

## THE PARABLE OF THE TENANTS (Those who work for another)

Mark 12: 1-12; Matthew 21: 33-46; Luke 20: 9-19

**Theme:** God has rented a vineyard to all of us to take care of. This vineyard is our lives, our hearts, our minds, our possessions, our very souls. The deep question is, "How will we take care of our vineyard and, when God requires that we give back to him, what will we do?"

### Lesson:

In its context this parable is about Israel and its religious leaders: the Pharisees, Sadducees, and the teachers of the law. The prophets who came before are like the servants the owner of the vineyard sent back to collect some of the fruit from the vineyards. The problem is that Israel rejected the prophets as we can see from reading 1 Kings 18: 4. Ahab, one of Israel's kings, permitted his wife Jezebel to kill many of the prophets of God. Another one of God's prophets named Jeremiah was rejected (Jeremiah 20: 1-2). Jesus speaks of the rejection of the prophets of God in Matthew 23: 33-36 and says, "*You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell? Therefore I am sending you prophets and sages and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. Truly I tell you, all this will come on this generation.*" (Sages = wise and very respected people.)

The son, whom they rejected and killed, represents Jesus who was rejected by so many in Israel. At the end of his sermon to the Sanhedrin (the supreme Jewish court of justice with 71 members) as recorded in Acts 7: 2-53, Stephen says, "*You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him — you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it.*" Mark 11: 18 says, "*The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, **for they feared him**, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching.*" At the end of the parable we are studying today it says, "*Then they looked for a way to arrest him because they knew he had spoken the parable against them*" (Mark 12: 12).

When Jesus asked his listeners what the owner would do to the tenants who killed his son, they answered and said, "*He will bring those wretches to a wretched end and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time*" (Matthew 21: 41). In giving this answer, they condemned themselves because they were the very ones who were rejecting Jesus and the time would come when the "vineyard" would be given to the Gentiles (all non-Jews). Later they realized that Jesus had spoken this parable against them (Mark 12: 12 and Matthew 21: 45).

When Jesus quoted from Psalm 118: 22-23, which speaks of the rejected "stone," he was applying this to himself because these Jews rejected him. Jesus is like the capstone, or corner stone the most important of all. Literally the text says, "the head of the corner." If the cornerstone is bad, the house will fall. If we reject Jesus, our whole lives will fall apart. The Bible speaks of how important Jesus is in Colossians, "*He is before all things, and in him all things hold together*" (Colossians 1: 17).

Now the question for us today is, "*How will we take care of what God has given us on loan? How will we take care of our minds, bodies, and souls? What will we do with the message we have heard about Jesus? Will we be like the people who rejected and killed the prophets and eventually killed Jesus? Will you let your fear control you so much that you reject Jesus?*" There is a proverb that says, "*Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe*" (Proverbs 29: 25). Jesus said in Luke 12: 4-5, "*I*

*tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that they can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him."*

Remember also that everything you have, your possessions, your mind, your education, your heart and soul have been given to you on loan from God. He then has the right to come to us and ask us to give back to him. He asks us to give more than just some good deeds. He asks us to give our whole lives, our hearts, our attitudes, our everything to him. Jesus asks us to do more than just clean ourselves up on the outside. He exposed the hypocrisy of the religious leaders when he said to them, "*Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness*" (Matthew 23: 25-28). Jesus wants us to be totally committed to him on the inside as well as the outside. We can be good on the outside and still have hate, prejudice, selfishness, self righteousness, greed, anger, and lust on the inside. When we pretend to be righteous on the outside but in our hearts reject Jesus, we are like the tenants who killed the servants of the master who came to collect from them some of the fruit of the vineyard.

Think about your heart today. Are you holding back from Jesus what he is asking you to give back to him? Are you holding back your affections, your mind, your heart, your possessions, your soul? Have you deceived yourself into thinking that all you have is yours and no one has the right to demand anything from you? Remember what the Bible says in 1 Corinthians 6: 19, "*You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.*"

God is inviting you to receive his love and forgiveness and follow Jesus with all your heart, mind and soul. He is inviting you to believe in Jesus as the Son of God, Lord and Savior, to admit that you have sinned and have not measured up to God's goodness, then repent and be baptized so that you can receive the forgiveness of sins and the Holy Spirit from God in your heart. Then, he is inviting you to passionately follow Jesus the rest of your life, share him with others, be generous, and be compassionate toward those in need. In this way, you will be taking care of your vineyard and giving back to God what is his. Jesus will change your life.

