

## Matthew 21:33-46

If this parable was made into a movie, it would not be classified as factual. Not even as historical fiction. It would be labeled as pure fantasy. The only part of the story that resembles actual reality, that is somewhat believable, is the part where the master of the house hires tenants to work in his vineyard. It is ridiculous to think that those tenants would not only refuse to give the master (who is the owner of the vineyard), the fruits the vineyard produced, but also that they would beat and kill the servants he sent to collect those fruits. That would be like a person renting an apartment refusing to pay the rent on the first of the month, and even killing whomever was sent to collect his rent check, not once, but month after month. And what master would send even more servants after the first group of servants was killed? And then would send his son naively thinking, "Well, they killed my servants, but they will respect my son." Fantasy, pure fantasy.

But if we recall our Old Testament history, we then begin to recognize that this parable is pure historical fact, because every one of God's prophets (the servants who were sent in the parable), was either persecuted, beaten, or killed by the very people who claimed to love God; who were chosen by Him to be His workers in His kingdom.

Now wouldn't it be nice if today we could sit back and relax because today's sermon is all about those awful people in the Old Testament, and not about us? Well, don't get too comfortable. Every word of Scripture was written for our learning, and this parable is no exception. There is accusing Law for us in this story, and there is sweet Gospel. Do not turn your ears away from the Law, for if it does not do its work within us, we will care little for the Gospel. What I'm saying is, do not be like the Chief Priests and Pharisees who heard Jesus' parable, as you are hearing it, but refused to be humbled by it. Instead, they got angry over it. No repentance; only stubborn pride. And you know what that bought them...a one-way ticket to hell.

So who are we in the parable, and how and where does it speak to us? Well, we're not the master...that's God. We're not the servants...they're His prophets. We're not the master's son, obviously. That leaves the tenants. By process of elimination we are the ones who are put to work in the master's vineyard. And this may not sit too well with us. The tenants refused to give their master the fruits he was entitled to. The tenants resented those who were sent to collect the fruits. The tenants rejected their master by beating and killing his servants. And the tenants grabbed the son and put him to death so they could have the inheritance.

Is this us? But we're nice people! We're not perfect, but we do not go around killing others. We give God His fruits--we come to church, sing a little, and give an offering envelope. How can we be those awful tenants? Now wait a minute! I did not say you were those awful tenants; I said you were the tenants. After the master puts those wretched tenants to a miserable death, he lets out his vineyard to other tenants--new tenants--who will give him his fruits in their seasons. That's you...isn't it? God has not put you to a miserable death. He has put you to work in His kingdom because His chosen people rejected Him. But you, His dear ones in Christ Jesus are, by His grace, giving Him the fruits He wants.

But tenants are tenants, and sometimes new tenants slip back into the wicked ways of the old tenants. When God comes looking for the fruits of repentance in our lives, does He always see the fruits He wants to see, or does He sometimes go away empty-handed? And do we sometimes get upset with His messengers who reminds us that God expects His fruits in due season?

What are those fruits in your life? They are the works of obedience which, if you are a sinner like me, are usually hard to find because they are always covered up with excuses. If we treated our boss the way we treat God, we would hardly get any work done for him or her, but we would always have a reason why--a good excuse. With God it's one excuse after another: I can't help my bad language, all my friends talk like that. I know I skip church a lot and do not read my Bible much, but I'm busy. Everyone else lives together before marriage, so it can't be wrong anymore. It's just a little gossip, everybody does it. And so on, and so on.

Fellow sinners, God does not accept our excuses. When He comes looking for the fruits of the Christian life in us, if they are not there...if we always give Him excuses and not fruits, then our fruitless tree will eventually end up in the fire and be burned. If we, who are the new tenants in the vineyard, live like the old tenants, then we will meet up with the same fate as them.

The Chief Priests and Pharisees did not like hearing these words, and that's because they were not repentant. They attended God's house of worship, but they were not repentant. They gave money into the collection box, but they were not repentant. They spent much time in prayer, but they were not repentant. And they were not repentant because they hardened their hearts toward the words of Jesus.

If you are going to be people producing the fruits of repentance; if you are not going to be like the old, wicked tenants, not like the Chief Priests and Pharisees, then it will be because God in His mercy is working repentance and faith in your hearts through the words of Jesus. And I thank God daily that this is exactly what is happening here in Augusta; that His mercy is overflowing for you. That He has made you tenants in His vineyard who love to hear His Word, and so you are giving Him the fruits He wants in your life.

As ridiculous as the wickedness of those old tenants is in the parable, even more ridiculous is how God responds to such wickedness in utter mercy. A normal master, after having just one servant killed, would send his army to kill all the wicked tenants. But God is not normal. He does not fly into a rage, as we do, when our loved ones hurt us. He is patient and kind. He keeps sending His messengers calling sinners to repentance...not once, not twice, but over and over. And He shows the very depth of His mercy by sending His beloved Son into certain, bloody, and painful death. God was not naive for sending Jesus. He knew just what He was doing. Jesus would be tortured and killed, but God sent Him still, as ridiculous as this sounds to us, because God, more than anything else, is full of mercy.

And this mercy, my friends, is directed at you. Have you been giving God more excuses than fruits? He is patient with you. He does not desire to punish you. He desires to forgive you. And this He does because of Jesus. You see, the old, wicked tenants were correct. The Son, the Heir, had to be killed if His inheritance was to be gained. And this is why Jesus died willingly, so that all His inheritance would be given to miserable sinners like us. It's here on the altar for you...the inheritance. The Heir was killed. Everything of His, now, is given freely to those who, in faith, receive His risen flesh and blood in this sacred meal.

God does not give "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth." He gives you Jesus for every wrong you have done to Him. He responds to our sins with mercy. He takes our abuse, our selfish way of living and returns to you a clean heart washed in the blood of Christ in Holy Baptism. Friend, do you understand what Jesus is saying to you in this parable? No matter how wickedly you have acted

toward God, He only responds in mercy toward you. The death of His Son guarantees this for you. His inheritance--forgiveness, life, and salvation--is all yours.

So go forth and produce in your life the fruits God wants to see. Do it, not to gain God's love and forgiveness, but because God already loves and forgives you in Christ Jesus. This might sound like it's too good to be true--too much like fantasy, pure fantasy. It's not! You, dear sinner, no matter how wicked your life has been--you are forgiven in Christ. Now in Christ you are called to live and produce fruit, and you will, for He lives in you. Amen.