

## "A Parable Wicked Vinedressers" Matthew 21:33-43

### I. The Parable of the Wicked Vinedressers

Have you ever heard of anyone so foolish and so blind as the vinedressers of this parable?

Jesus begins: 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. This is how business is done: The landowner pays for the deluxe vineyard and it belongs to him. Vinedressers work in it, and the contract isn't too difficult to figure out. They work for the landowner. They tend the landowner's vines and press the landowner's grapes. What they produce belongs to him, and he will reward them for their work. This is how business is done: There are rules to be honored and obeyed.

But here's where things go bizarrely wrong, as our Lord continues the parable: Now when vintage- time drew near, he sent his servants to the vinedressers, that they might receive its fruit. And the vinedressers took his servants, beat one, killed one, and stoned another. Again he sent other servants, more than the first, and they did likewise to them. True to the arrangement, the landowner sends servants to collect the fruit of the vineyard. But rather than follow the rules, the vinedressers beat and kill the servants. Even more astounding, they do not flee, but continue in the vineyard! More servants come; more servants die.

The vinedressers want the landowner's vineyard. They just don't want the landowner and the rules he has made.

What is the landowner to do? Then last of all he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' They had better.

They do not: But when the vinedressers saw the son, they said among themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance.' So they took him and cast him out of the vineyard and killed him.

I ask again: Have you ever heard of anyone so foolish and so blind as these vinedressers? Could they actually imagine that the landowner would give them the vineyard if they killed his son? Who would be so crazy as to believe there would be no punishment for their crimes?

It was evident to Jesus' listeners that day. He asked them, Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vinedressers? They responded, He will destroy those wicked men miserably, and lease his vineyard to other

vinedressers who will render to him the fruits in their seasons. No one would be foolish enough to get rid of the son and expect to keep the vineyard.

Or would they? Our Lord explained parable this way: 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'? Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it. A couple verses after this, we read: Now when the chief priests and Pharisees heard His parables, they perceived that He was speaking of them. Could those chief priests and Pharisees-those respected religious leaders-be the foolish and blind vinedressers of the parable? Were they so irrational as to think that they could kill the son and keep the vineyard?

Looking back, it makes sense. The Lord made Israel His people; without <sup>Him</sup>~~them~~, they never would have left Egypt. But by His power, He led them out of Egypt. He made a covenant with them: He told them that He was going to put them in a vineyard called the Promised Land, and that they were to abide by His laws. Furthermore, He promised to them that, although it might take a while, He was sending the Savior. The Lord of the Land would send His Son. Sounds a lot like today's parable, doesn't it?

Throughout the Old Testament, the Lord sent His prophets-His servants-to Israel, calling for the fruits of the vineyard: repentance, faith in God, trust in His promises. Time and time again, the people would not listen to the call to return to the Lord; and, time and time again, they took the Lord's prophets, beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. Faithful to His promise, the Lord sent more prophets to serve-they, too, were abused and murdered. Already in Isaiah 5 (the Old Testament lesson for today), the Lord calls Israel a vineyard of wild grapes, and warns of impending destruction for their sin.

Finally, faithful to His promise, the Lord sent His Son. Conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of the Virgin Mary, Jesus came as Savior of the world. He performed miracles and healings; more than that, He spoke. He spoke the truth, warning people of sin and announcing His forgiveness. He admonished them for false religion, for trying to earn God's favor by their works. He came as Son, as servant, as Redeemer-not to punish, but to save.

Four days after this parable, the chief priests and Pharisees would have the Son of God arrested; setting aside the Law of God, they would unjustly condemn him to death. The next day, they would jeer Him as He was nailed to a cross. The Lord who gave them the Promised Land had sent His Son to them. With His crucifixion, they would boldly declare: "We're getting rid of the Son. But we're still planning on keeping the vineyard."

Five days before, the parable had enraged them for predicting they would kill the Son. Enraged, they fulfilled the prophecy and put the Son on the cross.

