

Introduction

We come now in our study in Matthew to the parable of the tenant farmers (21.33-46).

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. 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." 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.

"Hear another parable" (21.33) shows us that this parable is part of a dialogue that began when the chief priests and elders challenged Jesus. And when he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority? (21.23). They are asking the Son of God, Jesus-Messiah about His authority to make *Him* give an accounting of Himself *to them*. In reply, Jesus initiated a dialogue. He answered them with a question, **I also will ask you one question, and if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things** (21.24). By this question, Jesus put His adversaries on the horns of a dilemma. He made them face two choices, both are sour lemons, and they had to taste one or the other. No matter which way they answer one horn of the dilemma or the other will poke holes in them, poke holes in their arguments, and painfully expose the absurdity of their attacks. You will recall that they chose the safe path, claiming ignorance: "we are not prepared to answer you; we do not know how to answer your question" (v. 27). Well, Jesus had an agenda all His own. The dilemma referred to John the Baptist: was His baptism from God or man? Thus, the very dilemma that silenced the religious leaders and allowed Jesus to excuse Himself from answering their question about His authority had in it the answer to the question because if you know who John is then you know who Jesus is. John is the forerunner paving the way for the Lord's coming to His temple. Therefore, Jesus is the coming Lord now present in His temple.

Continuing the dialogue, Jesus asked the chief priests and elders to ponder some parables. First, He asked them about a man with two sons, the "no-sayer" and the "yes-sayer" (28-32; we covered that parable in the last sermon). Then He directed their thoughts to the parable before us this morning: the parable of the tenant farmers (or vine growers) and the vineyard (21.33-46; there is one more parable in this dialogue: the wedding feast, 22.1-14 that we will cover next time).

Our goal today is to consider two main things: the presentation of another parable, and the dialogue about it.

1A. The presentation of another parable

Here, we give a brief summary and some general comments.

1B. Brief summary

Jesus speaks of a landowner and calls him **a master of a house** (21.33). He owns property and exercises authority over its use. On his land, he plants a vineyard and takes great care to make it

productive and keep it secure. Jesus tells how the man puts a fence around the vineyard, digs a winepress within it, and builds a tower to hover over it (21.33a). There is protection from wild animals, a place for pressing grapes at harvest time, and a watchtower to view the surroundings and stay a step ahead of potential dangers from animals and thieves. As landowners do, this man rented the vineyard to tenant farmers, people who work the vineyard for an income, but, of course, the owner of the vineyard must receive his share of the harvest. Complicating things slightly is the fact that the owner puts the tenant farmers in charge of the vineyard while he lives in another country (21.33b). Now the stage is set for events that transpire over time.

At harvest time, the master sent his servants to collect his share of the fruits (21.34). Surprisingly, the tenants beat, kill, and stone these servants (21.35). Undaunted, the landowner sent even more servants as collection agents, but the tenant farmers did the same thing to them (beating, killing, and stoning them, 21.36). Things are now in place for the major event of the story, which is the sending of the master's son to face these wicked vine growers. What happens then?

We should read this part of the story: **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** (21.37-39). There is quite a contrast here between the seemingly naïve landowner and the intensely cruel farmers. The master of the land states that the farmers will show respect to his son, but the farmers state that the son is the heir and by killing him they will have his inheritance (21.38). Therefore, they took hold of him, threw him out of the vineyard, and mercilessly killed him (21.39). The owner may seem naïve, but the farmers are definitely foolish. That is where the story ends. Now we turn to some general comments.

2B. Some general comments

Notably, Jesus does not give a direct interpretation of the story like He does in other places by saying things like, "the field is the world" regarding the story of the wheat and weeds. Here, He does not tell us what the details of the parable mean. He does not tell us what the vineyard represents or what He means symbolically by the master, the tenants, the servants, and the son.

No doubt, each of us already knows what the vineyard and characters of the story represent. From our perspective on this side of the death and resurrection of Christ, to hear this story is to understand its basic meaning. God entrusted a vineyard and land to His covenant people Israel expecting the fruit of righteousness. He sent His servants the prophets to garner that fruit, but they beat, stoned, and killed the prophets. Eventually, God sent His Son to gather fruit from His covenant people, but they killed Him too.

Although Jesus does not itemize the elements of the story, He does interpret it through dialogue. This brings us to the second major point for today, the dialogue about this parable.

2A. The dialogue about this parable

Jesus dialogues with the religious leaders by asking them two questions. They answer the first question (not the second), and He applies the second question.

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."** 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 (21.40-46).

The two questions are what will the landowner do and have you read the Scriptures?

1B. What will the landowner do?

At this point in the dialogue, the chief priests and elders react to the story with a powerful statement of judgment by which we know they condemn themselves: **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"** (21.41). It is a fitting condemnation, given who the judges are and what their judgment is. Caution: we often judge others harshly on things we are guilty of ourselves.

