

# The Parable of the Landowner

📖 Matthew 21:33-46

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Who was Matthew written too? Believing Jews.

Why was it written to believing Jews? To help them answer the argument from unbelieving Jews that Jesus cannot be the King because there is no kingdom.

Therefore, what is the theme(s) of Matthew? The King and His kingdom program.

What is Matthew's explanation of the King and His kingdom program? Jesus is the King, He has all the credentials of the King, fulfills prophecy of the King, does Messianic miracles, has orthodox teaching, but that generation rejected Him, crucified Him. But God raised Him and exalted Him to His right hand and the kingdom remains in postponement. During the postponement He is building His Church. When a future generation of Israel accepts Him then the kingdom will come. So the kingdom is presently in abeyance. There is no kingdom now....

Last week we studied Jesus' confrontation with the religious leadership in the Temple in Matt 21:23-27. This confrontation is the key to the three parables that follow. As long as this confrontation is kept in mind one understands that Jesus is addressing the religious leaders. Even they, as we will see later tonight, understood that He was speaking about them. Note in 21:23 that Jesus entered the temple, it was Wednesday; the previous day He had cleansed the temple, healed the blind and the lame and taught the word of God. This day He was teaching again and the religious leaders came to Him and questioned Him about the source of His authority for doing these things. Of course, they didn't really want to know the source of His authority but were only trying to catch Him so they could arrest Him and get rid of Him. In 21:24 Jesus responded to their question with a question of His own, a common rabbinic debate technique. If they answered Him, He would answer them. In 21:25 He asked whether the baptism of John was sourced in heaven or men. The religious leaders began reasoning among themselves saying, "If we say "From heaven," then He will say "Then why did you not believe John?" But in 21:26, if we say "From men," we fear the response of the people because they all regard John as a prophet of God! They knew that they had been outmaneuvered by Jesus and so in 21:27 they answered, "We do not know." Then Jesus said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things." Why is this in the

argument of Matthew? To show just how evil the religious leadership had become. They not only rejected Him, they did not even want to hear the truth. Jesus said earlier, do not throw your pearls before swine because they will trample them under their feet. He is applying that principle here. He will not tell them the truth because they are not open to the truth, they will only trample the truth under their feet.

It is important to understand that the Gospel of Matthew portrays the Jewish people as following the religious establishment. When Jesus does miracles and teaches orthodoxy the people look to the established religious leaders for their analysis and whatever they decide the people follow them. In Matt 12 Jesus did a miracle and the people said, "This cannot be the Son of David, can it?" They recognized the miracle as a messianic miracle but they were looking to the religious leadership. What they decided the people would follow. What this means is that even in the future it will come down to what the religious leadership decide. What they say the people will follow.

At this point we come to the first of three parables, and as I said before, all three of these parables were given on the same day and are directed at the religious leadership. The first parable is the parable of the two sons in 21:28-32. In 21:28 Jesus posed this question, "But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, 'Son, go work today in the vineyard.' In 21:29 he answered, 'I will not,' but later regretted it and went to work. In 21:30 the man came to the second son and said the same thing; and he said, "I will, sir"; but he did not go. In 21:31 Jesus said, "Which of the two did the will of his father?" And they answered correctly, "The first." Jesus then applied the parable saying the first son signified Jewish tax collectors and harlots, these were the only subset of Jews who did not follow the religious leaders, they followed the practices of pagan Gentiles. In the minds of the religious leadership and the common Jews these Jews were outside the pale of the kingdom. But the irony of the situation is that they were actually leading the way into the kingdom by believing John and his message of the kingdom being at hand. They recognized that John came in the way of righteousness, unlike the religious leaders, and they knew they were sinners and so they came to John at the Jordan and were being baptized, confessing their sins and bringing forth the fruit of changed lives, fruit in keeping with repentance. This was preparatory for believing in the One John pointed to, Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The second son signified the religious leaders. They thought they would automatically enter the kingdom because they were physical descendants of Abraham and they had all the external signs of righteousness. But Jesus says they were not believing John. And to heap condemnation on condemnation they even saw the changed lives of the Jewish prostitutes and harlots and still did not feel remorse so as to believe John and prepare to meet their King. Why is this first parable in the text? To show the strong rejection of the religious leaders! They had an enormous amount of revelation. They had John who had come in the way of righteousness, they had the changed lives of Jewish prostitutes and tax collectors and they had Jesus' wonderful teachings and miracles. They had all this and they did not believe John and they did not believe in the One John pointed to. This was a terrible rejection.

