

Isaiah 5: God's Vineyard should produce Godly fruit

What did you feel when that chapter was read? There are all those judgements and “woes”. I feel a bit like the always pessimistic Dad's Army character Private Fraser, who, when the Home Guard platoon were in a tight spot, he'd only offer words of so-called ‘comfort’ like, “we're doomed”! You might wonder whether it was worth coming to church this morning to hear a miserable gloom and doom sermon full of judgement. But there is grace and hope in the Christian message. As John's gospel says, God did not send Jesus into the world to condemn us but to save us. We'll think about this at the end, however, the emphasis, the dominant flavour of this passage is condemnation of sin and warning of inevitable judgement, and to try to be faithful to this passage, that's what I think this talk should stress. Passages such as this are in God's word for a purpose: to warn us, and also to show us our need of God's love and grace, His rescue, and so that we appreciate it more.

In these early chapters of the book, Isaiah confronts God's Old Testament people of Israel and Judah with their sin and warns them of judgement. And in Chapter 5 he does this with the picture of a vineyard.

We'll begin this morning by looking at the parable, or song, of the vineyard, where the people's sin is described as bad fruit from the vineyard. Then, second, God describes their sin as the evidence against them. Although we may not have committed the same sins as those listed, we might see some of the same sinful tendencies in our lives; thirdly, judgement is inevitable and that producing bad fruit does have consequences, then lastly we will see the rescue from sin through Jesus that God offers.

First, the unfruitful vineyard, v1-7.

This is a song, and can you feel the emotion of this song? We're more likely to sing when we're happy, aren't we? The prophet Isaiah sings to God, who he loves, a very unhappy song. It's a lament. It's sorrowful. It expresses extreme disappointment. This is much more than the disappointment we feel when the apple tree produces bad apples, or when I once planted grass seeds to restore grass to a bare patch, but...the patch remained bare. I tried several times to plant grass and only got the same result: a bare patch!

The picture of a vineyard would have been a powerful one for the first hearers of this message because grapes are the crop that grows best in Judah. So we can imagine Judean farmers as they read or heard this message anticipating it describing a fruitful harvest, especially after hearing, in vs 1 & 2 how the vineyard was planted with such great care.

But then came the shock! Look at the second part of v2. God looked for good grapes in this vineyard, but it yielded only bad fruit, bitter grapes! Then in v4, God asks that when He looked for grapes, why did the vineyard yield only bad? So twice we're told the vineyard yielded only bad fruit.

Then the shock increases. Look at v7. The vineyard in the parable represents God's Old Testament people!

They, who had the privilege of being specially set apart for God to have a special relationship with Him and uniquely identified with Him, are being described like an unfruitful vineyard! You see, they, God's vineyard, had been called by God to bear good Godly fruit by being

faithful to Him, and living justly and righteously, but had in fact born the bad fruit of sin instead. The disappointment is far worse than disappointment at bad apples or my garden's bare patches!

So in v3 God invites His people to be their own judge. So we come to

Second, the sins that are the evidence v7-24

The evidence of their sins is presented so that the justice, the rightness, of God's condemnation and judgement can be seen. You see, it's one thing to know in general terms that naturally we're "sinners", that we're rebels against God rejecting Him from our lives. But God also describes particular manifestations of sin that result from this.

V7 is where God begins the evidence. What He looked for was the opposite of the fruit that was produced: He looked for justice, but saw bloodshed. That must mean the shedding of innocent blood - that is the exact opposite of justice. I think that maybe the main example of this today in western societies is abortion. He looked for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.

We probably haven't shed innocent blood. But do you remember in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus, when He was talking about murder, said anyone who says to another "You fool" will be in danger of the fire of hell. You see, wanting another person out of the way - for example the motorist who's holding us up? - angrily dismissing them, comes from the same sort of inner attitude out of which comes murder - murder angrily gets people out of the way.

Now the "woes". "Woe" is a word that speaks of sorrow, regret and anger. Without going through the "woes" in detail, the "woes" seem to me to be in 3 groups of types of sin. While we may not have committed these actual sins, we may see that we can have bad fruit too, even as Christians:

- Injustice. We've already considered the injustice of shedding innocent blood. The "woes" here are for injustice involving greed and land-grabbing at the expense of the weak and poor, and corruption in the legal system so that the innocent are punished and the guilty go free. Again, we probably haven't committed these actual sins, but do our lives tend to be focussed on acquiring more and more money or material possessions, rather than on living for God? Do we focus getting our needs met more than being concerned about the needs of others around us?
- Living for pleasure (especially in their case, drink) rather than for God, perhaps to seek fulfilment and happiness. Do we live for pleasure and leisure more than for Jesus? Is leisure and pleasure the ultimate purpose of our lives - rather than living for God? Do we seek happiness and fulfilment from things that are not wrong in themselves, such as alcohol, music, hobbies,... rather than primarily in God? It's in God we find ultimate happiness and fulfilment.
- Blatantly rejecting God's laws, being strongly committed to sin, even reversing God's moral absolutes.

