



The Parable of the Wicked Tenants

Series: Matthew: The King and His Kingdom

Matthew 21:33-46

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Beloved, as we get into this text this morning, I want to take a moment to make sure we remember the purpose of these texts, these accounts of Jesus' last days and, in particular, His interaction with the religious leadership of Israel. How are they to impact us? These are some tough words, incisive words, prophetic and powerful. While they are not intended to cause unnecessary doubt, they are meant to be challenging, meant to force us to examine the reality of the faith we profess. They are meant to challenge us and to bring us to a place of tested confidence in our faith and our relationship to Christ and to protect us against the deceitfulness of sin and the soul-killing wickedness of hypocrisy. Working through these texts, testing ourselves by the words we read, the intention is that as children of God by His grace through faith in Jesus, we would be able to say with humble confidence – humble confidence – “I belong to Christ. I do trust in Jesus.” Peter understood that and that’s why he wrote: “His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins. Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” (2 Peter 1:3–11, ESV)

This is what is behind these texts. They are warnings and encouragement for our souls – to test and examine our faith, to bring us to repentance, to guard us from straying, and to confirm us

in the way of life – so that we may have an examined, tested, and confident faith with every other ground of standing, every foundation other than Jesus Christ and Him crucified removed. These passages are given to us a gift of grace, including this one today.

When we left off last week, Jesus had just finished firmly establishing His authority and exposing the stubborn hearts of the chief priests and elders, infuriating them by exposing their hypocrisy toward John’s ministry and His own and by telling them plainly that their religion would not get them kingdom, nor would the sins of the prostitutes and tax collectors – repented of and forsaken for faith in Christ – keep them out. Far from being done, Jesus tells them another parable commonly called the parable of the wicked tenants. Let me read the parable again and then we will break it down piece by piece. Read verses 33-38

The Parable of the Wicked Tenants (v. 33-38) Now, go back to the beginning with me to verse 33: ““Hear another parable. There was a master of a house who planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a winepress in it and built a tower and leased it to tenants, and went into another country.” (Matthew 21:33, ESV) Now I have to tell you that I just love the way that Jesus starts into this next parable. He doesn’t ask for their permission to share the truth with them, tip-toeing around the gospel. Having already established His authority over all of them, He boldly proclaims the truth. Hear another parable. That was the last thing that they wanted to hear. They didn’t want to hear Jesus teach anything else. They wanted Him gone, out of the Temple, dead. He was destroying their little religious fiefdom. Nonetheless, Jesus tells them a parable that illustrates exactly how God views them.

Listen again to the introduction of the story.

There was a master of a house who planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a winepress in it and built a tower and leased it to tenants, and went into another country. This is a story that would have been easily understandable to anyone who heard it. It was a common practice in Jesus’ day for a man of means to purchase a field, plant a vineyard, lease it to tenants and then to receive from those tenants a portion of the fruit, a fixed proportion of the harvest. In this unique case that Jesus describes, the landowner had done all the work of preparing and planting the vineyard, of placing a fence around it to protect it from animals, built a watchtower in the midst of it in order to make it secure from thieves, and had even dug a winepress in it for the production of wine. He had done everything necessary to make the vineyard productive and then entrusted it to tenants who would both enjoy the fruit of the

vineyard themselves and would present some of the fruit to the landowner as was expected. But this is more than a story. This is the history of Israel in a sentence and an allusion to Isaiah 5:1-2.

Isaiah 5 forms the backdrop for what Jesus is teaching here. “Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.” (Isaiah 5:1–2, ESV) Israel was the vineyard of God and had been given great privilege and favor, and despite that favor had produced only worthless grapes. This story is intimately tied to the teaching of Isaiah and the religious leaders of Jesus day would have recognized that.

