

Rev. Anthony T. Bertram

## RESPECT OR SHAME

Luke 20:9-20; Lent 5C; April 5-6, 2025

In Jesus' parable today, the vineyard owner represents God; the tenant-farmers he rented it to represent the religious leaders of Israel both in Old and New Testament times; the servants he sent are God's prophets; the fruit they were sent to collect is again the fruit of repentance we heard about the last couple of weeks; and, finally, the beloved son is Jesus, God's Son. Listen again to the parable's beginning. The two things I want you to listen for are how the tenants treated the servants and how the father hoped they would treat his son.

**“A man planted a vineyard and let it out to tenants and went into another country for a long while. When the time came, he sent a servant to the tenants, so that they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. And he sent another servant. But they also beat and treated him shamefully, and sent him away empty-handed. And he sent yet a third. This one also they wounded and cast out. Then the owner of the vineyard said, ‘What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.’”**

How were the Father's servants treated by the tenants? **Shamefully**, literally “without honor.” This is the honor demanded from us by God in the Fourth Commandment, the honor we should show to our parents and the other authorities God has placed over us.

How did the Father hope His Son would be treated? **With respect**, literally “not doing something shameful and embarrassing.” The sort of “respect” hoped for is based on the understanding that there are certain things that good people would be too ashamed to do, and their embarrassment at being caught doing such bad things should prevent them from doing them.

How did the tenants, the Jewish religious leaders, shamefully treat and dishonor God's prophets? They refused to repent of their own sins. They did not teach God's Word faithfully to the people or call them to repent of their sins, especially of worshiping false gods. The third prophet sent in the parable might refer to John the Baptist, the last prophet sent from God before sending His Son.

John called everyone to repentance, including kings and priests. The Pharisees and priests refused John's baptism because it required that they repent of their sins and admit needing forgiveness. King Herod locked up John in prison for calling him to repent of his adultery of marrying his brother's wife. Herod ended up ordering John's head chopped off. No fruit of repentance owed God was given, and His servants, the prophets, were treated shamefully.

How was God's Son treated? Was it with the respect due the Son of God as coming from the Father? No. Jesus spoke this parable just a couple days before His arrest and condemnation to death on the cross. The scribes of the Pharisees and chief priests understood that Jesus was speaking about them when He said: **"But when the tenants saw him [the beloved son of the father], they said to themselves, 'This is the heir. Let us kill him, so that the inheritance may be ours.' And they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him."**

With this basic understanding of Jesus' parable and how it applied to the Jewish religious leaders that led up to and were in place when God's Christ came, it would be easy for us to say to ourselves, "That applied to them, but it does not apply to me today. If it still applied to anyone, it would be pastors of the Church sent by God to call His people to repentance." There is some truth to that, since pastors are called to proclaim God's prophetic Word so people repent of their sins and believe in Jesus, that is, bear fruit in keeping with repentance.

Unfaithful preaching and teaching of God's Word in the Church happens in every generation. Just like God's Old Testament prophets warned His people against false doctrine and the worship of false gods, we still need to watch out for false teaching, recognize it when we hear it, reject it, and avoid those pastors and teachers leading people astray. Every church is full of sinners, but no church should knowingly tolerate the teaching of false doctrine in it. An indication that some congregations and denominations do not take God's Word seriously is that that they spend little time or effort teaching God's Word, don't take a stand that what it says and means is clear, and refuse to condemn sinful teaching and behavior, which usually is demonstrated by practicing open Communion.

There is also a personal aspect to Christian faith and life. If we think that there is nothing in this parable that applies to us individually, that would be a denial of our own sins, as if our sins did not cause the suffering and death of God's Son Jesus. Isn't it a sin to ignore God's Word, refuse to gladly hear and learn it, or reject the parts of God's Word that might interfere with what we want and like to do? Yes, those sorts of sins condemned Jesus to suffer and die on the cross.

To refuse to repent of our sins is to treat God's beloved Son shamefully and to shamelessly think that there is nothing about us that killed Him on the cross. I don't know what it is that lurks in the darkness of your mind and heart, only my own, but God does, so it doesn't do us any good to pretend it's not there. When we dare allow the light of God's Word to shine into the darkness of our lives and expose what is there, our response better not be to justify our sins by blaming them on the sins committed against us. No excuse counts before God who knows the truth. No amount of our rationalizing away our bad thoughts and behaviors changes that we have shamefully dishonored the beloved Son of God and caused His death.

Is there hope for us sinners? The hope that Jesus holds out to us is found in the very words that describe the shameless killing of God's Son in the parable. **"Then the Owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send My beloved Son; perhaps they will respect Him.' But when the tenants saw Him, they said to themselves, 'This is the Heir. Let us kill Him, so that the inheritance may be ours.' And they threw Him out of the vineyard and killed Him."**

Jesus clearly states that God's judgment will come on those who did this to His Son and refused to repent. This was Peter's point in his Pentecost sermon when he said in the hearing of scribes and chief priests: **"this Jesus...you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised Him up"** (Ac 2:23-24a). The only hope for those whose sins crucified and killed Jesus is that God has worked forgiveness by this. So Peter could preach, **"Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins"** (Ac 2:38).

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The same God and Father that forgave and welcomed home His prodigal son, sent His Son Jesus to suffer the disrespectful and shameless treatment of sinners to save those same sinners. The Father who sent His Son to suffer at the hands of sinners is the same God who treats us as His sons and daughters, even though it is our sin that caused His shameful death.

We should be embarrassed by and ashamed of our sins, but that will not forgive us. So what can we do? Instead of rejecting the Word of God that calls us to repentance, we should be like the tax collector in Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and Tax Collector. Off to the side at the temple and ashamed to even look up to God in heaven, the tax collector bowed his head, beat his breast in shame and begged, **“God, be merciful to me, a sinner”** (Lk 18:13).

With shame for our sins and respect for God's beloved Son, we **“fix our eyes on Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God”** (Heb. 12:2). Amen.