

**“Fruits of the Kingdom”**  
A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Scott Herr  
First Presbyterian, New Canaan, CT – October 8, 2023

**Please Read:**  
**Philippians 3:4b-14**  
**Matthew 21:33-46**

The outbreak of war in Israel and Gaza yesterday is another reminder that we are living in challenging times. It’s difficult for people to make sense of what’s going on in the world, let alone Washington, D.C. Given the inclination toward the nihilistic and chaotic approach of some leaders, it’s hard to live with hope. Last week’s powerful presentation by Alan Tieger reminded us of the past and current threat of totalitarianism, and we read daily about how dysfunctional our national politics are, how so many people are struggling to make ends meet, with homelessness and strikes on the rise, and hope for the future going down...

Today’s texts provide both a reminder of the surprising Good News of what God has done for us that we could not do for ourselves, but also a warning of the judgment to come if we do not better align ourselves with God’s moral and ethical vision for compassion, justice and peace.

Paul’s autobiographical statement is revealing in our Philippians text, because the apostle makes clear that our basis for hope is not found in the places we normally look. He quickly renders racial, educational, economic and religious sources for value as *nothing* “...because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” Paul says that while he has “suffered the loss of all things,” he regards them as “rubbish” in the NRSV translation.

This word in the Greek, σκύβαλα, is a crass word to find in one of the most beautiful NT epistles. Paul regards all of his worldly status and achievements, literally, as “crap,” or more specifically, “human excrement.”<sup>1</sup> However shocking it may be, it’s right there in the Bible! But why does Paul use such strong, sordid language? Because the difference is everything: his own righteousness that comes from the law *is nothing* compared with “the righteousness from God” that comes “through faith in Christ.” This is the heart of the gospel and is offensive to those who think the gospel is about personal piety or religious fussiness. Here is liberating truth for any who are burdened with the pressures of our society to *measure up* or *get it right*. The gospel is that we are invited into a new relationship with God based not on our merit, but on God’s grace!

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<sup>1</sup> William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 758.

By putting your faith, your trust in Jesus Christ, *you receive a righteousness from God*. Luther calls this “alien righteousness.” It doesn’t matter whether you’re an über-Christian or Atheist, we all have in our minds an idea of what is the standard, code, rule, law, or norm by which we should live. It’s the ideal in our mind of what our life, or the life of a good, responsible, successful person should live... And the truth is, that’s going to be different more or less for every person. And so we put ourselves under that “law.” And we are judged accordingly. We judge ourselves, or we believe God judges us. And so people either continue to strive for perfection under the “law,” and one of two things happens: 1) they give up on it because of fatigue or bitterness, or even worse, 2) they get *self-righteous* because they live under the illusion that they really are perfect under the law. Ironically, even people who live in rebellion to the “law,” exchange themselves as the judge of good and bad in their own system or “law.”

Paul admits this for himself: He was a Super Religious Guy, from the elite racial group of the Tribe of Benjamin, blameless under the law of the Pharisaical code, and was doing what any zealous Pharisee at the time would be doing: hunting heretics. He was *righteous*, or so he thought... But then Paul’s world was rocked by an encounter with the Risen Lord. He realized life under any type of tribal code, whether racial, cultural, class, educational, religious or whatever... meant *exclusion* and *judgment*. He explains elsewhere, “the letter of the law kills...” *Self-righteousness* is where the law leads. And no matter how much religious, political or economic success you may achieve, he says it’s all σκύβαλα, “crap.” Someone always ends up on the “inside,” someone else on the “outside.” And either way, the “law” leads to alienation and condemnation.

The gospel, however, is something else, a *tertium quid*, a different way... By putting your faith in Jesus, *you enter into a relationship with the living God*. “Coram Deo” is the Latin phrase. If I ever get a tattoo, that’s going on my back! *Coram Deo* roughly means, “In the presence of God.” It’s the essence of the Christian life: “to live one’s entire life in the presence of God, under the authority of God, to the glory of God.”<sup>2</sup> Paul says, “Christ Jesus has made me his own.” We are claimed by God as sons and daughters, heirs, by grace through faith.

Through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God offers to us an amazing exchange, really: Jesus takes the sacrifice for our sin, and we take the righteousness, or justice of God. As we receive this gift, our hearts are changed,

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<sup>2</sup> R.C. Sproul said this somewhere!

and we learn to show grace to others. This is transforming both personally and communally. Grace is how God seeks to change the world, to continue the healing work in the world through the likes of us... In other words, we need to re-think the metrics, the measurements by which we are evaluating our lives, our ministries, our leadership in the world. The “audit of Jesus”<sup>3</sup> evaluates how well we are “producing the fruits of the Kingdom.”