It is not hard to determine who is who in this parable. The master of the house, the landowner, is God the Father. Israel is the vineyard and the tenants are the religious leaders of the nation. God had planted Israel as His vineyard. He called Abraham to Himself out of Ur to make of him a great nation. He had chosen the nation to be a peculiar and special and precious possession to Himself. He delivered them from bondage in Egypt and gave to them a land of promise. He separated them from the other nations of the earth, given them revelations of Himself while the rest of the world was in spiritual darkness, made covenant with them to be their God and them to be His people. He gave them the Law and the oracles of God, good statues and ordinances that would bless them, set up His tabernacle – His own dwelling place – in the midst of them. He entrusted their care to the priests and elders and teachers, given to them the privilege and honor of teaching the people His word and leading them in His ways. He gave them everything necessary to be fruitful, so much so that in Isaiah 5:4, He could say: “What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it?” (Isaiah 5:4, ESV) The great Lord of Israel left the nation under the care of priests, and kings, and men of learning who should have cultivated this vineyard of Yahweh for Him, and yielded up to Him the fruit of this choice vineyard. But that is not what happened. Israel, as a whole, did not produce the fruit of the Kingdom – the fruit of righteousness, the fruit of humility before God and obedience, the fruit of faithfulness, the fruit of repentance, the fruit of loving God and loving your neighbor as yourself, the fruit of holiness and devotion to God, the fruit of making His name great among the nations. Israel never produced the spiritual fruit it should have, never became the fruitful and faithful people that they should have, largely because of the faithlessness and failure of her religious leaders.

Now that does not exonerate the nation. They are still guilty of their sin. But, the history of Israel is littered with references to the worthlessness of the false shepherds and spiritual corruption of the people as a result. You have heard the old saying “like father, like son.” Well in this case it is “like priests, like people.” For instance, we read in Jeremiah: “An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land: the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule at their direction; my people love to have it so, but what will you do when the end comes?” (Jeremiah 5:30–31, ESV) Or in Jeremiah 6: ““For from the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain; and from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely. They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace. Were they ashamed when they committed abomination? No, they were not at all ashamed; they did not know how to blush. Therefore they shall fall among those who fall; at the time that I punish them, they shall be overthrown,” says the LORD.” (Jeremiah 6:13–15, ESV)

Don’t miss this truth. With God’s favor and blessing comes great responsibility and accountability. The Lord God had blessed them and nurtured them in every way. This rich, invisible, faithful God had planted them and given to them every possible blessing and rightly expected from them, in response to His rich outpouring of blessing, that they would serve Him in holiness and glad obedience. To whom much is given, much is also required.

Jesus continues in verse 34 saying: “When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit. And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another.” (Matthew 21:34–35, ESV) In the story, the landowner sends his servants to go and to receive the fruit that he is due but the tenants respond wickedly. They take these servants and beat one, kill another and stone the third. They keep back any fruit from the landowner.

If you were a Jew, in particular one of the religious leaders of that time, the symbolism is obvious. The servants represent the prophets of God, sent to His people, powerfully preaching the Word of God in order to bring revival and repentance to the nation, seeking to stir them up to righteousness and faithfulness and fervor for the Lord. But their message was refused. When Jesus says of the servants that they beat one, killed another, and stoned another, He is not simply being a good storyteller. This is exactly what the leaders of Israel and many of the people did with the prophets of God. They persecuted them. One of the proverbial truths about the nation of Israel was their penchant, their inclination to persecute the prophets. They beat Jeremiah, stoned Zechariah, and oral Jewish history records that Isaiah was sawn in two

during the reign of Manasseh. Never has there been a nation that has persecuted prophets sent to them by God like Israel.

And they did it repeatedly: “Again he sent other servants, more than the first. And they did the same to them.” (Matthew 21:36, ESV) John the Baptist was the latest in a long line of persecuted prophets. Now I want you to notice that in the story, the landowner is exceedingly patient, sending more of his servants in the desire that the tenants will do as they should but the result is the same. This exceeding patience is a picture of God’s patience toward Israel to continue to send them prophets to call them to repentance, to make overtures of His grace and forgiveness if they will confess their sin and rebellion and turn to Him. He did not have to do this. Every rebellion against God’s rule could have been justly met with swift and thorough judgment, but God had been graciously patient.

