

Matthew 21:33-46 (CEV) Renters of a Vineyard

Jesus told the chief priests and leaders to listen to this story:

A land owner once planted a vineyard. He built a wall around it and dug a pit to crush the grapes in. He also built a lookout tower. Then he rented out his vineyard and left the country.

When it was harvest time, the owner sent some servants to get (Greek: the fruits) his share of the grapes. But the renters grabbed those servants. They beat up one, killed one, and stoned one of them to death. He then sent more servants than he did the first time. But the renters treated them in the same way.

Finally, the owner sent his own son to the renters, because he thought they would respect (Greek: my son) him. But when they saw the man's son, they said, "Someday he'll own the vineyard. Let's kill him! Then we can have it all for ourselves." So they grabbed him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him.

Jesus asked, "When the owner of that vineyard comes, what do you suppose he will do to those renters?"

The chief priests and leaders answered, "He'll kill them in some horrible way. Then he'll rent out his vineyard to people who'll give him (Greek: the fruits) his share of grapes at harvest time."

Jesus replied, "You surely know that the Scriptures say,

'The stone that the builders tossed aside is now the most important stone of all.

This is something the Lord has done, and it is amazing to us.'

I tell you God's kingdom will be taken from you and given to people who'll do what he demands. Anyone who stumbles over this stone will be crushed, and anyone it falls on will be smashed to pieces."

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard these stories, they knew Jesus was talking about them. So they looked for a way to arrest Jesus. But they were afraid to, because the people thought he was a prophet.

Grapes of grace (fruit of righteousness)

The question of Jesus' authority continues to be forefront in today's parable. The parable challenges the Jewish leaders to ask themselves if Jesus is the Son of the Father. Has Jesus been sent to them? Are they the tenants in the vineyard? But they don't really get it and continue in their unfaith, their unbelief. They refuse to accept Jesus' authority.

I'm not sure how we relate to the role of the tenants and because a question was raised last week I'd like to dig into the topic of producing fruit, our response to grace.

The owner in the story did everything for the vineyard. What could be expected in return for this investment? Certainly a fruitful vineyard, and also tenants who'd deliver the fruit to the one to whom it belonged. Withholding fruit is the equivalent of not giving God what belongs to God.

What fruit was the owner looking for? What is the fruit of a vineyard? Grapes.

What fruit is God the Father looking for in our lives? The answer is the same as last week. He's looking for faith. Faith which believes Jesus has authority to save. But is that all? This is the question someone asked last week, "Why be good?" Why do good works? Why bear fruit?

If God's love and grace are so freely and readily available, to big and small sinners alike, why be good? If God's will for us, if all God really wants, is for us to believe in his Son for our salvation, then why be good? Is it necessary for us to do good works? Does God have any expectation we'll be good? Is it necessary to be good?

Today's reading gives us the beginning of an answer? As the vineyard produced grapes so we produce the grapes of grace. Fruit follows faith. Good works flow freely from God's dearly loved people.

Consider **Ephesians 2:8-10** ⁸“For it’s by grace you’ve been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it’s the gift of God— ⁹not by works, so no one can boast. ¹⁰For we’re God’s handiwork, **created in Christ Jesus to do good works**, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

Good works don’t save us but they are evidence we’re saved. Good works are evidence of faith. We’re not saved by good works but we’re saved for good works. If a person says they have faith but there’s no evidence in their life then it might be fair to ask if their faith is genuine.

Maybe **James 2:14-18** helps us: ¹⁴ *What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them?* ¹⁵ *Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?* ¹⁷ *In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. ¹⁸But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.”*

Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds.

In his Preface to the book of Romans, Martin Luther says: “Faith is a living, daring confidence in God’s grace, so sure and certain the believer would stake his life on it a thousand times. This knowledge of and confidence in God’s grace makes a person, glad and bold and happy in dealing with God and with all creatures. This is the work which the Holy Spirit performs in faith. Because of it, without compulsion, a person is ready and glad to do good to everyone, to serve everyone, to suffer everything, out of love and praise to God who has shown them this grace. **Thus it is impossible to separate works from faith, quite as impossible as to separate heat and light from fire.**”

The natural response to God’s love and grace is a loving and gracious life of service, a life filled with good deeds or good works. But as Luther points out, in fact it’s more than natural because the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit is at work in the person of faith, in the follower of Christ.

Therefore Paul tells us about the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians chapter 5:22f ***But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.***

So back to the question, why be good? Or is there any need to be good? Do we do good works so we’ll look good? To please others? To please God? Who gets the credit? Whose ‘account’ is increased by our good works? Who is given the praise?

We could ask it in a different way. Does believing in Jesus change our lives - not just at the end when we die - but right now? Does our faith in Jesus make a difference to us? Does it make us better? Does it result in good works?

Yes, of course it does. Faith without works is dead. The amazing, gracious, love of God can’t be received, understood, and appreciated without a response of love to God and a desire to please God with our everyday lives.

In the Augsburg Confession Article VI, The New Obedience, we read “Our churches also teach faith is **bound to** bring forth good fruits, and it **is necessary to** do good works commanded by God, because of God’s will, but we should not rely on those works to merit justification before God.”

Does a vine ask whether it should bear fruit or not? No, good vines produce good fruit. Like fruitful vines producing grapes, we produce the grapes of grace, the fruit of grace. Our good works are empowered by the Holy Spirit and bring glory and praise to our loving God.

We respond to God’s goodness by being good, by doing good works.