

**The Parable of the Tenant Farmers**  
**Matthew 21:33-46**  
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The parable of the tenant farmers is the second of a series of three parables that Jesus spoke to the chief priests and elders in response to their question regarding His authority, *“By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?”* (Matthew 21:23). Jesus refused to answer their question because it was insincere and lacking faith, and led Him to tell them the parable of the two sons (21:28-32). The point of this first parable was to show the son who claimed to do the will of his father and did not, was like the religious leaders, while the son who initially rejected, repented and did the will of his father was like the tax collectors and prostitutes who will enter the kingdom of God.

This second parable builds upon the theme of the vineyard, and was also directed to the chief priests and elders who continued to listen to Jesus. This parable is found in all three synoptic Gospels (Matthew 21:33-46; Mark 12:1-12; Luke 20:9-19). Luke’s Gospel informs us that Jesus addressed this parable to *“the people”* (Luke 20:9), so the religious leaders were not the only ones hearing this story as it was spoken to the crowds in the temple courts.

In Matthew 21:45 we find those hearing these parables were *“the chief priests and the Pharisees,”* who tells us that the elders who were with the chief priests at the questioning of Jesus in 21:23 were largely Pharisees. *“The elders”* were those who functioned as part of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council which oversaw the religious life of the Jews. Many of the council were Pharisees and so we see the Pharisees join with the chief priests, who were aligned with the Sadducees, to oppose Jesus.

**The construction of the vineyard (21:33)**

The phrase *“Listen to another parable”* indicates that this parable immediately followed the last one. While the setting of this parable is also a vineyard, the workers are tenants, not the sons of the landowner. The setting of the parable is taken from Isaiah 5:1-2, *“Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.”*

Jesus built upon this Old Testament imagery by adding the landowner who rented the vineyard to tenant farmers while he departed on a journey. In Isaiah 5, the vineyard represented the unfaithfulness of the nation of Israel. Psalm 80:6-16 also used the image of a vineyard to represent the unfaithfulness of Israel. Because of the opposition to Jesus by the religious leaders, the addition of the tenant farmers becomes significant for how the leaders of Israel were unfaithful over the centuries.

### **The crop from the vineyard (21:34-39)**

In the parable, the landowner rightly expected to receive his portion of the fruit of the vineyard from the tenant farmers, so when it came time for the harvest, he sent his slaves to bring him this harvest. The tenant farmers opposed the rightful collection by the landowner of the produce. This opposition is more than mere resistance, it includes the violent acts of beating, stoning, and killing the slaves of the landowner.

The issue in Isaiah 5 was that the fruit of the vineyard was bad, while the issue in Matthew 21:33-39 was that the deeds of the tenant farmers were bad. So Jesus used the imagery from Isaiah 5 but sought to emphasize a different point in this story. With Jesus, the problem was specifically the behavior of the tenants. These tenants failed by withholding what was rightfully due the landowner and they failed by physically attacking the slaves of the landowner. In spite of the evil deeds of the tenants, the landowner sent a group of slaves, who only suffered the same suffering at the hands of the evil tenant farmers.

Mark's Gospel clarifies the extent to which the landowner went to collect his produce by breaking down each attempt: (1) the first slave was beaten and sent away empty-handed; (2) the second slave was wounded in the head and treated shamefully; (3) the third slave was killed; (4) many other slaves were sent, only to be beaten or killed; (5) a beloved son was sent, only to be also killed and thrown out of the vineyard.

The patient landowner then responded by withholding judgment and seeking for a third time to make the collection of what he was due. This time he did not send a group of slaves, but rather he sent his son to collect the produce, with the reasoning, "*They will respect my son.*" Even though the landowner extended the tenants multiple opportunities to respond rightly to their debt, the tenants again opposed the desire of the landowner by killing his son.

