

## Children

Good morning. *(response)* I want to show you two things and ask you a question. Are you ready? *(response)* Show the following pairs one at a time as you say them. The “want item” is at the end for emphasis: What do you want? Do you want some asparagus or do you want some bubblegum! *(response)* What do you want? Do you want to read a book or do you want to play Gameboy! *(response)* Ok, let’s ask this question of the men in the congregation: What do you want? Do you want to go to church or do you want to go play golf? *(response)* Do you think they are telling the truth?

I want to show you the same things again but I am going to ask different questions. What do you need? Do you need asparagus or do you need bubblegum! *(response)* What do you need? Do you need to read or do you need to play Gameboy! *(response)* Let’s ask our question of the men: What do you need? Do you need to go to church or do you need to play golf? *(response)*

Application: What’s the difference between a want and a need? *(response)* A want is something we would like to have—like a toy. Hold up the Gameboy. A need is something that we have to have—like knowledge. Hold up the book. The difference between being a baby and being grown up is understanding the difference between these two things: Wants and needs. Jesus told a story about some guys who got that mixed up and they demanded bubblegum and rejected asparagus—they demanded the things they wanted and rejected the thing they needed most. My prayer for you is that as you get older you will grow in your desire for asparagus; grow in your desire for knowledge; and grow in your desire for Jesus and his church.

I

Self-made. That’s one of the phrases that fills people with pride, especially in this country, where for years “pulling yourself up by your bootstraps” was the primary goal to attain.

A couple of weeks ago, we talked about the idea of working hard and feeling we deserve our own brand of “fairness” based on our measurement and success paradigms. Last week, we talked about the politics of authority and winning through rhetoric rather than personal identity, faithfulness, and authenticity. Today, Jesus’ disputes with the Chief Priests and Pharisees continue as he addresses their “right to rule the roost,” even if it’s not their roost to rule.

But this too is not unfamiliar to us today. Our “right” to do what we please, when we please, and how we please governs much of American life. In fact, more than any other country, the US is known for its emphasis on individualism. Each generation for the past 50 years has become more and more diverse in its opinions and beliefs—and the conviction that what we believe is equal to authority and truth. In fact, we as a culture have lost respect for authority, that is, any other authority besides our own thoughts and truth.

When you mix extreme diversity of opinions together with individualistic convictions of truth, what you get is an explosive cocktail. Welcome to 21<sup>st</sup> century America.

And yet this scenario is not so different from 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine, and especially first century politics.

The priests and pharisees, scribes and lawmakers were wedded to their power and prestige, and their money. They kept a careful balance of power between Rome and the Jewish people through Temple politics. And they had no intention of allowing that power to slip.

They claimed to rule Temple administration but also became the legal system for the faith, and those legalities became more and more strict and stringent. Their world seemed efficient and definitely

working, mostly to their advantage. But they forgot something very important. Their “turf” didn’t belong to them.

That error in vision, that is, understanding our “place” in the fishbowl, is exactly what afflicts most all of us at any given time.

We think we are the rulers, when in actuality, we are the tenants, the servants.

Anyone here addicted to Downton Abbey? It’s become one of the most watched shows today. It’s so beloved that people are watching the series two, three, more times.

The show centers around the dichotomies between the English aristocracy and the staff in service. It examines astutely their relationships, their aspirations, their feelings of ownership and envy, and their understanding of their role, identity, abilities, and place.

While some characters feel peaved about their servant role, others accept their place in the family gladly and take pride in their role.

In a sense, these kinds of personalities, feelings, and identity questions also come to play when it comes to our role in God’s world.

In Jesus’ parable for today, he speaks of a landowner, who is a metaphor for God, creator of the world and Lord of the “vineyard,” a metaphor for our “garden” world that we are required to “tend and till” on God’s behalf. In Jesus’ story, the crops and winepress are to be worked by the tenants of the property to create delicious wine that God will use to nourish the world with His love and grace. In other words, the job of the tenants is to “bear the fruit of the kingdom,” fruits such as love, grace, kindness, generosity, forgiveness, and mercy. However, that’s not what happens.

