

The Patience of Grace  
Luke 20:9-20  
March 17, 2013

*[Jesus] went on to tell the people this parable: "A man planted a vineyard, rented it to some farmers and went away for a long time. At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants so they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. He sent another servant, but that one also they beat and treated shamefully and sent away empty-handed. He sent still a third, and they wounded him and threw him out. Then the owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send my son, whom I love; perhaps they will respect him.' But when the tenants saw him, they talked the matter over. 'This is the heir,' they said. 'Let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others." When the people heard this, they said, "May this never be!" Jesus looked directly at them and asked, "Then what is the meaning of that which is written: 'The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone'? Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed." The teachers of the law and the chief priests looked for a way to arrest him immediately, because they knew he had spoken this parable against them. But they were afraid of the people. Keeping a close watch on him, they sent spies, who pretended to be honest. They hoped to catch Jesus in something he said so that they might hand him over to the power and authority of the governor.*

Grace, mercy, and peace from the author of Grace, the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Today's text is sometimes misunderstood. Often, this reading is accused of being all Law and no Gospel. Our goal this morning will be to dispel that myth.

Before we start in on the reading, we should set the scene for this account. It's Tuesday of Passion Week. Just two days earlier Jesus entered Jerusalem to shouts of: *Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!*" (Lk 19:38 NIV).

But that's not the tone now. This day Jesus was teaching in the Temple and the chief priests, the teachers of the Law, and the elders were questioning Jesus' authority. Jesus tells this parable in response to their accusations.

The story is very simple. The tenants are God's people. The servants sent by the landlord, who are supposed to collect what is due to the landlord, are the Old Testament prophets. Some of God's prophets were abused. Some of them were murdered.

Sometime this week, open up the Old Testament and spend some time reading about those men. You might be shocked to see how nasty God's people can treat the people God sends to them. And this treatment wasn't restricted to only the Old Testament prophets. Listen as Jesus tells his disciples how they will be treated: *But before all this, they will lay hands on you and persecute you. They will deliver you to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. You will be*

*betrayed even by parents, brothers, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. All men will hate you because of me. But not a hair of your head will perish. By standing firm you will gain life* (Lk 21:12,16-19 NIV).

Even today, those who speak for God can be, and sometimes are, treated very badly – sometimes from the world and sometimes from the people inside the church. This happens as the devil works to stir up conflict and division in the church, so that the church spends all its time and energy fighting itself, leaving no time or energy to fight Satan. You can see the same thing in today's parable. The tenants were so busy mistreating the servants of the landlord they weren't doing the job the landlord had given them in the beginning.

There is plenty of law in this reading. God has put each of us here to do specific things. God has expectations and he expects us to meet those expectations. While no one objects to the fact that Christ came to set us free, some people don't seem to understand that we have been set free to serve, not to do as we please.

We all like the words of Paul to the Ephesians: *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast* (Eph 2:8-9 NIV). But then comes that pesky next verse: *For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do* (Eph 2:10 NIV). Uh-oh, God, are you telling me you expect certain things from me as a response to what you have done for me? That sounds like law preaching, doesn't it?

So where is the Gospel in this parable? The Gospel comes as God's response to us not doing what he has ordained for us to do. The Gospel is in God's patience.

In Old Testament times, God was upset with his people. He sent prophets to tell the people how upset he was and to tell them how to get back on track. The people didn't listen. So, God sent more prophets. And the people didn't listen. God sent wave after wave of prophets – some were ignored, some were abused, some were murdered. Is this beginning to sound a lot like the parable?

So what does God do with these stubborn, abusive, murderous people of his? Does he turn them to toast like he should? No. Instead of destroying the people, God sends his own Son as the ultimate prophet. God sends Jesus to tell his people to repent. God knows what the people will do and he sends Jesus anyway. My friends, that is Gospel – not just a little Gospel, but tons and tons of Gospel.

