

The Parables of Jesus Lesson 24

The Parable of the Vineyard (Wicked Tenants)

The Parable of the Vineyard (or also known as, the Parable of the Wicked Tenants) is one of the most important as it relates to the section of scripture that we are studying, which leads us to Matthew 24-25 and the Olivet Discourse. It helps us to tie the message of Jesus directly to the destruction of the temple. It is also one of most condemning parables aimed toward the Pharisees and the religious elite of Israel. It's a defining parable in which a definitive decision is made as it concerns Old Covenant Israel and their rejection of Messiah, thus leading to their own rejection. This parable is told in all three synoptic Gospel: Matthew 21:23-32, Mark 12:1-12, and Luke 9-19.

The Text of the Parable

Matthew 21:23-32 “Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place. ³⁴ When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit.

³⁵ “The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. ³⁶ Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. ³⁷ Last of all, he sent his son to them. ‘They will respect my son,’ he said. ³⁸ “But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, ‘This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him and take his inheritance.’ ³⁹ So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

⁴⁰ “Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” ⁴¹ “He will bring those wretches to a wretched end,” they replied, “and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time.” ⁴² Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures: “‘The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes’?

⁴³ “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. ⁴⁴ Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed.” ⁴⁵ When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus’ parables, they knew he was talking about them. ⁴⁶ They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet.

Background and Context of the Parable

To truly understand the meaning of this parable we need to go back to the Old Testament imagery that it's drawn from. Many people may not realize that this parable Jesus tells is very similar to a parable that the Prophet Isaiah tells

Isaiah 5:1-7 I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard: My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. ² He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well. Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit. ³ “Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. ⁴ What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it? When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad? ⁵ Now I will tell you what I am going to do to my vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it will be destroyed; I will break down its wall, and it will be trampled. ⁶ I will make it a wasteland, neither pruned nor cultivated, and briers and thorns will grow there. I will command the clouds not to rain on it.” ⁷ The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the nation of Israel, and the people of Judah are the vines he delighted in. And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.

As we look at the historical interpretation of this parable, Isaiah is speaking to the southern kingdom of Judah in the 8th century (740-700's) BC, during the reigns of Uzziah to Hezekiah. At this time the kingdom of Israel has been divided and Isaiah's primary ministry is to the southern kingdom of Judah.

The warning that Isaiah is giving Judah is about the coming judgment on them from the Babylonians, which would lead to the destruction of Jerusalem, the destruction of the temple, and the exile. The first six chapters of Isaiah specifically deal with this time in Jerusalem.

- Chapter 1: "the faithful city" turned "harlot." Her hands are full of blood; leaders are corrupt; worship is empty.
- Chapters 2-4 moves back and forth between visions of hope and oracles of judgment, showing the contrast between the grim reality of Judah's present corruption, and God's glorious future for his people which comes through hope of a purified remnant and a future "branch of the LORD" (Isa 4:2).
- Chapter 5 The vineyard parable. God expected fruit (justice/righteousness) but found bloodshed and distress. The vineyard will be laid waste.
- Chapter 6 God tells Isaiah that his preaching will harden hearts until cities lie ruined and houses deserted, anticipating exile, the judgment of Jerusalem by Babylon. Yet, there's a remnant hope: "the holy seed is the stump" (pointing to restoration beyond judgment).

In Isaiah's parable, God is the owner/vinedresser who lovingly planted Israel as His vineyard. He did everything necessary: cleared stones, planted choice vines, built a watchtower, dug a winepress. He expected good grapes (fruit: justice and righteousness). Instead, He found "wild grapes" (bloodshed, cries of distress).

Isaiah indicts Judah for social injustice, oppression, and idolatry. The message: because they yielded "wild grapes," God would bring judgment on the vineyard (removing hedge, letting it be trampled). This foreshadows the Babylonian invasion, the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, and the exile. Israel, as God's vineyard, failed to produce the covenant fruit of righteousness, so the vineyard itself will be destroyed in judgment.

Interpreting the Parable of the Vineyard

Considering Jesus' use of Isaiah's parable as a 'guide', we now can easily interpret the Parable of the Vineyard as it relates to God's covenant people Israel, their lack of fruit, their rejection of Jesus, their rejection by God, and their coming judgment.

