

The Book of Isaiah, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 3: The Song of the Vineyard and the Woes

Isaiah 5:1–30

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Your aim in this lesson is to let the Song of the Vineyard do its disarming work on the class, just as it did on Judah. The genius of the song is that it draws the hearer in as a sympathetic observer of the farmer's heartbreak before revealing that the hearer is the vineyard. Try to preserve that movement. Let the class feel the owner's lavish care and his grief over wild grapes first, so that when 5:7 lands ('the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel'), it convicts rather than merely informs. The goal is honest self-examination: God has cultivated us with everything, and He comes looking for fruit.

Be ready to explain the key principle of 5:7, that God measures His vineyard by 'judgment' and 'righteousness,' justice and right dealing with others, not by religious busyness. This connects directly to chapter 1's rejection of empty worship. Help the class see that the fruit God seeks is a life that does right by people and reflects His own character (compare the fruit of the Spirit, Galatians 5:22–23, and Jesus' vine in John 15). Privilege, the class should understand, raises the stakes; the more God has done for us, the more grievous it is when we bear nothing.

The six woes (5:8–23) should be taught not as ancient curiosities but as a mirror. Greed, indulgence, defiant sin, calling evil good, conceit, and corruption are all alive and well today. The heaviest doctrinal moment (Q9) gathers up the woes to display the holiness and justice of God (5:15–16, 24–25). Make clear that God's refusal to call evil good is not harshness but holiness, and that a God who will finally set things right is genuinely good news for everyone who has suffered injustice. End by pointing to Christ the true vine, in whom alone we can bear the good fruit the Owner is seeking, so the class leaves both convicted and invited to abide in Him.

Question 1

Student Question:

Read 5:1–2. The owner did everything possible for his vineyard, choice ground, cleared stones, the best vines, a tower, a winepress, yet it yielded wild grapes. What does this teach us about God's investment in His people, and why does privilege and blessing increase, rather than decrease, our responsibility to bear fruit?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Isaiah begins not with an accusation but with a song: 'Now will I sing to my wellbeloved a song of my beloved touching his vineyard' (5:1). This is a brilliant rhetorical strategy. By framing the message as a love song about a friend's vineyard, Isaiah lowers the defenses of his hearers. They settle in to listen sympathetically, not realizing they are the subject of the song.

The opening describes a vineyard given every possible advantage: 'in a very fruitful hill' (the best location), the owner 'fenced it, and gathered out the stones thereof, and planted it with the choicest vine' (5:2). Anyone who has worked soil knows the backbreaking labor of clearing stones from a field by hand. This owner did it personally, and he planted only the finest vines.

He went further still: 'built a tower in the midst of it, and also made a winepress therein' (5:2). The tower was for protection and oversight; the winepress was cut in expectation of a rich harvest. Every action proclaims confidence and love. This owner held nothing back and fully expected good fruit. 'And he looked that it should bring forth grapes,' Isaiah says, and then the crushing turn: 'and it brought forth wild grapes.'

The teacher should let the weight of this land. 'Wild grapes' translates a word suggesting sour, stinking, worthless berries. After all that investment, the vineyard produced not a poor harvest but a rotten one. The lesson begins forming here: blessing and privilege are not neutral. They create responsibility. The more lavishly God cultivates a life, the more grievous it is when that life yields nothing good. We are not self-made; we are cultivated ground, and the Owner has a right to expect fruit.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God lavishes every advantage on His people; their fruitfulness is His rightful expectation.
- Privilege and blessing increase, never decrease, our responsibility before God.
- The song's strategy disarms the hearer before convicting him.
- We are not self-made but cultivated ground; the Owner rightly looks for fruit.
- 'Wild grapes' picture not a poor harvest but a rotten, worthless one.

Discussion Prompts

- What does the owner's lavish care, clearing stones, planting the best vines, building a tower, tell us about God's investment in us?
- Why does being greatly blessed increase rather than lessen our responsibility to bear fruit?
- Why do you think Isaiah delivered this message as a song rather than a direct accusation?

