

Exploring Scripture Reflection
October 8, 2023
Matthew 21:33-46
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Today we hear another parable told by Jesus: the Parable of the Wicked Tenants. It is part of the Gospel of Matthew known as the Controversy Section (21:23 – 22:14). Jesus and his disciples have now entered Jerusalem, and the opposition to their movement has become quite public. After Jesus drives out the merchants and money changers for the Temple, his authority is questioned by the chief priests and elders. Jesus pushes back and questions their understanding of John's message ("Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand"). What follows are three parables that highlight the self-righteousness of the current religious leaders and warn the new followers of Jesus to not fall into the same trap.

This parable is an allegory and is found in all three of the synoptic Gospels (Mark, Matthew and Luke). The Landowner is God, the Vineyard is Israel (cf. Isaiah 5:1-7 – The Song of the Unfaithful Vineyard), the Tenants are the Israelite leaders, the Slaves are the prophets, and the Son is Jesus. The message is that the current religious leaders have not been faithful to God's command of mercy and compassion, delivered first by the Hebrew prophets, and now by the Son of God himself. Instead they kill the prophets and Jesus. God then sentences them to their punishment for their evil actions, probably a reference to the Destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 CE. The vineyard is now turned over to a new group to be fruitful on behalf of God.

In verses 42-44, Jesus shifts to a new image by quoting Psalm 118:22: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone." Christ is the rejected stone upon which the Kingdom of God is built. This is preached by Peter before the rulers, elders and scribes assembled in Jerusalem after Jesus' death and resurrection. "By the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. This Jesus is 'the stone that was rejected by you, the builders: it has become the cornerstone.'" (Acts 4:10-11).

One must be careful not to fall into the trap of Christian triumphalism over Judaism in this parable. The warning is the same whether the audience is Jewish or Christian: be faithful to God's word or the vineyard will be transferred to others who will. As the great preacher Fred Craddock wrote in his commentary on this scripture: "The preacher of this text is not to be a teller of stories about disobedient Jews but a listener to stories told of disobedient Christians."¹

Reflection Questions:

- 1) How does reading/hearing this parable make you feel?
- 2) What does it mean to make the vineyard "fruitful" according to God?
- 3) What do you envision when you hear that Jesus is the "chief cornerstone"?

¹Fred Craddock, *Preaching the New Common Lectionary: Year A – After Pentecost* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 221.