

Love and Patience, but with Expectations
Matthew 21:33-44
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My appreciation of wine, especially red wine, began about 15-20 years ago when my wife, Laurie, and I went out to dinner with a group of friends. One of our fellow diners happened to be in the restaurant business and he ordered the wine for our table, making sure it complemented the meals selected. At that time, I didn't know much about wine, but I was fascinated with his apparent knowledge. Once the ordering was completed, I posed my friend some general questions about wine and one of his responses I have never forgotten. I asked him when it was best to drink white wine. Without hesitation, my friend said, "the best time to drink white wine is when the red wine is all gone". The seed was planted.

And it was when we visited some vineyards in Santa Barbara county a few years later that my wine appreciation began to bloom. I was mesmerized by the setting of this one vineyard in particular; electronic security gates, gentle rolling hills, perfectly ordered rows of plantings each with its own irrigation drip line, the beautiful tasting area, and the impressive production set up to create the wine itself. It was a sight to behold and I believe I joined about 4 wine clubs that day. However, my guess is the vineyard Matthew has

described for us here was, for its time, as well equipped as the California vineyards we visited.

Jesus used familiar settings and circumstances in many of his parables to help make them easier to understand, remember, and retell to others. And since 1st Century Israel was an agriculturally based society, Jesus's audience would have easily recognized the vineyard setting for this parable and the type of business relationship between the vineyard owner and the tenants. Similarly in this era, most Jews would have been familiar with the many stories of the Old Testament. So when Jesus mentioned a vineyard, he also meant to connect this parable to the Isaiah passage Bob read earlier and its use of a vineyard as a representation of Israel and God as the vineyard's owner.

Jesus's parables are like a kaleidoscope; with so many different interpretations based on which facet of the parable you decide to focus. So for today, I want to look at three messages I believe Jesus is communicating both to his audience and to us in this parable. And I intend to use wine and wine making to help accomplish this objective.

Wine making is a labor of love as the plantings are nurtured through the varieties of environmental conditions encountered, in

hopes of maximizing their growth and yield potential. As we examine closer, Matthew helps us to see the depth of the landowner's love for the vineyard in our passage.

The wicked tenants parable is one of the few appearing in all 3 synoptic gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In Luke's version, he simply said "a man planted a vineyard". In contrast, Matthew used the same detail as Isaiah regarding the construction of the vineyard: putting in a fence, digging a pit for the winepress, and building a watchtower. In doing so, I believe Matthew wanted to convey the landowner's love for the vineyard and his willingness to do everything possible so the plantings could survive and thrive. By using this description from Isaiah, Jesus sought to reaffirm God's protective presence and love for Israel. And even in reading this parable today, we too can use these same words as comfort almost 2000 years later, assured of God's presence and love. God watches over us and provides what we need to survive and thrive, regardless of the circumstances we face in our lives.

Another facet of wine and winemaking is patience. I always loved those old Paul Masson wine commercials where Orson Wells would say in his great commanding voice; "we will sell no wine before its time". Even after incurring the expense and effort of setting up a vineyard, it can take upwards of three years before the plantings provide their first crop. You also need to consider the

fermentation and aging processes of the wine, which can add another 1-3 years before you are able to even drink the wine. And then when wine is finally ready to be enjoyed, drinking it immediately after pouring may not be the best course of action. In some cases, decanting the wine, aerating it, or simply letting the glass of wine sit for a while allows it to open up and yield an even fuller taste than you might have ever expected. And as we go back to our passage, we see the patience of the vineyard owner, though not as it relates to wine or winemaking.

Jesus could have easily given a definitive ending to this parable after the tenants' initial brutal response; perhaps with the landowner immediately sending in an army to forcefully deal with the tenants.

However, Jesus detailed the measured response of the landowner as he made three separate attempts to receive the payment due. And even though the confrontation concluded with the unwarranted death of the landowner's son, Jesus still doesn't offer the fate of the tenants in this parable, instead allowing his audience to draw their own conclusions. In spite of their opposition to his ministry, Jesus still wanted to convey to the Pharisees and Sadducees God's willingness to wait, hoping for them to finally acknowledge Jesus as the messiah and God's son. And while this parable is emblematic of God's

unwarranted patience with the Jewish leaders, it also demonstrates God's patience with us, as undeserving as it might be. God is willing to provide us time to "ferment" and "age" before we finally welcome God's presence into our lives. God is unwilling to rush us before our time; no matter how long it might take us to recognize God's desire to be in relationships with us through Jesus Christ.

But ultimately, there needs to be a yield from the vineyard: good fruits leading to good wine. We see this message conveyed by Jesus in verse 43: *"Therefore, I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom."* A vineyard owner has an expectation from the plantings to contribute towards the wine vintage of that season. To some extent, we are each a unique vintage of wine, reflections of those vintages that have come before us; similar and yet different as a result of the conditions present during our respective growing seasons. But regardless of the circumstances, we are all expected to participate towards the production from God's vineyards, with each vineyard offering its own distinctive yield.

In making wine, a vineyard's plantings will be determined by what grapes fare best in that geographic area. Grapes thriving in Santa Barbara county may not do well in the Napa Valley, France, Oregon, or Argentina. In some instances, it's possible the vineyard owner will need to do some blending of different grapes, grafting

from other plantings, or even extensive pruning might be necessary; all with an eye towards the end result from the vineyard. Compare that to God's influence on our own lives; each of us exposed to a wide variety of interactions involving people, places, success, failure, gains, losses, and other experiences. Perhaps, some of these connections and moments brought great joy and happiness, while others provided pain and hardship beyond anything imaginable. Again, all of these life moments have been a part of God's efforts to help make us the best we can possibly be while under God's loving care.

And just because a wine may have come from an exclusive part of the world and made from a hard to find variety of grapes, it's no guarantee that wine will be appreciated any more than an economical screw top bottle sold at a significantly lower price. And in a similar fashion, God's love shows no favoritism or preference based on our backgrounds or vintage. God continually pursues us, hoping only for a relationship with each and every one of us by sending his son to assure our salvation – no matter how long it might take for us reach out.

Jesus used this parable to assure his followers of God's unwavering protective love and patience. The Old Testament details the countless times Israel tested God's patience over the centuries, with God welcoming them back into His protective care

because of His incomprehensible and unending love. And even though Jesus still hasn't been accepted by all the world as the messiah and God's Son, God will continue to patiently wait for all of humanity to welcome Jesus Christ into their lives and ultimately share in God's kingdom.

So whether we contribute fruit to a metaphorical bottle of a 1992 Screaming Eagle Cabernet, which sold for about \$500,000, or to a bottle of Trader Joe's Charles Shaw wine blends, otherwise known as "Two Buck Chuck", our heavenly vineyard owner will provide everything we need to contribute to a fruitful yield because we are all loved beyond anything we can ever imagine. And though we may give God countless reasons to lose patience with us, we are all assured God is more than willing to wait to see what good fruits we might yield – no matter how long it takes.

Amen.