Question 2

Student Question:

The owner asks, 'What could have been done more to my vineyard, that I have not done in it?' (5:4). When you consider all God has done for you, your salvation, His word, His people, His patience, how would you honestly answer His question about your own life right now?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

After describing all his labor, the owner turns and speaks directly, inviting the hearers to judge his case: 'And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem, and men of Judah, judge, I pray you, betwixt me and my vineyard' (5:3). He puts the verdict in their hands, and in doing so leads them to condemn themselves.

Then comes the heart-piercing question: 'What could have been done more to my vineyard, that I have not done in it? wherefore, when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes?' (5:4). This is the emotional center of the song. It is the voice of wounded love, of a giver who held nothing back and cannot fathom why the response was so worthless.

There is no good answer to the owner's question, and that is the point. God can truthfully say He has done everything. The failure is not on His side. When God's people fail to bear fruit, it is never because God was stingy or absent; it is because hearts refused to respond to lavish grace. The teacher should let this question hang in the room and turn it on each of us: what could God possibly have done more for us than He already has?

This verse exposes the irrationality and ingratitude of sin. Faced with everything God has provided, our salvation, His word, His patience, the fellowship of His people, ongoing sin is a baffling refusal of overwhelming love. The honest believer, hearing this question, is moved not to make excuses but to fall silent and then to repent.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God can truthfully say He has done everything; the failure in fruitlessness is ours, not His.
- Sin is ultimately irrational, a refusal of overwhelming, lavish love.
- The question 'what more could I have done?' calls for silence and repentance, not excuses.
- God invites His people to judge His case, knowing they will condemn themselves.
- Honest reflection on God's grace exposes the ingratitude of ongoing sin.

Discussion Prompts

- How would you honestly answer God's question, 'What could I have done more for you that I have not done?'
- Why is ongoing sin, in light of all God has given, ultimately irrational?
- What does it do to your heart to hear the wounded-love tone in the owner's question?

Question 3

Student Question:

Read 5:7. God looked for justice but found bloodshed, for righteousness but heard a cry. What does it tell us about the nature of true godliness that God measures His vineyard by justice and righteousness toward others, and not merely by religious observance?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verses 5–6 announce what the owner will do with a vineyard that betrayed his care: 'I will take away the hedge thereof, and it shall be eaten up; and break down the wall thereof, and it shall be trodden down.' He will stop protecting and tending it, let it be overrun, command the clouds to withhold rain. The protection that grace provided will be withdrawn.

This is a sobering picture of judgment as God removing His hand of blessing and protection. He does not always strike directly; sometimes He simply lets a people have the consequences of the

life they have chosen, taking away the hedge that kept the destroyers out. It is a quieter judgment, but a real and terrible one.

Then Isaiah springs the interpretation that turns the whole song on the listeners: 'For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah his pleasant plant: and he looked for judgment, but behold oppression; for righteousness, but behold a cry' (5:7). The mask comes off. They are the vineyard. They have pronounced judgment on themselves.

The teacher should highlight the stunning wordplay, which the audience would have felt even if we read it in translation. God looked for mishpat (justice) but found mishpach (bloodshed); He looked for tsedaqah (righteousness) but heard tseaqah (an outcry, a scream of the oppressed). The fruit God seeks sounds almost identical to the rot He found, yet they are worlds apart. And note carefully what the good fruit is: justice and righteousness, doing right by other people. This is the measuring stick of the vineyard, not how busy the religion was but whether the life produced justice and righteousness. It ties directly back to chapter 1; God has never been impressed by ritual that leaves the weak crying out.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Judgment can take the form of God withdrawing His protective hedge of blessing.
- God measures His vineyard by justice and righteousness, right dealing with others, not religious busyness.
- The wordplay (justice and bloodshed, righteousness and an outcry) shows how near good fruit and rot can look, yet how opposite they are.
- The fruit God seeks is a life that does right by people and reflects His character.
- This ties back to chapter 1: ritual that leaves the weak crying out does not please God.

