

**Message: “Life in the Vineyard”**

**I love the fall and winter seasons.** Fall is harvest time, when delicious fruit and vegetables are fully ripe after a summer of sun and moisture. Apple pies begin to appear on tables, along with pumpkin in various shapes and forms. The spice palate becomes warmer with the return of cinnamon, cloves and nutmeg.

**One of the things I love is going to a harvest festival or carnival.**

Some people love the rides. Others love the games. Some love the food or the specialty items. One of the activities I loved when I was young was going to the House of Mirrors.

**Do you remember what it was like?** There were mirrors made with different shapes. Each would reflect a different image of the person or persons standing in front of it. Some mirrors made us look tall. Some mirrors made us look wide. Some mirrors inverted or distorted us into shapes we found hard to recognize.

**I’m reminded of these mirrors when I read Jesus’ parable of the vineyard** (Matthew 21:33-46). Jesus is showing us how much life in the community of faith can be distorted. We may be surprised to find out how different life in the kingdom of God is, compared to the life we live now. We need Jesus. And we can help our neighbors find another way to live so, together, we can be healthy and fruitful.

**Context is very important to help us understand this parable.**

What’s going on behind the scenes makes a big difference. It may not be fair to ask, but I’m sure we have some Bible scholars in the room.

I’ll ask two questions:

- Where is Jesus when he’s teaching this parable?
- What happened the day before?

**For those of you who are online, I’ll repeat the responses.** Jesus is teaching and healing people in the outer courts of the temple. And he’s doing so on the day after his parade into Jerusalem for the last time. Jesus cleansed the temple overturning the money changers’ carts and throwing out the people selling doves for sacrifice. Since then, the chief priests, legal experts and Pharisees have been angrily challenging him. They are plotting against him.

**They ask, “What gives you the right to change things?”** But the chief priests, legal experts and Pharisees have no response when Jesus answers. **With this palpable tension, Jesus tells the parable of the landowner and the vineyard.** I’ll recap it briefly.

**“A landowner set up a vineyard and leased it to some tenants.** When harvest time came, the landowner sent staff members to collect a share of the produce as payment for the lease. Instead of paying up, the tenants brutally assaulted the staff, wounding some and killing others.

**The landowner then sent another group to collect, and they received the same violent treatment.** Finally, they decided to send their son and heir, thinking a family member’s status would be enough to bring these tenants to their senses. But the tenants killed the son and claimed the vineyard for themselves.

**At this point, Jesus turns to his detractors and asks,** “So what do you think the vineyard owner will do to these tenants?”

**They answer, “He will crush them and toss them aside.”** That’s what they would do. In other words, we may be able to go a long way down the road tending to our own private passions without regard for, or at the expense of, others. But eventually this will prove a self-destructive pattern of life.

**God wants wellness and well-being for us.** This is why God gave us the Law of Love. It’s why God gave us love in the flesh: Jesus.”<sup>1</sup>

**Our “Talking About Spiritual Things” Bible study group has been sharing our spiritual experiences together** over the past few weeks. We’ve been practicing with a buddy. And we’ve been learning to be more open to the nudges and prompting of God’s Spirit. I have to tell you, I feel the Holy Spirit nudging me about this parable. The Spirit prompted me to choose this passage from the lectionary a year ago. It’s like God knew what we needed before we could possibly know. I believe it speaks to all of us, you and me, in the season of life we are in.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/11680/real-self-care>

**Arthur Brooks is a contributing writer for The Atlantic** and the host of the *How to Build a Happy Life* podcast. He recently wrote an article I believe speaks to Jesus' parable in a modern-day fashion. I'm going to share some excerpts. I believe Brooks may have tapped into the real problem the tenants in the vineyard shared.

**The 1999 film The Matrix is famous for the metaphor of the “red pill.”**<sup>2</sup> In the movie, people live in a state of illusion, experiencing a simulation of real life which keeps them passive. The main character, Neo, is offered the choice of staying in the simulation by taking a blue pill or breaking into reality by taking a red pill.

**This isn't an easy decision: Do you choose reality with its difficult truths or live in numb oblivion?**

**And so “red pill” entered the lexicon as a choice we can make in life.**

On the one hand, the proposition runs, we can escape the narcotic distractions of modern life, where it's drugs or social media or smartphones or whatever we use to distract ourselves. On the other hand, we can face the harsh reality of our relationships, our work, our prospects and the truth about ourselves we might prefer not to face.

**With the blue pill, we are perfect the way we are.** We are lovable. Our opinions are right. We never sin. The red pill shows us our imperfect selves: flawed, maybe hard to love, blameworthy, ignorant, arrogant. We're in the House of Mirrors, but the image we believe is distorted is really our true self.

**The red pill allows us to see ourselves as we truly are.** It has a nonmetaphorical form called humility. Humility isn't always easy medicine, and it comes in more than one dose. But if we're willing to take that pill again and again, benefits await us.

**Humility can be defined as modesty about one's own importance, expertise or opinions.** It can refer to an act, a condition or a trait. Humility as an act might be giving up a good seat to someone else. Humility as a condition might be living in a simple, unflashy way. Humility as a trait might be avoiding the assumption that you're always

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<sup>2</sup>Material drawn from <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/10/humility-happiness-matrix-acceptance/675543/>

right. Humility can be practiced intellectually and socially, in relationships. This can involve refraining from behaviors such as boasting, for example. It can also change our perception of events, the little things that happen, and help us to gain a broader view, which isn't self-focused. Sounds like a recipe for life in the vineyard, doesn't it?

