

“What Work are We to Do?”

Matt 21:33–46 Pent18A 10-18-17

In the last two weeks we’ve heard two of Jesus’ vineyard parables. In the first one, He calls us out for having a “what’s in it for me” attitude toward serving Him. In the second, he exposes our tendency to appear righteous with our words but not with our works. Both teach that the kingdom of God belongs not to the self-righteous, but to the sinner who trusts in God’s righteousness in Christ.

Today’s parable exposes the root cause of this self-righteous pride: Idolatry. Jesus was speaking to those who considered the vineyard their personal possession.

It is the same problem Isaiah addresses: In the Old Testament God’s people continually rebelled against Him, the real owner of the vineyard. They imitate the religions of the people that God had commanded them to conquer. They bowed before wood and stone idols, sacrificed their own children in the fire to appease false gods, and indulged their sensual lusts as part of the worship rituals. This led to practices like cheating the poor out of their income and taking bribes in court, for example.

In addition, they performed the prayers and sacrifices in God’s temple without repenting of their sins, expecting God to listen. Worse yet, they abused, stoned, and killed the prophets God sent to warn them and call them to repentance. Though in his mercy God continually warned them, they hardened their hearts. They abused their privilege as people to whom God gave His covenant promises, his laws, and his protection and mercy. In short, they assumed ownership of God’s vineyard.

Jesus tells this parable to those who continuing to do the same. They were still rejecting the prophets, like John, and Jesus knew that they would even kill the son of the vineyard owner. Because of this, the kingdom would be taken away from them and given to others who did believe.

Because they built their own kingdom without the cornerstone, it would not stand. The cornerstone was Christ, at whom they took offense. In rejecting his mercy, they will receive his crushing judgment on the last day.

The parable intensifies their guilt with examples of extreme crimes and patience. Who really believes they could get away with such murder, especially of the owner’s son? What real landowner would give them more chances, much less endanger His own son?

The parable highlights the extreme love and

patience of God. He did not spare his own son, but as Paul says, while we were still in great rebellion, He sent Jesus to save us. He knew Jesus would be shed blood, and that his death would substitute for the punishment our rebellion deserves.

The Jewish leaders did the opposite of the work they were given to do in the vineyard. Instead of pointing others to God, being a light to the Gentiles, they themselves, rejected the very God who had chosen them out of all the nations of the earth.

They have their counterparts today. They include the obvious charlatans who use religion to line their pockets, and governments who seek to control the church in order to exercise more power.

But in some ways we are included. We act like vineyard owners when we rewrite or just ignore laws we don’t like; when we prioritize sins so as to make those we find in others worse than our own; when we reject the prophetic call to repent; when we crucify Christ again by not trusting his death as sufficient payment for sin.

All that is what we are not to do as servants in the kingdom of God. But what are we to do? Jesus answers clearly and simply in John 6:28–29. His disciples ask, “*What must we do, to be doing the works of God?*” Jesus answered them, “*This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.*” Accept, believe, follow, not stone, reject, murder and cast him out.

If we first accept Jesus, we will do the other works of the vineyard. If we receive His righteousness by faith, we will live righteously. If we accept his love and forgiveness, we will love and forgive our neighbor. If we accept his sacrifice for us, we will become living sacrifices that serve our neighbor. If we accept his prophetic word, we will heed the Law’s call to repent. We will rejoice in the Gospel’s news of His patience and forgiveness.

What are we to do in the vineyard? Accept the Son. Live the life He has given us, by faith every day. That will be enough. The rest will follow. Amen.