Text: Luke 20:9-19 (parallels Matthew 21:33-46 and Mark 12:1-12)
Title: The Gracious Owner and His Son
Truth: Although rejected by many, Jesus is the centerpiece of God's program.
Date/Location: March 2, 2025 (revised from February 12, 2017) at FBC

Introduction

Some interpreters call this the parable of the landowner. The owner is the hero of the story (the protagonist), while the vinedressers are the antagonists (opponents or rivals). The owner's son is a victim in the story. He should receive honor and return on the lease, but instead he is killed.

This parable is recorded in all three synoptic gospels. In each case it comes after the cleansing of the temple, and after the question about Christ's authority, and is followed by the questions on tax money and the resurrection.

I. The Parable, v. 9-16

A. The landowner did a lot of preparatory work. He then leased the land to vinedressers and went on to another venture. Although we have no details about the lease, it was a bilateral covenant or contract that had binding terms on both parties. The owner was not giving the vineyard away!

B. When it was time to get a return on his investment, he sent servants to receive what was due to him according to their agreement. However, the vinedressers reneged on their terms in the contract and beat some servants, killed some, and stoned some (Matthew's version). Mark's version tells us that the owner sent these servants one at a time. One was beaten and sent away with nothing; the second received a head injury from stones being thrown at him; and the third was killed. Luke is a little less specific, but the point is the same.

C. Finally, the landowner, acting very patiently and graciously, sent his son. In a way that we might judge to be naïve, he thought that they would respect his son and realize that he really meant business. But sinful people often exploit such graciousness.

D. The vine growers responded in accord with their evil minds—in a way that conspired about how they could turn this situation to their own selfish benefit. So, they killed the son to steal the vineyard entirely for themselves and be done with the terms of the contract which they felt were unfavorable. They were greedy and murderers and lacked integrity to carry out their word. Their "reasoning" was very perverse because

they did not consider what the master might do as a next step. They had no brakes on their behavior, but they would face the owner later.

E. By means of a question, Jesus enlists the aid of his audience to make a conclusion about what will happen next and to draw them into the story. Naturally, at least some in the audience conclude that the owner will come and destroy the wicked farmers and make a contract with a new group of people who will fulfill their obligations. The murderers are not fit to continue living and must be punished for their evil deed.

There is a question as to who exactly answered his question. Verse 9 says that the audience was the people, which included the religious leaders. But it is doubtful whether they would suggest a self-incriminating, self-destructive answer to Jesus' question, given their understanding that he was speaking the parable against them. Perhaps there were others gathered around watching, and one or more piped up with the logical answer, much to the chagrin of the religious leaders. It is also possible that before the application dawned on their darkened minds that they offered the only correct and obvious answer. If the religious leaders did answer, that would make the parable very effective.

F. In Mark 12 and Luke 20, the text records that Jesus gives the answer to his own question. This can be harmonized with what we read in Matthew in this way: Jesus asked the question; then someone from the crowd offered an answer; then Jesus repeated their answer for emphasis and for all to hear. He approved of this answer: yes, the meek and mild Jesus approved the answer that the owner will come and destroy the vinedressers and give the vineyard to others.

G. In Luke 20:16, some put in their own two cents and contradicted the Lord's conclusion about judgment on the tenant farmers. They said, "Certainly not!"

Are they saying "certainly not" to the farmers killing the son/heir, as if it is inconceivable that the tenants could be so wicked? Or are they objecting to the owner coming to destroy the farmers and giving the vineyard to others? Because of the placement of their response after the Lord says what the owner will do, I take it to be the latter. They are objecting to what the owner righteously did to the farmers. Such *justice* is too harsh for them to accept.

II. Explaining the Elements and Truths of the Parable

A. It is obvious that the landowner represents God "in real life." The vinedressers or tenant farmers represent the leaders of Israel. At the

time, that would include the scribes and Pharisees and other elders—the ones who wanted to kill Jesus (19:47, 20:1). They are the religious leaders, the ones calling the shots in the vineyard—so they think. But they are doing so apart from the approval of the owner! The servants are the prophets, many of whom were mistreated in Israel's history (Jer. 7:25-26, 25:4, 38:6; Luke 11:51).

B. The landowner's son represents Jesus. Jesus knows this is a self-reference, a Messianic reference. He teaches the hearers and us readers that He is different than the previous messengers. They were prophets; He is the SON. He is above the prophets. He is a special representative of God. He is the end of the line, in effect. There will be apostles and preachers that will come after Him, but there is no one higher than He.

C. Interestingly, the parable gives the answer to the Pharisees' earlier question about where Jesus's authority comes from. The Father assigned the authority to Him. He comes to earth with all the authority of the Father. It also alerts the authorities that He knows their plans, and that their plans, if carried out, will result in their judgment.

