

A PARABLE OF LIFE

Isaiah 5:1-7

The parable in Isaiah 5 is one of the oldest, as well as one of the most beautiful, instructive and impressive, that is to be found in literature. It is wonderfully rich in truths of inspiration and warning.

I. The Parable.

The vineyard had been planted in a most favorable location -- on "a very fruitful hill." It was not placed on the brow of a mountain, nor in the shady deeps of the valley, but on the slopes of a fruitful hill where the warm sunlight might fall upon the tender plants throughout the day. The husbandman did several things for the vineyard. He fenced it in for the purpose of protecting it from the hoofs of the wandering flocks and herds, and from the tread of the footpads. The owner dug the soil carefully by hand and pulverized every lump thoroughly. He also gathered the stones out of it, so that there would not be anything around the roots of the vines except good soil. He did not want anything to obstruct the warmth of the sunshine or to keep the rain from penetrating to the fibers of the vines. When all of this had been done, he selected and purchased the choicest vines that money could buy and carefully planted or set them in the fertile soil.

In order that the vineyard might be protected from the birds, beasts and wandering robbers, the husbandman built a watch-tower in the midst of it, at a spot from which every foot of ground therein might be under the eye of the watchman. Nothing that concerned the vineyard had been left to chance. It had been placed in an ideal location, had been fenced, painstakingly prepared, carefully planted and thoroughly cultivated with the most expert and solicitous care. Everything possible had been done to assist the fertility of the soil and to insure the development of the latent possibilities of the vineyard. Soil, showers and sunshine, combined with the skill of the vinedresser, enriched the vines and they grew satisfactorily.

Certain that such a vineyard, prepared and cultivated with such care, would produce an abundant crop of selected grapes, the owner built "a wine press therein," by means of which the refreshing and delicious juice could be extracted therefrom and turned into choice wines. With all of this careful preparation, diligent cultivation and tender interest, the owner naturally had the hopeful expectation of a plentiful crop of choice grapes, but he was doomed to disappointment. When the time of vintage grew new, he found in the vineyard, on which he had expended so much thought, time, care, money and effort, only wild grapes, which might easily have grown without the husbandman. All of his labor was recompensed with nothing better than the fruits of uncultivated nature. The design of the husbandman was thwarted. He expected that which would nourish and stimulate life, but the very opposite was produced.

This parable gives us a vivid example of failure under circumstances such as made the very best a most reasonable expectation. Instead of the vineyard fulfilling a reasonable expectation, the owner was subjected to an heart-broken disappointment, because all of the care which he had bestowed upon it had been in vain. Everything possible had been done to care for the vineyard, but its condition was hopeless. It had to be left alone and allowed to revert to the wild weed-ridden condition from which it had been delivered. To him it would ever be a memory of tragic failure.

The complaint in the parable was not that of mere fruitlessness, as in the case of Christ consigning a fig tree to the only end for which it had become fit. Here there was fruit, and plenty of it, but it was an utter disappointment to the expectation of the vinedresser. This fruit, which consisted of wild, inedible and injurious grapes, was of such a nature that he was ashamed of it and would have been richer without it.

II. The Picture.

This parable portrays beautifully and effectively the wonderful manner in which God provided for and protected the Jewish people. The vineyard in which He planted them was Palestine. As the vinedresser in the parable fenced his vineyard for its protection, God fenced the Jewish people with mountains and deserts and His own theocratic government for their protection. As the husbandman removed the stones from his vineyard for the benefit of the vines to be planted therein, God cleaned His vineyard of its former heathen inhabitants for the welfare of the Jews. As the vinedresser planted his vineyard with sorerk or choice vines, God placed in His vineyard the seed or children of faithful Abraham, and then to them he gave kings, priests and prophets. The royal city of Jerusalem was the ornamental and defensive tower which God set in the midst of His vineyard. The winepress which God placed in His vineyard was the Temple, where, according to Psalm 36:8, the wine of heavenly joy flowed in streams, and from which, according to Psalm 42 and various kindred passages, the thirst of the soul might be quenched. To the Jews God gave a perfect law, which reflected His own holiness and was very applicable to their immaturity. So great were the opportunities which God provided for the Jewish people that He could say, as did the husbandman in the parable, "What could have been done more to my vineyard, that I have not done in it?"

God rightfully expected from the Jews the fruitage of a clear witness for Him to all the surrounding nations. He looked to the Jews for righteousness, expecting them to be a "holy people, zealous of good works." But, sad to say, all of His loving care of them seemed to have been in vain.