Instead, the tenants begin to be tempted by power, money, prestige, and status, and they begin to believe that the vineyard is their own to tend as they see fit. Anyone who threatens their power and monopoly is eliminated.

In the story, the owner sends emissaries (or prophets if you will...referring to the prophets throughout history sent to guide and reboot the Jewish leaders in authority in the right directions of renewing their faith and loyalty to God) to collect the harvest. But those “in charge” kill them and go on as though the vineyard belongs to them. This goes on several times, until at last, the owner decides to send his own son to collect on the fruit of the tenants’ labor.

What happens? The tenants in charge plot to kill the heir and seize his inheritance. Now to us this may sound like delusions of grandeur; and yet the story strikes disturbingly close to home, as we realize, the Son is Jesus, and Jesus is describing his own impending death by those who believe, they can attain God’s kingdom by their own means, their own power, their own authority, and their own right.

If that kind of power-hungry arrogance doesn’t scare you, it should. For at one time or another, we all assume, we can “build God’s kingdom” by our own means, or raise up the church by our own power, or make the world a better place by our own wisdom. And it’s far too easy to forget who is really in charge.

Now Jesus doesn’t mean for us to believe that our efforts don’t matter. They do. That’s why we are the workers in the vineyard, God’s building and construction crew here on earth.

But lest we forget, Jesus reminds us, we didn’t make the designs. We don’t own the vineyard. We don’t have the right to determine the blueprint for success or the terms of our hire.

We do however have some say in the quality of the product. In fact, you might say, we are God's quality control department.

We can create the most delectable wine out of the orchard God has given us to work with, a wine so delicious that it is a delicacy. Or we can create something so sour that no one will want to drink it.

And here is the beauty of the scriptures. The word in Hebrew for Eden (God's original garden of delights) is the same word in Hebrew for paradise, and for heaven. "ganeden."<sup>[1]</sup> So, while we are thrust out of our easy life in the original garden, we still are placed into God's vast vineyard in order to "till and keep" it, to work the soil, cultivate love, peace, and loyalty to God, and to bear fruit that will in fact delight as the fruits of Eden were meant to delight. That is, our human habitat was created to be a wine-making, love-making business. And we as God's tenants are in the mercy and love making business.

And as God's tenants, we are held accountable for the quality of the love and mercy that we make.

Want to taste and see that the Lord is good? Taste the wine made by God's tenants, the most delectable wine in the world. Because our job is to cultivate the most wonderful fruit we can in the vineyard that God has given us.

This is the way we "build" God's garden kingdom on earth, "as" God has imagined it from, and like, in heaven.

At the end of Jesus' parable, he threatens the chief priests and pharisees, saying that if they continue to rule the Jewish people as they are, God's kingdom will be taken away from them and given to others, who will create the kind of "vineyard" world God intends us to create.

For the world we believe is ours to create belongs to someone far greater than we.

God has bestowed upon us —those he created to be only a little less than Himself—the ability to create a beautiful, harmonious, pleasurable, delightful world, filled with love, hope, and peace. But to do so, we must be willing to accept God's blueprints and build upon the cornerstone that is faith in Jesus.

For ultimately our lives, our livelihoods, and our future belongs to Him.

Will you take pride in your position as servant of God's kingdom? Or will you envy the power and prestige of the Lord's house?

The answer will tell you much about the garden kingdom you are building. And the future you will leave behind.

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<sup>[1]</sup> See [hebrewversity.com](http://hebrewversity.com)  
, by Lori Wagner

## II

Have you ever been rejected? It hurts, doesn't it? There is no pain more familiar to many of us than the pain of rejection. We remember those terrible younger years when we were searching for our identity, and acceptance by our peers was so important.

