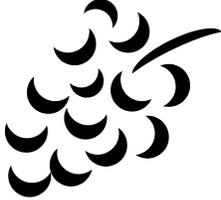


**Parable of the Landowner**  
**Matthew 21:33-46**  
**Pastor John E. Dubler**

This parable, spoken by our Lord while He was teaching in the temple during His last visit to Jerusalem, is sometimes called the “Parable of the Wicked Tenants.” This title is richly deserved; indeed the vine-grower-tenants in the story are wickedness personified. Jesus imparted this teaching only days before He died on the cross, was buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, and raised from the dead. The Parable of the Landowner appears in all three synoptic gospels. (Mark 12:1-12 and Luke 20:9-19 are the other passages, which should be consulted for a complete picture of the teaching.)



**The Parable of the Landowner from Matthew 21: 33-46**

“Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who PLANTED A VINEYARD AND PUT A WALL AROUND IT AND DUG A WINE PRESS IN IT, AND BUILT A TOWER, and rented it out to vine-growers and went on a journey. 34 When the harvest time approached, he sent his slaves to the vine-growers to receive his produce. 35 The vine-growers took his slaves and beat one, and killed another, and stoned a third. 36 Again he sent another group of slaves larger than the first; and they did the same thing to them. 37 But afterward he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ 38 But when the vine-growers saw the son, they said among themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance.’ 39 They took him, and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. 40 Therefore when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vine-growers?” 41 They said to Him, “He will bring those wretches to a wretched end, and will rent out the vineyard to other vine-growers who will pay him the proceeds at the proper seasons.”

42 Jesus said to them, “Did you never read in the Scriptures,

‘THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS REJECTED,  
THIS BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER stone;  
THIS CAME ABOUT FROM THE LORD,  
AND IT IS MARVELOUS IN OUR EYES’?

43 Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people, producing the fruit of it. 44 And he who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust.”

45 When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard His parables, they understood that He was speaking about them. 46 When they sought to seize

Him, they feared the people, because they considered Him to be a prophet. (NASU).<sup>1</sup>

### **One of three parables spoken in rebuke of the Jewish leaders.**

This is the second of three parables in which Jesus rebukes the Jewish leaders.

1. Parable of Two Sons: Matthew 21:29-32—Obedience, not lip-service counts
2. Parable of the Landowner: Matthew 21: 33-46—Cornerstone rejected
3. Parable of the Wedding Feast:  
Matthew 22: 1-14—Many are called, but only a few are chosen

### **The central message.**

The parable is a warning about rejecting the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Himself. It is chiefly addressed to the religious leaders of the day, although we may be certain that it is also addressed to anyone who rejects the Lord today.

### **The metaphorical elements of the parable.**

1. Landowner: God who created all things and ordained the nation of Israel to be a messenger of the good news of His redemptive plan to all the nations. (See Psalm 67.)

2. Vineyard: Jewish nation of Israel, and especially Jerusalem. Recorded in Isaiah 5:7 are these words, “For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel.”

- a. Wall: Divine protection
- b. Winepress: Law and sacrificial system
- c. Tower: Temple

3. Vine-growers: Religious leaders of Israel, the priests and teachers of the law

4. Servants: Prophets sent by the Lord to Israel

5. The Son: Jesus Himself, the Son of God

6. “Kingdom taken away” and “a people producing the fruit of it:” Jewish Temple worship is the kingdom taken away; Christianity (the church) replaces Judaism as the mechanism of propagating the good news of God’s mercy and redemption plan for all nations.

7. Stone which builders rejected: The messiah the chief cornerstone

- a. Those who fall on the stone: Those who accept the Lord are broken
- b. Those on whom it falls: Those who reject the Lord are crushed and scattered like dust when the stone falls on them.



### **Major Biblical allusions found in the parable:**

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<sup>1</sup> Except as noted, all scripture references are to the New American Standard Updated version produced by the Lockman Foundation.

The first is found in Isaiah 5:1-7. Notice how the Lord Jesus wove His parable tightly around the prophecy of Isaiah. Isaiah is a significant basis for the parable since it is probable that Isaiah himself was murdered by being sawn in-two.

Let me sing now for my well-beloved  
A song of my beloved concerning His vineyard.  
My well-beloved had a vineyard on a fertile hill.  
2 He dug it all around, removed its stones,  
And planted it with the choicest vine.  
And He built a tower in the middle of it  
And also hewed out a wine vat in it;  
Then He expected it to produce good grapes,  
But it produced only worthless ones.

3 "And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah,  
Judge between Me and My vineyard.

4 " What more was there to do for My vineyard that I have not done in it?  
Why, when I expected it to produce good grapes did it produce worthless ones?

5 "So now let Me tell you what I am going to do to My vineyard:  
I will remove its hedge and it will be consumed;  
I will break down its wall and it will become trampled ground.

