

Producing Good Fruit

The Parable of the Wicked Tenants

Matthew 21:33-46
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa



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(Before Scripture Lesson is read)

Two Sundays ago we looked at the parable of the Two Sons from Matthew 21. It immediately precedes today's reading, another parable, known as the parable of the Wicked Tenants. As a brief review, Jesus was embroiled in controversy with the chief priests and elders in the temple in Jerusalem during the last week of his life.

In the parable of the Two Sons, one son said he would *not* go to work in the vineyard, as his father requested, but later did so. The other son said he *would* go and work in the vineyard, as his father requested, but did not go. From this parable we learned that in the kingdom of God, **God prefers our works and deeds of faithful living to merely our lip service and putting on a good religious appearance.**

Today's parable has a similar theme: to do God's will means to bear good fruit.
(Read Matthew 21:33-46)

In case there is any doubt in anyone's mind, it is very important to remind ourselves often that **there is a strong moral and ethical component to Christianity that demands that instead of merely giving lip service to God we put our faith into action.** We learn this, in part, from the last point made in the parable we just heard. The kingdom of God belongs to those who produce good fruit.

In other words, **the realm of God isn't just about our individual or denominational beliefs about God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, the scriptures, and role of the Church, as important as they may be. It's not about subscribing to every jot at tittle in the ancient creeds and doctrines of the church. Rather, the kingdom of God is about what we do in the here and now with what we believe.**

This always begs the question: How do you live out your faith in God? How do we as a congregation? Are you and I, and are we as a congregation, for example, actively involved in works, projects and ministry efforts that bear good fruit and promote the kingdom of God? These questions must ever be before us.

You may be familiar with the critique that many Christians today are **functional atheists**. That term is used to describe those who believe in God, but function – live and act – as if there were no God. Meaning: **their lives do not reflect the values that they profess.** We probably all know some people who fit this description of functional atheists.

But let us turn now to today's parable and try to learn what it may have been saying to Jesus' original hearers and to Matthew's original readers. Then, let us try to find a relevant meaning for us today. **The parable of the Wicked Tenants**, as it stands in Matthew, is clearly **allegorical**: that is, it is a kind of code with each major element in the parable symbolizing something specific outside the story. We can recognize this

right away because of the opening description of the landowner carefully preparing his vineyard. He "planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower" (Matt. 21:33).

Did you notice how this almost exactly matches the description of the actions of the vineyard owner portrayed by the prophet Isaiah in our Old Testament reading from Isaiah 5? In that passage, Isaiah clearly announces that, "**the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel**" (Isa. 5:7). The religious leaders who heard Jesus tell this parable, as well as the first readers of Matthew gospel, would know this familiar story from Isaiah and would readily make the allegorical connections: **God is the vineyard owner and Israel is the vineyard.**

What happens next in the parable is an astonishing cycle of violence. The allegorical pieces fall neatly into place. The tenants of the vineyard, those responsible for the harvest, are clearly the religious authorities entrusted by God with leading Israel to fruitful obedience. The slaves who are sent again and again, only to be rejected and abused by the tenants, stand for the prophets calling the people to faithfulness. The vineyard owner's son, of course, can be seen (in the context of Matthew's gospel) as Jesus himself, who is thrown outside of the vineyard and killed.

Thus, when Jesus turns to the religious authorities and asks them about what the vineyard owner will do to these tenants who greet his servants with violence, and murder even his own son, their verdict pronounced on these vineyard tenants is, in essence, their own judgment. It is the religious authorities themselves who tell Jesus that those wretched tenants will be put to a "miserable death" and the vineyard will be leased to new occupants.

So yes, this parable does involve the element of judgment. In this case, **the judgment falls on the religious leaders as a response to their own failure to produce the fruits of the kingdom of God, which are the deeds of justice, compassion, and loving-kindness.**

In Matthew's historical context, written some 40 years or so later, he undoubtedly interpreted Jesus' parable to imply that the kingdom of God would be taken from the Jewish religious leaders and handed over to the Jewish, and later Gentile Christians who made up the church. These new tenants, the Christian church, would be able to "give him [the vineyard owner, God] the produce [the good fruit] at the harvest time" (Matt. 21:40-41).

So while Jesus' parable may have originally been meant as a judgment against the Jewish religious authorities, Matthew wants us, as Christians, to know that we are not off the hook. It is the Christian church that is now in the position of being the tenants, and the parable begins over again, with the effect of sending a warning to us.

We must not become like the former wicked tenants who do not bear good fruit. For if we do, then the consequences represented in the parable become our consequences. It is now the church that is responsible and challenged to truly be "a people that produces the fruit of the kingdom."

It must be tragically acknowledged at this point, however, that **the Christian church throughout history has done extensive damage with this parable. It has been misinterpreted in such a way that it has been used as a rejection not of just the Jewish religious authorities, but as a rejection and total dismissal of the entire Jewish people themselves.** This erroneous allegorical overlay has produced tragic consequences for Jewish-Christian relationships through the centuries. Much anti-Semitism and violence has been the result.

That is why many progressive biblical scholars reject this allegorical overlay as originating with Jesus. Instead, they suggest that this allegorical connection originated with the gospel writers themselves, who reflect their own struggles with Judaism after the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in the year 70 CE. But let us not be lax in paying heed to the warning of this parable, a warning directed especially to church leaders. Matthew claims that God will replace false leadership with faithful leaders. Also, in that regard, we might reflect on our much more subtle ways of beating up God's messengers who call us to become involved in the issues of our day.

All this brings us back to where we began, with the question of how we act and live out our faith. According to this parable, it is clear that we owe something back to God. Matthew, here, isn't being a very good Presbyterian in this regard. **While salvation may be by God's grace alone, in other words something that we can't earn by our good works, Matthew says that there is something expected of those who see themselves as part of the kingdom of God, namely: living under the authority of God and producing and giving back good fruit.**

How, then, do you and does College Hill Presbyterian Church produce good fruit? Certainly, through each and every expression of love that we exhibit toward one another. It also finds expression through our faithful worship, education, fellowship, stewardship, evangelism, congregational care, and particularly in outreach to others through our social action. Also involved is the myriad of ways we volunteer as individuals in our communities.

We also believe that we produce good fruit every time we proclaim that we are to be who God has created us to be. We must never pass up opportunities to share God's message of inclusive love and acceptance, and that we are to live in truth, honesty, and integrity in relationship to our true selves, as well as with others.

In seeking to be an inclusive community of faith, one without barriers, we strive to recognize all people as children of God, no matter what their religious affiliation, or lack thereof. We must seek to treat everyone, therefore, as people who are worthy of love, dignity, and respect. Unfortunately, there are still people, and yes, religious people, who refuse to accept the humanity of other people. But when we reject some of God's people, are we not also rejecting the God who created them?

While all this is always easier said than done, that nonetheless is how we produce good fruit as part of the realm of God – as faithful productive tenants in God's vineyard, of which we are all a part.

Amen.