**The word humility comes from a Latin word meaning “from the earth,” or grounded.** This has led many to regard humility as the most honest way of approaching life. In our Judeo-Christian tradition, humility is seen as a virtue. Jesus taught the meek shall inherit the earth, and the kingdom of heaven awaits the poor in spirit (Matthew 5:3-5).

**To be transparent, some philosophers and others reject this view.** For example, Frederick Nietzsche saw humility as a barrier to human progress, a form of self-protection for the weak and the mediocre. In this view, humility is twisted into a defense mechanism against the strong. However others, such as Norvin Roberts disagree saying, “There are no splendid human beings.” As Paul notes, all have fallen short (Romans 6:23).

**Perhaps the most fruitful way of viewing humility** is in the advice offered by the 11<sup>th</sup> century mystic Bernard of Clairvaux, “If you examine yourself inwardly by the light of truth, you will be humbled in your own eyes.” Humility is pure realism – the red pill.

**This doesn't mean we have to embrace some theory of our own absolute depravity.** We should recognize the empirical fact that, on our own, people tend to overestimate their strengths and underestimate their weaknesses. Humility is the full acceptance of the truth about ourselves. We need to be willing to look in the mirror the Lord holds up and see that what we may perceive as distortion is actually the truth.

**The reason we don't take this red pill is it's hard to swallow.** For example, psychologists have found people who hold intellectual and religious views with greater existential humility suffer more from certain kinds of anxiety than those who don't. In other words, when we admit “we may be wrong,” this can make us more anxious, so it's hard to want to take more doses. But this isn't an argument against taking the pill of humility.

**Maybe a better approach is to see humility as being like a physical fitness program.** Exercise requires a realistic assessment of our physical limitations and a willingness to embrace some pain.

A vigorous workout feels unnatural at first and even hurts. But when the positive health results appear, you realize it's worth it. It's also something you learn to do regularly and frequently.

**Similarly, the initial pain of humility yields benefits.** Scholars have found seeking truth offers improvements in almost every aspect of life. For example, research has shown that when people face negative events, humility can buffer the pain and stress they cause, perhaps because humble people are less likely to think they shouldn't encounter problems. Humble people also seem to have more successful long-distance relationships, greater self-control, and are less likely to abuse drugs. Humility can make us more generous with others and more effective as leaders.

**For those who want advice on how to practice humility, some of it is obvious.** We know things like "talk less about yourself" and "argue less, listen more."

**But for those who like the exercise analogy, here are three ideas that seem to work. First, study your weaknesses.** There are a lot of ways to help you find your strengths, but learning about your weaknesses is just as important. We need to know about all aspects of ourselves to, as Paul puts it, not think more highly of ourselves than we should (Romans 12:3). Once we know our weaknesses, we can learn to improve them.

**Next, ask a friend to make sure you take the red pill.** Jesus said, "*Why do you see the splinter that's in your brother's or sister's eye, but don't notice the log in your own eye?*" (Matthew 7:3). Humility is hard to observe accurately in ourselves but fairly easy to spot in others. So, ask a true friend to hold you accountable to be authentically humble, and call you on it when you fall short. This is the mark of a real friend, too. It's the person who knows you won't be happy with them but who also knows what's good for you to hear.

**And finally, quoting Mary Poppins, "a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down."** The red pill of truth doesn't have to be completely

bitter. Rather than seeing yourself as *smaller* to be humble, you can also recognize how other things are *greater* than a me-me-me focus. Putting God first seems like the way to go. It turns out that when people are exposed to awe-inspiring phenomena, such as the beauty of nature, their levels of humility increase. They have a more balanced view of their strengths and weaknesses and are more likely to acknowledge the contribution of outside forces (a higher power) in their personal accomplishment.

**There are several benefits to humility**, but there's one which has never been systematically studied but might be the greatest of all. Humility lets you take off your mask. Humility moves us from self-hating to self-knowledge and acceptance. Maintaining an image is taxing and it takes a lot of energy. Truthfully saying "I don't know," not competing, and just being your imperfect self can be a huge load lifted from your shoulders. As one well-known actor has said, they crave time in far-away countries, because in a place where people don't recognize you, you can be your true self and "just another person."

**The choices and decisions we make have an impact which goes beyond our own lives and sphere of influence.** I hope all of us – you and me, can take Jesus' lesson to heart and then come together in humility, with love and by the mercy of our Lord and Savior. I believe this is what it takes to live in the vineyard.

**Many people take pills to help them relax.** The red pill of humility might be the most effective medicine. No prescription required.

*Let us pray ...*

**Matthew 21:33-46 (CEB)**

“Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a fence around it, dug a winepress in it, and built a tower. Then he rented it to tenant farmers and took a trip. When it was time for harvest, he sent his servants to the tenant farmers to collect his fruit. But the tenant farmers grabbed his servants. They beat some of them, and some of them they killed. Some of them they stoned to death.

“Again he sent other servants, more than the first group. They treated them in the same way. Finally he sent his son to them. ‘They will respect my son,’ he said.

“But when the tenant farmers saw the son, they said to each other, ‘This is the heir. Come on, let’s kill him and we’ll have his inheritance.’ They grabbed him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him.

“When the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenant farmers?”

They said, “He will totally destroy those wicked farmers and rent the vineyard to other tenant farmers who will give him the fruit when it’s ready.”

Jesus said to them, “Haven’t you ever read in the scriptures, *The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. The Lord has done this, and it’s amazing in our eyes?* Therefore, I tell you that God’s kingdom will be taken away from you and will be given to a people who produce its fruit. Whoever falls on this stone will be crushed. And the stone will crush the person it falls on.”

Now when the chief priests and the Pharisees heard the parable, they knew Jesus was talking about them. They were trying to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, who thought he was a prophet.