6 "I will lay it waste;  
It will not be pruned or hoed,  
But briars and thorns will come up.  
I will also charge the clouds to rain no rain on it."

7 For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel  
And the men of Judah His delightful plant.  
Thus He looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed;  
For righteousness, but behold, a cry of distress.

A second major allusion is found in Psalm 118:22-23. It leaves no doubt about the fact that Jesus is referring to Himself when He cites the cornerstone. Psalm 118 would be sung by the disciples at the last supper, as it is part of the Hallel, the Passover celebration.

22 The stone which the builders rejected  
Has become the chief corner stone.  
23 This is the LORD'S doing;  
It is marvelous in our eyes.

There are other allusions within the parable, but knowing of these two and understanding their import will suffice.

## A closer look at the parable

The owner of the vineyard shows great care and concern for his creation. He builds a wall to keep out the animals, especially the foxes, notorious in the Song of Solomon (2:15) for ruining the vineyard. He also builds a watchtower to guard against thieves, poachers and all other manner of intruders. A winepress (or as in Mark 12, a wine vat), is located on site for the processing of the grapes once they are harvested. Certainly with this kind of investment and the great care and concern for his vineyard, the owner should have complete confidence that the vineyard will bear much fruit.

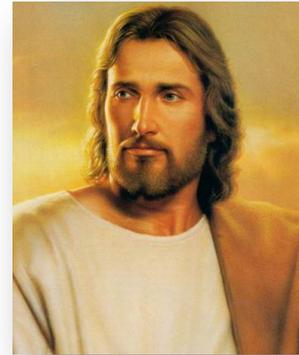
At the proper season, the owner of the vineyard sends some servants, or land agents to collect fruit as rent. This is payment-in-kind, and although not widely practiced in the west, is still followed in other parts of the world today.

But the servants are shamefully treated, as have been many of the prophets sent to us by the Lord. Indeed, the martyr Stephen, preaching to those who would stone him said, “Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it” (Acts 7:52-53). Those servants in the parable suffered one of three fates: brutal beating, stoning or death. Others were treated in the same way.

But the owner is extremely patient and generous, sending, as Mark notes, “many others,” finally, “He had one more to send, a beloved son.” The vine-growers plot the son’s death reasoning that they will then receive the inheritance of the vineyard. And so he is taken out of the vineyard and killed. Many have observed that Jesus fulfills not only the fate of the son in His death, but also the very location of His death. “They took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.” As the writer of Hebrews notes (12:13), Jesus suffered outside the city gate of Jerusalem where He was crucified. Thus He is the final fulfillment of the sacrificial offering system where “the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy place by the high priest as an offering for sin, are burned outside the camp,” Hebrews 13:11-12. Thus with premeditation and malice the religious leaders of the day killed the Lord of Glory, exactly in parallel to this parable.

What Jesus meant by this parable, including the meaning of the rejected servants and the beloved son are clear—even to the Pharisees who “understood that He was speaking about them.” From the creation onward there have been prophets sent. As we read in Hebrews 1:1-2 “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.” (NIV). Nearly all have been treated shamefully. The Pharisees and scribes were denounced in one of the eight woes which Jesus pronounced upon them as those who build the tombs of the prophets whom their fathers killed.

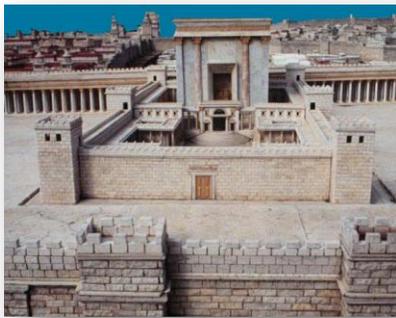
After the murder of the owner’s beloved son is disclosed, Jesus poses a question to His listeners, “Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vine-growers?” The



question discloses two facts: There is an owner of the vineyard and he is returning to his land holdings. No matter what man thinks with his various religious systems or lack thereof—God is still the owner of the vineyard. The Lord Jesus has promised to return and He will. His sacrificial death is followed at sometime by judgment for those refuse to honor Him as Savior and Lord, resulting in eternal damnation and consignment to hell for eternity.

There is a “last straw” a final point at which a flashpoint of judgment is triggered. There is an end to the world. The landowner returns. When he comes he will judge the earth.

### **Failure of the Pharisees to recognize Jesus’ true identity.**



The religious leaders were unwilling to accept Jesus’ claim that He is the messiah, the Son of God. Jesus noted their obstinacy and fundamental unwillingness to be included in God’s marvelous plan, when on the Hosanna Road (the path from the Mount of Olives to Jerusalem) He said, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling. Behold, your house is being left to you desolate! For I say to you, from now on you will not see Me until you say,

‘BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD!’” Matthew 23: 37f.

