

Isaiah 5:1-7

Fruitfulness is the goal of a God-centered life.

“What more was there to do?” God asked as Isaiah sings of him. “What more could we do?” is a common question, one we probably ask quite a bit.

We have never really had great luck in gardening. We have made significant attempts, lots of effort in a few different parts of the country. We have built boxes, improved the soil, we have fed the plants with miracle grow, but with the exception of zucchini, our labors have never been tremendously fruitful. (I really hope this won't be the same result with our kids!)

It can be so discouraging because we are a cultivating people - all of us, maybe in gardens, or in writing code, or hosting lavish gatherings. Cultivating young minds in education, by our own study... investing, laboring, to produce something desired. A goal achieved, a new life experienced, a love fulfilled.

What is it to work, to cultivate on a more profound level, not in mere snippets or portions of a life, but giving all of who you are to something, and it ends up fruitless, or worst still producing the opposite of what is healthy and good?

It is heartbreaking. Life altering. And that is just what the opening indictments of Isaiah have proven - and here it is revealed in a song.

What does fruitfulness mean? In Scripture, fruit is a metaphor used to describe the outward demonstration of one's inward disposition. Describing the produce of our lives. Something useful and right in response to what God does. And for our purposes this morning I am using the word fruitfulness to describe the production of good fruit, usable, healthy. The positive things expected after cultivation.

Working through this love song, this tune of unrequited love, I want us to see the heartbreak over Judah, over Israel really, and what they have been given and what it produced. But also we want to think of our own fruitfulness. What have we been given and what is the result?

1) Cultivation Rejected

“Let me sing... my love song concerning the vineyard...”

Here is poetry, prophetic singing, telling the story of God's relationship to those he claimed as his own people. Isaiah sings of the labor, the love, the grace extended to the “Vineyard” to Judah this nation set apart for God.

Setting them in a good place, a fertile hill. Removing the stones and planting choice vines. Chosen, desirable. He has built a watchtower in the midst of it - an image of longevity, he is not looking for a quick turnaround and the then planning to abandon the vines, he is laboring for the long haul. With a vat to collect the wine that will surely be produced.

A melodic picture of how God has claimed them as a people. How he has rescued them, protected them and given them a place of flourishing, a land. This is God gracing his people. Watering care, provision, and preference on them.

And he looked for fruitfulness, he looked for it to yield healthy grapes but it yielded wild grapes... sour, stinking grapes. Worthless fruit, which is no fruit at all.

“Having been lavished with an astonishing array of blessings from God historically—the promises to Abraham, the exodus under Moses, the manna in the desert, the conquest of the promised land under Joshua, the joy of eating harvests they did not plant and living in houses they did not build, the patience of God through the rebellions in the time of the Judges, the gift of leadership by David, the repeated warnings and encouragements from many prophets—Israel responded with a shameful array of sins for generations. They had “received the grace of God in vain.” Isaiah 5 unfolds the anguish of that reality in powerful terms.” Davis

We have seen it in the opening chapters of the Prophet, and now it is set to music so we will truly see... Isaiah is contrasting God’s lavish bestowments of grace with the disappointing outcomes on Judah’s end.

“Fruitlessness does not merely violate the Lord’s formal intention it contradicts his heart.”
Motyer

Isaiah 5:3–4 “And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. [4] What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?” (ESV)

Rather than standing alone as judge God is inviting Judah to participate now. What more could I do? An invitation to self-condemnation. Any clear-eyed observer would notice the same thing, God had given so much, he had cultivated a people, cared for them, provided for them, and the vineyard rejects the cultivation. And what is left will rot.

Left to waste, briars and thorns shall grow up, the walls of protection will be trampled down.

The vineyard that was God’s delight, his pleasant planting, to be ruined by fruitlessness. He looked for justice and saw bloodshed, for righteousness and instead an outcry of rage. It was Israel missing the point...God made it abundantly clear, generations of prophets. And still a

rejection of the cultivation, pride where humility was meant, greed where generosity was desired, immorality where faithfulness was supposed to be.

Jesus would sing a similar song... **Matthew 21:33–41** “Hear another parable. There was a master of a house who planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a winepress in it and built a tower and leased it to tenants, and went into another country. [34] When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit. [35] And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. [36] Again he sent other servants, more than the first. And they did the same to them. [37] Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ [38] But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.’ [39] And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. [40] When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” [41] They said to him, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons.” (ESV)

Matthew 21:42–45 “Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures: “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes”? [43] Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits. [44] And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.” [45] When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them.” (ESV)

The vineyard was not just some culturally relevant picture of life for Jews. They were familiar with this song in Isaiah and all over Scripture, they knew they were the vineyard. They are unsettled by Jesus because they knew the kingdom was being taken away...

