“The Vineyard of the Lord,” Isaiah 5:1-17 (Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 8, 2024)

Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard

on a very fertile hill. **2**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. **3**And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. **4**What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?

**5**And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. **6**I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and briers and thorns shall grow up; I will also command the clouds

that they rain no rain upon it. **7**For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting; and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, an outcry!

**8**Woe to those who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is no more room,

and you are made to dwell alone in the midst of the land. **9**The Lord of hosts has sworn in my hearing: “Surely many houses shall be desolate, large and beautiful houses, without inhabitant. **10**For ten acres of vineyard shall yield but one bath, and a homer of seed shall yield but an ephah.”

**11**Woe to those who rise early in the morning, that they may run after strong drink, who tarry late into the evening as wine inflames them! **12**They have lyre and harp, tambourine and flute and wine at their feasts, but they do not regard the deeds of the Lord, or see the work of his hands. **13**Therefore my people go into exile for lack of knowledge; their honored men go hungry, and their multitude is parched with thirst. **14**Therefore Sheol has enlarged its appetite and opened its mouth beyond measure, and the nobility of Jerusalem and her multitude will go down, her revelers and he who exults in her.

**15**Man is humbled, and each one is brought low, and the eyes of the haughty are brought low. **16**But the Lord of hosts is exalted in justice, and the Holy God shows himself holy in righteousness. **17**Then shall the lambs graze as in their pasture, and nomads shall eat among the ruins of the rich.

***“This is the Word of the Lord.” “Thanks be to God!”***

In the gospel of Luke, we read about an encounter that Jesus had with a Roman centurion. A centurion was an officer in the Roman army who commanded one hundred men. We read that the centurion, who was stationed in the city of Capernaum in Israel, had a servant whom he valued highly and who was very sick, to the point where he thought the servant would die.

But the centurion heard about Jesus and his ability to heal people of their diseases, so he sent a message to Jesus asking him to heal his servant. Jesus agreed to go with the messengers. But while Jesus was on his way, the centurion sent a follow up message.

In Luke 7:6-8, we read the content of the centurion’s second message to Jesus. “Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof. **7**Therefore I did not presume to come to you. But say the word, and let my servant be healed. **8**For I too am a man ***set under authority,*** with soldiers under me: and I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes; and to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.”

We read that Jesus is so impressed by the centurion’s second message that he “marveled” at it and said, “No one in Israel has faith like this centurion,” and then from the other side of Capernaum he healed the servant. Now, precisely what was it about the centurion’s response that impressed Jesus so much? For a long time, I would have answered simply, “Well, it was the centurion’s faith that impressed Jesus.” And that’s true, as far as it goes.

But there is something about how the centurion understood faith to work that I now believe impressed Jesus so much. The centurion understood ***the authority of Jesus*** better than maybe any other person on earth, and that’s what caused Jesus to marvel at him.

We are in our second week of our fall study on the Old Testament book of Isaiah, we’re looking at chapter five, and I want to show you two things about authority of God. *First, let’s look at signs God is not your authority.* *Second, the fruit that comes from God’s authority in your life.*

First, signs God is not your authority. The first seven verses of our passage for today describe a vineyard, a place where you grow the grapes out of which you make wine. Vineyards were very common in Israel, both 2700 years ago (when the book of Isaiah was written) and today, and they were often used as illustrations in the Bible.

The vineyard we read about in Isaiah 5 clearly belongs to God. The Lord took great care in making this vineyard: he dug it out of a hillside, he cleared it of stones, he planted the vines, he built a watchtower and wine press, and he waited for his vineyard to yield the grapes that would produce choice wine.

But instead of producing the kind of grapes that would produce the best wine, the Lord’s vineyard produced trash. Worthless grapes, out of which you could only make something that tastes like vinegar.

Usually, you’d hear a story like that and assume that there was something wrong with the field. The soil had some kind of fungus in it that destroyed the crop. Or there was something wrong with the vines themselves.

But that’s not what’s going on. In Isaiah 5:3-4 we read: “And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, ***judge*** between me and my vineyard. **4**What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?” God speaks as if something is ***morally wrong*** with his vineyard.

Does that make any sense? If I couldn’t grow anything in the garden in my yard, would it make sense for me to call a meeting of my homeowners’ association and say, “And now, O inhabitants of Cobblestone Park subdivision, judge between me and my garden! What more was there to do for my garden, that I have not done for it?”  
  
Of course not. But God is not talking about a literal vineyard. The vineyard is a metaphor. “For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting …”. Isaiah 5:7a.

The people of God are the vineyard. God has done everything for them: he’s given them houses and cities and lands in which to live, he’s given them rain and good soil to grow their crops, he’s given the protection from enemies, ***he’s given them his love,*** but his people, because they had rejected God’s authority and rebelled against him, only produce bad fruit.

