

“Mutiny amidst Bounty”
Luke 20:9-18
October 2, 2011

INTRODUCTION:

The parable of the wicked tenants is a “big picture” story summarizing Jesus’ view of the problem with the world. Philosophers have pointed out the power of stories to communicate meaning. They call them narratives instead of stories, and they call the “big picture” stories meta-narratives. Many philosophers today claim that there is no meta-narrative, which is another way of saying life is meaningless. Jesus here gives us in parable form his meta-narrative. It is directly about the story of Israel’s rejection of God, but applies more broadly to all of humanity.

The story itself is easy to grasp, even for those of us far removed from the cultural world of first century Palestine. A man has a large vineyard in a country far removed from where he lives. He makes arrangements for tenants to take care of the vineyard on his behalf. They enter into a financial agreement in which the owner is to receive a certain amount of the produce of the vineyard, while the tenants are allowed to keep the rest. After a sufficient amount of time has passed, he sends a servant to collect the produce he and the tenants had agreed to. The servant finds that the tenants have had something of a change of heart and don’t want to give the owner what he is entitled to. So they beat him and send him away empty-handed. This occurs twice more, with each servant being treated worse than the previous one. In a final attempt, the owner thinks that perhaps the error has been sending servants instead of someone with a little more authority. So he sends his son. Apparently, it is his only son, since the tenants think that once he is gone, no heir will remain. Though the son’s stature is greater than the others, he is treated the most severely, being killed by the tenants. There will be no more messengers, because the next visit will be when the owner himself comes to **“destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others”** (v. 16).

This is Jesus’ summary of Israel’s history. I am struck by how different Jesus’ story is from the one commonly told today. Today’s story is more flattering of humanity than Jesus’ parable, saying that mankind is searching for God. Jesus says that our quest is not to find God, but to make sure he stays out of our lives. Jesus tells a story of mutiny against the bounty of God. The landowner had provided all that was necessary for the flourishing of his tenants. But they wanted more, seeking to deny his rightful claim to the vineyard.

There is a story of mutiny on the British ship *Bounty* that has been made famous in several books and movies, most commonly called *Mutiny on the*

Bounty. The *Bounty* was sent to Tahiti in an attempt to acquire the breadfruit plant and transplant it in the West Indies as a food source for British slaves working there. But on April 28, 1789, Master's Mate Fletcher Christian led a successful mutiny against Captain William Bligh. Eighteen crewmen loyal to the captain were forced on to a small boat while the mutineers sailed back to Tahiti. This parable could aptly be given the same name, because it portrays a mutiny amidst God's bounty. Since our only hope is to accept Jesus' story as the true one, let's note the three central features of his story.

I. The Sinfulness of Sin

There are at least three features of sinfulness revealed in the actions of the wicked tenants. First, their actions are unarguably rebellious. The vineyard was not theirs to begin with, and they had an obligation to the one to whom it did belong. But they rebelled against the owner to whom they were obligated and insisted on treating the vineyard as if it belonged to them alone. In doing so, they changed the agreement in place when they were permitted by the owner to take possession of the property. It was rebellion, pure and simple. Notice, though, that the rebellion was not expressed until the owner asserted his ownership rights by sending the servants to collect the rent. Had he never sent any servants, there would never have been any occasion for their rebellious hearts to be revealed.

It is the same with sin. It is a rebellion against God, the owner of all things, that is revealed only when God asserts his ownership rights. When do people get angry at God and want to rebel against him? If people are allowed to define God in any way they want, they never define a God with whom they will get angry. But when God asserts his rights to be God, the sinful rebellion of the human heart is expressed. I can think of three occasions of this in our modern world. For example, people get angry at God when he asserts his right to define morality. When God calls certain behaviors wrong, it provokes a rebellious response, particularly among those who have been engaging in that wrong behavior. So if you tell your close friend who is having regular sexual relations with someone to whom he or she is not married, "Premarital sex is wrong," the response is easy to predict. "Who are you to tell me what I can or cannot do in the privacy of my own home?" The answer is, "I'm not telling you that, God is." Then their next question is, "And who are you to speak for God?" You answer, "I'm not speaking for God; he has spoken for himself quite clearly on this topic in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament." Again, the predictable response moves to attacking the Scriptures, either with the dismissive statement, "That's your interpretation," or with some other challenge to the authority of the Bible. If you've ever let yourself be drawn into one of these discussions about the authority of the Bible, you quickly see that the power of your arguments for biblical authority are irrelevant. People believe what they

want to believe because they have a dog in this fight. They want to do what they want to do and don't want anyone, God included, telling them what to do.

Another way I see the rebellious heart of sin is when God asserts his rights as judge. The idea that we have to stand before God one day and answer for our words, behaviors and even our thoughts, is guaranteed to provoke an angry rejection from people. "My God would never punish someone for eternity just because they made some choice about how to live their lives that the Bible says they shouldn't do." Or consider the common response when God asserts his right to be in control of our lives. When God doesn't answer our prayers for healing in the way we want him to, many respond in anger toward him. When Wendy's brother-in-law died three weeks ago, many people had to come to grips with the fact that God had said "No" to the prayers of thousands of people for his healing. God asserted his rights as God in this answer.

A second quality of sin that we see in this parable of the wicked tenants is that of increasing wickedness. Notice how their treatment of the owner's messengers worsened with each one. The first messenger was beaten and sent away empty-handed. The second messenger was treated similarly, with one addition. It is said that he was treated shamefully, in addition to being beaten. It is said of the third servant that he was wounded. The first two were beaten, but upon this one there seemed to be a more permanent wound inflicted. And then finally, the son was murdered. Sin is not static in our lives. It is like a cancer that, if left unchecked, will grow and destroy.

