

Matthew 21:33-46 – “A Parable of Wicked Tenants”

We're looking at Jesus' last few days before His crucifixion. He's made His way down to Jerusalem where everything is going to come to a pre-determined head. Remember, Jerusalem is the religious center of Judaism. The people that Jesus had to contend with and who posed the greatest opposition to Him were these religious leaders. These were the ones that should have been in tune to the Scriptures and recognized Jesus as their Messiah, but they failed to accept Him. This is why Jesus ministered mainly in the Galilee region. He was able to reach people more willing to hear, who weren't so hardened with self-righteousness. So, these last few days are a time of confrontation. Jesus is dealing with the pride, hypocrisy, and self-righteousness of these religious leaders. And it's what ultimately sets the stage for His going to the cross – which He has purposed all along.

In our text today, Jesus shares a parable (the second of three parables He shares) to show these religious leaders their sin and judgment for rejecting Jesus.

Summary Statement:

Jesus takes Israel's leaders through a history lesson to show them what was expected of them. But because they have failed in obeying God's calling for them, He reveals their future outcome based on their present problem with Jesus.

1. Jesus Reveals the History of Israel – 21:33-39

21:33-35 - *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.*

In this day it was not uncommon for an owner of a field to lease out their land to tenant farmers. They wouldn't own the land, most of the time they weren't the ones that even planted the crop, they were just tenants managing the crops and they would work it for their provision as well.

- Interestingly archaeologists have found ancient records of disputes between landowners and their tenant farmers.

As Jesus began to speak using this imagery, these Jewish leaders would have been very familiar with these terms and what they represented.

Let's look to Isaiah for the context of this.

- **Isaiah 5:1–7**, *“Now let me sing to my Well-beloved A song of my Beloved regarding His vineyard: My Well-beloved has a vineyard On a very fruitful hill. ² He dug it up and cleared out its stones, And planted it with the choicest vine. He built a tower in its midst, And also made a winepress in it; So He expected it to bring forth good grapes, But it brought forth wild grapes. ³ “And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, Judge, please, between Me and My vineyard. ⁴ What more could have been done to My vineyard That I have not done in it? Why then, when I expected it to bring forth good grapes, Did it bring forth wild grapes? ⁵ And now, please let Me tell you what I will do to My vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it shall be burned; And break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. ⁶ I will lay it waste; It shall not be pruned or dug, But there shall come up briars and thorns. I will also command the clouds That they rain no rain on it.” ⁷ For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, And the men of Judah are His pleasant plant. He looked for justice, but behold, oppression; For righteousness, but behold, a cry for help.”*

Notice the imagery that Jesus uses is taken right out of Isaiah, where the *Beloved* is God and the *vineyard* is Israel. A *winepress* is dug and a *tower* for security is built. Everything Jesus mentions in this parable is taken from Isaiah. His audience should have known quite clearly the significance of these things.

Now when the landowner desired to receive the intended fruit that should have come, he sent his servants to gather this fruit. But when they came, the tenants did not follow through with what was intended for them. Rather they beat and killed some of these servants of the landowner.

In this parable, the **landowner** is God. The **servants** are His prophets. The **vinedressers** are the nation of Israel who repeatedly walked in disobedience and was not bringing the intended fruit of worship and witness of the Lord. So the Lord raised up prophets to call Israel to repentance and obedience. God did so

out of a heart of care for His people and had blessing for them when they walked in obedience.

- Prophets like Jeremiah were raised up to speak to the nation and warn them of coming doom for their idolatry and rebellion. Jeremiah was mocked and mistreated; he was put in stocks. Isaiah was another prophet used to warn Israel and call them back to God. He was eventually sawn in two.
- These servants were beaten, stoned and killed.
- Think about that. These were God's representatives. He knew how they would be treated, but He sent them, and they willingly went, ready to lay their lives down for the kingdom cause. Are we willing to be servants of the Lord no matter the outcome? Are we willing to lay our lives down for the cause of Christ?

21:36-39 - *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.*

God was gracious to send other servants (prophets). He gave Israel warning after warning to get right with Him that they may enjoy the blessing He had for them. But they continued to ignore these prophets going so far as to kill some of them. How far they had fallen.

But what was even more gracious is that God decided to send His own Son. Surely they're not going to mistreat Him. Surely this will bring them to a place of submission to such authority.

- But when Jesus came, the religious leaders didn't want to surrender any ground to Him. They liked being the ones in charge, the rulers over this vineyard. They didn't want to just be the tenants that God entrusted to bring fruit from, they wanted to be the ones that were calling the shots.
- They were thinking they can act more like the owners and they failed to see their place before God. There was no fear of God in them. So they took the son and killed him.

Jesus speaks this prophetically because in just a few days the leaders of Israel are going to hand Jesus over to the Romans to be crucified. He will be cast out of the vineyard so to speak.

And keep in mind, these religious leaders didn't reject Jesus because they didn't realize who He was, they rejected Him because they refused to accept Him and submit to His authority.

2. Jesus Reveals the Future of Israel – 21:40-43

21:40-41 - “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.”

As Jesus wraps up this parable, He poses this question to His audience: *What will the landowner do to these wicked tenants?*

These religious leaders are hearing all this and they are full of righteous indignation – only it's more self-righteous indignation.

