

The Parable of the Landowner and the Wicked

Matthew 21:33-46

Matthew 21:33-46 - *"Hear another parable: There was a certain landowner who planted a vineyard and set a hedge around it, dug a winepress in it and built a tower. And he leased it to vinedressers and went into a far country. ³⁴ Now when vintage-time drew near, he sent his servants to the vinedressers, that they might receive its fruit. ³⁵ And the vinedressers took his servants, beat one, killed one, and stoned another. ³⁶ Again he sent other servants, more than the first, and they did likewise to them. ³⁷ Then last of all he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' ³⁸ But when the vinedressers saw the son, they said among themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance.' ³⁹ So they took him and cast him out of the vineyard and killed him. ⁴⁰ "Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vinedressers?" ⁴¹ They said to Him, "He will destroy those wicked men miserably, and lease his vineyard to other vinedressers who will render to him the fruits in their seasons." ⁴² Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: 'The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This was the LORD's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes'? ⁴³ "Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it. ⁴⁴ And whoever falls on this stone will be broken; but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder."*

⁴⁵ Now when the chief priests and Pharisees heard His parables, they perceived that He was speaking of them. ⁴⁶ But when they sought to lay hands on Him, they feared the multitudes, because they took Him for a prophet."

Background Notes

The parables were stories of everyday experiences that Jesus gave to illustrate moral and spiritual truth. This parable illustrates the truth that the nation of Israel had rejected Israel's Messiah, the Son of God. As a result of this rejection, the nation of Israel would be judged. It would be set aside until a future time when they would bear spiritual fruit. In the meantime, the Church would be established and built up, with Jesus Christ as the Cornerstone.

In this parable it is quite obvious that the landowner represents God, and the landowner's son and heir represents the Lord Jesus Christ. Here's the background for the parable. In biblical days, wealthy Israeli landowners would travel abroad and be away from their properties for considerable lengths of time. In such cases, they would put their property in the hands of tenants who would care for the land with its vineyards and orchards. At harvest time or vintage time, the landowners would send certain servants back to the property to receive the profits or a portion of the produce.

The Lord gave this parable in the last week of His earthly ministry, just a few days before He would be crucified. Once again our Lord predicted His death at the hands of the very people to whom He was speaking - people who should have received Him as their Messiah, the Son of God.

Doctrinal Points

1. The Son of God was rejected by Israel at His first coming.

In the parable, the vineyard represents Israel. God had brought Israel out of Egypt and planted them in the land of Canaan as His special vineyard. The psalmist mentions this in Psalm 80:8-11: *“You have brought a vine out of Egypt; You have cast out the nations, and planted it. You prepared room for it, and caused it to take deep root, and it filled the land. The hills were covered with its shadow, and the mighty cedars with its boughs. She sent out her boughs to the Sea, and her branches to the River.”*

As the landowner, God did everything to protect and care for Israel, His vineyard. *“[He] set a hedge around it, dug a winepress in it and built a tower.”* The “tower” emphasizes God’s watchful care over His people. In the land of Israel, you can still see the ruins of ancient watchtowers. They were used for keeping watch over the fields, to prevent destructive animals or thieves from ravaging the crops. The protective hedge may represent the Law that God gave through Moses. God used His Law to discipline and protect Israel, and to keep them safe and separate from the surrounding pagan nations. The winepress for processing grapes shows that God expected spiritual fruit from the vineyard of Israel.

The tenants in the parable represent the leaders of the people, such as the priests and the scribes. Notice that the self-righteous chief priests and scribes were the audience the Lord was addressing in the parable (v23). They were responsible to care for God’s vineyard - to teach the people God’s Law, to prepare their hearts for the coming Messiah, and to help them bear spiritual fruit.

But these leaders failed to care for God’s vineyard. They should have been cultivating the vineyard and promoting fruit in the people, but instead they cared only for their own powerful positions and selfish goals. They rejected Jesus as the Messiah and challenged His authority in an attempt to destroy Him. Jesus said to them, *“I also will ask you one thing, which if you tell Me, I likewise will tell you by what authority I do these things: The baptism of John—where was it from? From heaven or from men?”* And they reasoned among themselves, saying, *“If we say, ‘From heaven,’ He will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him? But if we say, ‘From men,’ we fear the multitude, for all count John as a prophet.”* So they answered Jesus and said, *“We do not know.”* And He said to them, *“Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things. Notice that these leaders understood that the Lord was speaking this parable against them! “When the chief priests and Pharisees heard His parables, they perceived that He was speaking of them” (v45).*

“When vintage-time drew near, he sent his servants to the vinedressers, that they might receive its fruit” (v34). The servants of the parable represent the prophets that God sent to Israel down through the years in the Old Testament period, like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Zephaniah, and all the other prophets who spoke for God to the people of Israel. But the people of Israel refused to listen to the message of the prophets. In fact, they persecuted the prophets, and even killed some of them. Tradition says, for example, that Isaiah was forced into a hollow log and cut into two. In the parable

we see Israel's rejection of the prophets: *"And the vinedressers took his servants, beat one, killed one, and stoned another. Again he sent other servants, more than the first, and they did likewise to them"* (v35-6).

