

Sunday: Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Date: October 4, 2020

Text: Matthew 21:33-46

Title:

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

Please pray with me.

Seven hundred years before Jesus, God sent Isaiah to tell a parable to God's people, Israel. This parable you heard in our Old Testament Reading this morning. Jesus had heard this parable, growing up, as the scroll of Isaiah was read in the synagogue as part of the Sabbath worship. He would have learned from the teachers in his childhood of God's message to Israel and to its leaders. Now Jesus retells the parable with a twist to Jerusalem's leaders. This parable is not merely history, it is vibrant and alive in 1st century Israel, as well as today.

“Hear another parable” (v 33) Jesus says to the listeners in the Temple courtyard.

“There was a master of a house who planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and put a fence around it and dug a winepress in it and built a tower and leased it to tenants, and went to another country” (v 33). Using Isaiah's description of the vineyard adds depth and color to Jesus' teaching.

As Isaiah describes the vineyard, we encounter a place where everything needed was provided by the Master. The vineyard is situated on a very fertile hill, had everything needed for it to be successful, good soil, water, and a temperate climate. The master dug it and cleared it of stones. He planted it with choice vines. To protect it he built a watchtower in the middle of it. He hewed out a wine vat inside its protective walls. Everything was laid out for the tenants of the vineyard. Everything they needed for life was provided for them

As we hear this description, there are overtones of creation contained therein. We can almost hear the master as he looks over the vineyard, having completed his creative work, say “It was good, it was very good.”

The master leased the vineyard to tenants who at first were overjoyed at the wonderful situation they found themselves in. It was truly a garden of delight as the vines grew and produced fruit.

But then the hearts of the tenants turned inward. Their thoughts become selfish thoughts. They determined they deserved the vineyard and its fruits more than the one who created it for them. They rejected the agreement they had entered into with the master and decided to change the terms. They elevated their status from tenant to master. They sought to be equal with the master and to reject his claim to a portion of the harvest in return for his hard work, for his gift of life, and a place in his kingdom.

When it came time to receive from the tenants a portion of the fruit from the vineyard, the tenants abused and killed the servants sent to them. They abused, killed and stoned the messengers sent in the master's name. Those who arrived were attacked, mistreated, abused and killed in rejection of the authority of the master.

Jesus' telling of the parable highlights the depths of the corruption of the hearts of the tenants. When the master sends his son to the vineyard the tenants delude themselves into thinking they can own the vineyard as their inheritance by killing the son. This is a bizarre idea to say the least. In their desire to please themselves, they reject the blessings of the master, who gave them a place to grow and flourish. They disregard the one who prepared a place for them to have abundant life. They and seek to make themselves equal to the master and take his property as their own.

The construction of the vineyard in the parable reminds us of the creation of the world. In Genesis 1 we encounter God lovingly creating a world filled with choice vines, trees, plants and animals. When everything was completed to God's satisfaction, he created man and woman and placed them in the center of the garden. They were to care for it, tend it, and give to God what was due to him. But the deceiver had other plans. Satan twisted God's word and deceived our first parents into rejecting the lordship of the God our Father. They turned away from God, instead focusing on their own wants and desires. In so doing they broke the relationship with God which led to their being removed from the garden. Cast out just like the wicked tenants in the parable told by Jesus today.

Israel's history is filled with God lovingly providing for his people, only to have them turn against Him and try to steal the inheritance He desired to give them through His Son. Psalm 80:7-13 recounts the preparation of the Promised Land and the placement of the Children of Abraham in it after their rescue from Egypt. The land flowing with milk and honey with. Exodus 13 speaks of a cluster of

grapes so large it took two men to carry. This was truly a glorious land, a vineyard beyond compare, but the Israelites rejected their master and were led into the wilderness for 40 years. When Israel did enter the land, they took possession of the land and prospered. Their prosperity however became their undoing as they soon rejected the agreement they had with God. They chased other gods, they abandoned the laws and rites of Yahweh and killed the servants of the Master, the prophets sent to them.

Over and over again, the people did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and were punished for their disobedience. Over and over again, God raised up judges to restore the people after they had repented. Isaiah, hundreds of years later, writes “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way” (Is 53:6). As a result of their disobedience and rejection of the Master, the Israelites were removed from the vineyard of the Promised Land and taken into captivity.

As Jesus tells the parable to the people in the temple courtyard, the Pharisees and the chief priests are convicted of their departure from the way of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Cast as the wicked tenants, they recognized that Jesus was pointing to them and identifying them with the ones who killed the master’s servants and would soon kill the heir of the Master. Jesus, the only Son of God, would be killed within days of this event, at the encouragement of the religious leaders in Jerusalem, including the chief priests and the Pharisees.

Though they kill the heir, the Son, the plan is full of holes. There is no way for them to claim the inheritance of the Son. The master will remove the wicked tenants from the vineyard. He will cast them out and give them the proper reward for their actions. They will be put to a miserable death. The master will then place new tenants into his beautiful vineyard. He will bless a new people with his gifts.

Jesus’ death became the final act that doomed unbelieving chief priests and Pharisees. These tenants of God vineyard would be judged for their actions. These leaders would be cast out of the kingdom of God and suffer a miserable eternal death due to their unbelief in the promise of and the actual presence of the Messiah. In Jesus’ death and resurrection the Priestly class is removed from tending the vineyard. The Pharisees are cast out of the land and in their place God the Father, the Master of the vineyard gives the land to people who will give to him the fruits in their seasons.

In the death of Jesus, the vineyard is opened up to all people. In Jesus' atoning sacrifice on the cross, the price was paid for the sins of the whole world. The penalty for all sins of all times is paid. To all who receive the gift of faith by the power of the Holy Spirit, the vineyard becomes their home. These new tenants are given the gift of life through the grace of God. In response to this undeserved gift, all who believe give to God the fruit he is due.

What fruit is that? Paul identifies this fruit in Ephesians 2 saying,

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing: it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them (Ephesians 2:8-11).

The parable of the wicked tenants is not just a parable for the benefit of the Pharisees and chief priests in the temple courtyard in the days leading up to Jesus' death. This parable is for people of all times. It was applicable to the generations before Jesus' birth and to the generations after. As Jesus taught about who would go into the kingdom of God ahead of the religious elite of his day, we can see that faith not works are the key to life with Jesus. This is explained by Paul in Romans 4 when he says

What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness." Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work, but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works:

"Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered:

blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin"
(Rom. 4:1-8).

It is the work of Jesus to cleanse us of all unrighteousness. It is not our work. In fact, if we try to make it our work, it becomes ineffective. In faith, Christ does

the verbs. Christ is the actor. Christ says we are forgiven, and we are. Christ calls us righteous, and we are. We are the passive recipients of forgiveness and faith. Growing out of this passive faith, is the active work of blessing God and being obedient to his will and his ways. The passive faith we receive responds in active good works as described in Matthew 22:37-40, where Jesus says,

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depends all the Law and the Prophets.

God has given to us a place in the vineyard he has lovingly crafted. A vineyard that he has tilled, planted, watered, and protected. In response, we give to him the fruits of the harvest he requests, love for Him and love for our neighbors.

This is Christ for you, Christ for me, Christ for all.

Amen.