

Matthew 21:33–46

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[0 : 00] Again, Matthew chapter 21, beginning in verse 33 and reading through the end of the chapter in verse 46. Hear the word of the Lord this morning.

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.

When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit. And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another.

And he said, other servants, more than the first, and they did the same to them. Finally, he sent his son to them, saying, they will respect my son.

But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, this is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance. And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

[1 : 06] When, therefore, the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants? 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 of their seasons.

Jesus said to them, have you never read 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.

Therefore, I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits. And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces.

And when it falls on anyone, it will crush him. When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them. And although they were seeking to arrest him, they feared the crowds because they held him to be a prophet.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. You may be seated. Well, good morning. And as you're finding your seat, I just want to express my own thanks to the worship team.

[2 : 20] I mean, how great is that, all of you volunteering your time? I know you show up on here. You show up here on days that are not Sunday. And then we just enter right into what you've done for us.

Just praising God for you, each one of you. And I'm still waiting for the day for Joe Pace to let me into the choir. He tells me it's going to be a long time.

A mighty long time. Our Heavenly Father, hide me behind your cross. Forgive me of my sins.

Allow these words to be unique moments in the life of our church. Do something with each one who has come as we come to understand what you have to say.

In Jesus' name, amen. Often, when Lisa and I are with our kids, our grandchildren might turn to me and say, Hey, Grandpa, tell us a story.

[3 : 35] And if I begin by saying, once upon a time, I can guarantee you little Simeon is going to break in and say, No, no, no, no, tell us a true story, Grandpa.

We want a true story. Children love stories. Adults are no different. Today, we're given a story.

The storyteller is Jesus. It goes by the name of a parable. And where most stories that we gravitate toward allow us to escape into another world, or stories are read because we want to encounter some redemptive element in those fictional beings that we can somehow appropriate into our own lives.

Perhaps stories are so powerful because they just enhance our leisure. All those things may be true of stories in general, but parables are here to pack a punch.

That's one thing you've got to know before we even begin today. It's a story, but the intention is to hit you right between the eyes.

[5 : 11] I guess I wouldn't necessarily then bring this one to play on my grandchildren come the next time they ask for one. But here it is. The children are not present.

They disappeared two days ago in chapter 21 with the triumphal entry. The audience for this story, it's actually listed there at the close, are the priests and the Pharisees.

They're earlier referred to as the priests and the elders. It's a story for an adult gathering.

Something like this. I want to forewarn you the point of the story.

Can I just lay it out there now so that it doesn't come with such great angst later? There will be earth-shattering consequences for anyone who rejects Jesus.

That's kind of where this thing is moving. Earth-shattering consequences for anyone who rejects Jesus.

[6 : 17] You'll be free to do so, but it will come at a devastating cost. Let's listen to the story as Jesus tells it, and let's see if we can't actually leave here as better people for having come.

Look at the story's setting with me. Verse 33. Here's the setting. 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 the tenants and went away into another country.

Just a couple of observations about the setting. He invokes the presence of a master of a house.

This would be a homeowner.

In the story, he'll be the proprietor. It's the one who has the rightful claim of the dominion, the plot of land under which his home exists.

He starts the story by presenting you and me with a lord of the manor, as it were. Secondly, though, this master of a house plants a vineyard.

[7 : 35] Now, this would have been a very common feature in the first century agrarian world. They would have been all familiar, each listener, to his story with what this looked like, whereas for you and for me it may or may not be the case.

But a vineyard is simply an ancient agrarian farm that more than likely grew wine. In fact, we're going to learn later that one of the aspects of this vineyard was a vineyard that had a wine press.

So there's not little hazelnut bushes growing here across Italy to supply what's needed for the man who owns Nutella. It's not oranges down in Florida that you may have come across.

No, this is a wine farm. This is a vineyard that would produce a harvest of grapes. It really wasn't until last year that I actually experienced what it's like to walk in a vineyard.

I found myself in South Africa and was taken to a wine farm, as it were, a vineyard. The oldest one in the whole country, Groot, Constantia, 17th century.

