

A Story That Exposes the Heart

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Date: 11 January 2026

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[0:00] So, our passage this morning is, I think, a reasonably challenging passage.! And it's told in the temple. So that's where we are when Jesus is telling this parable.

! And he knows that the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the elders are listening in. And they know who he's talking about. There is no confusion in this story.

We get to look at it from 2,000 years of hindsight. And so we have to look at this passage both with the view of Jesus teaching people 2,000 years ago, but also with the view that this parable might have something to say to us today, as if Jesus was speaking this words not just in a temple 2,000 years ago to some Pharisees and teachers of the law, but he's speaking this parable to you today.

And what does it mean to you? And so we'll kind of journey along in parallel as we try and work out what's going on here, and who's talking to who, and what does it mean for us. And so as he's talking, this isn't one of those nice, gentle illustrations.

This isn't a nice Jesus Christ, meek and mild, come to me children. It's a really gentle, lovely story. This is a confrontation.

[1:34] We know that because Mark's helpful enough to tell us in verse 12 that the chief priests and the teachers looked on, and they knew he had spoken the parable against them.

It's a story about what happens when religious people forget who owns the vineyard. I've entitled my sermon for today, because I love a title, just helps me organise my thoughts, a story that exposes the heart.

A story that exposes the heart. Because at its heart, this passage is about authority and alignment. Questions you might ask if you read this passage might be, who owns the vineyard?

Who thinks they own the vineyard? Who decides what fruit matters and where it goes? And what would you do when the sun turns up?

What would you do when the sun turns up? So let's have a look a little bit at this vineyard that is spoken about in our passage this morning. If you were to flick all the way back to Isaiah chapter 5, you would find a very consistent vineyard being mentioned there.

[3:01] It is almost as if Jesus has plucked Isaiah 5's vineyard that is created, and speaks those words that the people of the temple would have known oh so well.

Isaiah 5 tells a story about how God has created all things, how he is in all things, and it would have left them in no doubt that as he speaks about this vineyard, then he is speaking about the vineyard owner being God.

He's put it in that place, he's used language that they would know, so that they know that when you're looking at this, there is in no uncertain terms that the vineyard owner is God.

And he has gifted a perfect vineyard to the people. He's given them everything they need from a watchtower, a wall, a pit duck for a wine press.

He's done everything that they need. And then he rents it to the vineyard to some farmers, and lets them enjoy the product of his work.

[4:12] The first shock, I think, of this is that we have to remember that they are tenants and not owners. I think as you read this and you want to kind of work out why it's so shocking, you've got to remember that these are not owners.

They didn't buy the vineyard off God. They rented it from him. They said, we will enter into a contract or a relationship with you, God, and we've made some promises about the way we behave.

That's really crucial as we work through this, that there's been some promises made about life. And as the first century Jewish people would have heard this, they might have heard the idea linked with Isaiah 5, that the pit and the walls, the hedging and the tower represent the extraordinary gifts that God has given his people.

The law, the temple, the covenant, the priesthood. God has been lavish in giving them the perfect world to exist in. Nothing has been withheld. It reminds us that we also have been gifted a pretty good world.

God, you get to sit here today in freedom. There's no people oppressing us outside. You didn't have to walk through carefully trying to avoid secret police.

[5:39] We in this country are lavish with greatness. You've got a building over your head, which means we are not worshipping in the rain. That's a joy. We still get to live in a world where the church has a voice in the community, where we have respect and people like us.

These are not our possessions, however. They can feel like it, can't it? It can feel like this church belongs to us. It can feel like the Christian tradition belongs to us.

It can feel like our place in society belongs to us. But we are just tenants. We have just been gifted a relationship with God to use his church, of which he has created, for us in our time.

They are entrusted assets. The danger is subtle. Tenants can act like owners very, very quickly.

And so these tenants in our story begin doing that, don't they? They begin thinking that the walls, the watchtower, the press are all theirs. They tell themselves the story, well, we've worked in this place.

[7:02] We've grown the fruit. We've picked it ourselves. How dare he? How dare he come back and ask for the first fruits? How dare he do that?

He hasn't grown them. He hasn't laboured here. So the first servant turns up. They beat him.

Struck this man on the head and treated him shamefully. And he keeps sending people. And you wonder, don't you, when you think about this being God, I wonder whether any of us would be so patient.

Imagine if you owned something and you wanted to go and get your rent. And everybody you sent got treated badly. How long would you wait until you sent somebody and got really angry?

Until you got the courts involved? Until you started imposing your will upon them? We don't know how many people in this parable are sent because we get to the stage where it just simply says, he sent many others.

[8:16] Some of them they beat and others they killed. Now in the first people to hear this parable, they would have heard that, I think, very clearly as, God has sent prophet after prophet after prophet to remind you of the covenant of the relationship you're in with God.

And you keep on doing the really shameful thing of killing them or beating them and treating them badly. And I keep sending you people to remind you.

And still, you don't change your behaviour. We are gifted all of those stories and more in our Bible.

