

**Parable of the Wicked Tenants**  
**Matthew 21:33-46**  
**ABC 7/5/20**

If you have your Bibles, turn with me to Mt 21 as we continue looking at the parables of Jesus. This is Jesus' last week of earthly ministry before His crucifixion & He's speaking in parables to the Jewish religious leaders. Last week we looked at the parable of the 2 sons & saw the great comfort there is to those who've repented of their sins & a warning against hypocrisy, especially of the Jewish leaders in Jesus' day. Today we're going to be looking at the 2<sup>nd</sup> of a trilogy of parables in Mt 21-22. The background of this parable is found in Isaiah 5 where he described a vineyard that had been planted on a fertile hillside (1) & had every prospect of producing a great harvest. The one who planted the vineyard had carefully prepared the soil & removed every obstacle to the growth of the vine (2). A watchtower had been built for protection & a wine press had been dug in anticipation of the harvest. But when the time of harvest came, the vine yielded only bad, rotten, or stinking fruit (2). Isaiah then proceeded with the explanation, that God had planted the vineyard & the nation of Israel was His choice vine (3). He had brought them out of the desert & into a good land. He'd protected them & anticipated they'd produce good fruit. The kind of fruit God wanted is seen in vs 7: **He looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; For righteousness, but behold, a cry of distress** or rebellion. The nation of Israel hadn't walked righteously & justly before God. Isaiah's & Jesus' parables both condemn the Jewish leaders. Let's read it & hear God's Word. **Mt 21:33-46**

The landowner is clearly God. The vineyard is Israel. The tenants are the religious leaders who were to tend God's vineyard. The servants sent by the landowner are the prophets God sent to Israel over the years. & most importantly, the son of the landowner is Jesus Himself. Once again, Jesus is telling a story & holding up a mirror to the religious leaders & all the unbelieving in Israel to show them a picture of themselves. He wants them to see what they look like in the eyes of God as they've rejected the ministry of the prophets, John the Baptist, & their own Messiah. Even as He shows them this & warns of the coming judgment, He's showing them a picture of God's love, grace, & patience as well. This should've brought a response of humility & repentance. It didn't & their hearts remained hard. It also warns us of the danger of rejecting the gracious offer of God.

**1. The Parable** (33-39) Once again, this is a simple story. As Jesus tells it, one of His goals is to show the spiritual leaders of Israel how hard their hearts are toward God. He sent His prophets, including John the Baptist, & His own Son & they've rejected them all. But even as that picture is painted, we see the love of God graciously displayed. The practice of a wealthy landowner who leased out land for a % of the produce wasn't uncommon in the Roman empire. When the harvest was gathered, they'd send servants who would collect what had been agreed on. So Jesus tells this story about one of these landowners. But there's something different about this one. Usually, wealthy landowners weren't known for being charitable toward their renters. In fact, they were often cruel. But Jesus speaks of one who's incredibly lavish in his patience toward his renters who are unfairly treating his servants & refusing to give him the rent agreed on. This landowner sends his servants to be paid. But the tenants abuse them, run them off, & finally kill them. But the landowner doesn't stop. He continues sending servants to collect his due. & they continue to abuse & mistreat them. This is an unusual display of patience. The owner doesn't immediately remove the tenants but instead sends more servants giving the renters a chance to do what's right. As I said, these servants he sends represent God's prophets to His people. How had they treated them throughout history? Not well. Elijah & Amos ran for their lives. Zechariah was stoned. Jeremiah was beaten, thrown in a slimy pit, placed in stocks, & eventually killed. Ezekiel was rejected. Isaiah, tradition says, was sawn in 2. & John the Baptist was recently beheaded. From Mark's account we learn the 1<sup>st</sup> 3 slaves came separately, one after another (12:2-5). The wicked growers **beat** the 1<sup>st</sup>, leaving him bruised & bloody. The 2<sup>nd</sup> they **killed** outright & then **stoned a third**. After that, the owner **sent another group of slaves larger than the first, & they did the same thing to them**, Mark says, **beating some & killing others** (12:5). & finally he sends his son which drives the tenants to greater greed, treachery, & violence. The murder of **the son** was coldly premeditated. They didn't mistake him for another slave. They knew exactly who he was. It was because he was the son that they planned his murder in order to **seize his inheritance**. This may seem strange. How do they think they're going to inherit the vineyard by killing the son? That doesn't make sense, does it? The tenants apparently have reasoned that seeing the son approaching must mean the landowner

is dead. I mean, what father in his right mind, after sending a string of servants who were killed, would send his own son? When they see the son coming, they think, *The landowner must be dead & if we kill the son, we can take the matter to court & say, 'We're the ones who've been farming the land. We ought to inherit the land now.'* Historical sources suggest that possession was more than 9/10s of the law of ownership in ancient land disputes like this.<sup>1</sup> The picture is of an attitude of rebellion against the rightful owner of the land & this story must have generated great pity for the betrayed, grieving owner & resentful rage at the heartless, brutal tenants.

