

<sup>33</sup> “Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place.

<sup>34</sup> When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit.

<sup>35</sup> “The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. <sup>36</sup> Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. <sup>37</sup> Last of all, he sent his son to them. ‘They will respect my son,’ he said.

<sup>38</sup> “But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, ‘This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him and take his inheritance.’ <sup>39</sup> So they took him and threw 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 tenants?”

<sup>41</sup> “He will bring those wretches to a wretched end,” they replied, “and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time.”

<sup>42</sup> Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures: “ ‘The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes’?”

<sup>43</sup> “Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.

Dear Friends in Christ,

Do you realize what God has done for you by bringing you into his kingdom, making you his child? Do you realize what responsibility you have been entrusted with in his kingdom? Do you know God’s expectations for you? It’s easy to say that you know all of this, but does your life show that to be true? Jesus causes us to consider these things as we listen in on him telling a story to people who were—at least outwardly—part of God’s people. Jesus told this story to get their attention, to get them to repent of their sins, to have them consider God’s patience, his love, their Savior and the way they lived their lives. And then God recorded it so that you and I can think through these things for ourselves. Today, Jesus is urging you to...

### **Cherish Your Place in God’s Kingdom**

### **Respect the patience and love of God**

### **Embrace the Son and live for him**

It is absolutely vital for us to understand the scene when Jesus spoke these words. You need to get your mind in that place and time or you’ll miss the brilliance of Jesus’ story, his courage and love as your Savior, and his intention for you.

It was Tuesday of Holy Week, three days before Jesus went to the cross. The people Jesus told this story to were the Chief Priests, the Teachers of God’s Law, the Elders and Pharisees—all spiritual leaders of the Jewish people. Men from three of those groups made up the high council of the Jews, the Sanhedrin—the very men who would meet in two days and condemn God’s Son to death! They were listening to Jesus as he was teaching in the temple courts there in Jerusalem and they insisted that he tell them by what authority he was teaching there—pretty much a “*Who do you think you are?!*” moment. So Jesus turned his teaching toward them, though there were still other people gathered to hear Jesus. And he told them a parable.

Parables can be a bit like puzzles and some are more difficult than others. Some things in these “*earthly stories with spiritual meanings*” are easy to understand...some things are harder...and some things we shouldn’t try to figure out at all! What I mean is that a parable has one meaning, one lesson, one point to be made. So there is no reason to—and we should not—press a meaning for every little thing in the story.

In this parable there are a number of things that are easy for a Christian to discern. You heard the story as the gospel was read earlier and I would invite you to have the worship folder open to it so that you can look along with it as we go. You'll notice that printed in the margin there is a little cheat sheet for those things in the story that are fairly easy to identify. I included that to help us go right to applying this parable to those who heard it and then to us:

Landowner = God the Father

Vineyard = Israel/God's People

Farmers/Tenants = Jewish religious leaders

Fruit = All that God looks for in a believer's life

Servants = the prophets

Son = Jesus

The landowner planted a vineyard—God established his people, the nation of Israel. And just as the landowner in the story prepared his vineyard perfectly with a wall, a winepress and a watchtower, so God had perfectly prepared the kingdom of his people. The Jewish people had the Scriptures, the leaders, priests and Levites, the promise of a Savior. So the workers in God's kingdom were in a position to lead properly. The owner's going away is the equivalent of God entrusting his kingdom and its work to his people.

Jesus' story speaks of harvest time when the owner is looking for the fruits of his vineyard produced by these tenant farmers. Of course, God is always looking for his people to display their faith in him, for their lives to show the fruits of faith.

The way those tenants treated the servants sent by the owner is appalling! They beat one, killed another, and stoned the next. Then the owner sent even more servants, all of whom they treated the same way! This doesn't seem possible, does it? Who would do that? But before you accuse Jesus of telling an unbelievable story, consider what he meant.

How many prophets had God sent to his people over the centuries? How many did he send in order to get his people to repent of their sins and trust in him instead of false Gods, to give him the best of their offerings and not leftovers, to follow his expectations for daily living and the protection of the Messiah's line and the promise of salvation through him one day? How many prophets did the kingdom of God's people ignore and mistreat and even kill? Obadiah, Elijah, Elisha and more—all persecuted. Stories abound in Jewish writings about prophets being killed, most of which are not recorded in Scripture. But Jesus says, later on this Tuesday, in his final sermon, **"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you... (Matthew 23:37)."**

Through the horrible actions of sinful men, do you see the patience of God though? While they continued to persecute and even kill his messengers, God waited and waited, giving chance after chance for them to stop and listen and repent. This continued right up until God sent one last prophet—whom they also rejected: John the Baptist. The leaders of God's people did not respect those servants of God nor God's patience in sending them.

They also rejected the love of God. The vineyard owner sent his Son, expecting that these murderers would respect him. Again, we might say, *"What vineyard owner would send his son into a situation like that? That's outrageous!"* And it is. It is an outrageous love for totally sinful people that moved God to send his Son into this world. After these wicked leaders in God's kingdom (and their predecessors) disregarded and mistreated the prophets, Christ was sent into the world to pay for sin and to effect a change in hearts that produces fruitful lives of faith toward God.

Just as the wicked tenants did not respect the son, but saw this as an opportunity not only to keep the fruit for themselves but to also steal the whole vineyard, the religious leaders disrespected God's Son, as they had the prophets, God's servants before him.

