

ARE YOU A CARETAKER OR AN UNDERTAKER?

Today's Text: Matthew 21: 33-46

Extracts:

[Jesus said to the chief priests and Pharisees], **“Hear another parable. There was a certain landowner who planted a vineyard and set a hedge around it, dug a winepress in it and built a tower. And he leased it to vinedressers and went into a far country. Now when vintage-time drew near, he sent his servants to the vinedressers that they might receive its fruit; and the vinedressers took his servants, beat one, killed one and stoned another. Again he sent other servants, more than the first, and they did likewise to them. Then last of all, he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ But when the vinedressers saw the son, they said among themselves, ‘this is the heir. Come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance.’ So they took him and cast him out of the vineyard and killed him. Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vinedressers?” They said to Him, “He will destroy those wicked men miserably, and lease the vineyard to other vinedressers who will render to him the fruits in their seasons” [Matt. 21: 33-40]**

On Tuesday, 10 February 2009, President Obama attended a town hall meeting in Fort Meyers, Florida.¹ Henrietta Hughes, a homeless woman who lived in her car with her son, publicly appealed to him for housing assistance. In the crowd was Chene Thompson, the wife of the local state legislator. She stepped forward and offered the homeless woman her vacant house until she could find her feet again. Thompson would continue to pay the mortgage, property taxes, insurance and utilities. Her joy was “to have someone occupying it to keep it from becoming run-down.” On her part, the homeless woman expressed “overwhelming gratitude because no one would do that.”

Homeless Hughes has received blessings that she did not expect or deserve. She can show gratitude to her benefactor by using her home well. But what if she were to mess it up or even try to fraudulently sell it? Is that not we do to God? The earth and everything on it belong to Him [Ps. 24: 1], but He has given it to us to tend [Gen. 2: 8]. What have you done with the free lease on your part of His estate? Are you taking good care of it (as a caretaker) or trying to misuse or even usurp it (as an undertaker)? Let us find out from this week's study based on the parable of a landowner and the vinedressers that he put in charge.

¹ Based on “Kindness will help economy, homeless woman’s rescuer say,” <http://www.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/02/12/henrietta.hughes/index.html>

1. Background: How do you use what is kept in your care?

In continuation of His disputes with the chief priests and the Pharisees that had been on His case since His triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus told them the parable of a landowner who had planted a vineyard and built a winepress that he then left in the care of vine dressers while he was away to a far country [**Matt. 21: 33- 41**]. Any of us could have been in that man's place. For example, some of us may have travelled abroad or out of town and left our estate in the care of trusted family members or friends or even a professional agent. Some of us have had to travel away from home and left their children in the care of their spouses or parents. Some of us are on vacation and left the office in the care of a trusted subordinate. Some of us do not question what their insurance agents or financial advisers are doing with their accounts nor do they forensically examine the periodic reports that they receive. Therefore, we can easily relate to that landowner's situation.

Let us follow the story step by step, as follows:

a) *The vineyard belonged to the landowner*

It was the landowner who “planted a vineyard, and set a hedge around it; dug a winepress in it, and built a tower.” Then, he leased it to vinedressers and went into a far country [v. 23]. Everything on that estate [both land and structures] belonged to the landowner, meaning that he had the freehold rights to it. I do not know whether he signed a leasehold contract with the vinedressers, stating the terms of use and termination, where applicable. The likelihood is that it was leased on trust, just as most of us do with those we trust. No matter the terms of lease, only the landowner can determine what to do with his estate, whether to keep it or dispose of it. That is why we prepare wills to pass our estates to our descendants (as their inheritance) or to others if we so wish, after we die. Lessees (those to whom your property is leased) do not have the right to dispose of the estate without your express permission.