And if it was not terrible enough to reject John, the forerunner of the King, and the King Himself, Jesus now gives a second parable to show what they would do to the King; they would crucify Him. And how do you think the King will respond to that? You can't imagine that they would get away without some kind of judgment. Therefore, the parable of the landowner speaks of the judgment that they will face, which is sketched enigmatically in verses 41 and 43. So the main difficulty is isolating just exactly what that judgment is. Dennis spoke on verse 43 this last Sunday as a prophecy that was partially fulfilled and so you already have some solid background that you will want to keep in mind.

Let's read the parable in 21:33 and see if we can identify the component parts so that we can interpret correctly. Jesus said, **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.** <sup>34</sup>**When the harvest time approached, he sent his slaves to the vine-growers to receive his produce.** <sup>35</sup>**The vine-growers took his slaves and beat one, and killed another, and stoned a third.** <sup>36</sup>**Again he sent another group of slaves larger than the first; and they did the same thing to them.** <sup>37</sup>**But afterward he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.'** <sup>38</sup>**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.'** <sup>39</sup>**They took him, and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.** <sup>40</sup>**Therefore when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vine-growers?"** <sup>41</sup>**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."** <sup>42</sup>**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'?"** <sup>43</sup>**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.** <sup>44</sup>**And he who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust."** <sup>45</sup>**When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard His parables, they understood that He was speaking about them.** <sup>46</sup>**When they sought to seize Him, they feared the people, because they considered Him to be a prophet.** So they understood this was about them but they couldn't do anything about it at the time because note, **they feared** men. This was a fundamental problem with the religious leadership. They feared men but they did not fear God. If they had feared God and they really thought Jesus was an impostor what would they have done? They would have stoned Him. That was the penalty under the Law. But note that **the people...considered Him to be a prophet.** It was plain. Everyone could see that He was **a prophet.** And He was **a prophet.** But was He only a **prophet?** No. He was the Christ, the Son of the living God. And did the people consider Him to be the Christ, the Son of the living God? No. They only considered Him to be a prophet from the Galilee, from the town of Nazareth. But even this recognition by the people stood in the way of the religious leaders seizing Him at that moment.

Now the parable is about the religious leaders but in order to understand the full scope of the parable we need to identify several of the component parts. Most of these are quite easy to identify though the vineyard itself is a

trouble spot. Let's start with the identity of the **landowner**. In v 33 the landowner is the one who planted a vineyard, put a wall around it, dug a wine press in it and built a tower. This is all borrowing language from Isa 5:1-2. Then the landowner leased it out to vine-growers and went on a journey. In v 34 at the appropriate time he sent slaves to receive some fruit from the vineyard to no avail. In v 36 he did this again to no avail. Finally, in v 38 he sent his son and this too was to no avail. Who is the **landowner**? The **landowner** is God. He is the one who planted the vineyard, built a wall to protect it, dug a wine press to provide essential nutrients and rented it out with expectation of receiving fruit from it. Second, the identity of the **vineyard**. In v 33 the **vineyard** was planted, surrounded by a wall of protection, had a wine press dug in it, a tower in the midst of it and was worked by the vine-growers. Who or what is the **vineyard**? This is the one that is controversial. Most identify it as Israel quoting OT passages like Isa 5:1-7, which was partially quoted in v 33, and Ps 80:8-16. In those passages Israel is likened to a vineyard so it might seem natural to interpret the vineyard as Israel. However, in v 43 says "the kingdom of God" will be taken away from you and given to a people producing the fruit of it. So the vineyard is "the kingdom of God." Toussaint says, "Some say it is Israel on the basis of Isaiah 5:7 and other Old Testament passages such as Jeremiah 2:21 and Psalm 80:8. However, there are some rather serious difficulties with this view. It would be very difficult to explain how Israel could be taken away from its leaders and given to another nation in the light of Matthew 21:43. The Lord identifies the vineyard with the kingdom of God."<sup>1</sup> So the **landowner** is God, the **vineyard** is the kingdom of God. What the landowner had done was plant His kingdom on earth. He had put a wall around this kingdom by giving it a Law to protect it from other nations and also a wine press to provide the nutrients for the growth of this kingdom and a tower for the watchmen to watch over the kingdom. Of course, this kingdom deeply relates to Israel but the vineyard itself is not Israel but the kingdom of God on earth. Third, the identity of the **vine-growers**. In v 33 the **vine-growers** were those who leased the kingdom. In other words, they were to manage the kingdom for God. They were to be faithful stewards and bring the kingdom to fruition and in v 34 they were responsible to hand over good produce when God sent for it. This happened three times and all three times they failed to hand over good fruit. Who then are the **vine-growers**? The **vine-growers** are the leadership of Israel. They were appointed as managers over the kingdom and they were responsible for bringing forth appropriate fruit and handing it over at the proper time, but they had failed. Fourth, the identity of the **slaves**. In vv 34-39 the slaves were sent by God periodically, on three occasions, the first group was beaten, killed and stoned, the second group was larger but they were also beaten, killed and stoned. Who are the **slaves**? They are the prophets. God had sent the prophets to collect fruit for God but the religious leaders rejected the prophets (just as they had rejected John). Finally, the identity of the **son**. In v 37, at long last God sent His Son, the heir of the kingdom, and the leaders of Israel killed Him. Who is He? Obviously He is Jesus Christ. And this portion is predicting what the religious leaders would do to the Son of God, they would throw Him out of the kingdom and crucify Him. It's a fact that Jesus was crucified outside the walls of Jerusalem, the capital city of the kingdom.

