

24 November 2019

The Opposite of Thanksgiving Matthew 21:33-44

Matthew 21:33-44

'Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watch-tower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, "They will respect my son." But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance." So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?' They said to him, 'He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.'

Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the scriptures: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes"? Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.'

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What is thankfulness? Here's my definition. If you're taking notes, get ready. Got your pen? All right. Thankfulness is . . . a thing that cannot be defined in a simple sentence at the beginning of a sermon. In fact, I'm thinking about a multi-week sermon series for next year on the subject, so I'm not even going to try. But here it is the Sunday before Thanksgiving and I should probably say something about it. So let's start chipping away at a definition of this vast and complex thing by asking a preliminary question: What is the *opposite* of Thanksgiving? Think about that for a moment, and before you say anything, let me just specify that "*un*-thankfulness" and "ingratitude" are not acceptable answers. Ready? Think for a moment. What do you say: What is the opposite of Thanksgiving?

(Possible answers: complaining, envy, resentment, anger, selfishness)

So these are some good answers – all things that prevent us from being thankful. But today I want to talk about just one barrier to thanksgiving: the conviction that we *deserve* everything that we have. We normally call this attitude "entitlement." Look back at the parable that we just read. Jesus tells of a landowner who plants a vineyard. He doesn't just plant it; he does all the work to make the vineyard fruitful – builds walls, digs cisterns for water, everything. Then he leases this perfect property to tenants, with the rent being a share of the crops at the harvest. Now I think we can all agree that this is fair. The landowner has done everything he could to make it possible for the tenants to have excellent crops. Yes, they have to do the work of keeping the vineyard and harvesting the grapes, but they only have that opportunity because the landowner did the prior work and graciously permits them to live in this good garden. So the landowner's within his rights to ask for a share of the produce, right? But the tenants evidently

don't see it that way. All the preliminary work that the landowner did, that's ancient history. What matters is *now*, and they're the ones who did all the work of harvesting, while the landowner's off on vacation. Why should they share the fruit of *their* labor with that fat cat? After all, it's not like he needs it.

Entitlement. It is the conviction that everything I have I've earned. In fact, to tell you the truth, I've really earned a whole *more* than I have, but I've been cheated out of it. The world owes me. This attitude is only possible, though, if you are able to forget or ignore any gifts that others have given you, and all advantages you have that others don't. To the entitled soul, those things don't count. The attitude of entitlement makes gratitude impossible. And, I'm coming to believe, entitlement is one of the besetting sins of our society.

Now we hear the term entitlement most often in reference to people who live on government and charitable assistance, who evidently feel that they shouldn't have to work or do things that they don't enjoy, but instead are just owed their upkeep by society. Well, it's a real thing. I've met people like that. A previous church I served had a Personal Needs Closet – like a food pantry, but with hygiene and household supplies. James was a regular visitor. James loved to come in and talk non-stop about how much he loved God and Jesus – he always mentioned both; not sure how James felt about the Holy Spirit – and while he talked, he'd sneak extra supplies while no one was looking and get offended when we'd ask him to put them back. How dare we? So, yeah. This sort of entitlement is real. But for what it's worth, it's also incredibly rare. The reason I remember this God-and-Jesus spouting con man is because he was the exception. Most of the guests at the Personal Needs Closet were embarrassed to be there, as we would be, but didn't have anywhere else to turn. One weekday I was in the office and a woman I didn't remember ever seeing came in and introduced herself. She said that the year before she had been at her wits end. Her unemployment had run out, and she still had no job, and no laundry soap. So she forced herself to come to us. She said that the women in the closet had treated her with respect and helped her get what she needed. Anyway, this woman had a job now and she had brought a donation for the closet. I went out and helped her unload eight massive cartons of toilet paper from her full-sized pick-up. She was returning what she had received, a thousand-fold. Usually people who ask for help aren't entitled; they're desperate.

But there are other sorts of entitlement in our society. Anyone here work for the city or county? How about the entitlement of expecting police and fire service, immediate snow plowing and road repair, but you also need to cut my taxes! If you don't have enough in the budget for all these things I expect, then pay for them by cutting waste somewhere else. I gather that "waste" in this context is "any city service that doesn't directly benefit me." That's entitlement. Who cares that I am only able to go to my job and earn my salary because of things that have been handed to me, paid for by others: you don't expect me to chip in what *I* worked for, do you? It's exactly the sort of entitlement that the tenants in the parable demonstrated.

A brief digression here. I don't like paying my property taxes either. I could think of a lot of things I could do with those thousands. But in my sane moments, I'm glad to support our schools, our police and fire departments, and our road crews. In fact, I'd be willing to pay even more, if we could use it to subsidize more affordable housing for low income residents. This past year I served on a community task force – led by people like Keith Johnathan and Tashai Atkins – to house some of our homeless population. And it was good, and we succeeded in housing

some twenty individuals. And Sojourner's House is still full to capacity every night – even before the really cold weather.

All right. End of digression. My point is, that we as a culture have a problem with entitlement. We live in the safest and most comfortable society on earth, and as a group we all pretty much share the conviction that we deserve it. It's not an accident of birth. It's us. We've earned it, somehow. So all those other people who don't have our privileges – say, sweatshop employees in Bangkok – well, they probably don't work as hard as we do. That's entitlement.

And then there's the entitlement that often comes with privilege. Now, I know this is not a popular subject. I'll keep that in mind, but I'm going there anyway, because sometimes I have to preach to myself. I am a middle-age white male in America. I basically have privilege dripping from me. When I've been pulled over by the police for – inadvertently, you understand – speeding, I have never been worried. My parents never sat me down to tell me exactly how to behave in that situation for my own safety. Every black male in America has had that talk. I have never been followed by a store detective when I was shopping; every black or Hispanic person has experienced that. I have never watched people cross the street so as not to pass me on the sidewalk. As a pastor, when I have screwed up – inadvertently, you understand – I have never felt the burden of having let down every other male. No one has ever said, “*That's why men shouldn't be pastors!*” and yet every female pastor has heard that comment about women and still bears the weight of representing her entire sex at every meeting and in every sermon. I don't even live with the possibility of being insulted because of who I am. Ever thought about that? There are crude, insulting epithets that are used to describe black people just because they're black, Hispanic or Asian people just because they're Hispanic or Asian, women just because they're female, but there isn't a category insult for people like me. That's privilege.

Now privilege by itself is not entitlement, but it makes entitlement easy. If I deny that I have the advantages of privilege, pretending that everything I have or have achieved is just because I'm such a splendid person and deserve it all, that's entitlement. If I look down on those who don't have as much as I do, or have achieved less, and assume that that's their own fault, that's entitlement. And entitlement cripples gratitude, because it focuses my attention on myself not those around me, makes me think not about how much I've been given but what I think I *should* have been given. It makes me scornful of those who have less than I do and resentful of those who have more, because, of course, *they* don't deserve it. Entitlement fosters smugness and self-delusion and greed.

By contrast, thanksgiving begins with the acknowledgement that we don't deserve all that we have. Yes, we have worked hard for our pay, but the fact that we were born in a place where we have the chance to do that, instead of being born a Uighur in China or Dalit in India, is not something clever that we did. It's a gift. In fact, most of what matters most to us has simply been given to us: life, health, our families, the people we love and people who love us. We didn't earn any of that. We didn't *deserve* any of that. And since we didn't earn it, it's not a possession to grasp, but something to give away to others, like that truck-full-of-toilet-paper-lady did. And *that's* thanksgiving.