

Living the Fruitful Life: 1. Right Conditions

Isaiah 5:1-2; Matthew 21:33-34

November 1, 2019

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There are over 300 references in the Bible to vines, vineyards, and wine, an indication that vines and vineyards were well known and well understood in biblical times, but I've never grown grapes and I don't know anyone who has. So a few weeks ago, Tami, Joy Ann and I spent a day at Sovereign Estates Vineyard near Waconia, and I am grateful for the people there who took time to show us around and answer our questions on what was a very busy day of harvest. And over the next four weeks, we will share some of what we learned that I think will help us understand what we find in the Bible and how to apply it to our lives. Some of you might think it odd that we would present a series about wine. Maybe you grew up at a time when the Methodists were opposed to drinking alcohol of any kind. Isn't that why we serve grape juice instead of wine for communion this morning? If we go back to the years leading up to Prohibition of the 1920s, Methodists took a leading role, not because of a biblical teaching against alcohol, but because of the societal harm resulting from alcoholism. The Bible does not condemn wine and drinking wine, but drunkenness was a sin.

In the first century, drinking wine was an ordinary part of life because clean drinking water was not always available. If you had any property at all, you grew vines on it, and if you didn't have vines, you knew someone who did – and you'd help them care for their vines. The fermenting process preserved the grape juice because there was no such thing as refrigeration. If you had even a tenth of an acre, you could produce enough grapes for 250 bottles of wine and by watering it done in a 2 to 1 ration, you'd have 500 bottles until the next harvest. Everyone understood the importance of vines and how to care for them which is why references to vines and vineyard are so prevalent in the Bible.

In our scripture this morning, both Isaiah and Jesus offer a similar parable. Isaiah said: **Let me sing for my loved one a love song for his vineyard.** He's composed a love song for his beloved, and who is his beloved? It's God. Isaiah spoke of a loving God as you might love a spouse, and likewise God sees us as God's beloved. Isaiah says, it's a love song for his vineyard – God's vineyard – in other words, the planet earth. God has created a beautiful vineyard and you and I have been created as vines and planted in the vineyard with the goal of growing and becoming good fruit. Isaiah also sees the vineyard as Israel and the Israelites as the vines. And when Jesus uses this same metaphor, the church becomes the vineyard and each of us the vines. This morning, we gather in God's vineyard. We are the vines. **He dug it, cleared away its stones, planted it with excellent vines, built a tower inside it, and dug out a wine vat in it.** Everyone who heard Isaiah's words understood what he was trying to say because they had a vineyard or they knew someone who did. God planted, and we are the vines.

He expected it to grow good grapes... God has an expectation. It's like the tomato plants you put in the ground last spring. The only reason you did that was to get tomatoes. Why else would you plant them?! As humans, we have a deep longing to have a purpose. Why am I here? The words of Isaiah provide the answer. We are God's vines and we are meant to produce good grapes. And what's the good grapes/fruit? That's what Isaiah addresses in the first five chapters by telling us what people did not produce. **He expected it to grow good grapes – but it grew rotten grapes.** And in verse 7 he says: **God expected justice, but there was bloodshed; righteousness, but there was a cry of distress!** So what does God expect? Justice and righteousness. Justice meant insuring the rights of the weak and vulnerable – the poor, the

marginalized, the widow and orphan, the people the rest of the world has forgotten and ignored. But that wasn't happening in Isaiah's time. People were focused on making a better life for themselves, accumulating more, building bigger houses while the poor were getting poorer. And yet they were created – God gave them life for the purpose of doing justice and righteousness. Righteousness is more than doing right things. It's paying attention to people, doing the kind and compassionate thing. Justice and righteousness go hand in hand. Every act of kindness in which you expect nothing in return, every time you give generously to help someone in need. That's what many of you were doing last Saturday in our MAKE A DIFFERENCE DAY or when you bring food for the food shelf or you give to this morning's second mile offering. Or I still remember this photo I received last winter when Ashley and Emily were selling hot chocolate to raise money to help those who are homeless. These are acts of righteousness. We don't get extra credit for these things. We were made for the purpose of doing these things.

