

LUKE 20:9–19. (EHV)

He began to tell the people this parable: “A man planted a vineyard, leased it to some tenant farmers, and went away on a journey for a long time. When it was the right time, he sent a servant to the tenants to collect his share of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenant farmers beat the servant and sent him away empty-handed. The man went ahead and sent yet another servant, but they also beat him, treated him shamefully, and sent him away empty-handed. He then sent yet a third. They also wounded him and threw him out. The owner of the vineyard said, ‘What should I do? I will send my son, whom I love. Perhaps they will respect him.’ But when the tenant farmers saw him, they talked it over with one another. They said, ‘This is the heir. Let’s kill him, so that the inheritance will be ours.’ They threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. So what will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and destroy those tenant farmers and give the vineyard to others.” When they heard this, they said, “May it never be!” But he looked at them and said, “Then what about this that is written:

The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone? [Ps. 118:22]

“Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and it will crush the one on whom it falls.” That very hour the chief priests and the experts in the law began looking for a way to lay hands on him, because they knew he had spoken this parable against them. But they were afraid of the people.

What happens to virtues when they are overexercised?

We all agree that patience is a virtue. But what happens when patience is overexercised? We’ve seen it with parents. They tell their children, “Don’t do that,” “Knock it off,” “Stop it,” over and over again, but when the children keep on doing it, they don’t do anything. So the children keep on doing it. There comes a point when it is no longer patience, but condoning and enabling what is being done. There comes a point when being patient turns into being an accomplice to evil.

We all agree that innocence and putting the best construction on things is a virtue. But what happens when those traits are overexercised? Innocence becomes naïveté, and putting the best construction on things becomes ignorance, even stupidity.

You can do that with virtually every virtue. Generosity overexercised becomes wastefulness. Caution overexercised becomes indecision and laziness. And the list goes on.

Is this vineyard owner virtuous or foolish? Is he loving, or has he lost his mind?

A man bought or otherwise acquired a choice, fertile piece of property and planted it with grapevines to turn it into a vineyard. He put a wall around it to mark the land as his own and to protect it from animals and thieves. He dug a winepress in it so that he would have a means to turn the grapes into wine. He built a watchtower on it, so that nothing and no one could sneak into it in spite of the wall. This vineyard had it all.

The vineyard owner then rented his well-planted, well-prepared vineyard to some farmers and went away for a long time. This was a common-enough arrangement with farmland in Jesus’s day, and there were different ways the tenant farmers could pay the rent. One way was to

charge the tenant farmers a fixed amount of grain or oil or wine per year. Another way was to charge the farmers a fixed amount of money per year. But the way this owner charged the farmers was the fairest and wisest: He charged them a fixed percentage of the harvest. The harder they worked, the greater the harvest, and the more everyone stood to gain. But if the harvest was bad because of drought, the farmers didn't have to pay what they didn't have.

So when harvest time came, the vineyard owner dispatched a servant to collect the owner's share of the vineyard's produce. But these tenant farmers, who were living off the land and labor of the owner, beat his servant and sent him away empty-handed. And they beat him pretty badly.

There's a problem here. The tenant farmers were treating this vineyard as their own, treating themselves as the owners. What was the owner going to do? Well, remember those virtues I mentioned before? The owner now puts them on display. He sends a second servant. Maybe the first servant was making up his story. Maybe the tenant farmers just weren't used to having a vineyard owner taking his contract seriously.

But this servant they not only beat up badly like the first, but also disgraced or dishonored. Anthropologists have identified basically three types of lenses through which different cultures view evil and respond to it. There are "fear-power" cultures, which tend to be smaller tribal cultures. Our culture is classified as a "guilt-innocence" culture. People who commit crimes are guilty, and we seek justice or forgiveness to rectify guilt. But many cultures in what we call the East are classified as "shame-honor" cultures. People are shamed for not fulfilling group or religious expectations and they seek to restore their honor before the community. We also have concepts of fear and power, shame and honor. But I don't think we feel or understand disgrace or shame as keenly as those in Jesus's audience did. Perhaps God had his Word written in the Middle East because that's where all of these worldviews intersect, and so the Bible speaks in all three of these ways.

How was this second servant shamed or disgraced? We can only guess. One time in the Old Testament, David's mighty men were disgraced by having half of their beards shaved and being sent away with their garments cut off in the back so that their backsides would be exposed (2 Samuel 10:1-4). Perhaps something like that happened here. A person can recover from a beating easily enough, but it would take considerably longer for this servant to recover from his disgrace.

Now what? Clearly the first servant hadn't made up his story, since now the same thing and worse happened to the second servant. The owner decides to send one more. He's showing patience, firmness, and persistence, right?

