

The Parable of the Wicked Tenants
A Series on Parables Rebuking Jewish Religious Leaders: Part 2

1. Study the Parable of the Tenants (Matt 21:33-45; Mark 12:1-12; Luke 20:9-19). Divide the three passages into their corresponding sections to see how they compare and what details each author reveal about the parable.

Matthew 21:33

33) "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.

Mark 12:1

1) And He began to speak to them in parables: "A man PLANTED A VINEYARD AND PUT A WALL AROUND IT, AND DUG A VAT UNDER THE WINE PRESS AND BUILT A TOWER, and rented it out to vine-growers and went on a journey.

Luke 20:9

9) And He began to tell the people this parable: "A man planted a vineyard and rented it out to vine-growers, and went on a journey for a long time.

Observations:

Matthew records the landowner as 1) planting a vineyard, 2) putting a wall around it, 3) digging a winepress and 4) building a tower.

Mark records 1) planting a vineyard, 2) putting a wall around it, 3) digging a vat under the winepress and 4) building a tower.

Luke is the most abbreviated and records only 1) planting a vineyard.

Cultural context: Walls were often built about vineyards to keep out animals. The winepress and vat was constructed such that the grape juice would flow to the lowest point. A watch tower served as a lookout to guard against thieves and fire. Wealthy landowners often leased their land out to tenant farmers in a sharecropping deal where rent is paid as a portion of production. During the first century, the landowners were usually Roman, which did not sit well with Galilean Jews.

Matthew 21:34-36

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.

Mark 12:2-5

2) At the harvest time he sent a slave to the vine-growers, in order to receive some of the produce of the vineyard from the vine-growers. 3) They took him, and beat him and sent him away empty-handed. 4) Again he sent them another slave, and they wounded him in the head, and treated him shamefully. 5) And he sent another, and that one they killed; and so with many others, beating some and killing others.

Luke 20:10-12

10) At the harvest time he sent a slave to the vine-growers, so that they would give him some of the produce of the vineyard; but the vine-growers beat him and sent him away empty-handed. 11) And he proceeded to send another slave; and they beat him also and treated him shamefully and sent him away empty-handed. 12) And he proceeded to send a third; and this one also they wounded and cast out.

Observations:

Matthew records two groups of slaves being sent and mistreated. The first group had one slave beaten, another killed and another stoned.

The Parable of the Wicked Tenants
A Series on Parables Rebuking Jewish Religious Leaders: Part 2 (page 2)

Mark records three initial slaves who were beaten, wounded in the head and murdered. Subsequent slaves were treated just as badly.

Luke records only three slaves sent with each being beaten.

Cultural context: There is an ascending level of ill treatment: 1) beating, 2) killing and 3) stoning. Stoning is considered worse as an execution for apostasy or false prophecy and implies disgrace as well as death.

Matthew 21:37-39

Mark 12:6-8

Luke 20:13-15a

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.

6) He had one more to send, a beloved son; he sent him last of all to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' 7) But those vine-growers said to one another, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours!' 8) They took him, and killed him and threw him out of the vineyard.

13) The owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.' 14) But when the vine-growers saw him, they reasoned with one another, saying, 'This is the heir; let us kill him so that the inheritance will be ours.' 15a) So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

Observations:

All three accounts share that the son of the owner was sent, and after deliberations, the vine-growers murdered him. **Matthew** and **Luke** record the murder outside the vineyard and **Mark** inside.

Cultural context: With the arrival of the son, tenant farmers presume that the landowner has passed away. In murdering the heir, the vineyard becomes an ownerless property which becomes available to the first squatters according to Jewish law. However the parable portrays the tenants as being too presumptuous, because there are a number of ways the land could have been inherited and not necessarily through the son. The parable is intended to portray the tenants as wicked and stupid.

Matthew 21:40-41

Mark 12:9

Luke 20:15b-16

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."

9) What will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the vine-growers, and will give the vineyard to others.

15b) What, then, will the owner of the vineyard do to them? 16) He will come and destroy these vine-growers and will give the vineyard to others." When they heard it, they said, "May it never be!"

Observations:

All three accounts ask the question, "what will the owner do?" And all three report that the owner will destroy the offending vine-growers and get new ones.

