

The Book of Isaiah

Lesson 3: The Song of the Vineyard and the Woes -- Isaiah 5:1-30

Some truths are too painful to say straight out, so we sing them. Isaiah knew this. He walks into chapter 5 not as a prosecutor with a list of charges but as a singer with a love song. 'Now will I sing to my wellbeloved a song of my beloved touching his vineyard' (5:1). Picture a crowd leaning in, expecting a tender ballad. They have no idea that the song is about them, and that by the time it ends, they will have pronounced their own sentence.

It is a song about a farmer who loved a piece of ground. He chose the best hillside, cleared every stone by hand, planted the choicest vines, built a watchtower to guard it, and even cut a winepress into the rock, so sure was he of a good harvest. He did everything right. He held nothing back. And then, after all that labor and all that love, he came to gather his grapes, and the vineyard gave him wild, sour, worthless fruit. You can almost hear the ache in the farmer's voice as he asks, 'What could have been done more to my vineyard, that I have not done in it?' (5:4).

Then Isaiah springs the trap. The vineyard, he says, 'is the house of Israel,' and the men of Judah are 'his pleasant plant.' God 'looked for judgment, but behold oppression; for righteousness, but behold a cry' (5:7). In the Hebrew it is a heartbreaking play on words: He looked for mishpat (justice) and got mishpach (bloodshed); He looked for tsedaqah (righteousness) and heard tseaqah (a scream). The whole song has been God's lament over a people He cultivated with everything He had, who gave Him back nothing but rot.

After the song comes the reckoning, six 'woes' that name the wild grapes one by one: greed, drunkenness, defiant sin, moral confusion, conceit, and corruption. As we walk through them, do not hold them at arm's length as someone else's sins. Let the song do to us what it did to Judah. God has cultivated the vineyard of your heart with astonishing care. The question this lesson presses on every one of us is simple and searching: when the Owner of the vineyard comes looking for fruit in your life, what does He find?

Group Discussion: In the Song of the Vineyard, God lists everything He did for His people, choice ground, cleared stones, the best vines, a tower, a winepress, and then asks, 'What could have been done more to my vineyard, that I have not done in it?' (5:4). As a group, talk through all that God has done to cultivate His people, both Israel then and the church now. In light of so much divine care, why is fruitlessness such a serious and grievous thing to God?

Personal Reflection: God 'looked for judgment, but behold oppression; for righteousness, but behold a cry' (5:7). If God walked through the vineyard of your heart this week looking for fruit, where would He find good grapes, and where might He find 'wild grapes' that grieve Him?

Read Isaiah 5:1-30

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?

6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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?

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Psalm 80:8–16, Israel as a vine God brought out of Egypt and planted, the backdrop to Isaiah’s song; Matthew 21:33–43, Jesus retells the vineyard parable and applies it to the kingdom being given to a fruit-bearing people; John 15:1–8, Christ the true vine in whom His people must abide to bear fruit; Galatians 5:22–23, the fruit of the Spirit, the good grapes God looks for in us now; Amos 5:21–24, God rejecting empty ritual and demanding justice roll down like waters

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