

Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost
October 6, 2002

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

A Parable of Rejection that Speaks to Us All

1. About the advantages God has given us
2. About the patience God has shown us
3. About the tragic consequences of rejecting Jesus

Matthew 21:33-43

NIV Matthew 21:33 "Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey. 34 When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit. 35 "The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. 36 Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. 37 Last of all, he sent his son to them. 'They will respect my son,' he said. 38 "But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance.' 39 So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. 40 "Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" 41 "He will bring those wretches to a wretched end," they replied, "and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time." 42 Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: "'The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes'? 43 "Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

It's painful to be rejected. Whether it's "You're fired," or "You didn't make the cut", or "I don't want to see you anymore," rejection hurts.

If you've ever experienced rejection, then you can begin to understand what Jesus was feeling in the days before his crucifixion in Jerusalem. Though the praise songs of the Palm Sunday still lingered in the air, the signs of rejection were there, too. The chief priests and teachers of the law reacted angrily when they heard the children sing, "Hosanna to the Son of David" to Jesus. Later, some of the same religious leaders accosted Jesus in the temple courts and demanded to know by what authority he had overturned the tables of the moneychangers and driven the merchants out of the temple courts. As if they needed one more reason to reject Jesus! And Jesus knew that the rejection hadn't yet reached its "Crucify him! Crucify him!" crescendo. The opposition that

was building explains why here in Matthew 21 and 22 Jesus tells this parable and two others about rejection. The King of the Jews was in large part spurned by the very people who claimed to await his coming. It was painful for Jesus. He wept over it.

But we've gathered here this morning for something more than a history lesson. This account wasn't given to us just so that we can solemnly shake our heads at the rejection of Jesus and ask, "How could they do that?" It's the grace of God—nothing in us!—that makes us any different. And the truth is, the seeds of our own rejection of Jesus are present in our sinful nature: in our failure to recognize the advantages God has given us and in the way we test God's patience. The parable of the tenants is **A Parable of Rejection that Speaks to Us All**. It speaks to us, first, about the advantages God has given us.

1. About the advantages God has given us

Jesus is standing in the temple courts on Tuesday of Holy Week when he says, *"Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey. When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to his tenants to collect his fruit."* The contents of this parable sounded familiar to Jewish ears. They knew Isaiah 5, our Old Testament lesson this morning. God's vineyard was his people Israel. He had planted them in the Promised Land after driving out the Canaanites. He had built a hedge around Israel when he gave them the law to set them apart from the other nations. God had been lavish with his care for Israel. St. Paul, a Jew himself, asks the question in Romans 3, **"What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew?"** Then he answers, **"Much in every way!"** (Rom. 3:1,2) Later in Romans he lists the advantages, **"Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised!"** (Rom. 9:4-5) If the people of Israel didn't believe in Jesus, it wasn't for lack of effort on God's part. He'd given them all the advantages.

But, then, we've got a lot of advantages, too, don't we? To paraphrase Paul, "What advantage, then, is there in being a Christian in 21st century America?" And the answer, once again, is, "Much in every way." We have the freedom to worship according to our conscience. We have the prosperity to support wide-ranging Christian ministries of nurture and outreach. Best of all, we have the gospel of Jesus Christ with its life-giving, life-sustaining power. We aren't like the man the prophet Amos spoke about, who staggered from sea to sea, from north to east, searching for the word of the LORD and not finding it. (Amos 8:12) No, we have the good news of God's mercy in Christ in such amazing abundance that it's like a banquet table groaning under the weight of all the delicious food.

So what does God want us to do with all these advantages? The parable tells us. *“He sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit.”* The LORD wants us to bear fruit. He wants us to repent of our sins. He wants us to confess that Jesus is the Lord, our Righteousness, the one through whom alone we are saved. He wants us to produce the fruits of repentance in rich abundance in our lives. But what happens so often is that we turn our freedom into a license to sin. We misuse our prosperity and lose our way in a fog of materialism. And the single most spectacular advantage, that of knowing Jesus, we too often cast aside as an insignificant thing. When these things happen, it becomes true of us, too, that despite our many blessings, we haven’t borne the abundant fruit that God expects.

This parable demonstrates, though, that God is nothing if not patient. He is more patient than seems humanly possible—or provident!—in seeking fruit from his vineyard. Let’s take note this morning, too, of the patience God has shown us.

2. About the patience God has shown us

Planting a vineyard requires patience. After all the work of planting the new vines, it’s not until four or five years later that you can expect a real harvest of fruit. The landowner in the parable was patient and finally the day when he could collect his share of the harvest arrived. But his initial attempt to collect his rightful share of the harvest didn’t go well. It says here, *“The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third.”* So what does the landowner do? He sends still more servants! And they get treated the same way. So then what does he do? He sends his son to collect the fruit, reasoning, *“They will respect my son.”* Who would do such a thing? Who on earth would send his son into a situation where his servants had already been badly abused and even killed?