2B. Have you read the Scriptures?

Including the word "never" in this question (21.42) indicates the claim of Jesus that these shepherds of the covenant people do not understand the Scriptures; they are blind dogs who serve their own appetites instead of feeding the flock of God (Isa. 56.6-12; Jer.7.11).

Jesus quotes from Psalm 118 (while other things vary, Matthew, Mark, and Luke all find the key application to the parable in this Psalm).

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'?" (21.42).

The OT passage teaches that God gives abiding value to things that men despise. Therefore, God will take the despised and rejected one and make Him the most important man in the history of redemption. God will take hatred and heartless murder and turn it into salvation. God is triumphant over sin and death by the rejection and death of His son.

Jesus then applies the parable to judgment on the covenant people in two ways.

1) He says that God will take the kingdom from Israel and give it to another nation.

Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits (21.43). There is not just going to be a change in leadership. A new *people* will have the kingdom. This is the new Israel anticipated in John's way-preparing work. In view is the coming church that Jesus builds on John the Baptist, Peter, and all the apostles.

Now we know clearly that the vineyard is the kingdom of God, the saving work of God in history. The Lord incorporated the children of Abraham into that work and gave them the gospel in promise of the coming of Christ. However, His covenant people continued to disobey His word. When the prophets called them to repentance, they beat, stoned, and killed them. When Christ called them to repentance, they killed Him. Nevertheless, the redemptive program continues to move forward. God is faithful to His covenant even in the blackest hours of sin and unbelief. He will have His king and kingdom, if He must raise children to Abraham from the stones on the banks of the Jordan River (cf. Mat. 3.1-11).

2) Jesus makes the point that severe judgment awaits all unbelievers

For He says, **"And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him"** (21.44; Lk. 20.18; there is no variant in Luke). God will break and crush those who fall on the rejected stone. Those who reject the rejected one will experience eternal rejection.

Concluding Applications

We can hang the applications from this text on three key words: warning, promise, and summons.

1) The text gives a serious and sober warning regarding judgment

By unbelief, you fall on Christ and that will break you not Him.

Failure to repent and believe is what it means to "fall" on the Lord Jesus (cf. the context, 21.32, **For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. And even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him).**

If you fall on Christ in unbelief, you will do Him no harm, you will not hurt Him, and you will not thwart His purpose of receiving glory from His creation. You will not even prevent Him from receiving glory from your life because the broken pieces of your judgment will display the glory of His perfect justice (Rom 9.23-24: **desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory-²⁴ even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles**).

Therefore, Jesus says, **And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.** (21.44). If you fall on Him by unbelief, this stone will break you into little fragments. If the rejected stone falls on you in your unbelief, it will crush you to powder. With all the heaviness of the metaphor of a massive millstone, Jesus says that the millstone of God's judgment turns painfully slow, but it grinds exceedingly fine. If you have ears to hear, then you need to hear and heed this sober warning. The warning regarding unbelief is a call to repentance.

2) The text gives a marvelous and hopeful promise regarding salvation

... the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits (v. 43).

We have to marvel at the fact that the judgment on Israel is not a terminal point in the history of redemption; it is not an end to the promises of God. To be sure, Israel loses her place as the guardian of God's saving work in history. God gave the children of Abraham a special trust: **to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen** (Rom. 9.5). However, in their unbelief, they no longer have that trust; now the gospel belongs to all nations. Still, in the marvel of love and covenant faithfulness, God includes Israelites in His call of people to Himself from the nations.

if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ **For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.**

¹¹ **For the Scripture says, "Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame."** ¹² **For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him.** ¹³ **For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved"** (Rom. 10.9-13). The context here is the shift from Israel to the nations. The implication is direct and sure. God takes the kingdom away from Israel, but He gives it to a new people, a new Israel, composed, marvelously, of both Jews and Gentiles.

What then is the hopeful promise? If you believe in Christ and thus submit yourself to Him in the totality of all that you are, possess, and hope to be, then you have the kingdom that Israel forfeited. In this connection, you will do well to think about an underlying reason for calling God's plan of salvation a kingdom. One reason for this is the fact that the kingdom of God involves the restoration of sinners to a place of submission to God as their king.

Thus, a submissive spirit of faith, dependence, and childlikeness is at the beginning of the Christian life. Moreover, this same spirit of submission, dependence, and childlikeness is what gives the Christian greatness in each step of His daily walk to glory (Mat. 18.3-4).

Promised is all the blessings and benefits of life in His kingdom under His forgiving love and protection. Salvation flows from the rejected stone that was crucified outside the city gates. Through the resurrection, He triumphed over rejection and secured our redemption from sin and judgment. By faith, no charge, however true, can stand up in the heavenly court against you because God raised Him from the dead for your justification (Rom. 4.25). You can say, "I'm justified and I am a child of the king." You can say that because Christ Jesus died, was raised from the dead, and sits at the right hand of the Father making intercession for His people. Consider that if God did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for you, then how much more will He do all the lesser things necessary to see you home to glory (Rom. 8.32).

