Lesson Focus:
The church is God’s. He has allowed us to be its workers so that we might produce good fruit. When we try and take ownership of the church so that it serves our own interests we demonstrate our unfaithfulness.

Catching up on the story:
Jesus has just pronounced judgment on the Jewish religious leaders for not believing and obeying God. They sought to entrap Jesus, but instead, Jesus turned their questions around on them. In the previous parable, the religious leaders are the second son who says he will go into the field but then never does, so they find themselves being left out as even the tax collectors and prostitutes enter the kingdom of heaven before them.

Last week’s parable, this parable, and the one that follows it (Matthew 22:1-3) all belong together thematically. They all illustrate how Israel’s religious leaders have missed something very important.

The Text:
Those same Jewish religious leaders who questioned Jesus about his authority now have to listen to another parable. The first parable, Matthew 21:28-32, the parable regarding two sons, did not paint the religious leaders in a positive light. The parable under our consideration at the moment will not end well either. While the parable speaks a powerful word to the Jewish religious leaders of the day, it also has much to say to us. In this parable we see both God’s steadfast faithfulness and love in the face of human sinfulness, as well as his judgment.

We find Jesus in the Temple complex surrounded by the religious leaders of the day and, perhaps, his disciples. Jesus has already told one parable and will now tell another. I can imagine him standing, as people draw close to hear what he has to say, pointing a finger at the religious leaders and forcefully uttering these words, “Listen to another parable!” It is important to understand that what is translated “listen” is a second person, plural imperative. It is a command, not an
invitation or a request. “You all, you listen really well to what I’m going so say!” The tone is a bit more forceful than the previous introduction.

Unlike the previous parables (and the following one) we have recently looked at, Jesus does not begin with the familiar phrase, “The kingdom of heaven is like...” Rather, he chooses to jump right into the story, because the content of the parable does not refer to the kingdom of heaven, but the sad state of affairs here on earth.

There was a man who owned a plot of land. Because he owned the land he decided to place on that land a vineyard. With care and love the landowner begins to work. He plants the vines, puts a fence up to protect his tender shoots, digs a wine press in anticipation of the future fruit the vineyard will produce, and builds a watchtower. Keep in mind that from the time a vineyard is planted to the time it produces its first grapes can be close to seven years. The owner of the land is not seeking to gain a quick buck on his work. No, he has lovingly invested himself in the vineyard knowing that he will not see fruit for a long time. Finally, he leases the vineyard and sets off on business in another country.

Most commentators believe that the language at the beginning of this parable is meant to invoke the beginning verses of Isaiah 5.

Let me sing for my beloved
my love-song concerning his vineyard:
My beloved had a vineyard
on a very fertile hill.
2 He dug it and cleared it of stones,
and planted it with choice vines;
he built a watchtower in the midst of it,
and hewed out a wine vat in it;
he expected it to yield grapes,
but it yielded wild grapes.

Indeed, Israel is often referred to in the Old Testament as a vineyard that God has lovingly worked so hard to plant.
In faith, God selected a few to be the workers who would exercise care over the vineyard. These farmers, tenants in the text, have been chosen by God to bring the vineyard to fruitfulness. The much expected harvest time has come and the owner, knowing that there should be fruit, sends a messenger, one of his slaves to collect the fruit. But the farmers, rather than doing what the owner desires, beat one slave and then killed the next one that the owner sends.

By now a clearer image of what Jesus is getting at should be emerging. The vineyard owner is God. The vineyard that God has worked so hard to plant is Israel, God’s chosen people. The tenant farmers, the ones who were to guide Israel to fruitfulness, are the Jewish religious leaders. Lovingly, God has brought Israel into existence, he has provided for her and set leaders over her to guide her. Israel, however, through her history, did not always produce fruit. So, God would send prophets to her to call her back to faithfulness. Time and time again the prophets would speak the word of God only to be beaten and killed.

In the parable, the owner keeps sending slaves. Each time he sent a slave, the slaves were treated worse than the ones who preceded them. From this repeated sending of messengers we get a rather astounding image of God. If you and I were in the position of the vineyard owner in the parable, would we be so lenient with the tenant farmers? I imagine that after the first tenant was beaten or killed we all would have taken appropriate measures to ensure that those who had acted so violently would be dealt with. Yet God, in his love and faithfulness, exhausts all possible resources before executing judgment.

Remember that God, over and over again throughout Israel’s history, swears his steadfast love and faithfulness to Israel. The prophet Hosea paints for us a picture of God’s struggle with Israel:

When Israel was a child, I loved him,
and out of Egypt I called my son.
2 The more I called them,
the more they went from me;
they kept sacrificing to the Baals,  
and offering incense to idols.  
3 Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk,  
I took them up in my arms;  
but they did not know that I healed them.  
4 I led them with cords of human kindness,  
with bands of love.  
I was to them like those  
who lift infants to their cheeks.  
I bent down to them and fed them. [Hosea 11:1-4]

And a few verses later,

8 How can I give you up, Ephraim?  
How can I hand you over, O Israel?  
How can I make you like Admah?  
How can I treat you like Zeboiim?  
My heart recoils within me;  
my compassion grows warm and tender.  
9 I will not execute my fierce anger;  
I will not again destroy Ephraim;  
for I am God and no mortal,  
the Holy One in your midst,  
and I will not come in wrath. [Hosea 11:8-9]

Finally, in the parable, the owner of the vineyard decides to send his son,  
believing that the son will be respected. The presence of the son will be like the  
presence of the owner himself. So, the owner sends the son and he meets the  
same fate as the other slaves. The tenant farmers seize him and, in a twisted fit of  
logic, believe that they will receive the son’s inheritance once he is gone.