Again, notice the exaggerated patience of this landowner. Many liberal theologians have said things like, *This story is totally unreasonable. No landowner would have acted this way.* But that's the point. No human landowner would have shown this kind of patience. But God does. The patience of the owner & the brutality of the tenants are both extreme. But those excesses are essential to the parable's point. It was the very uncommonness of the owner's patience & of the growers' wickedness that Jesus' wanted His hearers to notice. Obviously, the details of the parable represent significant things. As mentioned, the vineyard represents Israel. The landowner is God. The vine-growers are Israel's spiritual leaders of the day & down through the ages who in unbelief rejected the rightful rule of God. & it also represents the whole nation of Israel in its unbelieving rebellion against the Messiah. The servants are the prophets sent by God to speak His Word & to stake His claims in His vineyard. The landowner's son is Jesus Himself. & so Jesus is telling a story about what the chief priests had done to the prophets (like John the Baptist) & were currently doing to Him. In just a few days they'll take Him outside the city walls & kill Him, their promised Messiah, the Son of God, the Lamb of God, the Way, the Truth, & the Life. Jesus is saying, *This is what you look like to God. You're in rebellion against Him.* Every time there'd been a revolt against the prophets by Israel, God could have rightly destroyed them. But God's love is patiently everlasting & is unparalleled in human experience. This God continues in His love & in His grace through the prophets to reach out to His people. Every time His people reject Him, He continues to send more. & finally He sends His own Son. Do you see the greatness of the love & patience of God here? God

---

<sup>1</sup> Craig Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, pp 332–333

sends servant after servant; His prophets & then His Son, because He doesn't delight in the destruction of the wicked, but delights when sinners repent & turn to Him. Jesus, even as He gives this warning to the Pharisees, Scribes, chief priests, & to all Israel, is showing them a glorious picture of how much God loves them. In a display of grace, instead of bringing immediate judgment, the owner provided one more opportunity for the tenants to pay. This time he sent his son to them, saying, **They will respect my son** (37). But they did not. The point Jesus is making is that these tenant farmers, the spiritual leaders of Israel, have forgotten that the vineyard is God's, not theirs. They're treating it as if it belongs to them, when in fact, it belongs completely to God. Instead of bowing the knee to the landowner's son, they've promoted themselves above him. They've placed themselves in God's place. & so we see a picture of the kind of rebellion against the Scripture, against the prophets, & against the Son, which these leaders were guilty of.

**2. Q & A** (40-41) After telling the story, Jesus asks, *What will the owner of the vineyard do?* The only logical answer was that he would use his authority to remove those who misused the trust given them. He'd find others who'd produce the harvest that rightly belonged to the owner (41). Those who gave this reply were passing judgment on themselves. When they told Jesus that the wretched vine-growers would be brought to a wretched end (41), the religious rulers judged themselves in the same way David had judged himself before Nathan. After hearing Nathan the prophet's parable about the rich man who took the poor man's only pet lamb to feed a visiting traveler,

**David's anger burned greatly against the man, & he said to Nathan, "As the LORD lives, surely the man who has done this deserves to die. He must make restitution for the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing & had no compassion." Nathan then said to David, "You are the man!"** (2 Sam 12:5-7).

Jesus, in effect, says to the chief priests & elders,

*You are the men! You're the wretched vine-growers who, by your own declaration, deserve a wretched end for beating & killing the vineyard owner's servants & his son. Don't you realize the owner is God, the vineyard is His kingdom, the servants were His prophets, & I am His Son? You've judged yourselves guilty of condemning to death not only the prophets but God's own Son.*

With regard to killing the prophets, later the same day Jesus said to the unbelieving Jewish leaders,

**You build the tombs of the prophets & adorn the monuments of the righteous, & say, 'If we had been *living* in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in *shedding* the**

**blood of the prophets.’ So you testify against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure *of the guilt* of your fathers (Mt 23:29–31).**

God had prepared a place of great blessing & graciously given stewardship of it to His people Israel. It was a place of promise, hope, deliverance, salvation, & security. But Israel misappropriated all those blessings for herself, robbing God of the gratitude, glory, & honor due Him. She persecuted the prophets He patiently & lovingly sent to call her to repentance & forgiveness.