No one on earth, perhaps. But God would. God did! His servants, the prophets, were routinely accorded a brutal reception when they came as God’s messengers to Israel. I think of the prophet Jeremiah being lowered into a muddy cistern because his penchant for telling the truth irritated King Zedekiah. I think of the prophet Amos, who went to the Northern Kingdom with a message from God, only to be told, **“Get out, you seer! Go back to the land of Judah. Earn your bread there and do your prophesying there.”** (Amos 7:12) Stephen, the first Christian martyr, asked the Jewish leaders shortly before his death, **“Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute?”**

So how did God react to the rough treatment dished out to his servants, the prophets? He sent his Son, his only, dearly-loved Son. We know the result. You can read it here in Matthew’s Gospel. They called him demon-possessed. They tried to stone him. And, not long after the beginning of his public ministry, they began plotting his death. Eventually, they succeeded. Jesus was condemned to be hanged on a tree because he called himself what he truly was, the King of the Jews. The rejection was not just intellectual or spiritual; it was

physical and it was fatal. They threw him out of the vineyard—they took him outside the city walls—and they killed him.

You might think this would be the limit of God's patience. But it's not. A little more than seven weeks after Easter, Peter was in Jerusalem preaching about Jesus. He didn't mince words. He told the people, "**You, with the help of wicked men, put (Jesus) to death by nailing him to the cross.**" (Acts 2:23) When his audience was cut to the heart by that accusation, Peter comforted them with the good news that God's patience had not been exhausted. "**Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.**" (Acts 2:38)

We are the beneficiaries of God's patience, too. The fact that the end of the world hasn't come yet is due to God's patience. Peter wrote, "**The Lord is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.**" (2 Pet. 3:9) Though we sin day after day, God's forgiveness in Christ is constant. As he absolves us of our sins, he welcomes us like a father embracing his long-lost child. God's patience was a marvel to the prophet Micah. He said, "**Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever, but delight to show mercy.**" (Micah 7:18)

The day will finally come, though, when calls for more patience from God will be too late. Even the people listening to Jesus' teaching knew what the landowner ought to do with tenants like those who so grossly abused God's kindness and patience. They said, "*He will bring those wretches to a wretched end.*" At the close of the parable, then, Jesus makes plain the tragic consequences of rejecting him in unbelief.

3. About the tragic consequences of rejecting Jesus

Psalms 118 predicted that when the Messiah came, he would meet with rejection. Jesus quoted it here, "*The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes.*" As far as many in Israel were concerned, Jesus didn't have the right stuff to be the Messiah. The problem, though, was not with Jesus, but with their concept of the Messiah. They wanted someone who looked kingly. Jesus looked like a servant. That was because he had not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. Failing to understand this, they rejected him. The one they rejected was in reality the capstone, the stone used as the lintel above an opening in a wall. Far from being a discard, a defective stone, the capstone was chosen for its strength. Their evaluation of Jesus was wrong. The one they rejected was the Lord, the Christ, the only hope for a dying world. The tragedy is that there would be no life for them without him. As the Bible says so plainly, "**Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.**" (Mark 16:16)

There would be another tragic consequences of this rejection. Jesus says to the Jewish leaders, "*Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.*" A dramatic change was going to take place in God's way of bringing people to the light of the gospel. In Old Testament times Israel was God's beacon, set apart to reflect the light of his grace to the nations of the world. Seeing God's goodness and mercy to Israel, the nations would come to Jerusalem to learn about the hope of Israel. But because of Israel's rejection of the long-awaited Savior, there would be a change. Now the kingdom of God would be given to the Gentiles. The roles would be reversed.

So it's come down to us. We can find ourselves here in the words of Jesus. We're the Gentile believers to whom the kingdom of God has been given. What an amazing privilege God has bestowed upon us! We are the repositories of the saving gospel of Jesus Christ. But we must know that with this great privilege comes a great responsibility. Jesus said, "*...the kingdom of God will be given to a people who will produce its fruit.*" God is still looking for fruit in his vineyard, and rightly so. He's given us all the advantages. He's been more than patient with us. Now he's looking for people who are troubled by their sins. He's looking for people who lay their sins at the foot of Jesus' cross and people who regard his promise of forgiveness in Christ as their dearest treasure. He's looking for people who love his Word and prize his sacraments. He's looking for people who regard their advantages as a sacred trust, each one to be used faithfully for God's glory and for the good of other people. He wants to find fruit in the form of people who shine like lights in this dark world and love their fellow man enough to share with them the living water who is Jesus Christ. You are that people. And by God's grace, you can produce the fruit he desires. Amen.