

October 4, 2026 Sermon Manuscript



Isaiah 5:1-7 (NIV)

¹ I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard:

My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. ² He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well. Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit.

³ “Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and people 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? ⁵ Now I will tell you what I am going to do to my vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it will be destroyed; I will break down its wall, and it will be trampled. ⁶ I will make it a wasteland, neither pruned nor cultivated, and briers and thorns will grow there. I will command the clouds not to rain on it.”

⁷ The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the nation of Israel, and the people of Judah are the vines he delighted in. And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.

Galatians 5:1,13-25 (NIV)

¹ It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery...

¹³ You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. ¹⁴ For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁵ If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

¹⁶ So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷ For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

¹⁹ The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; ²⁰ idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions ²¹ and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. ²⁴ Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵ Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.

Matthew 21:33-46 (NIV)

³³ “Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place. ³⁴ When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit.

³⁵ “The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. ³⁶ Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. ³⁷ Last of all, he sent his son to them. ‘They will respect my son,’ he said.

³⁸ “But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, ‘This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him and take his inheritance.’ ³⁹ So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

⁴⁰ “Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?”

⁴¹ “He will bring those wretches to a wretched end,” they replied, “and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time.”

⁴² Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures:

“The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
the Lord has done this,
and it is marvelous in our eyes?”

⁴³ “Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. ⁴⁴ Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed.”

⁴⁵ When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus’ parables, they knew he was talking about them. ⁴⁶ They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet.

The Parable of the Tenants for Us

This morning’s Gospel passage picks up right where we left off last week, and with another parable involving a vineyard. Although, what I’m not sure I made entirely clear last week, and can

be easily missed, is that what's recounted in Matthew 21 takes place during Holy Week: the original Holy Week when Jesus will be crucified. The chapter starts out with Jesus' Triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and now it's maybe Tuesday of that week, and by Friday Jesus will be hanging on a cross.

And so, with the parable we read from Jesus today that he is telling to the religious leaders, first and foremost we should understand the parable as a warning & prophecy about what these religious leaders are going to do to Him. Jesus says,

³³ ...There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place. ³⁴ When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit.

But what transpires after this sounds like something out of a scene from a gangster movie. The tenants take the master's servants and "beat one, (kill) another, and (stone) a third." But then, after all that, verse 36 says the master then sent even more of his servants to collect the fruit, only to have the same thing happen to them. Until finally the master sends his own son to collect his fruit, saying, "They will respect my son." But Jesus says that "³⁸ when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance.' ³⁹ So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him."

So, it doesn't take a biblical scholar to put together that Jesus' parable is first and foremost about the crucifixion He is about to endure.¹ He is warning these religious leaders who have been plotting his death that he knows what they're up to and the parable shows how truly evil and foolish it is. He's calling them off this harmful path, if they would only listen.

But once we recognize that this parable *is primarily* about the crucifixion, it can then feel like it's not actually all that relevant for our lives today, *especially* if we haven't rejected Jesus, but have instead recognized him as the messiah and as Lord. However, this parable is for us, too, and different paths we can be on that we may or may not recognize as harmful.

You see, the religious leaders don't put Jesus to death because they're trying to harm themselves; they do it because they are blind to their sin-sickness that is compelling them to do it. And, while in their case it certainly leads them to do something particularly abhorrent, in them we can see a reality of our human condition: that all of us have sin-sickness in our lives that we are unaware of, but that is bearing bad fruit for us and others. But the good news is this: that the Lord is ready to search our hearts and bring these things to light - to our consciousness / to make us aware of them. Though not to condemn us, but rather to heal us: to bring about even more fruit of His Spirit in our lives.