One comedian was talking about his attempts to land a date during his teen years. He says, "I never was very good at this romance thing. It's true. I remember my teenage years. We used to play spin

the bottle. The way we played it was that a girl would spin the bottle and if the bottle stopped on you, the girl could either kiss you or give you a quarter. By the time I was fifteen, I had enough quarters to buy my first car.”

He said, “I remember my first date. I wanted to play it safe, so I asked a rather plain girl out--after all, I didn’t want her to say ‘no.’

“I got ready to kiss her good night and she took off her glasses. I was startled. I said, ‘Without your glasses, you’re beautiful.’

She said, ‘Without my glasses, you aren’t too bad, either.’

He continued, “I’m not a quitter, though. I finally asked the most popular girl in our school out. And, you know, she didn’t say no at all. She said, ‘You’ve gotta be kidding.’”

Don’t hold up your hand if you’ve ever been there. No use adding insult to injury. Rejection hurts! Whether it’s being rejected by the opposite sex, or being the last one chosen for the ball team or standing on the sideline watching another girl being crowned homecoming queen, most of us know how it feels to be on the outside looking in.

It may help us to know that almost everyone is rejected sooner or later. Even some of our biggest movie stars tell of being rejected. Veteran talent agent Robert Littman tells how he once rejected a young would-be actor named Jack Nicholson.

Nicholson wanted to try out for parts on the popular television shows *The Virginian* and *Bonanza* (anyone remember those two vintage shows?). Nicholson asked for Littman’s help. Littman turned him down. He tried to discourage Nicholson by telling him that he thought directing was a sensible job, and that writing was an accomplishment, but acting [in his estimation] was a lifetime of rejection. Littman told Nicholson he wouldn’t be a party to such lunacy. Nicholson said, “If you don’t represent me, I am going to go with the Morris (Agency) . . .” And he did. And the rest, as they say, is history. “When . . . [Nicholson] won the Academy Award for *Cuckoo’s Nest*,” says Littman, “he went up to accept [his award] and said: ‘I want to thank that agent who many years ago advised me not to become an actor.’” Littman adds, “Thank God he didn’t mention me by name.”

Littman admits that during his career of twenty-five years he also turned down the Beatles. (1) Rejection is part of life. My favorite rejection is I was going to the apartment of a girl that I was dating and coming down the stairs was I guy I knew. I asked about him and her response was “Jonathan, you’ve heard the expression nice guys finish last, you’re one of the nicest guys I know.

Rejection hurts. Sometimes it shatters. Occasionally it kills. Jesus knew what it was to be rejected. Misunderstood by his own family, cast out by his own townspeople, crucified by his own nation and particularly by the leaders of the religion in which he was nurtured--he knew what it was to be on the outside looking in.

Our lesson for the day from the Gospel of Matthew deals with that very thing. Jesus was speaking to the chief priests and the Pharisees and he told them a parable:

Jesus said to the chief priests and the Pharisees, “Have you never read in the Scriptures: ‘The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone . . .’”

Of course the chief priests and the Pharisees had read it. It’s in the book of Psalms, verse 118:22. But here’s what disturbed them. They not only knew the verse, they knew he was talking about them. And they began immediately to plot how they could get rid of him.

Few Bible verses are quoted several times in the Scriptures. This one is.

Simon Peter quoted these same words to the rulers and the elders in Acts 4:11. I quote: “Jesus is ‘the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone.’” Later Peter would cite those words again in his epistle: I Peter 2:7, “Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, ‘The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone . . .’”

What an important message this is then: Jesus, the stone that was rejected has become the chief cornerstone. Jesus, who was rejected, now reigns at the right hand of God the Father.

What we need to see today is that this same Jesus can help us when we feel rejected. Christ was rejected that we might be reconciled to God. Because he knows what it is to be rejected, he can help us with our feelings of hurt and despair.

How do we deal with feelings of rejection? Think about that for a few moments while I suggest a couple of thoughts.

