

## Isaiah 5: SOUR GRAPES?

Isaiah presents an allegory about a "loved one" who owned a vineyard. He did everything imaginable to cultivate good grapes. But, he tells us, in verse 2: "*Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit.*" Sour grapes! That's what he got for all his efforts.

Aesop told a fable about a fox who tries to reach grapes hanging high on a vine. He is forced to give up, but to salvage his battered pride reassures himself, "The grapes are sour anyway!" In reality the grapes were fine and juicy, which is what attracted the fox to them in the first place. When the fox calls them "sour grapes" he is really acting like a poor loser. The sourness is not in the grapes, it is in the fox.

In Isaiah's allegory the owner of the vineyard complains that his grapes are bitter. But the sourness really is in the grapes, not the owner. Indeed, the owner emphasizes all the effort expended to ensure a harvest of good grapes. He chose a fertile hillside (v1). He cultivated the soil and cleared away all the stones (v2a). He planted the best quality vines in this fertile, well-tilled soil (v2b). He built a watchtower in it for the use of a labourer employed to protect the grapes from animals, birds and theft (v2c). He carved a winepress or vat out of bedrock (v2d), making an upper section in which the grapes were piled and then crushed by treading upon them with one's feet. The juice then ran through channels into a lower vat where it was collected.

In Lake County, California a vineyard operator expects to spend about \$US9,000 per year for each acre planted. After three years a 10 acre vineyard has cost \$270,000, and the grower has not harvested the first grape, nor laid the first brick for a winery, nor designed a label, nor purchased storage barrels and bottles. Isaiah's friend is bitterly disappointed that all his time and effort and expenditure have yielded such a miserable crop. He asks, "*Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it? When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad?*" (v4).

Why did it yield only sour grapes? This allegory doesn't come out of the blue. The reason for the spoiling of the vineyard has already been explained in 3:13-15:

The LORD takes his place in court; he rises to judge the people. The LORD enters into judgment against the elders and leaders of his people: 'It is you who have ruined my vineyard; the plunder from the poor is in your houses. What do you mean by crushing my people and grinding the faces of the poor?' declares the Lord, the LORD Almighty.

To ruin the vineyard is to crush God's people. The vineyard is God's people. This is explicitly stated in 5:7: "*The vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are the garden of his delight.*"

We are not altogether unfamiliar with this kind of identification. The comedienne Phyllis Diller once quipped, "Men are like fine wine. They all start out like grapes, and it's our job to stomp on them and keep them in the dark until they mature into something you'd like to have dinner with."

Isaiah's song is an allegory. The owner is God, the vineyard his people. The fertile hill is the land of Canaan, portrayed as a sacred mountain in Exodus 15. The digging up of

the site and the clearing of stones occurred when God's people, led by Joshua, cleared out idolatrous Canaanites from the land. The planting with "the choicest vines" is the establishment of the twelve tribes of Israel in the promised land. The watchtower may be Jerusalem; the winepress may be the temple. The taking away of the hedge and the breaking down of the wall is the removal of divine protection against foreign attacks and the trampling of the vineyard is the destruction wrought by foreign invasion, the devastating results of which are symbolized by the image of the vineyard becoming a wasteland, unpruned and uncultivated because God's people have been exiled (v13), a land in which briars and thorns flourish and on which no rain falls.

The allegory emphasizes that for God the most important thing of all is his people. Isaiah even uses language suggestive of the sexual intimacy between a husband and his wife, as in the Song of Songs. In verse 1 he calls the owner by a name usually used between lovers. The images of gardens and vineyards and fields were commonly used in the ancient world with erotic connotations. That God should call his people "the garden of his delight" is very suggestive. In Isaiah's day many believed various gods had sex and that by participating in certain religious ceremonies they could plug into the fertility of these gods, thus producing good crops and pregnancies. But unlike the gods of the fertility cults, the fertility God seeks is the production of justice and righteousness. Isaiah's so-called "love song" is a parody of popular fertility cult songs. The whole point is that the intimate relationship between God and his people has been violated and right relationships between his people have been undermined.

