



After 24 chapters of The Story I think we are learning that The Story is about returning to God. And we can only return to God if we know the way back to God. In John 14 Jesus describes heaven as His Father's House with many rooms. Then he says, *"I go and prepare a place for you."* So one of his disciples, Thomas, who was listening intently to what Jesus had said but was having a hard time wrapping his head around it, asked, *"Lord, we don't know where you are going so how can we know the way?"*

Jesus answered Thomas. He said, *"I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really know me, you will know my Father as well."* Then he goes on to say, *"Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father."*

We have been reading about Jesus these past few weeks in The Story. We are seeing that each of the gospels gifts us with a biography of Jesus. Each gospel is loaded with things Jesus did and said. But the central point of each gospel is not simply to convey information about what Jesus said and did. Each gospel is written to bring the reader to grips with who Jesus is. Each is written to force the reader to scratch his or her head and wonder, Who is this man?

In Matthew 16 Matthew tells us that Jesus asked his disciples, *"Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"* They replied, *"Some say Elijah, others say Jeremiah or one of the other prophets, some even say you are John the Baptist."* Then Jesus asked, *"But what about you Peter? Who do you say that I am?"* Peter answered him, *"You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God."* And Jesus replied, *"Blessed are you Peter."* Jesus went on to say that he must suffer many things at the hands of the chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. Peter's response, "No way Lord. This can never happen!" Peter was doing what came natural, something we all do. He gets confused because what Jesus told him didn't fit Peter's narrative. In Peter's Lower Story it just didn't make sense that Jesus, his messiah, his king would be killed.

Peter's narrative was that his Messiah, his King should assemble an army and overthrow the earthly empire of Rome. But before their eyes, God's Upper Story was being fulfilled. Jesus was indeed The King, and his spiritual kingdom was taking shape. Next week we will read about King Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey as the triumphant King as the people shouted "Hosanna, Hosanna to the King." So who is Jesus?

Who is Jesus?

He was also a sacrificial lamb. That was his calling. He was born to die as the sacrificial lamb who would die to pay for our sins. The millions of animals sacrificed over the centuries pointed to this one sacrifice—Jesus' death on a cross, the Lamb of God slain for the sins of the world.

As we approach Palm Sunday and as we go into Good Friday and then Easter Sunday, there is another question that gives us pause to think. Every one of us has people in our lives that we love dearly and we know they need to know the way back to God is through Christ, and that they need to believe and trust in what Christ did for them by dying for their sins. We pray for our friends. We are compelled to talk with them and we are compelled to seek to show them the love of Christ.

Also, every one of us has people in our lives that are difficult to love and we know that they also need to know the way back to God is through Christ and they need to believe and trust in what Christ did for them by dying for their sins. Hopefully we pray for these difficult people. Hopefully we talk with them and show them the love of Christ. So that begs the question that is answered in our text this morning. It's the kind of question that makes us uncomfortable. How does God deal with people he cares deeply about, yet still reject him?

We are not going to take time this morning to look at scriptures that tell us that Christ actually did die to save us from something, something tangible and terrible. That tangible and terrible thing the Bible calls hell.

We are not going to take time this morning to look up the scriptures and present theologically how a loving God could actually allow people to go to this place of eternal punishment.

We are not going to take time this morning to present theologically how God can be so loving and so full of grace for sinners like us, and at the same time be so righteous and holy that sin has consequences and God will not compromise on sin. A huge price for our sin had to be paid.

We are not going to take time this morning to present theologically that God gives people the freedom to choose to reject God and therefore choose to be condemned by God.

These can be very interesting discussions when we don't attach the faces of those we love and do life with who have yet to receive Christ as their personal Savior. Faceless discussions about

these grimmer points of theology are great in coffee houses, Bible College classrooms, but not for where we live. We all know of people who have yet to trust Christ and their eternal destiny is not secure.

