

## Enjoying the Fruits of Your Neighbor's Vineyard

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*When you come into your neighbor's vineyard, you may eat your fill of grapes at your pleasure, but you shall not put any in your container. When you come into your neighbor's standing grain, you may pluck the heads with your hand, but you shall not use a sickle on your neighbor's standing grain (Deuteronomy 23:24).*

This is a harvest law that was given to the Israelites by the Lord. Implicit in this law is the assumption that we were all created to “bear fruit” for others. That is, we are created to be useful to other people, to help bring them wellbeing through the goods and services that we provide. The Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church states, “A human being is born not for the sake of himself but for the sake of others. That is, he is born not to live for himself alone but for others. Otherwise there could be no cohesive society, nor any good in it” (*True Christian Religion* 406).

Each of us is a “vineyard” and a “grain field” from which others may pluck and eat. We do not have an exclusive right over the fruits of our lives. We were made for others as well as for ourselves.

The Israelites had another law, which has similar implications. It states, “When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not wholly reap the corners of your field, nor shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest. And you shall not glean your vineyard, nor shall you gather every grape of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger” (Leviticus 19:9).

The “poor” and the “stranger,” in spiritual terms, refer to people *who are in need* of what we have to offer, yet cannot pay us back. We are not to selfishly look for a reward from everything that we have and do. Our fruits are not just our own, to give only to those who please or benefit us. Our attitude should be one of unselfish service (even when prudence in this world demands that we secure payment to meet our own needs and to maintain a position in which we can continue to serve). The deeper reality is that all that we give and receive is a free gift from the Lord.

“Grapes” (and “fruits” in general) stand for the good things that spring from people's hearts and lives. The Lord intends us to derive joy from others' spirits, from their good feelings, from the ways their characters express themselves, from their acts of usefulness, kindness and generosity. These are the “grapes,” of which we may “eat our fill...at our pleasure.” In fact, one of the things that creates heaven is the assumption of good will, the assumption that we exist for each other, that the Lord created us, and re-creates us, to dwell in a sharing communion—a communion in which *His* love and goodness (not ours) is *really* what we share. The law in Deuteronomy 23 carries the spirit of this aspect of heavenly sharing and awareness.

An Israelite was allowed to enjoy his neighbor's grapes as long as he didn't put any into his container. The implication is that he had to remain in his neighbor's “vineyard” while he enjoyed his fruit. He couldn't take the fruit away with him. This seems to suggest that we may rightly enjoy others' goodness, as long as we respect them as the vehicles for that good. We should enjoy the good they produce with consideration: with them in mind, with appreciation, with acknowledgment of their role in bringing forth the Lord's good. Taking others' grapes away with us in our container

implies enjoying the fruits of others' lives without this consideration. We are then exploiting them, "using" them. This is where our attitude becomes one of stealing. In doing this, we violate the communion, which is heaven.

Putting our neighbor's grapes in our container while we are in their vineyard has a more specific meaning. Our "vineyard," symbolically, is our understanding, or outlook, from which we do good (or in which we do good). It stands for our doctrinal framework. When we are standing in another's doctrinal framework or mindset, we should not be so swayed by the strong flavor and sweetness of their effect on us that we adopt their perspective unthinkingly. Our own vineyard is the place to fill our containers. We must have our own understanding based on our own cultivation of truth and on our own efforts to apply that truth in our life "for good" (*Arcana Coelestia* 5117.13). We can, and should, enjoy others' goodness, but not adopt *their* ideas *in toto*, rather look to the framework the Lord is building in us.

The second part of the law from Deuteronomy states, "When you come into your neighbor's standing grain, you may pluck the heads with your hand, but you shall not use a sickle on your neighbor's standing grain" (v.25). The meaning here is obviously related to that of the first part. The "grapes" referred to acts that stem from our neighbor's love. (That is, they relate to the *will* part of the mind.) "Heads of grain" refer to the knowledge of truth that we gain from others (*Arcana Coelestia* 5212.4), thus to their ideas and insights. (This relates to the understanding part of the mind.)

We are allowed to "pluck the heads of our neighbor's standing grain with our hand." This means that we are allowed to sample, explore, and enjoy others' ideas of what is true in order to apply them to life. Plucking the grain "with *the hand*" symbolically carries the idea of applying truths to life. We are not to use their ideas to puff ourselves up, to feed our egos, to judge others, and so forth. We are to see them in relation to life.

As in the first part of the law, the picture here is of us eating as we are present in our neighbors' "standing grain." "Standing grain" is grain that has not yet been harvested and prepared for a specific purpose or for market. Once it is so prepared, to eat it would be stealing. But eating it in their unharvested field means respecting their need and right to understand and apply the truth to life in their own way.

The law specifically mentions not "using a sickle on our neighbors' standing grain." In general, this must carry something of the meaning of not putting our neighbors' grapes into our own container. We should not be planning to take our neighbor's grain back to our home, to enjoy apart from them. We should honor truth as a gift received from the Lord through others, given for the sake of others. It is not just for our own pleasure and advantage. But more specifically, "using a sickle" refers symbolically to bringing truth to bear on a matter, to judging and making distinctions (*Apocalypse Revealed* 643, 645). Using it on our neighbors' standing grain means trying to impose our own judgment on our neighbors' understanding of truth. Trying to tell them how they should apply their understanding to life, telling them *to what purpose* they should put their own "harvest"!

We are *meant* to gain pleasure and benefit from one another! Our useful service, our acts of kindness, our know-how and skill, our intelligence and wise insights—all these are to be shared. This

is the wonderful truth behind this law about the harvest from Deuteronomy!

But in its spiritual meaning this law reminds us that as part of this communion we should honor each other's gifts and the part individuals play in bringing the Lord's goodness and truth into our lives. And we should respect both our own and others' freedom and rationality—not stealing from them their own understanding or initiative in doing good, not allowing our own understanding or initiative to be pre-empted by them.

As we celebrate the natural harvest of this earth, which is given to us by the Lord, let us also reflect on the communion of His kingdom, with grateful hearts. Let us pray that we may do what it takes to become a more *giving* part of it. And let us pray that in graciously *receiving* from others, we may also be an occasion for many to rejoice in their God!

*Amen.*

Lessons: Deuteronomy 23:24-25, 24:19-22; Luke 12:13-21; *Arcana Coelestia* 8906.1