



Pastor Ken Nelson's Sermon

SERMON – 5TH LENT

LUKE 20:9-20

APRIL 3, 2022

WHAT IS “GODLIKE?”

What is God like? We can't comprehend with our minds one whose excellence overwhelms us. We therefore do well not to think we can plumb the depths of God's mind or in some crystalline fashion discern God's will – even though we do have his trustworthy, revealed Word. Isaiah 55:8 says, “*my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways declares the Lord.*” Therefore, none of us can just casually “discuss God.” It just can't be done. God is unimaginably holy, unquestionably merciful, and unwaveringly just. God hates sin, rewards virtue, and yet forgives sinners. If you don't mind me saying...” go figure!”

God is the creator of the stars and yet as Jesus says, he counts the hairs of our head and notices, and I suspect mourns, when even a sparrow falls to the ground. As the parable of the Prodigal Son last week made plain - as with sparrows so with fallen sinners. And yet the Parable of the Tenants could scarcely paint a more divergent picture of the character of God and His relationship with sinners. In the parable of the Prodigal Sons, a heartsick father is portrayed watching the horizon for his lost son – who'd wasted his life and was near starvation physically and spiritually. When the father sees him, he runs to him, throws his arms around him and restores him to the household – extravagantly. This sort of mercy is hard to grasp.

But today, we see the unwaveringly just God – the God who hates our sin. This parable arises out of Isaiah 5:1-7 – sometimes called “*The Song of the Vineyard.*” Isaiah goes to great lengths to describe what the owner had done to create the vineyard – clearing stones, planting a hedge, digging a winepress, planting the choicest of vines. “*What more could I have done for it*” the owner asks. Good grapes are anticipated, but it yields only sour ones – the sort that make you squint and put your teeth on edge when you bite one. The owner tears it down – and Isaiah says the vineyard is Israel.

In our story today however, which is Jesus' version of Isaiah's song, the vineyard is not destroyed, but changes hands. Most say that signifies Israel giving way to the church. Which would be fine if that is as far as the parable was intended to go. But parables never conclude that neatly. Their meaning hangs around awhile, lingers, outliving their immediate context – and they are just as much an eternal word of truth as say, the Ten Commandments.

So back to my original question – “*what is God like.*” The parable tells us God looks for and rewards virtue – “*our fruit*”, his “*share of the harvest.*” It tells us the owner of the vineyard is generous - not exacting severe quotas of performance from us. And patient – as the Old Testament says God is “*slow to anger and abounding in love.*” How else to understand the vineyard owner's many attempts to come to some accommodation with his tenants? But the owner – God, is resolute – steadfast in love, but steadfast in everything. God does nothing “halfway”. God is sovereign - another way of saying it is “*all powerful*” and thus we pray “*your will be done.*”

And so it will be. If the parable of the prodigal sons teaches us that God is resolute about showing mercy, even at the cost of his own dignity and risking his own future, God in the parable of the tenants is resolute about his power – he cedes none of it to anyone – no other god, as in the case of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and no other creature. And this is where this story touches all of us. For what the tenants wanted for themselves, was power. Well and good - so long as we remember the words of Jesus, who in Luke 6:37-38 said *“do not judge, and you will not be judged, forgive and you will be forgiven...the measure you use will be used against you.”*

In the church all power belongs to God. That means if we are going to be “godlike”, and what else would we seek to be - all our actions must be directed by, since all of them are accountable to, God. The parable of the tenants makes that clear. How then do we use power? In submission – primary submission to God, allowing no other “powers” to obstruct God’s - no matter how sensible they may seem or beneficial they appear, and mutual submission to one another. Ephesians 5:21 says *“Submit yourselves to one another out of reverence for Christ.”* We are men and women under authority – even as we also struggle – mightily, as Ephesians 6:12 says, *“with the powers of this sinful world.”*

The parable of the tenants is a prophesy of the crucifixion of God’s son Jesus. Yet as eternal word of God it also teaches us, who are in but borrowed, leased bodies, that we must whilst in them be watchful for the coming of Jesus among us – lest by our neglect or pride we crucify him all over again. So, who does God send our way, and how are we to treat them? God sends us our spouses, and children. God sends to us through baptism *“fellow members of the body of Christ, children of the same heavenly father and workers with us in the kingdom of God.”* God sends us himself, in distressing disguises – blind, lame, hungry, thirsty strangers often powerlessly imprisoned people physically and spiritually by the very powers of this world that stalk all.

And so, what is God like? We can tell much by how he used his power. He sent us his son – unimaginably holy, unquestionably merciful, and unwaveringly just Jesus Christ. The same Jesus his disciples once saw bathed in the glory of God on the mount of transfiguration, only to see him with face bloodied by blows and covered with human spit on Calvary’s holy mountain. They saw a rejected one – and they saw people who saw to it that he was dead. *“Whoever has seen me has seen the Father”* Jesus said. *“No one takes my life from me”*, Jesus said, *“I lay it down of my own will.”* Only the truly powerful God, who loves like that, can receive how we as sinners use our power - to fully show us His. AMEN