

Receive Mercy While You Can  
October 26<sup>th</sup>, 2014

Matthew 21:33-43  
Pentecost 20 A

Matthew 21:33-43  
Pastor Rob Zeratsky

We have before us today a unique parable of Jesus. It wasn't just meant to teach a general spiritual truth like most of his parables. It *does*, but more than that it spoke specifically to the crowd he was addressing. It was a little like when Nathan confronted David about his sin back during his affair with Bathsheba. It addresses the Jews and their own situation head-on, even going so far as to tell them what was in store for them in their own future. Jesus was here confronting a Jewish crowd who doubted his authority and they were engaged in a discussion about who he was and where he came from. They didn't recognize him as the Messiah, the Christ that had been promised. They rejected his God-given authority. And Jesus tells them a story to illustrate that this was not a new problem for them. They, as a people, had done this for centuries.

<read text: Matthew 21:33-34>

In the parable, the master of the house is God. The tenants as Jesus originally delivered the parable would be the Jews, the nation of Israel. The master prepared everything for them, gave them a place to live and comfortable work and expected a harvest when the time came. That is exactly what God did for the nation of Israel. He led them out of Egypt, brought them to the land of Canaan, destroyed their enemies before them and set them up in that good land. This was all according to the covenant made at Mt Sinai, and reaffirmed when they entered Canaan. God would be their God and in return they were to produce a harvest of righteousness. They were to live according to his law, they were to worship and serve him only.

Our Old Testament reading today demonstrated just one time when that did not happen, but that was not the exception. After the time of Solomon, who was only the second king over Israel, the kingdom split. The northern ten tribes, now exclusively called "Israel" gave up worship of the true God because the temple was not in their section of land. They set up golden calves and from there only went further astray. They never returned to worshipping the Lord.

The southern kingdom, the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, now just called the kingdom of Judah, well they went back and forth, but it was mostly back. For example as mentioned in the reading, Hezekiah was a good guy who tried to do what was right. His son that we read about, not at all. In the history of Israel, more often than not the harvest was not given to the landowner. And whenever the landowner sent his servants to find out where the harvest was, those prophets were attacked and sometimes killed.

And now as Jesus speaks, the Son of the owner had been sent. Jesus was warning them about what was going to happen. In his parable the tenants attacked and killed the son. And by the crowds own words, those who did it deserved the fate they would get. The owner would put them to death for their actions and give the vineyard to those who would produce the fruit properly. Sadly, those who heard Jesus did not react like David confronted with his own sin. Rather, even though scripture tells us just after this their leaders actually *realized* Jesus was talking about them, they hardened their hearts and looked for a way to arrest him.

And we know how that played out. They did put Jesus to death. And they were removed from the vineyard. Of course in reality it was more like the vineyard left them, the grace of God passed from the Jews and was taken to the Gentile nations where they welcomed the news of a savior from sin. And wherever God's gospel message was spread, there his workers produced fruit in keeping with repentance. The Jews all but had God taken away from them.

As it has been said, it is wiser to learn from the mistakes of others rather than your own. So we should ask, why did this happen to the Jews? Not why did God leave them to their fate, it's pretty clear how they earned it. But why did they earn it? What was it that caused them to behave like this, to reject God himself when he came to them?

Of course we could just say sin. The sinful nature hates God and wants to separate from him. But what is the specific sin or sins that caused this division for them? Well, if you look at the way Israel behaved in their history and look at the parable, to put it in the language of the parable; they forgot they were tenants. They forgot who the owner was and how their relationship with him worked. To the people of Israel, God was *their* God. He belonged to them because in their minds, he had to. He had selected the nation, chosen their father Abraham. They had this notion that they owned God and so no matter what they did, he couldn't abandon them. They were good with God simply because they were in the vineyard as it were, and God (for some reason they don't really specify) couldn't just kick them out.

