

## **Fruitfulness**

**October 22, 2017**

**Matthew 21:33-46, Isaiah 5:1-7**

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In my reading this week, I learned something about the long and arduous process of winemaking. I don't know about you but I never knew that planting a vineyard was so difficult with multiple stages over multiple years with multiple opportunities for something to go wrong. First, I learned that you don't plant seeds but rather you plant shoots, the vines. This first year, the vine doesn't even yield any grapes. And after the first year, the farmer or vintner cuts them all back. Already I can tell I might not have the patience for this kind of work and cutting back what you worked so hard to grow seems painful.

Then, in year two, the vintner does it again! You care for vines, watering them, protecting them, etc. Again, they yield no grapes and at the end of the season, you cut them back a second time!

Typically, it is in year three that the vine produces its first real clusters of fruit and we're thinking finally we're getting somewhere...let's make some wine! But instead, the good vintners just leave these grapes where they are, they don't pick them. They literally leave the grapes to die on the vine.

For many vineyards, it takes four years to bring in their first harvest and that's with four good years of everything going right, no drought and disease or pests or wildfires like we've had this year.

And this is just the growing part of the process but to get to that wine glass on the table we're going to need more time and patience because now begins the bottling part of the process. The grapes are pressed and put into casks but often the vintner won't taste the wine for another seven or eight years, in some cases, the process can go much longer and for those in the industry hoping to turn a profit, it could take 20 years before they've recouped their investment and maybe have earned some money on the process. The endeavor is long, precarious and requires both hard work and faith.

The comparison to congregational ministry is striking.

And that is where we begin. Jesus is on a collision course. The chief priests are nervous. They challenge Jesus and his authority. Last week we heard the parable of the two sons. This week Jesus tells the parable of the vineyard. Neither is meant to make us comfortable and if this week's reading made you uneasy then it has served its purpose. So, what is the purpose or the point of the lesson?

First, this parable is told as an allegory. It is a truth represented by fiction. There is a correlation between each character in the story and those who factor in the life of Jesus: the landowner is God who creates the earth, the vineyard, makes a special area, the promised land, and chooses tenants to work the land for him. The tenants represent the people of Israel. But when God wants to check on the vineyard by sending his prophets to remind the tenants of the importance of bearing good fruit--in the parable the prophets are represented by the servants--the tenants treat them badly, even kill some of them. Finally, the landowner sends his son, as God sends Jesus, and they kill him. Jesus predicts and Matthew remembers that Jesus himself is put to death. And what happens to the land then? It's taken away and given to others--the crushing stones as we read today. To the people of Matthew's community, that was clearly a reference to the Roman destruction of Jerusalem, the Jews being banished from the Holy Land and the Temple being destroyed.

The religious leaders of Jesus time understood clearly enough that this parable was—in part--about them. In the language of the parable, they aren't caring so much about what grows in the vineyard, they just want to find a way to keep the vineyard for themselves. The religious leaders wanted to hold on to what power they had. They became corrupt, political, they allowed the temple to become a robber's den. The vineyard left in their care was fallow. Or perhaps there were patches of bad fruit growing where good fruit had once thrived.

Jerusalem had become like Judah, as Joyce read this morning. The vineyard was no longer hospitable for good fruits to grow. These good fruits were replaced by sour grapes. Paul, in his letter to the

Galatians helps us to better understand what good grapes and sour grapes look like in congregational ministry. If you would like to read it, it can be found on page 191, chapter 6, verse 22. Like the tenants who fail to care for the vineyard so it yields good fruits, Paul warns us that when we are seduced by our own greed, need for power or our vanity, we end up with “the works of the flesh: fornications, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy,” We see this illustrated in Judah in the eighth century BC, in Jerusalem in the first century, and in countless examples here and around the world today.

But Paul also encourages us with images of good fruit. We should seek “the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” The tenants failed to grow the good fruit; the Temple authorities failed to sow the fruits of the spirit.