The Parable of the Wicked Tenants
A Series on Parables Rebuking Jewish Religious Leaders: Part 2 (page 3)

Cultural context: It was well known that landowners had the legal and social power to exert their will on tenants so this question would have been on everyone's mind. Asking questions was a standard rabbinic way of involving the listeners of the teaching. Why did the landowner take so long to evict the evil tenants? In answering the question, the listeners pronounce judgment on themselves.

Matthew 21:42

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'?"

Mark 12:10-11

10) Have you not even read this Scripture: 'THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS REJECTED, THIS BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER stone; 11) THIS CAME ABOUT FROM THE LORD, AND IT IS MARVELOUS IN OUR EYES'?"

Luke 20:17

17) But Jesus looked at them and said, "What then is this that is written: 'THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS REJECTED, THIS BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER stone'?"

Observations:

When Jesus asks, "have you not read," He is calling attention to Psalm 118:22-23, which in effect, say that the Scriptures points to Jesus Himself.

Psalm 118 is a song praising God's loyal love. It describes a man of God who was appointed by divine choice to a high position in the nation of Israel. This elect champion found himself rejected by his friends and fellow countrymen, and at the same time violently opposed by his enemies. With faith in God he battles for his nation, and he triumphs in such a manner that displays the power and goodness of the Lord.

Matthew 21:43-44

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."

Mark offers no pertinent verses.

Luke 20:18

18) Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust."

Observations:

Matthew 21:43 is the only account that further explains the parable. Here Jesus associates the vineyard with the kingdom of God. Verse 44 is an allusion to Isaiah 8:14-15.

Luke also loosely translates Isaiah 8:14-15.

The Parable of the Wicked Tenants
A Series on Parables Rebuking Jewish Religious Leaders: Part 2 (page 4)

Matthew 21:45-46

Mark 12:12

Luke 20:19

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.

12) And they were seeking to seize Him, and yet they feared the people, for they understood that He spoke the parable against them. And so they left Him and went away.

19 The scribes and the chief priests tried to lay hands on Him that very hour, and they feared the people; for they understood that He spoke this parable against them.

Observations:

All three accounts recorded that Jewish religious leaders recognized that the parable was about them. Motivated to consider seizing Jesus, they feared the public's reaction.

2. Who is Jesus speaking to?

Jesus is teaching to people in the temple when the chief priests, scribes and elders approach and challenge His authority to teach and do miracles (Matt 21:23-27; Mark 11:27-33; Luke 20:20:1-8). Matthew 21:33 opens with, "Listen to another parable" which draws a connection or sequence with the preceding Parable of the Two Sons. The Parable of the Tenants is Jesus' second consecutive parable directed at the Jewish religious leaders, which they understood and were quite angry. However, the parable could well be directed at other Jews who shared the same views as their religious leaders.

3. What is the meaning of the parable? What does it say about Israel's response to Jesus Christ? What is God's response to Israel? What is the purpose of references to the Old Testament? Use this chart to get you started in understanding the parable.

| Story Element | Metaphorical Equivalent | Comment |
|----------------------|--------------------------------|---|
| Vineyard | Kingdom of God | Jews have always understood the image of the vineyard to be a reference to the nation of Israel. |
| Landowner | God | |
| Tenants | Jewish religious leaders | Jewish religious leaders were charged with the "cultivation" of Israel's religious life. |
| Servants | Old Testament prophets | Sent by God, OT prophets have been killed (1 Kings 18:4, 13; Jer 26:20-23) and stoned (2 Chron 24:21-22). |
| Son | Jesus Christ | The parable can be seen as a veiled messianic self-reference of Himself by Jesus. |

Because of Isaiah 5:1-7 and subsequent Jewish literature, the vineyard was a common metaphor for the nation of Israel. Jesus' Jewish audience would have immediately made the allegorical connection; thus, when the landowner judged to destroy the wicked tenants and give the vineyard over to others, the Jews recognized this as their nation being given over to another, which prompted their response in Luke 20:16, "may it never be!"

It would not be until Matthew 21:43 when the Jews learn that Jesus uses the image of a protected and production ready vineyard to represent the image of the kingdom of God. The Jews discover, contrary to their belief, that Jesus did not equate the nation of Israel with the kingdom of God.

The Parable of the Wicked Tenants
A Series on Parables Rebuking Jewish Religious Leaders: Part 2 (page 5)

Jewish religious leader's response to God:

Jesus portrays Israel's response in two ways: 1) their response to God's sent prophets and 2) their response to Jesus.

