

The Parable of the Wicked Tenants

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[0 : 00] And as you turn there, let's bow our heads. Heavenly Father, we bow in your presence. May your word be our rule, your spirit our teacher, and your greater glory our supreme concern, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The war of the roses wasn't fought over flowers. If there are any men called William in Fort William, they don't live in castles. And the parable of the tenants isn't really about tenants at all.

It's about Jesus Christ. It's about how Jesus has replaced the Jerusalem temple as the climax and focus of God's love at work in his world.

It's about how and why the religious leaders of Israel rejected and crucified their Lord. It's about God's purposes for us as his church.

By this stage, Jesus has only a few days left before he will be betrayed, handed over to the Romans, and executed. He has much to say, a little time in which to say it.

[1 : 12] In this parable in Matthew 21, verses 33 through 46, with only a few words, Jesus explains who he is, what's going to happen to him and why, and what God's purpose in all this is.

We're going to learn that far from being the hapless victim of a bloodthirsty crowd, Jesus was always in control, and his gospel purpose was to create a new people who were characterized not by their ethnicity, but by their faith in him.

A people who do not reject Jesus, but who rely on him, and in so doing produce the fruit of righteousness, love, and peace.

There are three themes in this passage. The centrality of Jesus, the rejection of Jesus, and the people of Jesus.

Again, I say the parable of the tenants isn't really about tenants at all. It's about the gospel of Jesus Christ. It's about how Jesus replaces the temple of Jerusalem as the focus and climax of God's love in this world.

[2 : 25] It's about how and why the religious leaders of Israel rejected and crucified him. And the lesson we want to take away with us today, all of us, is the crucial importance of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord.

That it's by faith in him we become the people of God. First of all then, first theme, the centrality of Jesus. This parable is, in reality, two parables.

The first concerning tenant farmers, the second concerning the temple's future. Tenants and temples, but both themes coalesce around the centrality of Jesus.

Jesus, the son whom the tenant farmers seize, throw out of the vineyard and kill. Jesus, the stone the builders reject and throw away.

The reason that the parable of the tenants isn't really about tenants at all is because it's about Jesus, the son, and Jesus, the stone. It is not a parable about the morality of ownership.

[3 : 40] It's a parable about the man of God, Jesus Christ, the object of our faith, trust, and worship. In verses 33 through 41, he is the son.

In verses 42 through 46, he is the stone. He is the son, first of all, the son. We all know the story. Jesus tells it better than any of us can.

A certain landowner plants a vineyard. He takes great care of it. He places a wall around it to keep out predators and thieves. He digs a wine press in it to maximize the production of wine.

He even erects a watchtower for its protection. And then he goes on a journey and he leases it to tenant farmers. A thousand years before Jesus spoke these words, God spoke through the prophet Isaiah.

And God told Israel an even more in-depth parable about his planting of a vineyard. Back there in Isaiah chapter 5, the vineyard represented the nation of Israel, symbolized by the city of Jerusalem, which itself was placed on a hillside.

[4 : 48] In that parable in Isaiah 5, from which Jesus is drawing heavily here, we read, My beloved had a vineyard on a fertile hillside.

He dug it up. He cleared it of stones. He planted it with the choicest vine. He built a tower in it and he cut out a wine press as well. Israel, the people of Israel, are God's vineyard.

So who are these tenants whom God has placed over his vineyard so that it will produce a harvest of fruit for him? They are the religious leaders of Israel, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the chief priests, the teachers of the law.

These leaders are to tend and care for God's people, the vineyard, in such a way that they would produce fruit for God.

That fruit being, as we've seen all the way through Matthew 21, faith in Christ, repentance, and righteousness. But when God sent his servants to collect the harvest, these tenant farmers beat one, killed the second, and stoned the third.

[6 : 02] This refers to the way in which God had sent prophets to Israel to call them to repentance and faith, but to a man the religious leaders of Israel had rejected them and killed them, men like Jeremiah and John the Baptist.

Finally, God sends his one and only son, but the tenant farmers seize him, and they drag him outside the city walls, and they kill him.

We're going to look at more of this rejection in a moment, but what I want you to grasp here is that Jesus very deliberately in this parable refers to himself as the son.

A couple of chapters on, Matthew 23, 37, Jesus weeps over Jerusalem and he says, oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who killed the prophets and stoned those sent to you.

Jerusalem, the city which is the beating heart of Israel's history and life and identity and religion, has killed the prophets and has stoned those God sent to them, but now the son is here.

