

Let me repeat Jesus' words: "Therefore, I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that will produce its fruit."

Who, us? The kingdom of God will be taken away from *us*? This parable of the vineyard that Jesus tells is disturbing, especially his warning. Is it fair to say that the kingdom of God, the Church, Christianity in this country is on its heels? Jesus warned his listeners, and that includes us, that if we are poor stewards of His vineyard, His Church, He will take it away and give to others who are going to take care of it properly.

There are some around us who believe we are living at a point in history when it very much looks like this very thing is happening before our eyes. In the last 30 to 50 years, church membership in many mainline denominations has steadily decreased. In that time have we produced more or less fruit of the kingdom than we had been before? In the meantime, the Gospel of Christ is flourishing, producing great fruits and growing at incredible rates in other parts of the world, especially Africa and Asia.

At one time in this country, most of the people you knew went to church. Reverence was a virtue that most civic minded people practiced and expected others to practice. There were more baptisms than funerals. You were likely to hear a chaplain say a prayer before the start of the local high school football game over the PA system. You could say the pledge

of allegiance in school without someone suing to have the words “under God” removed from it. You could post the Ten Commandments in your court room. And so on.

Things are different now. It’s as if Christianity has heeded some call to retreat. How are we going to answer for this?

God has patience. I doubt there are very many of us who truly understand just how patient God really is. God is indeed *long*-suffering. Emphasis on the *long*. But patience, even God’s great patience with us, does not mean there is no end point. And if we haven’t reached that point, we’ve come dangerously close to it. That reality ought to shake us to our very souls.

The details in this parable of the vineyard are not too difficult to see. Israel is represented by the vineyard, and God is the vineyard owner. The tenants are the religious leaders of Israel, who were charged by God with the welfare of the nation. The messengers who were sent by the vineyard owner represent the prophets, who were often rejected and killed. Jesus, of course, is represented by the vineyard owner’s son. Here in this short parable, Jesus depicts at once both the history and future of Israel. And a grim future it is.

The parable of the vineyard has a great deal to teach us about God, about us and about Jesus Christ. First, this parable tells us about God’s *trust* in human beings. The owner of the vineyard entrusted it to the tenants. He left to go to another country, leaving them with their task. He

did not stand over them like a watchful guardian, ensuring that they carry out their task. God pays us a huge compliment by entrusting us to complete the tasks he has given to us. He leaves it up to us. How we handle the task God has given us, the tending of His vineyard, the stewardship of His Church, will one day be a source either of great joy or deep regret.

And this parable illustrates for us the great *patience* of God. The vineyard owner sent messenger after messenger to those tenants. He didn't come back to the vineyard immediately with sudden vengeance after the first messenger had been abused and ill-treated. He gave the tenants chance after chance to respond to his appeals. It's an illustration of how God bears with us, even in our continual sinfulness, and continues to send people into to our lives to call us back to Him. God doesn't give up on us after we sin once. Or twice. Or 490 times. You get the idea.

However, the parable of the vineyard also teaches us about God's *judgment*. God's patience is not without some limit. There is finally an end point. There is a line that can be crossed from which there is no return. The vineyard owner finally takes his vineyard away from those tenants who produced nothing, and who were abusive and murderous. He took it away from them and gave it to others who would produce a harvest. God's sternest and gravest judgment is when He takes out of our hands the task which He meant for us to do. We have sunk to our lowest point when we have become useless to God.

Moreover, the parable of the vineyard has a great deal to teach us about ourselves. It teaches us about human *privilege*. In the parable, the vineyard owner planted the vineyard, put the fence around it, dug the wine press and built a watchtower. He meant for all of that to make the tenant's task of cultivating the crop that much easier, and that they could do it well.

The parable teaches us about human *freedom*. The owner of the vineyard left the tenants to do the task in their own way, as they saw fit. God is no tyrannical task-master who micromanages our every move once He's given us a task to do. All He asks is that we do the task He has given us and that we do it well. He trusts us with the task.

Next, this parable teaches us about human *accountability*. When the harvest time came, the vineyard owner sent his messengers to collect his produce. Each and every person who ever lived has a day of reckoning coming with God. We are answerable for the way in which we have carried out the task God has given us.

We are also taught in this parable about the *deliberateness of human sin*. The tenants are seen plotting in the parable to kill the son and collect his inheritance. They knew that was wrong but they did it anyway. Sin is deliberate opposition to God. It is the deliberate taking of our own way, when we know God's way.

Lastly, the parable of the vineyard teaches us a great deal about the *claim of Jesus*. That is, we are shown here Jesus lifting Himself out of, or above the succession of the prophets. There were many messengers who

were sent by the vineyard owner, and then there was his own son.

Likewise, there were many prophets before Jesus, but He is God's only begotten Son. Some of the prophets were indeed great men of God, and no one would deny them that honor. But they were servants of God.

Jesus stands infinitely and uniquely above them as the Son of God.

The parable teaches us about the *sacrifice of Jesus*. He's telling this parable in advance of Calvary. In the story the son died at the hands of the wicked tenants. That makes it quite clear that Jesus knew what lay ahead for him. He knew He came to die for the sins, the *deliberate* sins of humanity. He didn't go to the cross to die because He was compelled to do so. He went willingly and open-eyed to his death and He knew what He was doing.

The parable ends with the image of the stone that the builders rejected. That became the cornerstone, the most important stone in the building, the thing on which all else depended. Likewise, it may be that people reject Jesus Christ, and refuse Him, and even try to eliminate Him. But they will find one day, that the very same Christ whom they rejected is the most important person in the world. The same man who went willingly and knowingly to the Cross has become the King and Judge of the whole world. It's possible to stumble over this "stone" and be crushed by it. Jesus is the foundation of everything, upon which everything is built. He is the cornerstone which holds everything together.

Jesus' final words in this passage are His warning that He will take away the Kingdom of God from us if we do not produce a harvest. That is chilling. Especially so because we are seeing it unfold before our eyes. Maybe not so much in the Roman Catholic Church, but generally, Christianity seems to be shrinking. Certainly, Christian influence over the culture has declined. It very much looks as if it's being taken away. Some are saying that we are long past the point of a post-Christian culture. We are even beyond an atheistic culture. What we are seeing now, according to some, is an anti-theistic culture.

What was once the norm in the United States, as I mentioned earlier, namely Christianity, that most people you knew belonged to some church or other, has become something that is at best tolerated today. And it seems the culture's patience with Christians is strained and wearing thin.

God calls us to faithfulness, and to stewardship of His Church. He has entrusted us with this task. He has given us all we need to do it and to do it well. We are privileged and free to have been given this task by God. He is very, very patient with us. And, we are accountable to Him. Let's take the best care of His Church that we possibly can, and have that as the account we give Him. Amen.