

Parable of the Tenants in the Vineyard

By Rod Matthews (4 Oct 2026)

The setting of the scripture we are going to cover today is the week leading up to Jesus' crucifixion. There are many events identifying who Jesus is. The triumphal entry into Jerusalem on a donkey is a direct fulfilment of the prophecy in Zechariah where the Messiah enters the city on a donkey, an animal symbolic of humility, peace and Davidic royalty. But the cross is approaching. Then Jesus cleanses the temple; and follows that up with the telling of the story of the fig tree that withers (perhaps a prediction of the withering of the fruitless nation in the decades ahead leading up to the destruction by the Romans in 70 AD). Then there is the delightful account of how the religious authorities demand Jesus tell them by what authority he does these things. That is worth reading.....

Matt 23:21-28 Don't you love it?! What a brilliant reply. Left these arrogant men speechless. Clearly they were more afraid of the crowd than of the Son of God. So just to rub in the lesson, Jesus then tells them a parable that is really an answer to their question about his authority – except they just don't get it. I would like to suggest that

arrogance is a character flaw that blinds someone to seeing what is reality. Plenty of examples of that in our world today. The parable in **Mat 21:33-46** is called the Parable of the Tenants in the Vineyard. Yes, it is about the tenants but just as the Biblical sub-heads added later often miss the crucial point of the parable, it could just as well be called the Parable of the Rejected Son, or the Parable of the Compassionate Landowner. It's a penetrating parable. It starts off peacefully and ends up with murder. It is also a mirror revealing the human heart, the history of Israel, the mission of Christ, and the nature of God's kingdom. It exposes rebellion, announces judgment, and promises renewal.

(v. 33) This is not a careless planting. It is meticulous, intentional, loving. The landowner does everything necessary for fruitfulness in an environment of protection. This imagery is drawn directly from Isaiah 5:1–7, where **Israel** is described as God's vineyard—planted with care, protected with a hedge, watched over by a tower, and equipped with a winepress. God spared no effort in establishing His people. He gave them His law, His presence, His promises, His prophets, His covenant. In a sense, the vineyard represents **privilege**—but privilege always carries **responsibility**. Needless to say, the owner does

expect fruit from all his expense and efforts. It is already obvious that the owner is God. So the time comes when the owner, knowing it is harvest time, sends servants to collect his income from the harvest. The vineyard is his and the tenants are only his employees who, I am sure, have been well looked after all along regardless of the fact the income

from the property would come only at the time of the harvest. It is, after all, the very reason the vineyard was planted in the first place. But in his absence, something has happened in the minds of the tenants. Instead of remembering they are employees, eager to be proven as faithful and reliable and trustworthy so they will be able to continue their tenancy into the following season, they have plotted to seize ownership of the property. So, when the owner sends some servants to collect the production of grapes, the tenants are ready. (v35-38) 'The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. **36** Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them in the same way.

You have to admire the landowner. He is patient and not easily angered. He waits. But the servants he despatched have not returned. Perhaps one of the two who were beaten and stoned survived and managed to return and report what had happened. Now, from our perspective, we can see that the owner is God and the vineyard is Israel. These servants represent the prophets—faithful messengers sent by God throughout Israel's history. Israel's leaders repeatedly rejected them, persecuted them, and killed them. As it says in 2 Chronicles 36:15–16. The tenants' actions reveal a deep truth about the human heart:

We want the blessings of God without the authority of God. We want the vineyard, but not the owner. We want the fruit, but not the accountability. This is ancient Israel's story. But interestingly, the religious leaders who are listening to Jesus, still don't get it.

[v37-38] With his servants dead, he plays what he thinks will be his ace. They murder the owner's son in the hope that, somehow, this will give up and they will assume ownership of the vineyard

because the owner now has no heir. I have to, again, attribute this to amazing arrogance. Did they really think that the owner would just walk away and leave the property to the murdering tenants?

Jesus is telling a story that is a prophetic foreshadowing of his own death. The religious leaders will soon seize Him, cast Him out of the city, and kill Him—just as the tenants cast the son out of the vineyard before killing him. In the parable, the son represents the final messenger, the owner's beloved, the owner's heir, and his last appeal to the hardened hearts of the tenants. When God sent prophets to Israel, people rejected them. When God sent His Son, humanity crucified Him. Just as the killing of the son in the parable represented their ultimate rebellion against their master, the cross is not merely a tragic event. It is the ultimate expression of human rebellion.

[v40-41] Now comes the great and ironic conclusion to the story. Jesus directly addresses the chief priests and elders listening to him teaching and asks them another question. Brilliant! Jesus has led them into a juridical trap—He makes them pronounce

their own judgment. At that precise moment, I don't think they get it. But then Jesus adds a little teaching right out of **Psalm 118:22-24** which they would surely have recognised.

[v42-44] There it is. Jesus has identified exactly

what the parable means. And the murdering tenants are identified as presenting the very ones who have just condemned themselves publicly.