What Jesus makes really clear with this parable is that His aim for our lives is that we would produce good fruit. The purpose of these tenants the landowner rented to is to *produce fruit*; and he is sending representative after representative back to *collect fruit*. So, from the parable, farming the vineyard is a metaphor for our lives, which are intended to bear spiritual fruit. But to be clear about what fruit us means: what Jesus means when He talks about our lives bearing fruit is what Paul outlined for us in Galatians today, where He says in verse 22 that "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control." In other words, becoming people that are more and more Him, like Christ.²

¹ The vineyard owner of course represents God, who first sends his servants to the tenants, whom the tenants mistreat and kill. These servants probably represent the prophets whom Israel had refused to listen to. The vineyard owner then sends more servants, but the tenants do the same to them. Until finally the vineyard owner sends his own son only to have the tenants take him outside of the vineyard to slay him, similar to how Jesus was taken to be executed outside of Jerusalem's city walls.

² ...who, as we said last week, is the true human: Jesus is the one who shows us how to be truly human

But what this parable highlights is how - because of the sin-sickness we each have - our lives can produce bad fruit, to very harmful effect. Of course our lives will always bear bad fruit to some extent, as the Lord is never finished transforming our character to become more like His. But to cooperate with the transformation God wants to do, we have to recognize the bad fruit. As American novelist James Baldwin observed, "...nothing can be changed until it is faced."

Well, there is a reason the lectionary paired the passage from Isaiah 5 with this gospel today, because Jesus has taken many allusions in this parable from it and those religious leaders trying to kill him were familiar with Isaiah 5 for sure. What God says through Isaiah here starts out as a love song for a vineyard. God says,

- ¹ I will sing for the one I love
a song about his vineyard:
My loved one had a vineyard
on a fertile hillside.
- ² He dug it up and cleared it of stones
and planted it with the choicest vines.
He built a watchtower in it
and cut out a winepress as well.

But the end of verse 2 says that after God had cared so well for his beloved vineyard, he was *shocked* to discover what sort of crop it produced. Isaiah continues,
Then he looked for a crop of good grapes,
but it yielded only bad fruit.

The original Hebrew word for "bad fruit", is better translated as "stink-fruit", as it refers to wild grapes that wouldn't be fit for making wine, that are sour or perhaps even rotting.

So God asks, what is he supposed to do? In verse 3 He says,

- ³ "Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and people of Judah,
judge between me and my vineyard.
- ⁴ 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?

And the obvious response as to what should be done with a vineyard that isn't producing, is not a single thing more; give up on it. Although, the Lord plans to go even further than that. In verse 5, he says,

- ⁵ Now I will tell you
what I am going to do to my vineyard:
I will take away its hedge,
and it will be destroyed;
I will break down its wall,
and it will be trampled.
- ⁶ I will make it a wasteland,
neither pruned nor cultivated,
and briers and thorns will grow there.
I will command the clouds
not to rain on it."

And anyone hearing this from Isaiah would've agreed that this response was deserved. And this is just like the religious leaders' response to Jesus' parable in our gospel. Very familiar with this Isaiah passage, but perhaps not yet putting together that Jesus is talking about them, when Jesus asks, "When... the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" They reply,

perhaps a bit too gleefully, “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.”

But in verse 7, Isaiah comes in with the kicker: *that vineyard is you!* He writes,

7 The vineyard of the Lord Almighty
is the nation of Israel,
and the people of Judah
are the vines he delighted in.
And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed;
for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.³

“Amazing grace who sweet the sound that saves a wretch like me,” deserving for God to give up on or even worse. But whether it’s those God was addressing Isaiah 5 or Jesus’ audience for the parable, including us, the problem he is trying to address is not even their overall sin-sickness, but their complete lack of awareness - either lack of awareness or complete denial - of their particular sins. By the end of verse 41, we’re told that they recognized He was talking about them, but they refuse to accept/acknowledge their sin that Jesus is mercifully trying to reveal to them. The good news is this: that the Lord is ready to search our hearts and bring these things to light (gently, at a pace we can take it in). Though not to condemn us, but to heal us: to bring about even more fruit of His Spirit in our lives.