The parable's allegory portrays religious leaders of ill treating and murdering God's Old Testament prophets. Did that really happen? As noted earlier, the Old Testament records prophets being killed (1 Kings 18:4, 13; Jer 26:20-23) and stoned (2 Chron 24:21-22). More pertinent and later is Jesus final woe (Matt 23:29-32) to Jewish religious leaders (scribes and Pharisees) that calls out their hypocrisy when they recognized that their forefathers, and thus acknowledging themselves to be sons, murdered and shed the blood of prophets.

In Matthew 23:32, when Jesus says, "Fill up, then, the measure of the guilt of your father," He is referring to their corporate sin and guilt that continues among the descendants of the wicked unless they repent (Ex 20:5; Num 14:18; Deut 23:2-6).

Blood guilt affects the whole community (Deut 21:1-9), which God Himself avenges (Deut 32:43; Ps 79:10).

"The measure of sin," refers to the idea that God can only tolerate so much sin, and when the "measure is full," He responds in wrath. While this usually applied to Gentile nations (Gen 15:16; Deut 9:4), this was the first time it applied to Israel.

While the parable portrayed the ill treatment and murder of the landowner's son, it was clear that Jewish religious leaders, recognizing and refusing Jesus' messianic claim, initially were not out to kill Him.

However, the people recognized Jesus as the Messiah. A few days earlier, Jesus entered Jerusalem to a big welcome and acclamation, and He cleansed the temple to shouts of, "Hosanna to the son of David!" (Matt 21:1-11). "Hosanna" is the Hebrew term for "save" with the context of appealing as in "save I pray." "Son of David" recognizes Jesus' lineage and hope of Messiah.

For six months, Jesus had been telling His disciples that Jewish religious leaders will kill Him (Matt 16:21; 17:22-23; 20:17-18), and through the Parable of the Tenants, Jesus now told the religious leaders themselves what they will do.

Understanding the quotation of Psalm 118:22-23 is essential to its significance to Jesus.

Psalm 118:22-23 is one of the most quoted Old Testament verses in the New Testament (Matt 21:42; Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17; Acts 4:11, 1 Peter 2:7, and paraphrased in Eph 2:20).

In the construction of ancient stone structures, the cornerstone was the first and most important stone laid down. Also known as the foundation stone or capstone, it served as the reference point for the layout of all corners of the building and its entire structure. In many instances, the name of the architect and the date of construction can be found on the cornerstone. To qualify as the cornerstone, the stone had to be large, cut a certain way and have a certain flawless quality in look and substance. It was the stone most carefully scrutinized by the stone cutter, mason and architect, and a construction project may be delayed until the right cornerstone was found and cut.

The Parable of the Wicked Tenants
A Series on Parables Rebuking Jewish Religious Leaders: Part 2 (page 6)

Psalm 118 is believed to be about the nation of Israel or its king, because the king often represented the nation. King David would be an example of “the stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone” when Samuel, expecting the older sons of Jesse to be the next king, realized that God had chosen the youngest.

In like manner, Jesus, from lowly Nazareth (John 1:46), did not fit the expectation of Jewish religious leaders. He was not the military leader that would overthrow Roman rule and restore the greatness of the nation. Jesus did not meet the qualifications for the cornerstone that the Jewish builders sought.

In recalling Psalm 118:22-23, not only does Jesus claim to be the Messiah, but He is the rejected Cornerstone of the kingdom of God who will be vindicated and exalted.

God’s response to Israel:

In the parable, the landowner assumed that the wicked tenants would accept his son, and his forbearance with their malicious behavior was cause for the ultimate implacability of his wrath. “What will the owner do?” Jesus leaves no doubt that the punishment would be capital.

The parable’s allegory is a prophecy: God’s response to Israel’s rejection of His Son will be Israel’s removal of their caretaking of the kingdom of God. The kingdom will be “given to a people who will produce its fruit.”

Jesus’ allusion to Isaiah 8:14-15, which speaks of God figuratively as a means of destruction (a stone, a rock, a snare, a trap), serves as a warning. Jewish religious leaders who fail to see and recognize the Chief Cornerstone do so at their own peril.

Instead of making some facts known about the kingdom of God, the Parable of the Tenants is about appraising known facts.

Beginning with the Parable of the Two Sons Jewish religious leaders are confronted with their disobedience. As a consequence of their disobedience, the Parable of the Tenants reveals to the nation that Israel is not the kingdom of God but as stewards of the kingdom, they will be replaced.

References:

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