

Introduction: A few days after His triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus was teaching in the Temple when the chief priests and elders questioned His authority to teach. Jesus countered with His own question. “*The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?*” The Jewish leaders were afraid to answer that question because the people considered John a prophet. So they said, “*we do not know.*” Jesus response was to tell three parables. It was as though Jesus said there are other things you do not know and need to think about. The 3 parables are: “Two Sons and the Vineyard,” “Wicked Tenants,” and “Wedding Feast.”

We looked at “The Two Sons and the Vineyard” last time. It’s message is that talking about doing God’s will is of no value, but actually doing God’s will is vitally important. The next parable in this trio is the “Wicked Tenants.”

Understanding the Parable: The “Two Sons and the Vineyard” and the “Wicked Tenants” are of course different but they have some things in common. Jesus directed both parables at Jewish leaders. Both condemn the leader’s actions. Both use the metaphor of a vineyard to represent Israel.

The second parable is longer and more detailed than the first. Like all parables, the “Wicked Tenants” has one main lesson, clearly expressed in Matthew 21:40-43. But considering all the elements of the parable, it comes close to being an allegory.

In the parable, the father is God; the son is Jesus; the servants are the prophets; the tenants are the Jewish rulers and other sinners whose hatred is so virulent that they murder God’s servants and would murder God if He came into their grasp. Think about God’s servants. How did the prophets prosper among the Jews? Isaiah was sawn in two; Jeremiah was stoned; Amos was murdered with a club; John the Baptist was beheaded; Stephen was stoned to death. What would happen if God came among them in incarnate form? The rulers and the crowd gave their answer a few days later when they cried out “crucify Him.”

God’s two great commandments are (1.) “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind.*” And (2.) “*Love your neighbor as yourself.*” In this parable, Jesus teaches that, in their natural state, many, perhaps most people hate God, hate their neighbor, and even hate themselves.

Relationship of the First to the Second Parable: In the dialog leading to the first parable, the stress was on the Jewish leaders’ rejection of John the Baptist, the

forerunner of the incarnate Son. In the “Wicked Tenants” the stress is on the rejection and murder of the Father’s beloved Son. Both parables use the vineyard metaphor to represent Israel.

Subdivisions Within the Text: The parable is in verses 21:33-39. In 21:40, Jesus asks the chief priests and other listeners what will be the consequence of the tenants’ wicked actions when the owner himself comes to the vineyard? Their answer is in 21:41. Jesus then gives His interpretation of the parable in 21:42-44. In 21:45 we are told that the chief priests and Pharisees realized Jesus was talking about them. In 21:46 their desire is to arrest and kill Jesus, but they choose to wait, for fear of the crowd’s belief that Jesus is a prophet.

The Wicked Tenants and the Heir

Matthew 21:33-46: *“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.”*

- Jesus had just finished the parable of the “Two Sons and the Vineyard” criticizing the Jewish leaders who were lavish in outward obedience and praise but lacking in genuine heart obedience and praise.
- In this parable, the “master of a house” (or owner) set aside a portion of his land to be a vineyard. He carefully prepared the soil, planted vines, put a wall around the vineyard, dug a winepress, and built a watchtower. This obviously refers to God’s provisions for Israel. Israel was the “vine” of God. **Isaiah 5:1a-2a** says, *“My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. ² He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well.”* This imagery of God’s provision and love for Israel was well known to those listening to Jesus.
- When the vineyard was fully prepared, the owner leased it to tenants. The tenants pledged to pay a yearly lease price by giving a specific portion of the vintage to the owner. With arrangements completed, the owner *“went into another country.”*

Matthew 21:34-36: *“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. ³⁶ Again he sent other servants, more than the first. And they did the same to them.”*

- The tenants are vine-growers with whom the owner has made a contract. His servants are people the owner commissioned to collect his share of the crop. As his delegates, on his authority, they requested the owner's share in his name.
- The tenants proved to be wicked men. They are scoundrels, dishonest, cruel, and murderous. They took the owners servants and beat one, killed one outright, and stoned another. When he heard of this, the owner surprisingly decided to give the tenants another chance to do their duty. He sent a larger party of servants, but the tenants treated them the same way.