- These religious leaders answer wisely for a change, and they answer correctly but they lacked discernment. They didn't realize that Jesus was talking about them. I can imagine Jesus chuckling to Himself at their self-righteousness and judgment being cast on those they thought deserved it, failing to see they were casting condemnation upon themselves.

And this is exactly what's going to take place. Israel was given an incredible privilege of being a nation set apart for God to be a light for the rest of the nations. They were given His Word, the Holy Scriptures that were to be preserved and passed down as the standard of truth. They were the nation that He would deliver the Messiah through that would bring the promise of life to the whole world. They had amazing blessings. But they squandered it. And because of it, God would turn the right of the kingdom and these spiritual blessings of the vineyard over to another group – the Church. The Church is made up of Gentiles primarily but encompasses all.

So here's these religious leaders feeling pretty full of self-righteousness, ready to call out judgment. They think they're so superior. It's easy to feel that way when we look at the sin in others.

- Too often the sin we struggle with always seems worse in others. How we need to be careful to look at our own shortcomings before pointing the finger of judgment at others.

33:42-43 - 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.

I love it when Jesus asks these religious leaders, **have you never read...?** Because they were the ones that should have clearly known from Scriptures what was going on. It’s kind of like a subtle slam he’s giving to these guys.

And Jesus quotes from Psalm 118:22-23, a very Messianic Psalm. Remember, the crowds quoted from this Psalm when Jesus just a couple of days earlier came riding into Jerusalem. They shouted, *“Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord”* (Matthew 21:9). That’s right out of Psalm 118:25-26.

But this Psalm also includes this passage about a rejected stone.

- Jesus includes it here to show how the religious leaders rejected Jesus. He was the chief cornerstone.
- Story has it that when they were building the Temple, no tool could be used or heard at the Temple site. So they cut and fashioned together all the rocks at a rock quarry away from the Temple. They would then ship them over and they would be ready to piece together. Well, one stone showed up and they didn’t know where it was supposed to go, they couldn’t figure it out, so they tossed the stone to the side. As they neared completion of the Temple, they noticed that this very important stone was missing. They called down to the rock quarry and asked where this stone was. They said they shipped it long ago. After some looking around, they discovered it down the hill, some bushes growing around it. And they discovered that this stone that had been rejected, was indeed the very stone they needed, the most important stone in the architect of the building.
- Jesus is often referred to as that Rock. (Psalm 61:2; 1 Corinthians 10:4).

These religious leaders had their own form of religion, but it was void of Jesus. And nothing they did would truly fit or work because if you don’t have Jesus, it’s all in vain.

- And many have been turning that Rock aside and realizing that their lives don’t seem as stable as they would like. He’s the Rock upon which everything else sits, He’s the rock that holds all things together.

This One that many rejected and turned aside as just an ordinary person, is actually the One that is holding all things together. This is the Lord's doing! It's marvelous. It's an amazing thing that God would send His Son as one of us and would willingly die for us. He is the One that we build our lives upon.

Since Israel rejected their King, the kingdom would be taken from them and given to a nation ready to bear its fruit. That is speaking of the Church.

- This is not speaking of replacement theology or that the church has replaced Israel or is now spiritual Israel. Promises that God gave Israel are still at play because they were unconditional. Israel will be set aside for a time, but the kingdom will not be taken from Israel forever. When Jesus returns and establishes His Kingdom, Israel will have a prominent place in it (Romans 11:26-27; Genesis 12, 15; 2 Samuel 7; Jeremiah 31).

3. Jesus Reveals the Present Problem with Israel – 21:44-46

21:44-46 - *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.*

We've already seen how Jesus is that key stone which we build our lives upon. When I gave my life to Jesus, I was stoned! Let me word that a different way. I came in repentance and recognized my need for Jesus.

So we have two options. We can either fall upon that Rock where we may experience brokenness, but that's where God would have us, to realize that we have nothing to offer in ourselves. We're not good enough to earn salvation, we need to be broken and humble.

The alternative is to have the Rock fall on you, in which there will not be brokenness, there will be crushing.

- Peter writes that He is a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense (2 Peter 2:8a). To many, Jesus is nothing more than a stumbling block. They get tripped up over the fact that He says He is the way the truth and the life. They try and live righteously in themselves. These religious leaders were following the law, many today follow religion. And then you have someone turn to Jesus and put their trust in Him and they're saved. All the while the religious folk are thinking, *'It's that easy? You mean they're going to go to*

heaven and I'm not?' And instead of yielding to Him humbly, people rebel against Him. He becomes a rock of stumbling, and one that eventually crushes.

- Everyone one day will have to bow down. You can either do it now and experience peace and life, or you can wait, when it will be to your detriment. Christ will either save you or judge you, there is no middle ground.

These religious leaders began to read through the lines and realized Jesus was talking about them. But instead of taking this to heart, they continued in rebellion and looked for a way to take Him out. The only thing that stopped them was the fear of the crowd.

Points to Ponder:

1. Have we been good stewards with what God has entrusted to us?
2. Are we bearing fruit and honoring God with our lives?
3. Have we been trusting in our own righteousness, or have we allowed the Rock of Jesus to bring us to a place of brokenness and dependency on Him?

2 Corinthians 5:21, *"For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."*