

THE GOSPEL PROJECT – CHRONOLOGICAL STORIES AND SIGNS JESUS THE STORYTELLER

The Wicked Tenants

The final parable that we will study in this series is not as familiar as some but it is one that always makes me sad when I read it. The landowner in the story provides everything his tenants could possibly need to be successful. And yet, time after time, they hatefully reject his position as landowner to the point of eventually killing the landowner's son.

This parable of judgment is found in *Matthew (21:33-46)*, *Mark (12:1-12)*, and *Luke (20:9-18)*. Jesus was near the end of His ministry. He had recently ridden into Jerusalem upon a donkey. *Matthew 21:9 (ESV)* ⁹ *And the crowds that went before him and that followed him were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!"* The crowds were quoting *Psalms 118:26 (ESV)* ²⁶ *Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD! We bless you from the house of the LORD.*

After Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, He drove the moneychangers out of the temple (for the second time). The chief priests and elders confronted Him over His authority to do such a thing and as usual Jesus answered their questioning with parables. The Parable of the Wicked Tenants as our lesson today entitles it is one of those parables and His questioners were livid when they recognized themselves as being the offenders in the story!

Keep in mind that this parable of judgment looks both backward to the nation of Israel's past actions and forward to their coming ultimate rejection of God's Son.

The wicked tenants reject their responsibility as stewards.

Read Matthew 21:33-35 (ESV) 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. ³⁴ When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit. ³⁵ And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another.*

Some translations use the word landowner or householder rather than master of the house. Whatever the owner's title, the property owner in this parable is God. *Psalms 24:1 (ESV)* ¹ *The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein.*

Dennis Davidson explains, "The story was based on a common practice of landowners hiring out their land to tenant farmers. The owner of the land rented out his property to tenants who were to give him an agreed upon

portion of his property's yield. The vineyard owner then takes a distant journey for a long time [perhaps referring to the period prior to John the Baptist]. He waited for the vineyard to produce its fruit."

The vineyard owner did everything necessary for the tenants to produce a good crop. One of the things Jesus referenced was the fence around the vineyard. This was a reference to the protective fence that God had placed around Israel. The psalmist described God's encompassing protection of His people in *Psalm 125:2 (ESV)* ² *As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the LORD surrounds his people, from this time forth and forevermore.* Ironically, they tore down their own God-built fence and disregarded God's protection. How many times do we do the same thing when we desire to go our own way? *Isaiah 53:6 (ESV)* ⁶ *All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way...*

Matthew Henry says, "God expects vineyard-fruit from those that enjoy vineyard-privileges, not leaves only." The Israelites knew from the beginning that they were 'God's chosen people' but they overlooked the reason they were chosen – that was to bear fruit for their Owner! Jesus said of His children in *Matthew 7:20 (ESV)* ²⁰ *Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.* Fruit bearing is still required of God's family today.

The owner of the vineyard in the parable kept sending servants to the tenants to see how things were doing. One by one his servants were beaten, killed, stoned. The parable depicts how God sent prophet after prophet to Israel and Judah, and they were all rejected even Isaiah. Tradition says that Isaiah was sawn in two. Although this parable is about God's judgment, it also reveals the loving patience of God that even after such shameful treatment He was still willing to send His own son when He had every right to send an army to wipe out the wicked tenants.

Jesus' use of the vineyard imagery has a connection with a song of Isaiah.

Read Isaiah 5:1-7 (ESV) ¹ *Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. ² 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. ³ And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. ⁴ What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? ⁵ And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. ⁶ I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and briers and thorns shall grow up; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. ⁷ For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting; and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, an outcry!*

Israel was beloved by God Himself (*Mal. 1:2*). When we connect Jesus' parable to Isaiah's song we clearly see that the vineyard imagery is a picture of Israel as God viewed His beloved. God brought Israel out of Egypt and protected her and fought her battles. He planted His chosen people in the land He had promised them. They

were to be His caretakers of the land and His Holy Word. The 12 men of Israel who first went into the land described it as a land that *flows with milk and honey*.