Earlier this year, I was watching a news report about Puerto Rico which said that two years after Hurricane Maria, there are still 30,000 homes without roofs. A few days later Linda Seaton asked me if I would go to Puerto Rico on a mission trip to help with home repairs, and I had every excuse – I had a grandson coming and I'd agreed to watch him on Fridays, the month of November is our stewardship month and I needed to be here, when would I get my yard work finished and Christmas planning is done in November – no way would I have time for this – and there's a reason I hire other people to do my home repair projects – but then one morning I was praying: Lord, I am grateful for this new day and the life you have given me. And once again today, I give my life to you. And I heard this voice in my head that I've come to recognize as God's Spirit say, "what about Puerto Rico." And so I told Linda – yes, I will go. I don't know what the next week will bring, but I know that I was made for justice and righteousness.

The most important thing that goes into making good grapes is the soil. It's having the right conditions – soil, sunlight, temperature, moisture. Here's what Isaac Savaryn told us when we were at the vineyard. [video] The taste of the grapes is dependent on the conditions. The most expensive acre of ground in the world is in Burgundy, France that produces what is considered the very best wines in the world. The taste is determined by the conditions. And if we are God's vines, then what are the conditions in which we are growing? We have our roots in our family background, and even if that was a challenging past, it has shaped us and even motivated us to do better. The people around us, the people we spend time with – they are shaping us. What we listen to and read or watch on the Internet. I think about this every Friday afternoon when I take care of my grandson – even at 3 months of age – what conditions am I providing – what I'm saying that he will not even remember is being planted within him. We gather here every week in God's vineyard, and my hope is that we create conditions that will enable you to produce good fruit – justice and righteousness. Last Wednesday, I sat down with a few of our children to ask them about what they experience through our Messiah Kids. They described the Bible verses they are learning, the crafts and activities that help them learn about God. And then I asked what's the best part of being here. There was no hesitation – it's the people. They love coming here because there are people they love to see and when they are here they know that they are loved. Is there anyone who would not benefit from these conditions?

I asked Isaac how long vines live. The vines in this part of the world have only existed for a couple of decades because it's only recently that the University of MN has developed vines that can survive our winters. But he said, under the right conditions, vines can last more than a hundred years. What we do here is providing the conditions to shape our children for the next 85-90 years and imagine how they will impact the world around them. Every child who enters here is being shaped by the conditions you provide. Sometimes I'll hear parents or grandparents tell me that they come so that their children/grandchildren will have an experience. I'm reminded

of those times I've been on an airplane, and before the plane takes off, there is always a safety demonstration. "If the cabin decompresses, an oxygen mask will drop from the ceiling, and if you have a child with you – what? – put the mask on yourself before you put one on your child. Because if you take time to put one on your child first, you could lose consciousness. Adults, we must become the person God wants so that we can set an example for our children.

This week, those who are members, will receive our 2020 Giving Guide in the mail, and I hope you will read it and pray about it, because your giving is what makes the conditions possible. Your giving is the fruit that has an impact on practically everything we do here. I was thinking about our activities of the past week: you provided Christmas packages for 135 children, you assembled 800 health kits for people in the Bahamas, you created hygiene kits for young women, you packaged 7,514 meals, you cleaned and sanitized the kitchen that will serve meals to persons who are homeless, you raked yards for two families in this community, you cleared buckthorn from our roadways, you served a meal to 82 persons in an effort to build relationships between Messiah and our Bloom community, you sent dozens of notes of encouragement to teachers at Oakwood School, you made clothing for babies born prematurely. You make a harvest possible.

So I have two questions: 1. What fruit are you producing? When God looks at you, his vine, is God finding justice, compassion, kindness, acts of generosity? That's why you've been given life. 2. What are the conditions you are putting into your heart and mind to shape you? When we are living fully each day with the right conditions, God looks at us and says, "well done, good and faithful servant, well done."

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of November 3, 2019

Weekly Prayer: God of love, plant me in the soil of your grace. Use the implements of your grace and mercy to prune and cast out what is foreign and hurtful. Leave nothing undone to help me be fruitful. Nurture me with the strength of Christ, the vine of everlasting life, so that you may find me to be just the kind of vineyard you envisioned me to be. In your holy name, Amen.

