Luke 20:9-19 (16c) When they heard this, they said, “May it never be!”

There is a reason that I highlighted the words that I did today. I did that because what this section of Scripture addresses is still the difficulty that many of us face in our lives as those who are to follow God’s Word. I would almost be willing to tell you that perhaps the lesson found in this section lays out for us the bitterest and the most personal of struggles you have endured. And yes, I am addressing you as “God’s children” as heirs of eternal life and salvation. Here is our battle.

Please note, this section shows both sides of the battle. There is our struggle as God’s children and then there is that reaction, notice I didn’t say “struggle!” I said, “There is that reaction!” It is the reaction of the world to God’s truth and wonder. It is the reaction of the world to what is right, good, and holy. That reaction is still seen in the world. It is something worth considering on this day. Our theme will be: **MAY THIS NEVER BE!**

The situation before us is quite clear. Jesus is teaching and preaching in the Temple and this is actually happening on the Tuesday of Holy Week, in other words just a few days before Jesus is going to be condemned and put on the cross. In a way, this text is Jesus’ last effort before he dies, to change hearts and minds, to wake people up to the reality of what was going on. Although it doesn’t seem that Jesus’ words have an impact on that day, I like to think that it was this lesson that so many heard, that after the death of Jesus and with his resurrection, made them rethink and feel the shame that lead them back to Jesus and to his wonder.

Jesus tells a parable. Honestly, it is a pretty straight forward story. A man has a vineyard. Actually, everything that makes a successful vineyard is found in this place. The man rents out his vineyard to others and then goes away on a long trip. As it happens, at the appropriate time, the vineyard owner sends forth a servant to simply collect the payment that was due in regard to the vineyard. Remember, he owned the vineyard. Probably built it, oversaw it, and again I have no doubt, this owner provided all that was necessary for this vineyard to be a total and complete success. But other business took him away. So he hired competent men to care for the vineyard. As would have been typical in an agreement like this, the owner got a percentage of the crop and the tenants would profit from the rest. It would have all been agree upon, contracts would have been signed, promises made and handshakes all around. No tenant was getting cheated!

But it is clear that the tenants are wicked. They realize that the vineyard is a total success. It produces wonderful crops and a very good revenue. Yet the tenants have determined that they will keep it all for themselves, that they will cut the owner out. I am sure they figured the owner was far, far away and they felt they could get away with whatever they decided.

Seriously, can you hear this parable and not have a sense of outrage? The servants of the owner are sent. They are simply brutalized and sent away empty handed. That’s not right! I admire the owner. He doesn’t seem to grasp at this point the wickedness of the tenants and rather choses to put the best construction on what is going on. The owner seems to figure that for whatever reason the tenants just don’t get that the servants were his servants and that somehow they thought the servants he sent were frauds trying to steal from the tenants. I don’t know exactly what the owner was thinking but it is clear he simply felt that some sort of horrid misunderstanding was going on rather than the fact that the tenants were simply and truly wicked. So the owner sends his Son.

His son whom he loves. The owner just can’t fathom that they would mistreat his Son. The son is the real deal. The son is clearly from the owner, and is recognized as such. The son, the owner felt, would get everything fixed and straightened out and all would be fine.

Except for the wickedness of the tenants. They knew it was the son. They plotted against the son. And note that they weren’t just willing to send the son away empty handed. They knew the son was the heir, the next rightful owner and they agreed to kill him. Agreed to murder thinking the vineyard would then be theirs! It is the deepest of wickedness, the very epitome of darkness. And so it is that the Son is struck down and killed.

Now the owner realizes the deep wickedness. Now the owner sends those who destroy these tenants, annihilates them and seeks out other tenants who will honor and respect the agreements they make.

It is at this point that the people respond with the words, **“May it never be!”** The people are shocked and horrified by this parable. They understand the complete wickedness of the tenants, the unfair hatred that boils from their hearts that allows them to murder the son. But not just to murder the son, but in that murder to expect they will gain and be rewarded with the vineyard. Yes, the people are outraged as it should be. And I hope and pray that we have the very same outrage. How dare this happen! May this never be!

But need I remind you that the people, these very people on Friday morning are going to be those shouting “Crucify him, crucify him!” On that morning where is their outrage and their disgust with the wickedness and evil of the tenants? In truth, by Friday morning they forgot about this lesson on wickedness. They got lured in and stupefied by their religious leaders who convinced them that the death of Jesus was the best thing for everyone around. What happened to the “May it never be?” It got swallowed up in darkness.

That is our battle dear People. This battle of believing and following the wonder of the Lord our God. God says, “Here is my Word and my Son, here is your Savior and God. Believe in Him.” But we are not listening. We hear: “Do this and be that…” and we are all fine and well with it until we realize with our slightly shady eyes, “Wait a minute, he wants me to be that! He wants me to follow and hear and believe. He wants me, the tenant, to give him his due and rightful fruit of faith! But I need that fruit. I want that fruit for myself.” And with that we are no longer shocked and dismayed at wickedness and sin, we are joining in and clamoring for the Lord our God to leave us alone!

