

The Vineyard ***Mark 12:1-12***

***The wind that sifts through cedar trees,
That all men feel but no one sees,
That bids me fall down on my knees,
Is God's gift.***

***This body that I call my own,
The pains and pleasures I have known
And every day like seed I've sown
Is God's gift.***

***Each blotch and blight in all my vast,
Forsaken and forgotten past:
The wool and snow that Grace amassed
Is God's gift.***

***A fool, forsaken and forlorn
I never dreamed, indeed I scorned
That love renewed and life reborn
Is God's gift.***

There comes a time to lift the veil of careful words and speak plainly. Jesus was visiting Jerusalem for one last Passover Feast. And that time had come for Him.

The covered colonnades and open courtyards of the temple were packed shoulder to shoulder with Passover pilgrims. And it was a noisy place. So the Savior stood, shouting over a chorus of chanted prayers and bleating sheep.

A crowd pressed around the Redeemer. At the very back, robed temple lawyers, Sanhedrin elders, and powerful priests listened. With folded arms and icy eyes, their faces burned at the indictment our Lord leveled at them.

In the very teeth of the wrath that raged within them, our Savior spoke directly to those Jewish leaders. And He told them a story with an image so familiar, they could not possibly miss it.

The Savior's story described a sun-splashed hillside where grapevines had been painstakingly planted and staked in rows. It was an unmistakable echo Isaiah's ancient indictment of God's people.

My well-beloved had a vineyard on a fertile hill...the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel and the men of Judah His delightful plant. Isaiah 5:1,7

Our Savior's parable is a sad story of rebellion and violence. It is the tale of tenant farmers who were cold-hearted and calculating, ungrateful and arrogant, brutal and bloodthirsty.

The meaning was not lost on the Master's enemies, either. They knew exactly what He meant. ***And they were seeking to seize Him, and yet they feared the people, for they understood that***

He spoke the parable against them. And so they left Him and went away. Verse 12

This was not dry doctrine to be discussed and debated. It was a God given glimpse of themselves. The Savior's story sliced open the secret motives of men's hearts then. And it still does today.

Those powerful Jews shared a love-hate relationship with our Redeemer. They hated Him. And He loved them.

In fact, that is why He looked them in the eye that day and forced them to face themselves there on the temple courtyard. Not out of anger, but moved by love and compassion.

That is also why God's Holy Spirit still speaks to us through our Savior's story today. Out of love.

The Rights of the Maker

The parable begins precisely as God's written Word in the Bible begins: with God.

And He began to speak to them in parables: "A man 'planted a vineyard and put a wall around it, and dug a vat under the wine press and built a tower,' and rented it out to vine-growers and went on a journey." Verse 1

Those images were obvious to the people at the temple who listened that day. The landowner was God. And the farmers were the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

The vineyard represented both the Jews' covenant relationship with the Lord and the land of Israel. And long before they saw it, Moses described the land God promised His people.

...a land with large, flourishing cities you did not build, houses filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide, wells you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves you did not plant, Deuteronomy 6:10-11 (NIV)

The children of Israel owed nothing at all to their own industry and ingenuity. Everything they had came from God. And that is just as true of us as it was of them.

We were born into a land of prosperity and peace. But we can take no credit for that. Both our own and the Jews' land was provided by God, just as the landowner prepared the vineyard.

The tenant farmers who came to till the grapevines did nothing to deserve their blessings. Long before they came, the landowner planted the grapes, dug the wine press, and built both a protective wall and a watchtower.

That was the foundational failure of the powerful priests who stood before the Savior that day. They refused to recognize that all the blessings they enjoyed came from the God of their fathers.

The apostle Paul aptly described that attitude as both a spiritual sickness and a serious sin.

...even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, Romans 1:21

It is important to remember that the landowner did not give the vineyard to the farmers. It still belonged to him. They were merely sharecroppers, tending the grapes for a share of the harvest.

And it is the same with us. Nothing we call our own really belongs to us. We are merely managers of our Master's property.

By the time the grapes turned from frosty green to dusty black, the ingratitude in the farmers' hearts had soured to selfishness and savage rebellion, just in time to welcome a visitor.

At the harvest time he sent a slave to the vine-growers, in order to receive some of the produce of the vineyard from the vine-growers. Verse 2

While he was still faraway, the owner sent a faithful servant to collect a small portion of the crop. That was the owner's right, just as it is God's right with us.

Like that owner, our heavenly Father expects something in return from those who live and thrive because of His blessings. And an understanding of tenant-farmer laws in Palestine at that time reveals the landowner's expectations as well as our Lord's.

Those laws stated that if an absentee owner did not receive part of the produce of his property for a set number of years, he lost all legal rights as a property owner. So the issue was not really a few baskets full of ripe grapes or some skins of squeezed wine.

The issue was ownership. By sending a servant to collect a portion of the harvest, the owner was demanding that the tenants submit to his lordship as the owner of the vineyard.

And that is precisely what God wants from each of us. He does not itch for our money or ache to have us serve Him.

Our Creator has no needs man can fill. No, our sovereign Lord wants something much more basic from us. He wants submission.

He wants us to lay our very lives, all we are and all we have, in His holy hands. He wants us to acknowledge we have nothing in all the world that is not really His: our pride and our possessions, even our brains and our bodies. Both Peter and Paul explained why.

You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 (ESV)

...you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ. 1 Peter 1:18-19

Christ paid the highest possible price for us. And He demands that we acknowledge His blood-bought ownership of our lives.

That submission must be more than a mere mouthing of words, too. The owner of the vineyard did not send his servants to exact pledges from the tenants.

He wanted them to prove their submission by their deeds. And that is precisely what our God demands of us.

