

PARABLE OF THE WICKED HUSBANDMEN – Matthew 31:33-46 cf. Mk 12:1-9; Lk 20:9-16

“Deadly Deeds of Depravity”

Gratitude is a rare commodity in this world of total depravity. Children are taking one another to court because of unhappiness over a share in the inheritance. Brotherly love is discarded like unwanted newspapers. Children are kicking parents out of the house because they cannot wait for their parents to die and to take their inheritance. Honouring parents is an archaic command to be ignored or forgotten. Employers are sacking their employees once their usefulness is used up or employees are resigning because of a better offer somewhere else. Loyalty is readily exchanged for cold hard cash! This is the world of the totally depraved that we are living in. Not only is there an absence of gratitude in our society today, there has also been an increase in violence and wickedness. Acts of good deeds and charitable works belie the depths of man’s depravity.

The spiritual realm is not much better. In fact, it is much worse because the expectation is that there ought to be better virtues and especially gratitude in religious circles. Sadly this is not the case. It is not so today and it was also not so in the days of Christ. The parable of the LORD Jesus Christ was spoken against the “most spiritual” people in Israel. Israel was chosen to be God’s people. The leaders were tasked with feeding, nurturing and protecting the flock. Instead, they “fleeced” the flock, not realizing that they would have to answer to the Good Shepherd of the flock.

Analyzing the Parable – The householder is God the Father; the vineyard is the work of God on earth; the husbandmen are the leaders in charge of God’s work on earth; the servants of the householder are the prophets and servants of God; the son of the householder is the Lord Jesus Christ.

Explaining the Parable – The care and concern God has over His work and people are seen in the verbs used in this parable to describe His vineyard. They include, “*planted a vineyard, and hedged it round about, and dugged a winepress in it, and built a tower.*” The householder protects it with a hedge all around it so that wild animals and thieves cannot enter in to destroy the vineyard. Then a winepress is dug out of solid rock where the grapes are pressed and the juices flow from. The tower is for the watchman or vinedresser to guard over the vineyard and its produce. Then the householder entrusts his vineyard and everything in it to the husbandmen¹ to look after as if the vineyard was their own. In the parable, the householder went into a far country which was common in those days. The husbandmen did not OWN the vineyard. They were farmers appointed by the householder. They had absolutely no right to the vineyard.

¹Husbandman comes from two Greek words which mean “land-worker.”

Harvest time had arrived. As was the custom, the householder sent his servants to collect the fruits of his own vineyard. Instead, the husbandmen *“took his servants, and beat one, and killed another, and stoned another.”* The household sent another batch of servants to collect the fruits from his own vineyard. The husbandmen did the same to this second batch of servants. Stoning was a common punishment in Israel meted out to criminals and wicked men. The accounts of this parable in Mark and Luke describe the servants of the householder as being sent one by one. The ill-treatment of the servants by the husbandmen increased in intensity - from beating to stoning to killing. There was neither remorse nor repentance on the part of the husbandmen. They were violent and most despicable in their evil deeds. Trust had been turned into daylight robbery.

The householder gave them another opportunity to repent and to do the right thing. This time he sent his son, his only son (see Mark 12:6), also called beloved son in Mark and Luke (Luke 20:13). The householder reasoned that they would show reverence to his only son who was to be the future owner of the vineyard. There could not be any argument or doubt in the minds of the husbandmen that the fruit of the vineyard has to be returned to the legal owner's son. They would not dare to hurt him, the householder must have thought. The householder was very wrong. The deadly deeds of the totally depraved were manifested by their premeditated murder of the only son of the householder. The wicked husbandmen said among themselves, *“This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and let us seize on his inheritance.”* They caught hold of the son and cast him out of the father's vineyard. They slew him. It was premeditated murder!

The hearers of this parable were asked this very pointed question, *“When the lord therefore of the vineyard cometh, what will he do unto those husbandmen?”* Amazingly, the hearers understood what Jesus said in the parable and they replied with righteous indignation, *“He will miserably destroy those wicked men, and will let out his vineyard unto other husbandmen, which shall render him the fruits in their seasons.”* Jesus did not continue with the parable, neither did he acknowledge their reply. Instead, Jesus quoted the Scriptures taken from Psalm 119:22-23. He rebuked them. Evil men might not want to acknowledge Christ as the Head of the corner but He will forever be the Head of the corner. This is the stone from which every part of the building will take its reference point before construction. This is the LORD's doing and men are helpless to stop Him.

The punch line in this parable is that *“The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof. And whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken: but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder.”* The ministry of God will be given to another. All who oppose the householder will be judged and ground to powder.

The Pharisees and chief priests knew that Christ was inferring that they were the wicked husbandmen in the parable. They wanted very badly to lay their evil hands on Christ but they were afraid of the people who regarded Christ as a prophet.

Applying the Parable -- Gentiles received the gospel duties when the Jews defaulted from their responsibilities. The local church was prophesied in Holy writ. This was the format of the dispersion of the gospel message throughout the world as Acts 1:8 highlighted. As far back as Genesis 12:1-3, the covenantal promises to Abraham had already included the whole world. This was the fulfilment of it. Through no fault of God but only that of the chief priests and Pharisees, the privilege of the visible manifestation of God's grace and mercies have been handed over to the local churches spread throughout the whole earth. As long as the local church is functioning according to God's holy and perfect Word, she is fulfilling the role which was once given to Israel in the OT. But Gentiles must beware of pride. **Romans 11:18-24** warn, *"Boast not against the branches. But if thou boast, thou bearest not the root, but the root thee. Thou wilt say then, The branches were broken off, that I might be grafted in. Well; because of unbelief they were broken off, and thou standest by faith. Be not highminded, but fear: For if God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest he also spare not thee. Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God: on them which fell, severity; but toward thee, goodness, if thou continue in his goodness: otherwise thou also shalt be cut off. And they also, if they abide not still in unbelief, shall be grafted in: for God is able to graff them in again. For if thou wert cut out of the olive tree which is wild by nature, and wert grafted contrary to nature into a good olive tree: how much more shall these, which be the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree?"*

Leaders in churches today must be mindful of their God-given duties to nurture, protect and feed the flock of Christ, who have been redeemed by Christ's precious blood. The church is not the building but the people. The people in the church are not theirs. The church is never a dynasty to be passed on to family members. God's church is to be passed on to faithful men, not family man. Christ will punish these leaders (especially pastors and elders) who abuse their power and position and who "fleece" the flock of Christ instead of feeding them. They will not escape. Those who fight against Christ will be broken. Those whom Christ will fight against will be ground to powder! Beware and be warned, all the enemies of Christ and all who are derelict in their duties as under-shepherds of Christ's flock! This Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen is for you.