The aftermath is a matter of history. Having rejected the Son, the officials turned all the more zealously to trying to please God by their efforts. This led, more and more, to an outright rejection of the Roman Empire. Forty years later, General Titus, (soon to be emperor) leveled Jerusalem the temple has never been rebuilt. The walls were destroyed and the vineyard was no more.

The vinedressers rejected the rules and the son, but wanted to keep the vineyard. In their sinful blindness, the Pharisees believed that the Lord would not judge them for Jesus' death; in fact, so blind were they that they believed He would approve of their treatment of Jesus. This is how blinding sin is; this is how foolish unbelief becomes.

We marvel at such irrational rebellion; yet, that is not the main point of the story. Recall the Lord's words once again: The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief cornerstone. This was the LORD's doing, And it is marvelous in our eyes. The Lord was rejected and crucified, but that was not His end. Three days later, He rose from the dead-victorious over sin, death and the devil. The chief priests and Pharisees meant His death for evil, but God meant it for good. For your good, in fact; for by His suffering and death, Jesus Christ has paid the price for your sins, so that you might be forgiven and have eternal life. He is the chief cornerstone-He is the solid rock on which you now stand, and the grace He has won by His cross is marvelous in our eyes.

Mark the parable well: By the actions of the wicked vinedressers, you witness the blindness of sin. By the death of the Son, you hear of your redemption, for the Son has died for you.

## II. The Son and the Vineyard Today

This parable is most fitting for our present times, and its warning must be heard today. First, however, we begin with the Good News.

For the sake of Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, God the Father has brought you into His vineyard. He has built a wall around you, setting you apart in Holy Baptism. He is your tower, crying out the dangers of sin and protecting you from enemies by means of His Word. He has dug in His winepress for you, to satisfy you with the new wine of His holy Supper. This is not your doing, but the Lord's; He has rescued you from sin and death to be in His vineyard forever. In this vineyard, He sets you free from sin to obey His Word. Therefore, you are set free to rejoice in the salvation He gives, and to honor the Son who has died to make you His. This is the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes. This is why we are gathered here: By

His means of grace-Holy Baptism, the Word and Holy Communion-He calls us into and keeps us in His vineyard. We therefore give thanks that He has brought us in; and we give thanks especially for what the Son has done by His death and resurrection. Without Him, we would be lost.

And here is the trouble: We marveled before at the foolishness of the wicked vinedressers for a couple of reasons. In fact, we can boil their sins down to two: First, they rejected the rules of the landowner, wanting the vineyard without the law. Second, they rejected the son.

They rejected the rules and they rejected the son. If you want to destroy your faith-or if you want to destroy an entire congregation or church body, follow the footsteps of these vinedressers: Reject the rules and the Son.

Or, in other words, reject the Law or the Gospel. The denial of either one will lead to the denial of both, and then you will have no hope.

It is popular today to claim to be a Christian, but to reject the Law of God.

This happens on a personal level, as Christians become involved in sins that they do not want to repent of, for the sins will be too attractive, too addictive, in some way too precious to lose. Common examples would include, oh, bearing grudges and refusing to forgive, cohabitation outside of marriage, tax evasion, gossip, etc. At such times, it is tempting to say, "I will be a Christian, but I will indulge this sin. I can do both: I will believe in Jesus, and I can keep this sin. I will be a good Christian without giving up this transgression." Or, "I want to be a Christian, just without the rules."

It happens on a congregational level-or bigger, as churches struggle with living in a sinful society. A congregation will often tread lightly on the law of God, justifying its practice for one reason or another. It may claim that it cannot minister to the sinner if it condemns their sin. It may claim that God's commands for holiness get in the way of evangelism, and they can't bring people in with a message of sin and grace. It may excuse the popular sins of the day, with the justification that "At least the sinners are coming to church, and that wouldn't happen if we opposed their sin." The justification usually comes back to this: "We will overlook God's law in order to share the Gospel."

Or, "We want to be in the Lord's vineyard and bring people into the Lord's vineyard. We're just not going to tell them the laws that the Lord lays down for living here."