Matthew 21:37-39: 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.*

- The parable reaches a dramatic climax. The owner has a son, a beloved son, his only son (as seen in Mark 12:6). He decides to send his son to deal with the tenants, perhaps thinking the tenants will be ashamed to hurt his son and will respect him as they would respect the owner.
- But the tenants realizing they have the owner's son in their control, reason that if they kill the father's heir, they can obtain his inheritance. They took the son out of the vineyard and killed him. This was not an impulsive action but a deliberate, pre-meditated murder.
- They gave no thought to the likelihood the owner would seek them out and wreak vengeance upon them. Sin is often foolish in that way, foolish in planning, in execution, and in failing to reckon what the consequences of actions might be.
- Having completed the parable, Jesus asks His audience a question.

Matthew 21:40: ⁴⁰ *When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"*

- It was common among the Jews for teachers to ask their audiences questions. So it came as no surprise for Jesus to ask what they thought would happen when the owner of the vineyard comes himself to the vineyard.
- The answer from the chief priests, Pharisees, and other leaders is in the next verse.

Matthew 21:41: *"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.'"*

With this statement, the Jewish leaders had passed a righteous sentence on themselves and the people. That sentence was executed when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in AD 70. The leaders and the people were cut off from privileges they had possessed for thousands of years.

Jesus asks them do they remember what Scripture says about the stone that the builders rejected.

Matthew 21:42-44: *“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.”*

- Christ is the “stone” rejected by the builders, but made the chief cornerstone by the Father. Whoever, stumbles over the significance of this stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, they will be crushed. Israel fell on the Stone and was broken.
- God was not going to leave His “vineyard” in wicked hands. He would transfer it to others. The kingdom of God would be taken from the hands of the chief priests, Pharisees, and other leaders and from the nation they represented, to be given to a new nation. What was the new nation to which authority over God’s interests passed? It is the church universal which Peter describes as “a holy nation (1 Peter 2:9),” and John speaks of as “a kingdom (Revelation 1:6).”

This new “nation” consists of all regenerated persons from every tribe and tongue, all bonded together “in Christ” as “one.” The Holy Spirit regenerates and indwells every member of the nation that is the church universal. The church universal is constituted on a different principle from the nation Israel, and it is held together by different bonds.

Matthew 21:45-46: *“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.”*

- The Jewish leaders, who planned to arrest Jesus and kill Him, realized Jesus had revealed their guilt and pronounced their doom. They would gladly have

immediately arrested and killed Him, but they dared not carry out their desire for fear of the crowd's reaction since they viewed Jesus as a prophet.

Significance of this Parable to Us Today: Christians today recognize Christ as the “vine of God” and themselves as branches of that “vine” (John 15). God made us what we are. He sent His servants to care for us. We present our fruits to Him. God has done wonderful things for us, yet before God regenerated us, we were like Israel's leaders in this parable.

We were God's enemies in our judgments, in our natural likes and dislikes, in our willful decisions, in our affections, and in our daily practice. Yet, while we were enemies of God, Christ died that we might become adopted children of God. How incredibly merciful!

What is to happen to people who do not live “in Christ?” Jesus asked those who heard His parable of the “Wicked Tenants” a form of that question. The people replied correctly that the wicked ones would be severely punished. God's judgment should never be taken lightly. He is full of grace, full of mercy, and patience, but judgment is coming.

The God who offers salvation today is the God who will judge in righteousness when the time comes. Now is the time of grace, the time to believe and be saved. If you are not “in Christ” today, you will have Him as your judge when you stand before His throne on that last day.

What's Next: The parable of “The Wedding Feast,” which is the third and last parable in this trio, all spoken by Jesus on the Tuesday after His triumphant entry into Jerusalem.