What about us? What about you? If your life is a vineyard and you are the vintner, what fruits are you yielding? Do you hold onto anger? Do you invite strife, dissension, do you create factions, as Paul says? Or maybe these bad fruits are less familiar to you. Maybe you are somebody who lets go of anger, maybe you are patient with others with whom you disagree. Maybe you are generous in spirit—accountable for your own missteps and wrong-doings, maybe you are gentle both with yourself and others. Perhaps your life—seen as a vineyard—is abundant with good fruit. Most of us fall somewhere in between these two extremes. We have every intention of caring for our vineyard and bearing good fruit and maybe much of the time we do, but we also have room for improvement. If we’re not careful, we sow seeds of anger, like the tenants, we try take the vineyard for our self. We forget about God and seek vanity, greed, power.

What does that mean for the church? What is fruit for us? What are we supposed to be producing? What is all of our long, patient work about? You'll see an insert in your bulletin that has three boxes and some arrows that are a simple description of an input-output system. It's simple really. In any system, say an agricultural system, a farm or a garden, there are inputs. In a garden you put seeds into

the ground, or if it is a vineyard, you plant the shoots or the cuttings of the vine, that's the input. But then there are the processes called throughputs. What do you do once the seeds are in the ground? You water, you weed, you fertilize, you wait. That's the hard work. That's the part that takes time and patience, and you don't always see results in the first year, or the second, or the third. But, if the first two processes were done well, then your output is grapes or fruit or grain or vegetables. If you have an industrial factory, then your input is raw materials—steel, plastic, wood, leather, rubber, etc. And your throughputs are whatever you do to those things in your factory. Your output might be a car or a baseball bat or whatever you decided to produce. But then what about us? As a church, what kind of process or system do we have? What kind of fruit are we supposed to produce? What is our input? What is our output?

This is where I think that churches often make a mistake. Too often we think that our output should be more people, more money to spend, a finer building. Or we think that our output should be a great youth program or fun times in fellowship or exciting worship. That's what we should get for all our work and patience. But I don't think so. That's when we've been confused about what we do, about what we are here for. People, money, the building—all of those are not outputs, they are inputs. They are the things we put into the process to begin. We start with our resources, our building, our financial resources, our people. We start with you. Those are the shoots that we plant in the vineyard. Then we have our throughputs. With these things we worship, we fellowship, we educate, we do mission trips. That's where the hard work of tending the vineyard comes in. Of course, the better our throughputs are, the better our outputs will be. So, what are our outputs? What does our landowner want to see happening in this little vineyard of ours? What kind of fruit should we be producing?

It has often been said that God does not call the church to be successful, but calls the church to be faithful. I think that's true, but we need to take it a step further. Tim Keller, in his book *Center Church*, makes the case that—even more than faithfulness--fruitfulness is the way ministry should be evaluated.

Not the corporate measures of success, counting members and giving and the like. But not just the measures of faithfulness either, but the biblical image, he argues, is not success or faithfulness but *fruitfulness*.<sup>1</sup>

So, what is *our* fruit? Well, our output is beautifully spelled out for us in Paul. These are the things we are compelled to focus on if we are to be fruitful in the eyes of God: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The results of tending our own vineyard and bearing these fruits for God reminds us that—what happens to the fruit, our future, is not up to us—that part is up to God because it is his vineyard. The future is not ours to determine. But our present is ours to care for. Our present mandate is to bear good fruit; fruit the landowner will be pleased with.

So, what do you think? Are we producing good fruit? What is our output? Do you see the fruits of the spirit growing among us? If Jesus came into our church, what would he find? If we have more anger than love, more jealousy than joy, more quarrels than peace, more dissensions than patience, we must tend to those parts of the vineyard, care for the soil, pull the weeds, cut away the disease.

If Jesus walked into your home, looked at your life, your marriage, your family, for these are vineyards too, what would he see? Would he see good fruit? The good news, for most of us, is yes, he would see good fruit but he'd also see the parts of our vineyard that need work, the parts that--with time--can overtake the good fruit and run our field afoul if we don't tend to it.

So, what can we take from today's parable? Enjoy the good fruits but don't take them for granted. They need to be tended to, we need to *practice* love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control—in our personal lives, our marriages, our families and here, in our church family. And in those areas of the vineyard that have become inhabitable, we need to lovingly tend to them, using our fruits of the spirit for healing so that they too may once again bear good fruit.

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<sup>1</sup> Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City, Timothy Keller, p.13