Isaiah reminded the Jews that they had received extraordinary privileges from God. The first and fundamental privilege which God conferred upon them was the choice which He made of the Jews as a nation. After choosing them, God revealed Himself to them as clearly as was possible through the Mosaic Law. Through its statutes and ceremonies were shadowed forth the great truths of His holiness, His mercy and His sanctifying grace. God also gave to them the tremendous help of the Prophetical Teaching to stimulate them to observe the Law with full purpose of heart. God had given the Jews a code of laws by which their actions were to be governed, and had done His best to impress upon them the duty of doing to others as they would have others do unto them. As anyone might expect, God looked to them for the fruits of righteousness and justice to correspond with their privileges. Privileges always entail obligations. The least demand that could have been made of them was that their fruits be in keeping with their privileges, but they failed to meet it. Failure to meet their obligation in this regard made it necessary for God to remove their privileges from the Jews and to reduce them to the level of their neighbors.

What a pity that the Jewish people, under the care and blessings of God, produced the noxious fruit of the wild vine instead of bearing good fruit! Truly their history demonstrated this lamentable fact about them. Unfruitfulness is bad enough, but pernicious fruitfulness is still worse. They gradually grew worse, even under the culturing care of God.

While all the features of this parable are, without any straining after effect, identifiable with the Jews, its reach is not limited, for it is a picture of human life, of any life, of your life and of mine. The care of God, which has been expressed in a thousand ways, and especially in the sacrifice of His Son, is the core of our individual history.

Certain descriptive epithets speak to us of the realms in which God has safeguarded and blessed the lives of most of us. Let us call them the material, the spiritual and the ecclesiastical factors in our lives and environment. As to position, you and I have been born in the United States of America, a so-called Christian land, a bit of the vineyard upon a very fruitful hill. For the most part, our lives have been fenced and protected.

At least this is true of those of us who have been fortunate enough to be reared in Christian homes. In many wonderful ways we have been kept from plumbing the awful abyss of sin. God has seen to it that our physical, mental and spiritual development has been within the limits of His own fencing -- fenced by our relationship to the home and the church.

As you look back over the way in which the Lord has dealt with you and led you, you will recall how He has gathered out the stones one by one. He has removed all the hindrances to your salvation. He put away everything that made it hard for you to accept Christ. Perhaps some of you had difficulties -- intellectual difficulties perchance, difficulties caused by the inconsistencies of Christians, difficulties created by the actions of your friends, and then those things in your own lives which stood in the way of the real planting of the Word of God in your souls. But, as you look back across the years, you can see the hand of God gathering out the stones or removing problem after problem from your life; and so, in spite of all these difficulties, you received Christ as your Saviour and you are now a member of the family of God. When you consider the advantages, privileges and opportunities He has given you, you must feel great searchings of heart. As you concentrate on these matters, you should be led to ask, "What has God not done for me?" What more could God say than to us He has said? What more could He do than to us He hath done? He has created us, sustained us, loved us, redeemed us, quickened us, forgiven us, saved us, preserved us, upheld us, instructed us, guided us, comforted us, blessed us and used us. If we are not fruitful, to His praise, how shall we excuse ourselves?

Looking back over our lives, it sometimes seems to us that, if we had been His sole favorites in the world, He could not have been more kind and gracious in His dealings with us. Just think of the godly families into which we entered as members, of His trust to us of health and mental power, of the places in which we have been set, of the successes that have been ours, and of the spiritual opportunities which He has given us.

All of us have been the recipients of numerous blessings, such as might justify the hopes of our friends and the expectations of God. Of the innumerable blessings of God, many belong to the realm of the natural, and quite as many to the realm of the supernatural. We have been created in the image of God. We have been given the ability to think, reason, love, feel, decide and act. We have come to our places on the stage of life in the grandest age in history. This is the age when science, philosophy and Christianity have brought inspiring truths to the level of common life. To us God has given His written Word. It points out to us the way of salvation and the pathway of Christian duty. It glows with revelations of tenderness and love. It throws a serene and beautiful light upon what would otherwise be a gloomy and uninviting future. It brings to man the inspiration of an undying hope and points out the path to the highest ideals. To the gift of the Word, God has added the gift of His incarnate Son and the ever-present Holy Spirit. The truth has been vitalized. Power has been placed at our disposal to enable us to obey the truth. Many of us have experienced what it means to pass from death into life. We rejoice in the consciousness that our names are written in the Lamb's book of life. Most of us have had Christian homes and praying parents. We have a happy church home. Christian institutions and companionships have formed part of an environment that has made it much easier for us to do good. To us has come position, power, opportunity and immense possibilities. What more could have been given? If the owner of the vineyard had a right to look for clusters of choice grapes at the time of the vintage, is it not reasonable that God and our earthly friends have a right to expect to find in the vineyard of our souls the rare fruits of achievement, character and spirituality?

