

Sept. 5, 2014 – Isaiah 5:1-7 (Epistle: Philippians 3:4b-14, Gospel: Matthew 21:33-46)

God has given you everything you need to be fruitful.

Today many things we buy come with a disclaimer written on the box: “Some assembly required.” The picture on the front looks great, but that isn’t what you see when you open the package. Often not everything is included. You must provide additional tools or parts that you are expected to have on hand in order to assemble the item. It can be challenging on Christmas Eve to figure out which is tab A so that you can put it in slot B – all so that your son or daughter can awake to find their present ready for them on Christmas morning. If you have been that son or daughter, you know how great it is to have everything there waiting for you. There is another disclaimer that often appears on packages. It can lead to great disappointment if it is ignored. That disclaimer is: “Batteries not included.”

We can be tempted to view the Christian life as having one (or both) of these disclaimers. But our sermon text shows us that God has in fact given you everything you need for this life – especially everything you need to be fruitful.

In this song, God uses the image of a vineyard to describe the house of Israel. This image may not be as familiar to us today as it probably was to the Jews of Isaiah’s time, but its message is clear. God had done everything for His vineyard. It was planted “*on a very fruitful hill. He dug it up and cleared out its stones, and planted it with the choicest vine. He built a tower in its midst, and also made a winepress in it.*” Everything was there to produce good grapes. “*But it brought forth wild grapes.*”

The translation “*wild grapes*” seems to be a bit too mild. The Hebrew word used here comes from the word meaning “stench” or “stink.” Instead of good grapes, the vineyard produced worthless, stinking grapes that are good for nothing!

In verse 3, God asks the very people He was addressing with this story to judge between Him and His vineyard. In verse 4 He asks, “*What more could I have done for My vineyard that I have not done in it?*” The answer is: “nothing!” God did everything that was necessary for the vineyard to be fruitful and produce good grapes. God continues: “*Why then, when I expected it to bring forth good grapes, did it bring forth wild grapes?*” That is a good question. There is no good reason why the Israelites did not produce good grapes.

The questions that God asks in verse 4 are good questions for us as well. Is there anything more that God could have done for us? We know He has done everything necessary for our salvation. He sent His only begotten Son to take away the sins of the world by His death on the cross. The same power that worked in Christ Jesus when God raised Him from the dead works in you (Ephesians 1:19-20). While you were dead in your trespasses and sins, God made you alive with Christ (Ephesians 2:5), so that through faith in Jesus you have everlasting life (John 3:16). Your faith itself comes from God. God has granted to you to believe in Him (Philippians 1:29). All this is the gift of God; none of it comes from ourselves (Ephesians 2:8-9).

But what about our life as a Christian here on earth – the time between our conversion and our death? Has God given us everything we need to live fruitful lives or do we need to supply something?

I drive past many churches on my way here on Sunday morning. I have not been to any of them, but I suspect that the message you would hear in most of them would focus on what a Christian does or on how a Christian should live. If you were to ask them if one goes to heaven because one lives a good life, I pray they would all answer as God does, “No! No one can live the perfect

life God requires. You are saved by God's undeserved favor, because of Jesus perfect life and innocent death in your place, apart from your works." Their preaching, however, might give a different impression – that one must do all these things to be a "true Christian." If we fall short, it is because we aren't trying hard enough or don't have enough faith. In essence they are saying that the Christian life comes with "some assembly required" and needs us to supply the batteries.

The truth is God has supplied all that you need, not only for your salvation but also for your life here on earth. God gives you all that you need to be fruitful. Through Jesus' death on the cross, the "stones" of your sins have been cleared out. Through baptism your sinful nature has been "dug up" and removed and God has given you His Spirit to guide, guard and protect you, like a tower and a hedge. In Christ you are a new creation, made into "the choicest vine" planted "on a very fruitful hill." Ephesians 2:10 tells us that God has even prepared beforehand the very works He wants us to do, so they are there all ready for us. God has done everything so that you will naturally produce fruit and do good works.

