

October 2 - Giving Back

A husband paid a good price for a rosebush for his wife. At the time of the purchase, it had several beautiful pink roses which were a delight to his wife. Since that time there have been no more roses. Every day he waters it. It gets sun the entire day. Every month he gives it rose food according to directions on the box. The bush appears healthy. The leaves are green. Fresh shoots are plentiful. The only problem is -- no roses! They want roses. They bought the plant to have roses. *What should be done with the bush if it will not produce roses?*

Everyone has a right to expect a return on their investment. God, above all, has a right to get the fruit of righteousness from his people. What will God do with a people that do not give Him what is due him?

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That's the question raised by the story Jesus told in today's Gospel, the so-called parable of the wicked tenants.

The landlord, the man who owned the vineyard - had *cleared the ground* and *planted* the grape vines - *built* the fence and the wine press - had gotten it ready so that it would produce grapes.

Then the landlord leased the vineyard to some tenants. They were to care for it, and harvest the grapes. Their payment to the owner was a share of the crop.

But when the grape harvest came - *when the rent was due* - and the landlord sent his agents to collect his share of the harvest from the tenants - *they decided not to pay*.

The wicked tenants act like they own the place. They had worked all year carrying for the vineyard, and they did all the work of harvesting - they felt it was all theirs now.

"After all, we did all the work, why should he get the benefit?"

Finally the master sends his very own son. Surely they will respond differently to the master's own son.

They kill the son rather than pay the rent.

Jesus' question: *What will the owner of the vineyard do to those tenants?*

Their fate isn't going to be pretty.

It is a story about judgment, a parable about reckoning. Jesus told it to us as among the very last

things he wanted to say to us, a couple of days before the cross. Be assured: there will be a reckoning. Jesus loves us enough to call us to account.

Note that today's parable of judgment is a parable – a story, not a well-worked-out doctrine of judgment. It's little help in precisely determining on what basis the judgments of God are made – such matters are up to God and not to us. However, in today's parable of the wicked tenants, the criterion of judgment certainly seems to be fruit. *"What have you done with what you have been given?"* is the key question which God shall ask each of us.

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The *vineyard* represents all that the Lord God has given us to sustain our lives - Not just our possessions, but the talents and abilities that God has blessed us with so that we can enjoy life.

That parable makes an unpopular point: the Lord *has some expectations of those who say they are his followers* - that we are to return **a share** of our blessings.

It's is a parable about stewardship. You know, managing God's stuff on God's behalf.

There are two central aspects of stewardship. The first is what we've been entrusted with and the second *is what in the world we're supposed to do with it.*

What are we entrusted with?

Several things: first, the gospel of Jesus Christ; second, our time and our abilities; and third, our personal, worldly stuff. All come from God. All are to be used in service to God.

But as we see in the parable, it takes more than simply knowing how blessed you are, and who the owner is, to be considered faithful. The jerks in Jesus' parable understood all that. When the owner seems to be an absentee -- off in another country or seated in heaven -- one begins to wrongly assume that he's never coming back to ask for what is due, or he truly doesn't care about it. *As a result, we live as though we can do what we want with it?*

No, a good tenant, a solid steward *does something* with the gospel and her time and his goods.

What should we do with what we have?

God has not only blessed us through that gospel - the good news of Jesus and His love, but we're supposed to share what we've received.

Our goal is to reflect something of Christ's love and kindness to others. It should be evident to those around us that we are followers of Jesus - citizens of His kingdom.

You've heard it before, so I'm just reminding you, that God has expectations of you and does hold you accountable.

Is there growth in knowledge of your faith? If called upon, could you even begin to defend your faith? When was the last time you invited someone to church with you?

You've been entrusted with the gospel of salvation - Are you being a good steward of what the Lord has given you?

Your life is a gift from God - your time, your abilities, your talents. Are you using them wisely? - offering them back to the Lord? Have you yet matured to the place where you can serve here, in the ministry?

Likewise, how are you doing at managing your goods? Whether it's much or little, are you seeking to grow what God has given you? Would Dave Ramsey -- Christian financial guru -- be applauding you, or feeling sorry for you?

When was the last time some of your stuff -- correction, *God's stuff* -- blessed anyone other than you and yours?

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We must recognize that all things -- the clothes on our backs, the dollars in our wallets

and even the ceilings above our heads belong to God, and are on loan to us from God. "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it" (Psalm 24:1) God owns everything. It's simply been leased to us. "We brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world" (1 Timothy 6:7). We are owners of nothing. It's all His.

* There was a little village in the mountains of Italy where the people grew grapes and each family in the community contributed to the making of wine. Each family would bring their wine to the center of town and pour it into one large keg.

But one year the weather did not cooperate and the vineyards did not produce an abundance of grapes. One of the wine makers decided that, since things would be tight that year, he would secretly sell his wine elsewhere. So he filled a barrel with water and poured it into the town keg, thinking that one barrel of water in the gigantic keg would go unnoticed and not impact the outcome of the wine.

The wine in the keg aged for seven years. At the end of seven years the villagers all gathered around that community keg to sell their wine to merchants. The entire community depended on the sale of their wine to provide for them until the next season. The giant keg and it was tapped. A pitcher was placed at the tap and out came nothing but pure water. It seemed that everyone in the village that year had the same idea and none had put in wine. Since everyone held back there was no wine to sell.

The villagers refused to share their wine in the community keg and consequently no one ended up with anything. Everyone assumed that everyone else would do their fair share, and wouldn't notice if they didn't contribute their share.

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Kim passed out these pledge cards. As you think about them, consider Paul's' advice. *Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal... Philippians 3: 12,13*

“Forgetting what lies behind”. We cannot live on past successes, nor should we be bogged down by past failures. We are forgiven and can put the past behind us.

“Leaning toward what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal...” That is the power and purpose of receiving forgiveness from God. It allows us to make a new start. It keeps our eyes looking forward – without looking over our shoulder to the past.

We can press forward to the goal – the prize – *the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.*

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That orientation toward the future means in spite of set-backs, I don't have to accept the way things are.

Instead of acceptance, lean into the future and press on -- Try new things -- a new direction – an increased commitment to the Lord and His church.

Press on - **focus on the future with hope** - *because Christ has made us His own* - and there is nothing we can't face with His help