[8 : 55] It had a Danish, like, manor, and all of the fields were kind of mounting on the slopes and the horizon. And we were capable of walking it, and I saw the wood posts that I didn't know how long they had been there, and the irrigation system.

And then later in the year, I had the pleasure of being in Italy. Don't think I travel all that much. It's the first time I've ever been to Italy. So don't, like, you know, get on my case for having gone to Italy as a pastor.

In fact, Lisa and I wanted to go to Italy at our 30th anniversary. That was nine-plus years ago. We went out for Italian food instead. But at any rate, this year I got to Italy, and we were in Tuscany and then Umbria, and then we went to a vineyard, and we stood in a cave, really, that went back to the Etruscan people, and we saw the casks.

And it was quite stunning, really, just to be in a vineyard, to smell. You could actually smell grapes on the vine. This man plants a vineyard.

And then it says, he put a fence around it and dug a winepress in it and built a tower and leased it to tenants and went away.

[10 : 17] This is an interesting thing. I mean, it's not just a story about a landowner with a vineyard, but for some reason, Jesus includes these little details in the setting which fire our imagination.

He wants us to know that the master of the house has prepared everything before leaving that it might be successful. That's the setting.

It isn't just where he's put you. It's that it has every reason. He has every reason to believe when he leaves that this is going to be worth all the money that he put into it.

He put a fence around it to keep things from the outside getting in, most likely. It says he put a winepress in it. I had to actually see, you know, what does a winepress look like?

I was familiar with an olive press where they put olives in a big circular concrete thing and hook a donkey up to it and goes around and gets that. But a winepress would have been almost like a concrete flooring on the farm floor that all the grapes would have gone into and it had ropes going across so that men and women who were getting the harvest, they would hold on to the ropes and they would go through the grapes separating the juice from the skin and from the seed.

[11 : 38] And underneath then the liquid would flow out into lower barrels and then they would take those barrels and the fermentation process would begin. This man didn't just plant a vineyard.

He planted one that the circumference of his land was protected, that it might be secure. He planted one that had housed all the elements necessary to get his crop into the process of fermentation. And then it actually says he planted a watchtower. A watchtower would have been the place from which all the workers could receive direction. Somebody elevated above.

I mean, when he went away, he had every reason for success. That's the setting. Can you see yourself standing there? He leaves.

But there's more here to the setting that would have been a common feature in first century Palestine. This setting that Jesus chooses to tell the story is a metaphor previously for God's relationship to Israel.

[12 : 49] I think this is partly why he chooses it. In Isaiah chapter 5, we read, Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard.

The writer is writing about God's love for his vineyard. He said, My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones and planted it with choice vines.

He built a watchtower in it in the midst of it and hewed out a wine vat in it. And he looked for it to yield grapes. That's the setting.

What emerges in the story, and all good stories do this, is they move from the setting to this escalation of plot line that holds the interest of the reader.

And it's no different with this story. Because after the setting in verse 33, I want you to put your eyes on verses 34, initially through 36.

[13 : 59] The story's surprising escalation of tension. Let me read it. Wow, there's some conflict in this story.

Again, he sent other servants, more than the first, and they did the same to them. These movements are like stairs that ascend for the storyteller, and now give you and me, the reader, the vantage point of this wonderful provision where everything was supplied.

Nothing needed to be outsourced. It's now resisted in its plan by those who were cultivating the farm.

To the point of killing servants, verse 35, and then verse 36, the interesting phrase to me in this story is, more than the first.

He sent other servants more than the first, and they did the same to him. The word servants, you and I need to know, is an interesting one, given what we know of the metaphor of the relationship between God and ancient Israel.

[15 : 30] You see, the priests and the Pharisees were likened to the ones who were to cultivate God's vineyard in Jesus' day.

Yes, let me put it that way. The priests had the privileged responsibility of curating God's farm so that people would know how it is they can be saved.

And the Pharisees were the ones who regulated what life would look like so that God's family would actually be in play. And so the chief priests and the Pharisees, whose privileged responsibility is the cultivation of God's people, well, historically anyway, they killed the servants.