[Illustration: A model of Herod’s Temple in Jerusalem at the time Jesus taught in the temple and presented the Parable of the Landowner.]

In the parable, this unwillingness to accept the rightful authority of the owner and the rejection of his envoys, including and finally the rejection of his son, is the final straw that brings God’s retribution (v. 39). The wretches come to a wretched end. The repetition of word sounds in this verse “He will bring those wretches to a wretched end,” is nicely preserved in the NASB from the Greek: *κακούς, κακῶς* (*kakous, kakoos*).

When the Pharisees heard Peter preaching a few weeks later, they no doubt recalled Jesus’ words in this parable. Consider these passages:

1. Acts 2:23-24. “. . . this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death. But God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power.”

2. Acts 3:14-15 “But you disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, but put to death the Prince of life, the one whom God raised from the dead, a fact to which we are witnesses.”

After virtually pronouncing upon themselves the sentence that they are the wretches who deserve to be brought to a wretched end, Jesus confronts the Pharisees with these words, “Have you never read in the scriptures . . .” This phrased is used by our Lord five times in scripture.

(Matthew 12:3; 19:4; 21:16, 42 and Mark 12:10.) In each instance Jesus points out that the scripture referred to speaks of Himself.

### **Use of the Cornerstone metaphor.**

Jesus is referred to as the Cornerstone in Acts 4:11, Romans 9:33, and 1 Peter 2:6, in addition to this parable. The function of a cornerstone is to keep the building properly aligned, straight and true during the construction process. If the building has an imperfect cornerstone (such as Buddha, Mohammed, Joseph Smith, ad infinitum); nothing is square from the time the foundation is laid until the last roof tile is in place. The structure is not only ugly it is unspeakably unsafe. Without Jesus as the cornerstone (He is the only perfect one) life will always be a bad fit, vanity and striving after wind, unsafe for the future and unpleasant to behold.

Even if one is proud and thinks his life is being built in good order—examination at the end of a life without the Messiah to save from eternal death, will reveal that it has all been vain, crooked and useless. His life will perish as the flowers of the field and wither as the grass.

The prophet Isaiah writes, “This came about from the Lord, and it is marvelous in our eyes.” In other words: The death of the Messiah and subsequent resurrection was God’s plan. Man could not have had in mind this great plan, or a hand in bringing about its ends. We are not the authors of salvation. There is one Cornerstone, and He is Jesus. There simply is no other. “And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved,” Acts 4:12.

### **We ourselves are the building built on the foundation of the Lord Jesus.**

The apostle Paul refers to the believers as a building made of “living stones,” when he writes, “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God’s household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit,” Ephesians 2:18-22.

Besides keeping the building true and safe, the cornerstone in this case functions as an instrument of judgment.

Those who refuse to humble themselves suffer the stone falling on them and crushing them to powder. Clearly, this is judgment for rejecting the Messiah. But when one falls on the stone, the parable notes that he will be broken. I take this to mean that those who accept God’s gracious offer for salvation will be broken but not ground to dust. If we receive Him as Lord, and fall on Him for our very lives we will be broken but saved. Every believer knows and has experienced the breaking of the Lord. He desires that all pride and selfishness be broken, and gradually, but irresistibly that we are sanctified; conformed to His likeness and image. Others see this “falling on the stone” as one and the same as the stone falling on a man. Both are seen as the judgment

subsequent to rejection of the Messiah. But in my estimation, the meaning of the stone falling on a man and grinding him to dust refers to the fate of anyone who rejects the Lordship of Jesus.

But if the stone mentioned in the parable is not a cornerstone but a capstone, as the NIV translators have it (see Mark 12), then the idea of falling on the stone and suffering the consequences of stone falling on oneself makes more sense. A loose capstone could fall from the parapet and likewise, one on a roof could stumble over a loose capstone and fall. This, however, seems inconsistent with the nature of a true cornerstone or even a capstone. How could Jesus be compared with a loose or defective stone?

### **Another failed attempt to arrest Jesus.**

“When they sought to seize Him, they feared the people, because they considered Him to be a prophet,” Matthew concludes in this account. This is not the first time the religious leaders were unsuccessful in arresting Jesus. On a previous occasion the temple police returned from their assigned duty to arrest Him. But upon hearing Him teach, they reported to their superiors, “Never has a man spoken the way this man speaks,” John 7:46. Indeed so.

### **Will you fall on the stone or will the stone fall on you?**

The importance of the parable for us is twofold: First, for those of us who have fallen on the stone, it is crucial that we build our lives with Jesus as the Cornerstone and not the ideas and practices of man. Second, for those who have not fallen upon the mercy and love of the Lord, it is time to consider the outcome. A day of judgment comes when the stone will fall on all who have not received Jesus as Savior and Lord, crushing that soul and scattering him like dust.