

The Parables

Part 11 – The Wicked Tenants

Matthew 21:33-46

Unlike most parables, that of the wicked tenants has elements of allegory. The vineyard represents Israel to whom God had given such rich supply. God provided for them abundant land in which they could flourish. He also sent prophets so that they could hear his voice. He gave them his law and ordained kings for their protection. The land owner is symbolic of God. The tenants represent disobedient Israel and the master's servants, God's prophets.

Perhaps the most obvious character is that of the master's son who represents Jesus the Messiah.



In the parable Jesus tells the sad story of Israel's rejection of God. They rejected and, in some cases, killed the prophets. Remarkably, rather than immediately judging them for their wickedness, God sent his Son to call them to repent and believe. But, as Jesus prophesies, not only will the people reject the Son, they will cast him out of the vineyard and kill him.

This stunning act of wickedness deserves the harshest form of judgment. Indeed, for the many who will not believe, the crucifixion of Christ stands as the ultimate testimony against them. And yet because of his mercy this act of evil and cruelty was simultaneously the means by which God saves all who turn away from their sin and trust in the Master's Son.

Main Idea: Though God blessed Israel they rejected his prophets and ultimately killed his Son, the Messiah.

Vs. 33 – No Jew would fail to recognize in this story a picture of the relationship between the Lord and Israel. In Isaiah 5:1-2, for example, God is the owner of the vineyard and Israel the vineyard itself, yielding bad fruit.

Vs. 34 – The tenant farmers would have owed the landlord a fixed proportion of the harvest.

Vv. 35-39 – The story represents the Lord's repeated appeals to his people through his prophets and finally through his Son. Israel had remained stubbornly unwilling to repent. Here Jesus is claiming publicly to be the Son of God. He knows they are plotting his death; he knows that they will succeed in killing him – indeed, he will let them succeed because he came to give his life a ransom for many.

Notice the irrationality of rebellion against God. The wicked tenants have not hope to succeed in gaining ownership of the vineyard. Their actions can only end in their being judged. Notice also that the son was thrown *out of* the vineyard and killed. Jesus would be taken outside of Jerusalem to be crucified; perhaps more to the point, he would be rejected by the people and it would be their rejection that would make his execution possible. As John has it at the beginning of his Gospel, "He came to his own, but his own did not receive him..."

Vs. 41 – Like David before Nathan, the religious leaders unwittingly pronounce their own judgment. Israel will lose her favored status and God's covenant promises will be fulfilled in the new Israel, the church.

Vs. 42 – Jesus is the stone which the religious leaders of Israel had rejected. He is the stone upon which the church depends.

Vs. 43 – The kingdom of God which had historically been centered in Israel and among the Jews, would now embrace a people called out from every tongue, tribe, and nation on the earth. This new people will produce fruit, which is precisely what the Jewish church had failed to do.

Jesus is condemning the old covenant church for its failure to produce true fruit. The fruit, in this parable, is faith in Christ and the life of righteousness and service that comes from that faith.

Vs. 44 – There is no avoiding Jesus. Either we will come to him in humble faith or we will be crushed by our rejection of the wisdom and power of God displayed in the cross.

1. God is good.

Jesus describes a vineyard that has everything necessary to flourish. The land is fruitful. It is equipped with 1) a wall to keep out wild animals, 2) a wine press to process the grapes, and 3) a tower enabling watchmen to keep an eye on the vineyard. These elements serve to illustrate God's rich blessings to his chosen people. He gave them all they needed to flourish.

2. God's people rebelled.

Foolishly the tenants seize the vineyard from the master's servants. It is an irrational act because there is no realistic hope that their efforts will result in anything other than their destruction. The rebellion of the tenants illustrates that of Israel who rejected and in some cases killed God's prophets who had been sent to warn them.

3. God sent his Son.

The patience and longsuffering of the master is the most remarkable feature of the parable. In the same way, God patiently endured his people's repeated rejection of his prophets. But God's mercy extended even further. He went so far as to send his beloved Son. But even he was rejected and killed by the very people to whom he was sent to plead. In this portion of the parable Jesus both claims to be the Son of God and prophecies about his own death.

4. God judged his people.

Following the parable Jesus asked his hearers what the master will do to the wicked tenants. Their answer is unambiguous – "He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants" (vs. 41). Israel's generations long failure to keep the stipulations of the covenant resulted in the loss of her favored status. In AD 70 Jerusalem was sacked and the temple desecrated by the Roman general Titus Vespasian. The birth of the new covenant church was a direct fulfillment of Jesus' words in this parable.

5. God keeps his promises.

Israel's rejection of God's prophets and ultimately God's Son were connected to their generation's long rejection of God's call that they be a light to the Gentiles. The old covenant church was always intended to consist of members from all the peoples. Israel's rejection and execution of Jesus were profoundly wicked acts. And yet none of these tragic events indicate that God's purposes or promises failed. On the contrary, in his gracious providence God put forth his Son to be a propitiation for his people's sins (Rom 3:21-26). The wicked act of the murder of Jesus was simultaneously the very means of deliverance for sinners. God's purposes will never fail. He will keep his promises to his church for whose salvation he did not spare his own Son.