Clearly, this parable has significance to the history of Israel. This parable is unique in that it includes so many direct allegorical features that connect to the nation of Israel:

1. The landowner represents God Himself, who is characterized by mercy and by long-suffering.
2. The tenants portray the people of the nation of Israel who reject the prophets that God sent them.
3. The slaves represent the prophets of the Old Testament who were sent by God to the nation.
4. The son of the landowner is obviously Jesus Christ, who is about to be killed by the Jews.
5. The vineyard is the less obvious referent. Some consider it represents the kingdom of God, for it is permanent and its fruit is reaped at the time of the harvest, the second coming of Christ. However, that the son was thrown out of the vineyard by the tenants makes this view difficult. Some consider that it represents the nation of Israel, as the landowner desires the vineyard to be cultivated. However, the people of Israel were those who rejected Christ. Perhaps it could only refer to the land of Israel, yet there is a better view.

What God had built for the people of God to worship Him was the temple. Jesus spoke this parable at the temple. He condemned the people who were using the temple to enrich themselves, rather than worship in Matthew 21:12-13. Regarding the son in the parable, *“they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.”* Jesus was not taken out of the land of Israel, but was executed outside of the walls of Jerusalem.

In the parable, the treatment of the son by the tenants is the climax of their evil. Their motive was more than to keep the produce of the vineyard for themselves, but they sought to *“kill him and seize his inheritance.”* This inheritance is the leadership of the kingdom, which rightfully belonged to the Son of God.

This seizure was the crux of the problem with the Jewish leaders, who imposed their will over the nation, rather than God’s will. They replaced the doctrines of God with their own traditions and their hypocritical worship was in vain (Matthew 15:6-9). They led the people of Israel into rebellion against the Messiah.

### **The condemnation by the vineyard owner (21:40-41)**

This led Jesus to ask the question, *“Therefore when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vine-growers?”* There is no question that the tenants were guilty of great crimes, but what should be the punishment? In this question, Jesus essentially asks the people what should be the judgment of their leaders. Whether it is the chief priests or the crowd who respond is unclear, but all heard the response, which was hard to argue with.

Unaware of the purpose for this parable, the people responded plainly, *“He will bring those wretches to a wretched end, and will rent out the vineyard to other vine-growers who will pay him the proceeds at the proper seasons.”* They recognize the tenants as wretches who deserve *“a wretched end.”* Not only do they advocate for punishment, but for their replacement with those who will give the landowner what he deserves.

This then hints to the future where the privileged position of being God’s people will be taken away from the Jews and given to the church, where Jews and Gentiles will be one (cf. Ephesians 2:11-22). The disciples of Jesus would end up as the new leaders of God’s chosen people to carry out His mission to the world.

### **The condemnation of the chief priests (21:42-44)**

Jesus’ words *“did you never read in the Scriptures?”* points here and elsewhere to Old Testament verses that referenced Himself (cf. Matthew 12:3, 5; 19:4; 21:16; 22:31; Mark 12:10). Jesus had said earlier that the word of God spoke about Himself, *“You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me”* (John 5:39).

Jesus follows this parable by quoting Psalm 118:22-23, *“THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS REJECTED, THIS BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER stone; THIS CAME ABOUT FROM THE LORD, AND IT IS MARVELOUS IN OUR EYES?”* This psalm spoke originally about David, who was rejected by the leaders of the nation, most notably King Saul, but who God would choose to make the chief cornerstone, the head of Israel. Likewise, the nation of Israel would be despised by the surrounding nations, yet was God’s chosen people. The ultimate fulfillment of Psalm 118:22-23 was in Jesus, the Son of David, who the Jewish leaders rejected but who God had appointed to be the chief cornerstone, the head of the church.

The result of this rejection by the leaders will lead to their condemnation. This is stated by Jesus in verse 43, *“Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people, producing the fruit of it.”* Because the leaders rejected the Messiah, they will be excluded from the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God will be *“given to a people, producing the fruit of it,”* namely the church (cf. Acts 13:46; 18:5-6; Romans 10:19; 1 Peter 2:9).

The disciples would become the apostles and prophets upon which the church would be founded (cf. Ephesians 2:20). They were the Jewish remnant that would continue God’s work in Israel to become God’s work in the church. We know that God’s promises to Israel remain to be fulfilled, and He has only paused His work through Israel. One day, the kingdom of God will come to be established in the land as God has promised, *“for a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; and so all Israel will be saved”* (Romans 11:25-26).