The coming of Christ, the Son of God, is seen in verse 37: *"Then last of all he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.'" Notice - the parable says that the leaders of Israel actually knew that Jesus was the Messiah! "But when the vinedressers saw the son, they said among themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance.' So they took him and cast him out of the vineyard and killed him."* The parable indicates that the Lord Jesus was not rejected in ignorance. **They knew that Jesus was the Messiah.**

But the leaders of Israel didn't welcome the Son! They wanted to keep their positions of power in the vineyard, the nation of Israel. *"So they took him and cast him out of the vineyard and killed him."* His death was by crucifixion on a Roman cross, outside the vineyard. Hebrews 13:12 says, *"Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate."* The people of Israel rejected the Son of God was rejected at His first coming.

2. The Son of God will be received by Israel at His second coming.

The Lord questioned the chief priests and scribes about the parable: *"Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vinedressers?"* (v40). Notice that the leaders condemned themselves with their answer: *"They said to Him, 'He will destroy those wicked men miserably, and lease his vineyard to other vinedressers who will render to him the fruits in their seasons.'"*

Everything the religious leaders listed as retribution for the "wicked tenants" literally took place. In 70AD, the Roman army overran Jerusalem. They destroyed the Temple, killed the leaders and most of the population, and enslaved or scattered the rest of the Jewish people. Israel was removed temporarily from her place of privilege, and the Gentiles were brought into the place of God's favor.

Then the Lord quoted from Psalm 118, a Messianic psalm: *"The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This was the Lord's doing and it is marvelous in our eyes."* The Messiah who was rejected by Israel was raised from the dead and has become the chief cornerstone, the capstone of the church. The Temple that the Lord is building today is composed of living stones.

The rejected Son of God has been glorified already - but there's more to come! The Lord said, *"Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it"* (v43). Who is this nation who will "bear the fruits"? We believe the nation bearing spiritual fruit refers to the nation of Israel in the future.

Bible prophecies clearly indicate that there will be a spiritual awakening in the nation of Israel before the Lord returns to earth. The nation that once rejected her Messiah will be given a new spiritual heart. They will bear spiritual fruit, and they

will welcome the Lord's return. This is the Israel of the New Covenant of Jeremiah 31:31. This is the Israel that will be saved, according to Romans 11:26. This is the Israel that will be part of our Lord's glorious millennial kingdom here on this earth.

When the Lord returns, all opposition to His kingdom will be crushed and removed: *"And whoever falls on this stone will be broken; but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder"* (v44). Notice that the stone is mentioned first as a stone that is on the ground, and then it is mentioned as a stone that is descending from above. Do you see the two advents of Christ here? At His first coming to earth, Israel stumbled over Him and was broken - and people are still stumbling over Him and are being broken today. At His second coming He will come from above and crush all enemies. This will be the fulfillment of the prophet Daniel's vision of the stone that will crush the image (the image that pictures the Gentile powers), and grinds the image to powder (Daniel 2). All of this will result in glory to God. The people of Israel will receive the Son of God at His Second Coming.

Practical Application

Is God's Cornerstone the Cornerstone of your life?

Israel rejected the most important "Stone" in God's building plans, the Cornerstone! They rejected their Messiah, and they were broken as a result. But Jesus Christ is now glorified, and He is the Cornerstone of God's building, the Church!

Is He the Cornerstone of your life? Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation from sin. We are sinners and we can't save ourselves - but there's hope! Jesus Christ died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins, and now all we have to do is acknowledge to God that we are sinners and receive His free gift of salvation in Christ. That's all we have to do. When we believe by faith in Jesus Christ as our personal Savior, we are saved, and He becomes the cornerstone of our lives.

Have you believed and truly become a Christian, or are you just going through the motions of Christianity by going to church or to some Bible study? Is **God's Cornerstone** the Cornerstone of **your life**?