

# The Parable of the Terrible Tenants

Jesus: Cornerstone or Crushing Stone?

**Scripture:** Matthew 21:33-46

**Sermon Series:** *Matthew*

**Topic:** Jesus, Parables, Judgment, Cornerstone

## Exegetical Outline (Mt 21:33-46)

An outline for preaching the text.

- I. **The Parable of the Terrible Tenants (21:33-46)**
  - A. The setting (v.33)
  - B. The sending of the servants (v.34-36)
    1. Beating and murder of first group (v.35)
    2. Same response to many more (v.36)
  - C. The sending and killing of the son (v.37-39)
    1. The reasoning of the master (v.37)
    2. The reasoning of the tenants (v.38)
    3. The murder of the son (v.39)
  - D. The response of the master (v.40-41)
    1. The judgment of the wicked tenants
    2. The transfer of the vineyard to faithful tenants
- II. **The Application of the Parable (vs.42-44)**
  - A. The prophesied rejection of the stone/Son (Ps 118:22-23) is a warning to the religious leaders of Israel (v.42)
  - B. The transfer of the kingdom of God from fruitless leaders to fruitful others (v.43)
  - C. The judgment of those who reject the stone/Son (v.44)
- III. **The Response to the Parable (vs.45-46)**
  - A. The leaders understood Jesus spoke about them (v.45)
  - B. They were seeking to destroy Jesus (v.46)
  - C. They crowds did what the leaders refused to do: rightly recognize Jesus' authority
- IV. **Conclusion/application**
  - A. Be amazed at, but do not abuse the long-suffering patience of God;
  - B. Produce righteous fruit and holy living
  - C. Recognize the reality of coming judgment of those who reject Jesus
  - D. Make Jesus the cornerstone of your life

## Introduction

In this parable Jesus is both predicting his own murder and pronouncing judgment upon the evil leaders who reject and conspire against him. The parable reveals the remarkable patience of God the Father, the deep wickedness of the Jewish religious leaders, God's expectation for his children to produce the good fruit of righteous living, and a warning that just judgment will come to everyone who rejects the Son of God.

## Literary Context

This passage falls on the third day of Passion Week. It is Tuesday of the week leading up to Jesus' crucifixion. Jesus is standing in the temple court among a crowd of onlookers having just been confronted by the chief priests, elders, and Pharisees. This group of religious leaders came to question his authority. Jesus turns the tables on them. He now challenges their authority.

Jesus' challenge comes in the form of three parables.<sup>1</sup> We considered the first last Sunday. Today we will consider the second parable, *the parable of the terrible tenants*.



### Religious Leaders Question Jesus' Authority

In the previous paragraph (vs.23-27), these religious leaders asked Jesus to identify the source of his authority. Jesus offered to answer their question about his authority if they would answer a question of his regarding the source of authority of John the Baptist. They declined to answer Jesus' question, therefore Jesus declined to answer theirs. They did this, not because they didn't know the source of John's authority, but because if they answered honestly, it would expose their own sin and rebellion.

### Jesus Questions Religious Leaders' Authority: the Parable of Two Sons

In response to this hypocritical, sinful stubbornness, Jesus told a parable about two sons (vs.28-32). The point of the parable is that *actions tell more than words* about the true condition of a person's soul. Through the parable Jesus confirms that John's authority came from God in heaven and that the religious leaders were guilty of sin for two reasons; 1) they ought to have believed John because of the truthfulness of his message, and 2) they ought to have believed John because they witnessed the changed lives of those who believed and received his message—the tax collectors and prostitutes. Jesus concludes with a warning that if they do not change their minds about

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<sup>1</sup> The parable of the two sons (vs.28-32), the parable of the wicked tenants (vs. 33-46, and the parable of the wedding feast (22:1-14).

the obvious work of God in the world—through both John and Jesus, then they will remain outside the kingdom of God.