Having failed to see how the parable involved them, they showed themselves to be worthy of being removed from positions of authority.<sup>2</sup> They rightly assessed the proper ending of the parable, that the irate owner would severely punish the wicked growers & then replace them with others who were reliable. They were completely unaware they were springing the trap of their own condemnation.<sup>3</sup> As we look at this parable which so beautifully sets forth the love of God & which also shows the wickedness of Israel in Jesus’ own time, we can’t stand back & say, *Isn’t it terrible how they’ve acted!* Because this parable is for us as well. This parable is for anyone who’s experienced the religious privileges which have been heaped upon us, especially here in America, where the Word of God has been given to us freely & openly. In light of those privileges, if we harden our hearts against God’s Word, if we don’t repent & turn to Him, we’re standing exactly where the chief priests & Pharisees stood. We must not misuse the privileges of God. We must not forget the kingdom belongs to the Lord. We’re to hear & to do His will. All of us are called to self-examination when we come to this parable. This parable isn’t just about them. It’s about us.

### **3. The Explanation 42-44**

At 1<sup>st</sup> glance, Jesus’ comment seems irrelevant to the parable. But He was using a familiar passage to reinforce His point. In a sarcastic request He asked the self-appointed authorities on Scripture, **Did you never read in the Scriptures...?** & then quoted the well-known words of Ps 118:22. He recites the same psalm which the crowds rejoiced with during His triumphal entry into Jerusalem a few days earlier, when He was welcomed as the **Son of David** (Mt 21:9). Jesus was rebuked by

---

<sup>2</sup> Dwight J Pentecost, *The Parables of Jesus: Lessons in Life from the Master Teacher*, pp 132–133

<sup>3</sup> John MacArthur, *Matthew*, Vol 3, p 296

the Pharisees for accepting that messianic praise (Lk 19:39). Now, from the same section of the psalm, Jesus reminded the religious leaders of **the stone which the builders rejected that became the chief cornerstone**. A **cornerstone** was the most basic & essential part of a building, from which the proper placement & alignment of every other part was determined. If the cornerstone was imperfectly cut or placed, the symmetry & stability of the entire building would be affected. Sometimes **the builders rejected** a number of stones before the right one was selected. In this account, one such rejected **stone** eventually **became the chief corner stone**. It seems obvious to you, I'm sure, what this refers to, but lets go to Peter's inspired interpretation in Acts 4:8–12. Peter & John had been arrested for healing a man & teaching about the resurrection of Jesus (4:2–3). The next day the Jewish leaders (the very ones who'd condemned Jesus a short time earlier) asked them by what power they were acting. Peter answers, & his answer is an interpretation of Jesus' word about the rejected stone. Starting at the end of vs 8:

**Rulers & elders of the people, if we are on trial today for a benefit done to a sick man, as to how this man has been made well, let it be known to all of you & to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by this *name* this man stands here before you in good health. He is the STONE WHICH WAS REJECTED by you, THE BUILDERS, *but* WHICH BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER *stone*. & there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved (8-12).**

Notice Peter's interpretation: The builders are the rulers of the people & elders (8, 10); the stone is Jesus Christ of Nazareth; the rejection of the stone was the crucifixion of Jesus; & the elevation of the stone to the chief corner was the resurrection of Jesus (10); the implication of this is that there's salvation in no one else (12). That's Peter's interpretation of the word of Jesus in Mt 21:42. Jesus brought this messianic psalm to the parable in order to reinforce His point. The rejected Son & the rejected stone both refer to Christ. Peter retold the same truth in his 1<sup>st</sup> letter:

**Behold, I lay in Zion a choice stone, a precious corner stone, & he who believes in Him will not be disappointed. This precious value, then, is for you who believe; but for those who disbelieve, 'the stone which the builders rejected, this became the very corner stone,' & 'a stone of stumbling & a rock of offense;' for they stumble because they are disobedient to the word, & to this doom they were also appointed (1 Pt 2:6–8).**

Paul declared to the Ephesian believers, **you are no longer strangers & aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, & are of God's household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles**

& prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner *stone* (Eph 2:19–20). Jesus is clearly the cornerstone that was rejected by the builders. But salvation can be found in no one else.