Around the turn of the 20th century French artist August Rodin created a well-known sculpture called *The Thinker*. We look at this work and wonder, What was he thinking about? Was he solving a math problem? Was he thinking about love? Was he wondering where he left his clothes?

Most people don't know that *The Thinker* was not created to be a stand-alone piece. Rodin had designed *The Thinker* as part of a larger piece to be called "Gates of Hell," which was never completed, that included demonic beings, tormented souls, and monsters writhing in agony on their way to judgment. Some say *The Thinker* was Adam contemplating the Fall of Man, some say it was the poet Dante illustrating his work, *The Divine Comedy*. Some say it was Rodin himself contemplating his own destiny.

I want us to assume the position and think about the Gates of Hell. I want us to assume the position and do the hard thing and allow the faces of those we do life with to enter our minds as we think. Open your Bibles to Mark 12. Today we are looking at a parable that answers our question. If you remember, Jesus did a lot of teaching through story by using parables. Parables teach a spiritual truth based on a story, using things in the story that are known well by the audience and relatable to their way of life and culture.

The Parable of the Tenants

"Jesus then began to speak to them in parables: 'A man planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a pit for the winepress and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place' (v. 1).

I imagine there may be some here who have actually planted some kind of vineyard. I won't ask you to stand up and give a testimony to the hard work and the great care needed to plant a vineyard that produces fruit. The point is that it takes hard work. The rocky fertile hillsides of Judah were excellent for growing grapes—the right rainfall, the right temperature, the right concentration of clay and limestone in the soil.

The story reveals more to us than just planting a vineyard. It says the man built a wall around it to protect it from small scavengers. He must have spent days removing the rocks from the soil and then stacking them around the perimeter of his vineyard to make a protective wall. Then it says he dug a pit for the wine press. A wine press was actually dug by hand in limestone rock. Imagine the work to scrape out a large shallow pool to put the grapes to be crushed. In those days most crushed the grapes the *Love Lucy* way—bare feet. As the juice was squeezed out it would flow down a channel to a fermenting pool that also had to be dug

out of the rock, and along with the skins the juice would ferment to make wine. But you couldn't just leave this big investment out in the countryside unprotected, so he built a watchtower, likely a tower about 15 feet tall and 6 feet square.

We see from this parable that the landowner represents God. The picture is that God prepared a place beforehand with great care. He then handpicked and established and resourced these farmers. He literally handed over his precious vineyard to these farmers who would rent from him and work the vineyard in such a way to bear fruit. Then when harvest came they would give the landowner the share that belonged to him per their agreement.

God establishes his people with care that they might bear fruit. Every Jewish person who heard these words of Jesus would have recognized what Jesus was referring to in this parable. The vineyard was a national symbol for Israel. The people understood how God, like the landowner of the story, had taken great pains to make the spiritual vineyard of Israel healthy and productive.

They understood that God had entrusted his people to leaders like the ones he was speaking to at that moment: Priests, scribes and elders. Together they made up a council of 70 called the Sanhedrin which oversaw the spiritual life of the nation.

"At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants to collect from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. But they seized him, beat him and sent him away empty-handed. Then he sent another servant to them; they struck this man on the head and treated him shamefully. He sent still another, and that one they killed. He sent many others; some of them they beat, others they killed" (verses 2-5).

So at harvest, God looks for fruit. In this story the owner of the vineyard sends servants to the tenants to collect on his investment. But we read that each of these servants received a terrible welcome. These tenants were not acting like tenants. They were acting more like they owned the vineyard. They acted as if the landowner, by sending his servants, was actually trespassing on their land.

We see that the tenants even kill some of the landowner's servants. At this point Jesus is showing how Israel's religious leaders had treated God's prophets sent by God. Remember those prophets? Elijah was driven into the wilderness. Isaiah, according to tradition, was sawed in two. Zechariah was stoned to death. John the Baptist was beheaded.

