

Sermon outline and notes © Dr. Stephen Felker, Pastor
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Introduction of text: As I have shared highlights of the gospel of Matthew, we are now considering the last week of Jesus prior to His death at Calvary. He has arrived to Jerusalem and has been triumphantly welcomed by the crowds. He is now teaching in the temple courts and He says the following (read vv.33-41):

Matthew 21:33-45 “God Requires a Fruitful Life”

Intro. You had a mother who went through discomfort and great suffering to bring you into this world. She even risked her life, because some women die from a complication of childbirth. Then, most of you had a mother who spent the next many months feeding you, bathing you, changing your diapers, clothing you, getting up at all hours of the night when you were hungry or sick. Many parents make many sacrifices for their children. They spend many hours playing with their children and going to their activities. They give instruction and much-needed discipline. Being the parent of just one child is a full-time job that lasts at least 18 years.

How should you respond to such loving sacrifice? Don't you think you should love your parents, show respect to them, and help care for them in their old age? Don't you think children should listen to their parents and obey them? Indeed they should. Eph. 6:1 says, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.” It is right, for they have given you life and a home with all that you need. They have given you unconditional love.

Well there is a parallel in our relationship to God. I have just read to you a parable that Jesus told. The parable illustrates the fact that God had done so much for Israel. And what did Israel do for God in return? Very little! Repeatedly they ignored God and disobeyed God. They were not loyal to God, but even worshiped other gods. And even when they gave up their idolatry and became outwardly religious, they did not fulfill their purpose as a nation. Israel was like the fig tree that Jesus cursed the day before; full of leaves, but no fruit! A fruit tree isn't much good unless it brings forth fruit. A life isn't much good unless it is living up to the purpose for which God created that life.

In this parable Jesus clearly sets forth the truth that God demands a fruitful life. God has *not* done so much for you, and blessed you so that you can just be a consumer of His blessings. You are to be a channel of blessing to the glory of God. You are to bear fruit unto God. And if you don't, we will see in our story the terrible consequence of that.

Do you have a fruitful life? From the very beginning God created man to be fruitful. He placed man in a garden to tend it to bear fruit. Many believers can see the fruit of having godly children and grandchildren. Or you can see the fruit of your ministry in the church, touching lives for Christ. I hope you can think of at least a few who will be in heaven through your influence. How many people have been blessed by you in some way? This is an important subject for our consideration today.

So let's look more closely at the parable that Jesus told, and see what it tells us about our relationship with God. First of all:

I. CONSIDER THE PROVISION OF GOD

This parable is based on Isaiah 5:1-7, and in it Jesus reminded the Jews of God's goodness to them as a nation. In v.33 Jesus began His parable saying, "There was a certain landowner who planted a vineyard and set a hedge around it, dug a winepress in it and built a tower...." The owner of the very large vineyard¹ cultivated the soil, planted the vines, provided hedges or stone wall² around it, as well as a watchtower for protection. A watchman had to be stationed in such a tower to warn of any danger from pillagers and from destructive animals. He also dug a winepress for processing the fruit. The winepress generally consisted of two excavations dug into the earth and lined with stonework, or hewn out of a rock cliff. The upper cavity, wide and shallow, served as a receptacle for the grapes. Here they were crushed by the feet of the grape-treaders (cf. Isa. 63:2, 3). How would you like to have that job? Then the juice would run through a pipe into the lower, narrow and deep compartment. Afterward it was put into jars.

So the owner took care of everything.³ It was a first-class vineyard that should have been profitable for both the owner and the tenants.

The parallel to God and to Israel should be obvious. God created them. He called Abraham, and told him that a nation would spring from his seed (Genesis 12-13). The vine of Israel grew and was nurtured in Egypt and then transplanted into the Promised Land. The land really belonged to God, a land that already had cities, wells, vineyards, and olive groves. It was a land flowing with milk and honey. He also gave them His Law. They would have been healthy and prosperous if they had obeyed His law. He gave them the rest of His holy Word as well. God truly provided all that they needed for a good life.

Surely we can apply the parable to us today. God has so well provided for us! We live in one of the most prosperous nations on earth. Even our poor are well off compared with most people on earth. He has provided our nation with a rich Christian heritage. The Christian faith has dominated the religious landscape of our nation for over 200 years. Unlike Israel, everyone in America could have their own copy of the Bible, the Word of God. God even provided for us the gift of eternal life through His Son Jesus Christ. He has truly done so much for us. God has been good to us.