Which brings us to Jesus’ parable of the Vineyard... Jesus has just rolled into town with a “triumphal entry” right up to the temple, where he rather impolitely turns over all the tables. In last week’s parable, Jesus declares *the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the Kingdom ahead* of religious leaders. And then Jesus tells today’s parable of the Vineyard, which is basically a reinterpretation of a story that all of his listeners would have recognized from Isaiah chapter 5. The vineyard owner is God, the vineyard is Israel, the tenants are the leaders, and the slaves of the landowner are the prophets. In Jesus’ parable, of course, the son is a foreshadowing of Jesus’ own story; how God sends his son, and how the leaders kill him...

The parable points to the lengths God will go to show grace to all... God even looks foolish in sending the son to redeem the situation. It’s interesting that the Tenants think if they kill the son, they will get the inheritance... They’re betting, you see, that the owner *won’t show up*, or is too much of a sucker not to claim what is rightfully his... So, the question behind this parable is does God care about God’s promises? Will God make good on them? Will God show up?

There’s a twist to this parable. In Isaiah 5 the problem with the Vineyard is the grapes. The vines will be pulled up... but in Jesus’ parable, the vineyard is fine; the *tenants* are the problem! Notice the actual religious leaders who hear the parable expect the end to be about “a miserable death” for the tenants...*but in fact the “miserable death” is what Jesus takes upon himself.*

Here is the stunning Gospel reversal in this teaching: The tenants may deserve a miserable death, but God surprisingly shows up and takes the hit for them, for us. So while the vineyard is turned over to new tenants, the gospel motivation for producing the fruits of the kingdom is not *fear*, but love and gratitude for the One who has born a miserable death for us, who has taken the penalty for

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<sup>3</sup> N.T. Wright, “Pauls’ Gospel and Caesar’s Empire,” in *Paul and Politics*, ed. Richard Horsley (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), 178.

unrighteousness that we deserve. And here's the kicker: We receive the inheritance. The riches of the Kingdom is given to us...

As we are seeing increasing sectarian violence in the world, the most recent between Jews and Arabs in Israel, debt disaster looming, racism and bigotry, we need to reflect deeply on what it looks like for us to produce the fruits of the Kingdom of God, to press on by faith, straining forward to love our neighbors *and our enemies*, to welcome others as Christ has welcomed us, and to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God... Jesus' parable is not talking about how Christians will take over from the Jews. It's rather about how there will be a reckoning – there will be *judgment* - for injustice, arrogance, and criminality, whoever the culprits may be.

Have you read the book, *life is so good*, written by George Dawson? He's an African American who lived to be 102 years old. His memoirs recall how he grew up as the grandson of slaves and learned quickly "his place" as a black man under the Jim Crow laws of the southern U.S.... George's story is a window into what it is like for someone who thinks because of the color of their skin, or education, or class or cultural heritage, that they are less than someone else... But George liked to travel, and back in the 1930's he caught a train to Mexico. He tells the story of how in a small mountain Mexican village, the people treated him differently. As he came to the town water fountain, there was a long line of people waiting to get their water. A fair skinned Mexican named Jorge handed him his cup and apologized that they had to share it.

George writes, "I laughed. What a strange country was I in where a white man offers to share and even apologizes to me for using the same cup that I would? I didn't know what to think. No one in my hometown would believe I was telling the truth even if I told them.... I got in line behind the others that were waiting, some with old gourds and others with buckets. Waiting in lines never bothered me, but a woman motioned me to follow her. She brought me up to the front of the line. She said, "*Senior, para usted el frente de la linea. Estoy seguro, que tiene usted mucho sed de su viajes!* (For you, the front of the line. I'm sure you're thirsty after your travels)."

And George concludes, "Knowing my place and all, I had never been in the front of any line before in my life. It felt funny, but I could see that I would only offend someone again if I didn't do it. The people in line nodded toward me; they weren't put off as I would have figured them to be. After all these years, straight out of

the mountain, that's still the best glass of water I've ever had. Maybe I just enjoyed that cup of water a little extra too, because I wasn't in the back of the line. Could be part of it; I don't know..." When Jorge took his cup back, he asked "Are you hungry now?" "Yes, sure," I said... "Then come!"<sup>4</sup>

As surprising as it may be, the good news is that in Christ, you are brought to the front of the line... you are welcome and loved, and a feast is set for you. And while I know the "fruits of righteousness" are described in many ways in the scriptures, I think it has something to do with inviting others to the wellspring of God's love in Jesus Christ and doing whatever we can to work toward a better life and fairer world for all. Maybe we can't bring peace in Israel or Ukraine, or fix our own national ills overnight, but we can make a difference in our families, at work, and with our neighbors. May we all drink deeply from the well of God's love, and through our daily thoughts, words and actions, produce the fruits of the Kingdom for all.

*In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.*

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<sup>4</sup> George Dawson and Richard Glaubman, *life is so good: One man's extraordinary journey through the twentieth century and how he learned to read at age 98* (New York: Random House, 2013), 137.