

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Tara enjoys gardening and likes to think she is quite good at it. One year during lockdowns she planted a huge crop of Brussel Sprouts and Cabbages; it seemed logical to grow some extra food while we had extra time at home. She prepared the soil, worked it over, cleared the weeds, planted the seeds, diligently separated the seedlings, and continued to weed and weed and weed. All the while watering diligently through a dryer-than-usual winter. Then when she thought the plants should be setting sprouts and forming heads of cabbage, one by one they shot up a flower and ran to seed. All that love and work were rejected.

Many of you will know or understand the unrequited love that Jesus speaks of in his parable as he expounds on Isaiah 5. A love that is poured out only to be rejected. You might understand it because of a similar gardening venture or a new project that you researched over the years and planned and built to provide for a family and yet the venture did not produce as you anticipated. You might understand it because you have experienced this unrequited love in a relationship that you thought would turn into lifelong happiness, or by the rejection of your love by one of your own children. You pour all your time, energy, and love into something, and it doesn't love you back.

George Jones sang of a love like this is his haunting country classic.

He said, "I'll love you till I die"
She told him, "You'll forget in time"
As the years went slowly by
She still preyed upon his mind

He kept her picture on his wall
Went half crazy now and then
But he still loved her through it all
Hoping she'd come back again

Kept some letters by his bed
Dated 1962
He had underlined in red
Every single, I love you

I went to see him just today
Oh, but I didn't see no tears
All dressed up to go away
First time I'd seen him smile in years

He stopped loving her today
They placed a wreath upon his door
And soon they'll carry him away
He stopped loving her today

The journey through Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, the Exodus from Egypt, the wilderness wanderings, the judges, the Kings and the prophets, the Exile and return from Exile is a long and continuous story of God lavishing his love on his chosen people and delivering them into his chosen land. Isaiah 5 and this parable in Matthew 21 are a retelling of the events for the beloved or the tenants (it's the same people), to recount to them what has happened. These stories show them that it is not God who is at fault for failing to love his people, it is his chosen people who at every turn and on every warning from the prophets have rejected his love. Rather than trust in his

promises and receive his love for them with joy they have declined his love and gifts to them by their continual desire to trust other gods or to chase after other things as if they were gods. This faithlessness has led to moral decay; we must be careful when reading these texts not to think that moral decay comes first. Faithlessness comes first, and this leads to God searching for 'justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, an outcry!' Isaiah 5:7 (ESV) We should apply this also to our own society, faithlessness comes first, and this is followed by moral decay. (See Romans 1)

God's sending of his Son in Jesus is the culminating step in his love for his chosen people and all humanity, and in enacting salvation this way God ties his plan together and uses the chosen people who have rejected him to enact his plan of salvation. The way Jesus presents his parables and the reactions of his audience suggest that he may be intentionally provoking them to take action. It is unfortunate but true that Jesus seems to deliberately offend the Jewish religious leaders, knowing that they will attempt to kill him. This is precisely what happens, and Jesus even acknowledges it to those who are listening to him in the temple. In his parable based on Isaiah 5, the son of the vineyard owners comes to collect the fruit and is murdered by the tenants.

Jesus' entry into the world is a continuation of God's lavish love for his people, it is yet another attempt to win their love, by winning their freedom from sin. But his chosen people largely reject him just as they did all the messengers that had been sent before to warn and protect them. Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection for all people continues to call out God's love to his people, especially the Jewish nation his chosen people, who even by their own words condemn themselves at the end of this parable; 'They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons."' Matthew 21:41 (ESV). The original tenants should expect to be removed and not included in the workings of the vineyard, but our gracious God continues to call them to repentance and faith; that is the fruit that he has been trying to grow.

One who was so abruptly called from destroying the vineyard to becoming a model tenant is Paul. He is switched from being a boar ravishing the vineyard to being the chief vigneron. Paul realises the astonishing nature of his own conversion from trusting in other gods to faith in the true God, through Jesus Christ. He expands on that in his letter to the Philippians where he tells them about the other gods that he had previously trusted. 'If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in **the flesh**, I have more: ⁵ **circumcised** on the eighth day, of the **people of Israel**, of the **tribe of Benjamin**, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, **a Pharisee**; ⁶ as to zeal, **a persecutor of the church**; as to righteousness under the law, **blameless**.' Philippians 3:4–6 (ESV)

The list is long but I think we could summarize them, Paul previously trusted in ethnicity (Jewish), his family name (tribe of Benjamin), his specific religious affiliation (Pharisee), his fight against the followers of Jesus, and finally his good works. Five little gods, to safely keep him from trusting in the one true God. You would do well to identify the little, or false gods in your life. Upon Paul's abrupt conversion and subsequent learning of Jesus' great love for him, he ceased to place his trust in these things and instead clung to Christ Jesus for all the gifts that he has to give. The picture Paul uses to describe this is firstly an accounting picture. I counted these things as profit, but now I count them as a loss. But he goes further and gives another picture, not only are they a loss in regard to earning salvation they are considered effluent, faeces in the light of God's great love in Christ Jesus.

God has also been lavishing his love on you. Not only can we see Israel's history as our history because we have been grafted into the vine of his chosen people, but we have years of God's love through various means to look on. We could look to our reception of the faith through our parents

(or whoever led you to faith) as a way that God has been lavishing his love on us, or his protection of the faithful people throughout history, the deliverance of the one true faith into this country. But we would do well to look at the objective ways that God still delivers his love to us, the same love that hung him on a tree and won salvation for us. God has poured out his love on us, through Jesus and delivered this by his means of grace both of word and sacrament.

We should then consider that when the word is read to us, it is God speaking to us and calling us to faith in him. It is the servants coming to collect the fruit from the tenants of the vineyard. For we are the new tenants of the vineyard as the previous unfaithful ones have been removed and God is still looking for his fruit. He wants us to hear his word, and know that he has lavished his love on us, and he wants us to respond by trusting in his promises. When we hear 'fruit' we automatically think 'good deeds'. But 'fruit' is primarily to trust in the promise, to believe the assessment that we are sinners and are still sinning, who need a saviour, and then cling to that saviour who has been revealed to us. See that being held and known by the saviour makes all our other claims to heaven into effluent. Yes, good deeds and righteous actions will flow out of this, but primarily the fruit is faith. Just as immorality was the outcome of Israel's unfaithfulness, morality should be the outcome of faith. Remembering all the time that we are still sinners, and even our best intentions to please God are never enough. This is why the Christian faith is not primarily moral teachings, it is primarily forgiveness teaching because that is the principal way that God loves us, by forgiving us all our sins in Jesus' name. This is the foundation stone on which everything else is built. If we were truly moral people there would be no need for forgiveness, because there would be no sin and we could probably make sense of that by achieving a righteousness of works and no one would stumble over the foundation that is Christ!

We still want to trust in other things; our ethnicity ("I'm Australian, or I'm from good German/European stock"), our good family name, our religious ideals ("I'm a good Lutheran boy, I served this committee for ... years") and our self-proclaimed good works. Instead, He only wants us to deliver the fruit in due season by trusting in his promise, diligently hearing the word that the pastor preaches to us, clinging to his promises made to us in our baptisms, confessing our sins and trusting in his forgiveness proclaimed to us and receiving his body and blood for our strength and preservation of body and soul.

Amen

The peace of God that surpasses all our understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, Amen.