

Bad Grapes and Bad Men

Text(s): Isaiah 5:1-7; Philippians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46

Dear Brothers and Sisters in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,

I'd like to share one of Aesop's Fables, *The Fox and The Grapes*. It reads,

“A Fox one day spied a beautiful bunch of ripe grapes hanging from a vine trained along the branches of a tree. The grapes seemed ready to burst with juice, and the Fox's mouth watered as he gazed longingly at them. The bunch hung from a high branch, and the Fox had to jump for it. The first time he jumped, he missed it by a long way. So, he walked off a short distance and took a running leap at it, only to fall short once more. Again and again, he tried, but in vain. Now, he sat down and looked at the grapes in disgust. ‘What a fool I am,’ he said. ‘Here I am wearing myself out to get a bunch of sour grapes that are not worth my effort.’ And off he walked very, very scornfully.”

The moral of this fable is this: Many pretend to despise and belittle that which is beyond their reach.

Today, we are looking at a song and a parable with a common theme. They both involve bad grapes and bad men in a vineyard. Adding to these portions of scripture, this fable begs the question: How often are we similar to this fox, seeing the ripe grapes of all that God has to offer us in His Word and Sacraments and walking away from them scornfully as if these blessings from him are sour and not worth being sought after? How often do we lack a thirst for the medicine of immortality offered at the Lord's table? How often are we like the fox in that when our feeble attempts at perfection fail to merit the grace of God, we turn from Him and don't see the bigger picture that is seen in the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus? I'd say it's often enough that we should pay close attention to the words of Isaiah and Jesus in our Old and New Testament lessons.

I. The Bad Grapes of Judah

Looking at our text from Isaiah, the prophet is issuing a warning to the Israelites of Judah, a people he describes in Chapter 6:10 as “deaf and blind.” After declaring the impending doom they would face due to their transgressions, Isaiah sings a song regarding a master of a vineyard and his vineyard. He sings, “My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.”

Have you ever eaten a bad grape? The sourness and the texture of a spoiled or bad grape is, in my opinion, one of the worst when it comes to foods that you might eat a bit after they expire. They smell of vinegar, aren't pleasant to the eye, and can be as mushy as baby food. Here in this text, we find one of the biggest letdowns for someone who plants and tends to any garden or crop. The master of the vineyard had done everything perfectly, and what was the fruit of his labor? Wild grapes. These are grapes that are not suitable, are sour and bitter, and would make a

lousy wine. How could this have happened? After all, the master of the vineyard put all of this effort into it! Geographically speaking, Palestine, where this is taking place, is a perfect area for growing grapes. As a hilly country, Palestine allows easy access to the necessary sunlight for grapes to flourish. A downside, however, is that the ground is usually very stony. So, this would be quite a task when the text in Isaiah speaks of digging it and clearing it of stones. The owner must have taken great care to prepare the ground. This perfect garden, these ideal conditions, this excellent gardener should have produced the perfect grapes!

If you have not figured it out yet, the master of the vineyard of this song is the Lord God Himself. He planted with choice vines for the nation of Israel by sending to His people the Law and the Prophets in the Old Testament. He prepared for the needs of His people, taking excellent care of them by delivering them from slavery in Egypt and leading them to the promised land. God provided the people of Israel with abundant blessings, but what did He find when the time came to reap what He had sown? Our text says, “and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold an outcry.” The conditions were perfect, and everything was perfect because God is perfect in grace and mercy. But bad grapes are all He found. All He found was the same corruption and plague of sin that has been manifest since the fall in the garden, and this was no fault of His own but the fault of man. To quote Luther in *The Bondage of The Will*,

“Just as a horseman, driving a horse which is lame in one or two of his feet, drives him according to his make and power. And so the horse goes awry. But what can the horseman do? He drives the horse, such as he is, in a drove of sound horses; he makes him go awry, and the others go well; it cannot be otherwise, unless the horse is cured. You see by this illustration, how it is that when God works in bad men and by bad men, evil is the result; but it cannot be that God does wickedly, even though he works evil by the agency of evil men. This is because, being good himself, He cannot do wickedly.”

As Edward J. Young put in his commentary on Isaiah, Israel “was an empty people, an example of ‘living hypocrisy.’” The people of Judah were a lame horse. They were men of evil and wickedness who were the children of God in title only and were finally cast out. The people chosen by God had shamefully turned away from the Lord’s wonderful grace, so the Lord turned away from them also.

