

# The Parable of the Tenants

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Preacher: Zack Purvis

[ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, thank you. It's a pleasure of mine to be here with you to see many new faces and many other familiar faces here. I also understand that St. Columbus is starting a series on the parables this summer, and so it's my privilege to speak to you on this parable that we find in Matthew 21. What are the parables? We often think about the parables in various ways.

We often treat them as if they are basically a kind of Aesop's fable, where it's a compelling story with a moral at the end. Don't be like the foolish giraffe. But the parables are something different. The parables are a distinct kind of communication. They are not actually, first of all, these sort of timeless eternal principles about you and your life that you can just apply to any context as you see fit. But they're about what is happening right then and there as Jesus speaks them. The parables even create the reality of which Jesus is speaking. And we find that with the parables, he is actually bringing his kingdom into the present age, not just teaching about the kingdom, giving information. But as he's speaking, he is recasting the whole world under his authority. And we know then that the parables fit Jesus' great threefold office. We're often familiar with speaking about him as our great high priest. And of course, he is our great king. And so too is he our great prophet. And as a prophet then, he is coming to deliver covenant sanctions of either blessing or curse, deliverance or judgment to the covenant people of God. And so too, do we find him doing that in this parable, the parable of the tenants, where Christ pronounces judgment on Israel and its leaders? Now, the context for this parable is actually very important here. Jesus gives this parable during what is sometimes called Holy Week, the last week of our Lord and Savior, which culminates with his crucifixion on Friday and his resurrection from the dead on Sunday. And during this week, he goes with the disciples each day to enter

Jerusalem to visit the temple complex. And then he retreats with them each night into Bethany. And that week begins on Sunday. It begins with the triumphal entry. And we can see this at the beginning of Matthew 21. Jesus rides into the city of Jerusalem on a young donkey. And this is no random act, nor even really a sign of humility, but he does it as the victorious king of Zachariah chapter nine. And the crowds realize this, the crowds shout out to him, Hosanna, blessed is the son of David, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. He is hailed by the crowds as David's son, the royal son, the messianic king. And now we see the dominos begin to fall towards Good Friday, because the religious leaders of Israel here, the priests, the scribes, the elders, they are shocked at how Jesus is greeted by the crowds. Even more, they are shocked by Jesus' lack of response to this greeting. Jesus, why don't you do something about this? Surely you see what the crowds are doing here. Surely you know that they are invoking Psalm 118, verse 26 of that Psalm. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Verse 19, open to me the gates of righteousness that I may enter in. Surely, Jesus, you know that they are invoking an ancient Near Eastern gate liturgy, where a protocol that a victorious king or a general follows when he comes back from battle and demands entry through the city gates. Surely, Jesus of Nazareth, you don't think they are talking about you here. Why don't you put a stop to this? But of course, Jesus does not put a stop to it. All of this happens on the Temple Mount, and then we see Jesus enter into the Temple. He ascends the hill of Zion in royal procession. The gates of righteousness are opened to him. All of that happens on Sunday. Now, Monday is a little different. On Monday, we find Jesus cursing the fig tree. What is this all about? Well, the fig tree is a national symbol for Israel. It represents the peace and prosperity of the nation. And so, cursing the fig tree is not like walking into your garden and doing something mean to your flowers here. This is the very symbol of Israel as the nation, the holy people of God. Jesus knows exactly what he is doing. He is right then and there as a prophet, bringing the curses, the sanctions of the covenant against the covenant-breaking nation. You know, may no one eat from your tree again, he says. And we read, there were many leaves but no fruit.

There were many Israelites but few believers. There were many who heard the promises of God as part of God's covenant family, but few who embraced those promises in faith. Then Jesus goes to the outer court of the Gentiles and he drives out the money changers. He cleanses this outer court of the temple. And this too is very significant because it tells us that this is not just the rubbish heap to Jesus. The gospel was always to go out from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria to the ends of the earth. And this outer court of the Gentiles represents the ends of the earth. What else does he do here? He calls to himself in the temple complex, the blind and the lame, and he heals them. Now the religious leaders had kept the blind and the lame out of the temple mount entirely because of their illnesses, because of their abnormalities. Surely they thought those who suffer physically must be accursed. They will profane God's house and yet Jesus calls them in as his guests. We also find him forgiving sins, bypassing the cult, the machinery of the temple. He does it personally in his person, greater than any high priest. At this point everyone can see what he's doing. He knows he's a rabbi. The religious leaders know, the crowds know, he is taking over the temple. He is fulfilling every type and shadow. That's Monday. On Tuesday then he explains the cursing of the fig tree and the religious leaders begin to plot his death. In Matthew 21 verse 23, the religious leaders challenge Jesus. They come asking him a question. They say, by what authority do you do all these things that you have done?

