

# “The Tenants and the Vineyard” // Matthew 21 33–46 // Listen #5

Matthew 21, if you have your Bibles this Memorial Day weekend.

Let me just say **that on this weekend we do want to recognize** those men and women fallen in service protecting our nation. Their sacrifice **gives us the freedoms** we enjoy today, including **our ability to gather** right here without fear of reprisal. **We honor them** and **salute** them today.

**Summit Church**, will you put your hands together as a sign of your gratitude?

This is the **last week of our series on the parables** of Jesus called *Listen*, so it is appropriate that this parable opens with Jesus saying:

<sup>33</sup> **“Listen to another parable:**

**What we’ve learned in this series is that Jesus spoke in parables** so that those who weren’t really listening, from their heart, would miss the meaning of his words.

- **Listening, we’ve learned**, is a critical life skill
- **My wife complains that sometimes I don’t listen to her.** The other day we were riding around in the car, and all of the sudden I felt her touch my arm and she said, *“Are you paying attention to*

*me? I just don’t feel like you’re listening.”* And I thought, *‘That’s a weird way to start a conversation.’*

- **“Mooresville”**: I’m going to be a little late to the rehearsal. What time? “About 10:30.

**So, Jesus often opened his parables, like he does this one**, with an admonition to *listen*, because only those who were really listening—and who were of the right disposition of heart—could perceive what he was saying.

The **parable we will look at today is an exception**, however, because Matthew tells us that **everyone**—including Jesus’s enemies—understood exactly what Jesus meant by this parable.

In it he offers an **uncomfortably accurate analysis** of the hearts of the Pharisees and a **prediction of what they were** about to do to him.

- *(Personally, btw, I love these little “beneath the surface” looks into the human heart that Jesus gives, because it **helps me understand what’s going on in my own heart** and in the hearts of others when they are wrestling with the authority of Jesus.)*

**Here’s the context:** Jesus tells this parable **shortly after he had cleared** the Temple square with a whip<sup>1</sup>, presumably standing in the Temple square. Everybody, particularly the religious leaders, is a **little on edge**, because they see Jesus as a clear threat to the establishment.

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<sup>1</sup> 21:12–13

Works Consulted:

“Parable of the Tenants,” John Mark Comer

“The Parable of the Last Messenger,” Tim Keller

“The Parable of the Murdered Son,” John MacArthur

“The Wicked Trustees,” James Boice

“Flirt or Follow,” Joby Martin

<sup>33</sup> There was a landowner, who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a winepress in it, and built a watchtower. He leased it to tenant farmers and went away.

The **prophet Isaiah had famously compared** God's creation of Israel to a landowner who planted a **vineyard and** left it under the stewardship of some workers to harvest, but when the time for harvest finally came, the fruit was sour, so the landowner destroyed the vineyard.<sup>2</sup>

**Everyone listening to Jesus would have known that story well**, and they understood it as a condemnation of Israel at the time of Isaiah and an explanation for why Israel had been sent into exile. **But when Jesus tells the story, he adds a twist.**

Let me walk you through it:<sup>34</sup> When the time came to harvest fruit, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit. <sup>35</sup> The tenants took his servants, beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. <sup>36</sup> Again, he sent other servants, more than the first group, and they did the same to them. <sup>37</sup> Finally, he sent his son to them. 'They will respect my son,' he said. (Now, **let me add** here: If you were listening to the parable you'd have to ask, ***If they had killed the 1<sup>st</sup> servants, Why would Owner send in his son?***

- **I mean, if I were a principal at a school** having lunch with my wife and got a report about an unruly classroom that had beat up the substitute teacher, and I sent in the vice-principal to check it out, and they beat her up, and then a security guard, and they beat him up, do you think I'd look at my wife and say, "Honey, would you mind walking down there and check that situation out?" Now, **my wife would probably be fine** because she is strong and pretty feisty, but **why would the owner do this?** Why send the most precious person to you into an extremely dangerous situation?

- That's a **great question with an important answer** we'll come back to.

<sup>38</sup> "But when the tenant farmers saw the son, they said to each other, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance.' (Which just shows you the **insanity of sin: If the guy is wealthy enough to own multiple properties** and hire servants to tend them, he is probably wealthy enough to hire a security force to deal with one if it has been stolen. But such is the insanity of sin!)

<sup>39</sup> So they seized him (the son), 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 completely destroy those terrible men," they told him, "and lease his vineyard to other tenants who will give him his fruit at the harvest."

<sup>42</sup> Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This is what the Lord has done and it is wonderful in our eyes?'" <sup>43</sup> Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruit. <sup>44</sup> Whoever falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will shatter him."

- This is a **quote from Psalm 118**, which was one of the **5 Psalms of the Hallel** sung throughout Passover week (which was going on all around Jesus while he was speaking).
- **Jesus takes one of the key themes** of this Psalm and says, "This is about me. I am the one everyone is singing about."
- I am the stone about to be rejected by you builders—you religious leaders—but I will become the primary **cornerstone of a new building.**"

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<sup>2</sup> Credit is due in this section to John MacArthur's sermon, "The Parable of the Mustard Seed"

- Or, if you don't follow the building metaphor, I'm the player who got cut from the team that becomes the star of a brand new team that ultimately wins the championship.)

<sup>45</sup> When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they knew he was speaking about them.

It was common knowledge that Israel had a **long legacy of abusing** the prophets. Israel's own history tells that story. **Every Jewish boy** of the time grew up learning that:

- The **prophet Jeremiah was beaten on multiple occasions**, thrown into a pit and then stoned<sup>3</sup>
- **Elijah and Amos were banished** and forced to hide in caves (1 Kings 13–17)
- **Ezekiel was murdered** after a sermon
- **Habakkuk and Zechariah both were stoned** by the Jews living in Jerusalem.<sup>4</sup> Zechariah got chased into the Temple and stoned near the altar.
- **Isaiah** was put into a log and cut in half (Hebrews 11:37)<sup>5</sup>

**So, these religious leaders knew their history.** But here was the thing: **They thought that was something in their past;** something that could never occur in their day. They were too righteous; too advanced; too morally upright for that to happen in their generation.

The **irony, of course, was that they were about to do something** even worse than any of their fathers had ever done.

**And there's an important lesson here for us:** We should not look so quickly with disdain on the sins of people in past history and assume that the reason they did those hideous things was that they were so

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<sup>3</sup> Also, a prophet named "Uriah," who prophesied around the same time as Jeremiah, *tried* to escape into exile, but the king tracked him down, brought him back to Israel, and ran him through with a sword (Jeremiah 26:20-23). The prophet Micaiah was punched in the face by false prophets (1 Kings 22)

backwards and sinful; and we by contrast are so advanced and enlightened.

The Bible teaches us that **we are made out of the same sinful** stuff that they are, with the **same fallen heart**, which means, given the same circumstances and pressures, we'd likely have acted the same way they did.

When we hear about **past generations of Christians** enslaving, exploiting, or abusing others—don't shake your head at them in self-righteous disgust and say, "**What was wrong with them?**" Instead, say, "**What is wrong with the human heart? What is wrong with my heart?**"

**Stories of human depravity** should not make us feel **proud and smug**, but humble and repentant.

- We are a **race that has routinely** scorned and ignored the prophets, and routinely uses whatever position of power it obtains to privilege itself even if it means exploiting others.
- **This all came to a head in the crucifixion**, where we see clearly displayed man's heart toward God. **When God was revealed**, we hated and killed him. (I showed you a few weeks ago that when Jesus went through his trial it was actually us, the whole human race, that was on trial.)

**That's what the religious leaders of Jesus's day didn't get.** They assumed that their advances in religion somehow indicated they had a different kind of heart.

<https://prophecytoday.uk/study/teaching-articles/item/234-persecuted-prophets.html>

<sup>4</sup> 2 Chronicles 24. <http://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/bb/bb32.htm>

<sup>5</sup> John MacArthur, October 12, 2014, "The Parable of the Murdered Son," sermon on Mark 12:1-12

**That's one of the dangers of religion.** It can keep you blind to your heart.

- **A lot of times when people grow up outside the church, you see,** apart from the constraints of religion, they see the full sinful capabilities of their heart put on display, so **when they get saved** they really repent.
  - They are like, “God, I see how bad I can get. I need you to save me!”
  - **And when they sing,** “*Amazing grace how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me!*” they do it with enthusiasm because they’ve experienced how much of a wretch they can be.
- **We who grew up in the church, however,** learn to curb our behavior to a point that we can stay blind to the sinful potential of our hearts—a wickedness that is every bit as present!
- **Here’s how I see it: (And I’ve used this analogy over the years).** **My 1<sup>st</sup> year out of high school I spent at a small Bible school** right beside a big lake in the Adirondack mountains in upstate New York. It was a great year, but the living conditions there were, shall we say, rustic (they’ve improved a lot since then), and **the water that came out the faucets** tasted like fish (because it was coming from a lake)... Religion is like the perfume that keeps you from recognizing the stench in your heart.

**Listen, your heart** is essentially the same as that which was in people in the past. That’s true **regardless of what color** you are, what **religion** you practice, or what **political affiliation** you have.

- **Your heart, outside of Christ,** is fundamentally the same as that of those who exploited and abused others, killed the prophets, and crucified Jesus.
- The **only difference between us** and them are forces and graces outside our control that have curbed or contained our sinful tendencies.
- **So, don’t look back self-righteously at them and say, “What was wrong with them?”** Instead, say, “What is wrong with me?”

- **Keep a posture of humility** about your own heart and ask God to reveal in you whatever rebellious or exploitive tendencies there are!

So, **what I want to focus on here for the next few minutes is the analysis of the human heart** that Jesus provides in this parable that is true in every generation.

### 1. Some unbelief is willful

- **The tenants in this parable didn’t murder the son because they were confused about who he was.** They hated him (**vs. 38**) because he challenged their ownership of the field.
- **By this point in Jesus’s life,** the religious leaders had convinced themselves that Jesus was dangerous and needed to be killed. But in **telling this story, Jesus, pulls back the veil** on their hearts and shows that theirs was a willful rejection.
- **In the book of Romans,** Paul says that a great deal of our behavior can only be explained in terms of a **deep dynamic of emotional** and spiritual repression, and that **underneath everything else,** the thing that we really repress is a hatred of God himself.
  - **Rom 8:7** says that our sinful heart has an inward hostility toward God. “The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so.” **Romans 8:7**
  - **Think about what that means.** Our natural mind **can’t submit** to God. It possesses a **deep hostility** to the authority and glory of God.
  - **Your heart** possesses that.
- **Repentance means recognizing that and looking to God to change it.**
  - BTW: **this is how you know that the Holy Spirit** is opening your eyes. It takes the Holy Spirit to see that sin is not just a violation of rules, but a whole attitude of resentment towards

Christ's claim over your life.<sup>6</sup> The sign that the HS is working in you is that it feels personal between you and God, not just a feeling of shame that you haven't kept the rules.

- **(What this all means is that...) For many people, their unbelief is not a lack of evidence for the head; it's a heart problem.**
  - I heard this the other day in **Richard Dawkins** "Is there anything God could do to get you to believe in him?" He said, "No. If God showed up into the room, I would want to know what sort of psychological or naturalistic explanation is going on here." He has gone atheism to anti-theism—a refusal even to consider the evidence that springs from a hatred of God.
  - **Aldous Huxley**, the philosopher who coined the term "agnostic" and author of *Brave New World*, said, "I had motives for not wanting the world to have a meaning... For myself, as, no doubt, for most of my contemporaries, the philosophy of meaningless was essentially an instrument of liberation... from a certain system of morality. We objected to the morality of Christianity because it interfered with our sexual freedom. There was one admirably simple method of justifying ourselves: (agnosticism)."
- **What I'm trying to get you to see is that sometimes there are heart things behind unbelief.**
  - I once heard a **story about a high school girl in a class** where they were given the assignment to take some historical figure who had an unusual story. She chose Jonah and did a great presentation on the history of Nineveh and the social dynamics at work in Jonah's preaching. Well, after all the presentations the cynical teacher got up and commended all the work but launched into a tirade about disregarding fantasies and being serious students of history. Well, it was obvious it was directed toward this girl so she raised her hand and said, "Is this about me and my presentation?" And the teacher said, "Yes, everyone knows all the stories in the OT

are all just myths with no basis in reality—there were no such persons as Moses, or King David, and certainly no Jonah." But the girl said, "But those people have the same historical documentation as other figures." But the teacher said, "Any educated person dismisses any supernatural explanations from all historical events prima facie." She then added, "These stories don't even make sense! How could Moses have led the children of Israel through the Red Sea? How could Jonah even have survived in the belly of a fish for 3 days?" And the girl said, "I don't know, but when I get to heaven I'll ask them." **And the teacher said, "Well, what if 'Jonah' is not in heaven?" And the girl said, "Well then you can ask him."**<sup>7</sup>

- **All throughout his ministry**, Jesus explained that if you have the right posture of heart—ears to hear—then the truth about him will be evident to see.
- **BTW, before I move on to our 2<sup>nd</sup> point**, we have to note that a **rejection of Jesus can take** a religious form, too. After all, these tenants first represent the chief priests, not atheists.
  - **This is one of the most important things to learn:** The #1 substitute for true surrender is religion! **Religion can be a very effective way** of avoiding the authority of God in your life. You don't want to surrender to God everything, so you come up with a scheme to pay him off.
  - In her novel **Wise Blood Flannery O'Connor** talks about one of the characters who avoided sin so that he could avoid Jesus. In other words, as long as his life never got desperate, messed up by some sinful choices, he'd never have to reckon with who Jesus was, how much he needed his grace, and the claims he makes on your life.
  - **Illus. For a lot of people, it's like the goal of their religion is to keep Jesus in time-out.** You're not really trying to know God or walk with him, you're trying to keep him at distance.

<sup>6</sup> Tim Keller, "The Parable of the Last Messenger," Luke 20:9-19

<sup>7</sup> John Mark Comer, "Parable of Tenants," sermon on Mark 11

## 2. Most rejection is rooted in a desire for control

- The **servants had been hired** by the owner, but **they were acting** (vs. 38) is as if the vineyard belonged to them.
- **Everything in us wants to pretend** like we are the owner, not the tenant. The world constantly reinforces to us that we are the owner.
- **A lot of sin goes back to this question: *Who owns your life?*** Is it yours, out of which you share some with Jesus? Or is it his, which he is allowing you to enjoy?
- **For many people, Jesus is like the GPS system in their car.** You decide you want to have a happy life, and you know God has something to do with it. So you keep it there and it helps you know which way to go. But you've always got the option to disobey the directions. And so, the GPS tells you to turn and you choose not to and God patiently says, "Recalculating." (BTW, I know a guy who told his wife that the GPS directional lady was the ideal wife and he wanted to know why she couldn't be more like her. That did not go well.)
- God is the **owner for your life, not the navigation system** for it.

## 3. God's grace toward us is amazing, but it won't last forever

- God **shows his grace toward us** is in this story in repeated ways.
- **First, the fact that he gives the vineyard to us to enjoy to begin with.** Life and the pleasures that go with it are just a great gift that God gives us to be happy!
- **Second, through the repeated, patient warnings** he sends the rebellious farmers. In this story, he **doesn't send them** just one messenger—**one chance to repent**—but chance after chance after chance.
  - The same is true for us. He sends us repeated warnings.
  - It could be **through a message** like this one. It **can also be** through natural things.
  - **The process of aging:** Aging is depressing, but in one sense it is God's gracious reminder that we don't last forever and everything we have is borrowed—we're a tenant not the

owner. **Middle school soccer / sore when I sleep / I realize that life goes so quickly. I'm NOT THE OWNER!**

- **The fragility of life is a messenger that we are not the owner:** I remember reading about a decorate Civil War general who was killed by a tick. Stared down danger and overcame it. Avoided death, destruction—but a tick got him.
- **C.S. Lewis said unfulfilled longings** were a sign that we were tenants, not the owner...
  - in every pleasure, the longing for it was better than the obtaining of it.
  - I always say that **only 4 things in my life** have fully lived up to expectation—everything else disappointed.
  - **C.S. Lewis:** It's like my life has been spent chasing after *"the scent of a flower I have never been able to find* (I've smelled the smell but can't find the flower!), *the echo of a tune my soul longs to hear* (I hear the echo of a tune but can't find the original). *If I find in myself desires which nothing in this world will satisfy, the only explanation is that I was created for another world!"*
  - **Unfulfilled longings are a messenger** that we are not the Master and Owner of what we have.
- **Again, you're in church today...** God has been after you.
- **Life is a messenger** constantly coming at you saying, "You're not in charge, not the owner, you are the tenant."
- **So, God shows his mercy by allowing you to tend the land, by repeated warnings... The ultimate way of showing mercy, of course, was by sending his Son!**
  - Like I said, **you have to stand a little dumbfounded** by the mercy of God shown to these farmers. After they had killed the other messengers, he sent his son?
  - **Would anyone else ever show that kind of mercy in that situation?**
  - *(You know, sometimes we complain about the harshness of God's judgment, as if, if we would have been in charge we*

would have been more merciful. But whenever God's mercy and man's are put into contrast, God always wins.

- **Think about it:** *Is this how you would have reacted to tenants that stole your vineyard? We're scandalized?*
- **In the story of Hosea**, for example, we are scandalized when God tells Hosea to go and buy back the wife who had committed adultery on him repeatedly and eventually sold herself into the sex slave trade. God says, "After she betrayed you utterly humiliated you, go and buy her back and love her again." And we find ourselves saying, "**That's not even reasonable.**" And God says, "Do it because that's what I am doing with you."
- In the story of Jonah, we are scandalized when God tells Jonah to go and preach mercy to the people that have captured, enslaved, tortured and abused your family, because that's what I am doing.
- **The reason we think ourselves more merciful than God is we don't perceive the depth of the evil of what we've done.)**
- **God's mercy, revealed in stories like this, is staggering. God sent his Son knowing full well what we would do to him. Why?**
  - Scripture says (first) that he was **demonstrating** (Rom 5:8) his love for us. He was putting it on display in a way we could never doubt and would never forget. We see that he was willing to make himself vulnerable and put himself in harm's way for no other reason to rescue us.
  - **Second, he was enabling us to trust him** by showing us his willingness to identify with us. He had no personal vested interest in becoming one of us other than to lead us to safety.
  - **I love my friend Joby's illustration** here... "The vacant lot next to the place where I lived in college was full of carpenter ants. When I would leave for class, the neighbor's kid would be on his Big Wheel. (*Remember those? They're about this high so cars couldn't see you and you couldn't see over the wheel so it was like a death*

*recipe*.) He would go to the vacant lot and spread jelly all over the place, and the ants would put on Facebook, "Hey, come get the jelly at the vacant lot!" The kid would wait until all the ants got there and then power slide with his big wheel through the lot and kill all the ants. **Now, if I loved ants and wanted to communicate with them, it would be impossible to try to stand over them and say, "Hear ye, hear ye, all ye ants! Thou shalt not eat the jelly, because it will lead to thy death."** They would just look at me and say, "Look at the size of that boot." **But if I were just an ant**, I wouldn't have the perspective to understand that psycho Big Wheel kid is on his way with jelly and death. So, I would need to **simultaneously be big and powerful enough** to have the right perspective and see their future and yet small as an ant to be able to communicate with them—to grow up like an ant, speak ant language, and yet still have the right perspective. **And then one day, at just the right time, I would enter the colony** and say, "Behold, ants! Follow me. I know the jelly tastes good. But look around. See all the ant legs and squished body parts? That's going to be you one day. Follow me across the street where there's no psycho Big Wheel kid—because his mom won't let him cross the street." **That's what the coming of Jesus is like, SORT OF.**

- **You say, "That is a ridiculous comparison."** Yes, but is that any more scandalous or ridiculous than what God did?
- **So, in becoming a man demonstrated his love for us, showed us that we could trust him, and third, his death became the means by which he saved us!**
  - Our murder of him became the means of our forgiveness.
    - He died for our sin, paying our penalty in our place.
    - **There's only 2 ways** to pay for sin: you, the guilty, can suffer for it eternally; or he, the righteous, can suffer in your place.

- His death also released the power that changed us. It's the **irony of the gospel**: The murder that came from the hatred we had toward God became the means by which God destroyed the hatred in our hearts. His **willingness to serve us and suffer for us** breaks the stronghold that self-centeredness and self-will have on our hearts.
- **And now you have a choice.** <sup>42</sup> "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This is what the Lord has done and it is wonderful in our eyes?" <sup>43</sup> Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruit. <sup>44</sup> Whoever falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will shatter him."
- **His grace is amazing, but it won't last forever.**
- **You choose whether** to let his death compel you to repent, and build your life on him, or ignore him and let him **crush you**.
- God, in his mercy, has sent you messenger **after messenger to remind us that we are not owners. And finally, he sent you Jesus.**
- That mercy is amazing, but in this parable Jesus shows you it won't last forever.
- **The parable's question: If you won't listen to the Son, who would you listen to?**

Finally,

**4. Don't flatter yourself that God couldn't get along without you**

In that last statement, Jesus told the Jewish leaders something here they absolutely did not believe. **Vs. 43:** <sup>43</sup> Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruit.

They thought, 'No way, we are God's people!' What other faithful group like us does God have? **In another place they told themselves**

**that:** "God could never destroy us, we are the sons of Abraham and we are his only people!" Jesus responded, "God can raise up sons and daughters of Abraham from these stones."

**And, sure enough, that is what happened:** In 70 AD, the Roman ruler Titus Vespasian massacred the citizens of Jerusalem, tore down the Temple **so that not one stone was left on top of another**, and destroyed 985 villages in Israel. **Spiritual leadership passed** to Jesus's Apostles, who were completely disconnected from the religious establishment, and who spent the **majority of their ministries taking the gospel** to the Gentiles.

**Paul gives the same warning to us. To Gentile Christians, he says, Don't take your place for granted either.** Romans 11:20 "(The branch of Israel was) broken off because of unbelief, and you (now stand in their place) by faith. Do not be arrogant, but tremble. <sup>21</sup> For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either." **Romans 11:20-21**

We **wouldn't be the first people in history that God had discarded** and then started over with someone new.

**Are we walking in a way worthy of the grace** we have received? This is how Paul frequently admonishes his churches: "*I urge you therefore,*" he tells the Ephesians, "*to walk worthy of the calling you have received in Jesus.*"<sup>8</sup> **Are you walking in a way that is a proper response to the grace of God?**

- Does how you **worship** demonstrate that?
- Does your **giving** reflect the gratitude that God showed you, of all people, grace, and your understanding of the responsibility that comes with it?
- **Your quest for holiness** adequately reflect the price Jesus paid to make you holy?

<sup>8</sup> Ephesians 4:1; Col 1:10

- Your **commitment to see this gospel taken** to others so they can have a chance to believe?

**If God took the gospel away from Israel and gave it to others**

because they didn't respond in a worthy way to it, he could do it to...

- Our church.
- My family line.
- Our denomination.
- Our country: Here in our country we have enjoyed access to the gospel like no people in history. There is no guarantee that will continue.

**Look, God's promises are guaranteed**, and he is going to do mighty things in this world. But we must never be so presumptuous as to think that God can only do mighty things through us because we are 'his people.'

**If we do not walk forward in humility, he will pour out his powerful Spirit** somewhere else.

So, 2 questions:

- **Have you received him?** We sing, "He *didn't want heaven without us. So, he brought heaven down.*" **That's true.** He doesn't want it without you! **But if you won't listen to that**, what else can he do? He's given you chance after chance. If you **reject the Son**, he'll have no choice but to grant you your wish.
- **AND, realizing the grace of God is a great gift to us, are you walking in a way that is a worthy response?**