First of all, when we're rejected, we do not give up the fight. We don't drop out of the race. We don't crawl off and hide under a rock. We remember St. Paul who also knew what it was to be rejected. Still he wrote, "One thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."

(Philippians 3: 13-14).

It is so easy to allow rejection to defeat us.

Author King Duncan tells about a remarkable young African-American woman from Jamaica who felt a deep connection to these verses about Christ's rejection. Here is the testimony she gave to him:

"I am the second child of my mother and when she gave birth to me, she decided that she didn't want me, so just like Moses was placed in a basket and sent down a river, I was placed under a plum tree in front of my father's house. A lady was passing by and told my paternal grandmother that I was outside under the tree. My father came and got me and his house was my home for 22 years. I grew up with him and my grandmother.

"Fast-forward to 24 years later. By this time I was a university graduate with a second degree, the Chief Financial Officer of a major company and a well-known Christian woman recognized for her philanthropy. I was doing pretty well despite growing up always believing that I was my mother's reject.

"I reconnected with my mother at a seminar; she had sought me out because by now she had seven children, nowhere to live, no job and no food to give them. The short version is I bought her a piece of land, built a house on it, found her a job and moved my youngest brother in with me so that I could mentor him. Today he is a 3rd year law student.

"The statement made about Jesus being the head cornerstone, the redemptive blood of my Savior and my relationship with him was what helped me to forgive my mother and made it easy for me to become the head cornerstone in her life. She rejected me and gave me away and a few years later I was the one she needed." Of course they don't always need us or even want us, but we can be the better person.

What a magnificent testimony--one who was rejected became a cornerstone for others, particularly her family. It hurts to be rejected--whether you are seven or seventy-five--whether it is by your peers or by your own family.

It hurts, but there is a man hanging on a tree who says to us, "I saw so much possibility in you that I gave my life for you. Don't give up. I know you are hurting, but your rejection will not defeat you if you will hold steady to your course and trust in me."

When we are rejected, we don't give up.

Instead we allow Christ to use that rejection to help us grow in maturity and to help us better minister to others who also feel rejected.

You and I may question why it was that Christ had to suffer and die. Why could he have not been born in Caesar's house rather than the stable of Bethlehem and established his kingdom by royal decree? It would have been so much easier that way and certainly less painful.

Fortunately the life of Christ came not from the mind of man but the mind and heart of God. Christ's entire life was defined by rejection--by his family, by his community, by his nation, even by the leaders of his religion. However, if he was not rejected, how could he minister to us in our rejections? If he did not confront life's most heartbreaking difficulties and disappointments, how could he help us as we pass through the dark valleys of our existence?

Remember how, in Galilee, a wretched leper forced his way into Christ's presence. "Depart!

Unclean!" the man said pitifully, for a leper was forbidden to come into contact with other people. The man's body was covered with decaying flesh and running sores.

What does the Master do? Moved by compassion he reaches out and touches the man's decaying body and the man was made whole.

The rabbis had a saying that "when the Messiah comes He will be found sitting among the lepers at the gate of the city." (2)

That saying was fulfilled in Jesus. He is the wounded healer, and those of us who have been wounded are called to be healers as well. "By his wounds were we healed" (1 Peter 2:24). Because he was wounded, he could reach out to us.

Christian author Robert J. Morgan tells us something interesting about Michelangelo's magnificent statue of David. As you probably know, the statue of David is an enormous work of art. Morgan says it was carved from a block of marble eighteen feet high. But perhaps you didn't know, says Morgan, that Michelangelo wasn't the first person to attempt to craft a statue from that chunk of marble.

An earlier artist named Agostino di Duccio selected that huge block of stone forty years earlier and had begun sculpting a statue of either David or an Old Testament prophet. But di Duccio gave up when he discovered how difficult this was. The piece of marble was quite thin and misshapen. He said, "I can do nothing with it" and gave up.