So in the story, the landowner has been patient with the tenants and now, after sending servant after servant, he sends his son and the response is shocking. Jesus comes the climax of the story saying: “Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.’ And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.” (Matthew 21:37–39, ESV) In the story, the landowner sends his son, certain that the tenants will honor him and respect him and fulfill their commitment. But the opposite happens. They conspire instead to kill the son, to steal his inheritance and to cast him out of the vineyard and put him to death.

The layers of symbolism in these few verses are rich. Just consider them with me. The landowner sends last His son. He is his last word to the tenants. It is a perfect picture of the truth that Jesus His Son is God the Father’s final revelation to Israel and to the world, His last word, His final appeal. God the Father sent His Son with the clear revelation of His place as the Son of God and the rightful heir. His character, preaching, teaching, miracles, His authority and power all pointed to His identity as the Son of God. The writer of Hebrews captures this perfectly when he writes: “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature...” (Hebrews 1:1–3a, ESV) Jesus is the final word of God. And, no one can miss, least of all the religious leaders to whom he is speaking, that He is clearly identifying Himself with the Son of the landowner. He is clearly saying that

this vineyard is mine and His Father had sent him and He deserved to be honored and revered and respected.

Now here is where we see the one departure in this parable that shows us that everything is not to be taken in a one for one correlation. Unlike the father in the story, God the Father did not expect that the religious leaders would receive Jesus. Should they? Yes! Did He deserve honor and worship and reverence and respect and tribute – no doubt. But the Father knew what he response of the religious leaders would be and so does Jesus. He is telling them in this parable that He knows they are going to kill Him. They are not as sly and sneaky as they may think. He knows that they plan to kill Him, to steal His inheritance, His glory, His place as rightful heir. Jesus is clearly implying that they know who He is. They knew His rightful place, the honor He deserves, the worship that belongs to Him. They know what is rightfully his and they sought to kill Him and take what belongs to Him. They know who He is, who He claims to be, who He has shown Himself to be with repeated flawless proofs, and still they are determined to kill Him and rob Him of His rightful inheritance, of the glory He deserves. They are usurpers, glory stealers. Even though the clear evidence demonstrated over and over again that Jesus Christ was the Messiah, God’s Son, the religious leaders would purposely kill Him. After being guilty of the blood of a long line of prophets, they were about to crown their long career of rebellion by the murder of the Son of God, Himself. Jesus unmask them completely and then puts them on the spot by asking them the big question.

A Revealing Question and Incriminating Response (v. 40-41) With the parable, Jesus baits the hook and the religious leaders bite. Pick it up in verse 40: “When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” They said to him, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons.”” (Matthew 21:40–41, ESV) They are caught and they know it. At least they give an answer. It is better than the “We don’t know” of last week. With this question, Jesus is making them judge and jury and they give a verdict that condemns them and pictures what awaits them if they do not repent. The owner will kill these men and give the vineyard to another. God will bring judgment upon them, death and wrath, and give responsibility for the vineyard to another. It was the only answer that anyone could possibly give and in rendering that judgment, the leaders of Israel pronounced their own doom. They pronounced their own doom because they would not receive Christ.

Christ is the Cornerstone (v. 42-46) “Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures: “ ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes?’” (Matthew 21:42, ESV) Jesus changes the metaphor here. From talking about Himself as the Son and the Heir, He now calls Himself the Cornerstone. In quoting from Psalm 118 Jesus says, in essence, “You are the fulfillment of the very words of this Messianic psalm. You think you are rejecting me and robbing me of my glory and my rightful inheritance, but you are not. Through your rejection of me, God the Father will make me the cornerstone of salvation.” Jesus is telling them that they are the very fulfillment of Messianic predictions of Psalm 118 -- those in the place of the builders of God’s kingdom, the tenant farmers in God’s vineyard, were going to reject the one who was the very cornerstone of the building. The very thing that they are trying to do to Jesus – stealing His inheritance, stealing His glory by taking His life, will only serve to promote His glory. Christ crucified would destroy the works of Satan, conquer the power of sin and death, make a mockery of the grave and rise again triumphantly redeeming for Himself a people to bring everlasting glory to His name. Jesus is the cornerstone of the plan of redemption. The arrogant Pharisees do not even realize that their rejection of Christ is part of the eternal plan.

