

Sermon For October 26, 2014 – Pentecost 20

Matthew 21:33-43 (NKJV)

Theme: Remember who owns the vineyard!

<sup>33</sup> “Hear another parable: There was a certain landowner who planted a vineyard and set a hedge around it, dug a winepress in it and built a tower. And he leased it to vinedressers and went into a far country. <sup>34</sup> Now when vintage-time drew near, he sent his servants to the vinedressers, that they might receive its fruit. <sup>35</sup> And the vinedressers took his servants, beat one, killed one, and stoned another. <sup>36</sup> Again he sent other servants, more than the first, and they did likewise to them. <sup>37</sup> Then last of all he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ <sup>38</sup> But when the vinedressers saw the son, they said among themselves, ‘This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance.’ <sup>39</sup> So they took him and cast him out of the vineyard and killed him. <sup>40</sup> “Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vinedressers?” <sup>41</sup> They said to Him, “He will destroy those wicked men miserably, and lease his vineyard to other vinedressers who will render to him the fruits in their seasons.” <sup>42</sup> Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures: ‘The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief cornerstone. This was the LORD’s doing, And it is marvelous in our eyes’? <sup>43</sup> “Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it.

Have you ever heard of “church shopping”? It’s the idea that a person should look for a church home much like they would shop for a pair of pants: find a style you like, see if it fits you, and make sure the price is what you are willing to pay.

Sadly, instead of pointing out what’s wrong with “church shopping,” many denominations have embraced the idea. They treat worship like a fashion trend – trying to attract “consumers” through style. Worst of all, some have even changed their teachings to be in sync with the philosophies of our day: claiming that they want to save people by any means necessary. But my question for them is this: “For whom are you trying to win souls: yourselves or God?”

We also are tempted to change our teachings at the whim of cultural relevancy. We are tempted to think: “It would certainly be a lot easier to attract people to “buy-in” to our congregation if our teachings came closer to matching the realities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. If we don’t “change,” won’t we “die”?”

Our sermon text for this morning warns that making the church about “us” is a very dangerous road to travel. **Remember who owns the vineyard!** God wants us to work for his glory, not our own.

Our sermon text takes place in the Temple on the Tuesday before Jesus’ crucifixion. Jealous of his popularity, the chief priests and elders ask Jesus who gave him the authority to teach? Knowing the hardness of their heart, Jesus answered their question by pointing them to John the Baptist. If they had believed his preaching they would know exactly who gave Jesus authority to carry out his ministry.

By means of a parable, Jesus redirects the same question to the chief priest and elders: by what authority do they carry out their ministry. As the parable points out they were no longer working under God’s authority, rather they were trying to usurp it.

And so Jesus says: “Hear another parable: There was a certain landowner who planted a vineyard.

The landowner is God the Father and the vineyard he planted was Israel. The Old Testament Scriptures are clear: Israel did nothing to merit the right to be his people. God chose them by grace. By his mighty power displayed in the Exodus, the LORD planted them in the land of Canaan to be his holy people.

In the same way it is only by the grace and the power of God that belong to the new Israel – the holy Christian Church. By the power of the Holy Spirit working through the Gospel, God planted faith in our hearts so that we can be his new vineyard.

Jesus says that the landowner *set a hedge around it, dug a winepress in it and built a tower.*”

Just as a hedge separates a field from the outside, so also the LORD has spiritually separated us from the world. The watchtower reminds us of how God watches over and protects us from every evil that threatens our salvation. And the winepress? It reminds us that our purpose in life is to produce the fruits of love and praise for him who saved us.

Jesus continues: *And he leased it to vinedressers and went into a far country.* This represents the fact that God entrusted his people to spiritual leaders whose whole purpose was to nurture them to produce the fruits of faith God desires. The Levites, scribes and priests are the vinedressers of this parable – as verse 45 points out: *when the chief priests and Pharisees heard His parables, they perceived that He was speaking of them.*<sup>i</sup>

Jesus continues: *Now when vintage-time drew near, he sent his servants to the vinedressers, that they might receive its fruit.* This verse simply illustrates the truth that God visits his people, desirous of finding fruits of repentance, faith, hope and love permeating their thoughts, words and actions. He wanted the religious leaders of his people to be the first to offer this fruit to him, but instead . . .

*. . . the vinedressers took his servants, beat one, killed one, and stoned another.* <sup>36</sup> *Again he sent other servants, more than the first, and they did likewise to them.*

Here we have Israel’s sad history portrayed: how Israel’s leaders often led the people away from the Lord. And why? Because they were not content with the duty God had given them. They didn’t want to see their ministry as service, but as a means to be served: a means to fame and financial gain. These leaders wanted to be more like the world around them. They were ruining God’s vineyard! They were making their ministry about themselves and not the LORD.

So what did the LORD do? In great patience and mercy he sent his servants – the prophets – to call Israel’s leaders to repent. What did the leaders do to the prophets? The book of Hebrews summarizes it in this way: *[Some] were tortured . . . Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword.*<sup>ii</sup>

Still, the LORD had great patience and compassion on Israel’s leaders, as we read: <sup>37</sup> *Then last of all he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’*

If one of your employees mistreated someone you sent to get a report from them, I am sure you would fire them on the spot! But look at the patience this landowner has: even though his servants have been mistreated and killed, he still holds out hope for those who rented his vineyard. Marvel at the Lord’s patience and love – desiring that not even the most wicked of men be lost in hell, but that they repent and live!