“God delighted in them, but they did not delight in him. And when delight dies, despising takes over, and judgment descends.” Ortlund

This song is left without resolution. The rest of the chapter actually gets worse. In previous sections there would be hope, here there is none. This song leaves Judah and humanity in great need.

One response would be relief that we are not Judah. That maybe there is another song to be sung for us. Jesus spoke of the new tenants of the vineyard, really a new vineyard to be had and we believe that's us. But what is to say we will end up different?

Fruitfulness is the goal of a God-centered life.

Is Isaiah five a warning for us as well? Have we been given much and are we fruitful in response?

2) Cultivation Neglected

“Fruit is the direct result of whatever controls our hearts. The fruit of a life not surrendered to Jesus includes “sexual immorality, impurity, and debauchery, idolatry and witchcraft, hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage,” and many more evil acts. In contrast, the fruit of the Spirit of God is “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”

An internal reality that has external effects, translates into action... opposite Judah, justice, righteousness. God’s will happening in us, being sanctified and made more like Jesus - behavioral choices that look like his. As his people, we want to be characterized by good works, humility, and forgiveness.

2 Corinthians 6:1 “we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain.” (ESV)

Those that claim Christ have been given immeasurably huge grace, but do we have the fruit the gardener expects?

God has been busy on our behalf! He opens himself to all people by taking on humanity, flesh, living among us, in the stink of our struggles and pain. Jesus stays faithful, obedient to the Father, all the way to a death that we deserved.

In response then what is desired? Obedience, reverence, that internal change leading to actions of love, peace, self-control... delighting in him the way he delights in us?

2 Peter 1:3 “His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness,” (ESV)

All we need is given to us, and we can take it for granted. We worship little things. We place our hope in dry wells. We neglect the grace given to us as if it doesn’t apply to all of life.

“The question is, “Are we bearing the sweet fruit consistent with the beauty of grace, and are we yielding an abundant harvest commensurate with the abundant grace God has invested in us?”
RO

“We tell ourselves, “If only I had more time, if only I had a better wife/husband, if only I were married, if only my job weren’t so demanding, if only I had more money, I’d really live for the Lord.” We tell ourselves, “if only we had this type of music or that... we would be the church we ought to be.” “If only this, if only that...” These are all excuses. At bottom, each one implies a criticism of God as if he hasn't already given us all we need to live well for him.” Ortlund

For all the avalanche of God’s grace, it is amazing how little fruit is being produced. We are well watered, well fed, so fat we should be dead.

Convicted we are quick to try to produce... squeeze some fruit out before people notice I am neglecting the cultivation of God. We draw up a checklist, we strive, we fill every void of the calendar assuming it will clear our name once for all. 'Jesus got me in now I am going to tend to this vineyard until I produce juicy grapes.' And still, everything comes out sour if there is fruit at all.

Our motivation is skewed, it becomes about earning, or proving to others we are "righteous" and it missing the mark.

There is tension here, what am I to do? Don't remove the hedge, don't leave me to rot...

We are intended for fruitfulness. Without a doubt. But what if we have been going about the production all wrong, in a way that has neglected the cultivation? How do we get to where we are supposed to be? To be fruitful?

3) Cultivation Activated

The vineyard has been given to new tenants. The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. The hope for Judah, the hope for us is Jesus.

Jesus sings a better song over us.

John 15:1–11 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. [2] Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. [3] Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. [4] Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. [5] I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. [6] If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. [7] If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. [8] By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. [9] As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. [10] If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. [11] These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full." (ESV)

Jesus, the true vine. His tending of the vineyard produces the fruit and we are made part of it. Abiding in Jesus is how we bear fruit!

By his word, he has already made us clean. We are now the choice branches, being made into his vineyard. From our cleansing we abide, we remain in him. A branch can't produce fruit by itself, it has to abide in the vine, be made one with the vine. Apart from Jesus, we are dead branches best used as kindling. In him, we bear much fruit. In him, we are given help, and God is

glorified. We are loved and empowered to keep his commandments - to love one another. To bear fruit.

And it is in this life, made part of the vine that our joy will be full.