We might summarize by saying that God had planted His kingdom on earth, given it a Law to separate it from all other kingdoms on earth, provided all it needed to grow and bring forth fruit, provided a watchtower and leased the kingdom out to religious leaders to watch over it while He stood at a distance. When the time came for collecting fruit He sent forth prophets but the leaders beat and killed them. He sent more prophets but the leaders did the same to them. Finally, He sent forth His Own Son, the heir of the kingdom, and the leaders killed Him too. In the end you see a picture of God who had been very patient with the leaders of Israel despite their continual mismanagement of His kingdom program.

So in v 40 Jesus asked, **Therefore when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vine-growers?** In other words, when God comes to check on His kingdom, what will He do to the religious leaders who have been given stewardship of that kingdom?

At this point in v 41 the people answer, **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.** This is probably the people but the leaders are among them. Others think these were the leaders themselves. If so this is a twist of divine irony in that the leaders unbeknownst prophesied their own judgment. MacArthur said, "Again the Jewish leaders pronounced their own judgment (*see note on v. 31*). Their verdict against the evil vinedressers was also Christ's judgment against them (v. 43)."<sup>2</sup> Whether it was the people or the leaders themselves, their verdict was correct. God would bring those leaders to wretched end and rent it out to other leaders who would bring Him the proceeds at the proper time. This aids in the interpretation of v 43 where Jesus says "the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing the fruit of it."

Before we deal with the identity of the "people" and the "other vine-growers" we have verse 42. **Jesus said to them, "Did you never read in the Scriptures."** When Jesus says this He is saying they were responsible to have **read...the Scriptures.** When people have the word of God available to them they are responsible themselves to **read** it and know what is in it. Here is a quote from **the Scriptures.** Where does it come from? Ps 118:22-23. This was a Hallel Psalm, a Psalm of praise that would have been very familiar to them since it was part of what was chanted at Passover. At the Triumphal Entry just days before many in the procession had chanted Ps 118:26, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord." This was not a foreign Scripture to them. But did they know what it meant? **'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'?** The picture changes from a vineyard to a building and its chief corner-stone. There is little doubt that the building is the kingdom of God. The religious leaders were supposed to be building this kingdom for God. But when the **stone** which is the **chief corner stone** of the kingdom came, the religious leaders **rejected** it. There is also little doubt that **the stone** should be connected with the smiting stone of Daniel 2 and serve as a symbol of the Messiah, especially when we see the stone's description in verse 44, **And he who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust.** The judgment relative to the Messiah is two-fold. First, those who **fall on the stone,**

meaning stumble over it, they **will be broken to pieces**. This refers to that generation who stumbled over the Messiahship of Jesus and would **be broken to pieces** in the destruction of Jerusalem in AD70. Second, those **on whom** the stone **falls, it will scatter** them **like dust**. This refers to the future judgment at the end of the Tribulation when the Messiah returns in His kingdom to destroy all kingdoms and their inhabitants who oppose Him.

The verses before and after verse 43 set the immediate context and controls for how we interpret verse 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.** Of course, **you** are the leadership of that generation. They are the vine-growers who had been given stewardship over managing **the kingdom of God**. The **kingdom of God** is the same kingdom Matthew has been referring to throughout, the Messianic kingdom which had been offered to that generation. This offer **will be taken away from you** meaning the offer of the kingdom would be withdrawn from that generation. The reason stated is because they had rejected the King and would crucify Him. It would be **given to a people producing the fruit of it** meaning it would be given to a future generation of leaders in Israel who would lead the people in **producing the fruit of** the kingdom. In short, the straightforward interpretation of the passage is that the kingdom had come near to that generation but they had rejected the King and therefore the kingdom was being postponed until a future generation of Jewish leaders led the nation in **producing the fruit of** the kingdom. Therefore, the **people** of verse 43 are a future generation of Israel and not the Church.

