

The Wicked Tenants (Matthew 21:33-45)

Let me begin by giving us some context to this parable of the wicked tenants. The religious leaders had just seen how Jesus cleaned up the temple of its ungodly commercial business. They also saw how the “whole crowd was amazed at his teaching” (Matt 11:21-23). Jesus acted with real authority and he also taught in the temple and the people loved it. The religious leaders tried to undermine Jesus’ authority by questioning it: “By what authority are you doing these things...who gave you authority to do this?” (Mark 11:28).

Though he refused to answer their question about his authority, Jesus did provide an answer that the religious leaders did not expect. He told a story. Jesus’ story is one of the most interesting parables ever told by Christ. It is interesting because it is both historical and predictive. Christ covered the history of Israel from God’s perspective, just as God sees it.

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Then he predicted or revealed exactly what was going to happen to Israel: they were going to reject God's own Son; and because of their rejection and cruelty, God was going to reject them by giving the Kingdom of God to another people—the Gentiles.

Ley's take a quick look at this parable of the wicked tenants. The owner of the land planted a vineyard and rented it to some farmers, and went away for a while. When harvest time came, he sent a servant to get his rightful share of the fruit, but his servant was beaten and sent away empty-handed. Other servants who followed were treated just as badly, and some were even killed. Then the owner sent his own son, who he thought would be respected. But they killed him, too. Jesus then said that the owner would return to destroy all those who killed his son.

It is clear what Jesus was referring to. The owner of the vineyard is God. We read in Isaiah 5:7 that "The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the nation of Israel."

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God sent many prophets to the unfaithful nation, only to be rejected. Then he sent his only Son, Jesus, who would be killed by them.

Here then is the authority of Jesus which the religious leaders were asking about. Jesus is none other than the Son of God, and he has the authority of God himself, far above any others. But the Jews rejected the authority of Jesus. Instead, they were trying to kill him. This would be held against them. Jesus quoted Scripture (“The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone” Psalm 118:22) to say that he would have the final word and determine the final outcome. This Palm Sunday psalm introduces the coming of the Messiah. How people respond to him will determine their destiny. “Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed” (Luke 20:18).

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Jesus has the authority and power to both forgive those whose hearts are broken by his message and punish those who reject him.

The religious leaders know that Jesus was referring to them and dared not reply, because they could not. Their authority was man-made and feeble and they were afraid of the people (Mark 12:13). Their authority is seems, was made or broken by the people, not God. They were more afraid of people than they were of God. How pathetic!

So, what is said throughout today's Scripture reading is applicable to all nations as well as to Israel. God has entrusted the vineyard of the church and of the world to us, the new nation, the new creation of God. Every point covered in Israel's history should, therefore, be a dynamic message speaking loudly and clearly to our hearts.

So, the three major points in this passage are (1) Israel's history as God sees it. And he sees it as this:

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the landowner is God. The vineyard is Israel, true Israel, the people of God. The tenants are the religious leaders of Israel; the servants are the prophets; and the Son is Jesus Christ, the Messiah.

The second major point in this passage is three astounding claims Jesus Christ makes that affect both world history and the personal destiny of everyone who ever lives in the world. The first claim is that Jesus is the Head Cornerstone or Capstone. The cornerstone is the supportive stone. All other stones are placed upon it and are held up by it. They all rest upon it. It is the preeminent stone in position and power. So it is with Christ; he is the support and power, the Foundation of God's new movement.

Jesus' second astounding claim is that God shall turn away from Israel to another nation. God gave a prophecy that dramatically affects world history: his vineyard or kingdom is going to be taken away from Israel and given to another people. Several important

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facts need to be understood at this point in order to grasp the significance of the Lord's prophecy. First, Israel is the nation of people raised up by God to be his witness to the world. Second, Israel failed God in its God-given mission and failed God miserably. Therefore, God took his kingdom away from them. As Christ points out in this parable, they "took God's servants, they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third (vv. 35-36)." Then they committed the most atrocious crime of history: they rejected and killed God's very own Son (v. 39).

The third astounding claim that Jesus made is that man's rejection of Christ will cause that man to be crushed. The people who stumble over Christ, the

Head Cornerstone of God, are doomed. Many who stood around Christ in that day stumbled and many stumble today. Many cannot believe that God actually sent his Son into the world. The idea that God would humiliate himself that much is beyond understanding, so they refuse to believe. The belief that Christ was a

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great teacher is acceptable to them; but acknowledging him to be more than a man, to be the Son of God who was to die for the sins of the world, is beyond them. Therefore, they stumble over the cornerstone, the very foundation which God has laid for the salvation of man. They stumble and fall over who he is, and they are shattered and broken.

And now the third major point of this Scripture reading is the threefold results of this parable. First, the religionists saw that Christ was speaking directly to them, but their consciences were seared by obstinate unbelief (1 Tim 4:4). They were insensitive to his warnings (Mt 21:41-44). Second, the

religionists reacted instead of repenting. They should have heeded the Lord's warning, but they did not. They were set against him, seeking to destroy him and to silence his claim. And third, the people saw Christ only as a prophet or a great teacher and not the Messiah. This too is tragic, but God was able to use

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their respect to protect Christ until the appointed time of his death.

So, what are the lessons we can learn from this Scripture reading from Matthew?

This parable illustrates the responsibility that believers have in nurturing their relationship with God. Just as the vinedressers were entrusted with the vineyard, followers are entrusted with their faith and the message of God. The historical rejection of God's prophets and messengers serves as a

reminder of the consequences of ignoring divine guidance and the importance of heeding spiritual teachings. While there is a warning of judgment for those who reject God, it also reflects God's mercy in continually reaching out to his people. And believers are called to bear fruit in their lives, demonstrating faith, love, and

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obedience. The expectation is that one's faith should manifest itself in actions that honor God.

Please bow your heads as I pray.

Heavenly Father, help me to recognize how many times you come to me through quiet prophets and whispered warnings that are sent to catch my attention. Help to listen to your messengers and the agents of your Word, particularly when I am busy and too self-absorbed to notice you inviting me to

you. Forgive me, Lord, when I turn my back on you. Teach me to see you, to listen to you, and to walk with you with an open heart that welcomes you and answers you in grace and love. We ask this in the name of your Son and our Savior, Jesus Christ.
Amen.