

SWIMMING AGAINST THE TIDE

Being Holy in an Unholy World

“How We Can Be A Holy Church”

Matthew 21:33-46

Charles Spurgeon, who was known as the “*Prince of Preachers*,” used to say, “*A holy church is a powerful weapon in the hand of God.*” And so it is! A holy church can make a tremendous difference in a person’s life.

I don’t know about you but I want this church to be that kind of church—a place and a people where Jesus is so lifted up and worshiped and followed...and where battered, broken and blinded people who have lost their way in life will find help, healing and wholeness in Christ Jesus.

And so that’s what I want to talk about this morning as I bring to a close this series of sermons entitled **Swimming Against The Tide—Being Holy In An Unholy World**. I want us to think about and pray about **“How We Can Be A Holy Church.”**

As we think about God’s call to holiness, there is much more at stake than just our personal holiness. A major part of this biblical call to holiness is God calling His church to be holy. God is not only calling **you** to be holy, He is calling **us** together to be holy.

The Bible says in **1st Corinthians 12**, “*We were all baptized by one Spirit into one body...you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it*” (1st Corinthians 12:13, 27 New International Version). And so I can’t just be concerned about **me**, my holiness—I must also be concerned about **us**, our holiness as a body of believers.

Let’s face it! We live within the midst of a highly individualistic society. Every day we get bombarded with this persistent message, “*Have it your way. Do your thing. Protect yourself. Actualize yourself. Take care of yourself.*”

And here’s the problem. This highly unchristian idea has slowly and

-2-

subtly invaded the church. Someone has said it like this: “*Most of us Christians have an ‘I’ problem. All we talk about is how ‘I’ came to Christ, how ‘I’ got saved, how ‘I’ have been transformed, how ‘I’ have reordered my life, how ‘I’ have surrendered all to Him, how ‘I’ am following Him and serving Him and worshiping Him.*”

When we think about our walk with Jesus, we think mostly in terms of a personal (and sometimes even a private) journey. But the Bible, whenever it talks about our relationship with God, is always careful to couch it in terms of “we.” Not just “me” but “we.”

The apostle **Paul** writes to new believers in **Ephesians 2**, “*You are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household*” (Ephesians 2:19 New International Version).

He writes in another place, “*In Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others*” (Romans 12:5 New International Version). It’s not just about “**me**” and my relationship with Christ; it’s also about “**us**” and our relationship with Christ.

Now please don’t misunderstand me. The grace of God’s sanctifying work is thoroughly personal. We are to be “marked” by the very character and spirit of Christ and that comes through a personal relationship and commitment to Him. **But it must never be private!**

The Bible says that we are to be “*a holy nation, a people belonging to God that...(we) may declare the praises of him who called...(us) out of darkness into his wonderful light*” (1st Peter 2:9 New International Version).

And so as we talk about this matter of holiness it has as much to do with how we act and live together as it does with how we act and live individually. So we need to think and pray serious about **How We Can Truly Be A Holy Church**.

I think that’s what Jesus was talking about when He told the **Parable of the Wicked Tenants**. Are you familiar with that story? It is found in the closing part of the **21st chapter of Matthew**.

Let me set the scene for you as you search for that passage. It was the very last week of Jesus' ministry here on earth before going to the cross. He knew that within a week's time that He would be leaving the work of the Kingdom in the hands of His disciples, His people. And so He tells several important stories, parables, about what God is really looking for in the life of His body, His people, His church.

This is one of those stories. It begins with **verse 33** and He tells this story to the religious leaders that day.

There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey. When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit.

The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. Last of all, he sent his son to them. "They will respect my son," he said.

But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, "This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance." So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?

"He will bring those wretches to a wretched end," they replied, "and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time."

Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: 'The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes?'"

"Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. He who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed."

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parable, they knew he was talking about them. They looked for a way to

arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet. (Matthew 21:33-46 New International Version)

Everyone present that day clearly understood the imagery Jesus was using in this story. You didn't have to be a rocket scientist to figure it out.

The **Landowner** is God. The **Tenants** are the religious leaders of the nation of Israel. The **Vineyard** is Israel—the land, the community, in which they lived. The **Messengers** are the prophets of the Old Testament. And the **Son** is Jesus.

