

## **Moses and the Ten Commandments**

Our lesson this morning from the Hebrew Bible was the recounting of God giving the Ten Commandments to Moses. In that great Bible story, we're even told, "When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance and said to Moses, 'You speak to us, and we will listen, but do not let God speak to us, lest we die,'" (Ex. 20:18-19). The people were afraid of God. They could see the great things He was doing, and they literally "shook in their boots." They were acutely aware of the terrifyingly awesome power of Almighty God, and how insignificant they were in comparison to Him. In that moment, they understood what the Apostle Paul meant when he said, "For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God;" (Rom. 3:22-23), to the church at Rome.

As Christ followers today, we would be wise to strive to follow the Ten Commandments. Jesus did. We read them and are tempted to think, "How simple these must be," yet, they're very hard to follow. When we worry about how we're going to pay a bill – we've taken our focus off God, and placed the idol of finance or worry on the throne of our heart. When we follow politics and know more about candidates and issues than what's in the Bible – we've placed politics on the throne of our heart. That's idolatry. When we start focusing on what this person, or that group, or this Bishop is saying or doing, or on temporary, fleeting wants which help stoke our egos, instead of keeping ourselves in daily Scripture reading and prayer – that's idolatry. The blow up we've seen in the United Methodist Church over the course of the last year and a half boils down to idolatry.

People were more focused on suspicion and conspiracies than they were on the Gospel. So they let their local church properties and their personal preferences become idols. Thank you, New Hope, for not pursuing idols when you were given the chance a year ago. As Americans we have a big problem with idols, we just don't talk about it much. Do you know how I know when I'm following Jesus most closely? It's when the Holy Spirit puts people in front of me with whom I'd rather not have to deal, and I'm forced to deal with them in a compassionate, loving manner. You know the type: the marginalized, the underdogs, the people on the fringes of society. And when my thinking on what stewardship looks like gets challenged. This is some of what we'll talk about today. If you have your Bible or Bible app handy, turn with me to Matthew 21:33-46. **Read Matthew 21:33-46.**

## **The Parable as Allegory**

Today's Gospel reading offers a parable given by Jesus. It's one of only three parables found in all three of what's known as the Synoptic Gospels – those are the

Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Since it's found in three of the Gospel accounts, we can be confident that it's an important one. The parable has many layers of meaning, so I want to peel through some of these, the way we might peel an onion.

On the surface, the parable of the tenants is clearly presented by Matthew as an allegory. The landowner represents God. The vineyard represents the kingdom of God. The tenants are the religious leaders. The slaves are the prophets. The son is Jesus. The new tenants are most likely the Church.

Matthew's interpretation relates to the story of salvation. God entrusted His kingdom to the Israelites during the Old Testament times. When they went astray, God sent prophets to try to correct them. Most of the people didn't listen to the prophets. Finally, God sent His Son, Jesus, to make clear God's message. But the religious leaders turned against Jesus, and finally had Him killed. Then the majority of the Jewish people refused to accept Christ. So the Kingdom was given to a new people – the Church.

### **Producing Fruit of the Kingdom**

I think this is the obvious message from the text. But today, I want to move us far beyond the obvious context to see how we can apply this parable to people today who trample on the grace of God. The first application we can pick up from this story relates to the amazing patience of God. This story is really a story about Him. We find that the landowner invested a lot in the vineyard. The landowner "planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a winepress in it, and built a watchtower, leased it to tenants, and went away." (verse 33). The verbs in that verse point to the active, caring, loving attitude of the landowner toward his vineyard. Then he went away entrusting the responsibility to the tenants to till, cultivate, and harvest.

The landowner expected his vineyard to produce fruit. The landowner placed a tremendous amount of trust in the tenants, just as God does in us. When ready to claim his harvest, the master sends representatives, not once, but twice (verses 34, 36). His patience seems unending. The first group was beaten, stoned, or killed (verse 35). The second group met the same fate (verse 36). Yet the owner was still patient. Finally thinking it inconceivable that his own son would be rejected, he sent him. "They will respect My Son," He says (verse 37).

However, the wicked tenants failed their final opportunity. In the ultimate test, the Son was cast out and killed (verse 40). An ordinary landlord would have sought revenge on these ungrateful tenants. He might bring legal action against them, or even armed forces to claim what was rightfully his. But this landowner is like God – not like us. God sent His Son! The basic character trait of God is love – and His love is patient.

## **God's Patience Has Limits**

But this passage also makes very clear that there is an end to the patience of God. When the Pharisees are asked what the owner of the vineyard will do when he returns, (verse 40), they reply, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time," (verse 41). God is patient, but we would be wise to remember that there is a limit to His patience!

When I was in high school, I had a history teacher, Mr. Clayton, who loved to give pop quizzes every day to see if we'd read our textbooks the night before. We'd also have weekly tests on Friday, to put together all the stuff covered in the book over the course of the week. Life is kind of like that high school history class. Sometimes we have tests of character, and sometimes pop quizzes which really challenge our commitments. But, like high school history, we must also face a final exam. The Bible says there will come a day when God's patience will reach its limits. At that point, the judgment and justice of God will prevail – whether people like it or not!

