

Part 25b – The LORD's Vineyard

The Church of Today

The parable of the vineyard applies not alone to the Jewish nation. It has a lesson for us. The church in this generation has been endowed by God with great privileges and blessings, and He expects corresponding returns.

We have been redeemed by a costly ransom. Only by the greatness of this ransom can we conceive of its results. On this earth, the earth whose soil has been moistened by the tears and blood of the Son of God, are to be brought forth the precious fruits of Paradise. In the lives of God's people the truths of His word are to reveal their glory and excellence. Through His people Christ is to manifest His character and the principles of His kingdom.

Satan seeks to counterwork the work of God, and he is constantly urging men to accept his principles. He represents the chosen people of God as a deluded people. He is an accuser of the brethren, and his accusing power is employed against those who work righteousness. The LORD desires through His people to answer Satan's charges by showing the results of obedience to right principles.

These principles are to be manifest in the individual Christian, in the family, in the church, and in every institution established for God's service. All are to be symbols of what can be done for the world. They are to be types of the saving power of the truths of the gospel. All are agencies in the fulfilment of God's great purpose for the human race.

The Jewish leaders looked with pride upon their magnificent temple, and the imposing rites of their religious service; but justice, mercy, and the love of God were lacking. The glory of the temple, the splendor of their service, could not recommend them to God; for that which alone is of value in His sight they did not offer. They did not bring Him the sacrifice of a humble and contrite spirit. It is when the vital principles of the kingdom of God are lost that ceremonies become multitudinous and extravagant. It is when the character building is neglected, when the adornment of the soul is lacking, when the simplicity of godliness is lost sight of, that pride and love of display demand magnificent church edifices, splendid adornings, and imposing ceremonials. In all this God is not honoured. A fashionable religion that consists of ceremonies, pretense, and display, is not acceptable to Him. Its services call forth no response from the heavenly messengers.

The church is very precious in God's sight. He values it, not for its external advantages, but for the sincere piety which distinguishes it from the world. He estimates it according to the growth of the members in the knowledge of Christ, according to their progress in spiritual experience.

Christ hungers to receive from His vineyard the fruit of holiness and unselfishness. He looks for the principles of love and goodness. Not all the beauty of art can bear comparison with the beauty of temper and character to be revealed in those who are Christ's representatives. It is the atmosphere of grace which surrounds the soul of the believer, the Holy Spirit working upon mind and heart, that makes him a savor of life to life, and enables God to bless his work.

A congregation may be the poorest in the land. It may be without the attraction of any outward show; but if the members possess the principles of the character of Christ, they will have His joy in their souls. Angels will unite with them in their worship. The praise and thanksgiving from grateful hearts will ascend to God as a sweet oblation.

The LORD desires us to make mention of His goodness and tell of His power. He is honoured by the expression of praise and thanksgiving. He says, "Whoso offers praise glorifies Me." Psalm 50:23. The people of Israel, as they journeyed through the wilderness, praised God in sacred song. The commandments and promises of the LORD were set to music, and all along the journey these were sung by the pilgrim travelers. And in Canaan as they met at their sacred feasts God's wonderful works were to be recounted, and grateful thanksgiving was to be offered to His name. God desired that the whole life of His people should be a life of praise. Thus His way was to be made "known upon earth," His "saving health among all nations." Psalm 67:2.

So it should be now. The people of the world are worshiping false gods. They are to be turned from their false worship, not by hearing denunciation of their idols, but by beholding something better. God's goodness is to be made known. "You are My witnesses, says the LORD, that I am God." Isaiah 43:12.

The LORD desires us to appreciate the great plan of redemption, to realize our high privilege as the children of God, and to walk before Him in obedience, with grateful thanksgiving. He desires us to serve Him in newness of life, with gladness every day. He longs to see gratitude welling up in our

hearts because our names are written in the Lamb's book of life, because we may cast all our care upon Him who cares for us. He bids us rejoice because we are the heritage of the LORD, because the righteousness of Christ is the white robe of His saints, because we have the blessed hope of the soon coming of our Saviour.

To praise God in fullness and sincerity of heart is as much a duty as is prayer. We are to show to the world and to all the heavenly intelligences that we appreciate the wonderful love of God for fallen humanity and that we are expecting larger and yet larger blessings from His infinite fullness. Far more than we do, we need to speak of the precious chapters in our experience. After a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit, our joy in the LORD and our efficiency in His service would be greatly increased by recounting His goodness and His wonderful works in behalf of His children.

These exercises drive back the power of Satan. They expel the spirit of murmuring and complaint, and the tempter loses ground. They cultivate those attributes of character which will fit the dwellers on earth for the heavenly mansions.

Such a testimony will have an influence upon others. No more effective means can be employed for winning souls to Christ.