<sup>38</sup> *But when the vinedressers saw the son, they said among themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance.'* <sup>39</sup> *So they took him and cast him out of the vineyard and killed him.*

Doesn't this seem a little absurd? I mean honestly, who would ever think that by killing someone's son, they would get their property?

Well, apparently, this is pretty close to what the chief priests and Pharisees were actually thinking about Jesus. Listen to what they said after he raised Lazarus from the dead: *Then the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered a council and said, "What shall we do? For this Man works many signs. If we let Him alone like this, everyone will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and nation."* <sup>iii</sup>

Did you catch that? The reason they refused to believe in Jesus is not because of a lack of evidence, but rather because they didn't want to lose their positions of authority and prestige. And so what did they decide to do with Jesus to ensure their place over God's people? We read that, *from that day on*, after hearing about the miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead, *they plotted to put Him to death.* <sup>iv</sup>

Jesus knew the murderous thoughts the chief priests and elders had towards him, and yet he still loved them so much that he wanted them to stop and repent before it was too late. This is why he asks the question to the crowd gathered around him:

<sup>40</sup> *"Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vinedressers?"* <sup>41</sup> *They said to Him, "He will destroy those wicked men miserably, and lease his vineyard to other vinedressers who will render to him the fruits in their seasons."* <sup>42</sup> *Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: 'The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief cornerstone. This was the LORD's doing, And it is marvelous in our eyes'?"* <sup>43</sup> *"Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it."*

Little did the crowd realize that, when they answered Jesus' question, they were telling the chief priests, elders, and anyone else who refused to believe in Jesus, their own fate: because they would reject and kill God's Son in unbelief, God would reject them. He would take away their status of being his dearly loved and chosen people and give it to others – the Gentiles – who would believe in Him. He would also miserably destroy the Jewish leaders and their unbelieving followers – something that happened in 69 AD when the Romans laid siege to Jerusalem and destroyed the temple – never to be rebuilt again.

Brothers and sisters in Christ: We are the ones to whom the LORD has now given his vineyard, and I pray that we never forget who owns it. Leaders in the Church need to especially remember that the ministry God graciously grants us is never our ministry; it is always his ministry, to be carried out to his glory according to his will. Pastors are not princes, presidents or CEO's; they are servants – commissioned by God to preach the Gospel in both Word and Sacrament. Why? So that the people entrusted to our care might repent and receive God's wonderful gift of salvation through faith in Jesus. And having received this salvation, God wants pastors and all church leaders to lead people as to how they can glorify their LORD for their salvation through a life of loving obedience to God's word, and service to their neighbor.

Whenever pastors start making ministry about themselves, things start to go bad. Whenever Church leaders think they have to tweak or change doctrines to be more palatable to modern sensibilities, they are no longer viewing the vineyard as belonging to God, but themselves. And if they continue to do this, they are in real danger of falling into the same trap Israel's religious leaders fell into: rejecting the Son; because whoever tries to change God's Word to say something it does not say, is at the same time trying to change God into someone he's not.

But it's not only religious leaders who need to take warning from our sermon text, so do we as individual Christians. How often aren't we tempted to refuse to believe some teaching of the Bible because it doesn't fit our preconceived notion of what God's word should "really" say? And when a pastor or fellow Christian wants to take the time to explain a teaching to us, we don't want to listen because we don't want to change. How often aren't we tempted to make worship about "me" instead of God – thinking more about what we want from our worship experience than what God wants for us – focusing on trifles instead of what God wants us to know and believe? How often don't we use "inconvenience" as an excuse not to come to worship: the time being too early or too late? How often aren't we tempted to base our faith on what we feel or think God says instead of doing the hard study of finding out what He actually says? In summary: how often don't we forget who owns the vineyard.

Yes, we all are tempted to make the Church about us instead of God; and for this we ought to pray: "*Have mercy upon me, O God, According to Your loving kindness; According to the multitude of Your tender mercies . . . cleanse me from my sin*"<sup>v</sup> of trying to steal your vineyard from you: of trying to make my religion about what I think instead of what you say. Have mercy on me for Christ's sake"

And do you know what? The Lord is pleased when we pray this prayer and will most certainly answer it. In love he sent Jesus to suffer and die for all our sins. When we humble ourselves before him in repentance, he is happy to lift us up with his forgiveness. He is happy to keep us in his vineyard – not merely as his servants, but as dearly loved children whom he adopted through the life, death and resurrection of his Son. The Lord is more than happy to send us his Spirit to instruct us through his Word, and encourage us through his sacraments – always directing us to himself, and the great love He has shown us in Christ Jesus.

Jesus, *the stone which [the Jewish leaders] rejected, Has become [our] chief cornerstone. This was the LORD's doing, And it is marvelous in our eyes*<sup>i</sup>. Upon him alone we build our faith and only from His Word do we derive our teaching. The LORD does not want us to be like the world - changing our doctrines to entice people to faith. No, rather he wants us to clearly and lovingly preach his Word in truth and purity – unafraid to call sin sin, and with even more boldness proclaiming faith in Christ for the forgiveness of sin. The world will consider our preaching outdated and not see any attraction to it. But that's ok, because we have God's promise that his word is powerful and effective – always achieving the purpose for which he send it: because ministry is never about us. It is always about Christ. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Matthew 21:45 (NKJV)

<sup>ii</sup> Hebrews 11:35-37 (NKJV)

<sup>iii</sup> John 11:47,48 (NKJV)

<sup>iv</sup> John 11:53 (NKJV)

<sup>v</sup> Psalm 51:1-2 (NKJV)