

PRESS ON!

SCRIPTURE READINGS (Note unusual designation)

Law: Luke 20:9-19

He went on to tell the people this parable: "A man planted a vineyard, rented it to some farmers and went away for a long time. At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants so they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. He sent another servant, but that one also they beat and treated shamefully and sent away empty-handed. He sent still a third, and they wounded him and threw him out. "Then the owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send my son, whom I love; perhaps they will respect him.' "But when the tenants saw him, they talked the matter over. 'This is the heir,' they said. 'Let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. "What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others. "When the people heard this, they said, "God forbid!" Jesus looked directly at them and asked, "Then what is the meaning of that which is written: " 'The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone'? Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed." The teachers of the law and the chief priests looked for a way to arrest him immediately, because they knew he had spoken this parable against them. But they were afraid of the people.

Epistle: Philippians 3:7-16

But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.

Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead,

I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained.

Gospel: Isaiah 43:16-21

This is what the LORD says— he who made a way through the sea, a path through the mighty waters, who drew out the chariots and horses, the army and reinforcements together, and they lay there, never to rise again, extinguished, snuffed out like a wick: “Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland. The wild animals honor me, the jackals and the owls, because I provide water in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland, to give drink to my people, my chosen, the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise.

MESSAGE:

The Bible is a book about the relationship between man and God. God originally designed man to live in a close relationship with Him so that God could bless man and man would be blessed. He created man as an object of His love. The result of this is that man can only be happy and truly at peace, when he is living in a close relationship with God. But as we know, sin severed our relationship with God, bringing death and misery into the world. But praise God, he was not content to leave us in such a sorry condition, and so he marked out two different paths which we might use to find our way back to Him.

The first path we can call the path of obedience. If a man can do all of the things God has commanded him to do and refrain from doing all the things God has forbidden him to do, he can have perfect fellowship with God and live in his presence forever. The other path is the path of faith. If a man believes in his heart that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died to pay the penalty for his sins and rose again to assure him of eternal life, he can have perfect fellowship with God and dwell in his presence forever. The first path—the Law—marks out exactly what we must do and what we must refrain from doing in order to deserve heaven. The other path—the Gospel—describes what God has done so that we might receive heaven as a free gift. The Law has been called God’s alien work; the Gospel, the work of His heart, which is a heart of love.

One of the most common misunderstandings of the Bible is that the Gospel is only in the *New Testament* and the Law is only in the *Old Testament*. This is connected to the idea that the God of the Old Testament is a God of wrath and judgment and the God of the New Testament is a God of love and mercy. This couldn’t be further from the truth: the Old Testament is full of the Gospel and the New Testament has plenty of law. God is the God of both because God is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. Our lessons for today are a good example of this: Jesus’ parable of the tenants of the vineyard is pure law, while Isaiah’s prophecy of the “new thing” God is doing is pure Gospel.

The parable of the tenants is a story about the terrible consequences of sin; Isaiah’s prophecy is about the new life that God provides under the *New Covenant*. Paul’s *Letter to the Philippians* contains a perfect synthesis of the two—showing us how we can translate God’s forgiveness and His instruction into a pattern of living which Paul calls “pressing on.” Let’s start by looking at Jesus’ parable of the tenants of the vineyard.

The parable of the tenants of the vineyard is Jesus’ farewell speech to his own people: the Jews. In the story, God is the owner of the vineyard, the vineyard is Israel, and the

tenants are his chosen people, the Jews. The tenants are welcome to all the fruit of the vineyard, with the exception of a small part that they owe to the owner. In a literal or material sense this “small part” is the Lord’s tithe—one tenth of the fruits of the tenants’ labors. But in a larger sense, it is the obligation to show the same love for others that God has shown toward us.

This small part, however, is too much for the tenants: they refuse to pay the owner his tithe. First they violently turn away the servants the owner sends to collect his payment. These servants represent the prophets God sent again and again to his people to urge them to repent of their sins and dedicate themselves to practicing justice and righteousness toward others, and to warn them of the dire consequences of their failure to do so. But the prophets had been treated violently and turned away just as the servants in the parable were.

Finally the owner sends his son as a special token of his good will toward his tenants in hopes that they will honor him at last and come to peace with his terms. But instead of viewing the arrival of his son as an honor and an opportunity to be reconciled to the owner, the tenants see it as an opportunity to rob the son of his rightful inheritance and confiscate the owner’s property. So they throw the son out of the vineyard and kill him. This is an ironclad clue that the son is Jesus, since, according to Jewish law, a criminal under the sentence of death had to be taken outside the city walls to be executed—just as Jesus was taken outside the city walls of Old Jerusalem to be crucified on Mount Calvary.

