

The Parable of the Tenants



Matthew 21:33–44 · Mark 12:1–11 · Luke 20:9–18

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Setting the Scene

The parable is told in the temple courts during the last week of Jesus' public ministry. The day before, he had entered Jerusalem as a king and cleansed the temple. The chief priests, scribes, and elders now confront him: "By what authority are you doing these things?" (**Matt. 21:23; Mark 11:28; Luke 20:2**). Jesus answers first with the question about John's baptism, then with the parable of the two sons, and then with this story of a vineyard, absentee owner, violent tenants, murdered servants, and **a slain son**.

The story is not a rustic illustration pulled from thin air. It is a living midrash on Isaiah's Song of the Vineyard (**Isa. 5:1–7**). In Isaiah, the Lord plants Israel as a carefully prepared vineyard, expects justice, and finds bloodshed. Jesus keeps the vineyard, the hedge, the winepress, and the tower, but he shifts the guilt. In Isaiah, the vineyard itself is barren; in the Gospels, the vineyard is still God's, and the crime belongs to those who were leased the care of it.

The scene is therefore double: a legal confrontation in the temple, and a covenant lawsuit that reaches back through the prophets to the founding of Israel.

Context

All three Synoptic Gospels place the parable in the same narrative frame: Passion Week, after the triumphal entry and the temple cleansing, before the questions about tribute, resurrection, and the greatest commandment. Mark gives the most detailed vineyard description and the starkest sequence of servants. Matthew adds the explicit verdict that “the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruit” (21:43), as well as the saying about the stone that crushes. Luke records the crowd’s horrified “God forbid!” and the warning that the one on whom the stone falls will be pulverized.

Historically, tenant farming under absentee landlords was common in first-century Galilee and Judea. The tenants’ plan—“This is the heir; come, let us kill him and take his inheritance”—echoes both greed and a legal hope that, if the heir disappeared, occupancy might harden into ownership. Theologically, the “servants” are the prophets sent “again and again” (cf. **Jer. 7:25–26; 2 Chron. 36:15–16**). The “beloved son” (especially clear in Mark) is Jesus himself. The owner’s final coming is both the judgment that fell on Jerusalem in A.D. 70 and the larger reckoning of God with unfaithful stewards.

The parable is therefore not an abstract lesson about agriculture. **It is Jesus’ public interpretation of Israel’s history**, his own identity, and the transfer of stewardship that his death and resurrection will effect.

Observations

1. **The vineyard remains the Lord’s.**
God planted, hedged, equipped, and leased it. The tenants never own the land. Stewardship, not possession, is the human vocation. Fruit is owed to the owner at harvest; it is not the tenants’ to hoard.
2. **Patience is not weakness.**
The owner sends servant after servant. The delay is mercy, not neglect. Only “last of all” does he send the son, saying, “They will respect my son.” The tragedy of the parable is that this hope is refused.
3. **The son is not another prophet.**
The tenants recognize him as heir. Their violence is not ignorance but usurpation. Matthew and Luke have the son thrown out of the vineyard and then killed—matching the historical fact that Jesus was executed outside the city (**Heb. 13:12**). Mark has the killing first, then the casting out. Either way, the heir dies at the hands of those who claimed to keep the vineyard for God.
4. **The hearers condemn themselves.**
Jesus asks what the owner will do. In Matthew they answer: he will destroy the wretches and give the vineyard to others who will pay the fruit. Only afterward do they perceive that the story is about them (**Matt. 21:45; Mark 12:12**). The parable functions as a juridical trap, like Nathan’s story to David.
5. **The rejected stone becomes the cornerstone.**
Jesus quotes **Psalms 118:22–23**, the same psalm the crowds had sung at his entry. The builders—the official leaders—discard the stone; God makes it the head of the corner.

Luke and Matthew add the stone that breaks those who fall on it and crushes those on whom it falls (cf. **Isa. 8:14–15; Dan. 2:34–35**). Rejection of the Son is not a neutral administrative decision; it is a collision with the foundation God has laid.

6. **The kingdom is transferred to a fruit-bearing people.**

Matthew's *ethnos* ("nation" or "people") is not a simple ethnic swap of Jews for Gentiles. It is a transfer of stewardship from unfaithful leaders to a community—rooted in the apostles, including Jewish remnant and Gentile believers—that actually yields the fruit the owner seeks: justice, righteousness, and the acknowledgment of the Son. Paul later insists that this does not cancel God's promises to Israel (**Rom. 9–11**). The parable judges unbelief and false stewardship; it does not erase election.

7. **Each Gospel accents a slightly different note.**

Mark stresses the son's unique place in salvation history. Matthew stresses fruit and the danger that even the new tenants may presume. Luke stresses the personal crisis of response: the crowd recoils, yet the stone remains.

Questions

The parable leaves several questions that theology must keep open rather than close too quickly.

- If the vineyard is still God's, **what does faithful tenancy look like now**—for church, synagogue, and every community that claims to tend what God planted?
- How do we distinguish prophetic critique of leaders from contempt for the people those leaders failed?
- The owner "expected" **respect for the son**. Does divine patience have a limit that we can map, or only a limit that God himself announces?
- What is the **"fruit" the owner requires**—cultic correctness, moral reform, faith in the Son, or all of these ordered toward the last?
- Can a people that once rejected the stone become, by grace, a people that builds upon it? **Romans 11 suggests yes**. The parable itself is more severe. How do judgment and hope stand together?
- **Where do we stand in the story**—as servants sent, tenants tempted to seize the inheritance, or a people newly entrusted with the vineyard?

These questions keep the parable from becoming a weapon against others and turn it into a mirror.

Conclusion

The Parable of the Tenants is Jesus' own reading of Israel's story and of his approaching death. God planted a vineyard and sought fruit. He sent prophets; they were beaten. He sent the Son; the tenants killed him to keep what was never theirs. The owner will come. The rejected stone will stand as cornerstone. **Stewardship will pass to those who give the owner his fruit.**

The warning is sharp: office, heritage, and temple do not substitute for honoring the Son. The promise is equally sharp: the vineyard is not abandoned. **God still wants fruit.** The same stone

that crushes the rebellious becomes the foundation of a people who will not treat the heir as an obstacle to their claim.

Holy Week proved the parable true. The tenants killed the son outside the vineyard. God raised him and set him as cornerstone. **The question the story still asks is whether those who now tend the vineyard will send the owner his fruit**—or whether they, too, will try to keep the inheritance for themselves.

Additional supporting verses

God owns the vineyard and wants fruit

Isaiah 5:7 · John 15:1–2, 8 · Matthew 21:43

Prophets, then the Son

Jeremiah 7:25–26 · Hebrews 1:1–2 · Mark 12:6

The Son rejected and killed

John 1:11 · Hebrews 13:12 · Acts 4:10–11

Rejected stone becomes cornerstone

Psalms 118:22–23 · 1 Peter 2:6–8 · Luke 20:17–18

Stewardship given to a fruit-bearing people; Israel not discarded

Matthew 21:41, 43 · 1 Peter 2:9–10 · Romans 11:1, 5, 29

The warning still applies

Romans 11:20–22 · John 15:6 · Revelation 2:5