How do we treat the word of the prophets? How do we treat the word of the New Testament gospel writers? How do we treat the word of Paul, Peter and John in their letters?

Do we read it and say, it's our relationship to God, the one whom we have a relationship with, and it's all about us making sure that relationship is strong.

[9 : 26] Or do we say, how dare he demand of my life? I've put the effort in. I've done the things. I've made the effort. And so he sends us word after word after word.

And in the story here, finally, the climax of the rebellion. He had one left to send.

Could you imagine he had one left to send? A person with loads of power and influence had one left to send, and it was his son, whom he loved.

This isn't somebody who's like, ah, I'll send him, we'll see what happens. This is somebody he cares about deeply. Saying, they will respect my son.

This will remind them of who I am. They'll see me. They'll see my image in this person. They will not do bad things.

[10 : 26] It says here, they will respect my son. And you can imagine it, can't you? As if, like, some kind of movie, where you've seen the beginning where it's all lovely, and then it all breaks down and gets bad, and servant after servant gets killed or badly treated, and then the sun rises down.

You think, there's no way this movie doesn't end badly now, because the sun's great, they'll recognise it, and all end up with a joy and a happiness. Not on this story.

This is the pivot of the parable. The tenants say, this is the air. Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.

We could rule the place. We could make everything of ours. It's a good job we're not like that, isn't it?

It's a good job we're not those kind of human beings who, when we're told that we should behave a certain way, do a certain thing, revere God in a certain way, spend time praising in prayer and reading these scriptures and treating each other in the way that we should do.

[11 : 36] It's a good job we don't treat the sun that way. Only we do, don't we? It's really easy when we look back at 2,000 years ago and we say, those Jewish people, they put Jesus on the cross, didn't they?

Shocking behaviour. But actually, we forget that it's your sin and my sin. That put Jesus on that cross. And at this point, we realise that it's our sin.

And however you imagined which part of this story you might have been in, you're definitely a vineyard tenant. You're the one who is rebelling and forcing Jesus to give his life for you.

You're the one who is choosing to do it your way. I grew up in my first job working for KFC. And when you work in fast food, you know what's going on in all the other fast food businesses.

And Burger King like to offer you the opportunity to have it your way. So you could, that was their big selling point. You could go into Burger King and you could tell them whatever you wanted and they would do it to make sure that you had exactly the burger you wanted.

[12 : 51] And I think that's often how we treat our faith. We want to curate it in exactly the way we want. We want to get rid of the bits we don't like.

Add in bits that we do like. Fold it into a palatable package that makes us happy. And only once we've done that, we'll be willing to do what this thing that we have created tells us.

Because we've got rid of all the bad things. This is sin. I think this is the sin that is in its purest form. It's not ignorance.

It's not just defiance. It's not weakness. It's calculation. As we construct God in our own wanting, what we want God to look like, we chuck out the bits we don't like.

The bits of scripture that we find difficult, we'll have rid of those. The bits of behaviour that we should do that we don't really like to do, we'll chuck that out. We'll bring in the bits we do like and we'll make a thing.

[13:53] And we end up wanting to only worship our Burger King and not worship the King of Kings. And I think that's really the big sin.

Because it's thought out. It's argumentative. We want all the benefits of God's vineyard without the authority of God's Son. We want all the blessings.

We want to be able to pray to a God who can do immeasurably more than we can imagine. We want to bring our problems to his feet and have him deal with them.

But we don't want to be obedient. We want inclusion into this world, but we don't want the Lordship. We want all the fruits and the benefits, but we don't want to have to repent.

Because I'm not really a bad person. I'm generally a good person, aren't I? Why do I have to repent? I've looked around and there's worse people than me. Once they've done the repenting, I'll repent.

[15:03] Fix them first, God. Because I'm a good person. I come to church on a Sunday. What more do you want from me? I put money in the collection most weeks.

What more do you want from me? I occasionally turn up to a midweek thing. What more do you want from me? And so, each one of us, in our own way, kills the Son.

Each one of us, in our own way, we kill the Son. I told you this was confrontational, didn't I? I told you this was challenging. I told you this is one of the most difficult parables in the Bible.

In fact, some commentators would try and suggest that we should get rid of this because this clearly can't be of Jesus. He clearly can't be this demanding.

Clearly, he's a God of love. He doesn't do these things. But yet, here we are. And so, we then get into the latter parts. And we have this change of focus in our reading.

[16:19] What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others. Haven't you read this passage of Scripture?

The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. So, this idea of a cornerstone is really important. Now, for those of you who have multiples of different Bibles, and have read different Bibles across the years, you might have come across a handful of them that will also say capstone.

If you're sat there going, oh, I thought it was capstone, not cornerstone. Don't panic. It doesn't matter. Don't get hung up on it. There are two different bits of stonework. One is like the first stone you would lay.

That would be perfectly right angled to allow you to run a good line that way, and a good line that way, that then would make the whole thing nice and square and right, and would be the beginning of the foundations. And if Christ is that cornerstone, he's the foundation of our life.