Through this parable & its explanation Jesus presented one of His clearest claims to divinity. The parable even alludes to the detail of His being crucified outside the city (Heb 13:12), just as the vineyard owner's son was cast out of the vineyard before being murdered. Jesus also made it clear that the Jewish leaders who rejected Him were without excuse. Like the evil tenants, they knew He was God's Son but refused to accept & honor Him as such. They wanted Him dead not because He was evil & ungodly but because He threatened their evil, ungodly control & authority over the Jewish religious system. Throughout history, & still today, many refuse to receive Jesus Christ as Savior & Lord not because of lack of evidence but because they refuse to believe the evidence. They don't believe simply because they do not want to believe.

We also learn here that God's kingdom will be established despite Israel's rejection of the Messiah. Jesus says, *My kingdom is going to be established even if the chief priests & Pharisees oppose Me.*

What's the seemingly puzzling statement mean in vs 44 where Jesus says, **he who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust.** There's an old rabbinic saying that says, *If a pot falls on a rock, woe to the pot. If a rock falls on a pot, woe to the pot – either way, woe to the pot.*<sup>4</sup> It's crushed either way. If you stumble over Christ as the Messiah, you are broken. If you oppose Him, you're broken. Christ's kingdom will be established. Jesus speaks very clearly (41, 43) of God taking the leadership & the kingdom away from them & giving it to others. The heroic figure in this story is the landlord who delivers justice but also graciously seeks out new tenants. Jesus reiterates judgment on unbelieving Israel & her ungodly leaders. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of vs 43 He reiterates their replacement for a time by believing Gentiles. But, as we know, by grace through God's unconditional promise, Israel will one day return to God & bear fruit for His kingdom. Paul assured his fellow Jews, **God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew....** When the fulness of the Gentiles has come in ... all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, 'The Deliverer will come from Zion, He will remove ungodliness from Jacob' (Rom 11:2, 25–26). But in the

---

<sup>4</sup> Craig S Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: NT*, p 100

meantime God has chosen another people to be His witness. He'd long ago declared, **I will call those who were not My people, 'My people,' & her who was not beloved, 'Beloved.'** & it shall be that in the place where it was said to them, **'You are not My people,'** there they shall be called sons of the living God (Rom 9:25–26; Hosea 2:23).

The Jewish leaders who, as it were, fell on Jesus & put Him to death would themselves **be broken to pieces**. For those who won't have Jesus as Deliverer, He becomes Destroyer. Just as the Father has given salvation through the Son (Jn 14:6), He has also **given all judgment to the Son** (Jn 5:22). Paul declared, **If anyone does not love the Lord, let him be accursed** (1 Cor 16:22). To put that truth in the language of this text, let such a person **be broken to pieces**, crushed into powder & scattered **like dust**, just as Jesus warned. God's enemies are destined to punishment. To try to destroy Jesus is to assure one's own destruction. Through Daniel the Lord predicted Christ's ultimate coming in judgment against the unbelieving peoples & nations of the world, represented by the magnificent & seemingly invincible statue of gold, silver, bronze, iron, & clay. As the **stone ... cut out without hands**, Jesus will one day strike the statue of unbelieving mankind, & **then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver & the gold will be crushed all at the same time, & become like chaff from the summer threshing floors; & the wind will carry them away so that not a trace of them will be found** (Dan 2:32–35). Jesus is showing that it doesn't matter whether Israel's leaders reject Him or not. His kingdom is going to be established. & so, before them they have 1 of 2 choices: They can either be a part of that kingdom & be blessed or they can oppose it & be crushed by the stone of the kingdom.

**4. The Reaction** In vss 45-46 we see the reaction of the chief priests & the Pharisees. They understand perfectly the parable & what Jesus is saying. They realize He's speaking of them as the tenants of the vineyard whom God had deemed to be faithless & passed judgment on.<sup>5</sup> They knew they were the builders who'd rejected the stone that would become the chief corner stone & because of that rejection they themselves would be rejected by God. But in spite of what they understood, the Jewish leaders took nothing Jesus said to heart. They heard but refused to heed.

