



[Rev. Steven S. Billings](#)

Sermon for Palm/Passion Sunday
April 13, 2025

Light and Darkness

John 12:20–43

²⁰ Now there were certain Greeks among those who came up to worship at the feast.
²¹ Then they came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida of Galilee, and asked him, saying, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”

²² Philip came and told Andrew, and in turn Andrew and Philip told Jesus.

²³ But Jesus answered them, saying, “The hour has come that the Son of Man should be glorified. ²⁴ Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain. ²⁵ He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶ If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also. If anyone serves Me, him My Father will honor.

²⁷ “Now My soul is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save Me from this hour’? But for this purpose I came to this hour. ²⁸ Father, glorify Your name.”

Then a voice came from heaven, saying, “I have both glorified it and will glorify it again.”

²⁹ Therefore the people who stood by and heard it said that it had thundered. Others said, “An angel has spoken to Him.”

³⁰ Jesus answered and said, “This voice did not come because of Me, but for your sake. ³¹ Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out. ³² And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself.” ³³ This He said, signifying by what death He would die.

³⁴ The people answered Him, “We have heard from the law that the Christ remains forever; and how can You say, ‘The Son of Man must be lifted up’? Who is this Son of Man?”

³⁵ Then Jesus said to them, “A little while longer the light is with you. Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you; he who walks in darkness does not know where he is going. ³⁶ While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light.” These things Jesus spoke, and departed, and was hidden from them.

³⁷ But although He had done so many signs before them, they did not believe in Him,
³⁸ that the word of Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled, which he spoke:

“Lord, who has believed our report?

And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?”

³⁹ Therefore they could not believe, because Isaiah said again:

⁴⁰ “He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts,



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Lest they should see with their eyes,
Lest they should understand with their hearts and turn,
So that I should heal them.”

⁴¹ *These things Isaiah said when he saw His glory and spoke of Him.*

⁴² *Nevertheless even among the rulers many believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they did not confess Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue; ⁴³ for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God.*

In today’s Gospel, Jesus tells a parable about a vineyard and some wicked tenants, who were supposed to be taking care of the vineyard for its owner, but instead took over the vineyard for themselves. Much like last week’s parable of the Prodigal Son, this story isn’t so much about the wicked tenants, but is more about the patience of the vineyard’s owner. The question Jesus ultimately poses is: “What Then Will the Owner of the Vineyard Do?”

He begins by using an image that was very familiar to His hearers. It’s the image of the vineyard. Many times in the Old Testament, Israel is referred to as a “vineyard,” with the understanding that the Owner of the vineyard is God. As the Owner, the Lord has the right to expect good fruit from His vineyard, that is, from His chosen people, who have been entrusted with the high privilege of managing His vineyard.

The owner in the parable rightfully expected fruit from the tenants, so he sent a servant to go and get it. They beat this first servant, however, and sent him away. Now, if I had been the owner, this first incident would have been enough for me to send in troops and force those wicked tenants out. But not the owner in the parable. He sent another servant. They beat this one as well and sent him away, having “treated him shamefully.” After this repeated offense, wouldn’t you surely have kicked them out? But again, no. The owner sent yet a third servant, whom they “wounded” and “cast” out. Their behavior was getting worse as they became more and more bold and brazen.

The servants in this parable represent the whole succession of prophets whom the Lord sent to His people Israel – prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, and so on. These prophets called God’s people to repentance and faith, which was the kind of fruit God was looking for. But, by and large, Israel did not receive His servants well. Instead, they shamefully mistreated them, rejected their message, and, in many cases, persecuted and even killed them.

This happened time after time, as Jesus indicates in His parable. So now, His question comes, in light of the repeated rejection and mistreatment of His servants: “What Then Will the Owner of the Vineyard Do?” In fact, that’s what the owner asked himself, isn’t it? “The owner of the vineyard said, ‘What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.’”



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Events like these could never happen in real life. I mean, what owner would put up with this kind of behavior for so long? And then, of all things, after the cruel treatment of his servants, to send in his own son to risk the same sort of rejection – or worse!? But that's what *this* owner does. Because that's exactly what *God* had done. The Lord had put up with Israel's obstinacy for many centuries. But, instead of wiping them out, as He had every right to do, He was giving them one last chance. Now He had sent them His Son. "What shall I do? I will send my beloved son."

Here was one even greater than the prophets: Jesus Christ, the Son of God Himself; the One at whose baptism and transfiguration the Father had said, "This is my beloved Son." God's own Son came to God's own people. Should they not have respected Him? In His character, in His teachings, in His miracles of healing, Jesus clearly manifested Himself as the One sent from God. Surely Israel would 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."