The good works that we do come not from our efforts but from God. It is He "who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13). Isaiah 26:12 says that it is the LORD who has "done all our works in us." It isn't as if God saves us then leaves it up to us to make it through this life until He takes us to our home in heaven. Paul wrote to the Philippians that he was "confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:6). God began the good work and will see it through! Paul doesn't say, "will complete it on the day of Jesus Christ." What he says sounds a little strange: "He...will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ." God will continually complete His work in your life during your time on earth until Christ returns.

But what about the times when we don't produce good grapes and our fruit is stinky and worthless. If God has done everything for us, "Why then, when [He] expect[s] us to bring forth good grapes, [do we] bring forth wild grapes?"

Our text doesn't answer this question directly, either about us, or about the Jews. Verses 12-13, a few verses later in this chapter, give us a clue. They say regarding the Jews, "they do not regard the work of the LORD, nor consider the operation of His hands. Therefore my people have gone into captivity, because they have no knowledge." The Jews had turned away from the LORD, the only true God, and worshiped gods made of wood or stone. For this reason God had sent them into exile in Babylon. They produced rotten grapes because they had turned away from God and all that He had done for them.

In the same way, we fail to produce good grapes when we turn away from God. We may not turn to idols made of stone, but we turn back to the stones that God has cleared out of lives. The world paints over them to make them look attractive and tries to convince us that these stones – these sins against God – really aren't bad, that they really aren't sins. Satan tempts us with the thought that we will enjoy the stones more than a cleared field – perhaps inside one we might even find a diamond. Our sinful flesh is eager to jump the hedge and bring back a stone or two. After all, we can keep them buried so that anyone looking will see nicely cultivated vineyard.

But these stones occupy our time and sap our energy. They choke out the choice vines that God has planted and trip us up, so that we don't produce good grapes. They lead us away from the One who bought us with the blood of Christ and who has provided us with all that we need to produce good fruit.

We also turn away from God when we try to resist these stones by our own strength, or try to produce good grapes by our own efforts. The church in Galatia was trying to do just that. Paul

wrote to them, “*Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?*” (Galatians 3:3). God does not bring us to faith and leave the rest up to us.

When Zerubbabel was rebuilding the temple after the Jews returned from Babylon, God sent him this message through the prophet Zechariah: “*Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit, says the Lord of hosts*” (Zechariah 4:6). The same is true for you: it isn’t your might or your power that enables you to resist sin and live a godly life. It is God’s Spirit whom He has poured out on us in baptism that does these things. It is “*by the Spirit...[that we] put to death the deeds of the body*” (Romans 8:13). It is the Spirit of God that leads you to produce good fruit. “*Love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control*” is “*the fruit of the Spirit*” (Galatians 5:22) not of your own efforts.

In verses 5 and 6 God tells what He will do to His unfruitful vineyard: “*I will take away its hedge, and it shall be burned; and break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will lay it waste; It shall not be pruned or dug, but there shall come up briars and thorns. I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain on it.*” These words may disturb us because we do not always produce the good fruit that God desires. But remember that there is “*now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit*” (Romans 8:1). In Christ, all your failures to produce good fruit are forgiven. You no longer need to fear punishment for your sins, either in this life or the next; Jesus took the punishment for the world’s sins on Himself when He died on the cross.

That does not mean, however, that this warning isn’t for us. It is. It is ammunition that God gives us for the Spirit to use to put to death our sinful flesh and its desires. It is a warning for the Spirit to use to keep us from turning away from God and from His salvation and power. It is the same warning that Jesus gave the chief priests and the Pharisees in our Gospel reading. The kingdom of God was taken away from them because they rejected Jesus, the Son of God, who came to save them.

So remember that God has given you everything that you need – everything you need for salvation, and also everything you need for a fruitful life here on earth. He has cleared away your sins and made you His fruitful vineyard. No assembly needed and the batteries are included, because it is He who works in you to both will and to do His good pleasure.

May the Holy Spirit keep your eyes on Jesus and cause you to always abide in Him so that you bear much fruit. Amen.

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