

Matthew 21:33-45

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[0:00] I invite you to turn with me this morning to Matthew chapter 21 as we continue our sermon series in Matthew's Gospel. Matthew 21, beginning in verse 33.

And as we read these words, remember that as we're celebrating the Advent season, the coming of Christ to the world, that now we're walking through the last week of Christ's earthly ministry, the reason he came to this world.

And so I think it's a very fitting pairing between our Advent season and his coming to the world and also his coming to his city. Matthew 21, verse 33.

Speaking again to the priests and the Pharisees in the temple courts. Jesus said, And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another.

Again, he sent 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.

[1:53] 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.

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 in their season.

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.

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 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.

[3:03] This is God's word. Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, will you in your word and by the power of your Holy Spirit, show us your Son, in whose name we pray.

Amen. Amen. Many of our Lord's parables are difficult to understand. They require a lot of wisdom and consideration.

But, just like the parable of the sons, the two sons, that last passage that we preached, this is a really clear parable, isn't it? Right? In verses 33 and 34, a wealthy landowner plants a vineyard. That metaphor is probably pretty clear to you, right? Already. The owner is the Lord. His people, Israel, are that vineyard. And to Jesus, to his Jewish audience, this would have been even more clear because the prophets had, for centuries, been using that same metaphor, especially Isaiah and Jeremiah.

And so, they would have very clearly understood what he was talking about. And what has the Lord done, Jesus in this parable says, for the vineyard, his people? Well, he planted it and fenced it and dug a winepress and constructed a watchtower, everything it needed for prospering and protection.

[4:38] And likewise, he'd set up Israel in the same way. His people, he'd given them a land and an identity and his scriptures and his temple, everything they needed for prosperity and protection.

And then the Lord leased it out to tenant farmers. That is, he entrusted its growth to servants who tended the vineyard. In a metaphor, that's the leaders of the people who ought to lead according to

God's directions.

And the understanding is that they would produce a crop for him, right? He was still the owner. Of the vineyard, not them. But then in verses 35 through 39, we see that they didn't act like tenant farmers.

They acted like owners, right? When the master sent servants looking for the yield of the vineyard, the tenants cast them out and killed them as if they were robbers.

They acted as if, spoke as if, right? They would own the vineyard themselves.

[5:46] Let's kill him and we'll have it. And that's also the history of Israel's prophets. They came looking for fruit, telling God's people, your lives, they're not producing the devotion and the obedience that the Lord requires of you.

And the prophets consistently told the leaders of the people that they were acting like owners, not like tenants. We see in Ezekiel chapter 34, The word of the Lord came to me, Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel.

Prophesy, say to them, even to the shepherds, speaking to the leaders of the people, thus says the Lord God, ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves, should not shepherds feed the sheep?

You eat the fat. You clothe yourselves with the wool. You slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. The testimony of the prophets throughout the history of Israel is that the leaders had used their position to prosper themselves, not to serve the Lord.

And the tenants throughout that history, the priests, the elders, the kings, for the most part, they rejected the prophets and that message, right? And killed some of them.

[7:13] We're pretty sure Jeremiah was killed. We're pretty sure Isaiah was killed by the people of Israel. And that's going to be Christ's lament when we get there in chapter 23. He's going to turn to the city of Jerusalem and he's going to say, oh, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it.

How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings and you were not willing. And that was the story again and again throughout the history of the people of Israel.

The tenants acted like owners all the way until the master sent his son. He came in the same way that the prophets came, right? He came to do the same thing in the parable.

And in fact, as we see in Christ's ministry, he does the same thing. He comes as a prophet. The first words of Christ's ministry in Matthew chapter 4 are, repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

Those are the words of a prophet. And here, he even in this parable about the testimony of the son, what is he saying to the Pharisees and the scribes and the chief priests?

[8:32] He's foreshadowing to them. He says, I know your plan and it's to kill me. To continue acting like owners and not like tenant farmers. And what's incredible here is he does something in this parable that he has never done before.

Right? Two Sundays ago when we looked at the parable of the two sons, we saw that Christ explained the parable to the priests and the elders.

And that was significant because Christ had never done something like that before. Of all the parables that he explained, it was only ever to his disciples, not even to the crowds who adored him.

To the crowds, he would say something like, he'd tell a parable and then he'd say something like, he who has ears to hear, let him hear. But he never explained any of the parables to anyone except the disciples until last week.

Or two Sundays ago now. Right? When he explained a parable to the priests and the Pharisees, to those who were against him. And so he extended to his enemies a grace which he had received, or reserved for his closest friends.

[9:50] And this week, in verses 40 and 41, he takes it a step further. He invites them to finish the story.

The crowds never added a line to a parable. The disciples never contributed to the story.

