

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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First Sunday in Lent, March 10, 2019

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 465, 544:6, 342, 112:1-4, 633:2.

Lessons: Isaiah 5:1-7, 1 Peter 2:1-20, Luke 20:9-19.

Sermon Text: Matthew 21:33-46.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Matthew has begun recording events in the last week of Jesus' life on earth. This chapter begins with Palm Sunday and on the next day "***Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. 'By what authority are you doing these things?' they asked. 'And who gave you this authority?'***" Matthew 21:23 (NIV) Jesus responds to their question with a question they refuse to answer, and then he tells parables.

Today we look at the parable of the wicked tenants of the vineyard who abused and killed those whom the owner sent to them to gather the fruits of his vineyard. This has also been called the parable of the vineyard owner or

THE PARABLE OF THE TENANTS

- 1. The owner of the vineyard expected fruit from his vineyard.**
- 2. The tenants, renters, leaseholders didn't give the owner what he deserved and were ultimately rejected and thrown out.**
- 3. In this we also find a warning for us who also have been called by Jesus into his kingdom.**

When we read a parable in the Bible we want to explain every bit of it, but we have difficulty unless Jesus or Scripture completely explains it. You recently heard about the parable of the sower and the seed, which is the most completely explained parable in the New Testament.

We can plainly see the emphasis of this parable. Today, we have all of the Old Testament and New Testaments at our fingertips. The people seemed to understand, too, but the leaders of the Jews may not have at first, as we shall hear in a few minutes.

The owner of the vineyard would expect fruit from the vineyard, right? We can explain the owner as God. The owner of the vineyard planted it and prepared it well for the greatest possible yield of fruit. "***He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower.***"

We can explain the vineyard as God's chosen people – the Jews. God had chosen the descendants of Abraham to occupy his household throughout the Old Testament. He gave them the land of Canaan and they were not to intermarry with the unbelievers in that land but to kill the Canaanites and all the people in that land. He did this to prepare his people for the coming of the Savior to be born in Bethlehem as a descendant of Abraham and King David. In their separation from the idolatrous nations around them they had the security that they should enjoy the protection of God.

We can explain the hedge as the Law, which surrounded Israel and separated God's people – the Jews – from the Gentiles.

But they – Israel – didn't follow him and didn't obey him. Their actions followed their hearts. Their hearts weren't "into obeying God", just as people today often "aren't into religion" – at least not religion as God teaches and demands it.

The winepress was there to make useful results of the fruit: to press the grapes so they could ferment and become good wine. But it takes fruit, in this example, grapes, which then ferment and change. This change might be compared to the change necessary through conversion and repentance.

The tower was a place from which the watchmen could watch over God's people. Watchmen is a term often used in the Old Testament for God's prophets. It also would serve as a shelter for the watchmen, who should protect the fruits. God even gave his people civil laws, to promote and uphold civic order among his people. In short, God provided his people with all they needed.

Today we might ask if there is anything we need. Oh yes, we have earthly, material blessings, but we also have the truth of God's Word, offered in every worship service.

And even for us children of God today, there is pressure to bring forth good fruit. We know that "*it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--not by works, so that no one can boast.*" But we must remember that Scripture then goes on immediately to tell us: "*For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*" Ephesians 2:8-10 (NIV)

The landowner rented out the vineyard. This was not permanent ownership so that the renters could do exactly as they wished. Renters are to obey the contract they have with the owner of the property. In some cases they aren't even supposed to pound nails into the walls without permission, as those of you who have rented places to live know.

The renters, the tenants, may be compared to the priests and Levites – the leaders of the Jews – who should have guided and protected and taken care of God's people.

The landowner went away for a long time, to another country. There was a lengthy time, about 2000 years, between the establishment of the covenant with Abraham and God's judgment on his descendants at the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A. D. and the dispersion of the Jews. There was also a time of about 400 years between God's last recorded prophecy and the coming of the Savior. During this last interval, God didn't intervene directly in the affairs of his people, but patiently waited.