This vineyard was supposed to produce succulent grapes for the owner. This fruit is identified in 5:7b: "*And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.*" God planted his people in the land of Canaan to produce a society characterized by justice and righteousness. Instead he sees a society characterized by leaders who crush his vineyard and grind the faces of the poor. Isaiah uses a powerful play on words in verse 7. God looks for *MISHPAT* but sees *MISHPACH*. *Mishpat* means "justice", *mishpach* means "bloodshed". He looks for the good grapes of justice and finds the sour grapes of bloodshed. He looks for righteousness, but hears instead cries of distress.

The rest of the chapter is all about the sour grapes God finds when he looks at what the nations of Israel and of Judah have become. We can smell these stinking grapes of injustice and unrighteousness when we consider the six woes or curses pronounced by God, each of which picks up on the imagery used in the allegory of the vineyard.

1. "*Woe to those who add house to house and join field to field till no space is left and you live alone in the land*" (v8).

For God it is his people who are primary and the land is secondary. The first woe is against those who have turned these priorities upside down; those who treat the land as primary - as so important that people mean nothing to them. They just keep acquiring more and more land till they "live alone in the land". They don't value being part of the community of God's people. Indeed, to do what they are doing necessarily involves taking away the God-given land inheritance of many of God's people.

How highly do you rate the community of God's people? The fruit God seeks can only be produced by a community characterized by healthy relationships. The terms "justice" and "righteousness" in the Bible fundamentally concern having right

relationships. Christians cannot produce this kind of fruit in isolation. The New Testament reinforces this reality. God's purpose is to build up churches, communities of Christians who delight in gathering together. Some who regularly attend church have little to do with the Christian community. They think of themselves as Christian, but largely confine their involvement to attendance at services. But they don't have a ministry in the church; they don't use their God-given spiritual gifts for the building up of the church community. Their primary concern is with the education of their children and building a safe and successful life for themselves.

The judgment also has an ironic link with the allegory. These people's great houses will become derelict buildings and *"a 10 acre vineyard will produce only a bath of wine, a homer of seed only an ephah of grain."* A "10 acre vineyard" is literally a "ten-yoke vineyard", that is, the area of land that could be ploughed by 10 yoke or teams of oxen in one day, let's say 10 acres. I'm informed that in a normal year a 10 acre vineyard in full production might yield about 50 tons of wine grapes. Just imagine 50 tons of sour grapes! The largest independent grape grower in Northern California is Andy Becksteder who reckons that on average one ton of grapes produces 700 bottles of wine. On this basis 50 tons of grapes would yield 35,000 bottles of wine.

What a waste! Imagine pouring 35,000 bottles of wine down the drain! These people make a terrible deal when they swap spiritual wine for material wine. So it is with you. You are pouring your life down the plug hole if you choose to give your life to anything other than becoming a vital part of the community of God's people, contributing to the development of right relationships within it.

2. *"Woe to those who rise early in the morning to run after their drinks, who stay up late at night till they are inflamed with wine"* (v11).

The allegory is reworked again. God wants to drink spiritual wine. These people want earthly wine. Motivational speaker Anthony Robbins has observed, "We aren't in an information age, we are in an entertainment age." The Israelites *"have no regard for the deeds of the LORD, no respect for the work of his hands"* (v12b). Why not? We are told they also *"have harps and lyres at their banquets, tambourines and flutes and wine"* (v12). They are too busy entertaining themselves to think about the work of God's hands. What is the work of God's hands? His vineyard, the creation of a people who will live lives characterized by right relationships, that is, justice and righteousness. But these people will be exiled because they have no understanding, that is, they fail to appreciate what a wonderful privilege it is to be God's vineyard. They have no interest in being the people God wants them to be. Such people receive poetic justice. They are so concerned with sating their hunger and thirst that they will die of hunger and be parched with thirst (v13). They will discover Death, Sheol, has a far greater appetite than they have. It will open its greedy mouth and swallow them, humiliating them for the arrogance with which they think they can ignore God.