Not one word. But he permitted, invited, his enemies to write the ending. And what ending did they write?

It's a pretty good one. 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 season.

And this is actually a better ending than we might first recognize. There's a word play going on here. The Greek text looks like this.

[10:55] Kakous, Kakos, apalese. Just looking at it and hearing it, you probably recognize that there's something verbally going on here.

That Kakous, Kakos. There's a correspondence to them. That Kakous word family has a number of senses and they all revolve around this idea of something evil or wicked.

And in this context, because of their context and their conduct and the coming wrath, the best contextual gloss probably would be something like vicious. So if you were to take this really as literally as you possibly can, it would read something like this.

The vicious ones, viciously, he will destroy them. So as they are vicious, so shall they meet their end viciously.

And that's what the ESV that we're reading is trying to get across when it says it wretches and a miserable end, but switching from wretch to miserable, sort of, we lose the correspondence there.

[12:01] And so in the Greek it's just a little more obvious what they're signaling. The master will give them a fitting end. And I think that's really helpful for us to see because it's an elegant wordplay.

Right? The priests and the Pharisees are supplying the parables and with a measure of elegance. And in so doing they're condemning themselves.

One writer put it this way, here they passed a righteous sentence on themselves. And friends, that's why I popped this up here. It's art. It's artful.

The wisdom of Christ is on full display. He's drawing out the strength of his opponents. They're lofty words to condemn themselves.

Right? If the wicked tenants won't listen to the servants, the prophets, and they won't listen to the son, perhaps they'll listen to themselves, to their own elegant words.

[13:08] And so, Jesus says in verse 42, you've condemned yourselves.

Except, that's not what he says. Instead of saying, you know, by your own words, you've sealed your fate, which is what we would expect next, right?

He interrupts the flow of the conversation. Not once, verse 42, but twice, verse 44, with these two references to a stone.

Now, if you omit those two stone verses, verses 42 and 44, the passage reads much smoother, and it makes more sense. Right? 41, they said to him, he'll put those wretches to a miserable death, let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their season.

Verse 40, when therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to the tenants? Sorry, verse 42, verse 43, therefore I tell you the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits.

That actually makes so much more sense than what Jesus says. Right? Isn't that a lot more fluid? So when Jesus interrupts the flow of the conversation and introduces this cornerstone idea, not once but twice, what is he doing?

[14:35] He's disrupting it. He's unbalancing it. He interrupts that flow and quotes Psalm 118.

And just two sermons ago, which for the people standing in front of him might be one or two days ago, Jesus rode into Jerusalem, seated on a donkey, as the crowds shouted from Psalm 118.

And so he is doubling down on their chance, doubling down on who Psalm 118 proclaims him to be. And even before that, before we get there, we didn't give a lot of attention before about what he said about himself in the parable.

But what is Jesus teaching about himself and his own identity and his own mission and his own work in that parable? He's obviously implying that he is the son in the parable, which means that the son comes after a long line of servants.

And so he's saying, I'm coming in the line of the prophets. Pharisees don't even believe that he is a prophet, but he's saying, I'm a prophet, and not only that, he is the most significant of them.

[15:58] Right? I am superior to the prophets. That's the whole point of sending the son. The son is the last of the messengers. He's saying, I am the climax.

You're not getting another message after me. And most incredible of all. Jesus is saying, I'm not like the other prophets.

Right? There's a clear distinction between all the servants that he sent and then finally, this my son in that parable. Right? They were the master's servants, but Christ is saying, I am the son.

I am uniquely related to the father. I am his own blood. I am his own heir. I am his family and his treasure and his joy. And when you strike the son, the father, as you yourselves have said, will come in fury.

And then Jesus, citing Psalm 118, picks up the chants of the crowds. Right? A day or two prior, the crowds were chanting Psalm 118, verses 25 and 26.

[17:05] Save us. That is, Hosanna. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. And he backs up just a few verses. Psalm 118, verse 22. Here it is in context.

Psalm 118, verse 19. Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord. This is the gate of the Lord. The righteous shall enter through it.

I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. Here's the verse. The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing.

It is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

On the very next verses are the verses that the crowds were chanting.

On the day he rode in to the city of David. What is this about? What is Jesus saying? Well, it's a royal psalm.

[18:08] It's about a king. A king entering the city and the temple of the Lord. Saying, open to me the gates of righteousness. We see that the Lord is offering in this salvation.

And in the midst of it, this happy day, there's one who was previously rejected by those in charge, who becomes the most important one of all.

And the Lord will lift him up in glory. It says, it was marvelous in our eyes. And it will be a day of thanksgiving and joy to God's people. So Jesus has taken those messianic shouts of the crowd and not only received them, and not only applied them to himself, but driven down deeper.

The son of the parable, the king of Psalm 118, will be rejected for glory. Glory that dazzles us, will be his, and this is the Lord's doing.