But it was that same block of marble Michelangelo used to create the statue of David. He took a stone that had been rejected, and with his superior skill carved the David that has thrilled the world for 500 years. (3)

Christ was despised and rejected for our sakes. And yet, "the very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner . . ."

Perhaps I am not talking to you this morning. Perhaps you have never been rejected. Perhaps you've never been wounded. That's wonderful in a way. It is also sad. That means you have never known what it is to feel the ministering touch of a man with nail prints in his hands. You have not needed that, so you have not experienced it. And you are at a great disadvantage in ministering to others. There are some of you, however, for whom the pain of rejection is all too real. Hang in there. There is a man with nail prints in his hands and feet who says it really does matter that you keep going. And remember, there are those who need you to be their wounded healer just as Christ has ministered to you.

### III Fr Desiano

They say that imitation is the highest form of flattery. I suppose that can be true. How did Michael Jordan feel when "Be like Mike" was the motto of a whole generation of boys growing up? Or Jackie Kennedy when millions of women began getting their hair styled just like hers? Or how Ruth Bader Ginsburg felt when she became a model of women's equality and achievement, with movies being made about her life?

But imitation can also be a form of envy, as when someone you are supervising at work thinks he can do your job better than you. Or when a company or nation steals the intellectual property of another. Or when we think the point of our lives is to "keep up with the Joneses" or even do better than them. That's where you get the rat race that can characterize so much modern life.

In the parable Jesus puts out for the religious leaders of his day, the tenants of the vineyard are filled with resentment because they don't own the vineyard outright. Instead of accepting who they were and the gifts they had, they wanted to take the owner's place. They are envious and jealous. They will resort to anything to do be in charge. As if it were possible for us to begin to be God.

A famous Jesuit tells this joke. A terrible car wreck takes the lives of a Franciscan nun, a Dominican priest and a Jesuit. After they die they come before God in judgment. The Franciscan nun is weeping and says, "I know that once or twice I kept money that should have gone to help the poor." God says to her: "But you helped so many people through most of your life. Enter paradise." The Dominican begins by saying, "Yes, I know there were some students that I gave up on and refused to help." But God says, "I know, but you gave yourself generously for so many years in the classroom. The Jesuit appears before God and looks at God on his throne. Then he says: "Excuse me, I think you are in my seat!"

A lot of modern life has been driven by this idea that we can take God's place. For all the advances we have made, we also have invented things and systems that can destroy us. World War I taught us that the weapons we learned to make can tear us all apart; almost all war since then has reinforced this reality. Our sophisticated economic systems can lift many out of poverty or they can crash on a regular basis with the loss of millions of jobs. Our computers and Internet have made it possible for us to believe almost anything; we never know when we are being manipulated. And even medicine can be misused and become a way to exploit people. Indeed, the coronavirus brought modern life to its knees.

There are two ways we can approach God. One way is wrap ourselves around arrogance and judgment, thinking that's how God is. We can even think of religion as a way to control God and others. When we do this, we are like the tenants Jesus talks about. The other way is to see the God Jesus reveals, a God of service and generosity, a God of compassion and kindness. A God we come to know through the life and words of Jesus. When we follow this path, God works in us, making us his children, and helping us be compassionate and generous, to live humbly as his disciples.

Paul says to the Philippians: "Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God. Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." When we let God be God and seek to put this God at the center of our lives, then we can see who God is and all that God gives to us—rather than distort God by our ambition, pride, and arrogance. When we live as disciples, then we can bring forth the kind of fruit in our lives that both enriches us and reveals the beauty of the Father.

So often people have tried to imitate God by distorting God's image and distorting their own lives. When we think we can become God we end up using and abusing people. The whole twentieth-century, from Communism to Fascism, demonstrates this. But when we imitate God by letting God work in our lives, in humility and openness, then we produce what God desires: saints like Francis, or Theresa, or Dorothy Day. When we think we have to supplant God, we forget how much of the vineyard, of the Kingdom, is already ours.

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Reflection: What is the image I have of God and how does it affect my life?