So shall we simply be consumers of God's blessing? Shouldn't we take what God has blessed us with and give back to Him through fruitful ministry? Well let's move on to my second point from the parable:

II. LISTEN TO THE PLEAS OF GOD

The owner of the vineyard had provided a fine vineyard and leased it out. If they would have worked hard, they both would have benefited well from the vineyard. All he asked was for a fair portion of the fruit. So we read in v.34, "Now when vintage-time drew near, he sent his servants to the vinedressers, that they might receive its fruit." He had every right to demand a good portion of the fruit at harvest time.

Even so, the blessings of God upon Israel were not to be used only for themselves. God did not bless them as an end but also as a means. Through them they were to bless the nations by

¹ It was common to have a large farming estates in Palestine (Wilkins, p. 697).

² The word translated "hedge" (*phragmos*) refers to a hedge, fence, or wall that separates (cf. Eph. 2:14).

³ We need not seek for special, detailed meanings for the hedge, winepress, and tower. They simply express the completeness of the equipment.

sharing the knowledge of God. They were to evangelize the nations. In fact, the land God gave to Israel was central to three continents (Europe, Africa, and Asia), which spread out like spokes from its hub.

Now in light of the fact that God had provided so much, was it too much to ask that they give a return to Him? What did God want in return? He wanted their love, their obedience, and their service to Him. He sought their praise and worship. He wanted them to introduce the knowledge of God and His salvation to the nations. But instead of giving God His due, they gave him little or nothing.

Now getting back to our story, the owner in the parable had gone off to another country. He was far away. Even so, after God planted Israel in the Promised Land, He gave them a few hundred years to see if they would obey Him, and yield the spiritual fruit that He rightly demanded. But Israel failed. So God began to plead with them to be fruitful and obedient, to give Him what was due. Notice how He did so.

A. God's Plea Was Given through the Prophets – In vv.34 & 36 the landowner sent servants to remind the tenants of their agreement and to collect the owner's portion of the fruit.

But notice the unthinkable response in v.35, "And the vinedressers took his servants, beat one, killed one, and stoned another." Clearly, the servants represent the prophets of the Old Testament. God called them and sent them to Israel with His prophetic Word of correction and appeal. But without exception they faced rejection and even hostility. The long history of the ill-treatment of Israel's prophets is a commentary on this part of the parable (1 Kings 18:4, 13; 22:24-27; 2 Kings 6:31; 2 Chronicles 24:19-22; 36:15-16; Jer. 20:1-2; Hebrews 11:35-38). What ungrateful people!

Even so, when we faithfully give out the Word of God to people, and present the claims of Christ, we can face rejection and persecution. I've known of some preachers who have lost their jobs because of their faithful proclamation of the Word of God.

B. God's Plea Was Given Patiently – In v.36 we see an illustration of the truth that God was patient with His people. There we read, "Again he sent other servants, more than the first...." One might have expected that the owner would have responded most vigorously to the cruel treatment his servants had received. Their treatment was also an insult to him. But he did not. He decided to give the share-croppers another chance to do their duty. Even so, God sent prophet after prophet, and He kept giving opportunity after opportunity to repent, and give Him what is His due. For hundreds of years God withheld His judgment from His rebellious and ungrateful people.

This reminds me of 2 Peter 3:9, "The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance." This God-rejecting, Christ-rejecting world deserves judgment. I'm amazed at the forbearance of God. But Christ hasn't yet come again in judgment because He is waiting, giving some soul yet another opportunity to repent and be saved before it is eternally too late.

So this parable shows that God has been patient with His people, sending prophet after prophet to remind them of their duty. Finally, God sent one final messenger to collect what was due from His people Israel. In this parable we also see:

C. God's Plea Was through His Son Jesus – We see this illustrated in v.37, "Then last of all he sent his son to them...." What a patient landowner! He gives them one more opportunity to

make things right. This final messenger was of quite a different caliber and character from the householder's servants. He was the owner's son. Even so there was all the difference in the world between even a prophet like Elijah and Jesus (cf. Hebrews 3:3-6). And here, Jesus asserts that He is not just a prophet, but the very Son of God! Those who say that Jesus was just a prophet, or a great teacher, are wrong. He is more than just a prophet. He is the very Son of God, sent by God the Father into the world. Part of His mission was to deliver God's message to the people. In Mt. 4:17 Jesus began His preaching by saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." They were falling far short and they needed to change their mind and attitude. They needed to change their ways as well. He also told people to believe in Him as the Son of God.

We have essentially the same appeal from God to us. We have the record of the message of the prophets in the Bible. We have the words of Jesus in the Gospel accounts. Through them God reminds us that He owns everything, and has allowed us to enjoy His world and many other blessings. And we owe Him our lives, our loyalty, our love, our trust, our obedience, our service, and our worship. Will we listen to the prophets? Will we at least listen to Jesus, the very Son of God? Will we respond in the right way to the appeal of God through the prophets, and through His Son?

