

The Parable of the Wicked Tenants
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Matthew 21:33-46

If you like parables that are to-the-point and fairly easy for modern audiences to understand, mostly, have I got one for you. Appearing at the exact same place in the storylines in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the Parable of the Wicked Tenants forms a key part of Jesus' critique of the religious leadership of his day. Last week, we heard him arguing with them about authority, and how they don't use it as they should. Today, they're continuing with that conversation, which just got a lot more pointed and dangerous. Jesus effectively uses this parable to illustrate for the leaders that they will be replaced, perhaps violently if they continue not to give God, the landowner, God's "due."

It is rarely a good sign in the Bible when a vineyard plays a central role in a story. For example, in 1 Kings, the evil King Ahab and his even more evil wife Jezebel conspire to deprive a man named Naboth of his vineyard. Ahab just wants it, but Naboth refuses to give it to him, and so Jezebel has Naboth killed. They repent only after the prophet Elijah publicly calls them out and shames them. While his act of repentance does save Ahab from ruin temporarily, that reprieve won't last for long. God later tells Elijah that God, "will not bring disaster in [Ahab's] days, but in in son's" (1 Kings 21:29, NRSVue). Later, the prophet Isaiah also uses a vineyard metaphor to describe how the people of his day have gone off the rails. In a passage known as a covenant lawsuit, where God "sues" the people for failing to do what the covenant requires of them, God similarly promises to bring ruin on the vineyard that is Israel. In that case, Isaiah says,

God “expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry” (Isa 5:7, NRSV)

It’s Isaiah’s covenant lawsuit that Jesus uses to set up his own version of a vineyard gone bad. Matthew’s community likely would have gotten the reference right away, so it’s probably a fair guess that they correctly anticipated how Jesus’ version would turn out. The parable starts a lot like Isaiah’s lawsuit does, with a vineyard that the landowner has meticulously planted, built up, cultivated, and then harvested. Jesus takes things a step or three further. After setting up some tenants to look after the vineyard, the landowner skips town. When he sends a series of messengers, including his own son, to collect what’s due him, the tenants don’t like it at all: “But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first, and they treated them in the same way. Then he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.’ So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him” (Mt 21:35-39, NRSVue).

And THEN, Jesus asks the chief priests and Pharisees: “What do you think happens next?”

It’s only at that moment that they begin to realize that Jesus is actually talking about them. THEY are the wicked tenants who refuse to give God, the landowner, the produce from the vineyard which is God’s due... and the end results won’t be pretty. Matthew’s criticism of these leaders is pointed. They are bad actors who have betrayed

their community. What's more, their rejection of Jesus means, at a minimum, they will lose their oversight privileges and all the social advantages that go with it.¹

Sure, it's harsh. And it leaves open a number of possibilities for how the parable has been applied. THE thing that it cannot, and should never be, interpreted as is a wish for Jews to be displaced in favor of Christians, despite how it's been used as a justification for antisemitism for centuries. God's love for the Jewish people is in no way diminished by the leadership failures of Jesus' own time, or of ours, period.² What we must consider instead is the context in which the parable is told. That matters more than which sibling God loves best. Matthew is likely writing with knowledge of what had happened with the Romans' destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. It may well be the case that he's speaking to that lived reality – i.e., the destruction of the Temple is what Jesus is talking about when he says that the cornerstone will crush anyone on whom it falls. It may also be that there was a desire on the part of some of Matthew's community to return to their Jewish roots as a way of seeking comfort in the middle of all the upheaval they'd experienced. IF that's the case, then these leaders with whom Jesus is debating are the competition – competition whose failures made them not worth following, even 40 or 50 years later.³

Secondly, this parable, and the chapter in which it appears, serve to check several narrative and theological boxes. It helps to build the tension between Jesus and

¹ Carolyn J. Sharp, "Commentary on Matthew 21:33-46." <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-27/commentary-on-matthew-2133-46-7> [accessed September 28, 2026].

² Andrew McGowan, "The Vineyard." <https://abmcg.substack.com/p/the-vineyard> [accessed September 29, 2026].

³ David Lose, "Words and Deeds." <https://www.davidlose.net/2017/10/pentecost-18-a-words-and-deeds/> [accessed September 28, 2026].

the authorities which will, in very short order, lead them to order his arrest. It also, encourages Matthew's audience, "...to see the Pharisees and chief priests in a less than flattering light and for this reason, perhaps, either to give this story of Jesus a second hearing or, if they're already believers, to be encouraged in their decisions to follow Jesus."⁴ And, finally, it suggests a theological explanation for the destruction of the Temple – as in, "God made this happen yet again because you all didn't hold up your end of the covenant." That explanation may also be intended to affirm Matthew's community in its collective decision to put its faith in Jesus. As a result, it's entirely possible that, through this whole debate, "We're glimpsing an exchange from an unhappy, even bitter sibling rivalry, and while it's uncomfortable we've seen enough of this kind of thing to at least make sense of it."⁵

So what are WE to make of this parable, which could just as easily be applied, and in so many different situations, in our own time?

I think the answer to that is, "it depends – and use it with caution." It's all too easy to take this parable and use it to clobber someone else whose theology or political views we don't like, as well as to claim a divine mandate for their destruction. That's not what Jesus is saying here at all. The entire point of his long-running debate with the Temple leadership is that they have to do a better job. He is trying desperately to tell, and show, them how. He is adamant that the people's welfare, which is at the core of his mission, depends on their success. And, he still loves them, despite the risk to his own life that he knows he's taking by challenging them loudly and in public.

⁴ David Lose, "Crazy Love." <https://www.davidlose.net/2014/09/pentecost-17a-crazy-love/> [accessed September 28, 2026].

⁵ Ibid.

Jesus wasn't concerned about hoarding power, or bringing home to his father what his father was rightfully owed as the owner of the vineyard, or even crushing anyone who tripped over the cornerstone. He's after restoration, pulling us back into a world where authority serves justice instead of itself, where the tax collectors and the prostitutes among us are given places of honor, and where everyone has their basic needs for food, shelter, and being treated with dignity and respect, met.