

All Along the Watchtower

Isaiah 5:1-7 | Psalm 80:9-17 | Matthew 21:33-46 | Philippians 3:4b-14

MATTHEW 21:33-46

³³ *Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watch-tower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country.* ³⁴ *When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce.* ³⁵ *But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another.* ³⁶ *Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way.* ³⁷ *Finally he sent his son to them, saying, "They will respect my son."* ³⁸ *But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance."* ³⁹ *So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him.* ⁴⁰ *Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?' ⁴¹ They said to him, 'He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.'* ⁴² *Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the scriptures: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes"?' ⁴³ Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. ⁴⁴ The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.'* ⁴⁵ *When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. ⁴⁶ They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.*

INTRODUCTION

Neel Burton, a psychiatrist and philosopher who teaches at Oxford, while researching the concept of greed, wrote: "Although a blind and blunt force, greed leads to superior economic and social outcomes. In contrast to altruism, which is a mature and refined capability, greed is a primitive and democratic impulse, and ideally suited to our culture of mass consumption." He later continued: "Like it or not, our society is fuelled by greed, and without greed would descend into poverty and anarchy."¹ Blunt indeed. But he's on to something here. The desire for personal gain, for more than is appropriate or deserved, even at the expense of others, is a normal state of being for most of us. We may not shine a spotlight on it, but greed is the base assumption at the foundation of much of our decision making. And it is this very subject that Jesus takes up in this challenging parable. The message is not complicated, but it is challenging, and it is countercultural. In short, the parable is a simple and solemn warning to the people of God. *Be warned. God's patience for our greed will eventually run out.* That is, the greedy intentions of our hearts, the part of us that is focused only on ourselves, that seeks only our own good, is incompatible with being in the kingdom of God, that is, counted among his people and granted his salvation. So again, *be warned. God's patience for our greed will eventually run out.* Let's see how this unfolds in the parable.

Here is how the parable reads: An owner of a vineyard leased his grounds to a group of tenants—a common practice in the first century. When the time came for the harvest, he sent his slaves to collect his share with a message: 'Time to pay the rent.' Entrepreneurs that they were, the tenants did not pay. This was not for lack of means, but for malice of heart, which is

¹ Neel Burton, "Is Greed Good? The Psychology and Philosophy of Greed," *Psychology Today*, October 6, 2014. psychologytoday.com/us/blog/hide-and-peek/201410/is-greed-good.

demonstrated in the violence of their response. In the scuffle, they beat the collectors, even killing one. But again, the landlord sent more. And again, they refused and beat them. Finally, the landlord decided that there's no way they would try this kind of thing with his own son—that's a step too far. And so, he sent him. Of course, he's a brave son, though, perhaps a little foolish given all that has happened, because the tenants did what greedy people do. They did the unthinkable. Assuming they may get some kind of squatters' rights if the heir is removed, they murdered him. There ends the parable.

1. VIOLENCE, VINEYARD, AND VICTORY

To understand the point of this parable, we will briefly consider a few aspects of the context. First, the question of why this parable is told right here: It follows the triumphal entry of Palm Sunday, but then the violent cleansing of the Temple when Jesus overturned the tables. These events begin five and a half chapters of conflict between Jesus and the Jewish leaders, indicating that the parable should be construed as part of the ongoing conflict.² Second, the language of the parable suggests strong linguistic ties to the song of the vineyard in our Old Testament lesson, Isaiah 5:1-7. There, the prophet speaks of the expectation is that the vineyard will produce grapes. Except that it doesn't. Drawing a parallel, the prophet says that the vineyard is the people of God. They were expected to produce righteousness. Except that they don't. Instead, they were unjust. And God's judgment will be upon them.³ Third, in the bit after the parable, Jesus quotes Psalm 118. *"The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes."*⁴ The use of Psalm 118 is interesting because it adds a layer of irony. A few verses later in the Psalm is what the crowd had referenced when Jesus entered into Jerusalem: *"Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD."*⁵ Where the rejected stone becoming the cornerstone is a cause for great joy in the Psalm, it functions as a warning here: *"The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls."*⁶ But to really see that, we must consider the conversation.

You see, Jesus has been interacting with the Jewish leaders. In his wonderfully Socratic fashion, he gets them to agree with his premise that these tenants deserve to be punished, death for death. And then he turns the tables on them. He essentially says: 'You are the tenants! You ignored the Scriptural promise that God would bring his people back to himself. You ignored the prophets. You kept God's people—in your greed—you kept God's people

² Why has Jesus chosen to tell this parable in this place, at this time? It comes at a fascinating moment. It's early in Holy Week. Jesus had just entered Jerusalem in his so-called Triumphal Entry a couple days before, and then violently cleansed the temple—arguably the most overtly provocative thing Jesus does in his three years of ministry. That violent event—when Jesus overturns tables of the money changers and pronounces judgment on them—begins about five and a half chapters of Jesus's accusations and judgment and frustration with the leaders of the Jews. The next day, he returns to the location of confrontation. He returns to the chief priests and elders who once again find themselves against him. It is in this context that Jesus tells the parable. Why is this context important? Well, as will become clear, it sets the stage for why the parable is construed as a warning. That is, the parable continues the angst of overturning the tables. The image of the vineyard is even attested to in other literature of the era—with similar parables to this one appearing in other Synoptic Gospels (Mark 12:1-12 and Luke 20:9-19), the Gospel of Thomas (65-66), and later rabbinic literature such as *Sifre Deuteronomy* §312, *Midrash Tanhuma Beshallah* 4.7, and *Midrash Tanhuma Emor* 8.30. See also Matt 13:1-20.