Isaiah also declares that when God humiliates people in judgment, he *"will be exalted by his justice, and the holy God will show himself holy by his righteousness"* (v16). This contrasts with verse 7b: the fruit God seeks is justice and righteousness. If God's people will not produce this fruit then God himself will display these qualities. But, because God's people have rejected justice and righteousness the only experience they will have of these things is when God brings them low and humiliates them.

3. *"Woe to those who draw sin along with cords of deceit, and wickedness as with cart ropes" (v18).*

Think back to the allegory. Imagine a cart loaded with grapes. That's the sort of cart that should have been pulled, a nation bearing the fruit of right relationships - justice and righteousness. Instead, here are a people who load their carts with the very opposite, sin and wickedness, and deliberately pull these carts. They don't take the judgment of God seriously. Their attitude in effect is one of "Let God hurry, let him hasten his work so we may see it", because deep down they don't really think they have anything to worry about from God. Mary Queen of Scots once threatened, "No one provokes me with impunity." God makes no threats just promises. Make no mistake we will all be judged. Nobody will 'get away with it'. The day WILL come when God judges all sin.

4. *"Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter" (v20).*

Sweet grapes have been exchanged for bitter, sour grapes. People have exchanged justice for bloodshed and righteousness for causing people to cry out in distress. Some smart alec has quipped, "When you rationalize, you do just that, you make rational lies." Don't make the mistake of convincing yourself that you are basically a good person and have not done anything *really* bad. This is to refuse to see yourself as God sees you.

5. *"Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes and clever in their own sight" (v21).*

When Eve ate the forbidden fruit in the Garden she did so to become wise. These are people who don't feel they have anything to fear from God. They feel they are living respectable, decent lives. They refuse to listen to God's assessment of them but prefer to be guided by their own self-evaluation. They treat their own intelligence and reasoning as the authority and don't take seriously what God says in his Word.

6. *"Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine and champions at mixing drinks" (v22).*

We are back to wine again, the substitution of spiritual wine for the material. But this time God is saying that just as wine damages our ability to sense what is real and what is not, so these people have lost their ability to see what is right and what is not, and, therefore, they pervert justice, acquitting the guilty and denying justice to the innocent. These people, God goes on to explain, don't draw their understanding of justice from "the law of the Lord Almighty", from "the Word of the Holy One of Israel". No! They have rejected and spurned what God requires of them.

For all these reasons, so the chapter ends, God will send the Assyrians to judge them (vv26-30). The chapter began with new creation language, with the image of the garden of God's delight, a vineyard on a fertile hill intended to produce succulent fruit. The last verse of the chapter employs language from Genesis 1 to indicate that, in the case of his people, God will reverse creation so that land will once again be covered by a roaring sea and darkness and distress.

In Mark 12 Jesus adapted the allegory of the vineyard in Isaiah 5 and gave it a fresh application. Again we see MISHPAT replaced by MISHPACH, justice replaced by bloodshed, for yet again we see a people rejecting God's Word when they kill the prophets and even the vineyard owner's own Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. God has

executed terrible judgment on the Jewish people and he has given the vineyard to others. But Isaiah 5 does not end the story. It is continued in Isaiah 27. Again God speaks of his vineyard, but this time he is looking to a future time when his vineyard will flourish. He promises, "*In days to come Jacob will take root, Israel will bud and blossom and fill all the world with fruit.*" This has been fulfilled in Christ himself. In John 15, for example, Jesus presents himself as the Vine and we, his followers, as the branches. The Lord wants to see us bear much fruit, for in this way we prove we are truly Jesus' disciples and truly love him (my quick summary of John 15).

Our church community is a vineyard. Let's make sure it produces the fruit the Lord longs to gather and taste - the rich wine of right relationships.