The parable ends with the son dead, because that's where the story ends for the wicked tenants.

The son is dead and the father is coming in wrath.

[19:30] The psalm doesn't end like that, and neither does Matthew's gospel, gospel, because the rejected stone becomes the very foundation of our faith and hope and life, because his tomb is empty.

And so taken together, verses 42 and 44, say that Jesus is like that stone. What kind of stone depends on your attitude towards God?

if you want to build your life on God, Jesus is that cornerstone. He's the only safe place to build your life for all eternity.

But if you reject him, the stone will crush you. So, what are we to do with this text? There are probably three major points of his lands and the lives of people.

Clearly, it applies to the leaders he's speaking to that day. People standing right in front of him. The leaders of the people of Israel. And so by extension, it will also apply to the leaders among God's people today.

[20:51] And finally, we're going to see how it applies to each of us individually. first, this obviously applies to the leaders then.

The priests, the Pharisees who are talking to Jesus, right? It's the obvious implication of the parable. It's what he says in verse 43, and it's what they understand then in verse 45.

They are the wicked tenants, rejecting the son who is standing right in front of them. And even more, he knows what their plans for him are. to kill him.

And he is warning them. They stand in a long line of wicked tenants who outwardly look like they're doing their job, but are denying the master himself and denying him the fruits of his vineyard, true

praise and worship.

They're using it to serve themselves, so they're the ones being worshipped there. And they are denying the very one, the son, one who is uniquely related to the father.

[21:59] They're denying him his harvest. And by their own elegant words, they stand condemned. And the warning comes as a prophecy.

The people of God will no longer be led by priests and scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees. The kingdom of God, the body of believers where God has truly received his king will extend just as it was promised to Abraham.

When the Lord first gave Abraham the promises, will extend to the whole world, to a people beyond the borders of Israel.

And the glory of the gospel of the Lord will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea. And so the new covenant that Jesus is about to establish at the end of this week, in his own blood, will, by his church, go to the nations.

Which is good news for everyone sitting in this room. Which means that this passage also is a warning to the leaders in the church today.

[23:07] Just as it warned the wicked tenants standing before Jesus then, warns leaders within the church today. David Platt, the leader of the SBC International Missions Board, looked at this passage and put it this way.

These leaders loved themselves more than they loved God and others. Their hearts were filled with greed and they wanted the vineyard and everything that came with it.

Verse 38 pictures them as grasping after the very inheritance. They lusted after power, control, and authority in God's kingdom. And they, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Sanhedrin, were leaders holding on to a position of love for power.

The New Testament instructs the leaders of the church not to be like that, right? To avoid just that same attitude. 1 Peter chapter 5, Peter says, I exhort the elders among you, shepherd the flock that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly as God would have you, not for shameful gain, but eagerly, not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.

Friends, that's what to look for in elders and deacons in the church, right? In our church family, here, and to any congregation to which the Lord takes you in your life, look for leaders who love Christ in his church, who love people in evangelism, and love the scriptures and ministry and worship, right?

[24:49] And so nominate candidates and vote for candidates who show a servant's heart, not an owner's heart, right? That's the attitude of the wicked tenants.

Not only that, not only nominate and vote for, but also hold accountable the leaders in the church always to that, right? Confront attitudes of selfishness and greed, the attitudes of false owners in church leaders who are actively serving, right?

Friends, that's an open invitation here at Shoreline to hold every leader accountable, right? We are stewards in a vineyard, not owners. So if we are using leadership responsibilities entrusted to us by the Lord and this congregation for our own purposes, for our own ends, it is the congregation's job to speak and to act, to call wayward leaders to repentance and to remove unrepentant leaders from those positions.

And then let us ask the question that will bring it home to every one of us, right? Why is this all happening?

Why are there evil leaders acting like owners instead of tenant farmers in the vineyard?

[26:21] Why are the tenant farmers, the leaders, prone to act like owners in the vineyard? Because people, all of us, are prone to act like owners.

All of us are. which means it doesn't matter if you're a leader or not, this is a warning for you. One preacher put it this way, we are all tenants acting like owners in our lives.

How? Well, in all sorts of ways. When we ignore God, we're acting as if we're in charge. When we reject his word, we're acting as if we set the rules.

In every circumstance and attitude where we prioritize our will over his, we are acting like owners. Paul Tripp, in a recent book he wrote called Sex and Money, Pleasures that Leave You Empty and the Grace that Satisfies, put it like this.

Little children, grown men, and women alike, need to be confronted with the stark reality that it will never be about them because they have been born into a world that by its very nature is a celebration of another.

[28:00] other. They have been born into a world that is not owned by them. They have been born into a world that was not intended to be ruled by them.

