

THE IRRESISTABLE TIDE OF HIS LOVE

Some people have the idea that the God of the *Old Testament* is a God of wrath and judgment and the God of the *New Testament* is a God of love and mercy.

In other words the *Old Testament* is full of Law and the *New Testament* is full of Gospel.

There's a theological term for this idea: it's called *Biblicus Baloneus*: Bible baloney.

First of all, the God of the *Old Testament* and the God of the *New Testament* are the same God, because God doesn't change.

Second, there's Law and Gospel in both Testaments.

As a matter of fact, today we find the Gospel in the *Old Testament* and the Law in *New Testament*.

The parable of the tenants of the vineyard is some of the toughest Law preached in the Bible—and it's preached by the Son of God to God's chosen people—the Jews.

The terms of the parable are explicit: the owner of the vineyard is God, the vineyard is Israel, and the tenants are the Jews.

As a vineyard owner places his vineyard under the stewardship of a vinekeeper, God placed Israel under the stewardship of the Jews.

They were to enjoy its fruits—kids, cattle, crops and the forgiveness of sins—and show their gratitude by returning a small share of its fruits to God.

Superficially this “payment” referred to the tithing of their earnings, the offering up of one-tenth of the fruits of their labors, to the Lord.

But at a deeper level, the payment referred to their spiritual worship, their obligation under the Mosaic covenant to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength,” and to “love your neighbor as yourself.”

In other words, they were to honor Yahweh by repenting of their sins and seeking His forgiveness, and they were to honor their neighbor by helping him when he was in need and seeking justice for him when he was unable to procure it for himself.

The servants which the owner sends to collect his share of the fruits of the vineyard represent the prophets God repeatedly sent to remind the Jews of their lawful obligation to worship God with all their heart and mind and soul and strength and to love their neighbor as themselves.

But just as Israel mistreated and rejected the prophets God sent, the tenants of the vineyard mistreat and reject the servants the owner sends.

Finally, the owner sends his beloved son to them in hopes that they will “respect him” and come to their senses.

But this only hardens their hearts further: they “talk the matter over” and decide to throw the owner’s son out of the vineyard and kill him, just as the Jewish leaders were conspiring at that very moment to have God’s Son taken outside the walls of Jerusalem and crucified.

Jesus’ conclusion to the parable was a blueprint for the future of Judaism.

He asks: “What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others.”

In other words, God would take Israel, His church, away from its tenants, the Jews, and give it to a people who would share its fruit, the gentiles.

Then Jesus adds: “The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone. Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed.”

When the Jews rejected Jesus, they rejected the capstone of their religion: the Messiah to whom it had been pointing for 1500 years.

Without Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, the Law of Moses would be too great a burden for the Jews to bear: they would be crushed under the weight of their own religion—or what was left of it.

It's clear that the Jews understood exactly what Jesus was talking about.

Luke adds that, "The teachers of the law and the chief priests looked for a way to arrest him immediately, because they knew he had spoken this parable against them."

This is heavy law preaching indeed!

And before we redeemed gentiles boast over our Jewish brothers and sisters by exempting ourselves from the terms of the prophecy and the weight of its judgment, remember that *we, the church of Jesus Christ, are the New Israel*—a new vineyard which God has placed under our stewardship.

We are the new tenants of the vineyard!

And like the Jews of ancient Israel, we owe a debt to the owner of the vineyard.

Jesus made this clear when he said: “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.”

Now a command is a law.

And a law has a penalty for disobeying it.

If there is no penalty for disobedience, it is merely a suggestion—not a law.

And Jesus didn't **suggest** that we love one another; he **commanded** it.

And the penalty for disobedience, according to the parable, is the same for us as it was for the Jews: if we fail to love one another as Jesus loved us we will lose our vineyard.

What does that mean in practical terms?

I think it means that when a Christian congregation ceases to draw its power from faith in Jesus Christ and fails to express that faith in deeds of love to its neighbors, it will not remain God's church for very long.

It may have the purest doctrine, the most beautiful sanctuary, the richest worship and the most exciting music, but unless it is a faithful and loving church, God will take it away and give it to someone else.

So how well do we love our neighbor?