Matthew 21:23-32 ""Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place. ³⁴ When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit.

- Here we see **God** (the landowner) planning a **vineyard** (His Kingdom/Covenant People).
- The **wall**, **winepress**, and **watchtower** shows how God planted and built up the vineyard.
- He rented the vineyard to **farmers** (or tenants) and moved to another place. This shows that God established the vineyard and gave it to Israel's care (and the care of the religious leaders 'shepherds' of Israel).
- They were expected to care for it and produce good fruit from the vineyard. In general, the fruit was the fruit of righteousness and faithfulness to God and their covenant with Him.
- At **harvest**, when God would require the fruit, he sent **servants** (prophets) to them to collect the fruit.

³⁵ “The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. ³⁶ Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. ³⁷ Last of all, he sent his son to them. ‘They will respect my son,’ he said. ³⁸ “But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, ‘This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him and take his inheritance.’ ³⁹ So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

- Here we see the **treatment** of the servants (prophets), they **beat, killed, and stoned** them. He also sent more servants to them, but they were treated the same. The Old Testament prophets were sent to call Israel to repentance and to covenant faithfulness, but over and over again, Israel rejected the message of the prophets, and because of that both kingdoms (Northern and Southern) experienced judgment.
- Jesus describes the treatment of the prophets by Israel and their leaders in Matthew 23:37 ‘Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you...’ Showing that Israel has a history of rejection and mistreatment of the prophets God sent to call them to repentance
- Next, the landowner ‘**sent his son to them**’, thinking that finally Israel would listen and respect the son, but instead they plotted to ‘kill the son and take his inheritance’. This was showing that the Pharisees and Israel would reject Jesus and have him killed.
- ‘**They took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him**’, this is speaking of Jesus’ crucifixion. He would literally be taken ‘outside’ of the Jerusalem and be crucified.

⁴⁰ “Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” ⁴¹ “He will bring those wretches to a wretched end,” they replied, “and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time.”

- So now the question is asked to the Pharisees, ‘**when the owner returns, what will he do to the tenants**’? In Matthew this is framed similar to the previous parable when Jesus asked them ‘which son did the will of the Father?’, in that question, Jesus trapped them, and here in Matthew he does the same thing (even though in Mark and Luke’s version, it’s Jesus who answer the question for them).
- The answer given in Matthew is he will ‘**bring those wretches to an end**’, and ‘will **rent the vineyard to other tenants**’. Mark (12:9) and Luke (20:16) say ‘*He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others.*’ This is obviously a very direct pronouncement of judgment.
- It pictures bringing an end to those (Old Covenant Israel) who were currently in charge of the vineyard (the Kingdom), even ‘killing’ them (or allowing another nation to kill them), and giving the kingdom to others (the people of God under the New Covenant).

⁴² Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures: “‘The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes’?”

- This quote comes from Psalm 118:22–23. The ‘cornerstone’ carries specific imagery as it relates to Israel. It carries the idea of the ‘cornerstone of the Temple’, and a stone that causes people to stumble and be crushed by it.
 - Isaiah 28:16 “Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, of a sure foundation; whoever believes will not be in haste.”

- Isaiah 8:14–15 “He will be a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense ... many shall stumble on it, they shall fall and be broken.”
- What’s significant about Jesus being the cornerstone, in saying that, he’s basically saying ‘I am the foundation for the New Temple.’ The Temple standing in Jerusalem at that time would be destroyed, and Jesus would become the new Chief Cornerstone for a New Temple, not of stone, but of New Covenant people.
- The New Testament takes this and explicitly applies it to a new temple, the people of God in Christ:
 - Eph 2:19–22 Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.
 - 1 Pet 2:4–8 As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him— you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For in Scripture it says: “See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.” Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,” and, “A stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.” They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for.
- The old temple (Jerusalem/Herod’s temple) would be left desolate (Matt 23:38), then destroyed in AD 70. So the cornerstone image implies both destruction of the old and the building of the new. The New Temple is the New Covenant people of God (made up of believing Jews and Gentiles).
- This is also quoted by the Apostles in Acts 4 as they stood before the Sanhedrin within the Temple courts on the Temple Mount
 - Acts 4:8-12 Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: “Rulers and elders of the people! ⁹ If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, ¹⁰ then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. ¹¹ Jesus is “the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone.” ¹² Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.”