By referencing Psalm 118:22-23, Jesus moved from the imagery of a vineyard to the imagery of a building. With this analogy, the builders were like the tenant farmers, who failed to fulfill their obligation to the landowner. The builders rejected the stone, and therefore the building that they were to build could not stand.

The analogy of a stone would become a part of the description by the early church of why Jesus had been rejected by the Jewish people when Peter referenced these same words of Psalm 118 in Acts 4:11. The symbolism of the stone also appears in 1 Peter 2:6-8, *“For this is contained in Scripture: ‘BEHOLD, I LAY IN ZION A CHOICE STONE, A PRECIOUS CORNER stone, AND HE WHO BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED.’ This precious value, then, is for you who believe; but for those who disbelieve, ‘THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS REJECTED, THIS BECAME THE VERY CORNER stone,’ and, ‘A STONE OF STUMBLING AND A ROCK OF OFFENSE’; for they stumble because they are disobedient to the word, and to this doom they were also appointed.”*

This appointment of Jesus as the precious cornerstone forms the basis for the church, which Peter refers to as a spiritual house made up of living stones, *“you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ”* (1 Peter 2:5). We exist together based upon the foundation of Jesus Christ, not by happenstance or by the ingenious idea of man. The church is from the Lord, who is the essential foundation upon which God builds His people in order to accomplish His divine purpose.

### **The condemnation by the chief priests (21:45-46)**

The chief priests were in the crowd that listened to Jesus and they recognized what He was saying about them. They likely discerned what Jesus meant by His words in verse 43, *“Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people, producing the fruit of it.”*

This is because He spoke in parables not to enlighten those who had rejected His words, but rather to hide revelation from them. *“For whoever has, to him more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him. Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand”* (Matthew 13:12-13). Jesus chose to clue them in to His meaning, knowing that His arrest and crucifixion was near, just as He had prophesied (Matthew 16:21-23; 17:22-23; 20:17-19).

In verse 45, we learn that there were Pharisees also in the crowd listening to this parable. This is the first reference to any Pharisees since Jesus had entered Jerusalem two days earlier. This group will play a large role in the next two chapters. After Jesus will give the third and final parable of this section in Matthew 22:1-14, we will find the Pharisees plotting together against Him and this will lead to Jesus’ condemnation of them in Matthew 23.

Both the chief priests and the Pharisees desired to arrest Him, but *“they feared the people, because they considered Him to be a prophet.”* This fear will lead them to conspire with the scribes and the Sadducees in the arrest of Jesus, for this evil deed would require the involvement of every faction of the Jewish leadership. For now, neither the chief priests nor the Pharisees felt they had the power to overcome those who viewed Jesus as a prophet.

In less than two days, a series of remarkable events would unfold to bring about the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus, with the support of the Jewish people who had cheered His entry into Jerusalem. This occurred by the manipulation of these Jewish leaders, in cooperation with the Roman government, but according to the preordained plan of God. Peter noted this in His address to the Jews in Acts 2:23, *“this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death,”* and also in the prayer of the believers upon the release of Peter and John in Acts 4:27-28, *“For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur.”*

## **Conclusion**

The chief priests fail to turn from their self-righteous control of the temple in spite of Jesus' actions regarding those buying, selling and changing money there (21:12-13) and in spite of the praise of the children (21:14-17). They were instructed by Jesus about their looming destruction (21:43-44) but continued to plot against the Lord (21:45-46). They were the fruitless fig tree that bore no fruit.

Throughout human history, there are people who opposed the will of God. Many of them are like these Jews, who present themselves as devoted to God, but whose hearts are far from Him. In their religion, they are committed to their agenda, their cause, their denomination, their local church, their Christian ministry, while only serving themselves. Their appetite for control over people and personal accolades can feed the addiction to selfish ambition and power.

In the end, the Lord sees the heart and is the ultimate righteous judge of all men. He is not fooled by those who are wise in their own eyes and is fully able to guide His desires for His people in spite of those who resist His will. Therefore, to grow as disciples of Christ, we must trust Him over anyone else and our allegiance to God must surpass any other influence in our lives.

*“Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 6:1).*