## The Parable of the Terrible Tenants (vs.33-39)

Now we turn to this second parable that Jesus spoke on this occasion. This parable intensifies Jesus' criticism against these false religious leaders. Through this parable Jesus highlights their failure to produce good fruit, their sinful rejection of God's prophets, the fact that they will reject and kill him, and finally that because of this great sin, God will remove from them the responsibility of the stewardship of God's kingdom and give it to other obedient leaders.

The parable can be divided into four sections; 1) the setting, 2) the sending of the servants, 3) the sending and killing of the son, and 4) the response of the master.

### 1) The Setting (v.33)

Jesus begins by establishing the setting of the parable. The setting is a vineyard and is described in v.33.

“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. **Matthew 21:33** (ESV)

**A master of a house planted a vineyard.** The **master** (*oikodespotēs οἰκοδεσπότης*) of a house is he who holds the highest authority<sup>2</sup> over all aspects of the house and its estate, “including the family and servants”<sup>3</sup> and employees. This master exercises his authority by showing great care and expends significant effort and expense in planting, protecting, and provisioning this vineyard. He put a “**fence around it**” to protect it from animals. He expects abundant fruitfulness for he “**dug a winepress.**” He “**built a tower,**” which would have been “used by watchmen to warn of intruders and also to give shelter from the weather to the workers.”<sup>4</sup> Finally, he “**leased it to tenants**” while he was away traveling. Thus, the master has gone to great lengths and expense to ensure that this vineyard would be viable and profitable, including entering into a legal agreement with tenant farmers who would cultivate and care for the vineyard in his place while he was away.

### The Vineyard in OT & Isaiah

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<sup>2</sup> Rick Brannan, ed., *Lexham Research Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, Lexham Research Lexicons (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 558.

<sup>4</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Clinton E. Arnold. vol. 1, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2010), 786.

The idea of a vineyard is frequently used throughout the Old Testament (OT) as an analogy of the nation of Israel.<sup>5</sup> However, this parable is very similar to one found in Isaiah 5:1-7. This OT passage would have come to mind among his listeners as Jesus told this parable. The main idea of that parable is similar to Jesus point here, that lack of faithful fruitfulness will lead to judgment and destruction. The primary difference between the parable of Isaiah and the one Jesus told here is the notion of the vineyard being leased to tenant farmers. The formal—i.e. covenantal—agreement is the most significant difference.

## 2) The Sending of the Servants (vs.34-36)

This legal lease agreement now plays into the progression of the parable.

<sup>34</sup> When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit. <sup>35</sup> And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. <sup>36</sup> Again he sent other servants, more than the first. And they did the same to them. **Matthew 21:34-36 (ESV)**

**When the season for fruit drew near.** “It normally took four years for the vines to mature and begin to produce harvestable grapes, and it was not until the fifth year that crops and profits began.”<sup>6</sup> During these four unproductive years, the landowner would have subsidized the vineyard and the tenants.<sup>7</sup> The investment expense of the master has dramatically increased. However, he can now begin to receive a return on his investment since the time for fruit has come.

**He sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit.** While the master is away on his travels he **sent his servants to get his fruit.** This refers to his portion of the yield that would have been determined in the lease agreement. However, something horrible and unexpected happens. The servants of the master are rejected by the tenants. They “**beat one, kill another, and stone**” to death a third. This is shocking and would have shocked every listener—as it rightly does us. They tenants are breaking their agreement. The lease would have included terms that specify what portion of the produce would have gone to the owner and what portion to the tenants. Shockingly, these wicked tenants break their legal lease agreement, break their promise, want to keep all the profits for themselves, and are willing to kill to do so.

What will the master do in face of such obvious and undeniable violent and criminal behavior? What will he do in response to the evil deeds of these murderous thieves?

**He sent other servants, more than the first.** This master is incredibly gracious. He is remarkably patient. Upon receiving news that the tenants have broken their lease and killed his servants,

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<sup>5</sup> See Psalm 80:8-13; Ezekiel 19:10-14; Hosea 10:1.

<sup>6</sup> Osborne, *Matthew, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, 786.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

he does not immediately return in wrath, which he could legally do, but rather he **sends other servants** and continues to give these terrible tenants an opportunity to keep their word and obey the terms of the lease. Sadly, this second group of servants are similarly treated with the same violence and hostility. Remarkably, even this second wave of multiple acts of aggression against the servants of the master does not exhaust his patience and grace. He continues to forebear with their sinful rebellion and resorts to another gracious alternative.