[7 : 09] No mere prophet, no mere priest, God's son. Don't these tenant farmers know that the man standing before them is God's son?

Don't the religious authorities to whom Jesus is addressing this parable know who he is? He is the son whom God loves. He's not merely God's servant, he's God's son.

And they must treat him with the same dignity and respect as if they would treat God himself. That's the point, is it not? The vineyard belongs not just to the landowner, but to his son, because his son is the heir of all that is his, and therefore that vineyard is his also.

Jerusalem belongs to Jesus. The temple belongs to Jesus. The nation belongs to Jesus. It's all his. And he's come now to look for faith and righteousness. No, the parable of the tenants isn't really about tenants at all, but about the son whom God sent.

This is who Jesus is, God's son. Come to claim what is rightfully his. But then also, Jesus is the stone.

[8 : 27] The second half of the parable from verse 42 to 46 contains multiple references to the stones which make up the temple in Jerusalem. Jesus here with his extensive knowledge of the Old Testament stretches to his own self-understanding of where he fits into it all, and he quotes from Psalm 118 verse 22, words we sing at every communion.

The stone which the builders rejected has become the capstone or cornerstone. The Lord has done this. It's marvelous in our eyes. In the earlier verses, the religious elite are pictured as being the tenant farmers.

Now they are the builders of the temple. And to be sure, it was their ancestors who had built the temple in Jerusalem, carefully placing one stone on top of another until a temple was built the like of which had never been seen before.

The tenant farmers in the earlier parable are now the temple builders. But just as the tenant farmers rejected a son, so now they reject a stone.

That stone is the chief capstone, the highest point of the temple. Some translations like ours here rendered it as cornerstone. That's fine. The point is that the builders reject the most important stone in the whole structure, that stone without which the building doesn't make sense and will fall down.

[10 : 00] Jesus, you see, is casting himself this time not as the son but as the stone, that cornerstone upon which the whole life of Israel is built. That capstone which climaxes the life of Israel.

He is the focus of God's presence and saving worship in the world. Jesus, the new temple of God as we have already seen earlier in Matthew 21.

All God's saving, loving purposes for the world coalesce around this one man, Jesus Christ, the stone the religious leaders of Israel rejected.

We simply cannot know or understand God without Jesus. Why? Shall the builder reject that very stone which is the cornerstone of his temple?

Shall the religious leaders of Israel really crucify their Christ? As you can see then, the major theme of these parables is not the temple, is not the tenant farmers or the temple's future but the person, the dignity, the work of Jesus Christ.

[11 : 08] He is the son God sent to the people of Israel. He is the stone who forms the capstone or cornerstone of God's purposes of love for his people.

It's a marvelous thing, you know, to echo the words of Psalm 118. But Jesus Christ our Lord is both God's son and the central stone. And I wonder to what extent we realize how great and glorious Jesus Christ is.

I wonder to what extent we worship him as son and stone. The water of the roses wasn't fought over flowers and there ain't nobody called William in Fort William who lives in a castle.

the parable of the tenants isn't about tenants. It's about Jesus Christ. The centrality of Jesus.

Secondly, we have here the rejection of Jesus. The rejection of Jesus. There's a chilling level of rejection at work in this passage. And what's chilling and tantalizing is the suggestion that both the tenant farmers and the temple builders knew exactly who it was they were rejecting.

[12 : 24] They knew that the one who had come to collect for the harvest was the landowner's son. They knew that they were rejecting the cornerstone.

In verse 45 we read when the chief priests and Pharisees heard Jesus' parables they knew he was talking about them. They knew that they were the tenant farmers and the temple builders.

What chills us about this passage is the thought that perhaps perhaps even these tenant farmers and temple builders staged their rejection of Jesus not out of ignorance but from the knowledge of who he really was as the Christ.

This rejection as we know will lead to the horrors of the cross but it works here briefly at three levels. It's a selfish rejection first of all. Selfish.

Why did they reject the son the landowner had sent to collect the harvest from them? Why? Why will the religious leaders of Israel kill Jesus? It is because in the words of verse 38 when the tenants saw the son they said to each other this is the heir come let's kill him and take his inheritance.

[13 : 41] They wanted to steal the vineyard they wanted to make it theirs. When asked the question whose vineyard is this they wanted to respond it's ours when all the time it wasn't theirs belonged to the landowner.