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that God's judgment can simply be the removal of His protective 'hedge'?
- Why does God measure His people by justice and righteousness toward others rather than by religious activity?
- What is the difference between fruit that merely looks religious and fruit that truly reflects God's character?

Question 4

Student Question:

Isaiah 5:4 has the owner asking why he got wild grapes when he expected good ones. What is one 'wild grape,' a habit, attitude, or sin, that has been growing in your life lately, and what would it take to root it out?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

With the song's meaning exposed, Isaiah now names the wild grapes one by one in a series of six 'woes.' The first falls on greed: 'Woe unto them that join house to house, that lay field to

field, till there be no place, that they may be placed alone in the midst of the earth!' (5:8). This describes the wealthy seizing property until they alone own everything, pushing others off their ancestral land.

In Israel, land was a sacred trust, allotted by God to families as their inheritance. To consolidate it into vast estates was not just economic ambition; it was trampling the God-given rights of the vulnerable and acting as if one could possess the earth alone. It is greed that isolates, the rich pursuing 'more' until they stand alone, having displaced everyone around them.

The judgment fits the sin (5:9–10): those great houses 'shall be desolate,' and the land that was seized will become barely productive, an acre of vineyard yielding only a tiny measure of wine. The very accumulation they trusted in will turn to emptiness. Greed promises fullness and delivers desolation.

The teacher should make this woe contemporary. The endless drive to accumulate, to add house to house and field to field, is alive and well, and it still isolates us from God and from people. Jesus warned that 'a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth' (Luke 12:15). Greed crowds out God, hardens us toward the needy, and never satisfies. God takes it seriously because it tramples people and dethrones Him in the heart.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Greed isolates, pursuing 'more' until we have displaced both people and God.
- Accumulation that tramples the vulnerable is a serious offense against God.
- The judgment fits the sin: hoarded wealth turns to desolation and emptiness.
- Greed never satisfies and crowds God out of the heart (Luke 12:15).
- The modern drive to accumulate operates exactly as Isaiah's first woe describes.

Discussion Prompts

- How does the endless pursuit of 'more' isolate us from both God and other people?
- Why does God take greed and the trampling of the vulnerable so seriously?
- Where do you see the drive to 'join house to house' at work in your own heart or culture?

Question 5

Student Question:

Read 5:8–10, the first woe. It condemns those who 'join house to house' and 'lay field to field' until they stand alone in the land. How does unchecked greed and the endless accumulation of possessions damage both our relationship with God and our community, and why does God take this so seriously?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The second woe targets indulgence and dissipation: 'Woe unto them that rise up early in the morning, that they may follow strong drink; that continue until night, till wine inflame them!'

(5:11). These are people whose lives revolve around pleasure from sunrise to nightfall, with feasting and music filling every hour (5:12).

The deadly result is named precisely: 'they regard not the work of the LORD, neither consider the operation of his hands' (5:12). The problem with a life consumed by pleasure is not merely the indulgence itself; it is that it crowds out all awareness of God. So filled with entertainment and appetite, they have no attention left to notice what God is doing.

This is a penetrating diagnosis for our own age of constant entertainment and easy indulgence. A person can fill every waking moment with amusement, food, drink, and noise, and in doing so completely lose sight of God. The danger is not always scandalous sin; often it is simply a life so full of pleasant distraction that there is no room left to 'regard the work of the LORD.'

Isaiah warns of the consequence (5:13–14): such a people will 'go into captivity, because they have no knowledge,' and death will open its mouth wide to swallow the revelers. The teacher should press the personal application gently but clearly. We must each ask what is filling our attention and appetites, and whether the noise of our pleasures has drowned out our awareness of God. The cure is not joylessness but deliberately keeping our eyes on the work of the Lord.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- A life consumed by pleasure crowds out all awareness of God's work (5:12).
- The danger is often not scandal but distraction, a life too full to 'regard the work of the LORD.'
- Constant entertainment and indulgence dull the soul's attention to God.
- Ignorance of God here is willful, the fruit of a self-absorbed life, and it leads to ruin (5:13).
- The cure is deliberately keeping our eyes on the work of the Lord, not joylessness.