Monday, November 4

Scripture: Nehemiah 5:1-6; Amos 9:11-15

Then there was a great protest of the people and their wives against their fellow Jews. Some said, "With our sons and daughters we are many, and we all need grain to eat and stay alive." Others said, "We have to mortgage our fields, our vineyards, and our houses in order to get grain during the famine." Still others said, "We have had to borrow money against our fields and vineyards in order to pay the king's tax." "We are of the same flesh and blood as our kin, and our children are the same as theirs. Yet we are just about to force our sons and daughters into slavery, and some of our daughters are already slaves! There is nothing we can do since our fields and vineyards now belong to others." I was very angry when I heard their protest and these complaints.

On that day I will raise up the meeting tent of David that has fallen, and repair its broken places. I will raise up its ruins, and I will rebuild it like a long time ago; so that they may possess what is left of Edom, as well as all the nations who are called by my name, says the LORD who will do this. The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when the one who plows will overtake the one who gathers, when the one who crushes grapes will overtake the one who sows the seed. The mountains will drip wine, and all the hills will flow with it. I will improve the circumstances of my people Israel; they will rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them. They will plant vineyards and

drink their wine; and they will make gardens and eat their fruit. I will plant them upon their land, and they will never again be plucked up out of the land that I have given them, says the LORD your God.

Observation: Israel was a land of vineyards. So it is not surprising that the vine and the vineyard serve as potent images in scripture. Today most vineyards are large and owned by well-off people. But Nehemiah 5 told of an economic crisis in Israel after the exile. The families upset that they had to use their vineyards to secure loans to buy food or pay taxes were clearly not very wealthy. The prophet Amos' picture of a better future expected many families would plant vineyards next to their gardens.

Application: Like most of the prophets, Amos did not make his words of judgment the last words. ("The worst thing is never the last thing.") In his concluding promise of a better future ("In that day..."), he said God's people would "plant vineyards" because God would "plant them." As a participant in God's promises ("If you belong to Christ, then indeed you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to the promise." Galatians 3:29), how does this promise of God planting you in a secure, fruitful world made new speak to your heart?

Prayer: Dear God, give me a heart that reacts like yours to injustice in our broken world, and strengthen my desire to let you plant me in the better world you have always promised. Amen.

Tuesday, November 5

Scripture: Hosea 14:4-8; Isaiah 61:1-3, 10-11

I will heal their faithlessness; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them. I will be like the dew to Israel; he will blossom like the lily; he will cast out his roots like the forests of Lebanon. His branches will spread out; his beauty will be like the olive tree, and his fragrance like that of Lebanon. They will again live beneath my shadow, they will flourish like a garden; they will blossom like the vine, their fragrance will be like the wine of Lebanon. Ephraim, what do idols have to do with me? It is I who answer and look after you. I am like a green cypress tree; your fruit comes from me.

The LORD God's spirit is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me. He has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim release for captives, and liberation for prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and a day of vindication for our God, to comfort all who mourn, to provide for Zion's mourners, to give them a crown in place of ashes, oil of joy in place of mourning, a mantle of praise in place of discouragement. They will be called Oaks of Righteousness, planted by the LORD to glorify himself.

I surely rejoice in the LORD; my heart is joyful because of my God, because he has clothed me with clothes of victory, wrapped me in a robe of righteousness like a bridegroom in a priestly crown, and like a bride adorned in jewelry. As the earth puts out its growth, and as a garden grows its seeds, so the LORD God will grow righteousness and praise before all the nations.

Observation: The Hebrew prophets used vines (and more broadly, the whole image of God as a planter and grower) as symbols to teach the Hebrew people about God's life-giving, renewing power. Hosea, like most other prophets, warned Israel that their unjust behavior and persistent worship of Canaanite idols was breaking their covenant with God. That exposed them to danger without God's protection. But Hosea's final image of God healing them and making them "blossom like the vine" said, it's always possible to turn. God's people always have a choice. No matter what lies in your past, you always have the choice to turn back to God.