### 3) The Sending and Killing of the Son (vs.37-39)

After sending many servants, the master decides to send his own son to these tenants.

<sup>37</sup> Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' <sup>38</sup> But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.' <sup>39</sup> And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. **Matthew 21:37-39 (ESV)**

**Finally he sent his son to them.** After sending multiple servants, the master decides to send his own son to them. Notice the language. This is a **final** opportunity for the tenants to resolve the problem. This is the master's final attempt to allow the tenants to comply with the terms of their lease and give the portion of fruit that they promised.

**They will respect my son.** Note the reasoning of the master. The son is expected to receive the same **respect** as would the master. The son is the personal representative of the master. He carries the full weight of the master's authority. When both Mark and Luke tell recount this parable they say that Jesus used the word "**beloved**."<sup>8</sup> The master was sending his **beloved** son, who was worthy of the same respect that was due to master and owner of the land.

**This is the heir.** Notice that there is no question about the identity of the one sent. He is recognized as "**the heir**" of the master and of the vineyard. These tenants do not misidentify him as a servant or a messenger or a thief, rather they know full well that he is "the heir."

**Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.** Perhaps they think that since the son has come, that the father has died. Thus, if they kill the heir, then there will be no one else to make a claim against the vineyard and they will be able to claim it for themselves. Their first thought is to "**kill him**." Murder is in their minds. So, they conspire together. "**Let us kill him**." There is not just one bad apple in the barrel. They all conspire together to kill him.

**They threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.** They waited until the son had already arrived in the vineyard and then they threw him out. Perhaps there is a hint of deception here. They may have falsely welcomed him into the vineyard and pretended to gladly receive him in order to find opportunity to come together to overpower him. This is what they do. Together they conspire, together they remove him from the vineyard, and together they kill him.

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<sup>8</sup> Mark 12:6; Luke 20:13.

#### 4) The Response of the Owner (vs.40-41)

The final section is marked by a question that is aimed at discerning the response of the owner.

<sup>40</sup> When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"

<sup>41</sup> 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 seasons."

Matthew 21:40-41 (ESV)

**When the owner of the vineyard comes.** The tenants of the vineyard made a fatal mistake in their thinking. The **owner** was not actually dead. They haven't seen their master in years. They probably thought, that if he is not dead, then he certainly no longer cares for the vineyard. Or perhaps it's too much trouble to mess with. He's far away in a distant country. If he is alive, then surely he will not return. But they were wrong.

Jesus now calls him the **owner** (*kyrios κύριος*), rather than 'master' as in v.33. This is the same word that is often translated as 'lord.' Yes, the lord of the estate sent his son, but he did so while he was still alive. The owner is not dead and he now will certainly come to the vineyard, of which he is the owner.

**What will he do to those tenants?** Jesus now invites his listeners into his parable. He asks the religious leader to whom he is speaking to offer a suggestion for what rightly ought to be done with these terrible tenants. What ought to happen to tenants who break their lease agreement? What ought to be done to tenants that abuse, beat, and kill the many servants of their master? What ought to justly happen to tenants who murdered the son of their master? What response ought the owner the vineyard do to tenants who have lied, attempted to steal, and murdered in order to keep what does not belong to them?

**He will put those wretches to a miserable death.** The religious leaders are able to make a correct judgment on these terrible tenants. These terrible tenants are **wretches** (*kakous κακός*) who deserve a **wretched** (*kakōs κακῶς*) death. There is a word play here that we do not see in English. In Greek the text is, **Κακούς κακῶς ἀπολέσει αὐτούς**<sup>9</sup> and literally means, "he will bring those wretches to a wretched end,"<sup>10</sup> or "those evil men deserve an evil death." Everyone knows this is correct. These terrible tenants deserve a terrible end.

The patience of the master is ended. The forbearance of the owner has reached its limit. The time for grace is over. Kindness has been abused too long. Justice will now come and these terrible tenants will receive a terrible punishment at the hands of the owner.

