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WHO OWNS THE VINEYARD?

Luke 20:9-19

By

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Luke Lesson 91

Who Owns the Vineyard? Luke 20:9-18

A few years ago, a family living in a beautiful home in West Palm Beach, Florida, told a film crew that it was okay to use the front lawn as a set for filming an episode of a TV show. They knew that cars would be crashing violently in front of the house. While the front yard was being destroyed, the owner of the home was tipped off and called from New York, demanding to know what was happening to his house. It seems that the people living in the house were only tenants who had no right to allow the property to be destroyed while the cameras rolled.

Some awful mistakes can happen when those who are tenants begin acting as if they were owners. The more valuable the property they occupy, the more responsibility they have to treat it carefully. Can you imagine tenants in a beautiful mansion who refuse to pay rent and who threaten or beat up those whom the owner sends to collect rent? They argue, "We live here; it's our house now." No one making that claim would stand a chance in a court of law. The owner has the right to receive rent and to have his property treated rightly.

To follow up the challenge of the Jewish leaders to Jesus about the source of His authority, He tells a parable about some wicked tenants of a vineyard, who had wrongfully assumed ownership of that which was not their own. It is one of only three parables that occur in all three synoptic gospels (the sower and the mustard seed are the other two). The parable answers the question that the leaders had just asked Jesus: "By what authority are you doing these things?" If God owns the vineyard and Jesus is the Son and rightful heir to it, then He is acting under God's authority. The Jewish leaders have wrongfully usurped the authority of God, the rightful owner.

Thus the fundamental question that not only these Jewish leaders, but also all who hear the parable, need to answer is, "Who owns the vineyard?" Keeping in mind the answer to that question will determine how we live.

Since God owns the vineyard,
we must live accountably to Him.

To understand this parable, we must identify the characters:

Owner of the vineyard God
The vineyard Israel
The tenant farmers Religious leaders of Israel
Servants of the owner The prophets
Son/Heir of the owner Jesus Christ

When they heard this parable, Jesus' audience would immediately have thought about Isaiah 5:1-7, where the prophet calls Israel God's vineyard and warns that He would lay it waste because it produced only worthless grapes. Jesus shows that God expects fruit from His vineyard, but He emphasizes God's great patience and love in sending many messengers and finally, His beloved Son. If His people produce no fruit and kill His Son, they will face His terrible judgment. But even though they kill His Son, He will triumph by becoming the chief cornerstone.

These things apply not only to ancient Israel, but also to us, whom God has graciously grafted into His vine (see Rom. 11:17-24). The parable reveals five things about God and those who profess to be His people:

1. God expects fruit from His people.

Why go to the bother of planting a vineyard if you don't expect fruit? It was a common arrangement for an owner to rent out his vineyard to tenant farmers who would pay him a percentage of the crop each year. So, at the proper time, the owner rightfully sent a servant to collect what the farmers owed him.

We would misunderstand the parable if we thought of these tenant farmers as poor sharecroppers who were being abused by a demanding owner. Rather, they were greatly privileged to be able to work in the owner's vineyard. They did not have to plant it; the owner did that. They simply entered into his vineyard, where they could work and make a sufficient living for themselves and their families. The owner was not a greedy tyrant, who stood over them with a whip, driving them mercilessly. He freely entrusted the vineyard to them and let them work it as they saw fit. But for these privileges, they owed him a certain amount of fruit.

Even so, God had done everything to provide for Israel, His vineyard. He drove out the wicked nations and gave Palestine to His chosen people. He protected them from fierce nations around them. He entrusted His people to leaders who, if they had been faithful, would have harvested a bumper crop. Israel should have been a light to the nations, pointing them to God, who so richly supplied their needs. God, who provided so abundantly for His vineyard, had every right to expect fruit.

So with us: We are greatly privileged in that God has given us His Word and has supplied us with everything pertaining to life and godliness (2 Pet. 1:3). He wants us to bear the fruit of Christ-like lives so that the hungry people who do not know Him will taste and see that the Lord is good.