But, that is not how the relationship works. God does not belong to anyone. God does not owe anybody. God gives not because anyone deserves but simply because he chooses. Pure mercy. Pure grace. No amount of work or status or heritage or wealth can obligate God to do anything for people. Anyone working in his vineyard is purely a tenant, hired at his own discretion. And if God so chooses, that tenant may be removed.

Except, that's not really what God wants. He wants all to be in his vineyard. He wants all to be a part of his kingdom. God did not want to cut off the Jews. He didn't want to hurt them. But, though our God is infinite in so many respects, he does have a limit when it comes to tolerating blatant sin. He wants to show mercy, he wants to show kindness. But to those who spit on his offers one too many times, they are judged. The time to receive his mercy is not infinite. The nation of the Jews had so many chances. So many prophets sent to call them back, so many times God gave them trouble to drive them back to him. And every time as soon as things got better they forgot him again. And then they killed his son.

Even then, historically speaking, God did not leave them immediately. The news that Jesus, the Messiah, had come and rescued the people was brought first to the Jews. But they rejected. And so God picked up his vineyard and took it to the Gentile nations. And in judgment left the Jews out in the cold. And by and large they have never returned to him.

Now if God did not spare those natural branches, who came out of the root of his promise, but he cut them off when they trifled with his grace and mercy, then how much more us who were grafted in after the fact? I don't bring this up because I think this is happening to us. I bring it up because the consequences are too grave for us not to be on our guard about it. So we need to ask ourselves now, and regularly, if we're starting to give in to any of the mindset that destroyed the Jews.

Is our confidence placed a little too heavily in the wrong place? Like the Jews is there anything in us that has us trusting more in outward trappings than what really saves? Do we focus on the wrong parts of salvation experience? That is to say, are we focused on the church building, or the congregation we belong to, or even the larger synodical body? If they were gone tomorrow would we be devastated that we had lost our church or would we recognize that the universal church of God marches on whatever the outward shape it takes? Do we trust these groups we belong to too much? If there was something proclaimed from the pulpit or our synod that ran contrary to scripture, would you recognize it? Or do you just take it at face value without checking to see if that's what God says.

Now, I certainly don't plan to ever deceive you, or to lead you astray from what Scripture says. But also remember why we choose to join a church body. Not because we want to believe whatever that church teaches. We belong to a church because we study what scripture teaches and find that the church is in agreement with that. How can you be a faithful member without regularly studying what God says in his word?

Of course even beyond that there's a personal warning in this parable about being overconfident in ourselves. Some people read about God's love and mercy a little too often and forget that it is only given at God's discretion. They become convinced that God owes them and cannot take it away from them. Sound familiar? You are a sinner. And only by God's grace, only by his mercy are you forgiven and gifted eternal life. Those that tread over this gift once too often, who trifle with it and treat it lightly, God will only take that for so long, just as he did the Jews. Saying "I'll take it seriously later," doesn't work when there may not be a later. This very day your life may be demanded of you.

As we've said so many times, there is literally nothing more important than your faithlife. You only have it because of the mercy of our God. Do not treat it lightly. Don't act like it will always be there no matter what you do. We are the new tenants of the vineyard. We don't deserve to be there any more than the previous workers. But God lets you in. Appreciate the mercy of God while you can. You should be dead. You should have been condemned the moment you were born. But God gave you time. Time to be washed by water and word. Time to know and trust him. Time to learn that you are forgiven. Time to be brought to faith so you may be saved. And by his grace you are saved.

Don't misunderstand. There's a fine line between the humble confidence we have in our God and the arrogance of assuming we can't be lost. When the trust and the focus are on God, we can't be lost because he won't lose us. If it's all on him, it cannot fail. But if we get overconfident, thinking we don't need to keep our eyes on him and he'll pull us out of the fire anyway, then we have another thing coming. Because that's just saying we don't really need him and that's faith out the window. Have confidence in God, but in God. A humble confidence that recognizes how much we need him and trusts that he will never fail us.

Be confident in the mercy of the Lord; but be rightly confident. Know that it will save you by the blood of Christ; know just how desperately you need it. But don't take it for granted, treat it like the life-saving truth that it is. Amen.