Yes, He wants us to commit our lives to Him. But He also demands that we show our submission by living in faithful obedience to His commandments.

That is His right as our Master and our Maker.

The Rebellion of Man

There is violence in our Savior's story: beatings, bloodshed, and murder. Time and time again, the owner sent servants to collect fruits of submission from the tenants.

But each of those servants was met with refusals and rebellion.

At the harvest time he sent a slave to the vine-growers, in order to receive some of the produce of the vineyard from the vine-growers. They took him, and beat him and sent him away empty-handed. Again he sent them another slave, and they wounded him in the head, and treated him shamefully. And he sent another, and that one they killed; and so with many others, beating some and killing others. Verses 2-5

The tenant farmers' response cannot help but surprise us. After all, they were the beneficiaries of great blessings. They enjoyed a bounty that cost them neither work nor wealth.

The vineyard was all planted and prepared when they came. All they had to do was hoe the weeds, tend the vines, harvest the grapes and squeeze them into wine.

But when the absentee owner sent a slave to collect what was his rightful due, the tenants reacted with rebellion and violently refused. Hearing that rankled Annas' emissaries even more.

They knew they were the rebellious sharecroppers. The servants represented God's prophets. And they well remembered Nehemiah's confession of their nation's sin.

They killed your prophets, who had admonished them in order to turn them back to You; Nehemiah 9:26 (NIV)

The book of Jeremiah records that he was beaten twice, put in stocks, locked in prison and cast down into a muddy cistern. Jeremiah also wrote that another prophet named Uriah was hacked to death by the king's swordsmen.

And he is not the only prophet who suffered martyrdom. Zechariah was stoned to death. Ancient Jewish writings record that Micah was thrown from a high cliff. And Isaiah was sawed in half with a wooden saw.

In the same way, the owner's agents were treated as beggars and thieves. They were beaten and cast out. And some those faithful servants were killed.

So deep is the depravity of the human heart that mankind simply cannot comprehend God's great love. Men call His patience weakness. And they arrogantly dismiss His kindness, crediting themselves for all the blessings they enjoy.

Those our sovereign God sends to them, men send away. And those who will not stay away or keep silent they persecute: hounding, harassing and murdering them.

But even that is not the depth of the darkness and depravity of mankind.

He had one more to send, a beloved son; he sent him last of all to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But those vine-growers said to one another, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours!' They took him, and killed him and threw him out of the vineyard. Verses 6-8

The Master's enemies had to be shocked. How could He know? Some weeks earlier, Jesus raised Lazarus from death and decay.

Afterwards, the Sanhedrin met secretly and agreed to plot the Master's murder.

...the chief priests and the Pharisees convened a council, and were saying, "What are we doing? For this man is performing many signs. If we let Him go on like this, all men will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation." But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all, nor do you take into account that it is expedient for you that one man die for the people, and that the whole nation not perish." John 11:47-50

Our Lord's stern charge was that the Jews would not only refuse to turn to Him. They would reject and murder Him.

And that is not nearly all. Our Savior also said they would do so knowing full well He was and is and ever shall be both the Son of God and their long-awaited Messiah.

Such was the depth of the Jews' rebellion. But we can take no solace in that. We are no better.

If we have no doubts that Jesus is Savior, God and King, yet do not bend our will to Him as Lord of our lives, our sin is the same as that of those Jews.

Like the tenant farmers, we are ungrateful and unholy. We are rebelling and rejecting the Redeemer who loves us.

And we are living on borrowed time.

The Ruling of the Master

There is a razor-edged warning in our Savior's story. Determined to possess the vineyard for

themselves, the farmers violently resisted the owner's rightful claims upon them and their grape harvest.

After murdering his messengers, the tenants were sure they had finally defeated the owner by savagely slaughtering his only son. But they were wrong.

Instead, their wanton rebellion ignited a firestorm of judgement. Our Lord's enemies knew what the penalty was. Once again Jesus' words are a clear echo of Isaiah's prophesy.

What will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the vine-growers, and will give the vineyard to others. Verse 9

Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled when the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem. This time it would be the Romans who would slaughter and enslave Jerusalem's Jews.

Have you not even read this Scripture: 'The Stone which the builders rejected, this became the chief corner stone; This came about from the Lord, and it is marvelous in our eyes'? Verses 10-11

Quoting a verse from Psalm 118, Christ warned God's ancient people. Their rejection of Him as Savior and Sovereign would hurt no one but themselves and would result in their own rejection.

But our heavenly Father has decreed that His Son will surely be honored. So instead of Jews, Gentiles of every race praise Jesus and enjoy His blessings.

It is the same with us. If we do not choose to love and trust Jesus, He will find someone who will. And they will be the ones who rejoice in His joy and bask in His blessings. But we will not.

Luke's account of this same parable records a warning that Christ also included.

Whoever falls on that stone will be broken; but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder. Luke 20:18 (NKJV)

So in the end we are left with a choice. We can fall upon the Rock of our Redeemer in confession and commitment. And He will not only give us hearts that are broken and contrite. He will also enable us to live in the very center of His kindness and compassion.

However, if we refuse to do that, we cannot avoid the Lord's judgment. His wrath will surely fall upon us, utterly and eternally crushing all we are and all we have.

There were only two manners of men in our Savior's story. There were rebellious farmers and the faithful servants the land owner sent to them. So we cannot help but be one or the other.

That is why we must choose to be our Master's messengers. We must determine to share our Lord's love and willingly bear the wrath of the rebellious.

Otherwise, we cannot avoid being one of the sinful tenants, living in selfishness and waiting for God to come and crush us beneath His judgment.

There is no other option.