II. The Bad Men of Jesus’ Parable

As the timeline of the account of God’s plan for humanity moves on, our Gospel lesson brings us to the ministry of Jesus and the parables He spoke to the people. Here in the Parable of the Tenants, we are graced with yet another account of a vineyard. This one, however, is a little more direct in its message, particularly regarding condemnation and judgment toward the chief priests and Pharisees. It is another vineyard with bad grapes, but in this case, more literally bad men.

Just as the garden was planted with great care in the book of Isaiah, so was this vineyard protected and cared for. Sending his workers and his own son to reap the fruits of the vine, a dreaded discovery was made regarding his hard work. What he got in return was the death of his

workers and his son and a plot against his life, resulting from selfishness and greed. Again, our vineyard owner is the Lord Himself, and His Son is the Lord Jesus Christ. In both the song and the parable, God has provided all good things and blessings across the board, from the world's creation to the sending of Jesus Christ. God has divinely protected His vineyard (His people) with “Moses to lead them, Elijah to call them to repentance, Isaiah to plead with them, and Jeremiah to warn them patiently.” (*Meditations on the Gospels: According To His Word* by Various Authors) And yet, the bad grapes, the bad men, have brought ruin to what otherwise should have been a perfect crop.

Don't you see? We should be cautious not to become like the men of Israel and the chief priests and Pharisees. More often than we would like to admit, we may reject God's blessings for what the world offers us. We can neglect the gift given to us through Christ Jesus on the cross. After all, we sent Him there in the first place! Because of the Old Adam in us, we can become wild and bad grapes. We can become like the bad men who murdered the son of the master of the vineyard. We can become like the foolish fox who sees all God has to offer us, and because we cannot attain it on our own, we reject it as if it is worthless to us.

III. Nothing to Do

As the psalmist says in Psalm 53, “God looks down from heaven on the children of man to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. They have all fallen away; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one.” As we consider our inability to keep God's commands and as we look inwardly and outwardly to see the fruits of our corruption, all that is left is to say with the apostle in Romans 7:24, “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” What else are we to do when the Law of God and the Cross being endured for us has humbled us to the point of awareness that we are devoid of any good within ourselves?

The answer is simple. We have nothing to do. The Lord God has sent Jesus to redeem and win His people. Our salvation is only the result of what God has done; not a single part of it comes from our merit. To the most minute detail, our faith has been instilled in us by the work of the Holy Spirit through the proclamation of the Word of God that is Christ incarnate and manifested in the forgiveness of sins paid for by the blood of Jesus. Christ has suffered, died, and been resurrected on the third day so that we may join Paul in our Epistle lesson and no longer have confidence in the flesh but rather confidence in Christ Jesus, who has won us from our affliction. Confidence in the flesh leads to God's blessings being taken away from us. Confidence in Christ leads to everlasting life that produces in us the fruits of faith so that we might share the gospel of Jesus and be witnesses to His names, words, and works.

Jesus Christ, “the stone that the builders rejected, has become the cornerstone.” He is everything upon which our salvation stands and is the vine within the garden of God, where God sees us as the perfect branch bearing fruit atop the beautiful hills of Palestine. We are made worthy of His garden and worthy of heaven. In other words, suitable grapes. As Jesus says in John 15:1-8,

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.”

We are to remain in the grace and mercy of Christ Jesus until he returns to deliver us from sin, death, and the devil once and for all. In the moments when we begin to hold up our faith with the confidence of the flesh, let the Law of God shine in our faces, reminding us that we are in desperate need of the forgiveness of sins that is offered to us in Christ.

IV. The Gospel is Relevant to You!

Speaking as a man raised in this church, I know that some of us have been Christians for a long time. You have heard the message a thousand times that having been baptized into the death of Christ Jesus, you have been made anew. You have listened to the good news of eternal life and salvation found only in Him. The Five Solas: scripture alone, Christ alone, faith alone, grace alone, and glory to God alone are all concepts in your Lutheran Christian blood. You have watched as the severity of the end-time prophecies increase leading up to the return of Jesus. You have seen the decay of the world around you. Regardless, do not let the Gospel become old hat to you.

If you walk away from this sermon with anything, it should be that the Salvation Gospel is as relevant to you today as it was the day you were baptized. The blessings of God in the Word and Sacraments are worth being sought after with much more vigor than Aesop’s fox could ever produce. Rejoice in the joy of your salvation with those around you, whether they be someone you’ve known all your life or the newest person to be brought to the faith. To all of my fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, I leave you with these words, quoting again from Edward J. Young’s commentary on Isaiah. Unlike the Israelites at the time of Isaiah, the chief priests and Pharisees, the bad grapes and bad men, “may we who belong to the church ever examine our hearts that there be no such hypocrisy within us but rather may our lives bring forth the fruits of that righteousness which comes from God alone!”

Amen.