Now Jesus spoke this parable to the Pharisees, the religious leaders of that day, but He is also speaking to us today—to the church, the people of God, the religious leaders of our day. *What is He telling us? What can we learn from this story?*

Isn't He saying to us as a group what He has been saying to us as individuals all through this series of sermons about holiness, namely that **true holiness, true spirituality, is not determined by the external aspects of our "religious" life, but rather by our inner life, as it reflects the beauty and nature of Jesus.**

He is talking to us as a group, a body of believers, a community of faith, and He teaches that if we are going to be a holy church, a church that brings glory and honor to the name of the Lord, then there are three things we must keep in mind.

First, God Has Left The Work Of His Kingdom In Our Hands. Look at **verse 33**. *"There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey."*

He left his work, his vineyard, his vision and his plans in the hands of others. He trusted them. He believed in them. He expected a harvest. The next verse says, *"When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit."* He placed tremendous faith in those in whom he entrusted his vineyard.

And, folks, that's a picture—an accurate picture painted by Jesus—of who God is! *Do you remember what Jesus said to His disciples on one occasion? He said, “I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these”* (John 14:12 New International Version).

Now just think about who He was talking to: **Thomas**, the doubter, who always had all of these questions and worries and fears; **James** and **John**, the Sons of Thunder, who earned that title because of their terrible tempers and frequent outbursts; **Peter**, the impetuous one, always speaking when he ought to be listening, up one day and down the next, who made out a science out of messing things up.

But Jesus believed in them and left the future of the Kingdom in their hands. He said to them, *“I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven”* (Matthew 16:19 New International Version). Or, in other words, *“I’m counting on you.”*

He has left His work in our hands. Now just stop and think about that for a moment. The work God wants to accomplish and do in this community, He has entrusted to us, His church. And if we don't get it done then it just may not get done...because He doesn't have another plan. As **E.M. Bounds** has put it, *“Men (people) are God's method.”* He has left His work in our hands.

Now I can just imagine what some of you are probably thinking. *“But, Pastor Mark, we're not the only church in this community. There are other churches!”* And, yes, there are. But I believe we can reach some people that no one else can reach—and if we don't do it, it just may not get done.

That's why there's a sense of urgency in everything we do. We must take our task seriously. *Now here's a second thing we learn from this story—*

God Has Graciously Equipped His People To Do His Work. Look at that first part of **verse 33** once again. *“There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a*

winepress in it and built a watchtower.” Now here's the thing I want you to see in this verse. The landowner didn't just leave his tenants with a patch of dirt and say to them, *“Turn this bare ground into a prosperous vineyard.”* No, he gave them everything they needed to succeed.

And in that same way, God has given this group of tenants, this church, this body of believers, everything we need in order for our “vineyard” to be productive and successful and fertile. Now I'm not talking about the outer, material blessings and resources God has given us—things like this building, technology, plenty of parking space, office equipment, musical instruments, curriculum, and all of these other tools God has given us that we might minister to the people of this community.

I remember the very first time I went to a Third World country and ministered in some of their churches. They had nothing, so to speak—very poor, inadequate facilities; no Sunday School material except for old, outdated stuff that churches back in the states had cleaned out of their storage rooms and sent them rather than throwing them away; no video projectors or sound boards or photocopiers.

And I remember coming back to our church in Bedford, Indiana, looking around at all the tools for ministry that we had and thinking, *“Man, we have everything. We are so rich. We are so blessed. We are so privileged.”* **But that's not what I'm talking about when I say the God has given us everything we need in order for our “vineyard” to be productive and successful and thriving.**

I'm thinking of the greater gifts, the more crucial resources, the key elements and instruments in ministry. God has given us His **Holy Spirit** to live in us and fill us and empower us. Jesus said, *“John baptized with water, but...you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit...(and) you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth”* (Acts 1:5,8 New International Version).

God said, *“I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions”* (Joel 2:28 New International Version). We are living in that

day.

Jesus said, *“When he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth...he will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you”* (John 16:13,14 New International Version).

He has given us His **Word** and *“the word of God is alive and powerful. It is sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit, between join and marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires”* (Hebrews 4:12 New Living Translation).

As the psalmist said, *“You word is a lamp to my feet and light for my path”* (Psalm 119:105 New International Version). While other books **inform** us and some even **reform** us, this book **transforms** us.