We who live in America are perhaps the most spiritually privileged people in all of history. We have God's Word in our language. We have an almost endless supply of helpful, readily available spiritual resources. We have more leisure time than any other nation in history to pursue spiritual things. We are blessed with adequate financial resources to support God's work here and around the world. With these great privileges comes the responsibility of bearing fruit for the owner of the vineyard.

All of us are either living for ourselves and our own gratification or we are living to bear fruit for the Lord Jesus Christ. We're either laboring for what we can get out of the vineyard or for what we can produce for the owner. Clearly, these wicked tenant farmers in the parable were not working for the owner, but for themselves. The irony is, we always find the most pleasure when we live to bear fruit for Christ, not when we live for ourselves.

I read of a young man who always found excuses to turn down his pastor's request that he teach a class of teenage boys. Finally, he admitted that he was afraid that it would cut into his time on the golf course. He realized how self-centered that was and agreed to take the class.

He worked hard at it and within a few months, he had led six young men to Christ. On the Sunday that the sixth boy professed his faith in Christ, the pastor asked the teacher, "Has giving up golf on Sunday been worth it?" With tears in his eyes, the young man

said, "My only regret is that I've waited so long to put others ahead of myself." The joy that he found in teaching that class of 13 boys, six of whom he had personally led to Christ, far exceeded any pleasure that he had experienced on the golf course (in "Our Daily Bread," Nov., 1983).

God, the owner of the vineyard, expects fruit from His people. But, how can we be motivated to live accountably to Him?

2. God's great patience, seen in His repeated, gracious messengers should motivate us to live accountably to Him.

At this point, the parable is not at all like real life. These wicked tenant farmers rough up and send away empty-handed the first servant that the owner sends. Any human owner would not have tolerated that. Any sensible businessman immediately would have thrown these bums out, prosecuted them legally for their negligence and abuse, and replaced them with tenants who would be more faithful in managing his vineyard.

But I'm glad to say that this owner, who represents God, was not a good businessman. He sent a second slave, who also was mistreated. After two times, anyone else would say, "That's it! These guys have had more than a fair chance!" But this owner sends yet another, whom they wounded and cast out.

Jesus is showing us the unreasonable, illogical, supra-human patience of our gracious God. He sent His prophets to Israel over and over again, looking for fruit. But the disobedient nation ignored, mistreated, and even killed some of these faithful servants. Yet in spite of this, God kept sending them, over and over again, as a demonstration of His abundant patience and grace.

The history of Israel reveals the tragic wickedness of the human heart. No people were as privileged by God as that covenant nation, and yet repeatedly they turned away from God. While Moses was on the mountain receiving the Ten Commandments, Israel was in the valley below carousing in front of the golden calf. Time and again they grumbled against God in the wilderness. When they moved into the promised land, instead of living separately from the pagan nations around them, they imitated their idolatry and immorality.

Yet where sin abounded, God's grace super-abounded (Rom. 5:20). Far beyond any human expectations, God patiently sent prophet after prophet to warn His people to turn from their sins. I say it reverently, but as a businessman, the owner of the vineyard failed. He should have thrown out these lousy tenant farmers after the first evidence of their rebellion. Ah, but thank God, He is not a hard-nosed businessman! He is far more patient than we can imagine. He sends repeated messengers giving repeated warnings as a demonstration of His abundant patience and grace.

If you have been a Christian for any length of time, you should be able to look back at God's extravagant patience and grace in His dealings with you and it ought to motivate you to serve Him more zealously. How many times I have been self-centered, living for my own aims, not to bear fruit for the Lord! And yet He always keeps sending His messengers to get me back on track!

God sends us preachers who proclaim the truth of His Word. He gives us the Bible, which we can read for ourselves. We see many other messengers in His church—friends and others who warn us by their lives and words of the need to live fruitful lives. God graciously sends us health problems to show us that we are frail and dependent on Him; signs of aging—gray hair, loss of hair, loss of youthful strength, and the death of loved ones and friends, to remind us that the eternal is what matters.