Discussion Prompts

- How can a life full of pleasant distractions leave us unable to 'regard the work of the LORD'?
- What in our modern lives most easily fills our attention so completely that we lose sight of God?
- How do we enjoy God's good gifts without letting them crowd out awareness of Him?

Question 6

Student Question:

Read 5:11–12. The second woe falls on those who rise early to pursue strong drink and fill their lives with music and feasting but 'regard not the work of the LORD.' What in your life has the potential to so fill your attention and appetites that you stop 'regarding the work of the LORD,' and how do you guard against it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The chapter pauses the woes briefly (5:15–17) to restate the great theme from chapter 2: ‘the mean man shall be brought down, and the mighty man shall be humbled... but the LORD of hosts shall be exalted in judgment, and God that is holy shall be sanctified in righteousness.’ Even in the midst of naming sins, Isaiah keeps the spotlight on God’s holiness.

This is a vital theological anchor for the whole chapter. The woes are not the bitter complaints of a harsh deity looking for reasons to punish. They are the necessary verdicts of a holy God who is ‘sanctified in righteousness,’ shown to be holy precisely by His refusal to tolerate sin. God’s judgment is an expression of His holy character, not a contradiction of His love.

The third woe then resumes with a chilling image of defiant sin (5:18–19): ‘Woe unto them that draw iniquity with cords of vanity, and sin as it were with a cart rope.’ These are people who pull their sin along behind them deliberately, who are yoked to wrongdoing and drag it everywhere, even taunting God: ‘Let him make speed, and hasten his work, that we may see it.’ This is sin that has become open mockery, daring God to act.

The teacher should help the class see the progression from earlier woes (greed, indulgence) to this one: sin that began as appetite has hardened into brazen defiance. When people scoff, ‘Where is God? Let Him do something,’ they have moved from weakness to open contempt. And it is against exactly this backdrop that Isaiah reminds us God will indeed be ‘exalted in judgment.’ His holiness guarantees that defiance will not have the last word.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God’s holiness is the anchor of the whole chapter; His judgment expresses His holy character.
- ‘The LORD shall be exalted in judgment’ even as He names His people’s sins (5:16).
- Sin can harden from appetite into deliberate, defiant mockery of God (5:18–19).
- Taunting God to act (‘let him hasten his work’) is the height of contempt.
- God’s holiness guarantees that defiance will not finally prevail.

Discussion Prompts

- Why is it important to see the woes as expressions of God’s holiness rather than mere harshness?
- What does it look like when sin moves from weakness or appetite into open defiance of God?
- How does remembering that ‘God shall be exalted in judgment’ change the way we view our own sin?

Question 7

Student Question:

Read 5:20. ‘Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness.’ Why is this moral inversion so dangerous, and how does our culture pressure us to relabel what God calls sin as acceptable or even good?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The fourth woe strikes at moral inversion, and it may be the most relevant of all to our time: 'Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!' (5:20). This is not merely doing evil; it is redefining evil as good and good as evil, attacking the very categories of right and wrong.

This is a uniquely dangerous sin because it removes the possibility of repentance. A person who does wrong but still calls it wrong can be brought to repentance. But a person who has relabeled their sin as a virtue has cut the wire that would have alarmed their conscience. When light is called darkness and darkness light, the soul loses its bearings entirely.

The teacher should help the class see how powerfully our own culture pressures us toward this inversion. We are constantly urged to celebrate as good, even as brave or progressive, the very things God plainly calls sin, and to brand as evil, as hateful or intolerant, the very things God calls good and righteous. The pressure to relabel God's moral order is relentless, and Christians are not immune to slowly absorbing it.

The defense against this woe is to anchor ourselves in what God has clearly said and refuse to let the surrounding culture redefine His categories. Good and evil are not ours to rename; they are fixed by the character of God Himself. The teacher should encourage the class to test cultural messaging against Scripture, holding fast to God's definitions even when, especially when, the world insists on calling light darkness.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Calling evil good and good evil attacks the very categories of right and wrong.
- Moral inversion is uniquely dangerous because it removes the possibility of repentance.
- Our culture relentlessly pressures us to relabel sin as virtue and righteousness as evil.
- Good and evil are fixed by God's character; they are not ours to redefine.
- The defense is to anchor in what God has clearly said and test culture against Scripture.

