

# Kingdom Parables

## The Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen

XXIV. The Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen - Matthew 21:33-46; Mark 12:1-12; Luke 20:9-19

### A. The Central Point of the Parable

The religious leaders of Israel rejected God's messengers and God's Son. As a result, God will take away their place of leadership and give it to another people who will care for his vineyard and give him the fruit of it.

### B. Significant Elements of the Parable

#### 1. The Householder

The word translated "householder" is the Greek word *oikodespotes*. It is the same word used in the other Kingdom parables which is translated "householder."

We find that this man built a vineyard and rented it out to caretakers. This, by the way, was not an uncommon practice in the area of Galilee. Many times, wealthy men would build vineyards or other enterprises and periodically send someone for the profits while they themselves lived many miles away.

#### 2. The Vineyard

We find that this particular man built a vineyard. Vineyards were very common in that area of the world as the grape was one of the staple foods. Not only did it make jellies and other foods, but it was the main ingredient for wine, one of the basic beverages in that part of the world.

Note that the man did not just plant the vineyard, but he built a wall around it as well as the necessary buildings for processing the wine. In other words, he very carefully started this enterprise in order to realize a profit. It was not a hobby of his or a mere sideline occupation.

#### 3. The Husbandmen

The Greek word translated "husbandmen" is *georgois* and literally means "earth worker." This word was used to speak of gardeners and others who made their living caring for crops.

It is of note to see that this must have been a pretty large vineyard to have required the attention of more than one husbandmen. Large vineyards were not uncommon to that part of the world.

These men would have been contracted to care for the vineyard. Their "rent" would have been a certain percentage of the crop. The remaining percentage would have been used by them for their living.

#### 4. The Servants

It is obvious that the owner of this vineyard was a very wealthy individual in order to have the means to build this vineyard as well as have a good number of slaves.

These particular servants would have been sent by the owner at the appropriate time to receive the proceeds from the crop.

All should go well, but we find in this parable that the husbandmen had no intentions of keeping to their bargain. Perhaps they felt that the owner was so far away that he would not bother to force them to make payment. In any case, they beat some of the servants, wounded other servants, and killed even others.

#### 5. The Fruit

The fruit is significant in that it was the product for which the vineyard was built. If no fruit was expected, the owner would hardly have gone to the bother to build the vineyard and hire the husbandmen.

#### 6. The Son

Since the owner was getting nowhere with his servants, he sent his own son under the assumption that the husbandmen would recognize him and give him the necessary proceeds.

As a side note, it is interesting to find that the law of that day stated that if the owner and heirs of this type of venture were to die, then the land would be divided up between the husbandmen. This is exactly what is alluded to in Matthew 21:38.

What really happened was that the husbandmen thought that the owner had died and that the son was coming to claim the proceeds from the harvest. They thought that if they would kill the son, then the ownership of the vineyard would go to them.

#### 7. Another People

Because of the wickedness of the husbandmen, the owner would of course come and destroy them. He would then seek out new husbandmen who would be trustworthy enough to provide the necessary proceeds from the vineyard as originally contracted.

#### 8. The Stone

The stone is significant in that Christ specifically mentions it. It is not a part of this parable although Christ uses it to give the explanation of it. We will look at this more closely in the following section on the interpretation.

### C. Insignificant Elements of the Parable

None

#### D. Interpretation of the Parable

Again, before we can look at the interpretation of this parable, we must understand its context.

Matthew 21 gives us some of the events during the passion week. Verses 1-17 occur on Monday, 18-19 occur on Tuesday, and 20 following occur on Wednesday. This is important to note since Wednesday is the last time Christ will be teaching in the temple. The next day, Thursday, he will be eating the passover with his disciples and on Friday he will be crucified.

Verses 23-46 of Matthew 21 occur Wednesday morning. As Christ is teaching in the temple, he confronts the religious leaders about their rejection of him as the Messiah. Matthew 22 contains the Parable of the Marriage of the King's Son and the attempts by the leaders of Israel to discredit Christ. Matthew 24 contains Christ's scathing rebuke of the Pharisees as well as his condemnation of their hypocrisy.

All this is given to show that the context of this parable is Christ's confrontation of the leaders of Israel regarding their rejection of him and the subsequent condemnation of God.

##### 1. The Householder

The householder is none other than God.

- It is God who in Isaiah 5 planted Israel as a vineyard. This metaphor was well known to Israel.
- It is God who appointed the leaders of Israel to protect and care for the vineyard.
- It is God who sent messengers as well as his own son to the leaders in order to receive the fruits of salvation, godliness, and holy attitudes.
- It is God who will ultimately remove these leaders and rent his vineyard out to others who will provide the proceeds in due time.

##### 2. The Vineyard

The vineyard is an interesting element in that it changes definition in a sense as we move through the parable. Note the following:

- The vineyard is defined by Christ as being the Kingdom of God (Matthew 21:43).
- Prior to Christ's death, the vineyard = kingdom would have consisted of Jews.
- However, after Christ's death, the vineyard = kingdom will be composed of Jews and Gentiles who have turned to Christ in faith.
- Therefore, we see the vineyard as referring in the general sense to God's chosen people, but in a specific and immediate sense to Israel.