A third quality of sin is that of using God's gifts against God. The tenants had been given the ability to use the owner's vineyard to provide for themselves. Their livelihood came from the owner's property, but they used this gift against the owner. The strength they had been given through his vineyard they used to beat his servants and kill his son. How do we do this in our sin? We take the money God provides us with and use it to establish a life that doesn't need God. We take a strength God has given and use it to distance ourselves from God. For example, God gives you a good sense of humor, but instead of using this gift to bless others for God's glory, you use it to draw attention to yourself. You try to address the brokenness of this world by getting people to like you instead of going to God. I heard in the news media this week that there are growing suspicions that Pakistan has taken some of the considerable military aid from the United States and used it to fund terrorist groups that attack our nation. If true, our gifts are being used against us. We do that in our sin.

II. The Greatness of God

There are at least two areas where I see the greatness of God in this parable. I notice first the greatness of his patience. I think I would have sent

the army much sooner than the owner did, probably after the first servant was beaten and came home empty-handed. But he sent a second servant, and then a third. He didn't even stop there, but took a great risk and sent his only son. It was only after the son's murder that he sent in the army. God is patient like this. He gives multiple opportunities for those who rebel against him to lay down their arms and submit to him. Remember that since the owner lived a long distance from the vineyard, it would have taken a long time for each servant to go and return. Before the army was sent in, they had many chances and a long time to submit themselves to the owner. Had they responded appropriately to the son, the mistreatment of the first three servants would have been forgiven. We are currently in this long period of God's patience today. Unfortunately, many misinterpret God's patience to mean that he has given up his claim on his world. That was certainly the hope of these tenants, that the owner would simply forfeit his claim and let them be in control. It was a fatal error. The owner was being patient with them, not forfeiting his claim. In the same way, God is withholding his hand of judgment today, with a heart of great patience toward his rebellious tenants. But don't make their mistake. Delayed judgment is different than cancelled judgment, and that brings us to our next point about God's greatness.

God is great in judgment. After the murder of the son, the owner **“will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others”** (v. 16). No one would argue that the owner in Jesus' parable was unjustified in bringing judgment upon those who had mistreated him so. How much more is God justified in his bringing of judgment upon those who have joined the mutiny, but have refused to respond to his son!

III. The Finality of Jesus

In the parable, the son was the last messenger. After him there was only judgment from the owner. The message is very clear. Jesus is saying that he is God's final word and God's decisive word. To reject him is to leave no option open except judgment. Knowing that the nation's leaders and the majority of its citizens will reject him and crucify him, Jesus quotes to them this passage from Psalm 118. **“The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.”** The cornerstone was the stone placed at the base of two intersecting walls. It was the stone holding everything together. The leaders reject Jesus and conclude that he is worthless, like a stone that the masons conclude will not work in their building. But the truth is that the building won't work without the stone, since it becomes the cornerstone. Then continuing the metaphor of the rock, Jesus says that he is a rock that will bring judgment. Some will fall on him, and like a clay pot falling on a rock, the pot will be destroyed, while the rock remains unharmed. Or if the rock falls on the pot, the results would be the same.

If Jesus is God's final word, then the application for us is easy. Listen to Jesus. We are all in this story at the point after the son has been sent to the tenants. So there are only two options for us, to reject the son or to listen to the son. What is the son's message to us? It is the same as the message in the parable. "Pay what you owe my Father." We have a debt to the Father because of our sin, and the Son demands payment. But there's a problem, isn't there? We can't pay the debt created by our sin, because it is far beyond our resources. In just a few days from the time he spoke this parable, the Son will do something that goes beyond this parable. He will himself pay the debt of sin that we owe through his death on the cross. Jesus speaks in this passage about himself as a rock that destroys. There is another image of a rock in the Scriptures, one that protects. Moses once asked to see the glory of God. God told him that he couldn't see God's full glory and live, so God put him in the cleft of a rock, put his hand over the opening and passed by, allowing Moses to see his back side. Jesus is the rock that has been cut that we might be in the presence of God's glory and live.

Jesus' payment of our sin debt also requires that we listen to the Son. His message now is not "Pay what you owe" but "Receive the payment I make on your behalf." How can you know that you've listened to the Son as he has said that? Do you remember how we noted earlier that the wicked tenants used the gifts of the owner against the owner, just as we use God's gifts against him? It is possible to do the same with the gift of forgiveness. How do you hear the news of this amazing gift of God's forgiveness? Do you hear it as if it is merely a "Get out of jail free" card that permits you to do as you please in this life and still have the assurance that you will go to heaven when you die? If so, you are using God's best gift, the gift of forgiveness through Jesus, against God. It is simply another way of not listening to the Son. To hear the Son's word correctly is to hear it with the kind of humility and gratitude that leads us to forsake self and give ourselves fully to Jesus.

CONCLUSION:

What would it look like for you to hear God's word correctly? It would mean that we wake up each day with the attitude reflected in that great first question and answer of the Heidelberg Catechism. The question asks, "What is thy only comfort in life and death?" The answer is,

That I with body and soul, both in life and death, (a) am not my own, (b) but belong unto my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ; (c) who, with his precious blood, has fully satisfied for all my sins, (d) and delivered me from all the power of the devil; (e) and so preserves me (f) that without the will of my heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from my head; (g) yea, that all things must be subservient to my salvation, (h) and therefore, by his Holy Spirit, He also assures me of eternal life, (i) and makes me sincerely willing and ready, henceforth, to live unto him.