We are to praise God by tangible service, by doing all in our power to advance the glory of His name. God imparts His gifts to us that we also may give, and thus make known His character to the world. Under the Jewish economy, gifts and offerings formed an essential part of God's worship. The Israelites were taught to devote a tithe of all their income to the service of the sanctuary. Besides this they were to bring sin offerings, free-will gifts, and offerings of gratitude. These were the means for supporting the ministry of the gospel for that time. God expects no less from us than He expected from His people anciently. The great work for the salvation of souls must be carried forward. In the tithe, with gifts and offerings, He has made provision for this work. Thus He intends that the ministry of the gospel shall be sustained. He claims the tithe as His own, and it should ever be regarded as a sacred reserve, to be placed in His treasury for the benefit of His cause. He asks also for our free-will gifts and offerings of gratitude. All are to be devoted to the sending of the gospel to the uttermost parts of the earth.

Service to God includes personal ministry. By personal effort we are to cooperate with Him for the saving of the world. Christ's commission, "Go you into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature," is spoken to every

one of His followers. (Mark 16:15.) All who are ordained to the life of Christ are ordained to work for the salvation of their fellow men. Their hearts will throb in unison with the heart of Christ. The same longing for souls that He has felt will be manifest in them. Not all can fill the same place in the work, but there is a place and a work for all.

In ancient times, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses with his meekness and wisdom, and Joshua with his varied capabilities, were all enlisted in God's service. The music of Miriam, the courage and piety of Deborah, the filial affection of Ruth, the obedience and faithfulness of Samuel, the stern fidelity of Elijah, the softening, subduing influence of Elisha – all were needed. So now all upon whom God's blessing has been bestowed are to respond by actual service; every gift is to be employed for the advancement of His kingdom and the glory of His name.

All who receive Christ as a personal Saviour are to demonstrate the truth of the gospel and its saving power upon the life. God makes no requirement without making provision for its fulfilment. Through the grace of Christ we may accomplish everything that God requires. All the riches of heaven are to be revealed through God's people. "Herein is My Father glorified," Christ says, "that you bear much fruit; so shall you be My disciples." John 15:8.

God claims the whole earth as His vineyard. Though now in the hands of the usurper, it belongs to God. By redemption no less than by creation it is His. For the world Christ's sacrifice was made. "God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son." John 3:16. It is through that one gift that every other is imparted to men. Daily the whole world receives blessing from God. Every drop of rain, every ray of light shed on our unthankful race, every leaf and flower and fruit, testifies to God's long forbearance and His great love.

And what returns are made to the great Giver? How are men treating the claims of God? To whom are the masses of mankind giving the service of their lives? They are serving mammon. Wealth, position, pleasure in the world, is their aim. Wealth is gained by robbery, not of man only, but of God. Men are using His gifts to gratify their selfishness. Everything they can grasp is made to minister to their greed and their love of selfish pleasure.

The sin of the world today is the sin that brought destruction upon Israel. Ingratitude to God, the neglect of opportunities and blessings, the selfish appropriation of God's gifts – these were comprised in the sin that brought wrath upon Israel. They are bringing ruin upon the world today.

The tears which Christ shed upon Olivet as He stood overlooking the chosen city were not for Jerusalem alone. In the fate of Jerusalem He beheld the destruction of the world.

“If you had known, even you, at least in this your day, the things which belong to your peace! but now they are hid from your eyes.” Luke 19:42.

“In this your day.” The day is nearing its close. The period of mercy and privilege is well-nigh ended. The clouds of vengeance are gathering. The rejectors of God's grace are about to be involved in swift and irretrievable ruin.

Yet the world is asleep. The people know not the time of their visitation.

In this crisis, where is the church to be found? Are its members meeting the claims of God? Are they fulfilling His commission, and representing His character to the world? Are they urging upon the attention of their fellow men the last merciful message of warning?

Men are in peril. Multitudes are perishing. But how few of the professed followers of Christ are burdened for these souls. The destiny of a world hangs in the balance; but this hardly moves even those who claim to believe the most far-reaching truth ever given to mortals. There is a lack of that love which led Christ to leave His heavenly home and take man's nature that humanity might touch humanity and draw humanity to divinity. There is a stupor, a paralysis, upon the people of God, which prevents them from understanding the duty of the hour.

When the Israelites entered Canaan, they did not fulfill God's purpose by taking possession of the whole land. After making a partial conquest, they settled down to enjoy the fruit of their victories. In their unbelief and love of ease, they congregated in the portions already conquered instead of pushing forward to occupy new territory. Thus they began to depart from God. By their failure to carry out His purpose, they made it impossible for Him to fulfill to them His promise of blessing. Is not the church of today doing the same thing? With the whole world before them in need of the gospel, professed Christians congregate where they themselves can enjoy gospel privileges. They do not feel the necessity of occupying new territory, carrying the message of salvation into regions beyond. They refuse to fulfill Christ's commission, “Go you into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.” Mark 16:15. Are they less guilty than was the Jewish church?