A brief comment about a cornerstone – from an engineering website: Historically, the structural function of the cornerstone was foundational, establishing the geometry and alignment of the building for the masons who followed. It was meticulously set as the initial reference point from which all other measurements were taken, determining the precise position of the entire structure. This single stone helped ensure that the foundation walls would be square and that the rest of the building would be built to true right angles. Masons used the established position of the cornerstone to stretch plumb lines and string lines, which acted as guides for laying the subsequent courses of stone or brick. By accurately setting this first stone, builders could maintain straight lines and correct vertical alignment, which was important for the stability and integrity of the whole building. Furthermore, the cornerstone was typically a larger, more durable stone, providing enhanced strength at the corner where two primary load-bearing walls met and transferred the structure's weight to the earth. This is obviously the role that Jesus plays in building the Kingdom and each individual life that is part of the Kingdom. This is a prophecy of reversal. The builders—Israel's leaders—reject Jesus. But God makes Him the cornerstone of a new people. The cornerstone is: the foundation, the alignment stone, the reference point and the structural anchor. Everything in the new kingdom is built on Christ.

[v44] Jesus adds a solemn warning. As one commentator put it, there are only two ways to encounter Christ:

[1] **Fall on Him in repentance**—and be broken in a healing way.

[2] **Have Him fall on you in judgment**—and be crushed.

[v45-46] Anyway, can you imagine what is going through the minds of the chief priests and religious leaders? They are so cock-sure of themselves and their righteousness, so arrogant and blinded, that they have walked right into Jesus' trap. Their reaction is not one of someone who has just learned an amazing truth and realises that he needs to repent, but of deep anger that they got outwitted. And their reaction only proves what Jesus was pointing out. To arrest him was the first step in getting rid of him, Remember their reaction when he raised Lazarus from the dead just before he came up to Jerusalem at this time? They were so frightened and irate that they might lose their

authority that they plotted to kill Jesus. And I expect that Lazarus's life was also in danger.

Now the chief priests know for sure that the story is about them. They know they are the tenants. They know they have rejected God's messengers. They know they are plotting to kill Jesus. He identifies himself as the Son of the owner in the parable. And to irritate them further, Jesus confirms their own verdict. They are in deep spiritual danger. But they do not repent. They harden their hearts and double down on finding a way to silence Jesus. Their hearts are exposed: They fear people more than God. They seek control rather than truth. They plot murder rather than surrender. This is the danger of religious hardness. The message can be understood perfectly and still rejected. So the parable clearly reveals the nature of the Father – the grace of God, but not the weakness of God or the tolerance of sin. There is judgment and grace.

If we look at it all from our own perspective, we see that:

A. God is patient. He sends servant after servant. He gives chance after chance.

B. God is generous. He entrusts His vineyard to us. He gives us everything needed for fruitfulness.

C. God is sacrificial. He sends His Son, knowing what humanity will do.

D. God is victorious. The rejected Son becomes the cornerstone. The murdered heir becomes the risen Lord. The vineyard is not destroyed—it is renewed.

E. God is inclusive. He gives the kingdom to all who believe, regardless of background.

F. God is just.

Those who persist in rebellion face judgment. The gospel is here in full: God provides; humanity rebels; God sends His Son; humanity kills Him; God raises Him; God builds a new people; God invites all to bear fruit; but there is a warning to all who insist on their own way. For those of us who have been placed in the vineyard as tenants, it is clear that God expects more than merely religious activity. He expects more than merely tradition. More than merely outward obedience. He expects **righteousness, justice, faithfulness, love, humility, repentance and generosity**. The vineyard is a picture of our lives as well. God has planted us with care. He has given us gifts, opportunities, relationships, and spiritual resources. He has placed us in a world where His Word is accessible, His Spirit is available, and His grace is abundant. The question is not whether God has provided because it is clear that we have all we need. The question is:

What fruit are we producing in our lives? Like all of Jesus' parables, it finishes up in the air leaving the audience pondering their place in the story. It leaves us questioning how we fit. After all, our life is not our own. Our gifts are not our own. Our opportunities are not our own. Our time is not our own and our resources also come from the Master.

We are the tenants and God is the owner. He has sent us his Son. We certainly have accepted him rather than tossed him out of the vineyard and murdered him. But he was willing to die that we might be given a new lease on life. What have we done in response?

There are times to review our lives and ask whether we resist him, and rather than surrender, do we strive to keep a measure of control over our vineyard? Are we still aligned with the cornerstone? Is Jesus still our foundation to the extent he ought to be, and are we in sync with the rest of the structure he is building that is based on that cornerstone? Is the fruit that we are producing consistent with the nature of God which lives in us through the Holy Spirit? We do not want to become arrogant like the chief priests and religious leaders of Jesus' time but maintain an attitude of repentance, obedience, humility, generosity, compassion, holiness, worship, love, justice and faithfulness. However, we should always remember that fruit that God seeks is not perfection. Fruit is direction. May we be the people who receive the Son, build on the cornerstone, and produce the fruit that brings glory to God.