Application: Jesus read the first three verses of Isaiah 61 in his hometown synagogue and said he was the fulfillment of that promise (Luke 4:16-21). His knowledge of the passage most likely extended to verse 11's beautiful promise of God growing "righteousness and praise before all the nations." What are one or two ways you are aware of God accomplishing that, either in history or in your life experience today?

Prayer: Lord God, let my life be a vehicle through which you can grow righteousness and praise in the hearts of those with whom I come in contact. Amen.

Wednesday, November 6

Scripture: Isaiah 5:1-7; Mark 12:1-12

Let me sing for my loved one a love song for his vineyard. My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. He dug it, cleared away its stones, planted it with excellent vines, built a tower inside it, and dug out a wine vat in it. He expected it to grow good grapes—but it grew rotten grapes. So now, you who live in Jerusalem, you people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard: What more was there to do for my vineyard that I haven't done for it? When I expected it to grow good grapes, why did it grow rotten grapes? Now let me tell you what I'm doing to my vineyard. I'm removing its hedge, so it will be destroyed. I'm breaking down its walls, so it will be trampled. I'll turn it into a ruin; it won't be pruned or hoed, and thorns and thistles will grow up. I will command the clouds not to rain on it. The vineyard of the LORD of heavenly forces is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are the plantings in which God delighted. God expected justice, but there was bloodshed; righteousness, but there was a cry of distress!

Jesus spoke to them in parables. "A man planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a pit for the winepress, and built a tower. Then he rented it to tenant farmers and took a trip. When it was time, he sent a servant to collect from the tenants his share of the fruit of the vineyard. But they grabbed the servant, beat him, and sent him away empty-handed. Again the landowner sent another servant to them, but they struck him on the head and treated him disgracefully. He sent another one; that one they killed. The landlord sent many other servants, but the tenants beat some and killed others. Now the landowner had one son whom he loved dearly. He sent him last, thinking, They will respect my son. But those tenant farmers said to each other, 'This is the heir. Let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' They grabbed him, killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard. "So what will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others. Haven't you read this scripture, *The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. The Lord has done this, and it's amazing in our eyes?*" They wanted to arrest Jesus because they knew that he had told the parable against them. But they were afraid of the crowd, so they left him and went away.

Observation: Isaiah 5 created an image the people of Israel loved: themselves as God's vineyard. Sadly, Isaiah didn't make the image's message positive. He said that they had disappointed their God—despite being planted in the soil of a fertile hillside, the vineyard produced "rotten grapes." Jesus' vineyard parable used that well-known image, and like Isaiah used it sadly. His story exposed the murder in the hearts of "religious" people who thought their titles gave them the authority to rebuke and refuse him.

Application: After Jesus told his pointed story, the religious authorities wanted to arrest him, but "they were afraid of the crowd." Ironically, in this case the crowd saw more clearly than their religious leaders. What blocked the leaders' vision? How can you keep your spiritual eyes and ears clear to recognize God's work in both expected and unexpected places?

Prayer: Dear God, you've given me so many favorable conditions to learn and understand what you seek from me. Help me to not disappoint you, but to let your principles guide me to a flourishing life. Amen.

Thursday, November 7

Scripture: Mark 4:2-9, 14-20

He said many things to them in parables. While teaching them, he said, "Listen to this! A farmer went out to scatter seed. As he was scattering seed, some fell on the path; and the birds came and ate it. Other seed fell on rocky ground where the soil was shallow. They sprouted immediately because the soil wasn't deep. When the sun came up, it scorched the plants; and they dried up because they had no roots. Other seed fell among thorny plants. The thorny plants grew and choked the seeds, and they produced nothing. Other seed fell into good soil and bore fruit. Upon growing and increasing, the seed produced in one case a yield of thirty to one, in another case a yield of sixty to one, and in another case a yield of one hundred to one." He said, "Whoever has ears to listen should pay attention!"

The farmer scatters the word. This is the meaning of the seed that fell on the path: When the word is scattered and people hear it, right away Satan comes and steals the word that was planted in them. Here's the meaning of the seed that fell on rocky ground: When people hear the word, they immediately receive it joyfully. Because they have no roots, they last for only a little while. When they experience distress or abuse because of the word, they immediately fall away. Others are like the seed scattered among the thorny plants. These are the ones who have heard the word; but the worries of this life, the false appeal of wealth, and the desire for more things break in and choke the word, and it bears no fruit. The seed scattered on good soil are those who hear the word and embrace it. They bear fruit, in one case a yield of thirty to one, in another case sixty to one, and in another case one hundred to one."