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<sup>9</sup> Kurt Aland et al., *The Greek New Testament, Fourth Revised Edition (Interlinear with Morphology)* (Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1993), Mt 21:41.

<sup>10</sup> Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, vol. 33B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1995), 622.

These religious leaders are unaware that they have just pronounced their own judgment.

## The Application of the Parable (vs.42-44)

Jesus now moves to apply the parable. By now the characters in the parable have become clear.

- The Master/Owner represents God the Father
- The vineyard represents Israel
- The tenants are the religious leaders
- The servants represent the OT prophets (ending with John)
- The son represents Jesus

Jesus transitions from the rejected son to a rejected stone from Israel's history. The words son and stone in Hebrew sound like. In Hebrew son is *ben* (בֶּן) while stone is *'eben* (אֶבֶן).

<sup>42</sup> 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?"

<sup>43</sup> Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits. <sup>44</sup> And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him." **Matthew 21:42-44** (ESV)

***Have you never read in the Scriptures.*** This is Jesus' way of saying, You haven't truly read your Bible. He knew they had read the Scriptures, but they had not received the meaning of the words that they read. They checked the box of their reading plan, but they had failed to meditate on the message.

***The stone that the builders rejected.*** Jesus here quotes from Psalm 118:22-23. This is a psalm which had recently rung in their ears only two days before as the whole city of Jerusalem sing, "***Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord,***"<sup>11</sup> as Jesus rode a donkey into the city while thousands waved palm branches before him and laid their coats on the road before him (Mt 21:8-9). The people received him while the leaders rejected him.

But, ***being rejected by the builders does mean being rejected by God.*** The fact that the leaders had rejected Jesus does not disprove his messiahship. The history of Israel includes lots of rejected saviors. There are many rejected sons who became the foundation stones of national deliverance.

- **Joseph** was a *son* rejected by his brothers, but through him God saved Israel.

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<sup>11</sup> Psalm 118:26.

- **Moses** was a *son* at first rejected by Israel, but then later through him God saved Israel.
- **David** was the youngest *son* at first rejected—first by his own family then later by king Saul, but through him God saved Israel. And the *“Lord’s doing, through each them was marvelous in our eyes.”*

Now the Lord was doing through Jesus something even more marvelous than what he did through Joseph, Moses, and David.

Jesus was here *predicting his own rejection* by the religious leaders (i.e. the builders). And not only was he predicting rejection, but he was also predicting his own death. In the parable the son was slain by the tenants. “The Son” was Jesus favorite title for himself. Let us not forget what God the Father spoke from heaven on day of Jesus’ baptism, *“This is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased”* (Mt 17:5). Jesus knows he will be killed at the hands of these builders and he still willingly embraced the Father’s will for him.<sup>12</sup> He has been predicting his death at their hands for several months prior to his arrival in Jerusalem.<sup>13</sup> Here now, through this parable, and before these religious leaders and the crowds, he for the first time publicly predicts his death.

*Has become the cornerstone.* He will be rejected by men, but acceptance by God. He was pointing to himself as the *“cornerstone.”* The cornerstone is the central stone of the whole building. Literally it means “the head of the corner.” The cornerstone keeps all other stones of the building in alignment and it is the primary stone upon which the whole building is founded. What God the Father was now building, was *centered* on Jesus. Jesus was publicly proclaiming to these religious leaders that through himself the Lord God was once again doing something *marvelous* in Israel. And they had better heed his warning.

*Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you given to a people producing its fruit.* Jesus is here saying to these religious leaders that if they reject the Son of God, then the stewardship of God’s kingdom will be taken away from them and given to others who will be faithful and fruitful.

Indeed, this is exactly what happened. The new building of the new covenant was entrusted to the 12 apostles. Through their ministry and teaching, the church of Jesus grew and expanded to include peoples of all nations.

*And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.* Jesus is the cornerstone of God’s kingdom work. Those who stumble over him will fall into destruction. To reject Jesus would bring God’s just wrath. To reject the Son is the same as rejecting the Father, because the Son is the personal representative of the Father. And

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<sup>12</sup> Isaiah 53:10.