You know, it may seem like Jesus is being harsh with these guys, but make no mistake: He’s actually loving them!! He’s saying “this is the reality of what you’re planning to do - look, face up to this stink fruit of yours - and don’t do this; choose differently.” But they just won’t give Him authority, trust His wisdom, or believe that He is bringing their sin-sickness to light for their own good, in order to heal them.

And likewise Jesus is loving us... by inviting us through this parable to consider our openness - our willingness to *have* Him make us aware of the stink fruit in our lives - of the sin-sickness that we are as of now blind to - to bring it into the light so that He can minister His healing (to us). And it *is* about healing: just this week I came to recognize some bad fruit in me, it was noticing I’d gotten into a habit of being reckless with my words in a particular context. But it was important for me to realize that God was showing me this for my healing, because my temptation was to beat myself up or indulge just feeling embarrassed. But better is to acknowledge it to God; remember He loves me and I’m a work in progress; ask Him to show me where that bad fruit was coming from - which I think I now understand was just me trying to be funny or cool - and I then ask God to guide me in His better way when a similar situation arises again. #

So, where I want to finish this is by just inviting us to consider if we are living before God in a manner that welcomes such revelations, trusting that even though they can be painful, they are for everyone’s good? And just to cultivate an imagination for ways we might do that... We can first of all simply pray for it. I would first point to our Psalm today: Psalm 19, a Psalm of David. Verse 12 and following highlights a posture (in Him) that those religious leaders lacked, as he prays:

12 Who can tell how often he offends? *
O cleanse me from my secret faults.

³ And the end of verse 7 includes two plays on words in the Hebrew, that are significant:

- the word for justice - mishpat - sounds very close to the word for bloodshed - mispah;
- and the word for righteousness - sedakah - sounds very similar to the word for outcry - se’akah.

So this is a clever way of illustrating what had happened: while God’s people thought of / presented themselves as faithful, upon closer inspection they weren’t at all. And this is much like our gospel passage, where Jesus’ parable is directed at religious leaders whose lives have the facade of faithfulness.

¹³ Keep your servant also from presumptuous sins,
lest they get the dominion over me; *

And famously, verse 14: "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer."

And then, also, David's words in Psalm 139, where he prays,

²³ Search me, God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.

²⁴ See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.

These courageous prayers teach us how to pray for what we're talking about. David acknowledges that he knows there will be folly in his life he is unaware of, and then asks God to search his heart and bring him out of darkness into God's everlasting way. We could literally use these words of David as a script.

But, what I would also point to - as another means for opening ourselves to God's revelations of our sin-sickness He's seeking to heal - is how our liturgy guides us in what we do here on Sundays. You'll notice that...

- We begin with the Collect for Purity, which echoes Psalm 139, where we pray:
 - *Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name; through Christ our Lord. Amen.*
- Then, having invited God to search our hearts and lead us into his everlasting way, we next hear God's word and a sermon, which gives God opportunity to reveal any offensive (or sinful) way in us.
- Following that, we're invited to confess, not just generally, but bringing before God anything he has shown us since we last confessed. But we receive, not his condemnation, but assurance of his grace of forgiveness.
- And after this, we come to the rail for Holy Communion, and we can receive the body and blood of Christ in the prayer that he would make us more like himself. As they say, "You are what you eat".
- Before finally, we are dismissed out into the world in the power of the Spirit, to bear good fruit with God's help.

If we approach our Sunday worship with these intentions, friends we are miles beyond the human foolishness we see in our scriptures today. But Sunday mornings are not just meant to be a weekly opportunity to open ourselves to God in this way, but rather a weekly rehearsal for walking before God with this openness on Monday through Saturday as well (through all our days).

So would you pray with me?

Lord, cleanse us from our secret faults. Keep us from presumptuous sins that might get dominion over us. Search our hearts and test to see if there is any offensive way - any folly in our hearts that is not of you - and lead us into your goodness, that our lives might bear even more of your fruit. In Jesus' name. Amen.