In like manner, the landowner in this parable represents God who created the earth and everything in it and leased it to us to tend for Him. A few examples from the Scriptures will drive this point home. On the verge of entering the Promised Land, Moses reminded the children of Israel that God had led them through the terrible wilderness, providing them manna for food that their elders did not know wherefrom, and water from a rock. He did so because of His plan to do them good in the end. Therefore, should they get there and become wealthy, they should not get pompous or proud; instead, they should remember that it was God who gave them the power to gain it for His own purpose [**Deut. 8: 1-18**]. Job, the greatest of the people of the East was the first to admit when adversity struck him through the works of Satan, “Naked I came from my mother's womb, and

naked shall I return there” [Job 1: 21]. When a dispute arose between the disciples of John the Baptist and the Jews about purification, they came to him to clarify to them the ministry of Jesus. He told them, “A man can receive nothing unless it has been *given to him from heaven*” [Jn 3: 22-27].

It follows that we do not own *anything on earth*, physical, psychological or spiritual, but we are mere custodians. We are only holding our bodies and natural talents, our positions and possessions, etc, in trust for God who has leased them to us until the day His Son, Jesus the Christ returns to establish His kingdom on earth. Therefore, we need to pay attention to this parable so as to learn the right attitude we should have towards God’s estate in our care.

b) *But what were the vinedressers thinking?*

The vinedressers seemed to have other plans concerning that vineyard. When “vintage-time” (harvest time) drew near, the landowner sent some of his servants to receive the fruit of that estate. The vinedressers took his servants, ‘beat one, killed one and stoned another’ [Matt. 21: 34-35]. The man sent more servants, just in case the vinedressers misunderstood him the first time, and “they did likewise to them,” that is, they also killed them [v. 36]. In essence, they did not render account to the owner of the estate on how they were using his property.

How many people have you provided a ladder with which to climb up in life only to slap you with ingratitude when they get to the top? Take the case of Nabal, the husband of Abigail [1 Sam. 25: 1-11]. He was a rich businessman with three thousand sheep and a thousand goats. While running away from King Saul, David had protected Nabal’s flocks against attacks from marauders. So, while Nabal was shearing his sheep, David sent his servants to him to “please give whatever came to (his) hand to (his) servants and to (his) son, David.” That was a humble request from a man who was going to be the next king of Israel. Nabal sent through David’s servants the following audacious response, “Who is David, and who is the son of Jesse? There are many servants nowadays who break away each one from his master” [v. 10].

But we are worse than the vinedressers! For example, what is our response to the servants that God has sent to us in the form of prophets or preachers or teachers? Have we not persecuted or killed them and ignored their message? For example, almost out of frustration, Jeremiah told the people of Judah, “From the thirteenth year of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah, even to this day, *this is the twenty-third year in which the word of the Lord has come to you ... but you have not listened.*” He added, “The Lord has sent to you *all the servants the prophets ... but you have not*

listened nor inclined your ear to hear” [Jer. 25: 3-7]. Instead, God’s servants were put on “trial of mockings and scourgings ... and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword” [Heb. 11: 36-37]. Stephen was stoned to death for testifying that He saw Jesus standing on the right side of His Father in heaven [Acts 7: 55-58]. Even today, the servants of God that insist on His truth are persecuted, maligned and maliciously disgraced and insulted. Some of those who get rapid promotion to sensitive positions in the churches are likely to be the politicians and hypocrites rather than the true believers. Therefore, we are still killing the servants that God has sent to us to account for how we are using His vineyard. That is why the word of God affirms that “all who desire to be godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution” [2 Tim. 3: 12].

c) *They even tried to seize his inheritance!*

The landowner, last of all, sent his son, saying, “They will respect my son.” But when the servants saw him, they said among themselves, “This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance.” In deed, they took him outside of the vineyard and killed him [Matt. 21: 37-39]. Perhaps, their expectation was that the vineyard would then become theirs and they would no longer be accountable to the landowner!

That is exactly what we also try to do to the estate that God has put under our care. For example, our bodies are the temples of God where the Spirit of God dwells. Therefore, we are required to keep it holy [1 Cor. 3: 16-17]. So, when we live in sexual immorality, have we not “expelled” God from His temple? When we solemnize marriages other than the union of a man and a woman, have we not disinherited God so as to usurp His temple? When Jesus the Son of God was crucified by real life “vinedressers,” was it not their attempt to stop the kingdom of God on earth? Can the gates of hell cannot prevail against the church of God [Matt. 16: 18]?

d) *But the evil vinedressers were destroyed and the vineyard was given to others!*

Jesus asked His listeners “When the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those trespassers?” They answered Him, “He will destroy those wicked men miserably, and lease his vineyard to other vinedressers who will render to him the fruits in their seasons” [Matt. 21: 40-41].