Discussion Prompts

- Why is 'calling evil good and good evil' even more dangerous than simply doing evil?
- Where do you see our culture pressuring people to relabel sin as good and righteousness as evil?
- How can we keep from slowly absorbing the world's redefinition of God's moral categories?

Question 8

Student Question:

Read 5:21, the woe on those 'wise in their own eyes.' Where are you most tempted to lean on your own wisdom and judgment rather than humbly submitting to what God has clearly said, and what would real teachability look like for you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The fifth and sixth woes come quickly. The fifth strikes at conceit: 'Woe unto them that are wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight!' (5:21). This is the pride of self-sufficient wisdom, people who trust their own judgment over God's revealed truth, who lean on their own understanding rather than submitting to Him.

This woe sits at the root of all the others. Greed, indulgence, defiance, and moral inversion all grow from a heart that is 'wise in its own eyes,' that has decided it knows better than God how life should be lived. Proverbs repeatedly warns against this: 'Lean not unto thine own understanding' (Proverbs 3:5). When we become our own authority, every other sin finds an open door.

The sixth woe targets corruption and the perversion of justice (5:22-23): 'Woe unto them that are mighty to drink wine, and men of strength to mingle strong drink: which justify the wicked for reward, and take away the righteousness of the righteous from him!' These are people whose only 'strength' is in their drinking, and who use their position to acquit the guilty for a bribe and rob the innocent of justice. Greed and indulgence have now corrupted the very courts meant to protect people.

The teacher should connect the sixth woe back to 5:7: God looked for justice and found a cry. Here is that cry's source, judges bought with bribes, the righteous denied their rights. Self-sufficient wisdom (woe five) leads to corrupt self-interest (woe six). The remedy for both is humility, the teachable heart that submits to God's wisdom and uses whatever influence it has to do right by others rather than to enrich itself.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Being 'wise in our own eyes' is the root sin from which the others grow.
- Trusting our own judgment over God's revealed truth opens the door to every other sin (Proverbs 3:5).
- Corruption of justice (acquitting the guilty for bribes) is the source of the 'cry' of 5:7.
- Self-sufficient wisdom leads naturally to corrupt self-interest.
- The remedy is a humble, teachable heart that submits to God and does right by others.

Discussion Prompts

- Why is being 'wise in our own eyes' the root from which so many other sins grow?
- Where are you most tempted to trust your own judgment over what God has clearly said?
- What would genuine teachability and humility before God's word look like in your life?

Question 9

Student Question:

Read 5:15-16 and 5:24-25 carefully. Isaiah says 'the LORD of hosts shall be exalted in judgment, and God that is holy shall be sanctified in righteousness,' and then describes God's anger and outstretched hand against sin. How do the six woes and the resulting judgment reveal the

holiness and justice of God, and why is it actually good news that God will not call evil good or leave injustice unaddressed forever?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verses 24–25 deliver the verdict that the six woes have been building toward, and they put God’s holiness and justice on full display. ‘Therefore as the fire devoureth the stubble... so their root shall be as rottenness, and their blossom shall go up as dust: because they have cast away the law of the LORD of hosts, and despised the word of the Holy One of Israel’ (5:24). The judgment is rooted in their rejection of God’s word.

The reason given is crucial: they ‘cast away the law’ and ‘despised the word of the Holy One of Israel.’ Every one of the woes, at bottom, was a rejection of God’s revealed will. The teacher should help the class see that all sin is ultimately a despising of God’s word, a decision that our way is better than His. The woes are simply the visible fruit of that root rejection.

Verse 25 shows God’s response: ‘Therefore is the anger of the LORD kindled against his people, and he hath stretched forth his hand against them, and hath smitten them.’ And ominously, ‘For all this his anger is not turned away, but his hand is stretched out still,’ a refrain that will echo through the coming chapters. God’s holiness cannot simply ignore persistent, defiant sin.