The rejection of the son you see was wholly selfish on their part. They want what is the landowner's by right and the son's by inheritance. They want all the authority they want to keep that harvest to themselves.

They didn't clear the stones from this vineyard. they didn't plant it. They didn't build a wall around it or dig a winepress in it.

They didn't erect a tower over it. Nevertheless they're claiming it for themselves. How like the religious leaders these Pharisees and chief priests they know the nation belongs to God but they want it for themselves and they're going to kill the son to get it.

The rejection of Jesus you see is wholly self-serving. They want to do what they want not what God wants and so they kill him.

[14 : 56] And I wonder to what extent this plays a part even in a small way in all our rejections of Jesus and his gospel. We want things our way not his way.

We want to claim the credit and the glory not him. We want to say look at what my hands have done not look at what God has done for me. It's our crown we want not Christ's cross.

Why did the religious leaders reject Jesus and crucify him? Because they were wholly selfish for their own reputation and authority their own status their own glory.

second level at which this rejection worked is it was systematic. Systematic. You'll notice that the rejection of the landowner's son was the last in a long line of previous rejections.

Verse 34 onwards when the harvest time approached he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit. The tenants seized his servants they beat one killed another stoned a third then he sent other servants to them more than the first time and the tenants treated them in the same way.

[16 : 05] What happened to the son was not unexpected rather he was the last in a long line of previous rejections. In context here of course Jesus is referring to all the prophets and godly men and women of the past whom God had sent to Israel to call them to faith and repentance.

God had sent them prophets like Uriah. We read of Uriah in Jeremiah chapter 26 Uriah was a prophet of God and he prophesied that on account of its unrighteousness and sin Jerusalem would be destroyed by the Babylonians.

Let me take up our reading from Jeremiah 26 verse 21 When King Jehoiakim heard these words the king sought to put Uriah to death but Uriah heard of it and he fled in fear to Egypt.

King Jehoiakim however sent Elnathan son of Ackbor to Egypt along with some other men. They brought Uriah out of Egypt and took him to King Jehoiakim who had him struck down with the sword and had his body thrown into the burial place of common people.

The tenant farmers the temple builders the religious leaders of Israel they didn't want to hear Uriah's faithful words and so they killed him. They did it before they'll do it again.

[17 : 35] They did it to the prophet Jeremiah who according to tradition was sawn in two they'll do it to Jesus the son and the stone the focus of God's love.

They're still doing it today. Whenever a Christian is persecuted for Jesus' sake Uriah is being run through with the sword once again. the tenant farmers are beating God's servants and killing them.

The temple builders are rejecting the cornerstone and capstone. How many times have you rejected Christ and his gospel? How many?

Hundreds? Thousands? When is enough enough? And then thirdly here the rejection was not just systematic it was savage.

Savage. I'm sure what shocks us about this passage perhaps more than anything else is the savagery with which the tenant farmers treat the servants and the son. Let me refer again to verse 35.

[18 : 41] They beat one, they killed another, they stoned a third. Then he sent other servants to them more than the first time and the tenants treated them in the same way. But what they did to the son is beyond compare.

Verse 39 they took him, they threw him out of the vineyard, they killed him. See the violence and savagery of the religious leaders.

That they would cruelly seize him, they would torture him, they would lead him bleeding and broken up the Via Dolorosa, the way of sorrows to a hill outside the city walls of Jerusalem and there they would crucify him in humiliation.

Such savagery. They must feel very strongly to be so cruel to anyone who would question their right to the vineyard. So strongly they'll beat them and they'll kill them.

But to kill the son, to kill the capstone, it takes the savagery of a beast to a whole new level. And you know the rejection of Christ is always a savage action even if dressed up in the gentleness of intellectualism.

[19 : 56] Are you rejecting Christ today? Are you saying no to God's call upon your life to faith and Christ's sacrifice on the cross? Think what you are doing. Please think twice before you leave this place having rejected him again, lest what happened to the tenant farmers should happen to you.

Remember what you're rejecting is not a theology and it's not a culture, it's a person, Jesus Christ, son and stone.

And it is a most serious matter. The rejection of Jesus. And then lastly and briefly, the people of Jesus, the people of Jesus.

As we close, I want us to notice another theme which runs through these three parables of Jesus. The parable of the father who sends his two sons out into the field, we saw that last week.

The parable of the landowner and the tenants which we're looking at this week. And the parable of the great banquet which we shall look at next week. The theme is this, the most unlikely candidates end up being the people of God.