We may not blatantly reject God's laws, or advocate reversing God's moral absolutes, but can we sometimes slip into excusing sin in our lives, thinking that because we're

not like the really bad people, our little weaknesses don't matter? But this forgets even our little weaknesses are sins and are offensive to God because they fall short of His perfect holy standards and His glory. Do we want God's blessings while still clinging onto sin in some areas of our lives – for example unforgiveness or bitterness?

The second part of v24 says the same: the people had rejected God's word and His law. Rejecting God's word and His moral laws is the same as rejecting God Himself.

All this bad fruit, sin, has consequences. So we must now look at

Third, the inevitable judgement :v25-30

The chapter has already warned of judgement. The vineyard will become an unfruitful wasteland (v5-6), both those of high position and the common people will die from hunger and thirst (v13-14). The great houses of the greedy land-grabbers will become desolate, fine mansions left without occupants (v9). The punishment sometimes seems to fit the crime!

I think all this can be described in one word: destruction.

V13 is more explicit as to what this disaster will be. God's people will go into exile. The Assyrian army, the big threatening world power at the time of Isaiah, was soon to capture and take into exile the northern Kingdom of Israel. Then about 150 years later the Babylonians invaded and took the southern kingdom of Judah into exile.

And v25 says The LORD's anger burns against His people; His hand is raised and He strikes them down... He's poised to carry out His judgement. It is so inevitable, it is described as actually happening.

V26-30 show in picture language the inevitability of judgement. It cannot be stopped. Perhaps an illustration today could be someone tied to a railway track with the unstoppable express thundering down the line towards them. V26: "Here they come" i.e. the invading army that God is summoning. "swiftly and speedily, not one of them tires or sleeps, not a belt is loosened not a sandal strap broken".

Then v28-30: sharp arrows, chariot wheels being like a whirlwind, and they being like the roar like a lion, convey the speed and power, terror and devouring destructive nature of the coming armies. This cataclysmic fearful judgement is inevitable.

The bad fruit of sin attracts God's wrath. But as we consider how this applies to us, we need to be clear that it is not inevitably true that there's a direct line between a person's difficulties, tragedies and suffering and the sins and failures of that person. If we're suffering, it's not God's judgement for past sin and failure.

But the Bible is clear that the inevitable judgement we all face is the final judgement when Jesus returns. This judgement is unavoidable for us all. It's coming. In God's timing, but it's coming. We need to respond and live as if it will come suddenly at any time. And those who did not believe the good news of Jesus and accept the salvation, the rescue, He offers, will suffer everlasting destruction (2 Thessalonians 1v9)

Lastly, the rescue God offers

Maybe, like me, we've seen some of the same sinful tendencies in our lives as those described in these verses. So we may feel a "woe" of God's displeasure at our sin being said to us. That even us if we're Christians and church people deserve nothing but judgement and everlasting destruction, may come as a shock to us! I find I'm in this category. Indeed as I go on in the Christian life I seem to be become more aware of my natural sinfulness. Actually Isaiah the prophet does too. In chapter 6, even he ended up, saying a "woe" for himself – as he saw himself as a man of unclean lips.

But the Bible does not warn us of judgement without providing us with hope – that is He has provided a way, the only way, we can be rescued from God's wrath in judgement. That's why He sent Jesus. How does Jesus rescue us?

First, by His death on the cross. This means that if we trust in Christ and His death on the cross, we need not fear God's wrath. Jesus has born the wrath that was coming to us; it won't touch us if we're trusting in Him. We're safe forever in Christ. Our salvation is secure – we must remember that.

But the bad fruit of sin still does have consequences for us, even for Christian believers. A naughty child who continues to behave badly ignoring his or her father's or mother's warnings still remains in the family loved as a son or daughter, but will certainly lose for a time the enjoyment of being a son or daughter! So, continuing in sin can rob us of our peace and a sense of God's love and nearness with us. It can, even for Christians, wreck our lives and damage our relationships. And as our loving Heavenly Father, God may bring us through challenging times as discipline for our own good, to help us to greater holiness.

Secondly, in John's gospel Jesus said "I am the true vine" (John 15v1). We've seen that in Isaiah God's Old Testament people were likened to an unfruitful vineyard that produced the bad fruit of sin. But now Jesus is the true vine! And He's been completely fruitful, being completely sinless and He obeyed God perfectly. So He has produced perfect good fruit that we cannot.

And if we're Christians trusting in Christ, we're joined to Him, we're in the true vine! So we have Christ's life within us, which begins to show in our lives. We increasingly bear good fruit, and less bad fruit. This means we can grow in reflecting Jesus in our character, and in obedience to God's word.

To close, what should be our response when we're aware of our sin and failings? First, repentance. Repentance means a change of mind and direction in our lives away from sin and to Jesus to accept the offer of rescue from God's wrath and to live with Him as our Lord. And repentance is not just something we do only once when we first turn to Christ. It's ongoing – it's a continual part of the Christian life.

Second, trust in Christ alone, and His death on the cross alone. It's His death that enables us to stand before God as if we're completely clean of every sin, both the big ones and the small ones. God wants us to know His forgiveness, love and grace, not rejection and punishment.

Let's pray