If “love” means placing a higher value upon their needs than upon our own and then doing something about it—do we love them at all?

If not, are we disobeying Christ’s law of love?

If so, will God take our vineyard away from us—like He did the Jews of Jesus’ time—and give it to people who will?

In the *Book of Revelation* Jesus writes an open letter to the church at Laodicea, a church whose faith had cooled and whose love for God and neighbor had waned.

He says to them: “I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot.

So, because you are lukewarm, I am about to spit you out of my mouth.”

I’d say that’s pretty clear.

“Work out your salvation in fear and trembling.”

We are commanded by our Savior to love one another as He loved us—which is to say, by practicing self-sacrificial love to others in order to draw them to Jesus Christ.

And the plain, unvarnished fact is: we fail.

We fail because when we reach down and try to find that kind of love in ourselves, *it just isn't there.*

But as the old song goes, that's because we're looking for love in all the wrong places.

Love doesn't come from us; it comes from God.

Not only love to receive, but love to share—and God is willing to give us oceans of it.

In today's Gospel from the *43rd Chapter* of the *Book of Isaiah*, God describes this love which he bestows on his people.

First, he reminds them of the times he has shown them his love in the past [43:16-17]

Then, having described these mighty acts of love, he tells them to forget about them and look instead to the future, to what he has in store for them! [43:18-21]

Ah, the divine “nevertheless.”

Your sins are as scarlet; nevertheless I will make them as white as snow.

This is surely one of the purest expressions of the Gospel, the love that flows unconditionally and freely

from the heart of God to His people—right in the middle of the Old Testament!

The Israelites had broken the commandments, neglected their worship, chased after pagan gods, stoned and killed the prophets, and failed to seek justice and mercy for the poor and dispossessed.

Nevertheless, God loves them and forgives them and promises to feed them and preserve them *because they are His people*.

This love of God has the power of an irresistible tide!

It not only renews those who drink of it, it renews all creation!

Wild animals will honor God after they have been changed by it, and the desert itself will become a garden.

If you imagine God's wrath as a raging forest fire which consumes everything in its path, imagine His love as an ocean that consumes the fire and waters the burnt soil so that it bursts forth with new life.

We rebellious tenants of God's vineyard are killed every day by the fire of God's wrath for our failure to obey His command to practice sacrificial love toward each other.

But then we are raised up again to new life by his love, so that we can proclaim his praise!

The question is: how do we draw water from this ocean of love so that we can carry it to those who are dying of thirst?

With this question in mind, listen to Paul in today's Epistle Lesson, as he exhorts the Philippians in the same way as God exhorted the Israelites of Isaiah's day, to forget the past and focus on the future: [Phil. 3:12-14]

What would this thing "to be taken hold of" be?

Surely not faith: Paul already had that in spades.

Not the blessings of heaven: no one was more confident that when he left this world he would go to be with Christ than Paul was.

What else, then, but love, the very thing which caused Christ Jesus to take hold of him?

And he takes hold of it by **pressing on**, by forgetting the past and forging ahead to fulfill Christ's command.

Like a surfer who gets ahead of the incoming wave so that he can ride it to the shore, Paul presses on in faith, in truth and in actions.

God's love is a mighty wave which can propel a believer to mighty acts of self-sacrificial love.

To show love is to "press on" as a surfer rides a wave—not in pursuit of anything except the joy of the ride itself.

Not seeking the shore—but merely seeing it as the natural end of a joyous ride.

Not doing it for a reward, but as a living demonstration of a greater power than comes from beyond him.

But you will never know that power unless you climb on the surfboard and paddle out to the deeper water, where you can catch the wave coming in.

No, we will not lose our vineyard because we have failed to love one another.

If that were possible, we would have already lost it.

Jesus was "about" to spit the church at Laodicea out of his mouth, but he didn't.

He wrote them a letter to rekindle their love and he invited them to renew the life of their congregation by eating and drinking with Him at His table.

God will not withhold his ocean of love from us—his people.

He will pour it into our hearts until our hearts overflow with it and it flows to others.

So you might as well stop trying to resist: God's love is an irresistible tide and you can't possibly hold all of it within yourself.

Besides, there are others who need it.

So why not just "go with the flow?"

Amen.