All of these gracious messengers, given over and over again, remind us that eternity is near and we must give an account. God's great patience in His dealings with us should motivate us to live accountably to Him, bearing fruit with our lives. But the greatest motivation to fruitful, accountable living is not the many prophets God sent. It is His final messenger:

3. God's great love, seen in sending His beloved Son, should motivate us to live accountably to Him.

The owner had one more to send, his beloved son. He said, "What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him" (20:13). Again, at this point the parable is not true to reality. In reality, God doesn't wonder about what to do or about what will happen if He does it. Both the Father and, as the next verse shows, Jesus the Son, knew that He would be rejected and

killed. It was no surprise. But in telling the story, Jesus brings out the vineyard owner's "quandary" to show both the depth of God's amazing love and the intractable wickedness of the human heart. The Father's love is so great that He was willing to send His beloved Son after His servants had been so abused. The depravity of the human heart is seen in those who would not only disregard the son, but kill him for their own selfish ends.

Note also Jesus' implicit claim here, that He stands apart from the other servants whom God had sent. They were servants, but He is the beloved Son. He is uniquely God's Son, of the same substance with the Father, one with Him and intimately related to Him in a way that no one else is. Jesus is God in human flesh.

When the son showed up the tenant farmers assumed that the owner was dead. Under Jewish law, property not claimed by an heir within a specified time could be claimed by the first party to do so. Thus they greedily assume that if they get rid of the son, the property will be theirs. They didn't kill the son because of mistaken identity, but precisely because they recognized who he was and they wanted his inheritance for themselves. The issue was, "Who owns the vineyard?" They did not want to submit themselves to God's rightful ownership. They wanted to rule the vineyard.

If we only could grasp the infinite love of God who sent His Son to a world as corrupt as ours! Have you ever thought about all the crud that God sees in this evil world every day? Law enforcement officers see more of the seamy side of life than most of us. They deal with rape, assault, murder, child abuse, and every other kind of crime. But God sees it all, not just in one location at one time, but all over the world all the time. He sees not only the sins committed outwardly, but those in the hearts of every person. Martin Luther once exclaimed, "If I were God and the world had treated me as it treated Him, I would kick the wretched thing to pieces!" We can all identify with his feelings!

But how did God treat this evil world? "God demonstrates His own love toward us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). Knowing that He would bear the penalty for every sin that we would commit, Jesus still was willing to take on human flesh and come to this wicked world! As Charles Wesley

put it in his great hymn, "Amazing love! How can it be, that Thou, my God, shouldst die for me!"

But the parable shows not only God's great patience and love, but also His righteous judgment on those who reject His Son.

4. God's righteous judgment on those who reject His Son should motivate us to live accountably to Him.

This parable illustrates what Paul exclaims in Romans 11:22, "Behold then the kindness and severity of God." God's kindness is seen in His sending far more servants to rebellious Israel than she deserved. His severity is seen when these wicked tenant farmers killed the son. Jesus is God's final messenger, the sum of His revelation to sinful man. If we reject Him, there is no further remedy. Only judgment lies ahead.

Jesus pronounces the judgment that the owner of the vineyard "will come and destroy these vine-growers and will give the vineyard to others" (20:16). That thought prompts the people to exclaim, "May it never be!" It shocked them to think of such a terrible thing! That judgment took place in A.D. 70, when the Roman general Titus destroyed the city and the Jews were scattered. They lost their place of privilege as God's covenant nation. God grafted in the Gentiles to accomplish His purpose "until the fulness of the Gentiles has come in" (Rom. 11:25). As Paul points out, we should not boast, but fear, or God could remove us and use some other group to fulfill His purpose (Rom. 11:17-22). The point is, if we who profess to be God's people live selfishly and do not bear fruit in His vineyard, He will set us aside and raise up others.

We need to apply this not just to the church "out there," but also to ourselves. We miss the point if we think that this parable was given to pagans. It was given to men who professed to know God, to national religious leaders. But they wrongly thought that *they* owned the vineyard. They thought that it was *their* ministry. They were using it for their own selfish purposes. As a result, they rejected Jesus' rightful place as the owner of the vineyard.