See, the word servant, well, the Old Testament keeps talking about the prophets as the servants. I mean, you could put it this way in the story. The priests and the Pharisees who were in the privileged place of bringing people into a relationship with God, by the time the prophets came along to get the harvest God expected, well, they killed my servants, the prophets.

See, the prophets would come later in Israel's history. They would come and just think of them as people that were harvesters.

[17 : 05] They would come and they are the ones who trim off dead wood that's not supposed to be here. They're the ones who put new wire up that would actually train the plant more profitably for the coming year.

They're the ones who would trim things, ready things for the harvest. And when God sent those men into Israel's history, well, they found something and it wasn't really fruit ready.

I mean, if you go back to that little moment in Isaiah 5 again, right after what I had read before, God said, what more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done for it?

When I looked for grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? See, the story is now emerging with significance.

And then the high point of the escalation of tension comes there in verse 37. Finally, he sent his son to them, saying, they will respect my son.

[18:09] But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, this is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance. And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

I mean, this tension now in the story is at climactic moments. People don't want God's son receiving his just fruit.

The son is a very interesting word choice here, isn't it? It's the theme that Matthew's been trying to prove from his opening line.

I got something to say to you about Jesus, son of David, son of Abraham. Early on, Jesus is called the son of God. Now Jesus is almost being self-referential, I feel.

He's writing himself into the script of his own story. He's saying, now what I'm seeing as I come on the scene amidst all the chief priests and the Pharisees, as I go to church, as I attend the temple, I've got wild grapes.

[19:19] I don't have a harvest of righteousness ready. This is the son, then, that is going to be taken out. All of this is just beneath the surface of the story.

verse 40 and 41. A climactic question.

Let me just set it up. When I tell a story to my grandchildren on my lap, I let the story have its own setting and I fill it out so that they can almost visualize it.

I go through the movements of the story, the extending stairs that would help them see where this is moving and then at some point I ask them a question. So what do you think about the story that I'm telling?

Jesus does something similar to his adult audience here. He actually gets to that very moment in the story where incomprehensibly the son is himself killed and then he asks them, verse 40, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to the tenants?

[20:30] And they said to him, he'll put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits of their seasons. What a moment.

If I had to frame this moment for you and for me as it's fallen upon me, this is the moment where the punch of the parable is now set up and they never saw it coming.

He asks them the question. It puts the listener, their response, puts them in the path of his knockout blow.

And that comes in verses 42 to 46. Can you just put your eyes on that text in some way? Find your eyes to the Bible and look at verses 42 to 46 because this is where the point of the parable lands a blow upon the listener.

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's marvelous in our eyes. Therefore, I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing fruit.

[21:51] Just look at those opening phrases. Have you never read and then therefore I tell you. Have you never read? This is the jab that sets up the right hook.

This is the left jab at the close of a story. He's talking to people who know the Bible. He goes, hey, if you get what's going on in my story, haven't you ever read the bit where this is what happens to God's people in their relationship to God?

Haven't you read the bit where they reject the very one who's come to build God's house?

Interestingly, the quote, and this will be really fascinating for some of you who have literary interest. Others of you just hold on for a minute. The quote is from Psalm 118. It's that final Hallel song that the children sang two days before where they said, blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.

It's the same psalm, it's just a different verse. Because in the psalm where people lauded the king's entrance into the city, blessed is the one who's coming, in that psalm there is language that he will

be rejected when he arrives.

[23 : 18] That the one who was a cornerstone, that's the word there, the one who, that is, the first stone that was laid, the stone upon which every other stone finds its reference point, that primary stone is the one that's rejected.

I mean, you think of it this way, even on a building like this, it's usually ceremonial today, but if you're a structural engineer today or you're an architect of points, you know the importance of a cornerstone.

You lay the first stone significantly, understanding that everything about your design will find its reference point to that and it has to be perfect.

What Jesus is saying is that in the psalm itself, the primary point from which every other person will find their reference in the kingdom was rejected.

Everything then is askew. And not only that, that same psalm will say, yeah, and the one that they reject, well, festive cords will bind him and he himself will become the sacrifice.

[24 : 29] So, so while, while Jesus appeals to a thing they ought to know that condemns their rejection of himself, he's already prophetically indicating that he will be the one that will die in their place, all from one place in Scripture.