What is truly stunning—and this gives you insight into how corrupt the sinful mind is that rejects God—is that Jesus was talking to men who had been planning this very thing and were on the verge of doing it! These leaders had been privately planning to kill God's Son and they are not moved by this story—even though they understood what he was saying! Jesus was looking these Jewish leaders in the eye and telling this story about them and their upcoming treatment of him—and they knew it! This comes after our text: **"When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew he was talking about them. They looked for a way to arrest him... (21:45-46)."**

They rejected the love of God in sending his Son because they loved themselves and power too much. We are told that they did not want to lose their positions of leadership and saw Jesus as a threat to that. They wanted the "kingdom" for themselves, even though this is not possible—the Kingdom of God is much bigger than their role in one place for a brief moment in history. But such is the delusion of the sinful mind.

When we hear that the wicked tenants took the owner's son and threw him outside the walls of the vineyard and killed him there, how can we not see Jesus, God's Son, being led outside the walls of Jerusalem to the cross where these very men listening to Jesus' story had him put to death? It is a pointed story because Jesus knew their hearts and minds. They were planning this very thing and it was only days away. These leaders were the wicked tenants!

**"Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"** As Jesus gives his hearers the opportunity to provide the end of the story, it was probably the regular people in the crowd who, out of a sense of justice, came up with the obvious conclusion: **"He will bring those wretches to a wretched end," they replied, "and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time."**

The wicked men neglected to consider that the landowner had this power! Did they think he would not do something when they killed his son? Did these wicked leaders who were intent on killing God's Son think that they would suffer no consequences for doing so? Their wretched end would leave a void at the vineyard—there would be no one to work. So naturally, the vineyard would be handed over to some who would respect the owner and work to produce fruit in that vineyard.

The religious leaders would lose their place in the kingdom for rejecting God's intentions for his vineyard, his kingdom, and wanting it for themselves. We might look ahead about 40 years after Jesus' death when, not only did they lose their positions, Jewish worship life was decimated when the Romans destroyed the temple in Jerusalem. The city was ransacked, the Sanhedrin was dissolved, worship as they knew it was gone forever. But even worse than all of that—those leaders who rejected God's Son ultimately lost their place in the kingdom of God entirely. Their wicked hearts and behavior and rejection of the Son led to a wicked end—destruction in hell eternally.

So story time was over. Now Jesus had something to tell them all, something that story could not furnish: the resurrection of Jesus from the dead after they would indeed kill him. **“Have you never read in the Scriptures: “ ‘The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes’?** Clearly they had all read, they all knew, and they were all now listening to consider what it is they *had* read.

Jesus refers to Psalm 118 and the words written right before the words so many of them had chanted to Jesus as he rode into Jerusalem just two days prior on Palm Sunday: **“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.”** If they knew that part was about the Messiah, they knew the words he just quoted were too. And so they could understand that Jesus was applying those words to himself. The high point of the story—the killing of the son—is really the first line of the Psalm using a different picture: **The stone the builders have rejected is the cornerstone.**

The cornerstone was the most important foundational stone of a building from which the rest of it was built. Jesus is this cornerstone for the Kingdom of God. His death and resurrection are the basis on which all faith is built. We trust that this means our sins are paid for, that death will not hold us either, and that we will rise to life in heaven. Cornerstone. Solid. Trustworthy. Jesus is the son that was killed. The stone that was rejected was deemed unfit for the building, so they destroyed it on Good Friday. But his death did not eliminate him! Just the opposite—because he rose from death! Jesus' resurrection was just what the new structure of God's kingdom needed!

And so Jesus is done with stories and pictures. Clearly and directly he looks those wicked leaders in the eye and says: **“Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. Whoa!**

Because the son killed by the tenants—the stone rejected by the builders—did not remain killed and rejected but became the cornerstone—“therefore” the kingdom of God was taken away from those leaders and those people and given to others. The Jewish nation as a whole no longer has what it so shamefully abused. Nor is it exclusive to Gentiles, however. The kingdom of God is made up of all those who bring forward the fruits of the kingdom before God: love for God and his Son, Jesus Christ, faithful service, godly lives. This is the spiritual Israel, made up of all kinds of people in all kinds of places, in whom the grace of God prevails.

Those who rejected the Son of God—the religious leaders and many of the people—rejected the cornerstone and met a terrible end as they found themselves outside the Kingdom. The Kingdom has been given to those who will respect God and love his Son. They will work in the Kingdom and bring forward the fruit God wants to see—living in a way that pleases him and shares the Son with others.

So we finally get down to this: how do we feel about God’s kingdom? Do you cherish your place in God’s kingdom?

Jesus’ story causes us to consider whether we could be found guilty of the kinds of things those tenants were. That may seem outlandish, but think about it. Have you ever disrespected or mistreated God’s messengers, his pastors, today? Have you ever ignored what they faithfully shared with you from God’s Word? Have you ever failed to produce fruits of faith that God expects to see in his people? What does God observe when he listens to your words and watches what you do and even peers into your heart and mind? The sins of the tenants are ours too.

Can you respect the patience of God as he has dealt with you over the years and right through to this morning? Chance after chance, God has worked to bring you around, to keep you in his kingdom. And he has not only been patient, he has been loving. God sent his Son in hopes that he will make a difference in your heart and life. We have been warned in the story and in the history of God’s people not to reject the Son because that leads to destruction. Rather God would have us embrace the Son. He wants us to look to Jesus and see his death outside the walls on the cross of Calvary. See his blood flow and his life ebb away as he pays for these tenant-like sins. But look past the cross too! Look at the empty tomb of Jesus. See the cornerstone of God’s spiritual kingdom set in place as he rises from death with assurances and promises for you: You are forgiven! You will not die, but live!

This good news makes such a difference in our hearts that our love and faith cannot help but spill over into our lives causing us to produce the fruits of faith that God looks for from his people. Cherish your place in the God’s Kingdom as you live for your Savior now and as you look forward to living with him in his eternal kingdom. Amen.

Now the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.