

VINEYARD TENDING

Matthew 21:33-43

For commodities brokers, unstable markets bring on mounds of stress. From grains to cotton, to foreign currency, to cattle and pork bellies...experts say these are the most volatile investments on the exchange. We all have investments, possession that we own and use to produce more goods and services. Economics – we study it in the classroom, we put it to practice in business, and we all hope we will benefit in the end.

Jesus teaches His listeners about vineyard tending through a parable of economic significance. The tenants correspond to the Jewish leaders who hated and eventually would kill Him. The landowner is God, and the vineyard is the kingdom of God. The servants sent to collect are the prophets, and the son of course is Jesus Himself. The lesson is pretty clear—because of their constant rejection of Jesus, the kingdom would be taken away from the Jewish aristocracy, and they would be punished severely.

Getting back to this notion of investments, we do nearly everything in our power to protect or secure that with which God has blessed us. Insurance is a billion-dollar business. Reliance on insurance, padlocks, and smoke detectors are intended to protect our sound investments. They put us at ease. Jesus' parable is intended to set off an alarm in our heads. and in our hearts. The Jewish hoi poloi had centuries of tradition invested in their teaching. Jesus was a threat to their national security. They resented His popularity with the people, their people.

That's it! These Old Testament priests and Pharisees has an investment in the people for themselves. To their way of thinking, the Israelites were their people. They assumed the vineyard God had planted was theirs; after all, they had been appointed as tenants by the Great Landowner, God Himself. These "chosen frozen" were hung up with a superiority complex.

Contrastly, consider your own misgivings. Your thinking gets muddled, and all at once you lose focus with your earthly investments. Some of you have young children or claim grandchildren. They are the future generation, the next best hope for all the success you couldn't achieve. So, tomorrow you go down to

the local grocery store and buy them a pound size chocolate bar. Handing it over to them, you kindly ask them to share it with their fellow brothers and sisters, or a neighbor. You've given them a sizeable investment, an investment they will cautiously guard with own their lives. Some of you have outgrown that kind of selfish guarding. (I haven't, but I know some of you are more mature than I am.) Some of you have more important investment than a rich, creamy, chocolate bar. Brother asks sister to borrow her car for a minute. Forget it! Mom goes through dad's old stuff and tells him she' going to throw some of the junk out. Not on your life! One man's junk is another man's treasure. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

The point is we all have investments we want to protect, just like the misguided leaders of Jesus' day. No, we may not be willing to kill for it, but so easily you and I forget who the Owner is. God send us parents to remind us that we are only stewards of God's investments. He sends us authorities like pastors and teachers "to collect His fruit" or see to it that we are honoring Him with everything we have. Our reaction is that we all too often resent it. Every time we act out in selfishness, and we do it often, we throw God out of "our" vineyards. In essence, our attitudes reflect the wicked violence of the ruthless tenants in our parable.

The Jewish leaders acted violently against the prophets and martyred the apostles. Jesus gave them warning to repent and believe in Him; they denied Him and blatantly rejected Him. We see that same sort of brutal violence against authority in 21st century America. It's in our own urban communities where policemen are shot in cold blood, and criminals are elevated to local heroes. No, we most certainly dare not exclude ourselves from the first century Jewish aristocrats whom Jesus addresses in the pointed parable. We're no better. It's a fact we can't deny. By mere association, our sin convicts us. It convicts us as enemies of the cross of Christ and accomplices with the hateful crowd.

So, we recognize that these words are also spoken by Jesus to us. "*He will bring those wretches to a wicked end,*" they replied, "*and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time*" (verse 41). Every sin of ours puts us in danger of having the kingdom of God taken away from us. Every sin, no matter how minor in our sight – like being selfish about a petty candy bar – remains a sin in God's eyes. No earthly insurance is going to protect us. No earthly investment will cover the cost required. Sin bears with it eternal consequences.

Moreover, this parable addresses another investment we dare not overlook. The landowner had invested a considerable sum toward the success of this vineyard. It had a hedge built up around it to keep out wild animals. It had a winepress, anticipating a favorable harvest. This vineyard had a carefully constructed watchtower to survey both inside and outside the compound. The landowner was paying out to hire good and industrious tenants. He had investments in the servants He sent to collect. All this added up. It added up to a losing proposition financially because of the dishonest, wicked tenants.

No wise businessman or woman today would put up with what these crafty and conniving tenants were doing. Twice the landowner had sent servants to collect his rightful dues. Twice they were summarily beaten, stoned, and killed. Twice the bold murderers had gotten away scott-free. Once bitten, twice shy. Justice today appears to be like that. Sometimes the judges get it right, but justice is not a given. We pride ourselves in a fair legal system that takes into account the principal of innocent until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt. But the landowner's patience is beyond reasonable doubt. The landowner had clearly and unequivocally been wronged. You and I wouldn't have stood for it. Not now, and not then.

God does not act so impatiently. Twice the parable illustrates His divine love and mercy toward us. Twice the Jewish leader were afforded a fighting chance to change their minds, their stony hearts, their bitter resentment towards our Lord Jesus Christ. Our heavenly Father waits painfully patient for us too. He has every right to crush us beneath the weight of temporal and eternal punishments with the power of His Law. *"But,"* writes Nehemiah, *"You are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love"* (Nehemiah 9:17b). Thank God for that! His loving-kindness is better than life.

Then God gave His most precious, His most treasured, the greatest investment He had – the landowner sent His Son. This parable demonstrates beyond all measure the love of our perfect, just God toward murderous and ruthless sinners like us. He didn't give up a chocolate bar, or a car, or his farm, or that which is most precious to you in this life. These things, even the whole world, would not have been nearly enough. God the Father gave His own Son for you and me. That's what the gospel in a nutshell declares: *"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life"* (John 3:16). It was no small price that was paid for your evil

deeds. Never think it a mere wave of a wand, and all is right. It was the beloved Son of God who was finally thrown out of the divinely ordained vineyard and killed for your salvation. What patience! What love with which our God has loved us! The result is an indelible insurance policy with heavenly benefits. The kingdom of God will not be taken from us. Though we have not earned it, it is ours through Christ and because of Christ.

What became of those rejectors of Jesus? In the end was justice served in the parable? Yes. The kingdom of God was taken away from those Jewish rebels and given to the newly ordained and newly established New Testament church founded on the confession of the apostles. Make no mistake—a very terrible and eternal end awaits the wicked. It won't be a little slap on the wrist or pat on the bottom. God Himself will see to it. The wicked will be forcibly expelled from the vineyard of God's grace and forever assigned to the place of weeping and gnashing teeth. Justice will be served in the Day of Judgment. The promise of Jesus has changed from century to century: *"Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him"* (John 3:36).

It ought not surprise or startle us that the world is still vehemently rejecting our Lord Jesus. The world of micro and macroeconomics with money investment is always seeking to earn more and more dividends. Whether today we have little or much, we are always striving to gain more tomorrow for ourselves (and many times at the expense of another). That's not all bad, but as 21st century Christians we believe we have even now the greatest investment life offers. We have the investment God put at risk for us; the all-availing sacrifice of Jesus offered up on the cross for our sin. Along with the apostle Paul we most heartily confess: *"I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me...I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus"* (Phil 3: 14, 14). To this end we pray, "Come, Lord Jesus, come." Amen.