

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Gospel Year A

WHEN PAYBACK BECOMES MERCY

Matthew 21:33-46

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Analysis by Timothy Hoyer

³³“Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. ³⁴When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. ³⁵But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. ³⁶Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. ³⁷Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ ³⁸But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.’ ³⁹So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. ⁴⁰Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” ⁴¹They said to him, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.” ⁴²Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the scriptures: ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes’? ⁴³Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. ⁴⁴The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.” ⁴⁵When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard

*his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them.
46They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.*



DIAGNOSIS: You Owe Me

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Let's Do It Right

Grounding: Everything had been well planned. Everything had been done with care. Everything had been done with love. Everything was working! Now the reward for all the hard work and love was at hand. And it all fell apart. Even the son of the owner was killed.

Tracking: We try to make plans, or at least hold our lives together, make it through another day and maybe have enough to eat (47% of Americans experience food insecurity—add the name of

your country, or some other major challenge, if you wish). We are told to go to school to get a good job to be a success. We try, we work, but it all falls apart. So we mourn the deaths of loved ones, maybe even a death from COVID-19.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): We Trust We Can Do It

Grounding: The landowner is God (lots of Old Testament imagery captured here), who chose a group of people to provide for and care for. But that group of people wanted to keep the rewards for the hard work to themselves. They disregarded God and focused on their own accomplishments, as if living was all about what they achieved and what was appreciated.

Tracking: We plan for our lives, for what we want to do, and leave God out. Get a good education to get a good job to have a good life is a religion whose gods are our own efforts and strengths and abilities. The God of Creation is replaced by the god of our deeds. The gods of our own deeds expect to receive gratitude and rewards. As far as these gods are concerned, they've earned it. But what if our own efforts are insufficient, if our own strengths are not enough, and our abilities not adequate to make things work? What are we then? Worthless? What is our life worth? Nothing? In this religion, those who fail or are weak or disabled have little worth.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Then Death Catches Us

Grounding: As Jesus told this parable to explain how God's people had turned against God, he asked the people what God should do. The people answered according to the way of justice: give people what they deserved. They answered according to the way of retribution: reward the good and punish the bad. "You reap what you sow." "No pain, no gain." They answered according to what they believed, according to their faith. By rendering a

verdict of death, they sentenced themselves to a just death.

Tracking: As we put our faith in the god of deeds, in the god of getting what we deserve, we get what we believe. We get rewards, we get punishments. We get praise, we get the blame. We live, we die. We got what we deserved for not believing in God. What can we do to change that? Work harder? It accomplishes nothing different. We can't escape the religion of our own deeds.

PROGNOSIS: I Grace You



Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Death Catches Jesus

Grounding: In the parable, the people killed the son of the landowner. Jesus asked for a verdict on that deed. But he himself, the son of the landowner, changed the ending of the story. He himself did not ask God to render a verdict over his enemies but asked God to forgive them. His mission was the new way of forgiveness, not the old way of giving people what they

deserved.

Crossing: Jesus died and rose for us. He replaces our deeds with his failure on the cross. He replaces our deaths with his life. He replaces judgment against us with his mercy. He replaces having to earn or deserve rewards with his way of grace. Jesus gives us the way of love.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): We Trust Jesus Does It

Grounding: The stone that we builders rejected (Jesus on a cross) has become the cornerstone on which God has built his new kingdom of mercy, forgiveness, and eternal life. Jesus is the new vineyard. Jesus is God's new plan for how to deal with all people. Everything is now done for the sake of Jesus. Jesus becomes the cornerstone of people's lives and the cornerstone of their faith.

Tracking: Before, we trusted the god of our deeds. With Jesus risen for us, we trust the God who died for us and who rose for us. It's not about our abilities, but what God will do for us through Jesus. Since we trust Jesus, God declares us to be of great worth to him. "This is the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes." As we believe, so we have.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Let's Do Mercy Together

Grounding: God's plan for his people in Jesus is for them to live in Jesus and his kingdom, and for them to offer Jesus' kingdom to others. The Easter message is to go and make disciples of all people.

Tracking: What of our plans and goals and hopes for our lives? What do we trust to make things go right? We still have to eat.

We still have to get through each day. But we now have two new resources. We have the community of the church to help us, and we help them. And we get to live using the new ways of Jesus. We get to act graciously toward others instead of repaying them what they deserve. We get to forgive. We get to show mercy and love and peace and hope. We get to do everything for the sake of Jesus.