So the issue for every human being is, will I submit to the directives of the one who rules over all things, or will I deny his authority and write my own rules?

This is the ultimate and inescapable human decision. There is an authority who rules every dimension of your life.

And God is sending messengers into our lives every day to remind us that we are his tenants, not independent owners.

Messengers like the Bible, and the church, and our brothers and sisters in Christ, with whom the Lord has placed us into a body, and other messengers that tell us that we're not owners, that we aren't in charge.

[29:15] Things like life situations and circumstances that shatter our illusions of control, that tell us in no uncertain terms, you're not in charge.

No matter what we want, no matter how hard we fight for it, you and I are not the owners of our lives. We were, as Tripp said, born into a world that by its very nature is a celebration of another. other. And so that means that these messengers, even if their message is difficult to hear, they are blessings.

Because they're aligning us to reality. Even though our hearts want to be controlled, being the owner is not what's best for us.

we're going to ruin the vineyard of our lives on our own. First, obviously, because of this parable, if we act like owners, the true owner will come and destroy us.

[30:20] The master will come, verse 41. The cornerstone will fall, verse 44. But even if he didn't, the vineyard flourishes.

We flourish best when we serve as tenants, not as owners. I'd make a terrible God. And so would you. He spoke and formed the atoms of your body.

The laws of physics that keep the sun burning, your feet planted on the ground, he wrote them. So let's stop pretending we are the owner of anything.

And instead celebrate the stone that the Pharisees rejected, who has become the chief cornerstone. God sends us the messengers as blessings.

Be thankful for them. And so when a messenger comes into your life, whether it's a person or a verse of the Bible or any circumstance that is confronting your illusion of control, and says to you, you're acting like an owner, not a tenant, right?

[31:35] Do you own your time? Do you own your checkbook? Do you own your plans? Don't kill them. And since you're probably not likely to murder someone, I hope not.

What does it look like practically for us to cast them out and kill them, right? When we reject their counsel outright. When we poison the well, right? We say, you're selfish or foolish, so I don't have to listen to you.

When we just simply ignore them or avoid them or confuse or confound the issue or use distraction techniques for them or ourselves. There are a million ways to avoid and reject or deflect the warnings.

But friends, we need to hear the message. We need to hear the message that the story is told to the priests and the Pharisees about the priests and the Pharisees, but their story, their ownership mentality can be found in every human heart.

I know it's in mine. In this story, we too are the wicked tenants. Every person who has ever lived, we naturally reject his authority, dispute his wisdom, doubt his goodness, contradict his faithfulness.

[32:56] We trample on his laws. Which are a reflection of his character. And that's a heavy thing to say, I know.

I know that when I come to a pulpit to open up and proclaim God's word to this many people, there is hidden pain all over.

Some of you came into this room today arguing with someone. depression. Or you're experiencing a miscarriage. Or you are in a deep depression.

Or all sorts of suffering. And you feel hopeless or depressed or desperate. And this just, this message, yet you're not in control, you're a wicked tenant, feeling like piling on.

Especially when I say, this is your chief problem, not that other thing. Whatever that other tragedy going on in your life, this is your real problem.

[34:09] How does that feel to you? But there's hope. Yes, this is your biggest problem. But it is a solved problem in Jesus Christ.

Right? This parable is the story for the rebellious priests and scribes and Pharisees. But there is another chapter of this story for all who are found in Christ.

For every wicked tenant, you and me, who comes to see their sin and wonder at the Son sent by the Father and repents from the heart and cries out for mercy.

His death does not seal their fate. It buys their pardon. And he promises to return.

To fix the whole vineyard. All the pain and suffering, hidden or not, will cease.

[35:19] on that day. He came to be rejected so that you could build your life on him, the cornerstone.

To be what you truly are, the tenant, he the owner. And to find a vineyard restored on that day.

When Tim Keller preached this passage, he focused a lot on how that ownership mentality is hard to give up. Relinquishing control is scary.

He put it this way. Jesus Christ was willing to die for you. He was willing to become an enemy and be treated like an enemy for you.

How can it be dangerous to give control of your life to somebody like that? It can't be. So wake up out of the sleep of denial with the thought of his love.

[36:29] He was slain on the cross so that instead of enemies, we could be his friends. Listen to the messengers. Listen to the messengers.

others. Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, thank you that you sent your son.

And that we're like the unfaithful tenants who acted like owners. Lord, thank you that his death does not cry out for our condemnation, but that in your great love, it cries out for our pardon.

And so Lord, will you help us to heed the message of the messengers, to hand over ownership of all our lives into your hands, and to produce a fruit of righteousness by your power, to your glory.

And Lord, may that be the hope for all who hurt today. The son is coming back to restore the vineyard. And we can glory in him.

[38:00] We pray that in his name. Amen.