

“Miserable Wretches, All”

Matthew 21:33-46

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

It's one of those times of the year when allergies, colds, and any other number of inconveniences can cause all kinds of chaos in your daily lives. Sickesses put you out of commission for days at a time, and persistent cedar allergies make your face blow up at just the thought of going outside. Your best reaction in those times when the stuffiness and congestion is at its worst is likely one where you say, “I am so miserable.” The way you cope in such times is not to hack off your nose with a scalpel, or rip out your lungs in hopes of emptying them. The answer is proper medicine, using the right remedy for the right problem. And that is exactly what is pointed out by the Lord following this parable of the tenants. In fact, it is actually the Pharisees themselves who come to the proper conclusion, saying in response to the tenants killing the servants and the son, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and let out the vineyard to other tenants that will give him the fruits in their seasons.”

Little did they know, although Jesus would soon make it clear, they were condemning their own actions. They are the sickness that makes one miserable, and Jesus has the remedy to get rid of the infection. But that remedy is one that defies convention, because His remedy is to be rejected by those who have killed His servants, and allow them to put Him to death as well. Christ speaks directly to the Pharisees and tells them that they are the evil tenants that will lose everything. They are the ones who will be cast out of the kingdom and have it given to others, to the Gentiles who will produce its fruits. But this is not just about the Pharisees. This parable applies to all who would reject Christ who is the cornerstone of the faith. And anyone who does not believe in the salvation He has won by His death on the cross, and secured in His resurrection, will find themselves just like those tenants who will be thrown out of the vineyard—miserable wretches, all.

Every person on this earth falls under the category of poor, miserable sinners. Each and every person here just confessed as much. The Old Adam within you is a cunning and virulent enemy, and one that rears its ugly head every day that you walk this life. He pulls you in directions that you know you shouldn't go, and most of the time that you don't want to go. But resisting and overcoming that old man, the sinful flesh that all bear, can't be done on your own. You cannot work your way to a better life and fight the battle against the flesh by fighting harder, doing more good, or isolating yourself from the world. It is the nature of the Old Adam to want to kill the servants of the vineyard owner.

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The flesh pulls you away from those who properly teach the Word in its truth and purity, properly distinguishing between Law and Gospel, and begins to make your ears itch for something more sensational.

The sin which Adam brought into the world and passed down to you through the generations is a plague upon your soul. And because of that sin, it is tempting to give in to the machinations of the world. It is tempting to let the evil desires of the heart take over because it just makes you feel good. So, your depraved flesh kills good and faithful servants by rejecting their good and proper teaching, and steers you to the ones who tell you that you are not miserable wretches, all. There is no sinful nature that makes you do things you don't want to do according to them, and that gives power to the evil one for him to twist that in your psyche and make you start to believe it. Paul pokes the devil in the eye in that regard when he records in Romans 7:18, "I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out." No matter how hard you try in your flesh, you cannot overcome sin. You cannot defeat it because on your own you are nothing more than that poor, miserable sinner that needs the help that only God can provide.

The false teachers of the world that draw you away from that truth are putting the faith of those who follow in danger. They are those whom Jesus says come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves (Matt. 7:15). All they do is feed the old man that wants to be just like the Pharisees who elevate themselves above all others. The problem with that is that makes the flesh responsible for killing not only the servants of the vineyard master, but his son, as well. In destroying the truth of the Word and leading people astray from the promise of the Messiah and the truth of His vicarious atonement, the work of the son is replaced with the work of the tenant. The inheritance that the son seeks to impart to the tenants will be given to another, ones who will care for the fruits of the vineyard in proper manner. And that proper manner has nothing to do with their own work in the vineyard, but everything to do with what the master seeks to give them as a gift.

Therein lies a great paradox of the faith. The Father sent His Son into the world to redeem it, knowing that it meant that those whom He sent Him to save will crucify Him. But that is the entire reason He was sent. He was sent to be the propitiation for your sins. He was sent to pay the penalty for the sin of Adam, and the only acceptable payment for that sin is death. The death of Jesus wasn't just a happenstance of history from a man that rebelled against the Jewish establishment. It was a necessary death to which He willingly went so that you would not have to die that death. He endured the fullness of God's wrath on your behalf, taking every ounce of depravity that your sinful flesh bears,

and placing it upon Himself. You are dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus because of the death that He died to redeem the world. He was and is the acceptable sacrifice for all sin, “For by a single offering He has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified (Heb. 10:14).”

The hope of all the nations lies in Jesus Christ alone. The Son who was killed by those He came to save, has given the kingdom to you by shedding His blood upon the cross of Calvary. Only by His work and the sacrifice He has made are you made righteous before your Father in heaven. What joy to know that His love for you is so great that He would give up His own life in order that you might live with Him in righteousness forever. As Psalm 23:6 says, “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” Jesus is that goodness and mercy, and by faith He follows you all the days of your life. For His sake you have been given His inheritance, and so you will dwell in His house forever. You will feast at His table for eternity, just as you receive the foretaste of that meal in the Sacrament He comes here to bring in His very body and blood for the forgiveness of your sins.

Despite the miserable state of the world, and despite the miserable wretch your sinful flesh makes you, Christ died to redeem you and to pay the price for the sins of the whole world. The sad reality is that the majority of those for whom Jesus bled and died will reject Him, and in their rejection, they will fall on that stone and be broken to pieces. Those wretches will be put to a miserable death, an eternal death of condemnation for their sin. But not so for you, as one who believes in the salvation won for you by your Savior upon the cross. There is a genuine call from the Lord in this Parable to stay true to the faith which has been given to you by His gracious gift. The Apostle John writes in his first Epistle, “Do not love the world or the things in the world...[for] the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.”

The goal of this life is to finish the race as one who is in the faith. You are indeed a poor, miserable sinner, as you confessed earlier, but because of Jesus’ blood, you have been made new. And it is the Cornerstone, Jesus Christ, who assures you that you will not fall from His grace, even though you fail time and again in doing His will. Because of the new man that dwells in you through Baptism, there is hope for all who have been blessed with the gift of faith in the Lamb who was slain. The Kingdom of God has been given to you, and according to the work of Jesus, it is yours even now, and will be fully yours when you reach the heavenly glory before His throne. You will not break against the stone, nor will it crush you. You have been saved and made righteous by the Cornerstone, and despite the sufferings of this life, He stands firm in protecting you as

His own dear child in the faith. For one day you will no longer have to bear the burden of this world, where you are “killed all the day long.” The stone that was rejected is your salvation, and that promise will be fulfilled in the coming of the Son of man, when His kingdom will be inaugurated in the fullness of His exalted glory forevermore. Amen.