³ The vineyard, for example, is a persistent symbol for God's people throughout the Old Testament—with grape leaves adorning their coins and a large vine engraving adorning the entrance to this very temple.

⁴ Psa 118:22-23.

⁵ Psa 118:26. See Matt 21:9.

⁶ Matt 21:44.

from him.' The stone that was rejected has become the cornerstone, but the ones who rejected that stone will be judged. *"He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time."*⁷ The context is one of conflict and judgment. And the point is this: The salvation of God's people is not unlike a vineyard. And just as the representatives of the vineyard owner asked the tenants for the produce of the vineyard—so God has repeatedly sent emissaries, warning them, desperately trying to guide them, begging them to bring about righteousness. But they failed to heed the warnings of the prophets. They failed to remember that they are but tenants, beholden to the landlord. Instead, they acted out of selfish greed. And in a last hope, God, just like the vineyard owner, sent his son. Nothing could be more gracious. Even so, as we will see in the coming chapters of Matthew's Gospel, the Jewish leaders rejected God's son, Jesus Christ, putting him to death, and sealing their own judgment. And so, *be warned. God's patience for our greed will eventually run out.* If only they had listened...

2. PAYING THE RENT

The question now before us, friends, is will we listen? I have three thoughts springing from this parable for us to consider.

First, we *are* greedy: each of us and without exception. To what extent are we pursuing our own gain at the expense of the condition of our hearts before God? Remember: How did the tenants respond to the coming of the son? *"This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance."*⁸ They responded with greedy hearts. It is amazing how quickly they went from working good jobs to selfish, greed-induced homicide. And we need to recognize that this is the tendency of our own hearts as well. It really takes very little for us to forget the benefit of others, and pursue our own agendas, especially in our age of positive self-image through self-realization which becomes self-absorption, an age of affirming each other's ambitions, each other's lusts for power or wealth, each other's greed, uncritically. And so, what do we do? Remember, the end of the parable—as with the Isaiah context—is about distinguishing those who are producing fruit. We must repent of such selfishness in our hearts, such disregard for the people around us, putting it to death, and bearing fruit worthy of repentance.

Second, we need to realize that God is patient, but also still a judge. And the judgment is inevitable. We get warnings, just as the tenants did. It might be what you are reading in the Bible. It might be what you hear at church, including right now. It might be somebody in your life saying to you, 'Hey, I think you might need to work on this or that. When God does show us such patience and generosity, do we act just like the tenants, and protect the little kingdom we're creating for ourselves? Do we presume upon God's patience? It's very easy, when we live relatively comfortable lives in a first-world nation with comfortable amenities, good healthcare, and a functioning government (excluding, of course, the MA35). Many of us are happy to go through life with very little existential worry. And it is so easy in that kind of a world to think: 'I'll work on the faith question, the religion question, the salvation question, later. There's something good on television tonight.' There's very little urgency for the things that matter, the metaphysical. But we need to know, God's patience does run out. The

⁷ Matt 21:41.

⁸ Matt 21:38.

judgment is coming. And those who have not borne fruit worthy of repentance will face eternity outside of God's kingdom.

Third, there is hope. If you put the first two together—we are all guilty, and God's judgment will come—then things may seem rather hopeless. Yet, I tell you, be comforted by God's profound sacrifice so that he may save us. Remember the parable. The landowner repeatedly sent warnings—which were met with further rebellion. And then, when most of *us* would have sent an army to wipe out the rebellious tenants, he sent his son. This is precisely what God did. The treachery of the tenants and the fruitlessness of the field required a price—a payment. Because we are guilty, because we have rejected the warning of the prophets and sinned, a price is required. But in a twist of irony, the killing of the son, his death—his death on a cross—covers our sins. Paul, in his letter to the Colossian church, put it like this: Christ Jesus cancelled *“the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.”*⁹ So, let me say this again: Christ's death pays for our sins. God is judge, and yet he ultimately pays for our transgressions through his own sacrifice. Come, and believe. Your past transgressions, your debt of righteousness before God, it is not the end of the ledger. God's mercy is undeniable and his love for you, for me, for all of us, remains.

CONCLUSION

And so, there it is: a parable and teaching of Jesus that serves as a warning for God's people. Be warned. Judgment is coming. The Son is coming to collect the rent—rent that none of us can pay. And yet, and yet, friends, that Son paid our rent. As the hymn goes:

I hear the Saviour say,
 “Thy strength indeed is small,
 Child of weakness, watch and pray,
 find in me thine all in all.”
 Jesus paid it all,
 all to Him I owe;
 Sin had left a crimson stain,
 he washed it white as snow.¹⁰

Let me pray: *Heavenly Father, we thank you for sending but your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ, to die that we might live. Help us, in your mercy O Lord, to be the fruitful vineyard that waits for your return. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

⁹ Col 2:14.

¹⁰ Elvina M. Hall, “Jesus Paid It All,” 1865.