One Chinese young man named Song Cheng (Gideon) was an atheist, but then was convinced that Christianity was true and took care of his vineyard. He summarized this by saying, "***My wandering heart has found the ultimate anchor, and my lost soul has found the eternal home.***"<sup>1</sup>

Now let's watch a video of some Chinese who took care of their garden or vineyard. However, at first they were not taking care of their garden.

Write down what you will do as a result of this lesson. This is for your private reflection on your life.

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<sup>1</sup> My Journey: From an Atheist to a Christian, <http://www.godoor.net/jidianlinks/mystory.html>

For further study here is a description of the Pharisees, Sadducees and the teachers of the law or scribes during the time of Jesus. This information is by Felix Just, S.J., Ph.D. at this site: [http://catholic-resources.org/Bible/Jewish\\_Groups.htm](http://catholic-resources.org/Bible/Jewish_Groups.htm).

**Pharisees** - a group of influential Jews active in Palestine from 2nd century BCE through 1st century CE; they advocated and adhered to strict observance of the Sabbath rest, purity rituals, tithing, and food restrictions based on the Hebrew Scriptures and on later traditions.

- "Pharisees" probably means "separated ones" in Hebrew, referring to their strict observance of laws and traditions (Luke 18:10-12).
- Long-time political and religious rivals of the Sadducees, vying for influence among the rulers and the people.
- Mostly laymen, but possibly also some priests (from the tribe of Levi) or even members of the Sanhedrin (Acts 5:34).
- Followed not only the laws of the Hebrew Bible, but also the "traditions of the elders" (Mark 7:1-13; Matt 15:1-20).
- Leaders were called "rabbis" or "teachers", such as Nicodemus (John 3:1-10; 7:50; 19:39) and Gamaliel (Acts 5:34; 22:3).
- Also had trained "scribes" (Mark 2:16; Acts 23:9) and "disciples" (Mark 2:18; Matt 22:16; Luke 5:33).
- NT Gospels portray them mainly as opponents of Jesus (Mark 8:11; 10:2), who conspire with the Herodians to kill Jesus (Mark 3:6).
- Some of Jesus' harshest polemics are directed against the "hypocrisy" and "blindness" of the Pharisees (Matt 23; John 9).
- In contrast to Sadducees (Mark 12:18-27), Pharisees believed in the resurrection of the dead (Acts 23:1-8).
- Paul himself was a Pharisee (Phil 3:5; Acts 23:6; 26:5), as were some other early Christians (Acts 15:5).

**Sadducees** - another prominent group of Jews in Palestine from 2nd century BCE through 1st century CE; they were probably smaller "elite" group, but even more influential than the Pharisees; they followed the laws of the Hebrew Bible (the Torah), but rejected newer traditions.

- "Sadducees" comes from the Hebrew *tsaddiqim* ("righteous ones"), which may refer to the way they wished to live their lives.
- The name may also derive from Zadok, the high priest under King David (1 Kings 1:26), since many Sadducees were priests.
- Long-time political and religious rivals of the Pharisees, although their influence was more with the wealthy ruling elites.
- Probably also rivals of the Herodians, since they had supported the Hasmonean Jewish rulers against King Herod.
- Closely associated with the Jerusalem Temple and with the ruling council ("Sanhedrin") of the Jews (Acts 4:1; 5:17; 23:6).
- Did not believe in life after death (Mark 12:18-27; Luke 20:27) or in angels or spirits (Acts 23:8).
- NT Gospels portray them (often together with the Pharisees) mainly as opponents of Jesus (Matt 16:1-12; Mark 18:12-27).
- But they also rejected the teachings of the Pharisees, esp. their oral traditions and newer innovations.

**Scribes** - men specially trained in writing, and thus influential as interpreters and teachers of the Law, and agents of the rulers.

- "Scribes" did not form their own party, but could belong to other groups (e.g. "the scribes of the Pharisees" in Mark 2:16; Acts 23:9).
- Most of their duties involved writing, e.g. producing legal documents, recording deeds, copying scriptures, teaching people, etc.
- Since they specialized in the interpretation of the Jewish Law (Torah), "scribes" are sometimes translated and regarded as "lawyers".
- But only Luke uses the technical term for "lawyer" (*nomikos*; 7:30; 10:25; etc.) in some passages where Mark and Matthew have "scribe" (*grammateus*).
- The Gospels usually portray scribes (along with chief priests, elders, and/or Pharisees) as opponents of Jesus who actively sought his death (Mark 11:27).
- The Acts of the Apostles also portrays them as opponents of the early Christians (Acts 4:5; 6:12).
- But there are a few exceptions: some scribes are neutral (Matt 13:52), or even praised by Jesus (Mark 12:28-34), or rise to defend Paul (Acts 23:9).