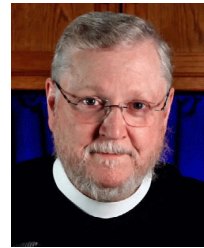
Bear in mind the drama taking place here, even as Jesus was telling this story. This was Jerusalem. It was Holy Week. There in the crowd, listening to Him speak, were the chief priests and scribes, the very ones who'd been busy plotting against Him. This was just days before their plot would go into motion and Jesus would be arrested. So, here at this point in the story, Jesus makes it plain that He *knows* what they're plotting. And what's more, He knows that their plot will be successful – they will, in *fact*, kill Him.

So that, too, is reflected in the story. The tenants do indeed throw the son out of the vineyard and kill him. And after this most heinous of crimes, the ultimate act of defiance and rebellion, the question comes again: "What will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others."

The wicked tenants ultimately met the end they deserved, and the owner gave the vineyard to others. After the Jewish nation rejected Jesus, their doom was sealed. Forty years later, the Roman army would destroy Jerusalem, including the temple. Not one stone would be left upon another. They lost their position as tenants and God gave the vineyard to others. The Church became largely Gentile. Thankfully, many Jews *did* receive Christ; some still do. But as a whole, Israel had forfeited its status as keepers of the vineyard. No longer would they be the chosen people of God carrying out His mission in the world. That distinction would now go to the Church.

What lessons can we learn from the Parable of the Vineyard? First of all, we need to recognize who the owner of the vineyard is. It's God. The Church belongs to God, not to us. We're just tenants, stewards of what belongs to Him.

The Church, therefore, is meant to serve His purposes, according to His design. This means some things get the priority and some things don't. The Church is not here to be a social club, a place for fun and games, outings, programs, and so on. It's not that these things are wrong, but they're not the *primary* purpose of the Church. The owner of the



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vineyard is looking for something else.

The Church is not here to be an entertainment center. Worship is meant to be something more, something deeper than a pep rally that makes you feel good. The message is not about teaching you how to live your best life. The Church has a message you can't find anywhere else: the faith creating, faith strengthening message of salvation by grace through faith in the suffering, death, and resurrection of the Son of God on our behalf. Gathering around that message is what the Owner wants from His vineyard.

The message of the cross is to be foremost in the church. We preach Christ, and Him crucified. Nothing else can save souls. We preach repentance and forgiveness of sins in His name. We call people to Christ as their only hope. This faith, then, will produce its fruit: love for God, love for neighbor; Christians bearing the name of Christ faithfully in their daily lives, living as God's people. The Church has a special identity and mission in the world. We tend this vineyard to do the will of the Owner.

The other thing that comes through so powerfully in this parable is the incredible patience of the vineyard Owner. By all rights he could have wiped those wicked tenants out right off the bat. But he waited. He was patient. He sent servant after servant, suffering one outrage after another. And finally, He sent His own beloved Son. This kind of thing doesn't happen in real life.

Except it does! God *is* patient and merciful like that toward us! He sends us His servants, with His message of mercy and forgiveness, week after week, year after year – even after we've blown it time and time again. "The Lord is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." Oh, the longsuffering of our Lord, that He puts up with willful, obstinate sinners like you and me and holds off on His judgment toward us!

He even sent His own beloved Son, Jesus Christ, into a hostile vineyard that would reject Him and kill Him. Instead of finding good fruit, He would receive a crown of thorns. Jesus knew full well what was coming for Him that fateful Holy Week. He knew what His opponents were plotting and what they would do. But He went through with it anyway. This is surely the most fantastic love of all! God's beloved Son, going into an unjust death to redeem a world of rebels. He did this for you!

When the tenants saw the son coming, they said, "This is the heir. Let us kill him, so that the inheritance may be ours." They thought that killing the son would gain them the inheritance. Ironically, it's in the very act of the Son's death that we *do* receive the inheritance! By His death on the cross, Jesus gained these riches for us. Then in Holy Baptism you and I were joined to Christ and became heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ. The inheritance is ours! Christ's righteousness, His status as a beloved Son, His resurrection and everlasting life in heaven – all these are part of the incredible inheritance we receive, purely out of God's mercy and grace and His fantastic love!



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What then will the owner of the vineyard do? For the time being, He will continue to be patient and longsuffering toward us, calling us to repentance and faith in His Son, our Savior Jesus Christ. For the time being, He will continue to do everything for His Church, so that we produce the good fruits that He's looking for. Someday – we know not when – His patience will end and He will bring this age to a close and make all things new. Until then, take advantage of His patience, beloved. Repent of your sins, turn to Him in faith, receive His grace, love, and mercy. But don't delay. Receive His forgiveness while you can, lest the vineyard be taken away from you and given to another. In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen