

The Wicked Tenants

THEOLOGICAL THEME: Judgment comes on those who reject God's commands, God's warnings, and God's Son.

Sometimes people who have only a cursory knowledge of the Bible make a sharp distinction between Jesus in the New Testament and the God of the Old Testament. They see Jesus as a mild-mannered man of goodness and grace, as opposed to the Old Testament God who executed judgment and vengeance upon His enemies and even punished His own people for their sins. Jesus' command "Judge not, that you be not judged" becomes an overriding statement that blankets all of His teaching.

But when we read the Gospels, we soon discover that Jesus is not the quiet, mild-mannered man dispensing folksy wisdom; He's the King who turns over tables in the temple, excoriates the religious leaders for their hypocrisy, and challenges the kingdoms of this world until He becomes a threat and is taken away to be executed. To see Jesus as merely a good, nice teacher is to flatten Him out, to make Him a one-dimensional person.



Why do you think so many people see Jesus as just a "good, nice teacher" and fail to consider His teachings about judgment?



Voices from Church History

"[Judgment] is no pleasing subject to me, any more than it is to you; but it is my duty to show you the dreadful consequences of continuing in sin. I am only now acting the part of a skillful surgeon, who searches a wound before he heals it."¹

—George Whitefield
(1714-1770)

In this session, we will look at the parable of the wicked tenants, one of Jesus' most famous parables of judgment. In this story we see the privilege and responsibility that comes with God's calling on our lives. We also see the grace of God in His warnings to sinners and the judgment of God in His retribution toward those who reject His Son. This parable's stark imagery reminds us that we are called to bear the fruit of repentance and mission and thus fulfill our purpose as God's people.

1. The wicked tenants reject their responsibility as stewards (Matt. 21:33-35).

³³ "Hear another parable. There was a master of a house who planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a winepress in it and built a tower and leased it to tenants, and went into another country. ³⁴ When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit. ³⁵ And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another.

If you were to see me drawing a picture of an elephant and a donkey having a battle, you'd probably realize I was doing more than illustrating "Old MacDonald Had a Farm." In our culture, the elephant and donkey duking it out are stand-in animals for the Republican and Democrat political parties. For me to tell a story about an elephant and a donkey is to make a point about American politics.

Something similar is going on at the beginning of this parable, but because we're removed from the original context, we might miss the connection. The image of a vineyard instantly evoked Isaiah 5:1-7 for Jesus' hearers.



Based on Isaiah 5, what does the vineyard in Jesus' parable represent? Whom does the vineyard owner represent?



How have you experienced a greater understanding of Scripture by knowing the storyline and the details of the Old Testament?

Jesus' parable is about God and His people. As Jesus retold the vineyard story, He made it clear that the religious leaders (tenants) who had been called by God (owner) to watch over Israel (the vineyard) had failed. The people had received the great privilege of being chosen by God. But they had failed to live up to the responsibility that accompanies that blessing. God was looking for fruit from His people, especially from the religious leaders, but no fruit was found.

Instead of apologizing for their lack of fruit, the tenants of the vineyard treated the owner terribly. They resented the intrusion of the vineyard owner through his sending of messengers. Their problem was not that they didn't bear *any* fruit; it was that the fruit they bore was *bad!* Instead of offering the good fruit of repentance for their failures, they offered the bad fruit of rebellion.

Already in this story we see a challenge to the religious leaders of Jesus' day. But what about us? The apostle Paul claimed that believers in Jesus are grafted into Israel. As part of God's people, we are God's vineyard, given the privilege of being His people but also the weighty responsibility of fulfilling His call on our lives. Until we see ourselves as stewards, we will never understand the nature of our call.



What are the responsibilities that come with our privilege of being God's chosen people?



What kind of fruit are we to bear as Christians?

2. The wicked tenants reject God's warnings and God's Son (Matt. 21:36-41).



³⁶ Again he sent other servants, more than the first. And they did the same to them. ³⁷ Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.'³⁸ But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.'³⁹ And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. ⁴⁰ When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"⁴¹ They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the

vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons."

Although the main point of this parable is the judgment of God, we shouldn't overlook the shocking display of patience on the part of the vineyard owner. He keeps sending messengers to the tenants, and the tenants continue to mistreat the messengers.

Just as the wicked tenants mistreated the servant-messengers, so also the religious and political leaders of Israel mistreated the prophets. You'd expect God to respond immediately after having one of His prophets mistreated, wouldn't you? Instead, God continued to warn His people of the consequences of their sin. He continued to send prophet after prophet after prophet, no matter how badly they were treated.



Voices from Church History

"[This parable's] purpose is to illustrate God's 'incomprehensible' concern for man, the lengths God will go to keep on his track and maintain contact with him despite his stubbornness and his blind delusion."²

—Helmut Thielicke
(1908-1986)

This doesn't seem logical, does it? How many times does the vineyard owner need to send servants—who get mistreated and beaten and killed—before realizing that perhaps something more drastic should take place? How many times does God need to send prophets to warn His people before He takes more decisive action? Logic and reason aren't the focus here but the grace and patience of God. It's not logic that drives God but love.



We tend to think of warnings as something bad, a message of judgment. How are God's warnings to us a sign of His grace?

The parable continues with the vineyard owner sending his own son, and for those of us on this side of the page, reading and listening to Jesus' story, the analogy is crystal clear. Just as God's people had rejected the warnings that had come from love, so also they would reject the Son who came in love. The wicked tenants see the son and covet his inheritance. Instead of responding respectfully and rightly, they throw him out of the vineyard and kill him. The same week that Jesus uttered this parable, the religious leaders would conspire to throw Jesus out of Jerusalem and crucify Him on the outskirts of town. This parable shows the seriousness of rejecting the Son of God.

Where do we fit in this story? On the one hand, the parable serves as a warning to all who reject the Son of God. Reject Jesus and you invite the judgment of God.

On the other hand, the parable serves as a warning to those who think they belong to God's people but continue to ignore His warnings. We show we truly belong to God by obeying Him, heeding His warnings, and embracing His Son. By failing to heed God's warnings, we take our stand against the prophets and against Jesus Himself.

99 Essential Christian Doctrines

98. *Nature of Hell*

For those who are not found in Christ at the time of their death, the Scriptures say that God's condemnation remains upon them (John 3:36) and that they will be judged according to their deeds done on earth (Heb. 9:27). The punishment that awaits unbelievers in hell is an eternal, never-ending suffering that comes from sins committed against an infinite God (Matt. 25:41,46). In hell, sinners are forever separated from God.

What words would you use to describe the vineyard owner if he had decided not to judge the wicked tenants?	
Why does punishment seem so proper in this case?	How does this impact the way we view the judgment of God?

3. The wicked tenants are rejected by God for their wicked schemes (Matt. 21:42-46).

⁴² Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures:

“The stone that the builders rejected

has become the cornerstone;

this was the Lord’s doing,

and it is marvelous in our eyes?”

⁴³ Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits. ⁴⁴ And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.”

⁴⁵ When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them. ⁴⁶ And although they were seeking to arrest him, they feared the crowds, because they held him to be a prophet.

It would be easy for us to misinterpret a couple of points in Jesus' parable, perhaps due to our pressing the parable for too many details. First, the vineyard owner seems like he doesn't know what will happen if he sends his son to the wicked tenants. In seeing the vineyard owner as an analogy for God, we might think that God was taken aback or surprised at how the prophets and His Son were treated. In contrast, God knew His Son would die, which is precisely the reason He sent Him—to be “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29).

Second, we might think that Jesus' words about the vineyard being taken away and given to others is a full-blown rejection of Israel. Instead, what is taking place here is not God rejecting Israel altogether but reconstituting Israel around His Son, the Messiah. Jesus is the cornerstone for God's new people.

As we apply this parable to our situation today, we should be aware of just how religious the rejection of Jesus and the prophets was. Sometimes we tend to think of people in categories of religious or irreligious, as if the former is good and the latter is bad. But in this case, the people who received the strongest condemnation from God were precisely the religious leaders and the people who bore no fruit. They were religious, but they weren't fruitful.



What are some ways we might use religiosity to mask our lack of fruitfulness?



What aspects of this parable's warning apply to us today?


We fail to apply this parable well if we do not consider our own lives. We cannot rely on our religiosity or our sincerity to escape the wrath of God. We must rely only on Jesus, the cornerstone of our faith, who incorporates us into His people. Belonging to God's people is both a privilege and a responsibility, just as it was in Jesus' day.

If we were to place ourselves in this story, we would need to see ourselves as the wicked tenants. We are the ones who have spurned God and ignored His warnings. We are the ones who have turned on His only Son. The question now remains: *On which side of this furious judgment of God will we be found?* It is only in embracing God the Son and humbly trusting in Him that we find salvation. Instead of being the cornerstone that crushes us in judgment, Jesus becomes the cornerstone of our new life in Him, the cornerstone of the new people of God to which we belong. The wicked tenants is a parable of judgment, yes, but its purpose is to bring us to repentance and faith in the Son.

Voices from the Church

“Judgment is prominent in the teachings of Jesus, beginning with a notable feature: Jesus will be the judge.”³

—Scot McKnight

 What role does “bearing fruit” play in our mission to share and show the love of God?

Conclusion

The portrait of a mild Jesus who spoke only of grace and never of judgment is a figment of the imagination. We serve a Savior whose scandalous grace was matched with the ferocious roar of judgment. In this parable, we see a glimpse of God’s patience but also His swift retribution. Let this story from Jesus shock your senses and lead you to see yourself as a steward of His blessings.

CHRIST CONNECTION: Jesus’ parable of the wicked tenants is one of the clearest denunciations of the religious leaders in His day. The story implies that God is the vineyard owner, Jesus is the owner’s son, and the religious leaders are the ones who have rejected God’s Word. Applying Psalm 118 to Himself, Jesus saw Himself as the cornerstone—the person in whom God’s judgment and salvation come together.

HIS MISSION, YOUR MISSION

MISSIONAL APPLICATION: God calls us to bear the fruit of repentance and mission, fulfilling our purpose as His people.

1. As stewards of God's gifts and resources, what are some practical things we Christians should be doing for God's glory in the world?

2. What are some ways we have failed to honor God's Son for which we should repent and find forgiveness?

3. How should we speak of Jesus if we are to be faithful to our mission to call others to believe in Him?

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