[21 : 08] The most unlikely candidates end up being the people of God. In the first parable, the one we considered last week together, we saw how the religious leaders of Israel are portrayed as being like a son, whom a loving father calls upon to go into the vineyard and to work.

They enthusiastically reply, we will go, sir. But they fail to obey. They do not repent, they do not change their mind, they just stubbornly refuse to go.

By contrast, the other son in that story last week initially rejected his father's command to go and work in the vineyard, but then regretted his decision and went.

Jesus uses this parable to describe how it is the tax collectors and the prostitutes because they repent and believe in him who are entering into the kingdom of heaven.

Next week, as we examine the parable of the great banquet, we will see a similar theme. But this week, we need to see that a similar theme runs through this parable also.

[22 : 21] These murderous tenant farmers who are the religious leaders of Israel are headed for judgment. From their own lips in verse 41, they say that the land owner will bring those wretches to a wretched end and he will rent out that vineyard to other tenants who will give him a share of the crop at harvest time.

From their own lips, they pronounce their own judgment that those wretches will be brought to a wretched end and that God will give the vineyard to other tenants.

The religious leaders of Israel shall be deposed and God's focus shall now be upon a new people who will give him his share of the harvest. And this new people are the equivalent of the tax collectors and the prostitutes of the previous parable.

They are the people of repentance and righteousness whose salvation is entirely of grace and whose fruit is faith. That fruit which has been the constant theme of Matthew 21 even since Jesus cursed that fig tree.

This new people have faith in Jesus as their Messiah. The Messiah who had been foretold by all the prophets and the leaders of Israel had beaten and murdered.

[23 : 50] This Messiah appointed to by John the Baptist whose authority came from heaven as we saw two weeks ago. Then we come across the issue of Jesus as the cornerstone of the new temple of God.

Someone's got a talking Bible. The same themes are present there also. We have the theme of judgment in verse 44 where Jesus says he who falls upon the stone will be broken to pieces but he upon whom it falls will be crushed.

Again it's a reference to the judgment of the religious leaders of Israel even more pointed than before given that Jesus here is using temple building imagery and the temple will be destroyed in AD 70 by the Romans.

But then in the coup de grace in verse 43 Jesus says therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.

That fruit being faith repentance. Righteousness. It is brilliant writing from Matthew. Flawless logic from Jesus. Wonderful grace for us as Christians.

[25 : 06] The kingdom of God is taken away from the religious leaders of Israel and is given to a people who are characterized by faith in Christ. The garden is taken away from the murderous tenant farmers and given to a people who produce repentance and righteousness.

righteousness. The kingdom of God now belongs to the waifs and strays of this world. The tax collectors and the prostitutes. The slaves and the Gentiles who believe in Jesus Christ.

In short the kingdom of God shall belong to the church. In fact here in Matthew 21 verses 33 through 46 we have the genius of the gospel.

The gospel whereby the religious leaders will as a result of what they hear that day from Jesus determined to kill him. But that crucifixion will only serve to redeem a new people called the church who will be characterized not by their obedience to the works of the law but by their faith in Jesus.

The war of the roses was not fought over flowers. There is to my knowledge no one called William in Fort William who lives in a castle and the parable of the tenants ultimately has little to do with tenants.

[26 : 25] Either tenant farmers or tenants export. The ultimate question it poses for us is this. Where are you in this story? Where are you in this story?

Are you one of the tenants who want little or nothing to do with Jesus whose kingdom is all of grace and whose fruit is faith and repentance and righteousness?

Or are you one of those people who recognizing that like the tax collectors and prostitutes the waifs and the strays you don't deserve it but you rest on Jesus as the son of the stone and you put your faith and trust in him?

Which of these two people are you? Let's pray. Lord we praise you for Matthew 21, 33 through 46 because it reveals to us Jesus Christ as the son of the stone, Jesus the exalted one.

And it reveals to us the savagery of rejection of Jesus. Reveals to us why it was that Jesus was killed by these people.

[27 : 43] And it also strips us bare of any pretense. And it shows us that the fruit you require from us is faith, repentance and righteousness. And Lord we pray for all of us here.

That you help us to stand in the place of the tax collector and the prostitute who know that they deserve nothing. And yet it's all of grace that by faith they are heirs of eternal life, forgiven and they have hope beyond calculation.

We ask these things now in Jesus name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.