The professed followers of Christ are on trial before the heavenly universe; but the coldness of their zeal and the feebleness of their efforts in God's service mark them as unfaithful. If what they are doing were the best they could do, condemnation would not rest upon them; but were their hearts enlisted in the work, they could do much more. They know and the world knows that they have to a great degree lost the spirit of self-denial and cross bearing. Many there are against whose names will be found written in the books of heaven, Not producers, but consumers. By many who bear Christ's name, His glory is obscured, His beauty veiled, His honour withheld.

There are many whose names are on the church books, but who are not under Christ's rule. They are not heeding His instruction or doing His work. Therefore they are under the control of the enemy. They are doing no positive good; therefore they are doing incalculable harm. Because their influence is not a savor of life to life, it is a savor of death to death.

The LORD says, "Shall I not visit for these things?" Jeremiah 5:9. Because they failed of fulfilling God's purpose, the children of Israel were set aside, and God's call was extended to other peoples. If these too prove unfaithful, will they not in like manner be rejected?

In the parable of the vineyard it was the husbandmen whom Christ pronounced guilty. It was they who had refused to return to their LORD the fruit of his ground. In the Jewish nation it was the priests and teachers who, by misleading the people, had robbed God of the service which He claimed. It was they who turned the nation away from Christ.

The law of God unmixed with human tradition was presented by Christ as the great standard of obedience. This aroused the enmity of the rabbis. They had set human teaching above God's word, and had turned the people away from His precepts. They would not give up their man-made commandments in order to obey the requirements of the word of God. They would not, for the truth's sake, sacrifice the pride of reason and the praise of men. When Christ came, presenting to the nation the claims of God, the priests and elders denied His right to interpose between them and the people. They would not accept His rebukes and warnings, and they set themselves to turn the people against Him and to compass His destruction.

For the rejection of Christ, with the results that followed, they were responsible. A nation's sin and a nation's ruin were due to the religious leaders.

In our day are not the same influences at work? Of the husbandmen of the LORD's vineyard are not many following in the steps of the Jewish leaders? Are not religious teachers turning men away from the plain requirements of the word of God? Instead of educating them in obedience to God's law, are they not educating them in transgression? From many of the pulpits of the churches the people are taught that the law of God is not binding upon them. Human traditions, ordinances, and customs are exalted. Pride and self-satisfaction because of the gifts of God are fostered, while the claims of God are ignored.

In setting aside the law of God, men know not what they are doing. God's law is the transcript of His character. It embodies the principles of His kingdom. He who refuses to accept these principles is placing himself outside the channel where God's blessings flow.

The glorious possibilities set before Israel could be realised only through obedience to God's commandments. The same elevation of character, the same fulness of blessing – blessing on mind and soul and body, blessing on house and field, blessing for this life and for the life to come – is possible for us only through obedience.

In the spiritual as in the natural world, obedience to the laws of God is the condition of fruit bearing. And when men teach the people to disregard God's commandments, they are preventing them from bearing fruit to His glory.

They are guilty of withholding from the LORD the fruits of His vineyard.

To us God's messengers come at the bidding of the Master. They come demanding, as did Christ, obedience to the word of God. They present His claim to the fruits of the vineyard, the fruits of love, and humility, and self-sacrificing service. Like the Jewish leaders, are not many of the husbandmen of the vineyard stirred to anger? When the claim of God's law is set before the people, do not these teachers use their influence in leading men to reject it? Such teachers God calls unfaithful servants.

The words of God to ancient Israel have a solemn warning to the church and its leaders today. Of Israel the LORD said, "I have written to him the great things of My law; but they were counted as a strange thing." Hosea 8:12. And to the priests and teachers He declared, "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge; because you have rejected knowledge, I will also reject

you; . . . seeing you have forgotten the law of your God, I will also forget your children.” Hosea 4:6.

Shall the warnings from God be passed by unheeded? Shall the opportunities for service be unimproved? Shall the world's scorn, the pride of reason, conformity to human customs and traditions, hold the professed followers of Christ from service to Him? Will they reject God's word as the Jewish leaders rejected Christ? The result of Israel's sin is before us. Will the church of today take warning?

“If some of the branches be broken off, and you, being a wild olive tree, were grafted in among them, and with them partake of the root and fatness of the olive tree; boast not. . . . Because of unbelief they were broken off, and you stand by faith. Be not highminded, but fear; for if God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest He also spare not you.” Romans 11:17-21.

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