[ 8 : 15 ] They're trying to trap him into claiming divine authority so that they can charge him with blasphemy. But Jesus opts out of their game. He offers a question of his own. He says, let me ask you a question. And if you answer me, then I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Here is the question. The baptism of John. Did it come from heaven or from man? That's the question. Well, here the leaders are in a corner because if they say what they really believe that John's baptism is from man, then the crowds will turn on them because as we read in Matthew's account, they all hold the crowds that John is a great prophet. But they cannot say that John's baptism is from heaven because then John's prophetic words are from heaven. His announcement that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah is from heaven. And so they refuse to answer. And so neither does Jesus answer them. But he does something else. He gives them parables. He speaks to them in parables still on Tuesday.

He gives the parable of the two sons. And then he gives this parable, the parable of the wicked tenants. You see, the parable is the answer to the question that was put to him. That's why the context here is so important. What do we find then in this parable, this parable of the wicked tenants? First of all, we see a treaty between the master of the house, the owner of the vineyard and the tenants. Verse 33 of Matthew 21. The owner of this vineyard has chosen his vine. It is his choice vine. He's planted it with care. Not only think has he planted it himself, but we're told that he built a fence or a wall around it to keep out wild thieves and invaders and animals. He put up a watch tower so that it would be safe from harm. He dug a pit for the wine press. The owner sets up everything perfectly for the tenants. He gives them everything that they could possibly need. And then he leases to them the field. And after some time, this field is producing and the owner sends his servants to receive the payment of a specific percentage of the yield of the vineyard. That is his rightful due. What is this? This is a summary of the entire relationship that Israel, as the people of God, was to have with God. Over and over in the Old Testament, we see Israel likened to a vineyard. Let me read, for example, in Psalm 80. You brought a vine out of Egypt. You drove out the nations and planted this vine. You cleared the ground for it. It took deep root and filled the land. The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches. It sent out its branches to the sea and it shoots to the river. So to in Jeremiah chapter two, God told Judah, don't forget, I brought you out of Egypt. I carried you through the wilderness, through a land of deserts and ravines, through drought and darkness, into my fields, which are fertile. And I planted you there as my vine, as my choice vine. The nation of Israel here was the visible kingdom of God in that age. And Israel is recapitulating, replaying again, Adam in the Garden of Eden. Israel here was to hear and obey as a faithful covenant servant. You know, God had planted Israel into the land, just as God had planted Adam and Eve into the garden and given them everything they could possibly need. And he told the nation of Israel in Leviticus 25, remember, remember this, he said, you are but tenants in my land. It's not your land. This land is my land. You are tenants in it. Now, as long as you do all the things that you are supposed to do, as long as you are fruitful and multiply, you extend my kingdom to the ends of the earth, you are holy to me, you do not go after foreign kings and serve other gods. As long as you serve me, you bring to me a tenth of everything that you

have, because that is what a servant, a vassal brings to the suzerain, the great king in tribute. As long as you serve me as your great king and follow me, then I'll permit you to live in my land. Then you may stay in my paradise that I've prepared for you. That's how it worked. This was a conditional promise, not for salvation, that always only is by grace through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. But this was to be a holy nation to remain in that land. That is the relation of Israel to Yahweh under the Mosaic covenant. Do this and you shall live, as we read in Leviticus 18.5. But God himself, you see, had given to the people everything that they could need. And that's what this parable depicts. It depicts the same covenant, this same relationship on a small, even on an intimate level, a precious vineyard, the owner of the vineyard and the tenants. And the owner here built that vineyard. He nurtured it. He protected it. He provided for it. There was absolutely no reason at all for that vineyard not to grow up to be Tuscany or Bordeaux. That was the treaty arrangement. But second, we see the treason committed by the tenants. In verse 34, the season for fruit draws near. The owner of the vineyard sends his servants to get its fruit, actually to get his fruit, to collect his due. It's his land. And the tenants, we read, take the servants and beat one, kill another, and stone another. Again, the owner sends other servants more than the first and the tenants do the same to them. Well, this is not what you expect to hear, given the way that this parable has opened. Where does this turn come from? Doubtless here Jesus is drawing from Isaiah, Isaiah chapter five, the great song of the vineyard.

[15:46] And we read there in Isaiah five, 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 watch tower in the midst of it. He hewed out a wine vat in it. And he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. Now, oh inhabitants of Jerusalem, men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard.

What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done. When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? So now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge and it shall be devoured. I will break down its wall and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste. It shall not be pruned or hode. Briers and thorns shall grow up. I will also command the clouds that they reign no reign upon it.