Those vinedressers did not deserve the privilege that they had been given. So, they were thrown out and destroyed and the privilege was extended to those who were ready to bear the fruits of appreciation and full obedience. In like manner, when we misuse the estate that God has entrusted to our

care, He will throw us out of His salvation plan and replace us with those who are ready to do what He has commanded. God forbid that we be cast out! That is why we cannot afford to behave like those miserable vinedressers.

2. The steps back to restoration begin with knowing why you have failed

Most of us are anxious to take good care of what has been put in our care because, in the words of Jesus, “If you have not been faithful in what is another man’s, who will give you what is your own?” [Lk 16: 12]. Therefore, it is better to be a caretaker (a good keeper of what belongs to others) than an undertaker (a person who buries or destroys what is of worth to others).

We may have become undertakers for one or more of the following reasons:

a) *Ignorance*

It is possible that we are driven by ignorance of what is expected of us. For example, how can you know what God wants you to do when you do not read the Bible? That you go to church and follow all the rituals of your denomination does not insulate you against ignorance. In fact, your doctrine may even promote ignorance. That was why even Paul, a Pharisee that knew so much about the law of Moses, said after he had come to know Christ, “Although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor and an insolent man, but I obtained mercy *because I did it ignorantly in unbelief*” [1 Tim. 1: 13]. Right now, you may be living in disobedience because it is acceptable in the circles where you move or you have not had the “privilege” to suffer lack in life. Are you waiting for harsh reality to remove your veil of ignorance?

b) *Laziness*

Laziness, physical or spiritual, can be a major reason for allowing God’s estate in our lives to grow weeds. Solomon speaks of it as follows [Prov. 24: 30-34]:

I went by the field of the lazy man, and by the vineyard of the man devoid of understanding, and there it was, all overgrown with thorns; ... its stone wall was broken down. I looked at it and received instruction: a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, so shall your poverty come like a prowler.

Some people cannot read a page of a newspaper before they get bored. How can they read the whole Bible and meditate on the word of God

therein? How can they war against principalities and spiritual powers that they cannot see [Eph. 6: 12]?

c) *Greed*

Only greed can explain why the vinedressers in the parable would kill the landowner's son so as to seize his estate. We are greedy for money, power and everything else and we are ready to steal, kill or destroy to succeed. [Jn 10: 10]. The word of God says, "He who is greedy for gain troubles his own house; but he who hates bribes will live" [Prov. 15: 27]. Why should you gain the whole world but suffer the loss of your soul [Matt. 16: 26]? Therefore, it is better to be satisfied than to be sacrificed!

3. Conclusion: Become a joint-heir with Christ!

The landowner is a figure of God the Father, his son is a figure of Jesus, the Son of God that the Father sent to us in human form to rescue the estate that Adam and Eve had lost to the devil in the Garden of Eden [Gen. 3: 15]. When the Jewish leaders got the Romans to take Jesus outside of the gates of Jerusalem to crucify Him on the cross at Calvary, little did they know that "the stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone ... and whoever falls on this stone will be broken, but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder" [vv. 42, 44]. Finally, the kingdom of God has extended to us, the Gentiles, because the nation of the Jews (but not all Jews) had first rejected it [[Rom. 11: 11]. Just as the Jews will be grafted back into the tree of salvation before the return of Christ [Rev. 7: 4-9], so will God give us the opportunity to return to Him "for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" [Rom. 11: 29]. The blood of Jesus has sealed that for us!

By faith in Christ Jesus, you have become the son of God (by adoption) and a joint-heir with Christ [Rom. 8: 15-17]. You have been freed from the temptation to misappropriate God's estate because you cannot crucify Jesus twice! Now, you have the unique opportunity to serve as a faithful caretaker of the temple of God which is what you are.

Be a caretaker, not an undertaker!