D. The vineyard represents not a piece of land but a nation—Israel—throughout its history. We need to think about it in that longer historical context. Read Isaiah 5 in this connection. Note verse 7: "For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel."

E. God *planted* the vineyard, meaning He created it, chose it, built it, blessed it. He also *leased* it, meaning that he assigned stewardship for it to certain leaders. It is work, but the lease rate is not exorbitant; it is not even expensive. God then "went into a far country for a long time" which I understand means that He left the stewards to their work. I take the far country to picture God as One who is not micromanaging the business but entrusting its care to others.

A question: do those stewards trust God as much as He entrusted to them? Another question: What has God leased to *you*? God has put a measure of 'trust' in you as well. Do you return that trust?

Jesus does not mean this parable to convey a deistic worldview where God set things up and then goes away, intending to have no interaction with the work of His hands. In the parable, though the owner is far away, he is keenly interested in the work and fruit of the vineyard, so much so that he sends several representatives to secure his returns.

F. The timeless lessons of this parable are exposed in the story by the extreme kindness of the owner and the extreme wickedness of the

tenants. These qualities are emphasized in the story to the point that we ask how the owner could be so naïvely kind and how the farmers could be so gratuitously wicked.

G. The first truth we learn is that **God is exceedingly gracious**. Over a lengthy period, He sent His servants to the nation of Israel to "receive its fruit," which I think is honor and worship for Him. In view of their recalcitrance, He sent the prophets to warn the people of impending doom unless they turned back to Him. The prophets encouraged repentance, worship, etc. God's kindness in these ways was repaid with abuse and murder, with rejection and continuing in the world's pagan ways. But God does not desire to have people fall into judgment, so He is slow to anger and plenteous in mercy (Psalm 103:8, 145:8).

H. A second key point we are reminded of is that **Jesus came and died**, like the owner's son in the story. But that was not the end of Jesus—He rose again and extends an offer of forgiveness to people just like the wicked tenants. His graciousness extends beyond measure to all who repent of their sin and believe in Him.

I. But there comes a point at which God's grace is exhausted. This leads to the third truth: **God's wrath will be manifested**. The leaders of Israel apparently believe that God should indefinitely tolerate rebellion and idolatry. They want to make you think that God is harsh, mean, and even evil for doing what He has done. But God is none of those things. All it takes is a little longer-term memory to remember that for centuries, even for thousands of years, God had put up with the nation of Israel and helped them despite their bad behavior (Acts 13:18). But they could not presume on this or think they could forever get away with "murder."

His patience runs out and time comes to take care of the problem concerning which He has long been patient. The end of the parable points out the landowner will destroy the wicked tenants. This is a picture of final judgment. They will be "destroyed miserably" and His farm will be leased out to others who will do what the owner wants.

J. This applies directly to the religious leaders of Jesus' day; but it also applies to any religious leaders who lead the people of God astray and harm God's messengers. Those who follow false teaching will be assigned the same portion as those they follow.

K. The agreement that the owner made with the farmers is like the Law of Moses. It was a bilateral, conditional covenant. The people of Israel broke that covenant, so God treated them in accordance with its negative terms, the curses of Deuteronomy 28:15-68. Worse than that,

they killed messengers whom God sent with the purpose of expressing to them God's call to repent, His grace, and (also) His judgment. He was being more than fair to the terms of His covenant. We are thus reminded of a fourth truth, namely that **obeying God's word is the best and right way to live** whether you understand it now or not.

L. We also learn a fifth truth: that **the heart of man is desperately wicked**. He will often get what he can out of a situation, without regard for God, or the private property, health, and life of others.

III. The Application of the Story to the Audience, v. 17-18

A. We return to the people's response of "Certainly not!" in verse 16. They could not stand the idea that Jesus was telling them they were so wrong as to merit divine retribution. We see the same response everywhere today when people shout and pout about the rule of law. "Certainly not!" they say to punishing people who have broken the law.

B. Jesus asks them if they ever read the Scriptures—and understood what they read—in Psalm 118:22-23. This is a Psalm from which the crowd was quoting "Hosanna" in Matthew 21:15 when Jesus entered Jerusalem. The religious leaders were mad about this proclamation. Turn to Psalm 118 now and read it.

C. The stone of the Psalm is the son of the parable. The tenant farmers rejected him, just like the builders rejected the stone that was destined to become the chief cornerstone. Jesus is talking about their rejection of Him. The builders (Pharisees, etc.) rejected the stone (Christ). The builders of the nation of Israel should not have rejected the most important stone in all their building! Maybe other nations of the world would reject the cornerstone of Israel—and still God would see to it that the rejected One became the King—but the nation Israel should not reject her own cornerstone!