"When the harvest time approached, [the landowner] **sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit.**" He sent servants to gather his fruit. It belonged to him and they had no right to do just whatever they wanted with the fruit. This is just as it is today – sharecroppers have no right to do exactly what they want with the fruit – be it corn, grain, cotton, grapes, whatever. When we think of fruits in this parable, we think of the words of John the Baptist in Matthew: "**Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.**" Matthew 3:8 (NIV) "**Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance**" Matthew 3:8 (KJV) Such fruits suitable for showing repentance include seeking after holiness and righteousness.

The landowner was expecting fruit but instead his representatives got this treatment: "**The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third.**" This is exactly how God's prophets were treated in the Old Testament. People didn't want to hear God's Word any more than people do today. They were just as sinful as we are. Mankind is in no way "getting better and better" but even more evil and perverse. God sent prophets repeatedly, from Moses up to the time of John the Baptist,

"Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way." More servants and more of the same treatment.

"Last of all, he sent his son to them. 'They will respect my son,' he said." Finally he sends his son. Surely we can recognize the son of the landowner as the Son of God – Jesus Christ! "Surely people would respect the very son of the landowner." But they didn't respect the Son. They wanted to do things their own way. They wanted it all. They wanted to take over.

"So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him." They killed him, the son of the owner. They delivered Jesus to Gentiles to be killed. Jesus even suffered and was killed outside the city of Jerusalem! This is a direct prophecy of what will happen to Jesus himself, actually in just a few days! Stephen, before the leaders of the Jews had him stoned to death, asked "**Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him.**" Acts 7:52 (NIV)

We can see in the actions of the wicked tenants their acts of self-righteousness. They finally take upon themselves and pretend that they can earn their own righteousness before God by getting rid of the Son of God, the Savior. Even Caiaphas in persuading the leaders of the Jews to have Jesus killed said "**You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.**" John 11:50 (NIV)

So Jesus asks: "**Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?**" Jesus asks a question and his faithful hearers correctly answer: "**'He will bring those wretches to a wretched end,' they replied, 'and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time.'**" "They" are the people. We might call these 'regular people', certainly not "**the chief priests and the Pharisees.**" Not the leaders of the Jews who should have been teaching and directing them to the coming Messiah, who had now come into their midst.

Just look at what the owner of the vineyard does. He kills the evil people. The "**wretched end**" is a picture of eternal death in hell. Jesus tells several parables with this kind of point. The people who reject God and reject his only-begotten Son, the Savior, are cast into outer darkness.

Because the renters, the tenants, did not give the landowner what was due to him, they get what they deserve. Elsewhere Matthew records these words of Jesus: "**I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.**" Matthew 8:11-12 (NIV)

Jesus goes on: "**Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.**" The landowner then will entrust the vineyard to others who will do what the owner wants. This is exactly what happened to the descendants of Abraham to whom God had given every protection and blessing.

The message of salvation was then given to Gentiles so that they could bring forth the kinds of fruits God was seeking.

Jesus then goes to another picture: the cornerstone. "**Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the Scriptures: "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes"? 'Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. He who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed.'** When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew he was talking about them. They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet."

Because Jesus is the cornerstone as well as the capstone of the arch which holds the building up, the builders, the leaders of the Jews have no use for him and reject him.

This is what the Lord will do and does. The stone which the builders, the leaders of the Jews, rejected is the stone upon which they stumbled and fell, and were broken, and ultimately will be crushed by this stone. On Judgment Day Jesus will grind them to powder. Jesus, our rock of salvation endures.

The leaders of the Jews recognized what the people apparently knew and saw earlier. They wanted to kill him, but right now Jesus' time was not right. However, it would happen within the week.

Just as the Jews lost the kingdom, so can we! Beware!

God planted the vineyard and prepared it in the best possible manner. But Israel, and especially its leadership, refuses to yield the tribute that is due. They have the revealed will of God and know it, but they will not yield to its demands. They live their own selfish lives and carry on as if they are the householders who owe no accounting to God. The owner is in a far country. They think that they may do as they please.

God's chosen people as a nation rejected him and the Savior when he came to earth. Let us take care that it does not happen again to us, collectively or individually, God's chosen people in the twenty-first century.

Faith must be built on the foundation of salvation built on the chief cornerstone, Jesus himself.

May we be good tenants, stewards, caretakers of God's kingdom and his messages. May Christ become and always be our foundation and cornerstone. May we daily bring forth fruits that will please our God! Amen.