

Matthew 21:33-43

It wouldn't take a jury very long to decide this case. The tenants would be convicted on all counts—thievery, assault, and murder...in the first degree. They beat, stoned, and killed every servant that the landowner sent to them. What were they thinking? They were tenants, after all! They did not own the vineyard. The landowner was entitled to collect his fruit at the harvest. And they didn't just turn the landowner's servants away empty-handed; some they beat, others they killed. They even killed the landowner's son with the thinking that once the heir was dead, they could claim the vineyard as their own.

If this story were to happen today, anywhere in the world, it would be front page news! But, it's just a parable, right? It didn't really take place, did it? Wrong. After Jesus told this parable, the Chief Priests and Pharisees understood that the parable was about them. So, yes, it is a true story. The landowner is God. The vineyard is His Kingdom. The tenants were His chosen people. And the servants were God's prophets.

God, out of pure grace, brought the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob into His Kingdom. He gave everything to them. He took care of all their physical needs. He defended them against their enemies. He gave them the promise of the Messiah—that through them, the Savior would come. And what did He ask of them?...that they would simply live as His people. As a landowner expects to receive a harvest, so God expected to see the fruits of faith in the lives of His people. But they were not there. They turned away from Him. They became a disobedient people. And when God sent His prophets to call them to repentance, they mistreated them, spoke evil of them, and many they put to death. And when God sent His Son, they threw Him out of the city, and on a bloody hill they nailed Him to a cross. "What will the landowner do to those tenants?" Jesus asked. By their own words, the Chief Priests and Pharisees condemned themselves: "he will bring those wretches to a wretched end, and give the vineyard to someone else."

Friend, that "someone else" is you. He chose you for His own and made you a member of His Kingdom in the waters of Holy Baptism. Everything that He did for His people of old, He has done for you. He has given you every good gift—material and spiritual, temporal and eternal. He cares for you. He gives you what you need for this life. He defends you from all evil. He has given you the Savior—He who came to deliver you from your sins. In Him, Jesus Christ, you have everlasting life. He has given you His Word and Sacraments to nourish you in your faith until you reach your heavenly goal.

In the parable, Jesus says that the landowner put a wall around the vineyard, dug a winepress in it, and built a watchtower. These are the Means of Grace—the Word and Sacraments. The wall separated the vineyard from the world. Baptism separates us from those who are not a part of God's Kingdom. We are called out of this world and placed into His vineyard. The winepress crushed the grapes to make wine. The Lord's Supper is our winepress where Jesus gives us His precious blood with the cup of wine. The watchtower is where the watchman called out to warn the workers in the vineyard against threatening invaders. The pastor is God's watchman who calls out the Word of God to us so that we are protected from Satan's attacks. These Means of Grace, God has placed in His vineyard to lead you to Christ and your heavenly home.

Now, having given you all good things, what does God expect of you? As any landowner would expect to receive a harvest, so does God. He wants to see, in your life, the fruits of faith. But sadly, we are just like the tenants in the parable. We reject God's rule over us. We don't want to live as His people—we live for ourselves.

He wants to see families where husband and wife are faithful to each other, and children obey their parents. He wants to see His people in His House on Sunday mornings. He wants to see His people in His Word, and fathers teaching their children the fear and love of the Lord. God expects to see His people caring for each other, not gossiping behind each other's back. He looks in your life and mine for the fruits of faith, but what He sees are sour grapes—a people who have turned away from Him to live as we please.

And when He sends His servants, are they welcomed with open arms? Sadly, as in days of old, God's servants who faithfully call His people to repent are often mistreated, ignored, and spoken of in evil ways. And when He sends His Son through the preaching of His Word, the water, bread and wine—all too often we respond like those tenants and cast Him out of our hearts, for there is no room there—they are filled with stubborn pride and arrogance. For we think just as the tenants thought...we want to own the vineyard...we want to own what God has given...we want God out of the way, so that we can act as our own "god" in life.

Now friend, you've heard the Law, and its purpose is to prepare your heart for the Gospel—for Christ. And we might ask, "just where in this parable is the Gospel?" Sometimes it's hidden in the strangest places. Jesus would have us look at those tenants, and what they said at the coming of the landowner's son..."if the son is killed, we can take the vineyard." And there is the Gospel. God's good news to you is that, as wretched as those tenants were, they had it right. When the Son is killed, the inheritance is ours. When Jesus was put to death on the cross, the inheritance became yours. What's the inheritance?—the vineyard...God's Kingdom...heaven. It is yours because the Son was killed.

So, are those tenants in heaven? They were fools, thinking they could take the vineyard while rejecting the son. They had the first part right, but the second part they had all wrong. With the death of the Son, the inheritance is ours—but it cannot be taken, only given! No one can take the vineyard. No one can take God's Kingdom. No one can take heaven and eternal life. It can only be given by God. And He gives it through His son, Jesus Christ.

I can tell you in full assurance of truth, that God has given you the Kingdom of Heaven. How do I know this? Because this inheritance He gives through Jesus Christ, and He has given you Christ. Baptism is Christ. The Lord's Supper is Christ. The Word of Forgiveness is Christ. You have been baptized into Christ Jesus—all things are yours. God has given you the Word of Christ that declares your sins to be forgiven. He gives you His true body and blood in the Lord's Supper to assure you that you are His.

Why would God give this wonderful inheritance to disobedient people like you and me? Well, there is no one else to give it to. There is no one on earth who is not a wretched tenant. There is no one who obeys God. "There is none who does good and sins not." But God desires above all things to give Christ to sinners like you and me. This He has done,

and this He will always do. He sent His Son to those wretched tenants in the parable. He sends His Son to wretched sinners like us.

You cannot “out-sin” God’s forgiveness in Christ. The more you disobey Him, the more He forgives you. The more you reject Him, the more He patiently seeks you in love. The more you ignore His Word, the more He mercifully leads you back to Christ in that Word.

Do you see what this parable teaches? God has prepared His vineyard for you! The wall, the winepress, the tower, it was all done for you! No we don’t deserve it. That’s why this is good news. God gives us what we do not own. He gives us what we have not earned, and what we do not deserve. It’s all yours, friend. The Kingdom of Heaven is yours, because you are forgiven in Jesus Christ. He was killed for your sake, and He lives to give you the wonderful inheritance of heaven. Amen.