

**Willow River Parish: Clear Lake, Deer Park, and Faith Family**

**Title: When We Forget Grace...**

**Lesson: Matthew 21:33-46**

<sup>33</sup> *"Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place. <sup>34</sup> When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit. <sup>35</sup> "The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. <sup>36</sup> Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. <sup>37</sup> Last of all, he sent his son to them. 'They will respect my son,' he said. <sup>38</sup> "But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance.' <sup>39</sup> So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. <sup>40</sup> "Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" <sup>41</sup> "He will bring those wretches to a wretched end," they replied, "and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time." <sup>42</sup> Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes'? <sup>43</sup> "Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. <sup>44</sup> Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed." <sup>45</sup> When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew he was talking about them. <sup>46</sup> They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet.*

My first car was a used 2006 Toyota Camry. California, just like Wisconsin, is a big state where you can't really get around without a car. So, my wife and I needed one when we were in Southern California, and we got a great deal on a 2006 used Toyota Camry in 2018 through a friend of a friend.

I still remember the first time I saw that car because the back bumper was dented, and the inside was really messy. When I looked inside, I felt like I could guess the owner's personality. After checking it out, we had to decide whether to buy it or not. Even though the price was low, my wife and I hesitated because of the messy interior. But then, as if we were suddenly convinced, we gave the owner the money on the spot and bought the car. That's how the 2006 Toyota Camry became our first car.

We went to a restaurant for dinner right after buying the car. As we got the car, we didn't have to rely on services like Uber and Lyft anymore. However, the car wasn't the perfect one we had expected. The back bumper was dented, and the inside of the car wasn't in great shape. It looked like the previous owner had spilled coffee or coke, and the floor mats in the driver's and passenger's seats were very dirty. Moreover, there were cigarette marks everywhere, and we weren't happy with the purchase.

After coming back home, I started looking up how to take care of our car by watching YouTube videos and doing some online searches. First, because the inside of the car was really messy, I took it to a nearby car wash for a detailing service. A few hours later, the interior was nice and clean, which took care of one of our concerns. The next day, I visited a reliable repair shop that a friend had recommended to get the car checked. A few days later, I got a call from the mechanic at the shop. He said that even though the car was 14 years old, it was still in good shape after some basic maintenance, and I could come and pick it up.

After buying the car, we were worried about it, but after some minor maintenance and replacing new tires, it became a good car to drive. We could finally feel happy about it. We saw getting that car as a blessing from God. However, not all of its issues were fixed. Since the car was old, the engine warning light on the dashboard would always come on. I went to the repair shop several times and even learned about it on YouTube.

The mechanic told me that the engine was fine, but because the car was old, the dashboard errors were due to wiring issues. I got what he meant, but if any of you have driven a car with the engine warning light on, you can probably understand how I felt. I was always a little nervous when driving that car. If I ever smelled something strange while driving, I'd take it to the repair shop the next day. Here's what I've learned through this experience: 1. Buying an old used car may be easier on your wallet, but it can cause a lot of worry about the car, often keeping you awake at night. 2. On the other hand, when you buy a new car, your finances might not be great, but you can have peaceful nights of sleep.

And three years ago, we moved to Wisconsin. After arriving in Wisconsin, we purchased a new car from KIA. Before I came to the United States, while I was dating Esther, her father drove a KIA car, and I found it impressive. So, I had this idea that if I ever bought a car in the future, I should get one from KIA. And, that's exactly what we did. Although I initially wanted a slightly larger model, we decided that the current car would be sufficient since we are a family of three.

After a few hours of intense negotiation with the dealer, determined to get the car at the best possible price, we finally settled on the final price, completed the complex paperwork, and at last took delivery of the car. My car was waiting for me right in front

of the dealership, and I was so overjoyed that it's hard to put into words. That's why I took a photo of the car in its initial state. Being a brand new car, it provided me with a sense of security that I couldn't compare to my first used car. That car gave me a sense of excitement. I no longer needed to study cars on YouTube every night. And now, it's been three years since I've been driving the current car.

Since most of you probably have cars, let me ask you this. I'm not sure how long you've had your current car, but you likely remember those moments when you first got it. How did you feel at that time? Most of you were probably very happy and excited. Now, after 3, 4, 5 years, or even longer with your car, do you still experience the same excitement, joy, and thrill you felt when you first got it? Maybe many of you don't. I, too, realized that I had forgotten the amazement, joy, and excitement I felt when I first purchased my current car, and I started taking it for granted. When I found myself taking things for granted, Matthew 21:33-46 provided me with valuable insights.

In Matthew 21:33-46, Jesus tells a story. There was a landowner who had a vineyard in the story. He planted it, put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it, and built a watchtower. Then he rented it to some farmers and went to another place. The owner provided everything the farmers needed to manage the vineyard. The owner didn't do this because the farmers were exceptional or smart; it was simply an act of grace.

This was a great opportunity for the farmers as well. If they had tried to plant their own vineyard, it would have cost them a significant amount of money: expenses for the vineyard land, the construction of surrounding walls, the purchase of a winepress, and the construction of watchtower. However, the owner provided them with everything they needed at no cost. They probably initially felt grateful for the vineyard and everything provided, and they would have worked diligently with joy.

However, as time passed, they started taking everything related to the vineyard for granted. They didn't remember the excitement, gratitude, grace, and joy they felt when they were initially chosen by the owner to work in the vineyard. They forgot it. In fact, they even forgot who the owner of the vineyard was. As the harvest time approached, the owner sent his servants to collect his fruit. However, to the farmers who had forgotten all gratitude, these servants were seen as nothing more than robbers who had come to steal their fruit and property. As a result, they captured the servants, severely beat one, killed another, and stoned the third.

However, it seemed that the owner was a person filled with love and patience. So, he sent his servants to them once again with patience and love. However, the outcome remained the same as before. Finally, as a last option, he sent his son to them. The owner believed that no matter how wicked the farmers were, they would listen to his son. However, as

soon as they saw his son, they thought they must kill him in order to take control of the vineyard, and indeed, his son was killed by them.

The farmers believed that by killing his son, they could take over the vineyard, but that was their misconception. Their thinking was completely wrong. The owner got rid of all those wicked farmers and brought in others who would show gratitude by yielding fruit.

Friends, what can we learn from this story? The Israelites were Abraham's descendants, and God had blessed them. But they didn't appreciate God's love and grace, didn't express gratitude, and held bitterness towards God. As they moved away from God, Israel suffered complete destruction and was only reestablished as a nation in 1948. However, they still face conflicts and disputes with neighboring countries, including Palestine, even today.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, churches in Britain experienced big growth and renewal. They also had strong military and economic power. But when they didn't appreciate what they had and took it for granted, they started to decline. In the United States, churches also had big growth and a revival. When I was a seminarian, I learned about United Methodist Polity from Bishop Grant Hagiya. He told us that a hundred years ago, it was common for Methodist churches in Southern California to have over 1,000 members. However, nowadays, there are very few churches with more than 1,000 members.

Friends, when we forget to be thankful for what God has provided; when we take God's grace for granted, our lives lose their sense of gratitude. Our lives become devoid of grace. In a life without gratitude and grace, all that remains are complaints, bitterness, and conflict.

Friends, do you remember the time when you first felt God's grace? Can you recall the thankfulness and joy from that moment? Is Jesus Christ still the foundation of your life? Are you still feeling God's grace in your life? Do you sense God's presence? And are you still showing love to others with gratitude? Are you assisting and serving?

I pray that your journey of faith is not stuck in the past. I pray that you continue to feel God's grace and love. I pray that you still have a strong love for God and your neighbors. Amen.