

# Decision Time

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## **Matthew 21:33-46**

Clearly today's text is an allegory, a form of literature in which every word and image stands for something other than what is actually being said. Very quickly, in this text God is the landowner, the land of Israel is the vineyard, the members of the Jewish religious establishment are the tenant farmers and the prophets of the Old Testament are the representatives of God who come to collect what is due – to hold the tenants accountable. And it is not hard to guess who is the son sent by the father and killed by the tenants. That's what this text is. Here is what it is not.

It is not some kind of anti-Jewish polemic. Way too many sermons have been preached over the years suggesting that the unfaithful tenants of the vineyard are the people of Israel, and that, because of their unfaithfulness, the vineyard - God's kingdom, God's blessing - will be taken away from them and given to new tenants... Christians and Christianity superseding – replacing – Judaism; Christianity now favored by God.

The problem with this interpretation, besides the fact that it has been used to support anti-Semitic attitudes in the church, is that it is wrong. This is not a condemnation of an entire people. Jesus himself was Jew. It is crazy to think he would issue a blanket condemnation of his own people. This is a dispute with the religious leaders – they have been the unfaithful ones. And, secondly, to say that this text is an attack on Jews and a blessing of Christians, is to let Christians off the hook way too easily. For this is a word spoken, not only to Israel, but also, most definitely to the church; a word that every person of faith needs to hear.

First of all, within these rather challenging words of Jesus, I believe there is a word of comfort, of reassurance. The vineyard – the church - does not belong to us. God is the owner. Now this may come as a surprise to the Sonoma County Assessor's office, and perhaps even to our own Board of Trustees, but all of this really does not belong to us. Thus is God's church. God has claimed it with the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and then chosen to call us here. Says one pastor, "There is grace here. I can't keep this church going, nor can you. The church is gathered under the authority of God, not through our earnest efforts. So we can take heart. The church is not all left up to us. This is God's church, God's service, God's people."

Now does this mean you can put your offering back into your wallets or purses... okay, let's allow God to pay the PGE bills and the church staff. Not hardly. We still have responsibilities for the welfare and mission of the church. We must faithfully tend the vineyard. But it reminds us that all of this is God's idea. God has called us and thereby placed us into a relationship with God and each other. And so, we sit down and ask, well, what do we want to do, perhaps we should first ask, what would God have us do, what does God want from us in this situation? Yes, a difficult text, but let's not forget the grace. God, the owner, the Creator, seeks to bless us every step of the way. Again, it isn't all up to us.

Which leads to a second point... there is a word of grace, but there really is no sidestepping the word of judgment. Or better yet, the hard-word of accountability. The tenants in this story act as if they own the place. They will do what they want and really seemingly couldn't care less about the landlord and his

wishes. In fact they beat his servants and even kill his son. It becomes a story of rejection - the tenants rejecting everything the landlord has said or done and choosing to go their own way. And how often has that happened in human history?

As I was reflecting on this text, I was reminded of some words of the late Dag Hammarskjöld: "I don't know who – or what – put the question. I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer Yes to Someone – or Something – and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender – had a goal." I wonder if that could be what Jesus is talking about in this text... making a decision, saying "Yes"! – living in response to a call, a claim on our lives; living, as one author has said, "in a way that would not make sense if God did not exist."

I know I've said this before, but I want you to realize how radically countercultural this text is. It was the philosopher, Hannah Arendt, who noted that the modern secular world has destroyed God, the family and community, throwing people, not out into the world, but back on themselves. All we are left with, she says, is a sovereign individual; with little source of meaning in life other than the individual. The individual, in his or her autonomy and detachment, becomes the sole center of all meaning. Forget the Landlord, say the tenants, forget his teaching, forget his expectations, forget his blessings, forget his servants, get rid of his son. We will take this vineyard and do as we please. It's preposterous to think that anything or anyone has a claim on our lives. As William Sloan Coffin, Jr. once said, "There is no smaller package than a person wrapped up in him or herself."

A young man was dying of AIDS in a local hospital. It was in the early days of the disease...so much fear. Someone remembered he had a church connection years ago, so a local pastor was called. He came to the man's room, quickly shouted in a prayer, then closed the door and left as fast as he could. Another pastor in town, a young woman, heard about this and immediately rushed to the hospital. She went into the young man's room and held his hand, sang to him and read scripture until he died. Afterwards her friends asked, "Weren't you scared?" "Oh yes," she said, "I was terrified. I went home, took about ten showers and prayed." "Then why did you do it?" "I kept thinking...what would Jesus have done?"

"At some point I did answer Yes..." This text isn't about obligations, requirements, doing enough good works so you can get into heaven. It is about faithfulness, about choosing who we will follow, whose voice we will listen to and what we want our lives to look like? It is about bearing good fruit with our lives, living in grateful response to the One who has given us so much.

In the end, is the landowner angry... or is he broken-hearted? Does God want judgment...or restoration of relationship? And so I wonder if the ending to the story is not up to the landlord, but in fact up to us. How do we choose to live? What path do we choose to take? Says preaching professor, Marvin McMickle, "A recently glimpsed bumper sticker says, 'The world you desire comes not by chance but by change.' What a difference a letter can make! What a difference a person can make! The world God is attempting to shape through the ministry of the church will not be established by chance or coincidence. It will come only when people change how they live – no longer rejecting the will of the God who made them, but striving to be good tenants, living together in justice, loving-kindness and peace."