

Introduction

Stories can be powerful tools of communication. A story well-told can seize attention and help teach a lesson or make a point. It can also enhance comprehension as well as evoke a strong response like emotion or even resolve. A well written work of FICTION may make you laugh or cry or even experience fear or anger; it is not even true but it can affect you deeply. Jesus was a powerful communicator. The multitudes who heard him were impressed because he spoke with authority. Among the communication tools he used effectively was the telling of stories or parables. By the use of parables, Jesus sometimes drew his listeners into a drama which enabled them not only to understand but also to experience an emotional component of understanding which brought weight and conviction to the truth he was communicating. We definitely see this in the parable of the wicked tenants. As we read it together, watch for both the understanding and the emotion that are evident in the ones who were listening to Jesus.

[Read Text and Pray]

The parable of the wicked tenants is one in a series. There was first the parabolic act of cursing the fig tree. It exposed the fruitlessness of Israel. Then came the parable of the two sons. It highlights the hypocrisy of the Jews in general and of the Jewish leaders in particular. Now the third parable is of the vineyard tenants. Its main point is to reveal the hostility in the hearts of the Jews and their leaders toward God himself. They are not just hypocrites; they literally HATE the very God who set them apart as a nation for himself and who has blessed them so abundantly. They have received grace from God but yet they despise him. And as a consequence they will pay a hefty price.

In the parable I want you to see . . .

I. God's Gracious Provision.

A. The parable begins with the master of a house. He is a great land owner. And he engages his wealth to plant a vineyard. He seemingly spares no expense. He makes proper preparation, supplying the resources necessary for growth and for fruitfulness. These aspects are suggested in the fact that he plants the vineyard. He also provides protection. It is depicted in the building of a fence around the vineyard. It would keep out thieves and wild animals. The tower would serve multiple purposes. It was a lookout post. From here one could see the servants of the master approaching so that the workers would be prepared to receive them well. One could also observe the approach of potential bandits or others with ill intent in order to meet them appropriately. And yet the tower would also be a place of shelter for the tenants. Finally, we observe that the master of the house dug a wine press. It is a mark of anticipation. He fully expects the vineyard he has planted and prepared for so lavishly to produce fruit. And that fruit will become fine wine. And he will expect to enjoy from its produce. Last of all he secured tenants. These workers would enjoy the privilege of working the vineyard. They would harvest the fruit and press the grapes and store the wine in skins or jars. For their labor they would have housing and would enjoy from the fruit, but by contract the master of the vineyard would receive his portion of the produce.

Establishing a vineyard such as this required no small investment. Each aspect involved significant expense, and this landowner spared none. To be able to have a part in this vineyard, to be able to work in this vineyard, would have been a high privilege and honor. So we have a landowner who plants the vineyard and spares no expense.

B. Clearly, the landowner is the Lord and the vineyard is Israel. It is more than a good inference from the parable itself. The prophet Isaiah sings a song in chapter 5. It is a song about the Lord and his vineyard. Isaiah calls the Lord his beloved. And he sings,

My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and he planted it with choice vines; he built a watch tower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it?

The end of the song goes like this:

For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting.

Psalm 80 reiterates this picture. Verse 8 says to the Lord, "you brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land."

C. The intent of the opening scene in the parable is to communicate the magnificence of God's gracious provision and loving care all aimed to produce fruit in abundance which would bless both the tenants and the master of the house. He would share the blessing with the tenants but he would expect that as the exclusive investor he would receive richly from the produce of the vineyard. It belongs to him after all.

God brought Israel out of the darkness and death of captivity to a blessed land prepared for the people to be fruitful in serving the Lord. All of grace, he would provide generously and graciously for them so that they would be fruitful in worship and in obedience. They would have no other gods but him and they would love him and they would thereby render to him the fruit of worship, praise, and glory. And this should have been easy. It should have been natural. As he said in Isaiah, "What more was there to do?" God brought them out to be his worshipers. He expected produce. In the parable he built a wine press in the midst of the vineyard.