For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel. And the men of Judah are his pleasant planting. And he looked for justice. Behold, bloodshed. And he looked for righteousness. Behold, an outcry. You see, the tragedy here is that it was not wild outside invaders who trampled the vineyard of the Lord, but it was Israel herself. Just as we see the covenant of works in creation and as Adam's history is replayed at Mount Sinai with the creation of Israel as the holy nation, the people of God. So too in this parable do we see the fall. The treason against this treaty of the great king. Like Adam, Hosea 6, verse 7 says, Israel has violated God's covenant. The vineyard in the parable is Israel. God is the landowner.

The tenants are all of the unbelieving nation, but particularly the religious leaders. And the servants are the prophets whom God has sent to his people. You know, again and again God sent prophets. The owner sent messengers of his treaty, his covenant. He kept sending them and they kept preaching a message of repentance. You have broken the terms of the treaty, but there's still hope for you according to the promise made to Abraham, according to the promise of the gospel. And these prophets were sent to Israel and Israel did not just not listen to them, but we find that they killed them. They killed them. We see this with the prophet Elijah, who tells us in 1 Kings 19, I've been very zealous, he says, for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left and now they are trying to kill me too. We see this again leading up to the time of the Babylonian exile in 2 Chronicles 36. We read, the Lord, the God of their fathers sent persistently to them by his messengers because he had great compassion on his people, on his dwelling place and on his vineyard. But they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words, scoffing at his prophets until the wrath of the Lord rose against his people until the hour there was no remedy. We see this as well with Judah, that part of Israel that comes to confess in Nehemiah chapter nine after returning from exile, how they had captured fortified cities and a rich land and took possession of houses full of all good things, cisterns already hewn, vineyards, olive orchards, fruit trees with abundance. And they ate, they were filled, they became fat, they delighted themselves in your great goodness. Nevertheless, the text says, they were disobedient, they rebelled against you, they cast your law behind their back, they killed your prophets who had warned them to turn them back to

you, but they committed great blasphemies. You see, this is the pattern. God sends his prophets to the people that they would repent for violating his treaty. And Israel rejects the prophets, even kills them. You know, again, like Isaiah five, what more is there for me to do for you? The owner of the vineyard says, he does everything for it to produce a great harvest.

[ 21 : 20 ] Well, it yields instead wild grapes, sour berries, unfit for food or wine. But the owner continues to send his servants to the tenants. God continues to send his prophets to his people. You find God being patient and kind, giving every opportunity for centuries that Israel might repent and be restored. In the seven woes against the scribes and the Pharisees, in Matthew 23, Jesus says, woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites. For you say, if we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have killed the prophets. But Jesus tells them you prove by your very words, you were the sons of those who murdered the prophets.

Fill up then the measure of your fathers. You serpents, you brood of vipers. How are you to escape being sentenced to hell? Therefore, I send you prophets. Notice, by the way, he says, I send you. The son not only represents the owner, but it really is his vineyard.

He says, I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town. So that on you may come all the righteous bloodshed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zachariah, the son of Barakiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.

And then Jesus offers his great lamentation, doesn't he? Oh, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it. How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings? And you would not.

Look, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

[ 23 : 49 ] In verse 37 of Matthew 21, the owner has run out of servants to send. There's only one person left. Finally, he sends his son saying, they will respect my son. Now, in the accounts of this parable in the gospels of Mark and Luke, we read here, my beloved son. This is a clear allusion to Genesis 22. And Jesus's audience would not have missed it. Over and over in Genesis 22, God tells Abraham to take his son, his only son, the son whom he loves. It's repeated again and again and again to offer him as a burnt offering on Mount Moriah. But of course, Isaac is not sacrificed. God spares Abraham's beloved son. The true sacrifice of which Isaac is a type appears when God sends his son, his only son, his beloved son. Now, that's the father's verdict at Jesus's baptism. You are my beloved son in whom I am well pleased. That's the announcement at his transfiguration. This is my beloved son. Listen to him. He's the great prophet. He's the last prophet here. Notice also,

Jesus says in the parable, speaking about himself, he says, finally, finally, the owner sent his son. Finally, he sent him in the fullness of time, Galatians 4. God sent forth his son, born of a woman, born under the law. What's the proper response to the arrival of this son? Well, the proper response is Psalm 2. Kiss the son. Kiss the son lest he be angry. And you perish in the way, for his wrath is kindled. But blessed are all who take refuge in him. Surely they will respect the son. But we read in verse 38 that when the tenants see the son, they say to themselves, this is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance. And the tenants then take the son and they throw him out of the vineyard and kill him. You see the escalation of violence. The tenants have refused to bring the owner his rightful share, his due, and now they want to steal the vineyard and the son's inheritance. The tenants have become just like Ahab, that greedy, wicked king in

First Kings 21. They become like their father, who with Jezebel, his wife, had the vineyard owner Naboth put to death in order to steal Naboth's vineyard. Just as these tenants here say, come, let us kill him. The exact same phrase, actually, that Joseph's brothers say about him in Genesis 37. It is not a crime of passion. This is premeditated murder.

