

Life and Death in the Vineyard

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Three services

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"Hear another parable. There was a master of a house who planted a vine yard and put a fence around it and dug a winepress in it and built a tower and leased it to tenants, and went into another country. When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit. And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other servants, more than the first. And they did the same to them. Finally, he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.' And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" 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.

Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes?'"

"Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of heaven will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits. And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him." Matthew 21:33-44

The parable we read this morning, told by Jesus, instructs us well as an allegory. Each character in Jesus' story represents a real person or group. The immediate meaning of the parable would seem to go like this. 1) The landowner refers to God. 2) The vineyard represents the nation of Israel. The Jews would have been familiar with Isaiah 5 in which God planted a vineyard, symbolizing Israel. 3) The wicked tenants probably represent the Jewish religious leaders and rebellious people. 4) The servants sent by the owner represent the Old Testament prophets. God sent many prophets to Israel to warn them of their sin, but they were mistreated and some of them were killed. 5) The owner's own son has to represent Jesus Christ. 6) The new tenants to whom the owner gave the vineyard represents the rest of us, the Church of Jesus Christ.

There is a strong tendency when we study parables in the Bible to name them from a human perspective. If we use a NIV translation, we would read about the "Parable of the Prodigal Son". But if we tried to look at it from God's perspective, we might use a title such as the "Parable of the Forgiving Father". That's really what the main point is, isn't it? Recently, we studied a parable about workers who worked a different period of time, but they all got the same pay. Many call it "The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard". But if we named it from what we believe to be God's perspective, it could be named "The Parable of the Generous Boss". That's really what the main point is. Now the parable we are studying today is often referred to as "The Parable of the Tenants". But if we called it the "Parable of the Patient Landowner" we would name one of its main points. This is a challenge that we face in life: to stop looking at things just from our perspective and seek to know God's perspective on matters in our lives.

Actually, one can find at least three truths about God in this parable. Number one is GOD IS THE OWNER. We might give lip service to believing that but does it influence our stewardship of the things he has granted us? God is the Creator. He owns all of Plant Earth and everything beyond it. The Psalmist writes in Psalm 24:1, "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it." The tenants did not own the vineyard. The owner had placed them there and expected to receive some of the grapes harvested. Was that unreasonable? He did not demand all of the grapes, just a portion. But the tenants rejected his request and acted as if they owned the vineyard and all of the harvest belonged to them.

Let's put this into a modern setting. Imagine you are a landlord and own some condominiums. You are a busy person, and you send one of your employees to collect the rent for you. But instead of paying the rent, the renter beats up your worker and informs him, "This apartment is mine! I am not paying another dollar for it. Get off of my property and stay off of it." How would you feel about that? I bet you would take action and soon!

But note that is not what the owner does. We might say truth # 2 must be that GOD IS PATIENT. If this were real life today, we would call the police, there would be red or blue lights flashing, and there would probably be an arrest. But this is a made-up story and Jesus wants to teach us something. First, the owner sent his servants to gather some of the fruit. They beat one, killed another, and stoned another. But he was patient and he sent more servants. They received the same treatment. So finally he sent his son.

But don't miss the point that this parable is also about each one of us. God has prepared a vineyard for us to manage. God has put us here. But he is the almighty Creator and he owns it all. He expects something from you. He is not expecting 90% or even half of what you have, but he does want you to be generous and be cheerful about it. That being said, your money is NOT what he is primarily interested in. He wants you. He is asking you to acknowledge his ownership, his Lordship over your life. And this vineyard you are living in is not all that wonderful. He even has plans to relocate you to a place where there will be no more sin, no more death, and no more bad neighbors. You see, he really does love us. He wants to take good care of us.

So this is truth # 3. GOD IS LOVE. In the parable, after the owner's servants had been rejected and abused, the owner took an astonishing step—he sent his son! Mark also mentions this parable and his words indicate that this was the owner's only son. It is hard to miss who Jesus is really talking about here. He is really talking about himself. John 3:16 reaffirms that with this all-important statement: "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." Does everyone fully understand that? There is only one God and He has only one Son and he loved us so much that he sent his only Son so we could be reconciled with God the Father.

That is one thing that is absolutely amazing about God's love. We are sinner's by nature and by choice, but God still loves us, in spite of our sin. He has provided a solution to our problem through the perfect sacrifice and payment by his Son Jesus Christ on the cross.

Not only that, he has reached out to us time and time again with plenty of messengers. He sent his prophets to relay his holy Word to us. They were ignored, mistreated, and sometimes killed. He sent his only begotten son, Jesus. Jesus chose twelve disciples to instruct and to pass his teachings on to us. Eleven of the twelve were martyred for proclaiming the Christian faith. God has used many additional methods to acquaint us with his plan of salvation. We have the most published book in the history of the world in the Bible. We have the ministers and teachers in Christ's church. We have a World Wide Web filled with thousands of Bible studies. There are reminders all around us that we have a date with death and we had better be prepared to meet our Creator.

But God will not be patient forever. There is a day set when history as we know it will come to an end. But for those living today, their time in this world and their day of accounting may come well before that. We only live a heartbeat away from eternity. Not everyone grows old before they die. The mass shootings in Nevada this past week should at least teach us that. God's messenger Paul warns us in 2 Corinthians 6:2 that we better be ready when he says, "I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation." Now is also the day when those who believe in Jesus and appreciate his sacrifice and God's mercy should respond by producing good fruit and returning to him a fair amount of what he has given to us.

As you sit here today, what has been your response so far to what God has done for us? It is a good thing for one to examine himself. The Bible encourages us to do so. So I ask you today to ask yourself, "Am I being a good steward of the vineyard in which God has placed me? Do I really appreciate what God has done and is planning to do for me? Does the time I spend with him, and the talents I use to serve him, and the money I return to support kingdom work reflect a real appreciation of what he has done for me?" Many people would tell you, that those who are faithful in the use of their time, talents, and treasure for the Lord are blessed. I don't know who first said this, but many people believe it is true: "You can't out give God." Amen.