⁴³ “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.

- Here we see Jesus’ rejection of Old Covenant Israel and its leaders. “From you” is directed to the chief priests and Pharisees (21:45), but they are the representatives of the Old Covenant, national Israel system, Jerusalem leadership, the temple, priesthood, and their law-centered covenant identity. The “you” isn’t every Israelite individually, but the corporate, covenantal structure of Old Covenant Israel under its leaders.

- In the Old Covenant, Israel (as a nation) was God's vineyard/steward of His kingdom purposes. But through repeated rejection, of the prophets and climactically of the Son, they forfeited that stewardship. This doesn't mean God rejected Jewish people as individuals (many thousands believed, and the apostles themselves were Jews), but that the national covenant role of Israel was being taken away
- The "taking away" came historically with the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in AD 70, marking the end of the Old Covenant order. From that point forward, God's kingdom is expressed not through national Israel under the law, but through the new covenant community in Christ. Old Covenant Israel was the steward of God's kingdom purposes until the Messiah came. When the Son was rejected, stewardship passed permanently to the new covenant people.
- Given to "A People" Producing Fruit, "A people" doesn't mean a new ethnic nation but a new covenant people of faith, the church, composed of Jew and Gentile, united in Christ. This fulfills the promise of Isaiah 5 (vineyard destroyed for lack of fruit) and Jeremiah 31 (new covenant with law written on the heart). Peter makes this explicit in 1 Peter 2:9-10: *"You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation..."* language originally given to Israel in Exodus 19:6, now applied to the church.
 - Romans 9:6 "For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel..."
 - Romans 2:28-29 "For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter."
 - Romans 11:17-24 (The Olive Tree): Gentiles are grafted into God's people by faith. Some natural branches (unbelieving Jews) are broken off, while believing Gentiles are included. Identity in Israel is about faith in Christ, not ethnicity alone
 - Galatians 3:7, 29 "Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham."... "And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise."
 - Philippians 3:3 "For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh."
 - John 8:39-44 Some Jews claim Abraham as their father, but Jesus tells them: *"If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing the works Abraham did."*
 - Ephesians 2:14-16 "For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself *one new man* in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility."
 - Galatians 6:15-16 "For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon *the Israel of God*."

This is NOT 'Replacement Theology' as it's often referred to by opponents of this view. Replacement theology says that 'God has replaced Jewish Israel with the Gentile Church. But that is not the case, God is fulfilling his promises to Israel through Jesus and the promised New Covenant. this is 'Placement Theology', God has placed both believing Jew and Gentile into one body by the cross.

⁴⁴ Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed.” ⁴⁵ When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus’ parables, they knew he was talking about them. ⁴⁶ They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet.

- **“Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed.”** This goes back to the stone imagery: Falling on the stone = stumbling over Christ. Many would “trip” over Him because He didn’t fit their messianic expectations. To stumble over Him is to be shattered. The stone falling on someone means that judgment is coming and the Temple and Old Covenant system would be ‘crushed.’
- **“When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus’ parables, they knew he was talking about them.”** They understood the point, and this is important for us to understand... Jesus was talking to *them*. It had an immediate context for those in Israel in Jesus’ day
- **“They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet.”** Here is the leaders’ dilemma: They wanted to silence Jesus immediately, but they feared the crowd. Their concern was not truth but politics. But the irony is, they should have feared God’s judgment (the stone), but instead, they feared people’s opinions.

Conclusion

The Parable of the Vineyard brings the confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisee to the forefront: God sent prophets to His vineyard, and the leaders beat them, rejected them, and finally killed the Son. Jesus, the rejected stone, becomes the cornerstone of God’s new people. The sobering warning is that to stumble over Him is to be shattered, and to resist Him is to be crushed. But the good news is that for all who receive Him, He becomes the foundation of a new temple, a new family, a new humanity. The leaders understood Jesus was talking about them, but rather than repent, they hardened their hearts and plotted His arrest.