The Book of Hebrews summarizes in chapter 11, verses 37-38 what the life of a prophet was like. **"They were sawed in two, they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated – the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, lived in caves and in holes in the ground."**

All of this by the tenants was done for one reason: These tenants didn't want to answer to a higher authority. They didn't want God telling them how to live. It's no surprise when God sends someone into our lives who calls us to surrender to a higher authority. We find ways to shut them out.

In the midst of this attitude of life—I don't need God's help and I certainly don't need him telling me how to live—we see in this parable that God patiently and kindly pursues, despite rebellion. Prophet after prophet is rejected. In 2 Peter 3:9, the Apostle Peter weighs in, *"The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."*

The parable continues. Look at the heart of God revealed to us further in verses 6-8.

"He had one left to send, a son, whom he loved. He sent him last of all, saying, 'They will respect my son.'"

The landowner is saying, "they won't listen to my servants, perhaps they'll listen to my beloved son. They have to respect my son. He's me. He has my authority. When they see his face they will see me. He is the path to me."

Wouldn't you want to give this man some advice? "Hey, if you really love your son, don't send him. Don't be foolish. Don't be stupid, Don't be that extravagant. These humans are not worth it. They don't respect you. Worse than that, they hate you and they will hate your son. And that proved to be true.

"But the tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' So they took him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard (verses 6-8).

They seized the son. Then they killed him and as the last act of indignity, they threw him out of the vineyard.

God shows us extravagant love by sending his only Son. Martin Luther said, "If I were God and the world treated me as it treated him, I'd kick the wretched thing to pieces." Charles Spurgeon said, "If you reject him, he answers you with tears; if you wound him, he bleeds out cleansing; if you kill him, he dies to redeem; if you bury him, he rises again to bring resurrection. Jesus is love made manifest."

Are there limits to his patience? Assume The Thinker position. What happens to those who keep on rejecting his authority? How long will God let this go on? In verse 9 Jesus asked the key question of the parable?

"What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others."

As we might recall from history, a great national judgment came upon Israel under the Roman Emperor Titus only 40 years later. In 70 AD Jerusalem was destroyed, the city burned, no

stone stood standing. You can still see stones the size of trailers toppled from walls left blocking entrances to the ancient city of Jerusalem still there as reminders of God's judgment on his rebellious people. But the lesson of the parable doesn't end there. He gives the vineyard to someone else.

God will judge and establish a new people based on their response to Jesus. Jesus changes images here from a vineyard to a building. The vine-growers are now builders.

Haven't you read this passage of Scripture: "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes?" (verses 10-11).

These builders are picking choice stones to build a beautiful temple. Each one is carefully inspected. One is judged as useless and tossed into the rubble pile. But as the building continues, a choice stone is needed, a choice stone that will hold the entire building together and keep it from collapse. They look and look and realize that the perfect fit, the perfect stone to hold the entire building together was in the rubble pile. They pull it out and it is made into the cornerstone of the building.

It's no mistake that in the original language the word used for "stone" (*eben*) is almost identical to the word for "son" (*ben*). Jesus Christ the beloved Son (*ben*) was killed by the tenants and thrown out of the vineyard; he was the stone (*eben*) the builders rejected and cast off into the rubble pile. But the greatest surprise of all is that he was raised from the rubble pile of death to become heir of the vineyard and the chief cornerstone of a spiritual building made up of all who claim him Lord, whether Jew or Gentile.

"Then the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders looked for a way to arrest him because they knew he had spoken the parable against them. But they were afraid of the crowd; so they left him and went away" (v. 12).

So we have seen not only what Jesus does, we see who Jesus is. We see that God has turned this vineyard over to those who accepted Jesus as King and as the sacrificial lamb who died to pay for their sins.

We also must ponder this: What is our personal responsibility as we assume the position of The Thinker sitting safely outside the Gates of Hell? What is our responsibility for those we do life with that don't see Christ is the way to God and who will fall under judgment?