Well, that leads to the next point of our story:

III. RESPOND TO THE PLEAS OF GOD

One would expect the kind of response found in the last of v.37, "They will respect my son." After all, the sonship of Jesus was confirmed with miracles and fulfilled prophecy. We should also expect that the people would have given the landowner his due.

Yet, the actual response was far different than respect toward the Son. In v.38 we read, "But when the vinedressers saw the son, they said among themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance.'" Indeed, the leaders of Israel had no regard, no respect for the Son of God. The Pharisees and scribes, who stood in the audience with frowning hatred as He spoke, were living out the words of this parable. They had already plotted His death. Indeed, in v.39 Jesus predicted what they would do to Him, "So they took him and cast him out of the vineyard and killed him." Even so, Jesus Christ was taken outside the city walls of Jerusalem and crucified (Heb. 13:12-13). To them, Jesus was a threat to their privileged position. Instead of seeing their leadership as a stewardship from God, they viewed their position as a self-serving means to obtain honor, power, and wealth for themselves. They didn't want to share it or yield it to Jesus, so they got rid of Him.

Jesus warned the leaders of Israel that their plot to kill Him was known by Him, and actually predicted by the Old Testament. He said in v.42, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: 'The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This was the LORD'S doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes'?" This was from Psalm 118. The crowds quoted from that Psalm when they welcomed Jesus into the city, so this Scripture was fresh in the minds of the rulers. The Jewish leaders knew the messianic import of the Scripture Jesus quoted. They were the builders who rejected the stone (Acts 4:11). What incompetent builders! They did not recognize the very stone needed to build their nation for the glory of God. So based partly on this verse, the Lord not only predicted that He would be rejected and killed, but also that He would become chief among us. Indeed, both predictions came true! Jesus was crucified, and He did in fact become the chief foundation stone of His church (Eph. 2:20-22; 1 Peter 2:4-5). The suffering of the Son was turned into the position of ultimate prominence and importance.

What have you done with Jesus? Have you rejected Him? Have you ignored His earnest appeal? Don't make the same mistake. Make Him Savior and Lord of your life. Live a fruitful life. Are you leading others to Jesus? Are you helping to build up His Church with your service? Are you giving Him worship and praise each week? And do you think that giving God 10% of the income He has blessed you with is too much? Do you need to make some changes in your life starting today, to give God what is due?

Let's just suppose that you listen to the prophets. And let's suppose that you even listen to the words of Jesus, God's Son. But you walk away and do nothing about what you have heard. You just keep living life as a consumer of God's blessings. You do not give Him the love, the honor, and the worship that He is due. Let's suppose you do not give Him your life and service. Then you need to consider the last point of the parable:

IV. BE WARNED OF THE PUNISHMENT OF GOD

When you consider how the tenants had abused the landowner's servants, and even killed his son, we are not surprised by the question of v.40, "Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vinedressers?" What do *you* think he should do? What would you do to such people if they had killed your servants, and even your son, as well as withhold what was rightfully yours? Well the story was so gripping and it was told with such realism that his audience was carried along by it. Forced for the moment to forget their hatred of Jesus, most of the audience of Jesus spoke with one voice and said in v.41, "He will destroy those wicked men miserably, and lease his vineyard to other vinedressers who will render to him the fruits in their seasons." Everyone recognized that those wicked men deserved to be punished, and such punishment was just. So with majestic finesse, the Lord forced them to act as their own judge and jury and pass sentence on themselves.

I believe we have a parallel to the procedure followed by Nathan the prophet when he addressed David. Nathan gave a parable (II Samuel 12:1-4). [Briefly tell the story?] Then David reacted to the injustice of the man in the parable (vv. 5-6). Then Nathan gave the explanation and application: "You are the man!..." (vv.7-12). David was the one who had many wives but yet he took the one wife of his faithful servant. While Nathan was telling the story, David was unaware that the prophet was, in a concealed manner, talking about him. Perhaps the chief priests and Pharisees, among others, were at first unaware of the fact that they themselves were "the wicked tenants."

