

Pentecost 20

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Matthew 21:33-43

The Stone the Builders Rejected has become the Capstone

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Fellow-Redeemed,

It has always struck me. How could such beautiful and peaceful places have witnessed such bloodshed? You maybe felt the same way when you visited Gettysburg, PA, or Sharpsburg, MD near Antietam Creek. A different quiet and peaceful place where you would not expect violence is a vineyard.

Acres and acres of vines often on rolling green hills are a picture postcard of tranquility. There may be some kind of a wall around the outside boundaries. In the middle of the vineyard stands the winery. The entire pastoral scene elicits tranquility, not anger and resentment that lead to murder.

Yet that is exactly what happened in Jesus' parable of the Tenants, or as we learned it in KJV, the Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen. It is a striking parable of contrast between what should have been, and what is. The tenants should have welcomed the landowner's servants, his representatives, and then especially rolled out the red carpet for his son. Instead, the tenants killed the servants, murdered the son and lost the vineyard. Now it is our vineyard.

What happened? Jesus tells us by quoting the psalm. **The Stone the Builders Rejected has become the Capstone.** In Christ God has extended his grace to all. Through Christ God has judged all.

1. It was the Tuesday before Good Friday. Jesus is in the temple courts speaking to the Pharisees, chief priests, and elders who were questioning Jesus' authority to preach and teach and do miracles. Mark and Luke also record this parable. Matthew, writing for Jews, emphasized the mounting hatred of the Jewish leaders toward Jesus. Mark and Luke writing for Gentiles emphasized the patient love of God for all in Christ.

The vineyard is the kingdom of God. The landowner is God. In Christ God has extended his call to possess that kingdom to all. That call came first to his own people Israel. They were the first to receive his kingdom and bear fruit for him.

All throughout Israel's history, God had sent prophets to his people. From Moses through Isaiah to John the Baptist, these messengers declared, "Thus says the LORD". The prophets from God then looked for fruits of faith in the coming Savior.

What did the prophets get for their faithful efforts? "The tenants seized his servants; they beat the one, killed another and stoned a third. Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way."

Not giving up on the tenants, the landowner rightfully expected them to treat his son better. Surely they would recognize him and acknowledge his relationship to his father and respect him. That did not happen, did it?

"They said to each other, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance.'" It was no different with God's eternal Son whom the Pharisees and other Jewish leaders now were grilling as to his authority to compare them to the parable's tenants.

Make no mistake. Matthew tells us that they knew who Jesus was referring to in this parable. Matthew writes, "When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew he was talking about them. They looked for a way to arrest him."

In Christ God has extended his grace to all. When his first tenants killed his prophets and then his Son, the Lord took the vineyard, the kingdom of God, away from them and gave it to other tenants, the Gentiles. God has given the vineyard of the kingdom of God to us.

God has the right to do this. He makes this judgment through Christ. Through Christ God will judge all.

2. Jesus applied the words of Psalm 118 to the chief priests' and Pharisees' actions. They rejected him. By their rejection they made Jesus the capstone. He is the stone that holds the kingdom of God together. The Lord used their rejection to extend his grace to all nations in Christ.

God's judgment in this matter does not take place apart from but through Christ. Whoever "falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed." Jesus Christ is an offense to those who want to rely on their own righteousness. He is a stumbling block to those who rely on their own reason and wisdom. The very Savior who came for them causes their destruction because they reject him.

Through Christ God's judgment gives others the kingdom of God through the gospel. He gives it, Matthew writes, "to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time." Jesus will give it, he says, "to a people who will produce its fruit." It is through Christ that believers bear fruits of faith and give them back to the owner of the kingdom, our Lord God. It is through Christ that we continue to take care of the kingdom.

The historical context of Jesus' parable is the Pharisees' and chief priests' rejection of Jesus as the Messiah. This rejection went down through many in Israel as well. As a result, the Lord has graciously extended that grace to Gentiles, to you and to me in Christ. Through Christ God will judge us all; not on the basis of being Jew or Gentile and not according to our own goodness and works.

The immediate application of Jesus' parable is what are we doing with the Lord's vineyard, the kingdom of God? Do you welcome the landowner's servants who represent him and speak his Word? Or, do you kill them if not physically but by not listening to them or opposing them when they speak for God?

One author I read recently was bemoaning the current state of preaching and listening in many churches. I mentioned to the Bible class last Sunday how important preaching and listening to preaching are in the church. That author wrote, "There is not much of a premium today on preaching that seeks to uncover the truth and reveal it to people. People prefer to enjoy instead the repetition of half truths they already know, cosmetized and represented in a way they find entertaining and non-threatening. Nuggets of wisdom they have handled until they fairly gleam from the fondling."

Do you welcome the servants and the Son? Think of what you would do if you were visiting a winery and found out the son of the owner was "in the house." Wouldn't you locate him, run to him, listen to what he had to say about his vineyard? Or, would you think, "I'll murder the son and take his inheritance?"

Jesus Christ is "in the house." He is the landowner's son, the capstone, the heir of it all. Find him, run to him, and listen to what he has to say. In him God has extended his grace to you. Through him God has judged you. He has judged you not guilty of your sins. He was stricken, smitten and afflicted; rejected by men but now the capstone of our salvation.

God's vineyard is not ours to do with as we please. May the Holy Spirit bring about our daily repentance so we do not become "wicked husbandmen" and receive a wretched end, but instead be the tenants who will produce fruit and "give him his share of the crop at harvest time." Amen. <SDG>