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Patience and Punishment

What a patient friend we have in Jesus! He sees our confusion and disloyalty but keeps welcoming us back into his arms of love. People make a mistake, however, when they take Jesus' patience for granted and test his love. The enemies he faced during his ministry on earth heard his harsh judgment; Jesus expects his fruit trees to produce fruit. If they do not, they will be destroyed. We hear Jesus' words with respect and reality. "Be *patient* with me, Jesus. Spare me the *punishment* I deserve and empower me to live my life for you."

Sermon - Graves into Gardens Matthew 21:33-43

Are you non-confrontational? Do you find it easier taking the passive aggressive route rather than being direct? Well, today Jesus looks people right in the eyes and confronts them about their sin. I bet when you have a bone to pick with someone you know, you also confront them by telling them an allegorical agricultural parable, right? Well, that's what Jesus does, and to understand today why that's actually such a brilliant punch-in-the-gut, we need to get our minds in sync with someone who would have been immersed in the Old Testament scriptures like the people Jesus originally spoke this parable to—the religious leaders.

This parable is about a vineyard gone wrong, and a vineyard is basically just a grape-garden, right? Hm, can you think of a time in the Old Testament that God entrusted a garden to some tenants that messed it up...? The grand biblical drama begins in exactly that way—garden work gone wrong—and you'll find that really that summarizes the entire Old Testament:

God planted a beautiful garden in Eden and entrusted it to a couple tenants—Adam and Eve. God wasn't holding anything back from them, he wanted them to prosper—to be fruitful, multiply, and enjoy the lush garden they were in where they could dwell together with God. If for some reason, they should choose to pick their own inheritance for themselves, however, God had a stern message of law for these tenants: They would surely die. But there was no problem because they trusted the goodness of their God and delighted in giving all glory for their work to him. That is until a Deceiver put into their heads, "Did God really say this stern message of law? You'll be better off seizing the inheritance for yourself." And once they acted on this, just like God said, it brought death and exile from the garden.

Throughout the whole Old Testament, again and again we see God trying to place tenants in his garden spaces where they could again dwell with him and prosper. But the tenants seem determined to ignore God and face the consequences:

God graciously preserves Noah through the flood, and the first thing he does is plant a vineyard ...and get drunk, which leads to some shameful stuff and some curses. Joshua leads the people into the promised land of Israel which is described as a garden paradise flowing with milk and honey; but as soon as they're in the land, the period of the Judges reads like a gradual downward spiral of everyone doing what they consider right in their own eyes despite God's clear and stern message of law. And then comes the period of the Kings—that should be

good, right...? But despite prophet messengers coming generation after generation with stern messages of law looking for collections of fruit, the people don't listen. It's at this time that one prophet messenger, Isaiah, brings this stern message of law:

"My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. 2 He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well. Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit. (...) 7 The vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the nation of Israel, and the people of Judah are the vines he delighted in. He looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress. (...) 25 Therefore the LORD's anger burns against his people; his hand is raised and he strikes them down."

Throughout the chapter, Isaiah exposes the people's lack of fruit—their injustice, how they hoard resources for themselves, ignoring the poor and needy, lusting for alcohol, and then looking at the mess before them and having the gall to define all that *bad* as being "*good*." The people had turned God's vineyard into a graveyard, and if a graveyard was what they wanted, then a graveyard was exactly what they would get. But did the people listen to Isaiah? Of course not. And they were exiled from the garden of Israel to Babylon.

Now, 700 years after Isaiah, there's a new generation of tenants making the same old mistakes. Yet God is so unreasonably patient that he now sends his own Son. "*Surely, they'll respect him, right?*" Jesus, the Owner's Son, confronts the religious leaders by repurposing Isaiah's message—showing them that they are continuing this role of wicked, unrepentant tenants. They're playing the part of God's workers, but in reality, they just want the garden for themselves on their own terms—to retain their own status and reputation without confrontation. Just like their ancestors, they didn't listen. In fact, for confronting them, they already plan to kill Jesus and they will soon act on it, fulfilling the end of Jesus' parable. They turn Jerusalem, the very city that's supposed to be the hub of God's garden goodness overflowing to the world, into God's own Son's gravesite. But the stone they reject will crush them—their unrepentance will bury them in the graveyard of their own making.

Your heart was created to be a hub of God's garden goodness; yet when we search the depths of our hearts, is that what we find? There is punishment for those who kill the prophets and turn God's garden into a graveyard.