And yet, the wicked tenants reject God's warnings and God's Son.

Read Matthew 21:36-41 (ESV) ³⁶ *Again he sent other servants, more than the first. And they did the same to them.* ³⁷ *Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.'* ³⁸ *But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.'* ³⁹ *And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.* ⁴⁰ *When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"* ⁴¹ *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."*

When the owner sent his own son, this was the ultimate and last sacrifice and Jesus' final warning to the religious rulers. McGee comments, "the Son was standing before them, giving them the parable. What are they going to do with God's Son? "Instead of receiving and honoring the son, the men cast him out of the vineyard and killed him. Jesus was soon to be crucified "outside the gate" rejected by His own nation.

At first, the listeners were so caught up in the story they did not realize that they passed sentence on themselves.

The wicked tenants are rejected by God for their wicked schemes.

Read Matthew 21:42-46 (ESV) ⁴² *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"?' ⁴³ Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits.* ⁴⁴ *And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him."* ⁴⁵ *When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them.* ⁴⁶ *And although they were seeking to arrest him, they feared the crowds, because they held him to be a prophet.*

Jesus quoted **Psalm 118:22 (ESV)** ²² *The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.* A Jewish legend explained this verse by declaring that at the building of Solomon's temple a stone was sent up from the quarries at the very beginning for which the workmen could find no place, so it was thrown down into the valley below mount Moriah. Later they sent word that they were ready for the cornerstone, but the masons declared it had been sent up already. Finally someone recalled the rejected stone, and a search in the valley brought it to light, and it was hoisted up to the mount again, and made the head of the corner.

The builders' rejection of the stone is the same as the tenants' rejection of the son who was sent to them. The chief priests and the elders were the builders with oversight of the Jewish church – God's building: and they would not allow Jesus His rightful place in 'their' building. They tossed him aside like a stone that would serve only as a stepping-stone - something to be trampled upon.

Jesus also quoted **Psalm 118:23 (ESV)**²³ *This is the LORD's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.* I remember this being quoted when our building on First Street was erected. But this passage goes far beyond any earthly building we might erect. *This was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes.* The kingdom was about to be taken from Israel and given to another – the Gentiles – the church! **1 Peter 2:9 (ESV)**⁹ *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.* Yes, the hand of God was in all this. This was the Lord's doing. Even the rejection and murder of His Son by the Jewish builders was in the foreknowledge of God. It is marvelous that the LORD opened the way of salvation to us! Gentiles who are united to God's family by faith.

The very oracles of God had been given to the nation of Israel. (**Romans 3:2**) They had been given a sacred trust and the privilege of bearing God's name to the world. But that was no longer to be. Paul wrote of the Jews in **1 Thessalonians 2:15 (ESV)**¹⁵ *who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out, and displease God and oppose all mankind.*

Jesus said: *the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.* Jesus used this metaphor to show that one truth can affect people in different ways, depending on how they relate to it. **Isaiah 8:14 (ESV)**¹⁴ *And he will become a sanctuary ... and a rock of stumbling...* We are to fear God. He will be one of two things to us: a sanctuary of salvation or a rock to trip over. Let's always say: **2 Samuel 22:47 (ESV)**⁴⁷ *“The LORD lives, and blessed be my rock, and exalted be my God, the rock of my salvation.*

The coming judgment is clear. Jesus the Son is the ‘building block,’ but He will become the ‘crushing stone.’ He offers mercy and forgiveness *now* but promises judgment later. We should choose Him now.”

The characters in this story were easily identified. Even the religious leaders understood it and they did not like what they heard. The owner of the vineyard is God; the vineyard is Israel; the tenant farmers are the religious leaders; the servants are the prophets and priests God sent to Israel; the son is the Messiah, Jesus; the others are the Gentiles. Jesus' parable indirectly answered the chief priests and Pharisees' question about His authority. He revealed that He knew about their plan to kill Him and yet He remained steadfast on His mission.

Everyone must answer this question – What will you do with the Son?