If you are here this morning and you consider yourself a Christian, if you think of yourself as part of the people of God in the new covenant established two thousand years ago by Jesus Christ, you have one job to do: bear fruit for God. You belong to God, he has all authority over you, you are his vineyard, and your job is to produce his grapes.

But it’s easy to be deceived. It’s easy to talk yourself in to saying, “Of course, I belong to the Lord. Of course, God is the authority in my life,” when it’s not true and in fact you’re rebelling against him. I’ll show you two warning signs that’s happening

*First, the presence of greed.* “Woe to those who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is no more room, and you are made to dwell alone in the midst of the land.” Isaiah 5:8. The wealthy people of Judah kept buying up all the land around them until they were all alone. They literally owned all the land as far as their eyes could see, and in a hilly region like Judah, that could be quite a distance.

It’s not a sin to be rich. The Bible nowhere condemns wealth in and of itself. We have examples of rich believers in the Bible like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, Solomon, Job.

The problem with these rich people was that, in their greed, they were driving the poor of the land. They were hurting people with their wealth. In ancient Judah, there were no salaried or hourly wage jobs you could get to provide for yourself. The only way you could work and not starve was to own a little piece of land: forty, fifty, maybe sixty acres. You could grow enough food on it to provide for your family and have a little extra left over to sell to make some cash. In fact, everyone in Judah was supposed to have their own property. God assigned every family a plot of land during the conquest of Canaan back in Joshua’s time.

But by Isaiah’s time the rich had driven their neighbors off their property because they wanted it for themselves, and now some of God’s people were either homeless, or going hungry, or both.

Let’s apply this principle today. If you have the financial resources to buy a lot of property, it doesn’t have the same effect on the poor. Very few people live off the land as they did in Judah.

But let me ask it this way: what do you daydream about? Do you daydream about one day having enough land out in the county so that you can’t see your neighbors, and they can’t see you? Maybe it’s a big, nice house out in the country or maybe it’s just a deer camp, but do you think you spend an inordinate amount of time daydreaming about being all alone on it?

Do you daydream about having some vacation property where you can get away on the weekends and the only people you can see there are your family and friends (because there the only ones who are invited)? Do you daydream about having some place close to the Square where you can walk to have a bite to eat and socialize but then retreat back to your place where no one can bother you?

I’ve had those daydreams, and while I don’t think there’s anything inherently wrong with having or having access to places like that, if that’s where your mind continually goes, if that’s your happy place and when you have a rough week, you’re grumpy until you get there, ***you’re probably not very interested in serving others.*** Those aren’t the grapes the Lord wants produced in his vineyard. Be very careful not to turn God’s blessings into a license for greed.

*The second warning sign is the practice of self-indulgence.* Isaiah 5:11-12: “Woe to those who rise early in the morning, that they may run after strong drink, who tarry late into the evening as wine inflames them! **12**They have lyre and harp, tambourine and flute and wine at their feasts, but they do not regard the deeds of the Lord, or see the work of his hands.” And though it’s not a part of our sermon text I’ll read from verse 22: “Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine, and valiant men in mixing strong drink …”. The NIV translation of the Bible has “champions at mixing drinks,” and no offense to anyone here this morning but I just have to think that last night someone in Oxford was calling himself a “champion at mixing drinks.”

We live in a town where the motto is, “We may not win every game, but we’ve never lost a party.” A lot of professing Christians in our town are proud of that reputation. But when is it ok to indulge too much in the party scene?

Is it just on home game weekends? Because it’s kind of expected then, especially when the Rebels win? Is it on vacation? Is it Friday nights or girl trips or 21st birthdays or only in Vegas? When is it that it’s ok to bear the bad fruit of self-indulgence?   
  
And the answer for God’s people must be, “Never.” If you find yourself slipping into that pattern, watch out … because you are on your way to rejecting God’s authority over your life. Isaiah 64:8 says, “But now, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand”? You know what the potter can do with the clay in his studio? ***He can do whatever he wants with it.***

Friends, when it comes to authority, ***we only have two options***. Either God is the authority in our lives, or we are. There is no in-between.

And you can’t say, “Yes, I believe God has authority over me, but I don’t have to obey him all the time,” or “I’m a moral person, but there are always exceptions.” No! If you get to choose the exceptions, if you pick and choose situations where you can be greedy or self-indulgent, ***you’re the authority in your life***.

If you’re here and you’re not a Christian, and you’re not a part of some other religious tradition, then by default ***you are the authority in your life.*** That means that you determine what is right and wrong for you. You determine for yourself what is kindness and what is cruelty. You decide for yourself what is tolerance and what is bigotry. You make the rules up as you go.

Now, no one wants to admit they are making up their own morality as they go along. But if God is not your authority, who is? It must be someone. And the only answer is: yourself. You’re the one deciding for you what is moral and what is immoral. ***You’re the one in control.***

But why is it that we don’t want to completely submit to God***? I think it’s because we’re afraid of where it might lead.***

We think, “If I do what God says to do with my money, will I have anything left over for me and my family?” It’s almost like we feel like we must be a little greedy, or we won’t be taken care of financially.

