

Text: Matthew 21:33-46 // Mark 12:1-12 // Luke 20:9-19

Title: The Wicked Vinedressers

Truth: Although rejected by many, Jesus is the centerpiece of God's program.

Date/Location: February 12, 2017 and July 31, 2022 at FBC

Introduction

Some interpreters call this the parable of the land owner. The owner is truly the hero of the story (the *protagonist*), while the vinedressers are the antagonists (opponents or rivals). This same event is recorded in all three synoptic gospels. In each case it comes after the cleansing of the temple, the question about Christ's authority, and is followed by the questions on tax money and the resurrection. In Matthew, it comes after the parable of two sons asked to work in the father's vineyard; one went but the other politely rebelled.

I. The Parable, v. 33-41

- A. The landowner did a lot of preparatory work. He then leased the land to vinedressers and went on to another venture.
- B. When it was time to get return on his investment, he sent servants to receive what was due to him according to their agreement. They had a bilateral covenant or contract that had binding terms on both parties.
- C. However, the vinedressers reneged on their terms in the contract and beat some servants, killed some, and stoned some. Mark's gospel 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. Many other servants suffered similar fates.
- D. Finally the landowner, acting very patiently and graciously, sent his son. In a way that we would judge to be naïve, he thought that they would respect his son and realize that he really meant business. But sinful people and gracious ones don't mix too well, because the sinful often exploit the gracious.
- E. The vine growers responded as their evil minds would naturally do—in a way that reckoned on how they could turn this situation to their own selfish benefit. So, they killed the son so as to steal the vineyard entirely for themselves and be done with the terms of the contract. They were greedy murderers.
- F. Jesus enlists the aid of his audience to draw a conclusion about what will happen next. Very naturally, they admit 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. He should have done that earlier, but patience delayed him.
 1. There is a question as to who exactly answered his question. The audience primarily consisted of the religious leaders (v. 23, 45). 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. So perhaps there were others gathered around watching, and

they piped up just then with the logical answer, much to the chagrin of the religious leaders. However, it is possible that before the application dawned on their darkened minds, they offered the only correct (and obvious) answer. If *they* answered, that would make the parable very effective.

2. In Mark 12 and Luke 20, the text makes it appear 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 it better.
3. In Luke 20:16, the Pharisees put in their own two cents and contradicted the Lord's conclusion about judgment on the tenant farmers. They said, "Certainly not!" They couldn't 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. That's the sinner's mindset; it is not only wrong, but societally unworkable.

II. Lessons and Applications

A. It is fairly obvious that the land owner is a picture of God. The servants are the prophets. The land owner's son is Jesus. The vinedressers or tenant farmers represent the Pharisees and chief priests. They are the religious leaders, the ones calling the shots in the vineyard—so they think. But they do so apart from the approval of the owner!

The lessons of this parable grow out of 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 naïve and how the farmers could be so wicked.

- B. The first lesson we learn is that **God is exceedingly gracious**. Over a lengthy period of time He sent His servants to the nation of Israel to "receive its fruit." He sent them 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, or at least with rejection and continuing to follow the pagan ways of the world. God is gracious toward you.
- C. A second key point we are reminded of is that **Jesus came and died**, like the owner's son in the story. God arranged the circumstances so that from the viewpoint of the world, the death of Jesus was an unjust act by wicked tenant farmers. That act was used to implement a much more important thing—salvation. And 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. Jesus died for sinners just like you.
- D. But there comes a point at which God's grace is completed. This leads to the third lesson: **God's wrath will be manifested** eventually. 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 their farm will be leased out to others who will follow the contract.

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.

E. 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 from God who were 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 lesson, namely that **obeying God’s word is the best and right way to live.**

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

III. The Application of the Story to the Audience, v. 42-44

A. 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 people were quoting “Hosanna” in Matthew 21:15 when Jesus entered Jerusalem. The religious leaders were mad about this proclamation.

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. It took the Lord to accomplish such a turn-around from rejection to capstone and it was a marvelous thing to the onlookers to see. Jesus is talking about their rejection of Him. The builders (Pharisees, etc.) rejected the stone (Christ), and in a stunning turn-around, that stone (Christ) became the chief cornerstone (Acts 4:10-12). He is the most important building block in the program of God. How wonderful this is for believers to see!

B. The vineyard is likened to the kingdom of God. Jesus says that it will be taken away from the Pharisees and chief priests. That is, their stewardship as leaders over the nation will be taken away (and, though 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—the saved version of the nation (Romans 11:25-27)—will participate in the kingdom. The church will also be involved in the kingdom (1 Peter 2:9-10) but the kingdom will have a heavy Jewish flavor.

This teaches us that the 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 for a later time.

- C. The stone that Jesus speaks of in verse 44 is the chief cornerstone of v. 42, which is Himself. 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. Some people will stumble over Christ, and others who hate Him will be crushed to powder. 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.

IV. The Response of the Chief Priests and Pharisees, v. 45-46

- A. After hearing the parables (the parable of the two sons, and this one), the religious leaders knew that Jesus was speaking about them. The parables were not so difficult that these unbelievers missed the point! They understood that they were the lying son (v. 30), the tenant farmers, and the builders, all of whom are condemned in Jesus' parables.
- B. They hated Jesus all the more because of this and wanted to kill Him. But in addition to *not* fearing God, they had another problem: they feared people! They would not throw John the Baptist under the bus for fear of the crowds (21:26), and now they feel they cannot kill Jesus for the same reason. They had to find a way to get rid of him without the crowd being involved.

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 against them. Their own influence was too precious to throw away on the basis of the truth! As long as they kept their place and power, lies, murder, hatred, revenge, and the like were all acceptable to them. They believe that the end justifies the means (“by any means necessary”).

Conclusion

The earlier parable of the two sons ended with Jesus stating that common sinners would enter the kingdom of God while the Pharisees would not. Obviously, this refers to sinners who had repented when told they needed to do so by John the Baptist or by Jesus and His disciples. But repentance was something that the chief priests and elders were totally unwilling to do.

The parable of the vinedressers also 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) and it would render to its owner what is due Him—honor, worship, and service—like the vinedressers should have done to the landowner.

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

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