

Just Who Are the Wicked Tenants of God's Vineyard?

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Are we the “wicked tenants” Jesus speaks of in Mark 12? Who, me? How could that be? I’m a good person. I try to live the right way and follow where Jesus leads me. Maybe. Even so, it could be that **we** have been the wicked servants.

The Parable of the Wicked Tenants

In the parable of the wicked tenants, Jesus tells us of a man who

...planted a vineyard, put a hedge around it, dug a wine press, and...leased it to tenant farmers...At the proper time he sent a servant to the tenants to obtain from them some of the produce of the vineyard. But they seized him, beat him, and sent him away empty-handed.

Again he sent them another servant. And that one they beat over the head and treated shamefully. He sent yet another whom they killed. So, too, many others; some they beat, others they killed.

He had one other to send, a beloved son. He sent him to them last of all, thinking, ‘They will respect my son.’ But those tenants said to one another, ‘This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.’ So they seized him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard.

The Parable's Meaning and Identification of the Wicked Tenants

In this parable, the wicked tenants were the leaders of Israel. The servants God sent were the prophets. They were not well received by Israel. Biblical history details the shameful treatment and deaths of these servants. The “beloved son” refers to Jesus himself, the beloved Son of God the Father. Even though the tenants of the vineyard treated the landlord’s servants so poorly, he in his unfathomable mercy would still send his only son to them. However, this is not just about Israel’s ignoring God’s wishes.

Are We Also, Or Have We Been, Wicked Tenants?

Our Lord has left us with our own “vineyards” of blessings, gifts, talents and charisms. He has provided all of these to us—we bring nothing to the table that He has not provided for us. We truly are His tenants. He has “leased” these gifts and talents to us for our use in His greater glory. The motto of the Benedictines, from 1 Peter 4, “...that in all things God may be glorified...” is another way of stating it. Are we using what He’s “leased” to us for His greater glory, or for ours?

That in All Things God May Be Glorified

How do we view the gifts and blessings Our Lord has given us? Are we prideful about our skills and abilities, or do we praise God for loaning them to us? In his Rule, (Prologue 29), St. Benedict tells us we should, “...not become elated over [our] good deeds...it is the Lord’s power, not [our] own, that brings about the good in them.” Do we seek adulation and exaltation for how good we are in any number of areas where people keep track of such things? Or, on the other hand, is our intent to lead others to God through what we do?

Do we share our knowledge of, and love for Jesus for His sake and for the sake of those we’re hoping to bring to Him? Are our motives less noble and focused more on us than on Him? In other words, are we ego-centric or Christo-centric? This is not something that always is a simple binary choice or answer. Many times, even when trying to focus on Jesus, our self-exaltation can creep into the picture. Sure, we’re bringing others to Christ, and look how good we are at it! Perhaps we need to discern which root sin or sins we need to battle—pride, vanity, or...?

God Sends His Servants to Us Tenants

God puts many, many people in our path through the course of our lifetime. They come in all forms, shapes and sizes. Many of them may be family members, close friends, or coworkers. Others may be someone whom we’ve met as they briefly passed through our lives. There are no coincidences with God. He initiates events or allows them to happen for a reason—for the sanctification of souls—ours and others’. These numerous individuals are the “other servants” He sends to us. But how do we treat them?

If we look back on our lives, how have we treated those who have been placed here by the Lord for us? Hopefully we have not beaten or killed any of them literally. But how might we have otherwise brutalized them in our interactions with them?

Our Abuse of His Servants

The era spanning the last 50 years or so has been one characterized by the theme “if it feels good, do it.” What damage have we inflicted on the souls and psyches of those that

God placed in our path? Rather than bringing them closer to God, have we driven them further away? This is the exact opposite of God's will for us and for them. God desires that we not only be open to His graces for us, but that we be available for graces to be poured out on others through their interaction with us. What an awesome responsibility, and one that we may often overlook.

Even if we have tried to live a life of virtue, how have we treated some of the other people God has placed in our path? Have we really paid attention to their needs, seeing them through His eyes? Or have we, on the other hand, ignored them because they were different from us? Have we been kind to family, friends and other acquaintances even when it was inconvenient for us? Can we look back at these times and discern what God was trying to teach us? We each will need to account for how well we lived out the Great Commandment at our particular judgment.

Our Treatment of the Prophets He Sends Us

Going a step further, through baptism, every Catholic is expected to participate in Christ's ministry as priest, prophet and king. The role of prophet includes sharing His teaching, and speaking the truth boldly. We should praise God for sending individuals to us who work to fulfill their role as prophet with us. Here's where it can get uncomfortable, though. When we hear the prophet speaking the truth, instructing and admonishing us, we may not appreciate it initially. When that's the case, how do we react? A humble response would include taking it to prayer, and discussing it with a spiritual director or confessor. If we act as wicked servants, though, the response looks quite different. In that case, we'd ignore and possibly berate this servant sent by God. After all, who do they think they are? Nothing is wrong with me! Besides, who asked them for their meddling opinion anyway?

We Wicked Tenants and the Beloved Son

As John 3:16 tells us, "For God so loved the world that He gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him might not perish but might have eternal life." God sent His only beloved Son for our salvation. Has our treatment of Him been any better than that afforded Him by the wicked tenants of Mark 12? We haven't planned to kill Him and throw Him out *per se*. Yet, every time we commit a sin, isn't that what we do to Him? We turn against Him; we are in opposition to the beloved Son who came to save us:

Sin is thus 'love of oneself even to contempt of God.' In this proud self-exaltation, sin is diametrically opposed to the obedience of Jesus, which achieves our salvation. CCC 1850

Our sins against God include our maltreatment of those other servants He has sent to us as well.

Changing Our Perspective, Changing Our Behaviors

Habitual patterns of sin may be somewhat difficult to overcome, but with God's grace, anything is possible. Creating a habit of being in God's presence can help us short-circuit sinful impulses. Mother Angelica, EWTN's foundress, tells us:

Perhaps the secret of all prayer and holiness of life is wrapped in God's plea to listen—to listen to His Silent Presence—that Presence that penetrates our being and keeps us in existence—that Presence that fills our souls with love and serenity—that Presence that makes us strong when we feel weak.

Practicing the presence of God, a key to building virtues, and throwing off the “old self,” simply means keeping God present in our minds and hearts as we go about our daily routines. The more we can do that, the more we can avoid acting as wicked tenants, and the better tenants we will grow to be in His vineyard.

God's Merciful Love for Us

Even after our less-than-exemplary lives, God still loves us infinitely and seeks us out. He still longs for our love, for our ongoing conversion, with His grace—for our continual turning back to Him in repentance, with an amendment of our ways.

What man among you having a hundred sheep and losing one of them would not leave the ninety-nine in the desert and go after the lost one until he finds it? And when he does find it, he sets it on his shoulders with great joy and, upon his arrival home, he calls together his friends and neighbors and says to them, ‘Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.’ I tell you, in just the same way there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance. Lk 15:4-7

God wants to heal us and bring us to Him. We should let Him do so. This way, we can share our first fruits from His vineyard with those who are in any way less fortunate than us. May the Lord make us worthy tenants of the vineyard He has leased to us in this life. May He give us the grace to charitably meet those other servants whom He sends to and for us. May He never let us ever be separated from Him and His merciful love.