Seriously, ever have a sin you are confronted with and you don’t repent and you don’t grasp your wickedness and you don’t want to give that sin up. You are one of those wicked tenants. You have refused to yield to God. You have refused to honor his name and as if that isn’t bad enough, in truth you have refused to even honor the deal you made with Him. You have refused to grasp: “You are the Lord God and I am but a tenant in your vineyard.” Instead we act out: “I want your position. I want to be the Lord. I want to call the shots. And I am willing to throw your Son out and kill him too!” Dear people that is the result and the truth of each and every sin that we decide to indulge in. And when that happens in your life then you be sure to sit back and ask, “What happened to the ‘May this never be?’”

And in many cases that is exactly the point of the words of Jesus when he says, **“Then what about this that is written: the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone? Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and it will crush the one on whom it falls.”** Hang on to that thought for a moment.

Because we need to speak of the problem that there is a large group in this world that doesn’t even think that the cry, “May this never be,” is accurate and right. That’s the other group that you hear of in this little story with Jesus. Here is the reaction of this group. **“That very hour the chief priests and the experts in the law began looking for a way to lay hands on him, because they knew he had spoken this parable against them.”**

Let this sink in. They knew! They knew this parable was about them and their hearts. They knew the parable spoke of God the Father and that the vineyard was God’s people Israel. They knew the servants sent represented the prophets of God that historically speaking, the Jewish people mistreated and abused, even killed. They knew that the Son was Jesus. They knew all of this. Knew their hearts had been exposed and revealed. They knew!

I would like to think that had I been them I would have had my heart melted. That I would have fallen to the ground in repentance and sorrow and begged Jesus, begged God to save me from the dark and evil nature of my heart. I would have prayed, “Lord Jesus, I believe! Help my unbelief! Help me to not be lost in sin and trespass! Help me to honor you, love you, hear you, follow you, yes Lord, to give you the rightful fruits of faith that you have filled my vineyard with!” I would like to think that had I been them that’s what I would have done…but I have become to wise and enlightened by my Savior and God to think that on my own I could be so noble and good. I pray God’s forgiveness.

Because all too often in my life (and I think yours too) we have with stubborn and wicked hearts plotted against God and his Word. God shows us our heart and its darkness and we run further back into the cave of despair as we refuse to repent and know his love. Such is what our sinful nature can perpetrate on us if we are not careful. We will be those who reject, who despise, who instead of running from evil and wickedness go home and that very hour contemplate the death of Jesus.

You know, there was a time when I could never have understood the horror of these religious leaders and their decision to kill Jesus. But as the years have unfolded and as I have grown in my knowledge and understanding of the true human condition of sin, I am no longer shocked. Now, instead of an outraged “May this never be!” I know that instead I need a prayerful and humble “May this never be!”

I need the Lord and his love. I need to know his forgiveness. I need to have his help to overcome and win the victory. I need his wisdom in temptations, his grace in my failings. I need the Lord in every aspect of my life. May I never forget the Lord and who he is! May I be humble so that when my sins come to light I am filled with horror and sorrow at what I have done! May I always be willing to hear and learn at the feet of Jesus, knowing that He loves me and will never bring me any eternal harm! May I seek his strength when the pain and difficulty of life is on the brink of too much so that I seek Him because he has won the victory and passes it on to me! May I always grasp and understand that it is not about me and how good I am compared to others (Because that is never the measure! The measure is the holiness of God!). May I grasp the beauty of salvation and the hope of eternal life as the balm that soothes my troubles and calms my fears! These are the things we are to express in our faith. These are the things we need to grasp and understand about our lives so that the wonder and joy of being a tenant of God is not lost on us but that we are grateful and in awe at God’s goodness.

Because it is this attitude that is expressed in Jesus’ words. **“Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces.”** The truth of God humbles and reveals. The perfection of God shows just how far we have fallen. When Jesus is your foundation and hope then our attitude is exactly that of the Apostle Paul that we grasp we are the chief of sinners, hopeless in eternity without him. Our pride is crushed. Our self-righteousness is exposed as totally faulty. But in being broken to pieces we are made whole and forgiven in the blood of the Lamb. And because we are on the rock, let the wind and waves roar and howl, Jesus is our foundation and hope.

But don’t forget the second part of that saying. **“It will crush the one on whom it falls.”** That is the reminder that we can’t stand against our Lord and Savior. You can have him as Savior or you can have Him as the Almighty, all-knowing Judge who on the basis of your works of the law will cast you to hell forever. Yes, you will be counted as the wicked tenants who killed the Son and who themselves will be annihilated forever by the Holy and Righteous God.

Simple isn’t it. You are either on the Rock or under the Rock. And I think we can all say of under the rock, “May this never be!”

Lord, we thank you for your love and grace. Continue to help us focus on you and your gracious forgiveness, on your love and grace which alone saves. Let us be the second group of tenants who serve and love you! Amen.