

What Are You Doing in the Vineyard?

Scripture Text: Mark 12:1-12

Introduction

As we wind down the series on Jesus' parables, we come to a couple of parables that Jesus spoke during His final week before His crucifixion. The parable today asks us what we are doing for God. How are we using His stuff? Are we producing fruit? Throughout Scripture we find many references to God entrusting to His people things for them to use for His glory. It is important to remember that all we do ought to be for the glory of God - *to make much of Him, not much of ourselves*. The parable today reminds me of the one Jesus told about the Laborers in the Vineyard from Matthew 20:1–16. In that parable, the owner of the vineyard had hired people throughout the day to work in his vineyard. At the end of the day, he paid each worker the exact same wage, to which the ones who had worked the longest complained. We saw in that parable that it is God's vineyard anyway, we are His workers, and He is fair to give us all the same reward. In a similar theme, the Parable of the Tenants tells us about men who had been selected to use the owner's vineyard, who had mistreated the owner's servants, killed his son, and what the owner was going to do with those wicked men.

This parable occurs during the last week of Jesus' earthly life. The books of Matthew, Mark and Luke all record the events of Jesus entering the city of Jerusalem one week prior to His crucifixion. At this point in the narrative, Jesus had His eyes fixed on the cross. He knew what was about to happen and purposely went to the city of Jerusalem in order to minister to the people there and to complete the task for which He came. Jesus had just entered Jerusalem, what is commonly called the Triumphal Entry, and the crowds were shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" After that, Jesus went into the temple and drove out the money-changers, upsetting the chief priests and scribes. Later, when Jesus was walking again in the temple, the chief priests and the scribes and the elders asked Him, "By what authority are you doing these things?" So, we read that as soon as Jesus entered Jerusalem, He was stirring up trouble and upsetting the established order of things. Jesus then told the Parable of the Tenants and gave them another reason to kill Him.

The Vineyard Described

In this parable, Jesus described a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a winepress and built a watchtower. This would have been familiar to the Jewish people of that time. Landowners who rented their land to tenant farmers were quite common in Galilee at this time. These tenant farmers usually were required to turn over between one-fourth and one-half of the produce to the land owner's servants. Jesus was describing something that would have been familiar to the people. He also made the point that this parable was about the Jewish people. In fact, the Jewish people would have recognized this story as it was remarkably similar to what some call the "Song of the Vineyard" from the prophet Isaiah. We read this in Isaiah chapter five:

Isaiah 5:1-2 *Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.*

Jesus told the Parable of the Tenants with much of the same elements. In this parable, the vineyard was Israel. The owner of the vineyard was God. The tenant farmers who leased the vineyard were the religious leaders of Israel. The servants who the owner of the vineyard sent to the tenant farmers were the prophets of the Old Testament. The beloved son was Jesus. The point Jesus made was that God had planted Israel as His choice vineyard. He had brought them out of the wilderness and into a good land. He had rented the vineyard out to farmers, leaders in the nation, who were to lead God's people. He had also protected them throughout history and had expected them to produce good fruit. The kind of fruit God expected was justice and righteousness, but instead God had witnessed disobedience and wickedness. In Isaiah's "Song of the Vineyard", the nation had not produced fruits of righteousness. In this parable, Jesus emphasized the wickedness of the tenants, the leaders of the nation.

The Servants Rejected

If you owned some land and had rented it to others to use and produce something for you, you might occasionally be interested in how things were going. You would probably send someone to check on the business and bring to you some of the produce of it. The owner of the vineyard did this. When the time was right for produce, the owner sent servants to the tenants to get some of the fruit of the vineyard. However, the tenant farmers treated those servants wickedly. Some they beat and some they killed. Similarly, God had sent servants to collect fruit from the people of Israel. The servants in the parable represent the Old Testament prophets who God had sent to seek spiritual fruit in Israel. God had sent them to call the people to repentance and obedience to Him. Rather than listening to God's prophets and turning back to Him, the people of Israel had rejected them. Jesus described this clearly in one of the seven woes to the scribes and Pharisees found in the Gospel According to Matthew:

Matthew 23:33-34 *You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell? Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town.*

Israel's leaders were going to do what had been been doing for hundreds of years - persecute the messengers of God. God was patient with the vineyard He had planted, and sent many servants (the prophets) to call His people to repentance and collect fruit from the vineyard. But they were not willing. Thus Jesus also lamented:

Matthew 23:37 *O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!*

Whatever we can say about God, we cannot say that He is impatient or unmerciful. He is a God of great patience and mercy. In an unusual display of grace, the owner of the vineyard sent his very own beloved son to them, even after they had beaten and killed his servants. The owner of the vineyard believed that those wicked tenant farmers would at least respect his son. The son in the parable represents none other than Jesus Himself. Calling him the “beloved son” in this parable is reminiscent of Jesus’ baptism and transfiguration in which God the Father said, “This is my beloved Son.” The point is clear: Through the years, God had sent many prophets to His people who were rejected and some were killed. God was now sending His very own, beloved Son. The tenants in the parable killed the beloved son just as Israel was going to kill Jesus. In the parable, the tenants thought that they would receive the son’s inheritance by killing him. They may have assumed that the son had come because the father was dead. They were mistaken and were about to experience the father’s wrath.