The great British evangelist, **Alexander MacLaren**, used to say it like this: *“He who has the Holy Spirit in his heart and the Scriptures in his hands has all he needs.”*

So let me just say it like this: *Do you realize that the greatest resource this church has here on earth is you?* You can do more for God’s work than any band, any building, any parking lot, any choir, any multi-media production!

These things are merely supplemental. God has equipped you and me to do the work of ministry and He accomplishes His will not through things but through people, Spirit-filled people! And the fruit of the Spirit is...what? **Love! Joy! Peace! Patience! Kindness! Goodness! Faithfulness! Gentleness! And self-control!**

Dr. Jess Moody used to say it like this: *“People don’t go to where the action is. They go to where the love is!”* That’s what really defines a holy church.

People don’t say, *“You ought to come see our building,”* or, *“You ought come and hear our band,”* or, *“You should come and hear our preacher,”* but, *“You should come and meet our people.”* God has given this church the task of doing His work in this community.

He has equipped us to do His work. He has given us His Spirit and

His Word that we might be holy people...full of love and joy and peace and kindness and goodness and gentleness. *Now here’s the third thing I want you to notice from this story.*

God Requires The Tenants Of His Vineyard To Be Held Accountable. This is the heavy part of this story. Look at **verse 43.** *“Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.”*

Jesus is telling the Pharisees that the kingdom of God belongs to those who are doing the work of God. There’s no “grandfather” clause here. You can’t inherit God’s favor based on something that happened long ago. Those who do God’s work receive the blessing of God and those who aren’t doing God’s work get left behind.

Between **verses 33** and **43** we see that the tenants of the vineyard were positioned for success. They had a vineyard in which to work and they had all they needed to do the work of the vineyard. But somewhere along the way they became rebellious and cantankerous. They decided that the vineyard belonged to them and they selfishly took possession of it and even defied the Landowner and his Son.

Now Jesus, of course, directed this story to the Pharisees, to those who became so wrapped up with rules and regulations, policies and power, that they completely missed the spirit and the work and the grace of God. But this story also has a very present day application.

We must not forget whose vineyard this is. We must not forget whose work we are called to do. We must not forget we’re here to do His work His way through the power and presence of His Spirit in our lives. We must not forget that we are here to build His church...and if that’s not happening, God will hold us accountable and the work will be taken from us.

There are abandoned churches all across this county and our nation. There is nothing automatic about the survival of a local church. If a car manufacturer stops making cars, the firm goes out of business. If the church ceases to be the instrument for making Christians, it disappears.

So how do we become a holy church? It all begins with you and me

committing to be holy people. We don't wait for someone else. We don't wait for the "other" guy. We just jump right in and offer ourselves wholly and fully to the Lord.

In you were alive in 1982 then you probably recall that tragic airplane crash that occurred at Washington D.C.'s National Airport. The plane crashed in the Potomac River shortly after take-off. You may remember seeing television footage of a young woman struggling to stay alive as she floated in the icy waters of the Potomac.

There was a helicopter above and it kept lowering to her a safety ring for her to hold on to and to wrap around herself so she could be lifted to safety but she was so weak that she couldn't hold on to the ring and she kept falling back into the icy waters.

So she tried to paddle her way to shore but she was so weak and cold that it was obvious she would never make it. The shoreline was lined with spectators and even rescue personnel, but no acted. No one did anything and yet it was obvious that she wasn't going to make it.

At that moment, at 28 year old government errand boy by the name of **Lenny Skutnik**, who was standing on the shore with everyone else, could stand it no longer. He said later, *"I felt so hopeless. She was screaming, 'Would someone please help me,' and it looked like she passed out and so I took off my boots and winter coat and jumped in the water."*

Skutnik swam to the floundering woman, dodged all of the debris and the ice, and pulled her to shore. He later explained, *"When the girl needing saving, God looked around and said, 'Eeey-meeneey-miney-moe. You're Moe!' So I jumped in."*

Satan would love to remind you of all of your weaknesses and all of your failures. He would love for you to look around and say, *"Look at all of these people. They ought to be doing something. They ought to be stepping forward."*

But God says to us, *"Eeey-meeneey-miney-moe. You're Moe."* And if we'll jump in, He will do incredible things and help us to really become a holy church.