3) The text gives an emphatic and powerful summons to fruitful discipleship

The larger context reveals the open welcome, patience, and loving-kindness of God. Intuitively, we must all grant that the actions of the landowner are not likely to occur in actual life. If you were the landowner, and you had servants harmed and even killed, would you send your son to collect payment from them? Would you think that this kind of people would show respect for your son? This fact, untrue to ordinary life, powerfully conveys the thought of what people ought to do, especially in light of the patience and the vulnerability of the landowner. On one hand, the wretchedness of the tenant farmers is so clear and so profound that even wretched hypocrites can hear the story and call out for severe judgment on these farmers. What the farmers ought to do stands out in the story. On the other hand, the patience and vulnerability of the landowner does not present God as a weak and foolish owner of the earth. Instead, it powerfully presents the openness of His offer of grace and kindness that patiently gives much time and many opportunities for repentance. God extends open arms to Israel. To a disobedient and stiff-necked people, God extends welcoming hands (Rom. 10.21, **But of Israel he says, "All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people"**).

A bottom line point defended in this context is the authority of Christ. The challenge to His authority, to His *authoritative teaching*, is what led to the dialogue and this vineyard parable. Thus, a lesson here is that your teacher is the Son of God; He is the Lord. He is your risen Lord Jesus, **the head of the corner**. He is present as your teacher by the Spirit until the end of the age.

Therefore, you are to bring forth the fruits of repentance. This must be genuine in contrast to the hypocrisy and false piety of the spiritual leaders in Israel. That means that you have the duty to learn for practical living. A key practical fruit is prayer in new temple worship (cf. the earlier context on the house of prayer). You need to be earnest in learning from the Lord as your prophet, priest, and king, prayerfully earnest. The Lord's questions leap from the text *to you* (21.42): "have *you* read the Scriptures?" Do *you* understand the marvelous "doings" of the Lord? Do you dialogue with openness in the Lord's presence with His people, pastor and flock?

Some Reformation saints express this kind of practical and fruitful discipleship well. I cite two of them from the seventeenth century *to exhort you to learning theology as everyday Christians*: Thomas Cranmer and William Ames.

a) Homilies of Thomas Cranmer (Puritan in 16th century England)

"Unto a Christian man there can be nothing either more necessary or profitable than the knowledge of holy scripture, forasmuch as in it is contained God's true word, setting forth his glory, and also man's duty... Therefore as many as be desirous to enter into the right and perfect way of God, must apply their minds to know holy scripture; without the which, they can neither sufficiently know God and his will, neither their office and duty. And as drink is pleasant to them that be dry, and meat to them that be hungry; so is the reading, hearing, searching, and studying of holy scripture to them that be desirous to know God or themselves, and to do his will" (*The Reformation*, Nichols, 132-33).

According to Ames, what hinders this great privilege of knowing God? People "who loathe and abhor the heavenly knowledge and food of God's word" are those that are "drowned in worldly vanities, that they neither savour God, nor any godliness. However, there is another way, "whoever is diligent to read, and in his heart print that he readeth, the great affection to the transitory things of this world shall be diminished in him, and the great desire of heavenly things (that be therein promised of God) shall increase in him" (Nichols, 133).

b) William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology* (1642)

Theology is "the doctrine or teaching of living to God" and that is where we find the good life because "theology is better defined as that good life whereby we live to God" (Nichols, 106). If theology defines the good life, then you find the promise of the highest possible

goodness in life in the treasures of the gospel of Jesus Christ the rejected stone made head of the corner.

Now, how do you answer these key questions: what is most necessary and most profitable for the Christian man and for the Christian woman? Do you have your priorities in order regarding the authority of Jesus? Do you recognize that studying the God-ward life is the noblest of all pursuits in this world? Do you seek the face of God at the feet of Christ your Prophet? If so, then you need to make this kind of commitment daily, “Lord, this is another day that you have given to me. In this day, what is most necessary and profitable for me is to know your holy word. Help me today to live what I know of you and your will in the business, the busy-ness, of my day. *Help me, O Lord, to return eagerly to your word, especially on your honorable resurrection day Sabbath* (Acts 4.10-12). Help me *to print more of it in my heart for your glory*. I commit myself to you as my authority in all of life. I commit myself to the authority of your teaching that I have before me in the sixty-six books of the Bible. I commit myself to learn from you so I can better know you and know how to do your will. Amen.”

May we fall down before the majesty of our God in humble acknowledgement of our sinful “no-saying” and covenant breaking. May the Lord, by His Spirit, enable us to avoid hypocrisy by living out our commitments of baptism, communion, and our church covenant. May we learn from the Lord Jesus and may we come to know Him better and better by seeking to live under His authority as our prophet, priest, and king. To Him be all glory, now and forevermore, amen.