---

<sup>5</sup> Dwight J Pentecost, *The Parables of Jesus*, p 134

They knew He spoke of their ungodliness & their condemnation, but they didn't even consider whether He was right. They wouldn't be convinced & therefore couldn't be convicted. They wouldn't repent & thus couldn't be forgiven. They knew the gracious truth about Jesus but wouldn't follow Him. They knew the damning truth about their own sin but wouldn't turn from it. Their only thoughts were of self-justification & revenge, so their reaction was to want **to seize** Jesus & put Him to death, just as they'd been plotting since the beginning of His ministry. The hindrance this day was **they feared the multitude, because they held Jesus to be a prophet**. The leaders had contempt for God but no fear of Him. They also had contempt for **the multitude** but did fear what they might do. They weren't God-pleasers but men-pleasers. Accordingly, they held off seizing Jesus until they were convinced they could turn the people against Him, which a few days later they succeeded in doing.

As Jesus comes speaking this message of judgment against people who've usurped the authority of God it includes a message of love. But even that message of love was missed by the Jewish leaders because of their sin. Jesus words, though strong ones of reproof & rebuke, were words of grace designed to shake these men from their spiritual slumber & from their rebellion against God, & cause them to turn to Him. He's holding up this parable as a mirror & saying, *This is what you look like. This is who you are. You're rejecting God. You're rejecting His Word. You're rejecting His prophets. You're rejecting Me & I'm the promised Messiah. Turn from that rebellion & turn to Me.* When they saw it, their response should have been to have humbled themselves & fled to Christ. But they wouldn't. Many today are just the same. There are those in this world who think that God owes it them to forgive & accept them. *It doesn't matter how I live, it doesn't matter what I believe, because in the end God will forgive everybody.* That wasn't the belief of Jesus & He makes it very clear that those who reject Him, who say "No" to the offer of mercy in the gospel, who refuse to have Him reign over their lives as Lord, He will reject & condemn. There will come a day when He'll utter from His throne in glory the terrifying words, **I never knew you...** (Mt 7:23), **Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire...** (Mt 25:41). If you find yourself responding to God's warnings & rebukes by saying, *I don't care about that. I don't care what the Word says,* or if you find yourself

responding by apathetically thinking, *So what? That's fine for others, but it's not for me*, you're on dangerous ground. Rebellion & apathy puts you right where the Pharisees were. & that's why this parable isn't just for them. It's for us. In the warning, see the hope. Because Jesus is saying, *You deserve to be crushed, but by My death, I'll give you the vineyard if you'll but trust in Me*. Paul saw it clearly & said God...

**raised Him (Jesus) from the dead & seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly *places*, far above all rule & authority & power & dominion, & every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. & He put all things in subjection under His feet, & gave Him as head over all things (Eph 1:20–22).**

That's why Jesus could say, **All authority has been given to Me in heaven & on earth (Mt 28:18)**. & Paul could preach in Athens with unwavering authority: **God has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead (Acts 17:31)**. Don't be like the builders, the tenants, the Pharisees this morning! Don't reject or stumble over this rejected stone. Because the very stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. What more God could have possibly done to woo the wayward back to Him than by sending His own Son to die in their place.<sup>6</sup> & yet God is so patient, year after year & century after century. But one day all the extra chances will run out & judgment will come.<sup>7</sup> & that's the message of God's Word for us today. May the Lord bless it to our hearts. PRAY

#### COMMUNION

A few days after Jesus told this parable, disillusioned with the Messiah who wouldn't be their kind of savior & with the King who would not be their kind of lord, **the multitude** gave the rulers no more cause to fear them. When given the choice of releasing Jesus or the insurrectionist Barabbas, they chose Barabbas. & when Pilate asked what he should **do with Jesus who is called Christ**, they all cried, **crucify Him!** (Mt 27:21–22). We come to the elements today to remember with gratitude the grace & mercy of God shown to us in the giving of His Son to die for us. Thankfully, His sacrifice is sufficient & God raised Him from the dead & He offers each of us His eternally righteous life.

<sup>6</sup> J. Lyle Story, *Hope in the Midst of Tragedy*, pp 194–95

<sup>7</sup> Craig Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, pp 337–338

Now when evening came, Jesus was reclining *at the table* with the twelve disciples.... While they were eating, Jesus took *some* bread, & after a blessing, He broke *it* & gave *it* to the disciples, & said, "Take, eat; this is My body" (Mt 26:20, 26).

We remember the Son, sent by His Father, who died in our place for our sins as we eat of the bread together.

And when He had taken a cup & given thanks, He gave *it* to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins (Mt 26:27-28).

We remember Jesus death, His taking the wrath of God upon Himself in our place, as we drink of the cup together.

After singing a hymn, they went out (Mt 26:30). We will do the same.