: “*The Lord will enter into judgment with the elders of His people and His princes: “For you have eaten up the vineyard; the plunder of the poor is in your houses.*” The nation’s leaders were not providing moral leadership. They were plundering the poor, and they were allowing corruption in the courts.

Hosea 10:1 says, “*Israel empties his vine; he brings forth fruit for himself, according to the multitude of his fruit.*” Hosea and Isaiah were contemporaries. Hosea ministered primarily to the northern kingdom of Israel, while Isaiah ministered primarily in Jerusalem. Hosea denounced Israel for selfishly producing fruit for itself, and not for the Lord. Furthermore, Israel used her self-made fruit for increased idolatry!

Psalms 80 is another Old Testament vineyard passage. Psalm 80 describes how God brought the vine of Israel out of Egypt and planted it in the Land - but God allowed this vineyard of Israel to be uprooted because of its sin.

About 100 years after Isaiah's time, Jeremiah also likened the nation of Judah to a vineyard that God planted in the Land, expecting good fruit. Jeremiah 2:21, *"Yet I planted you a noble vine, a seed of highest quality. How then have you turned before Me into the degenerate plant of an alien vine?"* And Jeremiah 12:10, *"Many rulers have destroyed My vineyard, they have trodden My portion underfoot; they have made My pleasant portion a desolate wilderness."*

Ezekiel was a contemporary of Jeremiah. He ministered to the Jews who were already in captivity in Babylon, while Jeremiah ministered in Jerusalem. Listen to Ezekiel's well-known parable of the fruitless vine. Ezekiel 15:1-6: *"Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying: 'Son of man, how is the wood of the vine better than any other wood, the vine branch which is among the trees of the forest? Is wood taken from it to make any object? Or can men make a peg from it to hang a vessel on? Instead, it is thrown into the fire for fuel; the fire devours both ends of it, and its middle is burned. Is it useful for any work? Indeed, when it was whole, no object could be made from it. How much less will it be useful for any work when the fire has devoured it, and it is burned?' Therefore thus says the Lord God: 'Like the wood of the vine among the trees of the forest, which I have given to the fire for fuel, so I will give up the inhabitants of Jerusalem.'"* The point of Ezekiel's parable is obvious. A vine is not good for lumber, or for making pegs, or even for firewood. A vine is good for only one thing - bearing fruit! And a vine is *expected* to bear fruit! God expected His people Israel to bear fruit - but they did not.

In the same way, God expects His people today to bear fruit. In John 15:5 our Lord Jesus said, *"I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing."* And verse 8, *"By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples."* When we abide in Jesus Christ and walk close to Him, we are enabled to bear much fruit.

God expects His people to produce fruit.

2. God will not force His people to produce fruit.

The Lord did everything possible to prepare the ground and help the vineyard of Israel to produce good spiritual fruit. He provided choice vines, fertile soil, protection, cultivation, etc. But God did not *force* Israel to produce good fruit. Producing fruit was a matter of Israel's will - but they made bad decisions and wrong choices, and thus Israel produced wild grapes.

In verse 7, there is a "play on words" that emphasizes the contrast between the good fruit God was looking for – but, because of Israel's sin, what God found instead. In English, verse 7 says: *"He looked for justice, but behold, oppression; for righteousness, but behold, a cry for help."* The play on words is this: the Hebrew words for "justice" and "bloodshed" sound similar, and the Hebrew words for "righteousness" and "cry of distress" sound similar. To capture the play on words, one commentator translated verse 7 this way: "God waited for equity, but behold, iniquity. He waited for right, but behold, riot."

God *expected* His people to produce fruit - but He did not *force* His people to produce fruit – and this is still true today. John 15 says that the Lord will prepare, protect, and prune His branches - but He will not manipulate them against their will.

God will not force His people to produce fruit.

Practical Application

What more can God do for you?

“What more could have been done to My vineyard that I have not done in it? Why then, when I expected it to bring forth good grapes, did it bring forth wild grapes?” (v4).

God did everything He could possibly do for His vineyard Israel, so it could bring forth good grapes. Unfortunately the vineyard only produced wild grapes.

Today, as a believer, is your life producing good grapes or bad grapes? Does your life exhibit good fruit – fruit that is pleasing to the Lord?

If there's not much good fruit in your life, whose fault is that? Is it God's fault - or your fault? It's your fault. Wild grapes are the result of your personal bad decisions and wrong choices.

Seriously, look back on your life, and think it through. What more could God have done for you? God provides for us, protects us, prunes us, sends us warnings, brings us counsel through His Word, and brings people into our lives who can help us produce good fruit. God does everything possible to help us to produce good fruit for His glory - and yet how often we produce the fruit of bitterness and anger and jealousy – and worse.

Have you been thinking that you could produce more fruit - or better fruit - if God changed your life circumstances, or gave you more money, or more free time? No – that wouldn't make it happen. A change of circumstances wouldn't help you produce good fruit, because God already knows and supplies what's best for you. He knows what circumstances of your life will be best for producing good fruit – and he's already providing it!

Think it through. What more can God do for you?