Judgement Pronounced

Jesus then turned to the very people He was accusing of being like these wicked tenant farmers and asked them to pronounce a judgement. He asked them, “What will the owner of the vineyard do with these wicked tenants?” In Mark’s account of the parable, it appears that Jesus answered His own question; however, in Matthew’s account of the same parable, Jesus did not give the answer. Instead, the people rightly replied, “He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others.” Interestingly, the people pronounced their own judgement for they were the ones who had rejected and killed the prophets and who were rejecting the Son of God now and would kill Him. In rendering that judgement they were pronouncing their own doom. Israel had failed to be the righteous people God had created them to be, so He was going to give the vineyard to other people. After this, Jesus said the following:

Mark 12:10–11 ¹⁰ *Have you not read this Scripture: The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone;* ¹¹ *this was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes?*

Jesus showed that Israel’s own judgement on themselves was in keeping with prophetic Scriptures. Citing Psalm 118:22-23, Jesus referred to Himself as the stone that Israel had rejected that was in fact the cornerstone of what God was building. Even as He spoke these words in the parable, Jesus was on His way to the cross to die for the sins of mankind and redeem a people for God that included all who would come in faith to Him. One should not overlook the fact that “this was the Lord’s doing.” God’s plan all along was for His Son to be the cornerstone of His holy people. What this means for us is that God’s will for the church, the people of God, is for it to be built on nothing less than Jesus Christ. This is like what the song “Cornerstone” declares:

“Christ alone, Cornerstone...He is Lord of all.”

Our hope must be built on nothing less than Jesus Christ or it is a false hope. When we lose sight of the reason we are here, when we make church about us or about what we

want or about things that do not really matter in eternity, we are in danger of rejecting Jesus and being useless in God's vineyard. That is a bad place to be. The chief priests and the Pharisees understood the parable and realized that Jesus was talking about them. They were the tenants of God's vineyard who were unworthy to be in it and on whom God was declaring judgement. As a result, they sought to kill Jesus, thus fulfilling their part in this story. They were confirming that they were indeed the wicked tenants who rejected the owner's servants and killed the owner's son.

Hope Declared

If Jesus was here today and told this parable to us, and then asked us what should be done with those wicked tenants in the parable, would we respond so differently? I suspect we would answer in much the same way. We would say that those wicked tenants should be punished and put out of the vineyard and the vineyard given to others. In Matthew's account of the same parable, Jesus said the following:

Matthew 21:43 *Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits.*

Part of the judgement Christ pronounced to the leaders of Israel was to take away the Kingdom of God and give it to people who would produce fruits. Many see this as fulfilled when the Apostles began preaching the Gospel to the Gentiles. We see this recorded in the book of Acts regarding Paul and Barnabas:

Acts 13:46 *And Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, "It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles."*

After the Jewish people rejected the message of hope through Jesus Christ, God sent it to the other nations who gladly received it. The Good News of Jesus Christ spread like wildfire throughout the region. Multitudes received the good news, inherited eternal life and came into the Kingdom of God. What we see in this parable is not only God's judgement on the Jewish people who had rejected Him, His servants, and His Son but also the grace extended to all peoples of the earth who would receive Him.

Conclusion

In closing, when we read this parable, we should not make the mistake that because Jesus was speaking primarily to His Jewish audience, that it does not apply to us as well. We are just like the Jewish people and must take an account of our own place in God's vineyard. Just as these tenant farmers in the parable rented land from the owner of the vineyard to do some work, God entrusts to us His property to work it and produce for Him fruit in His kingdom. God gives each of us time, talents and treasures and He will hold us accountable to how we use them. The vineyard belongs to Him. We are only stewards of it, tenant farmers, who are allowed to work it. God expects us to produce righteousness and good works for His glory.

Therefore the question we ought to ask ourselves is this: What are we doing in God's vineyard? Are you producing fruit for the owner of the vineyard? Are you perhaps resting on your laurels? Are you trusting in a prayer you made long ago believing there is nothing else you need to do? Perhaps you have forgotten whose vineyard it is and think that your life, or the things you have, or the church are all about you. Are you like the wicked tenants in this parable who rejected God's message, who rejected God's servants that He sent to them, or even who killed His Son in favor of something they wanted more? Is that you? Do not turn from God and His Son. Do not waste His stuff on the selfish pursuit of personal gain or the vain recognition of men. If that is you, I encourage you to get right with God today. Turn to the cornerstone, not to some temporary structure that you are creating that will not last. God is not building a brick and mortar structure for a certain group of people to assemble once or twice a week. God is building a holy people who will love Him and each other and who will reach the lost world for Jesus Christ. Is that you? May it be so. Amen!