We think, “If I do exactly what God says about self-indulgence, then will I have any fun at all? Or will my life be like one really long, boring church service the rest of my days?” We think we have to go out and find happiness on our own, because we can’t trust God to get it for us.

The bottom line is that we don’t submit to God’s authority because we don’t trust him. We think, “The only way I can be sure I’ll be taken care of is if I handle it.”

But that’s not true, ***because the things we most need in our lives are the things we cannot get our own.***

Second, the fruit that comes only with God’s authority in your life. What we’re looking for in the greed and the self-indulgence are the traits Paul talks about in Galatians 5: love, joy, peace, patience, the ability to be kind and good, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Those are also known as the fruit of the Spirit, and ***these are things we want.***

Who doesn’t want to be joyful? Who doesn’t want to be peaceful, or loving, or self-controlled? ***And if you had that fruit in your life, would it matter how much money you have?*** If you were full of joy and peace and self-control, would the size of your portfolio matter? And if you had love and kindness, why in the world would you ever need to overindulge?

But you cannot get this fruit on your own. Going back to greed … make all the money you possibly can, ***yet no amount of money can guarantee you peace***, because all the money and the nicest houses and the best vacation spots can’t prevent car accidents, can’t stop cancer, can’t keep your heart from being broken, and can’t guarantee your children won’t go off the rails.

All the parties in the world can’t guarantee that you’ll find love and joy, to say nothing of faithfulness or self-control. Is there anything more predictable than feeling regret the morning after a night you thought would be the time of your life?

We want the fruit of the Holy Spirit’s work in our lives. ***But we can’t get it on our own.*** You can’t get joy directly. There isn’t a store where you can buy it, nor can Amazon ship it to you. You can buy things hoping they’ll give you joy. You can get into a relationship with someone hoping it will lead to joy. But joy is never guaranteed no matter how skillful or careful we are in how we live our lives. ***Only God can give it to you.***

Now, let’s read the last of our passage, Isaiah 5:13-15: “**13**Therefore my people go into exile for lack of knowledge; their honored men go hungry, and their multitude is parched with thirst. **14**Therefore Sheol [Hebrew for “the place of the dead”] has enlarged its appetite and opened its mouth beyond measure, and the nobility of Jerusalem and her multitude will go down, her revelers and he who exults in her. **15**Man is humbled, and each one is brought low, and the eyes of the haughty are brought low.”

In other words, because the rich and powerful in Judah had oppressed their poorer brothers and sisters, God was going to discipline them. He was going to bring the Babylonians from beyond the Euphrates River to conquer Judah and take the wealthy into exile and where they would die far from home.

Now, verses 16-17: “But the Lord of hosts is exalted in justice, and the Holy God shows himself holy in righteousness. **17**Then shall the lambs graze as in their pasture, and nomads shall eat among the ruins of the rich.” To the poor people of Judah, those who had been oppressed, God said, “I’m going to get rid of the people who have taken your land and gotten drunk on its proceeds and will give it to you instead. I will be your shepherd. And there you will always have plenty to eat, ***because I will be your God, you will be my people, and I always provide for my people.”*** That’s the promise of God to the people of the old covenant.

And the promise for us today in the new covenant is that when we submit to God’s authority through his Son Jesus Christ, he will provide for us. In 1 Peter 5 Jesus Christ is called “the chief Shepherd,” Christians are his sheep, and he promises over and over again that if we trust him, he will give us everything we need, especially love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Maybe the sweetest verses in all the Bible are found in the second half of the Sermon of the Mount, Matthew 6:25-34, where Jesus says to the people who trust him, “Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? **26**Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? **27**And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? **28**And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, **29**yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. **30**But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? **31**Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ **32**For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. **33**But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. **34**Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.”

A worry-free life where every need is met and where joy and fellowship can be found with God and other believers: that’s what’s promised when we submit to God’s authority and trust him through Jesus Christ.

To bring it full circle, think back to that centurion in Luke 7. What made his faith so impressive that Jesus “marveled” at it? It was that the centurion deeply believed that Jesus wanted to heal his servant and that Jesus was able to heal his servant, and that was true whether Jesus was in the room with the servant or if he was on the other side of the world. Put another way, ***the centurion believed Jesus was good, and that Jesus had all authority.***

Do you believe that? Do you believe that Jesus is good, and that he has all authority? I hope you do, but if you’re not sure about that ***it’s enough for now to believe that it’s no good for you to be on the throne of your life.*** It’s enough to know that you don’t trust yourself and you need to trust Jesus.

So, here’s what I want you to do as we close the sermon. I want you to pray like this: “Lord Jesus, I don’t want to run my life. Nothing good is going to come of that. I know better than to trust myself. I want to trust you. I want to give my life over to you and I want to be the kind of vineyard that produces the fruit you desire. Lord Jesus, help me to follow you.” Will you pray that? Jesus loves to answer that kind of prayer. PRAY