That's a jab if ever there was one and believe me, it landed. But it actually set him up for the right hook. verse 43, therefore, I tell you the kingdom of God is going to be taken away from you, given to a people producing fruits, and the one on whom falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone it will crush him.

Now, those just aren't words that he decides to lay out, but I did tell you it was earth-shattering news for those who reject Jesus. He's pulling here, not from Psalm 118, but from Daniel chapter 2, even another children's story where the king had a dream about a tall statue of his own kingdom, and Daniel interpreted it and said, well, you can build your kingdoms however you want, but at some point a stone is coming, and the stone is going to shatter the rain and the rule of all that you've built for yourself.

Jesus is alluding now to that Daniel 2 image, so that by the Psalms and the prophets he is indicating himself to be the one that will crush any who reject him, but also be the reference point of their covering for those on whom he would be received.

you know, I'm going to do it, I'm going to do it one more time, I'm not going to ask you to even turn it, but I'm so convinced that all of this comes out of Isaiah's prophetic discourse, verse 5, not only did he plant a field to yield grapes, not only did it yield wild grapes, but now I tell you what I will do to my vineyard, I will remove its hedge, it shall be devoured, I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down, I will make it a waste, for the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are pleasant, his pleasant planting, he looked for justice, but behold bloodshed, for righteousness, but behold an outcry, and with that the story is nearly complete, because verse 45 and verse 46, that's not the words of Jesus, now you're getting Matthew's takeaway, and believe me this is where you and I come in,

[27 : 35] Matthew tells us that when the chief priests and Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them, and although they were seeking to arrest him, they feared the crowds because they held him to be a prophet, a parable is intended to punch, this parable wants to say that there will be earth shattering consequences for anyone who rejects Jesus as king, not just religious people, not just chief priests and Pharisees, I mean you look again at verse 44, the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him, anyone now comes into play, you come into play, I come into play, the question is simply this, what are you doing with

Jesus' story? which really comes down to what are we doing with Jesus? Do we hold him to be the son of God, the savior of sinners, the rightful heir over all of God's kingdom?

Or, do we consider ourselves to be set loose in this world to create our own meaning, and therefore push him from his rightful place?

What are you doing with Jesus? This is it, for those of us who would reject him, there will be earth shattering consequences.

What are those? Well, it means that we won't enter into his kingdom. it means that you won't receive all the wares that he's the rightful recipient of.

[29 : 46] It means that when you die and stand before him and he says to you, why should I let you into my kingdom? You'd have to honestly say, I'm not quite sure why, because I spent my life

building my own.

But, for those who do receive him, to those who do labor in his vineyard and give him the fruit that he deserves, well, this story is nothing to fear.

I mean, look at the way that that wonderful little line ends. The story ends really with that nice line in verse 41, where the people actually say that he's going to give it to others who will give him the fruits in their seasons.

That's what he wants from you. That's what he wants from me. He wants you to be a person who submits yourself to the son's rule in order for laboring for his welfare.

That's it. That's the purpose of life. And those who do that receive the kingdom. Is Jesus getting the fruits of your seasons?

[31 : 09] Jesus actually says it's not just a thing in the future. He's like the tax collectors and the sinners. They're getting into the kingdom before these guys. They're people. You can already be getting the rewards of the kingdom long before you see your king face to face.

Well, I pray that we would be, as a church family, living stones. Not killing stones.

Living stones built up in ways that serve his welfare. Let me just say it again. don't die before deciding for Jesus.

Because there will be earth shattering consequences for any of us who do. Instead, delight in the privilege of being put to work in his field.

and give him all the fruits of your labors. Our heavenly father, we have heard this parable with its power.

[32 : 41] I pray that as we've looked at it together as a church family, that there wouldn't be a single person here who would succumb to the fate of those who reject Jesus.

Help us to receive him that the earth's shattering eternal consequences would not befall us, but rather heaven's salvation and your kingdom would open up to us.

Help us to do it even as we give ourselves to you in faith. In Jesus' name, amen. Well, let's stand, get on our feet.