And what will happen as a result? Jesus says, the owner will come and kill the tenants and take away their vineyard and give it to others who will produce its fruits and share the tithe. His meaning is clear and it is equally clear that the Jews understand him: they will lose the blessing promised to Abraham because they failed to honor the Son when he came to them. Their response was to “look for a way to arrest him” because they knew he had spoken this parable against them.

Now I suspect that most of us good Christians, when we hear these Biblical accounts of how the Jews messed up, start to feel a little smug. “*We’d have done better than they did,*” we say to ourselves. And of course both the Old and New Testaments are full of accounts of how the Jews failed to obey God’s commands and fell into the worship of pagan gods. So we have a lot of occasions to feel superior. Paul calls this “boasting over the branches,” since we are only God’s adopted children, wild branches that have only been grafted into the main vine, whereas the Jews were native branches.

The fact is, these accounts were written down and passed on to us as a warning, so that we would not fall into the same sins that the Jews did. You see, we have the same problem as the tenants of the vineyard had. God has called us into his kingdom just as he called the Jews into his kingdom to be a “light to the nations,” a kingdom of priests who would mediate his love, his justice and his righteousness to others. We are to be fruit-bearing branches, drawing our life and strength from Jesus, who is the vine, and showing forth the fruits of faith unto the world. But like the Jews we prefer to keep the fruit for ourselves rather than sharing it with others. We pray, “*Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us,*” and we know that if we refuse to forgive others God will not forgive us, yet we nurse anger against someone who has offended us—maybe even a member of our own family—and we rationalize our right to do so. When

we do that, we throw the Son out of the vineyard and crucify him all over again. We know that the commandment says, *“Honor the Sabbath and keep it holy,”* but we say *“You can worship God in a boat or on a golf course—it doesn’t have to be in church.”* Well, yes it does. Jesus said that worship was where two or more were gathered in His Name—not in the name of golf or fishing. When we do that, we throw the Son out of the vineyard and crucify him all over again. We know that Jesus wants to make of us “fishers of men,” and we applaud those who make the effort to do so, but we tell ourselves that evangelism just isn’t one of our gifts and, anyway, *“They know where the church is—they don’t need me to tell them.”* When we do that we throw the Son out of the vineyard and crucify him all over again.

The truth is that we want to live life on our terms rather than God’s. And with the Owner out of sight and out of mind we don’t see why we shouldn’t be able to do just that.

God has provided a way, a path we never could have found for ourselves. A way described in the Gospel according to Isaiah. Knowing that we are hopelessly lost in a desert of sin, God has shown us the way out. Just as he opened up a path through the waters of the Red Sea for the Israelites, he has opened up a way through the wilderness of this world for us. He has made water bubble up through the dead sand and provided streams of living water in the wilderness. He has formed us as a people for Himself and pointed us toward heaven and promised to accompany us every step of the way. And what has he asked in return? *Only that we proclaim his praise!* We are living in a country—for that matter, a world—which is spiritually dying. Christianity is all but dead in Europe and it is on a steep decline in America. Mainline denominations—Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Lutheran and Catholic—have suffered from 35-45% erosions in church attendance and membership over the last 50 years. It is to some extent to our credit that the Missouri Synod has suffered only about a 5% decline in membership. But that is hardly something to be proud of. To survive we have to grow, and to grow, we must make it our responsibility to *proclaim God’s praise!*

God would have this to be the fruit of our faith: that we summon up our sinews and proclaim His praise to the world. God has done a new thing, a life-renewing thing! *“I provide water in the desert and streams in the wasteland, to give drink to my people, my chosen, the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise.”* (Isaiah 43:20-21). This is the active, living faith that God is trying to implant in each and every person. So yes—we can rest in the confidence that when things get bleak and desperate, when every path we can imagine leads to a dead end, God will do something new; he will show us a way out. He will show us His way out. But never forget that He will do it so that we may proclaim his praise.

This is the attitude and the pattern of living that Paul calls “pressing on.” *“Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”* (Phil. 3:12-14) Pressing on is living “heavenwardly.” It is abandoning our worship of cleverly constructed plans and strategies of life based on decision matrices and experientially based flow charts with upsides and downsides and backup plans. It is living in the daring certainty of faith. It is embracing the thought that the best we can do

with our lives is to live each and every day in faith, do what lies clearly at hand, commend the outcome to God, and know that *“...he causes all things to work together for good for those who love him and have been called according to His purpose.”* But we need to remember that

“In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps. (Proverbs 16:9) As Luther once said, *“Work as if everything depended on you, but remember that it all depends on God.”* Heavenward living is striving to keep the owner of the vineyard in mind every minute of the day and looking forward to the imminent return of His Son. It is always remembering that your primary citizenship is in heaven and that the prize your eye is fixed upon—the victor’s crown—has already been won for you, even as you press on. As Paul puts it, *“Only let us live up to what we have already attained.” (Phil. 3:16)*

Amen—and praise the Lord!