It says simply that they wounded him and threw him out. Instead of minor scrapes, cuts, and bruises, together with shame and disgrace, there are deeper wounds and trauma inflicted. We get the impression that what was done to this third servant was life-altering for the worse.

It seems like this is the turning point or hinge, right? They've used up their three strikes. It seems like what the owner decides now will show whether his previous decisions were virtuous or reckless, wise or foolish. And the owner of the vineyard also seems to understand that this is the deciding point, since he deliberates with himself: "What should I do?"

He decides...to send his dear, beloved son.

What? Is this vineyard owner out of his mind? Who would do something like that? Who would send his son into a situation like that? But the owner reasons that even these vile tenant farmers will have enough sense of shame in a culture that is more shame-honor than ours is that they would not risk dealing with him the same way they dealt with his three servants.

But if this parable were a movie being shown in front of our eyes, we would be watching from this point on with our faces covered, peeking out with one eye between our fingers.

“But when the tenant farmers saw him, they talked it over with one another. They said, ‘This is the heir. Let’s kill him, so that the inheritance will be ours.’ They threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.”

Are you happy now, vineyard owner? Your own dear son is dead. We could see it coming a mile away.

But wait... Is the vineyard owner’s patience actually a vice? “So what will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and destroy those tenant farmers and give the vineyard to others.” His patience *does* have an end. The tenant farmers *do* get what’s coming to them in the end. In Matthew, it isn’t Jesus himself who simply tells what will happen to the tenants. He actually asks the audience what should happen to them. And they get it. “He will bring those wretches to a wretched end,” they say.

They understand that the wretch in this story is not the vineyard owner. The wretches are the tenant farmers. After all, which tenant farmers would act this way? When they are given the best possible vineyard to farm? When they get to do so under the most favorable terms? When not one, not two, and not even three servants are sent to them, but also the owner’s own son whom he loves is sent to them to collect what is rightfully his? Which tenant farmers would think that they could become legitimate heirs of the vineyard by killing the vineyard owner’s son? Who are really the cruel, the foolish, the shameful, the insane ones here?

And when we see who the cruel, the foolish, and the insane ones really are, then we have to go back again and ask, “And who shows this kind of patient love to such people, especially when it turns out that the person showing this kind of patient love is really not a wet noodle after all?” After all, when you study the story, you realize that the owner isn’t really just about the produce or the money. Especially by the end, it becomes clear that he is more concerned about the tenant farmers themselves. He wants them to be able to enjoy his vineyard, but he wants them to enjoy it with honor and in righteousness. If we were to find him after his son had been murdered, we would find him sobbing not just over the loss of his son, but also over the fate of those tenant farmers.

Jesus makes clear, and the people understood, that he was speaking this parable against the Jewish leaders. This parable was basically a metaphor for the entire Old Testament culminating in Jesus standing before them that very week. The vineyard owner was God. The servants were the prophets God had sent them, the prophets whom their ancestors had in large part shamefully mistreated. And the dear, beloved son was Jesus.

Ironically, they responded to the parable by wanting to do exactly what the parable said they did in the end. Yet Jesus tells them the parable anyway, as a call to repentance, before he gives the vineyard to others.

But we know how the real story ends. They did put Jesus to death. The Jewish people by and large rejected Jesus, though he has preserved a remnant among them who believe in him. And God has given the vineyard to others, to the Gentiles, to us.

So we do well first of all to marvel at the love Jesus has shown both them and us. Jesus actually based this parable on one that God told through Isaiah in Isaiah 5. And in that parable, God asks the rhetorical question: “What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it?” And in this parable, what more could God have done than sending his own son? What more could he have done for us and for world than sending us his Son in human flesh? Not to mention that he even wants to give his vineyard to others after what he experienced with the first tenant farmers! Those of you who rent out property, if you’ve had renters trash your place, are you eager to rent it out again?

We need to marvel at this love. It is some kind of love—love that does not even spare his own Son in order to have us enjoy his vineyard and blessings with honor and in righteousness.

But we also do well to see that even though God’s love extends all the way up to his Son, it also ends with his Son. God’s love is some kind of love, but if it were overexercised, it would not be love, but participating in evil. There is an end to his love, an end to his patience. If we ignore his Son in this life, there are no second chances. God will not give us one more chance to acknowledge him on Judgment Day before his throne. By then it will be too late. He will tell us, “I already sent you my Son. What more could I have done?”

God’s love is some kind of love. Marvel at that love as we approach Holy Week. And remain in that love, that you may produce the fruits that God is seeking. May God help us to do so by the power of his Holy Spirit, for Jesus’s sake. Amen.