The vineyard is a picture of Israel. As we stated above, the symbol of a vineyard for Israel was quite common in the Old Testament. Refer to the following passages, especially Isaiah 5:1-7 in support of this:

Psalms 80:8-19  
Isaiah 5:1-7  
Jeremiah 2:21  
Ezekiel 15:6; 17:6; 19:10-14  
Hosea 10:1

A protest that may arise at this point is how can the vineyard represent Israel and the Husbandmen represent it's leaders, which are also part of Israel? The answer to this is to realize that we should never try to interpret a parable allegorically. When we do, we will have contradictions such as these. However, if we use the parable only to illustrate its central truth, these kinds of contradictions do not cause us any trouble.

### 3. The Husbandmen

The husbandmen refer to the religious leaders of Israel. This is inferred in verse 45 where we see that the leaders understood that Christ was referring to them. Since the husbandmen are the central element of this parable, they must of necessity refer to the leaders. No other identification makes a lot of sense.

When we make a cursory study of the attitude of Israel's leaders we find that other than rare exceptions all of them categorically rejected Christ. In Matthew 23 in Christ's rebuke of false spiritual leaders we find that he particularly hits them hard by showing that they have opposed God's messengers all throughout history. In fact, he says in verse 29 of Matthew 23 that they revere the prophets of old although it was their predecessors who killed them.

However, the leaders of Israel were not content to just kill God's messengers, they also killed Christ who was God's Son.

Note also, that God originally intended the leaders of Israel to lead his people into righteousness. Unfortunately, they deceived the people and milked them for their own advancement.

We could really expand on the above to several pages, however, note the following few points in support of the above statement:

- The High Priest was a political appointee of Rome who usually bribed his way into power. In fact, some of the most wicked and vile Jews of the day were serving as high priest, e.g. Annas and Caiaphas.
- The whole priesthood was marked by greed and graft. The Sadducees ran the temple concessions and made tremendous profits off of the worshipers. This is what so incensed Christ and caused him to cleanse the temple on at least two, and possibly three, occasions.

- The Pharisees had so redefined the law that they were able to break it to their advantage. Note Matthew 15:1-9 and Matthew 23.
- Not only did the Pharisees not enter into the Kingdom, but they actively hindered others. See Matthew 23:13.
- The religious leaders had defined salvation as being the result of external actions, not internal attitudes. See Paul's commentary in Philippians 3:3-11.

#### 4. Servants

The servants are the messengers God sent to Israel. It is interesting to note that with few exceptions, all of the prophets in the Old Testament were for the most part rejected by the leadership of the day. Some were treated ill, some were injured, others were killed. See Hebrews 11:36-38.

Another note on this can be found in Matthew 23:29-36.

#### 5. Fruit

This is not a central element. However, it is instructive to see that Christ is identifying fruit with that which God expected the leaders of Israel to produce in due season.

Fruit is the produce God was looking for in his people.

A study of "fruit" in the New Testament reveals three distinct interpretations all of which are in actuality related. We find fruit as being souls, godly attitudes, and righteous acts.

What God really demanded of the leaders of Israel was to model a godly lifestyle so as to produce that in the people of Israel. Unfortunately, that is not what was done.

#### 6. The Son

The son of the householder refers to none other than Christ.

In John 3:16 we find that Christ revealed himself to be the only begotten Son of God. Time and time again in the gospels Christ calls himself God's Son. No other interpretation will make any sense.

We know from reading the rest of Matthew that the leaders not only rejected Christ, but had him crucified. He was a threat in many ways:

- The Sadducees saw Christ as threatening their income and their comfortable place in the Roman system.
- The Pharisees saw Christ as a threat to their power and prestige. He had condemned them and exposed the hypocrisy of their own hearts on many occasions.

## 7. Another People

Because of the rejection of Christ by Israel's leaders, God removed them and gave the care of his vineyard over to others who would give him the fruit of it in due season.

This is another point at which a strict allegorical interpretation would lead to error. If the vineyard refers to Israel, and Israel is set aside during the Interim Kingdom, then how can they still produce fruit?

The answer to the above is to make the identification of the vineyard to be God's chosen people, who can not only be Jews but Gentiles as well. However, it is also important to note that the path of blessing today for Jews is through the Church. See Romans 9-11 on this subject.

## 8. The Stone

We only mention the stone because it is at this point that Christ takes Psalms 118:22 and applies it to himself. This same application is made in Acts 4:11, Ephesians 2:20, and 1 Peter 2:6.

Simply put, Christ is telling the religious leaders that although he is rejected, he will eventually become the head of the corner, the chief stone in God's building (see 1 Peter 2:3-8).

## E. Application of the Parable

1. Since the leadership of Israel failed to fulfill their responsibilities toward God, they were removed from their place of leadership and replaced by others who would fulfill God's requirements.
2. It is important for us to note that God takes the responsibilities of leaders seriously. Although many seek after positions of leadership, not all understand the accounting they will give to God for the right exercise of their roles.
3. Although many reject Christ, he still is the chief cornerstone. Those who reject him will be ground to powder.