Of course, the son in the parable is Jesus. God, after having all of his messengers  
rejected and most of them killed, sends his son. Now, we might stop and ask  
ourselves, Is God so ignorant that he believes that by sending his son any
different outcome might be achieved? Perhaps this is where the direct correspondence with actual characters ends. At the same time, however, we know that God is not ignorant or stupid, but that God, because of his faithfulness and love, will go to the extreme to bring about restored relationship with his beloved.

Next, Jesus puts a question to the religious leaders, “Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” In an ironic twist the religious leaders speak their own judgment. The owner of the vineyard will come personally and put those nasty tenant farmers to a miserable death. He will then give the vineyard to another tenant who will hand over the fruit that the field yields.

In response to the leaders pronouncement of judgment Jesus quotes Psalm 118:22-23. According to Bruner, in this Psalm Israel was the stone that had been rejected by other human authorities, but God had restored the stone through the return from Exile. Jesus is, no doubt, referring to himself as the stone that the builder rejected. Only this time, the rejection is coming from Israel’s religious leaders not from the gentile nations (Bruner, 381). Even though these religious leaders will reject Jesus, he is indeed the cornerstone through his death and resurrection.

In the previous parable Jesus pronounces judgment on the Jewish religious leaders by declaring that even the tax collectors and prostitutes will enter the kingdom before them. In this parable Jesus goes a step further. These religious leaders, because of their unwillingness and incompetence in guiding the people toward righteousness and fruitfulness, the kingdom of God will be taken away from them! Their place in the kingdom will be given to another people (in Greek “people” is actually “nation” or “gentiles”).

These people are the church, comprised of both Jews and Gentiles who turn and begin living faithful, fruitful lives. It has always been God’s plan to bring non-Jewish nations into the people of God. If we remember back to the promise God
gives Abraham in Genesis 12, Israel is to be a blessing to the entire world. God’s salvation come through the Jewish people by way of Jesus, but it is for all people. A word of caution must be spoken here. Throughout the ages it has been believed that the Jews have been completely rejected by God because of their rejection of Jesus. This belief has led to massive and systematic persecution of the Jewish people by Christians. This belief cannot be substantiated with the Bible, either from this passage or others. Jesus, in this passage, is not rejecting all Jewish people. His disciples are all Jewish! Rather, the context of the last few passages makes it clear that who Jesus is rejecting are the people who are supposed to be caring for and instructing God’s people so that they might produce fruit and be faithful.

I am sure that the religious leaders were not very happy about Jesus’ story and his pronouncement of judgment on them. At that moment, they would have very much liked to arrest him, but they could not because they were afraid of the crowd. They were afraid of the crowd because the crowd knew Jesus was special, a prophet at least, perhaps someone even greater.

**So What?**

I think the main issue here, for us, is the issue of ownership. In the parable, the tenants acted in the way they did because they desired to own and control the vineyard and its produce. As we have seen, the tenants are Israel’s religious leaders. In a certain way, these religious leaders had taken ownership over Israel and had done the work so that Israel would produce the fruit that was beneficial to the religious leaders. Their leadership of Israel was not so that God might bless the world through Israel, or that God might be glorified through Israel, but so that the religious leaders might be blessed and glorified. They had it backwards.

I believe this is our tendency with anything we involve ourselves with. No matter how good or noble the cause is, as our hearts are bent in on ourselves, we search for ways to make even the greatest causes serve our own needs. This is our temptation as we serve in the church. The church is God’s. Its mission is to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ in word and in deed. It is our job to tend the vineyard so that when it produces fruit we give the fruit to God. We cannot
keep the vineyard’s produce. We cannot hope to make the vineyard our own. It belongs to God.

**Critical Questions:**

1. **How does this text reveal to us the nature and character of God/What is God doing in this text?**
   
   a. God is a great giver of chances. Israel had many chances to be faithful. The tenants in the story had many chances as well. At the same time, however, God is serious about the faithfulness and obedience of those who he has called to follow him. Only after we have demonstrated our complete rejection of him does he give us over to the judgment we have selected for ourselves.

2. **What does holiness look like in this text?**
   
   a. Holiness, in this passage, is being faithfully aware that we do not own the church. The church is a gift from God. We are its stewards. We have the responsibility to work with the Spirit to produce fruit that is acceptable to God.

3. **How does an encounter with this story shape who we are and who we should become?**
   
   a. Our activities in the church should be aimed at producing fruit that is acceptable to God.

**Specific Discussion Questions:**

Read the text aloud. Then, read the text to yourself quietly. Read it slowly, as if you were very unfamiliar with the story.

1. **Why does Jesus use another story about a vineyard? Read Isaiah 5:1-2. Who is the vineyard in Isaiah?**

2. **Who does all the work in getting the vineyard ready? Why might who does the work be important?**

3. **Who are the characters in the parable and whom might they represent?**
4. The tenants think the land will become theirs if they kill the son. What actually ends up happening? To whom is the land given?

5. The main issue of the parable is ownership. The tenants want to own the land so they can keep its produce. How might Israel’s religious leaders have done the same thing?

6. As a church, have we ever sought to have the church benefit us? In what ways have we tried to “own” the church?

Works Cited: