

# The Landowner

*Matthew 21:33-46*

*With Study Questions*

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# The Landowner

*Matthew 21:33-46*

Hear another parable: There was a certain landowner who planted a vineyard and set a hedge around it, dug a winepress in it and built a tower. And he leased it to vinedressers and went into a far country.<sup>34</sup> Now when vintage-time drew near, he sent his servants to the vinedressers, that they might receive its fruit.<sup>35</sup> And the vinedressers took his servants, beat one, killed one, and stoned another.<sup>36</sup> Again he sent other servants, more than the first, and they did likewise to them.<sup>37</sup> Then last of all he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.'<sup>38</sup> But when the vinedressers saw the son, they said among themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance.'<sup>39</sup> So they took him and cast *him* out of the vineyard and killed *him*.<sup>40</sup> "Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vinedressers?"<sup>41</sup> They said to Him, "He will destroy those wicked men miserably, and lease *his* vineyard to other vinedressers who will render to him the fruits in their seasons."<sup>42</sup> Jesus said to them, "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*' ?"<sup>43</sup> "Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it.<sup>44</sup> And whoever falls on this stone will be broken; but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder."<sup>45</sup> Now when the chief priests and Pharisees heard His parables, they perceived that He was speaking of them.<sup>46</sup> But when they sought to lay hands on Him, they feared the multitudes, because they took Him for a prophet (Matthew 21:33-46).

## Problems with Inheritance

A friend who is a probate attorney informed me years ago how seldom things go smoothly in the settling of estates. Family members, who peacefully co-exist for years, rapidly become ugly in the face of the inheritance struggle.

An inheritance is an odd thing. By the very nature of it, it is not something that can be earned (although sometimes those leaving the inheritance might stipulate requirements – like finishing college or caring for a family member – still it is not earned). Yet people develop a sense of entitlement and this can yield all sorts of bitterness.

The Scriptures speak often of inheritance (*kleronomia*). Peter refers to the Christian's inheritance as **“incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven...” (1 Peter 1:4)**. And although Peter places conditions on the inheritance that we should **“love as brothers, be tenderhearted, courteous...that we may inherit a blessing” (1 Peter 3:8, 9)**, this condition must be understood as the fruit of a truly faithful Christian and not in terms of merit. For Paul clearly writes:

**For if the inheritance is of the law, it is no longer of promise; but God gave it to Abraham by promise (Galatians 3:18).**

What we will see in this parable is how desperately men want to be in control of their environment. Although in this parable the environment happens to be the Old Testament church, it can include men's desire to exclude God from family, business, government and virtually every other venue in life.

I am often exposed to this mentality after writing a column, of a religious nature, for a secular newspaper. Some recent comments include:

Perpetuating myths will probably bring human civilization to an end in a very miserable and ugly manner. Religion is politics in fancy robes. People on ego trips trying to control others with 99 and 44/100 per cent pure unadulterated dogma- Religion has brought the world incalculable misery.

All you indoctrinated ones believing you will live forever with Jesus or some other dreamstate fantasy in the sky - get with Bushy and get over to Iraq and get involved in the world's latest religious war. Get over there and help slaughter some more men women children in the name of whatever your religion is. And don't forget to keep up your mindless bigotry

and hate of anything that doesn't fit your brainwashed mind-  
Believer in life, not the nothing after life

God this, god that, jesus this, jesus that drivel- If there is a God  
then he is a sadist.

What we see in these types of writings (and I receive much more like  
them) is an effort to keep the Son out of the vineyard.

### **A Confrontation**

Jesus is in the temple engaging the chief priests, and elders (Matthew  
21:23). They had initially confronted Him (asking by what authority He  
did these things – Matthew 21:23) and now He is confronting them. This is  
the second parable (the first parable revealed their unrepentant heart [the  
Parable of the Two Sons – Matthew 21:28-32]). This parable will expose  
their corruption as priests and reveal the consequences.

**Hear another parable: There was a certain landowner who planted a  
vineyard and set a hedge around it, dug a winepress in it and built a  
tower (Matthew 21:33a).**

### **God's Vineyard**

The landowner here I take to be God. It is God who actually plants  
the vineyard, not men. The vineyard is Israel as God's chosen instrument  
to bring glory to His name and redemption to man.

**For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel  
(Isaiah 5:7)**

The chief priests and Pharisees knew Jesus was speaking of them  
(Matthew 21:45). So the parable is directed at the church of the old  
covenant – more specifically the leaders of that church.

By the hedge, winepress and tower we understand that God has not  
left his church without provision.

**My Well-beloved has a vineyard On a very fruitful hill. <sup>2</sup> He dug it up and cleared out its stones, And planted it with the choicest vine. He built a tower in its midst, And also made a winepress in it; So He expected *it* to bring forth *good* grapes, But it brought forth wild grapes (Isaiah 5:1b, 2).**

God has provided for His church in gifts, provision and knowledge.

### **Gifts**

**When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, And gave gifts to men (Ephesians 4:8).**

### **Provision**

**And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:19).**

### **Knowledge**

**All Scripture *is* given by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, <sup>17</sup> that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16).**

Whatever shortcomings may be found in the church is never due to God's lack of provision.

**And he leased it to vinedressers and went into a far country (Matthew 21:33b).**

### **Absent God?**

People often query about the apparent absence of God. Of course God is all places at all times and will be found by those who truly seek (Proverbs 8:17). But in a sense there is an absence of God as we see here

being in a “**far country**”. In this respect men should be thankful for God’s absence for the absence is the temporary absence of His judgment.

The vinedressers are the shepherds, the blind guides of Israel. God gives the responsibility of His church to men. But they are merely sharecroppers (*georgois*). They do not own the vineyard and should not govern the vineyard by their own standards and wisdom but by the wisdom of God and for the glory of God.

We shall see that these hirelings are thieves and robbers (John 10:11-13).

**Now when vintage-time drew near, he sent his servants to the vinedressers, that they might receive its fruit. And the vinedressers took his servants, beat one, killed one, and stoned another. <sup>36</sup> Again he sent other servants, more than the first, and they did likewise to them (Matthew 21:34-36).**

## **Vintage Time**

Vintage time could be understood to be any time God demands a reckoning. It was vintage time in Sodom when ten righteous men couldn’t be found (Genesis 18:32). Vintage time for the sake of this parable was the end of the Old Covenant when the landowner would send His Son.

Prior to sending His Son the landowner would send servants who we are to understand as the prophets who are stoned and killed (Matthew 23:37). It was the office of the priest to care for God’s people and it was the office of the prophet to inform the priests and all of God’s people what the will of God was.

We still have the prophets contained in the Scriptures and it is the function of us all to acknowledge their authority. It is through the Word of God that true fruit is produced. A fruitful vineyard heralds the justice and righteousness of God.

**For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts *is* the house of Israel,  
And the men of Judah are His pleasant plant. He looked for  
justice, but behold, oppression; For righteousness, but  
behold, a cry *for help* (Isaiah 5:7).**

There was no true fruit in the Old Covenant church; only oppression and cries for help. Christ's churches are to be wells of living waters. But when Jesus Himself is rejected, all that flows from Him eventually disappears. Liberty is replaced by cruelty and tyranny. In the place of righteousness we find wickedness and instead of redemption we find only condemnation.

The church would reveal its abject wickedness by its response to the Son of God Himself.

**Then last of all he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.'<sup>38</sup> But when the vinedressers saw the son, they said among themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance.'<sup>39</sup> So they took him and cast *him* out of the vineyard and killed *him* (Matthew 21:37-39).**

## He Sent His Son

Mark records the parable this very touching way:

**Therefore still having one son, his beloved, he also sent him to them last, saying, 'They will respect my son' (Mark 12:6).**

In this parable Jesus conveys an assumption made by God; that men will respect His Son. This is not to say (as we shall soon see in Matthew 21:42) that God is caught off guard by men's hardness; its design is to heighten the sense of culpability.

Instead of respect, the vinedressers become like Joseph's brothers.

**Now when they saw him afar off, even before he came near them, they conspired against him to kill him (Genesis 37:18).**

Conspiracy heightens culpability because it is not merely premeditated, but the dialogue necessary in a conspiracy offers increased opportunity for conviction and repentance.

## **Cast Out for Our Sanctification**

Clearly the vinedressers, who are the chief priest and Pharisees in this parable, have no respect for the Son. That which is rightfully His, they want, and they're willing to cast Him out of the vineyard and kill Him to get it.

**Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate (Hebrews 13:12).**

And similar to Joseph's brothers, the very actions they would commit for evil, God ordained for good – that Christ might sanctify the people with His own blood.

## **Pronouncing Their Own Judgment**

Like Nathan with David (2 Samuel 12:5-7) and Jesus earlier with Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:43), Jesus allows their own words to pronounce their judgment.

**Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vinedressers? <sup>41</sup> They said to Him, "He will destroy those wicked men miserably, and lease *his* vineyard to other vinedressers who will render to him the fruits in their seasons" (Matthew 21:40, 41).**

The Pharisees now proclaim their own judgment. The Temple would soon be destroyed (Matthew 24:2) and Israel as God's nation/church would be destroyed and replaced by those who would produce the required fruit. The vineyard would now be composed of Jew and gentile alike and the Temple, rather than a building made by man, would be the body of Christ (John 2:21).

**Jesus said to them, "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'* (Matthew 21:42)?**

## The Cornerstone

Jesus now reveals that His detractors, similar to their predecessors, are on the dark side of prophecy. The very stone on which the building of true religion was to stand – the cornerstone which sets the course and direction of every inch of the structure was the stone that had been rejected.

Yet Jesus would become the cornerstone through a more significant process. He would not be elevated to Messiah through the efforts or votes or consensus of men – it would be the Lord's doing.

**Inasmuch as you saw that the stone was cut out of the mountain without hands, and that it broke in pieces the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold – the great God has made known to the king what will come to pass after this (Daniel 2:45).**

To observe what the Father would accomplish through His Son is truly marvelous to behold. The faithful should never be disheartened due to the apparent temporal victories of sinful men. There seems to be a corresponding correlation between the evil men seek and the good God accomplishes in the exact same events.

**Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it (Matthew 21:43).**

## A New Church

Israel was both a church and a nation. And although the New Covenant church is not nation per se, it is referred to as such in various places (Romans 10:19; 1 Peter 2:9; Isaiah 9:6 [government]). It should be clear that the kingdom of God was taken from Israel (which was always God's design) and became an international entity. This was always God's promise. As He proclaimed to Abram:

**And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed (Genesis 12:3b).**

**And whoever falls on this stone will be broken; but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder (Matthew 21:44).**

### **A Stone of Stumbling**

Jesus had become a stone of stumbling (Isaiah 8:14; 1 Peter 2:8). He seems to be presenting a crescendo of judgment. There were those who stumbled over Christ. Jesus was a stumbling stone to those who sought salvation by works rather than faith.

**...but Israel, pursuing the law of righteousness, has not attained to the law of righteousness. <sup>32</sup> Why? Because *they did not seek it by faith, but as it were, by the works of the law. For they stumbled at that stumbling stone (Romans 9:31, 32).***

The unbelief of sinful man who stumbles over, rather than trusts in, Christ will be, (literally, thoroughly crushed – *synthlasthesetai*). But in the present context, it was not merely stumbling but attacking Jesus. And this would incur the judgment of God which Jesus calls being ground to powder or pulverized (*likmesei*).

This word (*likmesei*) means to part the grain from the chaff or to winnow; something John the Baptist had preached regarding the imminent destruction of Jerusalem (Matthew 3:10, 12). The wheels of God's justice may grind slow (at least according to us) but they grind to powder. Those in positions of religious leadership who had willfully rejected the Son and oppressed and killed God's people now hear that their days are numbered:

**I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held. <sup>10</sup> And they cried with a loud voice, saying, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" <sup>11</sup> Then a white robe was given to each of them; and it was said to them that they should rest a little while longer, until both *the number of their fellow***

**servants and their brethren, who would be killed as they were, was completed (Revelation 6:9a-11).**

**Now when the chief priests and Pharisees heard His parables, they perceived that He was speaking of them. <sup>46</sup> But when they sought to lay hands on Him, they feared the multitudes, because they took Him for a prophet (Matthew 21:45-46).**

In order to understand the gospel of Matthew, we must not stray from the historical context. Although there are principles to be learned from this dialogue, the conflict is between Jesus as His contemporaries in the clergy. They perceived (accurately) that He was speaking of them.

Once again their cowardice is shown. Instead of seeking to protect the people from a false prophet (which was included in their responsibilities as the shepherds of God's people) they feared the people because they believed what Jesus taught.

People often get the leaders they deserve, whether good or bad. The faith of the multitude functioned to limit the power and authority of the ungodly clergy. God has continued to faithfully bring His word into the hands of the laity. Although there should be respect for those who hold the offices in the church, it is the responsibility of all Christians to herald God's word above whatever religious or secular magisterium may presume to speak on God's behalf.

## Questions for Study

1. Discuss the Christian's inheritance. Is it earned (pages 2, 3)?
2. What are some ways people try to keep Jesus "out of the vineyard (pages 3, 4)?
3. In what respect is it God, rather than men, who plant the vineyard (page 4)?
4. What is the vineyard in this parable (page 4)?
5. How has God provided for His church (page 5)?
6. In what respect can it be said that God is absent (pages 5, 6)?
7. What is vintage time (page 6)?
8. What is Christ's church to be (page 7)?
9. Discuss how man's evil and God's good could be the same event (page 8).
10. What does a cornerstone provide (page 9)?
11. Discuss the end of the Old Covenant church and the beginning of the New Covenant church (page 9).
12. In what respect was Jesus a stone of stumbling (page 10)?
13. What was about to happen to Israel (pages 10, 11)?