Observation: Jesus told a parable about a farmer sowing seed, and where the seed landed made a big difference. (People trained in wine tasting say one layer of a wine's flavor reflects the soil in which the grapes grew.) At the story's end, he used a common Hebrew expression: "Whoever has ears to listen should pay attention!" It was a way of saying the story's meaning wasn't obvious, that understanding its message took attention and thought.

Application: When we "listen and pay attention" to what Jesus said about his story, we realize that he wasn't talking about farming. He was teaching lessons about spiritual growth, the factors that can keep us from growing, and the importance of taking in God's good "seed" and allowing it to grow. What steps are you taking to make your heart and mind "good soil" in which God's word can grow and bear a good crop?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you want me to know you. You reveal yourself in many ways, some of them subtle and quiet. Give me ears to hear, a spirit attuned and attentive to all you wish to plant in me. Amen.

Friday, November 8

Scripture: Proverbs 24:30-34

I happened upon the field of a lazy person, by the vineyard of one with no sense. Thorns grew all over it; weeds covered the ground, and the stone wall was falling down. I observed this and took it to heart; I saw it and learned a lesson. "A little sleep, a little slumber, a little lying down

with folded arms”—and poverty will come on you like a prowler, deprivation like a man with a shield.

Observation: This passage expressed simple wisdom. One of the important themes in the book of Proverbs contrasts lazy people with the diligent. The sages considered laziness a type of folly that results in abject poverty. It is of course wiser to work diligently than to lazily while away our days. (Like all the proverbs, there are exceptions. At times lazy people end up wealthy, for various reasons.) But as we recall how the prophets and Jesus used vineyards as a spiritual image, the proverb may also tell us about our inner life.

Application: In terms of a physical vineyard, these were the results the proverb described: “Thorns grew all over it; weeds covered the ground, and the stone wall was falling down.” What would be some of the specific results you (but maybe not always other people) could discern if you are “lazy” about caring for your inner “vineyard”? On the other hand, what steps might it take for you to avoid spiritual poverty by actively caring for your inner vineyard?

Prayer: O God, remind me that the life to which you call me is a good life, one that produces greater purpose, satisfaction and joy. Deliver me from the urge to be lazy in following you. Amen.

Saturday, November 9

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 3:6-9

I planted, Apollos watered, but God made it grow. Because of this, neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but the only one who is anything is God who makes it grow. The one who plants and the one who waters work together, but each one will receive their own reward for their own labor. We are God’s coworkers, and you are God’s field, God’s building.

Observation: Earlier in 1 Corinthians (see 1 Corinthians 1:11-12), the apostle Paul addressed the report from some Corinthian Christians that the Christians in that Greek city were dividing into factions. They apparently drew the dividing lines by choosing their favorite church leader. In today’s passage, Paul made it plain he saw no value at all in playing that game. He said he and an eloquent Christian from Alexandria, Egypt named Apollos both served the same function: working together to nurture God’s vineyard—God’s people. But they both realized it is God who produces the growth in human hearts and lives.

Application: In his commentary on this reading, N. T. Wright wrote, “What Paul has a problem with is the idea that anyone might play him and Apollos against one another, within some personality contest based on the human standards of ‘wisdom’ and rhetoric.... Paul is just as cross about people putting him on a pedestal as he is about anybody else being there. There is only one pedestal in the kingdom of God, and only one person to be put on it. But it isn’t a statue to be put up as a monument in a town square. It is a cross; and the Messiah who hung and died on it passed judgment on all human fame, celebrity, popularity and reputation.” What does it mean to keep Jesus on his cross at the center of your inner vineyard, and not any of Jesus’ human servants who help to water the vines?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I can learn much from many of your servants. But in the end, only you can make the seeds of your kingdom grow in my life. Please keep me growing and thriving in your grace. Amen.