D. Thus far we can pause to see the point illustrated by the introduction to the parable that God saves people in order to produce fruit. God certainly saves sinners from the penalty of sin. He who is in Christ escapes the righteous wrath of God. As Jesus said, "whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment but has passed out of death to life." But in Christ there is more than just freedom from condemnation and judgment. There is also the provision by God's grace for fruitfulness. It is the fruitfulness of loving and glorifying God. It is the fruitfulness of holiness and good works. Peter put it this way, Jesus "himself bore our sins in his body on the tree that we might die to sin and live to righteousness." God put Adam in the garden to image himself in the world. He put Israel in the midst of the land of the Canaanites to display God's glory before a host of ungodly nations. And he places believers in Christ to SHINE like stars against the night sky in the midst of a perverse and crooked generation. Christians are God's workmanship for good works. So don't hide your lamp under a basket. Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven. And do it enthusiastically out of a conscious awareness of how greatly and graciously God has provided for you to be fruitful. How amazing it is that we get to be workers in his vineyard!

II. God's Incredible Patience.

You notice in the parable that time for fruit arrived and the master sent his servants to get his fruit. The tenants, however, did not want to give the master what he was due. So they did not welcome his servants. They were hostile to the servants. They beat one and killed another and stoned another. What is incredible in the parable is that the master did not immediately come down upon the tenants. Instead he sent another wave of servants—more than the first. But the tenants did the same to them as they had the previous ones. Now surely the master would come judge these wicked tenants! No, he gave them one more opportunity. He sent this time his own son. Surely they would respect HIM.

This section of the parable depicts how through the years God sent his prophets to call the people to repentance. Over and over, one after the other, the Lord summoned his people through the prophets to turn from their idolatry and from their immorality and from their friendship with the world. Over and over they stiffened their hearts against his call. Sure, there were occasional revivals, but they were short-lived. The trajectory of the nation was consistently downward. Right now I am reading through Jeremiah. This man was hated because he called the people to repentance and because he prophesied things they did not want to hear. He was put in isolation. Food was withheld from him. He was threatened and falsely accused. He was thrown in a cistern. According to tradition he was stoned to death by certain Jews with whom he had gone into Egypt. According to Jesus the Jews had a history of killing the prophets God sent to call them back. And the way they were currently treating God's own son reveals that the hearts of the leaders were no different then than they had been in generations past. Even they recognize the evil depicted by the figure of the tenants. When Jesus asks what the owner will do with those tenants, the Jewish leaders reply with emotion, "he will put those wretches to a wretched end."

Jesus even foretells and depicts his own crucifixion at the hands of the Jews. According to the parable the wicked tenants threw the master's son out of the vineyard and killed him. So Hebrews says that Jesus suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. The blood of all the prophets added together could not atone for sin, but through his rejection and murder, the Son actually died a unique and glorious death. His death actually accomplished atonement for sinners whose nature is no different from these leaders. By nature we are all stubborn-hearted wretches, dead in trespasses and sins, children of wrath like the rest. But God! The taking of Jesus outside the city and the placing of him on the cross was humanity displaying its utter hatred of the son of God. But the son was displaying incredible love by accomplishing reconciliation between himself and sinners. And what must a sinner do to receive such reconciliation? Don't reject him! Don't reject him! Rather receive him as the son of the owner. Receive him as the son of God. Turn from your hostility against God and trust in the provision he has made through the death and resurrection of his son!

But despite the hostility of the tenants, the owner gave them opportunity after opportunity to change. Servant followed mistreated and rejected servant after servant. Finally the son came. This is the last opportunity before he comes himself. While the progression does suggest a looming end to the patience of God, it also displays the enormity of the patience of God. God's people need an understanding of the magnitude of God's patience. You know, God is love. And the first thing the Bible says about love in 1 Corinthians 13 is that love is patient. The patience of God is described in Psalm 86:15 which says, "But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, SLOW to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." The patience of God is beautifully portrayed by Jesus in this parable. It has us asking, "how could he be so patient?" The patience of God boggles the mind. God is patient to a world which largely has closed its heart and mind to him. The world operates on the assumption that God does not exist. But he continues to provide for them air to

breathe, water to drink, food to eat, light to see, and comforts to enjoy. They curse him and say he does not exist, but he has sent his servants to call the world to himself, and he waits, day after day. If it was up to us, the extension of patience would have ended long ago. But God is truly patient.

His patience is also demonstrated not only to the world in general but also in his relationship with those who have come to faith in Christ. We who have been justified are not yet glorified. And we won't be until we die or Jesus comes back which ever happens first. God has worked in Christ to free his people from the power of sin, to sanctify us. And our march toward bearing the image of Jesus is a series of steps in that direction. We are being changed ONE degree at a time. By God's grace we sin less. But we are not yet glorified and we often still return to the trough of sin. If God were not patient with us, where would we be? It is imperative for our own sanity that we take solace in the fact that God is patient toward us. He is so good. He is so good. The patience of God is not a reason to sin more. Take lightly his patience and you will show that you do not really fear God. But you who fear him, give praise to him for his patience and long suffering.