And right now, the action described in the parable as Jesus delivers it is taking place on the Temple Mount. See, that's what the parables do. They create the reality of which they're speaking. The tenants take the son, the beloved son, and they throw him outside the vineyard to die. For God so loved the world, he gave his only beloved son. And as Jesus is telling this parable, the religious leaders are plotting the execution of the son that will soon take place outside the Temple Mount, outside the city in disgrace.

That's where our Lord makes our great salvation outside the camp, becoming sin for us that we might be brought into the kingdom of God. In one little remarkable parable, we see creation, fall, and redemption. Third and finally here, we have the Temple. It's significant, again, the context. Remember, Jesus is giving this parable amidst the vineyard in the walled city, in the Temple complex. And that's why he begins to mix metaphors of a vineyard and a temple here. In verse 40, Jesus asked the religious leaders, you know, in response to all this that you've heard in this parable, what do you think the owner of the vineyard will do? This is the aha moment. This is the way parables work so powerfully. They worm their way into your mind and explode before you realize what's happened. You know, think of Nathan's parable before David in 2 Samuel 12. You know, the wealthy man with many herds who kills the poor man to take his one lamb. Now, just hear me out, David, oh wise king, what would you do in a case like this? Well, surely he'd be put to death. Behold, David, you are that man. The owner of the vineyard will come and destroy and give to others.

[ 29 : 43 ] Verse 45, the religious leaders perceive that he was talking about them. Mighty perceptive they are. You see, the parables are, first of all, about what Jesus is doing right then and there in his ministry. What does Jesus say then? He says, the stones that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. What does this mean? In rabbinic literature, the scribes, the elders are referred to as builders. They are the builders of Israel. How could builders reject the most important stone? Have you not read this in the scriptures?

Jesus asks again, quoting from Psalm 118. How are you experts in God's law? He's saying. Again, remember where they are. Remember the context. They are in the temple precincts that Jesus Christ has taken over. He has cleansed the temple. He tells his disciples, if you say to this temple mountain, be thrown into the sea, it will happen. If you ask in prayer, you will receive if you have faith. That's not a timeless principle that we can apply to whatever thing we're interested in. But he's telling his disciples, if you really understood right now, you would tell the temple to be thrown into the sea because the temple is coming down. It served its purpose. We have no use for it anymore. I am here. Remember the question, who has authority to do these things? This is the answer you see. Christ says, I am the cornerstone. I am the temple. I am the sun. Now, what will the owner of the vineyard do? He comes to destroy the tenants. The religious leaders sought to destroy Christ, but instead they find they are destroyed. The physical temple itself is destroyed in year AD 70. The opportunity, in other words, for Israel as a holy nation, not as individuals, but as a holy nation to embrace Messiah has come and gone. The cornerstone that they rejected has crushed them into dust, the text says. Now, this applies first and foremost to the nation of Israel, but it also applies to all who reject the sun. And so God takes the unbelieving nation, he takes away from them his vineyard. He adds Gentiles to his vine. The outsiders become insiders. That's the familiar refrain of all the parables. The gospel goes out to all nations so that the visible kingdom of God in this age is his church composed of believing Jew and Gentile alike. The true vineyard, the true Israel of God. And so Christ, as the living temple, continues to build his church. As we read in 1 Peter 2, whereas Paul tells us in Ephesians 2, you are no longer strangers and exiles, he says, aliens. You are fellow citizens with the saints, members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ himself, the cornerstone. The whole structure grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God in the spirit. That's what we find, no physical temple. We find the spirit of God in dwelling all who belong to him. That's what we see. And we see it in our individual lives, don't we? But we see it especially on the Lord's day. We see it here as we gather together as God comes down to meet with us in spirit and truth through word and sacrament, as we worship the Son whose kingdom shall have no end. For all who receive the Son then are brought out of that desert, the ravine, the howling wastelands, the haunt of jackals that is exile, out of bondage, in death and slavery to sin and made to be tenants in the land. Not just tenants, you see, but coheirs with the Son. For all who receive him, receive his inheritance, all that he has becomes ours in the lush vineyard of our God. And we cannot then help but bear fruit as his life works through us. And so, loved ones, let us receive him. What a Savior. What a servant of the Lord who comes. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Let's pray. Our Father, our great patient and merciful owner of the vineyard who chose each and every vine individually for your own vineyard, we know, Lord, what we would do to the Son apart from your grace. We know that it was our crime against you that brought him to his death, but it was your love for us and his great love for us that sent him there. And it was your love and power

that raised him from the dead. And so we ask that you would give us hearts to receive the promise that you make to us in the gospel, that we would trust in you, and that we would share your love for every outsider whom you have chosen in the Lord Jesus Christ, who rules and reigns with you in the Spirit, one God and three persons forever to be praised. Amen.