The second way to apply this parable today, is to point out our responsibility. We must see ourselves as the tenants in this parable. We are now the tenants of the kingdom of God. The tenants were provided with everything they needed. They were given the freedom to do the task as they wished. This was an opportunity for growth – but they blew it.

Instead of showing faith, they resorted to greed and their murderous instincts. The behavior of these tenants was the perfect example of humanity's rebellious response to God's love. The people of God resisting God's love, and following their own desires instead. We may pretend to be surprised by the murder of the slaves and the murder of the son, but all we have to do is watch the 5:00 news to be reminded of the dark side of human nature.

## **Forgetting Their Covenant**

One commentary noted that the wicked tenants are those who "don't want to give fruit to the owner, reject the owner's authority, and work for themselves."<sup>1</sup> The servants in the parable worked the land, but they treated the land as if it was their own. Somehow they forgot that it never belonged to them. They forgot – or rejected – their covenant with the landowner.

They owed something to the landowner that they were unwilling to give. The same is true for us. It is clear that we owe something back to God. There is something expected of those who are citizens of His Kingdom, namely us living under the authority of the Owner, and producing and giving back the proper fruit.

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Patte, *The Gospel According to Matthew: A Structural Commentary on Matthew's Faith*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1986), pages 298-299.

These wicked tenants forgot that they were simply stewards. Sometimes we forget, too. We are under the delusion of ownership. We think we own things – when in reality God is the Owner of all things. All we have belongs to God. We are simply the stewards of it for the amount of time He’s willing to let us make use of it.

## **House of Stuart**

My dad’s Dad’s name was Robert Campbell Berryman. When I was about four or five, I asked him how he got his middle name. He told me it was his mom’s last name before she got married to his dad, and that her family had originated in Scotland. As a young person, I was interested in our family’s history, and where everyone came from before coming to America. So I read about Scotland.

In the 1100’s or so, the King of Scotland had a friend who he appointed to a hereditary Prime Minister type position, known as the High Steward of Scotland. Eventually the Scottish royal family, and the Stewarts, as they became known, had become so intermingled through marriage, that the Stuart family inherited the Scottish crown by the 1370’s, and held it until 1714. What does “ownership” really mean to us anyway? To the House of Stuart, they assumed “ownership” of a kingdom. Eventually they died out – and are buried in the ground in Edinburgh and London. Now the land owns them. The same is true of all that we own.

A little over a year ago the world watched the funeral of Queen Elizabeth II. As I watched that, I noticed a few things. There was a lot of pomp and pageantry. But while the Queen’s body rode in a hearse, there was no U-Haul trailer behind it carrying all her possessions. We leave everything when we die. So we see that the Bible is accurate when it describes us as stewards. We have possession of things for a little while.

The Bible also reminds us that we owe something back to God. When we hear pastors speak of giving ten percent of our money as a tithe, a lot of people bristle at that. They feel like the Church is getting into their personal business. If we really understood who the real Owner is, we wouldn’t object to giving back a portion of the gifts to God. The same can also be said of our time!

## **Jesus – Our Cornerstone**

The workers in the parable had grown accustomed to a sense of ownership. Of course, they thought they were the owners. They had worked hard for what they had. But the landowner says, “You don’t own anything, never did.” And God says, “You never owned what you didn’t create. You are guests on earth, not rulers, servants, not masters.” Once we get over the delusion of ownership we’re able to really enjoy the good things that God has put in the vineyard for our pleasure. We just need to share it with other guests as well.

As part of the judgment, Matthew makes it clear that the new tenants have the same responsibility as the old – “to give Him the fruit at the harvest time,” (verse 41). New tenants who think they are working for themselves could face the same fate as the old ones (verse 43). The way they ensure that they don’t become like those they’ve replaced, is to keep Jesus as their focus. Jesus quotes Psalm 118:22-23, while talking about Himself in verse 42, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes.”

Jesus also says, “The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, and it will crush anyone on whom it falls,” (verse 44). What He’s telling them – and us – is that people have the option of accepting or rejecting Him. If we accept Him, He becomes our firm foundation for living. If we reject Him, we lose. Our faith isn’t a hobby – it’s the central activity of our lives. After hearing this, things finally clicked for the religious leaders. We’re told, “they realized that He was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest Him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded Him as a prophet,” (verses 45-46).

Most of you have computers. We’re used to running programs on our computers. We might run Microsoft Word, Adobe Acrobat, or Zoom. At the heart of the computer is the central operating system. Every program is managed and runs through this central operating system. It determines how everything else runs on the computer. This Gospel lesson today implies that Jesus has to be the central operating system of our lives. He is the key element – the cornerstone – in our lives. May we learn from this passage about the amazing, yet limited patience of God. And may we become responsible stewards instead of wicked tenants. May we build our lives on Jesus Christ, the Cornerstone. Amen.

**Prayer:** God our Beloved, You set before us the goal of new life in Christ. May we live in the power of His resurrection and bring forth the fruit of Your gentle and loving rule. Amen.