He is the one whom everybody didn't care about, didn't think was useful, and was trying to create their building in their own way. But if we have him as our cornerstone, everything will line up with him in our life.

[17:33] Without him, the structure will have no integrity at all. However, if Christ is the capstone, he's the climax, the bit that holds everything together.

He crowns the whole building. He makes it strong. Without him, the structure may look impressive, but has no purpose or future. We might look great.

We might look well-dressed, well-organized, well-educated, well-spoken. But actually, without Christ as our capstone, we have no purpose or future.

So, reject him as the foundation, and you stumble, and you will stumble over him. Reject him as the Lord and culmination of everything, and he will fall upon you. Either way, this parable allows us no neutrality.

There isn't a middle ground here where you can say, well, not really for Jesus. Not really for the vineyard owners. You're either one or the other. You have to be involved.

[18 : 45] But what God has done in the death of Christ, in this parable, may look like, in the first instance, oh my goodness, the son is dead. However, there is some joy in the death of the son.

Because in his death, do you notice that phrase, the stone the builders reject has become, there's a, the rejection of the son becomes the cornerstone of faith.

So, only through Christ's death and resurrection, do we get to enjoy the relationship that we have now. We're no longer striving like the Old Testament people, trying to make sure that we can follow the law, trying to do the right thing, even though it's really hard.

Instead, we get the blessings and the joys of grace. The Lord has done this and it is marvellous in our eyes.

The Lord has created a way that you and I, in our rebelliousness, that we don't end up like those people. He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others.

[19 : 54] Instead, we get to read that and say, aren't we fortunate that we know a Christ who died for our sins? The rejection of Jesus is not the failure of God's plan here, it's the means by which it is fulfilled.

The cross is the ultimate act of human rebellion. And at the same time, the supreme act of divine redemption. So it's not an accident that the stone that's rejected by the experts becomes the cornerstone of our salvation.

So what does this mean for us? Well, firstly, I think it's really easy, isn't it, to be busy tenants, to do all the things we think we should be doing in a church so that we look good being in a church.

You know, dress well, turn up on time, come and read the Bible. Aren't I a good Christian? We look after everything.

We make sure it's all shining. But when the owner comes looking for fruit, there is nothing to give. Because what God's really looking for is he's not really looking for just activity.

[21 : 07] He's looking for transformation. He's looking for people who come into this building behaving, acting, doing things in a way that are not of him.

And he hopes that by meeting with him that we will be transformed into his likeness. Step by step. Day by day, week by week, month by month, year by year, decade over decade.

So that eventually we will be, find our maturity in Christ. And it's not just about survival, just clinging on, hoping that we'll make it through another decade as the church.

It's about repentance, holiness and mission. It's about being properly engaged in the work of building the kingdom. So maybe we ask ourselves, what are we producing?

Are we producing fruit that's worthy of a vineyard that we've been given? Are you producing fruit that's worthy of the vineyard you've been given in your life? The tenants thought that by removing the son, they would secure their future.

[22 : 25] In our cultural moment, there is a strong impulse, even within the church, to soften, sideline the unique authority of Christ for the sake of acceptability.

This passage is very, very clear. To reject the son is not to make the vineyard more inclusive. It's to lose it altogether.

We don't get to choose what we like and what we don't like. We don't get to choose what we follow and what we don't follow. We don't get to choose the bits we want to do. We have to do it all, because that's what the son demands of us.

But there is comfort in that cornerstone. God takes the stone that was rejected by the builders, and builds the most important part of his temple. It reminds us that if God does that with Jesus, if he looks after and makes him the cornerstone, the bit that we can all follow, if we follow that plan, then each of us have our place in the building of God's kingdom.

Because Jesus isn't the totality of it. He's the cornerstone, the bit that begins the building. We are the stones that then build the rest of it. And that means that not one of us are overlooked.

[23 : 45] Whether you're old or young, whether you're successful or struggling, whether you're fully going for Christ and believe everything, or whether today you're here and you're doubting and struggling and just want some answers.

In Christ, you are all loved and all have your place alongside him in making the kingdom of God. I asked you at the beginning some of the questions you could think about when you're reading this parable.

And the one unavoidable question is this one. What will you, what will we do with the sun? If Jesus was to walk back bodily here into this church this morning, how would we treat him?

How would you treat him? Because we cannot keep the vineyard and silence the air. We cannot enjoy the gifts and reject the giver.

We cannot build God's church while discarding God's son. But if we receive him as the cornerstone and capstone of our lives, as a foundation and our Lord, then what the world rejects, God will use for his glory.

[25 : 00] And I hope and I pray that then we will see that it is truly marvellous in our eyes. If you're sat there today thinking, I want to see God at work.

I want to see God doing great things. I want to be able to celebrate miracles and things that are happening. It starts in ourselves. It starts with us following the word of God in our lives, not just on a Sunday, not just when we're in this building or when we're with other Christians.

that every day, every hour, every minute, every second of our lives, we seek to devote to Christ.

Amen.