This highly-attractive plan is doomed to failure for a simple reason: We are brought into the kingdom of God by the forgiveness of sins. We are kept in the kingdom of God by the forgiveness of sins. Persistent, unrepented sin-no matter how comfortable and attractive-destroys, because it rejects the forgiveness that keeps you in the faith.



As you persist in sin, your heart will harden more, little by little. Eventually, you will decide that skipping worship seems a good idea, because you're not interested in hearing about your guilt. You then deprive yourself of the means of grace, and your heart hardens further until you have no faith left. Meanwhile, you may decide that you are a Christian because you still believe in Jesus-but you believe He excuses your sin. But this is not the Jesus of the Bible; it is a false god. This is the tragic path of the one who wants to be a Christian, but rejects the Law of God.

On the broader level of a church, the same decay takes place. The church stops condemning sin, but still preaches forgiveness for a while. However, since sin doesn't really need to be forgiven, the message of the forgiveness of sins starts to sound mundane, old-fashioned, and irrelevant. The church therefore begins to preach some other message instead-the importance of acceptance, of social causes or self-help, to name a few. This is done to bring people in to hear the Gospel; but when is the Gospel heard? Such a church may well invoke the name of Jesus and claim Him as its Lord, but it no longer proclaims His Word. It no longer warns of sin, and so it no longer announces forgiveness.

This is the dangerous end for those who say, "I want to be in the vineyard, but I do not want the Lord's laws." In the end, the danger is not that they defy God's Law; the greater error is that ignoring the Law leads them to disdain the Son and His death on the cross for their sins.

It is indeed a damning sin to join those vinedressers in saying, "We want the vineyard, but we don't want the Lord's rules," because it leads to a rejection of the Son and His grace. And so we also remarked on the foolishness and blindness of the vinedressers, who declared, "Let's get rid of the Son and keep the vineyard for ourselves."

At times, faith is not destroyed by first rejecting the Law; the rejection of the Son comes first. It goes like this: Many in our world to reject the Scriptural truth that Jesus is the Son of God, conceived of the Holy Ghost and born of the Virgin Mary. If you reject that truth, then you must declare that the Scriptures are wrong for proclaiming it. If you reject the Scriptures as false, then the laws which the Bible proclaims are no longer binding. Thus you have rejected the Gospel and the Law, and you are lost in your sins. You have deprived yourself of the Law which would tell you about your sinfulness, and the Savior who has died to take away your sin.

We saw before that many who reject the Law will still call themselves Christians and invoke the name of Jesus. Perversely, it is also true that many who deny Christ will still call themselves Christians and even invoke the name of Jesus. It is therefore imperative that we do not judge a church because it calls itself Christian; we judge a

church based upon whether or not it proclaims Law and Gospel-upon its preaching of the Word and administration of the Sacraments.

We must beware of one other temptation: Many will defend a church that denies the Law or the Gospel by saying, "But look how well it's doing! It can't be wrong if it is so successful! God surely wouldn't permit that, now, would He?" Likewise, the individual may joke, "If God really didn't like what I was doing, He would have struck me down by now." Remember the parable: The landowner sends servants multiple times, as well as his son, giving the vinedressers plenty of opportunity to repent. When they do not heed his patient correction, they are destroyed. The Lord patiently proclaims His Word to you, to the Church, to the world. Do not mistake His patience for toleration of evil or approval of sin. Judgment is coming, and the time for repentance is now.

So we repent, and we rejoice in this: Repentance is available because the Son has come. He has lived to fulfill the Law of God that we could not, and He has died in your place on the cross. He gives His Law to you so that you can know of your sin and your need for forgiveness; He gives His Gospel that you might be forgiven; and He gives us the privilege of proclaiming His Law and Gospel to all who will hear. The proclamation of Law and Gospel, of sin and Son centers on that cross lifted high. Because of the Son's death there, you are in the vineyard. Because of His cross, you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen