

SERMON on the Parable of the Vineyard
Matthew 21:33-42, September 6, 2020
(Based on sermons given by Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeev) of Volokolamsk)

In Holy Scripture, namely the Old Testament, Israel is sometimes referred to as a “vineyard.” When our Savior spoke the parable that we heard today, the people of Israel understood that the Lord was speaking about them. Israel was loved by the Lord and chosen to be the inheritors of His promises. The people of Israel were selected as the vehicle by which salvation would come to all mankind. The Israelites proved to be unworthy of this high calling and disobeyed the commandments of God. A sacred covenant was made between God and Israel, and Israel broke this covenant. Many times the Lord sent His prophets to correct the Israelites, who responded with anger, cruelty, violence and even murder. Finally God sent to them His beloved Son who they not only did not obey but betrayed and brought about His suffering a horrible death. We heard in the Gospel today “The very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes” (Matthew 21:42). The question we must ask is, “Why did the builders reject this stone? Why do people reject God?” People reject God because they don’t want to live according to His commandments, because these commandments prevent them from living in sin. To live according to the commandments of God means that we must wage a continuous struggle for goodness. People who live without God think that they are free to do anything that they want and can indulge themselves in whatever they want, as much as they want, in their lives. However, even people who live without God will discover that there exist boundaries and limits to what they are permitted to do. In addition, there are consequences for their actions. The parable of the vineyard, therefore, does not only have a historical significance, but also has meaning for us as individuals, for contemporary life and for the modern world. God created the world and mankind out of His love in wisdom, beauty and goodness. He sends into the world preachers and apostles to teach us truth and love. However, how do people answer God’s love? Very often, they answer with hatred. Throughout the history of mankind and up until modern times entire political regimes have stood up against God. In the last century mankind witnessed the God hating communist regime of Russia which tried to erase every trace of God by desecrating and destroying an untold number of churches, monasteries and spiritual schools, and murdering bishops, priests, monastics and laity. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia struggles now to pick up the pieces, rebuild its holy places and re-educate its people in the Orthodox Christian faith, trying to undo the untold damage which resulted because of so many years of brutal satanic persecution against God and His faithful followers. Communism and hatred of God has not ended in the world today. For example, modern day China and North Korea still forbids the existence of Christian churches and teaches a national policy of atheism. Very few people know and understand that the most persecuted religion in the world today is, in fact, Christianity. The Middle East, the Holy Land, Palestine, Egypt, Syria and Lebanon were once the center of the Christian world. On the soil where our Savior and His disciples walked and preached, in the mountains, deserts and caves where the greatest Christian monastic centers and saints once flourished, Christians are being arrested, tortured, murdered and driven from their homes. Ancient churches, monasteries and shrines are being desecrated and destroyed. The very existence of Christianity is being extinguished in the very places where Christianity began.

Modern man does not always answer the question of God with faith or hatred. Very often people today respond with indifference. For them, the existence of God is insignificant and unimportant. Such people often choose not to speak with their children about God, saying that when they grow up they can decide for themselves. They feel that whether or not you believe in God is your personal business and you should keep it to yourself and don’t show your faith to other people. This indifference, this tendency to create a world without religious values isn’t any less horrible than the direct hatred and assault on God and faith, because indifference has a very harmful and destructive effect on the soul. Why do many people today, young and old,

suffer from drug addiction, alcoholism and other vices? The reason is because many have no idea for the reason of their very existence or the purpose of life. No matter how fortunate, wealthy and successful people may be, they suffer distress, anxiety, depression and unhappiness due to their spiritual impoverishment and emptiness. The deceptive belief that it is not necessary and unimportant to believe in God has a horribly destructive influence on human souls, especially on the souls of children and young people. What should be our answer to all of this? We heard the answer today in the words of the Apostle Paul: "Stand fast in your faith" (1 Cor. 16:13). Stand fast in your faith, keep your faith, value your faith — namely, faith in God, faith in Christ and faith in His Holy Church which offers you salvation. Stand fast in your faith, because only faith can fulfill the yearning and hunger that we all experience in our hearts. Let us listen to these words of our Savior as a warning to us. Let us pray to the Lord that we may all stand fast in the faith. And let us pray that with God's help we may pass on this gift of faith to our children as well. Amen.