"What are you talking about—killing prophets? What's that have to do with me? I'm a pretty nice person, not someone who leaves graves in my path. I'm not such a depraved, wicket tenant!?" Is that so...? Ya, because when someone comes to you and confronts you with your sin you just welcome them with joy and thanksgiving every time, right? *"Oh, thanks so much for telling me about my sin and insufficiency!"*

Ya, right. No, I'll bet when another face is before yours confronting you with your sin, you don't get right in line in obedience right away—there's a part of you that *kills them in your heart*. You could even recognize that what they're saying is true (in fact, that probably makes it even worse)—that sin that you want to hide or pretend it's normal—but if someone came and exposed the complete depravity of your actions to a room full of people, a part of you would *kill them in your heart*. It can even be over some of the smallest things—if we even sense that someone might possibly be insinuating that we're wrong, our hearts are so quick to get bloody. Why does your heart get that cutting feeling that silently screams "*Kill!*" when you're confronted with your sin? It's because, just like our ancestors, we want to retain our reputation as a nice guy or a nice lady without hassle or contradiction. We don't show it, but there's a pharisee in our hearts that wants the inheritance for ourselves and is willing to kill anyone that threatens that. Tenants! Wicked Tenants! That's no garden you're living so comfortably in—it's a graveyard.

Jesus' stern message of law is that there is punishment for those who operate the environment of their lives on their own terms and then refuse to repent in the face of confrontation. As he arrives calling you to repentance through his word or through the mouthpiece of one of his servants, do not reject his rebuke, but repent. *Ya know, Mary Magdalene was in a garden that had become nothing but a graveyard to her. She had repented—that wasn't the issue anymore—but she still had no hope. She had no hope because she thought she*

had no Savior. His tomb was right there. What would she do with her heart full of guilt? Was that tomb her destiny as well?

And then she heard a voice in the midst of this graveyard—a living, breathing voice. She thought she had mistaken him for being the gardener. And she had no idea just how right she was. There was hope after all. Life had sprouted in the graveyard. The garden was back.

Although humanity since the beginning of time, to Israel's religious leaders, to your very own heart has polluted God's good garden rightly making us worthy of being left in the graveyard of our own making, the Owner and Creator of the universe in his unreasonably gracious patience sent his own Son who takes all of the death we have created and sprouts life. He knew he would find death in this graveyard, yet took on flesh and blood and walked right into the place where that flesh and blood would be struck down anyway. In another garden, called Gethsemane, as our perfectly obedient garden tenant, Jesus prayed, "not my will, but yours be done," just as he had done his whole life through to Golgotha, and he did so because of the sure triumph he knew was ahead of him and the inheritance of life he knew his father would bestow upon him. His tomb would not be grave, but through his resurrection it would be the hub of God's garden goodness overflowing eternal life to the world—restoring Jerusalem to what it was always meant to be.

Jesus' triumph and victory may stand as a gravestone for the unrepentant self-righteous, but for you who put our faith in Him, those humble afflicted ones who find hope in his resurrection like Mary, he is our cornerstone to build on. The inheritance is his, and he delights in sharing it with the likes of former tax collectors, prostitutes, and sinners of every sort. He delights in giving his inheritance to you, brothers and sisters—to *you!* In Jesus, you are no longer destined for that grave of your own making; you have an eternity of dwelling in the Garden of God with your Savior as your own freely-given possession.

Notice how everything in this parable is unreasonable, the sin of the tenants and the patience of the Owner alike. The tenant's sin-clouded minds led them to act unreasonably thinking that they could have the vineyard for themselves after killing the Son when the Owner was still alive! But the patience of the Owner is unreasonable as well! It is truly mind-boggling that God would send his Son into the world after he had seen how his people treated the prophets. So both man's sin and God's patience are unreasonable in their own right—but here's the difference between the two: Sin's unreason just leaves its victims miserable in their own graveyard, but God's unreason always blesses. It works to the benefit of his people, leaving us with undeserved love and peace as he patiently dwells in our midst.

Brothers and sisters who have been transformed from mere hired hands to children of God and coheirs with Christ, as God's children, proper garden work has been restored to us. The reality is that we still live in a world where humans are not carrying out their work in the plot of land they've been given by God like they ought to—and this no doubt directly affects you. The state of your family and friendships probably resembles a graveyard in many cases. But we have seen that what looks like a hopeless grave is not so with Jesus. God dwells in our midst again—right here in our hearts where the Spirit reigns. So although in many ways we live in a graveyard, we can live like we're in the Garden! When people like our family, friends, and adversaries encounter us, may it not be like they're encountering our old self—the wicked tenant who cannot handle confrontation; but may it be like they are encountering our new self in the Spirit—a worker in the garden kingdom of God. May we be workers who delight in repentance knowing that our inheritance is not ours to seize but Jesus' to freely give, and who produce fruit like the gentle patience God exhibits especially in the face of confrontation and rejection.

Our church has an actual graveyard behind it. We're reminded of death every time we come to church. And yet we rejoice because we know that graveyard is not just a graveyard; for we know that God's Son turns graves into gardens. The kingdom of heaven is theirs. The kingdom of heaven is yours. Glory be to Jesus. Amen.