

Michael J. Mathey
Pentecost XIX
October 8, 2023
Text: Isaiah 5:1 – 7 & Matthew 21:33 – 46
Title: It's Perfect

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Tina turned off the vacuum and looked around the room. She was finally done. Her in-laws would be arriving tomorrow afternoon for their first visit since the wedding, and the apartment was finally clean. Her new husband, Dave, had laughed at all of her preparations as he helped with some of the cleaning chores. He thought that she was going a little overboard in her efforts. After all, he pointed out; they of all people know who we are and how things would really look on a typical day. Why go to all of the effort to try and make the apartment look otherwise? Dave was a typical guy and just didn't get it. Tina wanted his parents to see how nice their home was, and she didn't want them thinking that she was having any trouble keeping up with everything. It was a small matter of pride that they see the place looking better than they probably expected it to be. She looked around and ran through her mental checklist one more time. Everything was just perfect.

The chef moved through his kitchen with more intensity than the staff had ever seen. He was always meticulous in his preparations and kept a close watch on their work to make sure everything that went out met his high standards, but this particular order was different. He watched them closely, directed them urgently, and took great pains to make sure that every detail on the plate was exactly as it should be. When the restaurant critic's went out the door of the kitchen, it was just the way the chef wanted it to be. It was perfect.

It had certainly been a major project, but it was finally done. He knew even before He began it what a great undertaking it was, but He wanted to make sure it happened and that it

happened in just the right way. Every single step was exquisitely planned out and executed. There was nothing that was left to chance, and every time He began a different stage of the work it was only after the previous stage was done to perfection. It had to be that way, or the entire project would fall apart. Each new step depended on the successful completion of the previous step so that it could also succeed. And once He knew for sure that each step was good, He could move on to make the rest of it just as good. Now, seven days after He began the first steps of Creation, the Lord God could sit back and look at His entire work with satisfaction because nothing else had to be done. The earth and everything in it and around it was finally done, and all of it, the plants, the stars and the planets, the animals, and the man and the woman was very good. It was absolutely perfect.

The land was the best around. The soil was rich and fertile, and it was on a nice gentle hill that seemed to work the best for a vineyard. So the owner decided that he would use it for that very purpose. He took the greatest care to remove every stone as he dug up the soil, and he selected only the choicest vines to plant there. Then he took the time to dig out a winepress in it, and he carved out a vat to store the wine. To finish his project, the owner then built a watchtower in the middle of everything, and even fenced off the land to keep intruders and thieves out. Finally, the owner of the land was finished with his work. There was nothing else that could possibly be needed in such a great vineyard. The only thing left to do was wait for the harvest. Everything was just perfect.

This is the scene described by the prophet, Isaiah, in today's Old Testament lesson from chapter 5, and it is described again in a similar way in Matthew 21. Everything is just right. It is the perfect vineyard, and the grapes that it produces should be just as perfect. There shouldn't be any problems with them at all. But that isn't what happens. After the details of the vineyard are

given, Isaiah writes, "...and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. 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? 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. 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 so rain upon it. 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!"

The Lord reveals Himself as the owner of the vineyard which is the house of Israel, and He is, to say the least, disappointed by what He has found there. There should be large, juicy grapes on the vines which are the house of Judah. The fruit that grows is supposed to be just right for making good wine, but instead the vineyard is producing only weak and sour wild grapes that are literally good for nothing. So Yahweh asks the question directly to His people. It is a question of judgment so intense and stern that we are still confronted by it as part of our worship on Good Friday, "What more could have been done for my vineyard beyond what I already did for it?" That vineyard had everything that it needed to produce what it was supposed to produce, but instead what grew was worthless. All of the work that was done for this vineyard seems to have been a wasted effort. The fruit that should have been produced by the vineyard just isn't there, and the Lord is ready to take extreme measures against it. The vineyard's protection is going to be removed, and the crops are going to be abandoned. The land and the crops, that is the Lord's chosen people, will be punished for not doing what they were supposed to do. They have not produced fruit. They have not been faithful.

When you remember that the Christian Church is now the new Israel, it becomes clear that this prophecy is not just a one-time warning. In the Gospel lesson for today, Jesus tells the Jewish leaders that they have rebelled against the owner of the vineyard, and they will be removed because they refuse to give to the Lord what He is owed. They are poor stewards of His gifts. The vineyard will be turned over to new tenants, and they will have the chance to produce the fruit that should be found. So, this whole warning is not just for the Pharisees and the chief priests that Jesus is talking too, it is meant for us as well. Like a farmer or a gardener checks the crops for the fruit that is supposed to grow, so the Lord checks you for the fruit that He expects to see. Are His appointed stewards doing what they're supposed to do?

Is the fruit there that the Lord expects to find? Are you living the life of faith that you are supposed to be living? Can you answer the old question positively, "If you were accused of being a Christian today, would there be enough evidence to prove it?" Does your life show that you love the Lord your God with all of your heart; with all of your soul; and with all of your mind? Do you love your neighbor as you do yourself? Do you have no other gods before the Lord, or do you let other things take priority over your relationship with Him? Do you keep the Sabbath day holy or use His name in vain? I'm sure that you see where I am going with all of these questions. We are a pretty poor substitute for the tenants of the parable that Jesus tells in Matthew 21. Our glaring failures in keeping God's Law are just as bad as the actions of the murdering and rebellious tenants who kill the vineyard owner's son in the parable. We all deserve to be punished equally.

At least that's what we would so richly deserve if we had to rely on our own ability to keep the Law to earn our salvation. Left to ourselves we can never be good enough or sincere enough or repentant enough to be saved from the damnation that we should receive. In today's

reading from Philippians, Paul shows that he understands this fact very well. He was "...a Hebrew of Hebrews...a Pharisee...under the law blameless." He was the perfect Jew, but not a perfect human. Martin Luther had the same understanding. He was the perfect monk and Catholic, but not a perfect human. The ultimate irony is that the only person who was ever perfect enough to earn His way into heaven was Jesus Christ, and He didn't *have* to earn His way in! He did it all for you because you couldn't!

The Son of the vineyard-owner, Jesus, does not stay dead at the hands of the evil tenants. Death can not hold someone who is perfect because the power of death comes from sin. The Father looked at His Son, and He saw the perfect sacrifice to pay for your sins. And after Christ rose from the dead, the Father will now look at you and see the perfection of Christ in place of your sinful self.

But what about the sour and spoiled fruit that your sinful nature produces? Doesn't that still leave us in trouble with the owner of the vineyard? Thankfully, it doesn't. As a faithful Christian, even your failure to produce good fruit will be forgiven, and the Father will look at your tainted and sinful works and He will see the perfection of Christ in them as well. And in His infinite mercy, the Owner will not evict you for your sins against you. Instead He will forgive all of your sins and failures, and He will continue to work in you to make you more and more holy and, therefore, productive until the day that He can finally look at you again and say, "You are perfect." Amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.