There are two main parts to this text. We've covered the first part – how God lovingly reaches out to his people. Over and over God extends his patience to give his people every chance to respond in a proper manner. The second part of the text is how God's people respond to his efforts.

The people in the Old Testament didn't want to hear what God had to say. That's why they treated God's prophets so poorly. They didn't want to hear that they were sinners

in desperate need of God's forgiveness. In rejecting God's message, they were rejecting God.

The question at hand is, are we any different? I don't think so. We don't always want to hear what God's Word has to say to us. We don't like being confronted with our sinfulness and our need to repent and be forgiven. We aren't interested in being told we are gossips. We don't want to hear that we sometimes lie to each other. We aren't fond of being told we're not always genuine. When there are needs inside and outside of the church, we are quite comfortable thinking that it's someone else's job to cover those needs.

In verse 17 of our reading, Jesus says: *Then what is the meaning of that which is written: 'The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone'? Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed* (Lk 20:17-18 NIV).

That has a very heavy law sound, so what does Jesus mean? The Law of God hurts when it points out people's sin. It hurts believers and non-believers alike. The consequence of that hurt depends on a person's reaction to the Law.

Those who fall on the Cornerstone are those who are hurt and convicted by the Law, but not destroyed. These people respond to the hurt of the Law by repenting of their sin and turning to God for forgiveness.

The word of God's Law hurts. The author of Hebrews writes: *For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart* (Heb 4:12 NIV).

We might be broken to pieces by the Law, but when we turn to God, Jesus heals us. Jesus picks us up and mends our broken lives, our broken spirits, our broken relationships, even our broken relationship with God. The sacrifice that Christ made on the cross is the healing that God offers to his broken people.

The last part of verse 18 tells the fortune of those who ultimately reject God and his offer of healing. It says: *but he on whom it falls will be crushed*" (Lk 20:18 NIV). The Darby Bible translates verse 18 in a more graphic manner: *on whomsoever it shall fall, it shall grind him to powder*.

Although God has love and patience beyond anything we can imagine, the Bible warns us that God's patience has its limits. It is possible for our rejection to push God's patience too far. God is to be treated with respect and reverence. Again, we turn to the book of Hebrews to hear: *Let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire* (Heb 12:28-29 NIV). We are also told: *It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God* (Heb 10:31 NIV).

Those who reject God will be crushed, ground to powder, by the cornerstone of the Law. These people see their sinfulness in the mirror of the Law, but instead of turning to God for forgiveness, they reject God to the point of God rejecting them.

The response of the tenants to the son of the landlord is very interesting. Remember, the tenants are God's people, the son is Jesus, and the landlord is God. The tenants reasoning is that they can kill the son and keep the inheritance for themselves. The irony is that killing the son to have the inheritance was totally unnecessary. The riches of God's inheritance already belonged to his people. But the people rejected what God intended to give them and forced God's ultimate Gospel response.

The crucifixion of Christ was more than just the fulfillment of a plot devised by evil men. In reality, the death of Jesus was God's ultimate act of love. In Egypt, Joseph told his brothers: *You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives* (Gen 50:20 NIV). The same is true with Jesus. His suffering and death meant life for all who believe and trust in him.

Part of the controversy surrounding the movie "The Passion of the Christ" was charges of anti-Semitism. The claim was that the movie made the Jews look bad because they wanted Jesus dead. But that's too simple. Paul says: *He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification* (Rom 4:25 NIV). It wasn't just the Jewish people who called for the death of Jesus, we all do. Every time we sin we take our place at the cross with hammer and nail in hand.

However, out of the riches of God's grace and mercy, and despite the fact that our sin helped nail Christ to the cross, the death of Jesus is what secures our inheritance in heaven. It's a beautiful paradox to the nth degree.

The parable of the tenants is packed full of Gospel. Even though there is a frightful warning to those who reject God, the overall theme of this parable is that God continues to reach out to his wayward people. From Adam and Eve to today, and until Christ returns, God's love will extend his grace and mercy to all people. That's the Gospel truth.