<sup>13</sup> Matthew 16:21; 17:9, 22; 20:17-19.



the terrible punishment and wrath that will fall upon all who turn their backs on Jesus will be seen by all as perfectly just.

Jesus is leaving his listeners with the choice. He will either be the *cornerstone or the crushing stone* of one's life. He will be the head of one's life or the foot under which one is crushed. Jesus will either be receive or rejected. Receiving him ultimately leads to life, while rejecting him will lead ultimately to destruction.

## The Response to the Parable (vs.45-46)

Will this parabolic warning cause the minds of these leaders to be changed?

<sup>45</sup> When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them. <sup>46</sup> And although they were seeking to arrest him, they feared the crowds, because they held him to be a prophet. **Matthew 21:45-46** (ESV)

The leaders understood what Jesus was saying. They understood that the Master/Owner was God. They understood the vineyard referred to Israel. They understood the servants referred to the prophets—whom the previous leaders had killed. They understood that Jesus was the son in the parable and that they were represented by terribly wicked tenants. And they did not change their minds. They were "*seeking to arrest him.*" They *feared* the wrath of *the crowds*, rather than fearing the wrath of God. They continue to reject the Son. The crowds of average people saw the hand of God, the anointing of God, and the power of God on display through Jesus. Surely he was prophet sent by God. But these leaders did not receive him, but instead they sought to kill him.

## Conclusion

Let us now consider how this parable applies to us today.

1. ***Worship God for his long-suffering patience toward sinners.*** The Lord God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. He has not dealt with us as our sins deserve, nor has he repaid us according to our iniquities. His mercies are new every morning.

Our wretched sins demand that we die a wretched death, and yet Jesus chose to die a wretched death so that everyone who would go to God through him, could enjoy eternal life with the Father. Oh the patience, the grace, the mercy, and the love of God. Oh the deep, deep love of the Father shown through Jesus, his *beloved Son*, who chose to lay down his life for his friends. Jesus knew exactly what God the Father willed him to do and willingly walked into death in order to show us the patient love of the Father.

2. ***Produce the fruit the Lord expects.*** The Lord expects from his people lives of repentance and obedience. Oh, repent today. Even now repent of your sins. Turn and obey the gospel. Turn away from sin and walk in righteousness. Today sow seeds of repentance and cultivate the peaceful fruit of righteousness in your life. If you are a follower of Jesus, does your life look like the life of Jesus?
3. ***Judgement comes to all who reject Jesus.*** No one who rejects Jesus will escape judgment. Just as this parable reveals that these terrible tenants rightly deserve a terrible judgment, so in the end of time will all people agree that God's judgment is just and that those who have rejected Jesus and trampled underfoot his sinless sacrificial blood, rightfully deserve to be eternally separated from in the terrible torments of everlasting hell.
4. ***Make Jesus the cornerstone of your life.*** Jesus is the cornerstone of heaven and earth. He is the only firm foundation for a life that will last. Jesus and Jesus alone will keep you steady through all the political, relational, environmental, and spiritual turmoil that each of us must endure. Everything changes. Except Jesus. He alone is the "same yesterday, today, and forever."<sup>14</sup> He alone is solid, stable, and steady. Make him the cornerstone of your life today. Reorient your life around him. Put him at the center of your life.

## Discussion Questions

1. When and where did Jesus tell this parable?
2. To whom was this parable directed?
3. Whom do the characters in the parable each represent; who is the master of the house? Who or what is the vineyard? Who are the tenants? The servants? The son? What is the fruit?
4. What is the primary point or main idea of this parable?
5. What might the Lord be saying to you individually through this parable?
6. Why do you think the Lord so often choose to marvelously use those whom the world at first rejects? What does this tell you about the character of God?
7. What else does this parable reveal about the character of God?
8. What does this parable reveal about the character of Jesus?
9. List several practical things a Christian can do to make Jesus the cornerstone of one's life.

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<sup>14</sup> Hebrews 13:8.