The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone....Just as the cornerstone is the basic, most important part from which the proper placement and alignment of every other stone was established, the stone that held the building together, so to speak – without a cornerstone you have no building; so Jesus is the Cornerstone of salvation -- the vital, indispensable, crucial, essential Rock of salvation. According to the Father’s will, He, the Cornerstone, died for our sins, but was raised from the dead, triumphant over sin, death, and hell. He, the one chosen and precious to the Father, is the author and giver of life, able to impart spiritual life to all who believe in Him. Apart from Him there is no life with God. Life only comes when our eyes are opened to the wonder of all that God is for us in Christ, when our eyes are opened to our sinfulness and our lostness, and we see the redemptive power of Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross and we come to Him in humility and brokenness and faith and find eternal life in Him alone. It grows as we come to Him and commune with Him daily, building everything in our lives on who He is and on what He has provided for us in His death and resurrection, and He imparts to us His life, supernaturally in union with Him. We become like Him, and we draw our life from the Cornerstone who is Christ.

This was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes...It is marvelous – a wonder, amazing, astonishing -- in our eyes. It is. Standing back and looking at the salvation that God has accomplished for His people, with Jesus as the Cornerstone, as the very focal point of that work

– it is utterly amazing that God would save for Himself a people at all; that He would do it in the way that He does it. Jesus knows that He must die. He knows that He is the Savior and the atoning sacrifice for sinners and through the rebellion and rejection of sinful men, God in flesh would accomplish the salvation of sinners.

Jesus pronounces the judgment upon unfaithful Israel and her unfaithful religious leaders. “Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits.” (Matthew 21:43, ESV)

The Kingdom of God is built upon Christ. He is indispensable to it. And because they reject Christ, they are rejected from the Kingdom. From them, from Israel, would be taken their special standing in the eyes of God which they had enjoyed, because they had not been faithful and had utterly rejected God even unto the killing of His Son. It would be taken away and given to the church, given to those who are fruitful in light of the saving work of Jesus Christ, those who receive Him as the indispensable cornerstone of salvation. By His death and their hands, and His resurrection, Christ would create a new people, a new nation, without borders speaking every tongue. They will bear the fruit that God seeks – holiness, obedience, righteousness, faithfulness, love. The Lord would take their sinful rebellion and turn it to great good. He would use the rebellion of religious lost Israel to keep His promises to spiritual Israel.

Summing it all up, Jesus says: “And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.” (Matthew 21:44, ESV) Anyone found opposing Christ is going to be broken to pieces and anyone who persists in His rebellion, when Christ falls upon Him, will be pulverized and ground to dust. What is the difference between the one falling on the stone and the one upon whom the stone falls? The difference is this. If you stumble over Christ, if you stumble over His words, over His gospel, over His Lordship – you will be broken, but a broken man may yet be healed. He may still repent and receive mercy. There is still time for him to repent of his sin and put his faith in Christ as Lord and Messiah. But those who continue on their rejection, when the judgment of God finally falls – and it will – there will be no opportunity to repent, no escape from the judgment to come. They will be crushed, pulverized under the wrath of God. The God who offers salvation now is the God who will judge in righteousness at the end of days. If you will not have Jesus as Savior and Lord now, you will have Him as Judge when you stand before His throne on the final day.