God expects us to reach a high standard of Christian intelligence. He expects an unmistakable witness for Himself and for His truth. There should not be any hiding of our light under a bushel. There should not be any hesitation to confess whose we are

and whom we serve. Neither should there be any inconsistency between our profession and our practice. God expects abundant fruit of charitable deeds and devoted labors. He looks for holy and beautiful character. "Love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance" are the grapes that ought to grow on Christian trees.

We have learned by painful experience that expectations are not always realized. As there was failure in the vineyard of our text, so, alas, there is too frequently failure in human life. "And he looked that it should bring forth grapes, and it brought forth wild grapes." That is the story of many a life. More than frequently there is inglorious failure and disastrous defeat where superlative success and complete victory could reasonably have been expected. We all know something about good beginnings with bad endings; vows that were not kept; ideals that were not realized; dreams that have vanished without the going of the night; purposes that were consumed by the fires of procrastination; splendid desires that were stifled by the growth of the obnoxious or the inferior; noble aims that were cast aside, as one throws away a worn-out garment; and splendid work begun only to be allowed to remain unfinished and fall into ruin. All this means a harvest of "wild grapes."

It is sad to see "wild grapes" anywhere, but infinitely sadder to see them on the barren branches of soul life. The parable pictures such a condition of failure as may have come to some of you. Years ago there were hours of genuine repenting, the exercise of true faith, and then the sweet consciousness of pardon, the joy of the Spirit's presence, a holy calm and a blessed repose in the green pastures and by the side of still waters. There was the light of a soul-satisfying revelation of God, the bliss of communion with Him, the peace that is born of the certainty that one is being taken care of, and that "underneath are the everlasting arms." There were earnest yearnings to reach the ideals that are presented to us in the life and character of Christ. The soul was thrilled by the visions of a hope that was big with immortality. There was a joyful participation in the services of God's house and a life that was fully dedicated to the Father's will. Now all of this is a back number in your experience. These things can be spoken of only in the past tense. Greed of gain has taken the place of hungering and thirsting after righteousness. Your eyes are turned toward the making of money or the indulgence in pleasure rather than toward God. Real joy has departed. There is little or no interest in the services of God's house or in the work of advancing His kingdom. What might have been precious clusters of the Spirit hanging upon the vines of life are blighted, blasted and withered. They are worthless, or worse than worthless. It is a sin to be less than we might be, and do less than we might do. Any life that surrenders to the lower and is satisfied with the inferior will be cursed with a harvest of "wild grapes."

Every failure, every choice of the inferior and every prostitution of power must be accounted for. After the harvest there will be a judgment. Every life will be judged according to its advantages and opportunities. We shall be held accountable for what we have received, and judged for the failures that we might have avoided. Unerring wisdom will mark with certainty the contrast between the "is" and the "ought to have been." We may be satisfied with ourselves now, but that is not the important thing. We stand face to face with a question of awful significance: "Is God satisfied with us? Are we what we ought to have been, considering our advantages?"

Consider how great are your privileges: a knowledge of the will of God, the example of Christ, a throne of grace which is ever accessible, and the counsel and help of the Holy Spirit. If God looked for the fruits of justice and righteousness from the Jews, what manner of fruit may He reasonably expect from us? God's gifts of truth, light as to duty, moral culture and opportunities for doing good create peculiar obligations to be fruitful, to do justice and to love mercy. Failing to make the most of our privileges will mean that God will take them away from us and give them to others who will render fruits

in their season. Instead of repining because our privileges are not more numerous, let us diligently use those which have been granted to us, and thereby make them what they were intended to be -- sources of blessing.

Doors of opportunity are wide open to you. Will you enter them? The sublimest ideals of the ages have been revealed to you. Will you make them your own? Christ invites you with tender voice. Will you receive Him as your Saviour, and then crown Him King of kings and Lord of lords in your heart? If you will, the vineyard of your soul will be made glorious with rare clusters of character, achievement and spirituality. But if you turn away from the light; if you ignore the plan of God; if you squander the riches of infinite love; if you surrender to the inferior and the ignoble; if you prostitute the gifts of heaven to unholy ends, you will glean a harvest of "wild grapes" when the vintage of life is gathered in, and that will mean failure.