This is the heaviest doctrinal moment of the lesson, and it must be handled as good news, not merely as warning. Recall 5:16: ‘the LORD of hosts shall be exalted in judgment, and God that is holy shall be sanctified in righteousness.’ A God who would call evil good, who would shrug at bloodshed and bought judges and trampled poor, would not be loving; He would be complicit. It is precisely because God is holy and just that He will not let injustice stand forever. For everyone who has ever cried out under oppression, the truth that God will finally set things right, that He refuses to call evil good, is profoundly good news. His justice is the guarantee that evil does not get the last word.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- All sin is ultimately a despising of God’s word, deciding our way is better than His (5:24).
- God’s holiness means He cannot simply ignore persistent, defiant sin.
- ‘His hand is stretched out still’ shows judgment is sustained against unrepented evil.
- God’s refusal to call evil good is an expression of His holiness, not harshness (5:16).
- A God who shrugged at injustice would be complicit, not loving.
- God’s justice is good news: it guarantees evil will not have the last word.

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Isaiah trace all the woes back to casting away and despising God’s word?
- How is God’s refusal to ‘call evil good’ actually an expression of His goodness and love?
- Why is the truth that God will finally set things right good news for those who have suffered injustice?

Question 10

Student Question:

Looking back over the whole chapter, from the loving labor of the vineyard owner to the six woes, name one specific 'wild grape' Jesus is asking you to surrender, and one kind of good fruit He is cultivating in you right now. What is the next concrete step of letting Him tend the vineyard of your heart?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The chapter closes with a terrifying picture of the instrument of judgment (5:26–30). God will 'lift up an ensign to the nations from far, and will hiss unto them from the end of the earth' (5:26). He summons a distant nation (historically Assyria, and later Babylon) as His agent, and they come with frightening speed and readiness.

The description is vivid and relentless (5:27–28): none weary, none stumbling, none sleeping; their arrows sharp, their bows bent, their horses' hooves like flint, their chariot wheels like a whirlwind. This is an unstoppable force. Then the imagery turns predatory (5:29): 'Their roaring shall be like a lion... they shall roar, and lay hold of the prey, and shall carry it away safe, and none shall deliver.'

The final verse leaves us in darkness: 'they shall roar against them in that day like the roaring of the sea: and if one look unto the land, behold darkness and sorrow, and the light is darkened in the heavens thereof' (5:30). The chapter that began as a tender love song ends in roaring darkness. The contrast could not be sharper, and it is meant to be felt.

The teacher should bring the whole lesson to rest by gathering up its trajectory and pointing forward to Christ. God planted a vineyard and looked for fruit; finding only wild grapes, judgment followed. But this is not the end of the story God is telling. Centuries later, Jesus would retell this very song as a parable (Matthew 21:33–43) and then declare Himself 'the true vine' (John 15:1). In Christ, God plants His vineyard anew, and now, abiding in Him, His people can finally bear the good fruit the Owner has always sought (Galatians 5:22–23). The warning of Isaiah 5 is real, but so is the invitation: come and abide in the true vine, and let Him cultivate in you the justice, righteousness, and love that God has been looking for all along. The Owner is still walking His vineyard, and He is still asking what fruit He will find.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God can summon even pagan nations as instruments of His judgment (5:26).
- The judgment is pictured as swift, unstoppable, and inescapable.
- The chapter's movement from love song to roaring darkness is meant to sober us.
- Jesus retells this song (Matthew 21:33–43) and offers Himself as the true vine (John 15:1).
- In Christ, abiding in the true vine, His people can finally bear the fruit God seeks (Galatians 5:22–23).
- The Owner still walks His vineyard, still looking for fruit; the invitation to abide stands open.

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Isaiah end this chapter that began as a love song in 'darkness and sorrow'?
- How does Jesus' claim to be 'the true vine' (John 15) answer the problem of the fruitless vineyard?
- What good fruit is Jesus seeking to cultivate in you, and what would it mean to truly abide in Him this week?