What is truly amazing is that some of these men who heard this stern and solemn warning would later come to faith in Christ, confessing their sin. Some of these men who were angered and offended by the Lord's parable when they first heard it, would later believe the truth of what He said. And God, in infinite mercy, forgave them, even the sin of killing His Son, when they turned to Him in repentance and confession. Luke tells us in Acts 6: "And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith." (Acts 6:7, ESV) But that would be later. On this day we read:

"When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them. And although they were seeking to arrest him, they feared the crowds, because they held him to be a prophet." (Matthew 21:45–46, ESV) What a sad ending to this parable this is. They perceive, they know with certainty that Jesus is speaking about them but they do not tremble or repent. Just like always, they take nothing that Jesus says to heart. They hear his words without profit to their souls because they are too proud and arrogant to do so. They do nothing, because they lack the conviction or courage to do anything at all.

How Should We Receive These Words?

There are some very serious implications that we need to consider as a result of this text. The thing about this parable is that it is for everyone, for all of us individually and collectively. This parable is specifically for a people who have been the recipients of great spiritual privilege from God, people who have been recipients of His mercy and His favor, who have been granted the great grace of hearing the Word of God faithfully preached and taught, who have had the privilege of hearing the gospel at all. So we need to hear and receive these words. Prophetic preaching and warning is not an act of unkindness. It is not mean. Prophetic preaching comes from a heart that is desperately concerned and burdened for your soul. Jesus' words, though they are strong and pointed and reproofing words, were words of grace designed to shake these men out of their apathy, to shake them out of their rebellion and cause them to repent and turn to Jesus. Likewise these are words to wake us up. And let me just say that the way we respond to these words is an indicator of the presence or absence of grace in our hearts. How should we respond?

First, we need to take seriously the reality that we, the church of Jesus Christ, the true church, have been given the privilege, but also the responsibility of the stewardship of the kingdom. “As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in Scripture: “Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.” So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,” and “A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense.” They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” (1 Peter 2:4–10, ESV) We need to take stock of how we are individually and as a church ordering our lives around this reality, this responsibility. We must remember why we exist – to offer up spiritual sacrifices that are acceptable to God through Jesus Christ -- the sacrifice of praise, the sacrifice of worship, the sacrifice of obedience, of godly character, of love for the brethren, of a heart to follow Christ, even when it means suffering for His name, of testimony of the gospel and the pursuit of the lost for the sake of Christ’s glory. We exist to be a fruitful and faithful people. Kingdom citizenship cannot be an empty claim.

Second, and in a more personal sense, we need to ask, “Is Christ the cornerstone upon which I am building my life?” God the Father has put forth His incomparable Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, as the Cornerstone. He has put Jesus forth as the Savior of sinners, as the Redeemer of souls, as the wrath-bearing, sin-destroying, righteousness-providing, forgiveness-purchasing, holy Lamb of God and cornerstone of redemption. He has put Christ forward as the most valuable, most treasured, most precious, only irreplaceable person in the cosmos. Are you building your life on Him and all He has done.

Everybody builds their lives on something, on what they treasure the most. Trace what you invest the most time, money, energy in; examine what you orient your life around and prioritize as most valuable. Trace what you think about the most. Trace what you devote the most time to. Examine what is non-negotiable in your life and you will find what it is that you are building your life upon. Everyone’s life reveals the cornerstone upon which it is built. Everyone’s life confesses a religion. For some it is: worldly pleasure, wealth, the American dream, power, influence, spirituality, riches, reputation, religion, human wisdom, social standing, sports,

education, achievement...they all fall short. Only those that treasure Christ, that honor Him, that trust in Him, that place the entirety of their hope, and faith, those that build their lives upon the testimony and the work of Christ in purchasing life through His death and resurrection from the dead...those that build their lives on this cornerstone will never be put to shame, will never be disappointed and will not be crushed. The only sure foundation is Jesus Christ. And if your life is built on Him as the treasure of your soul, it will be evident.

Is He, in truth, the cornerstone on which you are building your life?

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