So Jesus used the parable to warn of the consequences of following the same course of action as these vinedressers. This was directed especially to the leaders of Israel. And there were two consequences specifically mentioned:

A. Punishment Will Include Death and Destruction – In v.41 they stated the kind of punishment that was due to such people, "He will destroy those wicked men miserably...." These murderers were rounded up and executed for their crimes. This is also pictured in v.44, "And whoever falls on this stone will be broken; but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder." To the Christian, Jesus is a rock, a solid foundation for our lives. To many others Christ is a rock that people stumble upon because he is not the kind of Savior they want (Isaiah 8:14-15; Romans 9:32-33; 1 Corinthians 1:23; 1 Peter 2:8). I'm talking about the true Jesus of the Bible, not the one that is preached by cult leaders and other false prophets. Therefore, they trip and fall over such a stone. But in the end, those who reject Christ will find Him to be like a large crushing stone that

will strike unbelievers in judgment. Surely this is an allusion to Dan. 2:34-35, where the Messiah is pictured as coming like a stone, which strikes the godless kingdoms of this world, and breaks them into pieces (see also vv.44-45).

Even so, the nation of Israel was destroyed in 70 A.D., only 40 years after Jesus spoke these words of warning. Hundreds of thousands lost their lives. Their city and their temple were crushed and burned. And listen to me. If you do not repent of your sin, trust Jesus as your Savior, and bear fruit that demonstrates that you have truly been saved, then you also will face a terrible end.

Again, Jesus likens Himself to a large stone that will crush to powder those who fail to bear fruit unto God. Do you remember what happened on 9/11? You probably have seen more than once the collapse of twin towers of the World Trade Center. When each tower collapsed, almost everything was pulverized to powder, beyond recognition. Over 1000 bodies were pulverized or burned, and could not be recovered. And being ground into powder describes a judgment that is final, complete, and from which one can never recover. Hell is a place of utter loss, a place of suffering from which you will never recover. Think about it. Most preachers these days don't preach about hell but Jesus Himself clearly warned of it.

Jesus warns of another consequence of consuming the blessing of God, and doing nothing with it:

B. Privilege Will Be Removed and Transferred to Others - In v.41 we read that the landowner will rightly "lease his vineyard to other vinedressers who will render to him the fruits in their seasons." The vinedressers' calculation had been that killing the heir would make them lords of the vineyard; the grim fact was that they cast themselves out when they cast him out.

Then in v.43 Jesus applied the parable directly to Israel saying, "Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it." For hundreds of years Israel had been the chosen people, a special nation unto God. But they were on the verge of losing it all because they did not bring forth fruit unto God. They even rejected and killed their Messiah, God's Son.

Indeed, Israel lost everything. They were set aside, and Christ began to build His church, which became made up primarily of Gentiles. Now spiritual blessing comes through us to the world, instead of through Israel. In 1 Peter 2:9 Peter said of the Church, "But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light." Note that Peter also uses the singular "nation" to describe the church. All who become individual disciples out of the plural "nations" (28:19) will be brought together as one new "nation."

America has been a great nation that became a blessing to the world in so many ways. We have sent thousands of missionaries to the nations. We have defeated tyranny and spread freedom and greater prosperity. Yet we have become increasingly a nation of consumers that have turned from God. I and others are giving fair warning to America. If we do not repent, God will withhold His blessing and we will face His judgment, and the blessing of God will pass to other nations.

The same thing can happen to an individual church. This reminds me of Rev. 2:5 where Jesus said to the Church in Ephesus, "Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent." Indeed, the kingdom has been taken from the churches of Asia Minor and Syria, because within a few hundred years they stopped bearing fruit. And there are churches all over this country that have essentially died because they became self-serving social clubs instead of vineyards that bear fruit unto God. God's blessing will be upon our church only to the extent that

we spread the gospel and minister in the name of Jesus, not just to our own members, but also to those outside of our fellowship.

Conclusion: This parable was our Lord's final warning to the religious leaders. And what he warned about was fulfilled. I wonder: when will you receive your last warning? This message could be your last warning. You could die in a traffic accident before you hear another gospel sermon. Will you consider the goodness of God? He has blessed you. He has made many other blessings available to you if you will only accept them by faith. Will you give heed to the plea of God to give Him what is due? Will you repent of your sin, trust in Jesus as your Savior, and yield your life to Him as Lord? Will you stop being just a consumer of God's blessings, and start being a channel of His blessings to others?

Now I'm speaking to many who have already trusted in Christ as your Savior. But is your life fruitful to God? Do you bear the fruit of righteousness (Matthew 5:20), good works (Colossians 1:5-10), Christian character (Galatians 5:21-22), and the fruit of new disciples (John 15:16)? Perhaps you need to make a renewed commitment to be fruitful to God.

Sources: Stephen Felker, *Devotional & Explanatory Notes on the Entire Bible* (Col. Hghts, VA: Published by Author), 2020; William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture, Vol 6* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 4 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017); John Phillips, *Exploring The Gospel of Matthew: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1999); Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Matthew*, reprint, Christian Publishing Co.; Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Loyal: Matthew* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1980); Michael J. Wilkins, *The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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