“So, what does this fruit look like? Good fruit is seen in a change in our disposition, attitudes, affections, and actions. Those sins which we formerly loved become loathsome to us. We begin to love others with the love of Christ. We more easily forgive. As we are given opportunity, we seek to do good to everyone. We exercise our spiritual gifts for the building up of the body of Christ. We share the good news of salvation and make disciples. We are grateful and give praise to God. We seek to do all things for God's glory. We confess our sins to God and pray for His continual work in us. We strive to know God and to do the things which please Him, knowing that we can bear no true fruit apart from Him.”

“Being a fruitful Christian is not accomplished by checking off a "to do" list but by having our essential being and character changed, renewed, and progressively conformed to the image and likeness of Christ. To be fruitful means to follow Christ. To love what He loves. To do what He commands from a loving motive and with a joyful spirit.”

Jesus is the faithful remnant of Israel—the true Vine and fruitful Vineyard. By the Spirit's presence in our lives, we have entered into an organic union with him—a union of branches to Vine.

Our response is to “simply to abide—to dwell, to marinate, to go “deeper still” into Jesus. For apart from Jesus, we can do nothing and will bear no fruit.” “United to him and cleansed in him, we bear fruit.” Our motivation changes, we live from the gift of grace we have received. And instead of fruit by addition, it happens in subtraction - pruning, when unhealthy things are removed. We stay close enough that the vinedresser has access to trim!

It seems counterintuitive. Just be part of Christ. Let him rule your life and there will be fruit. There will be evidence of your active, live faith. But it is found, enlivened, activated in Jesus, by not taking it for granted but by clinging more tightly to the grace he gives us. And the point is it comes not from us but something being worked in us - we don't gin up the fruit, the one who cultivates produces it. And we live yielding to Jesus in our lives until the fruit is the natural response.

We are not strong people. We are in need of righteousness and the strength of another, just to walk in the way Jesus is calling us to. The glorious news is that he gives us his strength. We are not meant to achieve on our own what only can be done in him.

Ewen has a turtle that lights up and plays music. Blue. Blue has all the parts he needs. The microchip with music on it, the led lights necessary. But Blue doesn't sing without a battery... Likewise, we are given everything we need. We have the gifts, the personalities, the guidance we

need to obey, to revere, to delight. But none of it breathes with life if we are not plugged into Christ.

Fruitfulness is the goal of a God-centered life. Accomplished abiding in Christ.

How do we respond to the song of the vineyard, or better yet the song of the true vine?

Sing Back - Believe in him, that his life, death, and resurrection were for you. Keep believing it. Delight in Christ as he delights in you. Don't miss his grace, and be passionate about finding sources, reminders of this grace. Stay there in his grace. We have a tendency to think there is a next chapter and we are always trying to turn the page but Jesus says abide. Remain right there in his arms of care, provision, purpose, and pruning.

Yield to Jesus - Submit to his God's pruning, surrender the things that have stopped producing fruit and trust his process. Be obedient to the way of Jesus, this way of love. Know that it is Christ bearing fruit in you, yield to him and run with it. Live it out in community. Be part of the new vineyard, the new family.

In the early dawn, a young gardener was pruning his trees and shrubs. He had one choice currant bush which had gone too much to wood. He feared therefore that it would produce little if any, fruit.

Accordingly, he trimmed and pruned the bush and cut it back. In fact, when he had finished, there was little left but stumps and roots.

Tenderly he considered what was left. It looked so sad and deeply hurt. On every stump there seemed to be a tear where the pruning knife had cut away the growth of early spring. The poor bush seemed to speak to him, and he thought he heard it say:

“O, how could you be so cruel to me; you who claim to be my friend, who planted me and cared for me when I was young, and nurtured me and encouraged me to grow? Could you not see that I was rapidly responding to your care? I was nearly half as large as the trees across the fence, and might soon have become like one of them. But now you've cut my branches back; the green, attractive leaves are gone, and I am in disgrace among my fellows.”

The young gardener looked at the weeping bush and heard it's plea with sympathetic understanding. His voice was full of kindness as he said, “Do not cry; what I have done to you was necessary that you might be a prize currant bush in my garden. You were not intended to give shade or shelter by your branches. My purpose when I planted you was that you should bear fruit. When I want currants, a tree, regardless of its size, cannot supply the need.”

“No, my little currant bush, if I had allowed you to continue to grow as you had started, all your strength would have gone to wood; your roots would not have gained a firm hold, and the

purpose for which I brought you into my garden would have been defeated. Your place would have been taken by another, for you would have been barren. You must not weep; all this will be for your good, and someday you will be richly laden with luscious fruit.”

May we too be richly laden with healthy fruitfulness as we abide in the vine.