May we be like Paul who said that the goal of his life was to please God and he was confidently waiting for that day to stand before Christ to receive whatever blessings God might have for him beyond the precious gift of salvation he had already received on faith. This compelled Paul. If our goal is like Paul's to please Christ, we need to think about the fact that we are now tenants

in his vineyard, and we have been given a responsibility to bear fruit in God's vineyard.

The work God has for us to make and mature more disciples until he comes again is to be accomplished through his church. The scripture is clear, there is no other plan. The work needed to be done in our community will simply not get done if we the church do not do it. There are people that we can reach that no other church is positioned to reach. God has entrusted us. It's a responsibility we must take seriously. So look around and see what God is doing around here and climb aboard. Be intentional to love on those outside these church walls in those places of influence God has sent you, places like your job, your school, your neighborhood, your family. You, along with your Christian friends, or along with your community group, consider signing up for a LoveWorks project to serve Christ outside these walls.

God has blessed and protected our vineyard. It is in great condition to bear fruit. He has resourced us beautifully for the tasks ahead. We don't have a watchtower or a winepress, but we are rich in resources that allow us to connect with God, with other believers, with a ministry, and to receive encouragement and support to share with our neighbors up and down this peninsula, all for the purpose of bearing fruit. The question we need to be reminded of regularly is this: What distracts you from the work of the vineyard today?

Is it your schedule? May God reveal to you his priorities. Is it your fears? May God give you confidence to step out and trust him, to experience the rush of being placed in a position of being used by him completely dependent upon him showing up as he leads you to reach out. Do you think your past failures and doubts has disqualified you from working in the vineyard?

Over Thanksgiving weekend Julie and I went to the Napa Valley for a little get away. We hadn't been to Napa in over 20 years. We didn't know much about vineyards or wine and the work involved to produce it. My wine expertise was limited to Trader Joe's wine at \$2.49 per bottle. So we took a vineyard tour. It was a great decision. At one point our guide was telling us about what makes the grapes so sweet. He told us that stress produces sweeter fruit. What kind of stress? If the roots need to work hard through a hard and rocky soil to find nutrients, it puts stress on the vine. The stress brings exceptional flavors into the fruit. Then he went on to talk about the harvest. He said that harvesters wait for the hottest part of the day to harvest. Why? The heat of the day brings the sugars out of the vine and into the fruit. The stress of being under heat produces the best fruit.

Your hard knocks, your failures, your struggles are not without purpose. God can use all your experiences, the good, the bad, and the ugly to bear sweet fruit in the vineyard. You have something to offer someone that no one else can fully identify or connect with that will move them toward Christ.

Now for you older folks here today, you pillars, I have some special encouragement for you. Have you ever wondered if you are too old to bear fruit? That you are past your prime? That over the years you did your duty and now it's the younger one's turn? It's time for someone else to weed and prune the vineyard? Someone on our tour asked if they had any old vines in the vineyard. The guide said this, "We have a smaller parcel of very old vines." "How come?" "Well, the older vines don't produce the volume of fruit that the young ones produce, and the old vines take a little longer to get to the point of producing the fruit each year." He asked why they keep the old vines around. He said, "If we are patient and wait for the older vines to catch up and produce their fruit these older vines don't produce as much but what they do produce is the sweetest fruit that creates the finest wine in the vineyard."

Are you listening you old vines out there?

Some friends were hanging out one day, and the conversation grimly turned to the issue of death. One of the friends asked the others, "What would you like people to say about you at your funeral?"

One friend answered, "I would want people to say, 'He was a great humanitarian who cared about his community.'"

A second replied, "I would want people to say, 'He was a great husband and father, an example for many to follow.'"

The third friend gave it some thought and answered, "I would hope someone says, 'Look, he's moving!'"

That third one is funny, but you know what? When God looks at me today, when he looks at us today, when he looks at our CPC church family today, I want him to say, "Look, they're moving!" I want him to look out on his vineyard and say, "They don't just talk. They work." I want him to say to the heavenly host, "I'm so proud of my new tenants in my vineyard. They are not dead. They are moving."

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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