It took "the Lord's doing" to accomplish such a turn-around from rejection to capstone. It was a marvelous thing to see.

D. The stone and chief cornerstone, Christ, is a stumbling block to some (1 Cor. 1:23; 1 Peter 2:7-8; Romans 9:32-33). But others just hate Him. So, some people will stumble over Christ and will be broken. Others who hate Him will be crushed to powder. Whether ignorance or obstinate rebellion, both will bring a person to ruin. Neither way of relating to Christ is acceptable, and the outcome will be essentially the same—the one who rejects the Lord will be broken beyond remedy.

E. In Matthew 21:43, the vineyard is likened to the kingdom of God. Jesus says that it will be taken away from the Pharisees and chief priests and elders. That is, their stewardship as leaders over the nation will be taken away (and, although unmentioned, they will also be destroyed). The kingdom will be put into the hands of a people who will live up to its requirements. A future generation of Israel will participate in the kingdom but this generation will not. This generation experienced destruction, which occurred in 70 AD at the hands of Rome. The individuals of the generation, whether alive at that time or dead, will also face a final judgment at God's judgment seat.

Note: Jesus is *not* saying that the kingdom will be taken away from present Israel and given to an entirely different people group (supersessionism or replacement theology). Instead, the kingdom will be taken from present Israel and given to a future generation of the nation Israel and its blessings shared with saved Gentiles in the church as well.

First century nation of Israel would *not* be the recipients of kingdom benefits. They had rejected the King, and so the King had rejected them. The kingdom would be delayed to a later time.

In that future kingdom, the stone, Christ, will be the chief cornerstone and savior of all mankind (Acts 4:10-12). In a stunning turn-around, He will be the most important building block in the program of God for the nation of Israel.

F. To complete the thought: how exactly does Jesus's quotation of Psalm 118:22-23 respond to their "certainly not" exclamation? They are saying that rejecting the son should not result in punishment for the tenants. Jesus is saying that there is a teaching in the Old Testament which amounts to a Messianic prophecy that the stone will be rejected and become the chief cornerstone. And due to that rejection, He implies, it is entirely reasonable for the builders themselves to be rejected. They have done something beyond awful.

IV. The Response of the Chief Priests and Pharisees, v. 19

A. The people understood what the Lord was saying. After hearing the parable, the religious leaders knew that Jesus was speaking about them. The parable was not so difficult to understand that these unbelievers missed the point! They understood that *they* were the tenant vinedressers and the builders, both of whom are condemned.

Their response of "certainly not" reflected not just on the story but on the reality that was meant by the story. In fact, they objected not so

much to the fictional guy killing his evil tenants, but to God judging the nation of Israel. They were so depraved and entitled that they could not see how God could do that—how God could judge the nation of Israel for her sins? This is not just any old people; this is the Jews! Do they not have special privilege before God?

B. Yes, in many ways Israel does have privilege because of Gods' grace (Romans 3:1, 9:4-5). But with this privilege comes a stricter judgment. The nation had been punished numerous times over its history. They were brought low in Egypt as slaves. They wandered in the wilderness for nearly 40 years. They were defeated in miscellaneous battles. They were oppressed by several nations during the period of the Judges. They experienced famine. Their nation split in two. The northern tribes were deported by Assyria because they were unfaithful to the Lord. The southern kingdom (Judah) was sent to Babylon 120 years later to judge similar idolatry. From the post-exilic period up to the first century, they were under the power of foreign kings and wicked rulers, particularly in the intertestamental period.

   The fact that God would punish the nation once again for her rejection of her King should be absolutely no surprise to anyone, least of all the Jewish people.

C. To say "no" to God's judgement for murder is over the top. No one is that privileged to be able to excuse themselves from God's judgment.

D. They hated Jesus even more because of this and wanted to kill Him. But in addition to not fearing God, they had another problem: they feared people! They were 180 degrees out of phase with what God wanted—He wants us to fear God and not people, instead of the other way around. And since the popular opinion was that Jesus was a prophet, they did not want to risk an uprising. Their own influence was too precious to throw away in exchange for the truth of Christ. To keep their place of power, then lies, murder, hatred, revenge, and the like were all acceptable to them. They evidently believe that the end justifies the means.

Conclusion

The parable of the vinedressers in Matthew's gospel ends with a mention of the kingdom of God—with Jesus saying that it will be taken from the present leadership of Israel and turned over to a nation which bears its fruit. Such a nation would show forth the fruits of repentance (as John the Baptist called for). It would also render to its owner what is due

Him—honor, worship, service—like the vinedressers should have done to the landowner.

What fruits of repentance are you bringing forth to the divine owner of the universe?

May Christ's words echo from His voice through His book to your ears. And may you embrace the chief cornerstone!

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