

Goal: That the hearers would more readily use the God's blessings for His service.

Julie was a secretary working in a large office building and she was having a very long morning. The phone never stopped ringing and the pile of work on her desk kept growing. Finally, the time came for her to take a well-deserved break. She stopped by the vending machine, bought a bag of cookies, put them in her purse, then went to Starbucks and waited in line for a cup of coffee. After she got her coffee, she found an empty chair at a table and sat down enjoying those brief minutes away from the office. She brought her devotional book that she had started but not finished over breakfast that morning.

After Julie took a sip of her coffee, she reached out and took a cookie from the bag. But to her astonishment, a man sitting across the table also reached into the bag and took a cookie. She was a little upset, but didn't say anything, because it was only one cookie. But a few minutes later, she took another cookie and again, he took one too. Now she was getting a little bent out of shape, especially since there was only one more cookie left in the bag. Apparently, the man also noticed that there was only one cookie left. He reached into the bag, took it out, broke it in half, offered one half to her and ate the other half himself. Then he smiled, got up from the table, and walked away.

By this time, steam was coming from her ears! Julie wanted to throw her chair at the greedy man. Who does this jerk think he is? How dare he ruin her coffee break by helping himself to half of her cookies! She stood up, slammed her devotion closed, and snatched up her purse, when a bag of unopened cookies spilled out. All this time, she had been helping herself to someone else's cookies and he didn't seem to mind! He had every right to be upset because she had taken what belonged to him without asking or even saying thank you.

That same mistake was made, but with a greater degree of anger and violence by the tenants of the vineyard in the parable Jesus sets before us today. The tenants didn't own the vineyard they were working. They didn't own the fruit it produced. As sharecroppers they leased the land. They didn't pay any purchase price, they only paid rent, and the rent they agreed to was a portion of the harvest.

Now, if you've ever rented a house or an apartment, you know that legally the renter's first responsibility is to pay the owner and the tenants had the same obligation. But when the owner sent employees to collect the rent, the tenants reneged. They figured, *"Why should we give him anything? We're the ones who do all the work around here! Did he help with the harvest? No! And since we're doing all the work, this should be our*

vineyard, not his! And if it's our vineyard, the harvest belongs to us!" Not only did they not pay the owner the rent, they beat and killed the collectors. Like Julie on her coffee break, the tenants took something that rightfully belonged to someone else.

The same thing happens so often to each of us. All our lives, we've been helping ourselves to God's bag of cookies. Whether we realize it or not, whatever cookies we have are cookies that come from God. Do we always recognize the source of the gifts we have been blessed with or do we simply claim them as our own and dare anyone to try to take them away? Whether it's our jobs, our homes, our cars, our money, our worship, even our time, we say, it's mine, I earned it and I'm going to do with it what I want.

At a church voter's meeting a wealthy member stood up and shared a witness of his faith. *"I'm a millionaire, and I attribute my wealth to the blessings of God in my life."* He went on to tell about the turning point in his relationship with God. As a young man, he just earned his first dollar and went to a church service that night. There was a missionary who spoke about his work in the mission field. Before the offering was passed the pastor said everything collected that night would be given to the missionary's work.

The wealthy man wanted to support mission work, but he knew he couldn't make change from the offering plate. He either had to give all he had or nothing. So he decided to give all that he had to God. Looking back, he said he knew that God had blessed that decision and had now made him wealthy. When he finished, there was silence in the room. As he returned to the pew and sat down, the elderly woman behind him leaned forward and said, *"I dare you to do it again."* When we start out our Christian walk of faith, it's easy to remember that the gifts and opportunities that come our way are from God. But something happens along the way. We forget the owner. We come to think of the vineyard and everything it produces as something we own.

There are two other elements to this parable. First, that God blesses His people with everything they need but they've responded by beating and killing His prophets and even His Son, Jesus. Second, there's an element of judgment. Every time Jesus tells a parable about a vineyard there's always a warning of judgment for those who work to care for His vineyard. But the focus of God's Word for us today is on our duty to use His blessings and be His stewards. It's our obligation as tenants of the vineyard to give a portion of the bountiful harvest we've enjoyed back to the One who gave us everything, including life itself.

Whose world do we live in? In our world or in God's world? Whose vineyard, or whose church do we work, ours or God's? And what difference does that make in our lives, in our work, or even here in our worship? The psalmist David sang, "***The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.***" (*Psalm 24:1*) That's true. The earth is the Lord's. We're tenants of the earth, not the owners. As much as we seem to like to think, we never own land. We simply lease it for a little while from the One who created it.

And we don't own the church, either. The church also belongs to God, not to us. We're responsible for the ministry of the church, all of us, not just the pastor. But the church belongs to God. And make no mistake about it; God will judge us one day by how faithfully we've been in working and carrying out His ministry.

Now you might think that doesn't sound fair but it's the truth of God's kingdom. It might also not sound fair for God to give His Son as a sacrifice on the cross of Calvary but that's exactly what our Heavenly Father has done for us. He gave His Son for each of us. He bought us with His blood and made us His own through the waters of Baptism.

So the question is where are you serving? Do you work in those areas that fit your interests and pays dividends for you or for others? Where are you working in the vineyard of God's church. Are you serving as an usher? Do you teach keiki church planting seeds for future harvests? Are you part of the choir or worship team? Are you visiting those in our church who are in need? Are you serving others at Family Promise this week or handing out food on Saturday mornings? What work are you doing here in this place?

We are tenants of this earth, stewards of what has been entrusted to our care. But we are also stewards of the church, entrusted with the awesome task of ministering to the needs of a broken and hurting world. And, as the tenants of God's earthly vineyard, we gather as God's church every week to celebrate God's victory over death, and to offer back to the owner of the vineyard a portion of what the land has yielded to us. We offer up the sweat, the tears, and the laughter of our lives. And as we do that, we continue to receive from God forgiveness through the body and blood of the Son who was crucified that we would be saved forever. You know what? As Cal would say, *we're getting paid a lot more than we're worth*, aren't we? AMEN