This church is *not* my church. It is *not* the elders' church. It is *not* your church. It is *the Lord's church*. He's the owner of the vineyard. If He allows us to work in His vineyard, we are blessed. Any work that we do in the vineyard is not for us; it is for the owner.

We need to be careful, because it's easy to start enjoying the grapes in the vineyard. It's personally gratifying to serve the Lord. You like the nice things people say to you. You enjoy being used by God. All of this is fine as long as you remember that it's *His* vineyard and that all that you do is *for Him*. But if you start serving for what you get out of it and drift into thinking that it's *your* ministry, you've just usurped the rightful place of the owner. If you keep going in that direction, He may come and remove you from your place of service in the vineyard.

God expects fruit from His people. His great patience and grace, seen in the many messengers He sends to us when we get off track should motivate us to bear fruit. His great love, seen in His sending His beloved Son, should motivate us to live accountably before Him. His righteous judgment on those who reject His Son and usurp ownership of the vineyard should motivate us to live accountably to Him. Finally,

5. God's certain, final triumph in Christ should motivate us to live accountably to Him.

Our sin can never thwart the sovereign purposes of God. Jesus cites Psalm 118, from which the "Hosannas" of the multitude on Palm Sunday were taken, to show these wicked Jewish leaders that even if they kill the Messiah, God would reverse their sinful choice and make Him the chief cornerstone. (The word can also mean "capstone." It's difficult to determine which is intended.) These men thought they could get rid of the owner's son once and for all by killing him. Little did they know—although they should have, since it was predicted in this psalm over 1,000 years before—that God would raise up His Son and install Him in the chief place of honor that He deserves.

It's a great comfort to know that human sin can never thwart the sovereignty of God. We are responsible for our sin, yet God sovereignly ordains everything that comes to pass and rightfully judges those who do not submit to His purposes. Proud men take their stand against the Lord and His Christ, but God scoffs at them (Ps. 2:1-4). These wicked tenant farmers could kill the son, but God would raise him up to be the chief cornerstone, just as His Word prophesied.

Verse 18 means that if you pit yourself against the chief cornerstone, you will lose and He will win every time. A Jewish proverb put it, "If the stone falls on the pot, alas for the pot; if the pot falls on the stone, alas for the pot!" (Midrash Esther 3:6). Either way, the pot loses and the stone wins!

God determined before the foundation of the world that Christ would die, yet those who wickedly condemned and crucified Jesus in accord with God's sovereign plan are responsible (Acts 2:23; 4:27-28). God always triumphs; those who oppose Him always lose. That fact should motivate us to keep on bearing fruit in His vineyard, no matter how difficult it may be or how much opposition we face. God's side will win in the end.

The sad thing is, we can understand the truth and yet reject it. These men who heard this parable understood that Jesus spoke it against them (20:19). They knew that He was predicting God's judgment if they continued their course of action. Yet they persisted in seeking a way to seize Him. They feared the multitude; they should have feared God.

Conclusion

Jesus told this parable for two main reasons. He wanted to encourage His faithful servants who get beat up and thrown out of the vineyard to keep on being faithful. He owns the vineyard and the main thing is for His servants to bear fruit for Him. Second, He told it to warn those who wrongly think that they own the vineyard that they do not. A day of reckoning is coming!

Every first time visitor to the town of Twin Lakes, Colorado hits the brakes when he first drives into town. The reason for that automatic behavior is that there is a police car with a mannequin sitting behind the wheel just as you come over a hill heading into town. Before you realize that it is just a dummy, you hit your brakes because you think that you are accountable.

We need to keep in mind that God is not a dummy—He's real! Jesus Christ is the rightful heir and owner of the vineyard. Either we submit to Him and serve Him or we will face His certain judgment. If we wrongly start thinking that we own the vineyard, the stone will fall on us and scatter us like dust.

Discussion Questions

1. Do Christians need to fear God's judgment? Back your answer with Scripture.
2. What are some "messengers" God uses to get our attention?
3. What is "fruit"? How can we become more fruitful Christians?
4. If God has sovereignly ordained all things, how can He hold us accountable for sin?

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