But also look to the patience of God as a model for your own patience. We are called to love one another, and the first characteristic of love is patience. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, PATIENCE. If God is slow to anger and abundant in mercy, so should we be with one another. We may think that zeal for holiness means we should live on the warpath against sin all around us. But no, Paul says do not return evil for evil but leave vengeance to the Lord.

Luke tells us of the Samaritan village that rejected Jesus. He and his disciples were passing through the village and sought a place to lodge. But the villagers refused for them to stay there because they were on their way to Jerusalem. James and John were breathing fire over this rejection. They said to Jesus, "Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" Jesus turned and rebuked them. When we benefit from the patience of God but then turn and refuse to be patient with others, we are just like the unforgiving slave. He owed an insurmountable debt to the master but the master forgave the debt. Still he went out and found a fellow slave who owed him but a little. Rather than forgiving, he refused to show mercy but threw his fellow servant into jail until he paid the debt.

We who have received the patience of God in infinite measure should overflow in our extension of patience to one another.

III. God's Eventual Punishment.

So Jesus poses to the chief priests and elders the question, "When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" He is pointing to a day of reckoning, a day when the owner has extended his patience to their extreme. He can send no one else. He must come himself. What will he do?

The chief priests and elders, they are ready with an answer. He is going to bring justice. These tenants are wretched and the owner will deal with them according to their wretchedness. Essentially, Jesus says, "How right you are! But how mistaken you are because you have not realized that YOU are the tenants! You are the ones about to throw the owner's son out of the vineyard and kill him because you have rejected God himself. You want his vineyard for yourselves. You will kill the heir in an effort to retain power and prestige for yourselves. And the owner will judge you."

The punishment is because they have rejected the very cornerstone to God's building. It is a marvelous thing that God is doing. Just as he planted a vineyard, he is building his kingdom as a temple consisting of people. And the chief cornerstone, the one upon whom the whole building rests, is a person. And that person is the Son of God. His name is Jesus. And if you reject him, you put yourself outside the kingdom. No one comes to the Father except through him. There is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by whom we must be saved. The consequences for those who reject Jesus are GRAVE.

First, the kingdom will be given to others. The kingdom belongs to those who produce its fruits. It is not going to be defined by Jewishness but by fruitfulness.

Second, there will be dire consequences for those who kill the son. Jesus says, "the one who falls on the cornerstone will be broken to pieces." This is not as in tripping over the son but intentionally falling upon the son to bring about his death.

Third, there will be the eventual consequence of eternal judgment before the very One these individuals were rejecting. Then the stone will fall upon THEM and THEY will be crushed under judgment eternally. In a third- person sort of way, Jesus is telling these leaders that eventually he will be their judge. And the judgement they have said should come upon the tenants will in fact come upon them.

And they knew it. They perceived that Jesus was speaking about them. But what was the result? Were they convicted so that they might turn from their wickedness? Clearly not. They were even more determined to keep the vineyard unto themselves. They were even more determined to get him outside the gate and kill him. But at the moment, their fear of man made them wait. A couple more days and they would have the multitudes where they needed them to be and they would perform their dastardly deed. They were warned but their hearts were hardened.

Conclusion

How do you react to the exposure of your sin? Defend yourself? Hide? Deny? Ignore? Harden your heart? That is the reaction of the enemies of God. And they were headed to a debacle, a crash. They would eventually be brought to their knees because they would not kneel before Jesus in the now. Scripture says, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." There is a way of forgiveness, of the removal of shame, of the bringing of reconciliation, of the embrace of the patience of God. It is the way of confession, of repentance, of a change of heart, of resolve to sin no more. It is also the way of trusting in Jesus Christ and embracing him as the cornerstone. Is there some sin to which you are clinging today, refusing to admit, hardening your heart? Let that sin go. Renounce it. Repent of it. And fall before Christ Jesus. Draw near to God and he will draw near to you.

Prayer

Benediction

May our Gracious and Patient Lord whose mercy abounds cause his face to shine upon us. May he give us repentant hearts that turn from hard-heartedness and may he give us hearts to trust in him to produce the fruit of his kingdom. A-men.