This is a minority view but I think the best view in the context. The majority view is that the **people** in view are the church. We'll take a little time to look at this view, its arguments and why these arguments are weaker than the counter arguments. Toussaint expresses the view this way, "...the nation is the church....The church is said to enter into the blessings of the kingdom (Gal 3:7-9, 29; Romans 11:20-24)....Not only does the church inherit the kingdom with Israel, but the church is also called a nation (1 Peter 2:9-10; Romans 10:19). The logical conclusion is, therefore, that the church is the nation to whom the kingdom is given in Matthew 21:43."<sup>3</sup> For him the solution is a logical connection of various passages. Constable stated the view a little differently saying, "Because Israel's leaders had failed to produce the fruit God desired and had slain His Son, He would remove responsibility and privilege from them and give that to another "nation" or "people" (Gr. *ethnei*). What God did was transfer responsibility for preparing for the kingdom from Israel and give it to a different group, namely the church (cf. Acts 13:46; 18:5-6; Rom. 10:19; 1 Pet. 2:9)."<sup>4</sup> The argument seems to flow along three lines of reasoning. First, Israel failed and crucified God's Son. Second, God transferred Israel's privileges to another nation or people. Third, the Church is called a nation or people. Therefore, the nation or people is the Church.

This argument may seem logical and persuasive but it has a number of weaknesses. First, the Greek word translated **nation** and sometimes **people** is also used of Israel in a number of passages, including John 11:51 and Acts 24:17. So why not conclude that the nation or people is a future generation of Israel? Why insist it must be the Church? Toussaint disagrees with this argument saying that "the difficulty with this explanation is seen in

that "nation" (*εθνος*) is used and not "generation" (*γενεα*) or "offspring" (*γεννημα*)." However, in the context Jesus is not blaming every generation of Israel for rejecting and crucifying God's Son, but that one generation led by the Pharisees and Sadducees, and that one generation did constitute the entire nation at that time. The Pharisees even understood Him as referring to them as that nation. It's a fact that right now everyone in America, this generation = the nation. The bottom line is it is a far cry from logical necessity to conclude that the nation or people is the Church and not a future generation of Israel. Second, the two passages used to prove the Church is called a nation or people, Rom 10:19 and 1 Pet 2:9-10 are questionable at best. Both are quotations from the OT and so one must argue from each context how the NT author is quoting these OT passages. The first one is Rom 10:19 which quotes Deut 32:21. In this context Paul is dealing with hypothetical objections for why Israel did not believe. Someone may say, "Surely Israel did not know." In other words, Israel can't be held responsible for not believing because they didn't have enough information. "First" says Paul, they did know because "Moses said," and then he quotes Deut 32:21, "I will make you jealous by that which is not a nation, By a nation without understanding will I anger you." This was right out of Israel's national anthem. Every Jew knew these words as well as you know the Star Spangled Banner. Paul is saying they did know and because they knew God raised up Gentile nations that did not have a covenant with God to discipline Israel. If Israel had not known God would not have disciplined her. But Israel did know and so He did discipline her. The reference to God making them jealous by "a no nation, by a nation" is a reference to Gentile nations that had no covenant with God. The Church is primarily composed of Gentiles but it is not a Gentile nation, it is believing Jews and Gentiles in one body. Therefore, to use Rom 10:19 to prove that the Church is a nation is a serious contextual violation. The second one is 1 Pet 2:9-10 which quotes several OT passages, in particular our concern is his quotation of Exod 19:6. Peter says, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession..." There are two possible ways to understand Peter's quotation. First, Peter could be referring to the remnant of Jewish believers within the Church. 1 Peter 1:1-2 designates Peter's audience as "sojourners of the dispersion." This Greek expression always refers to Jews and never to Gentiles. Further, Peter was the apostle to the Jews so it would not be surprising if he wrote a letter to the Jewish remnant within the Church. Therefore, these expressions may refer exclusively to the remnant of Jewish believers and not to the Church as a whole. Second, if Peter is referring to the Church as a whole, then he is making an application of these OT passages to the Church because of one point of similarity. That major point of similarity is that just as Israel was the center of God's purposes during the OT so now the Church is the center of God's purposes in the NT. Far from proving that the Church is a nation, the most 1 Pet 2:9 could prove is that the Church is the center of God's purposes. It could never prove that the Church is a nation. The great commission in Matt 28:19 says "Go unto all nations and make disciples..." The Church is not a nation, it is believers from all nations. In fact, even common sense tells you that the Church is not a nation but composed of people from all nations, including Israel. Remarkably, the only other passages cited by the proponents such as Gal 3:7-9, 29; Rom 11:20-24; Acts 13:46 and 18:5-6 all refer explicitly to "Gentiles" and not the Church. Again, the Church is not Gentile, it is composed of believing Jews and Gentiles. 1 Cor 10:32 distinguishes Jews and Gentiles and the Church. These three groups are never confused in God's

purposes and to the extent that someone does confuse them, confusion results. So at best the arguments being used to prove the nation is the Church are weak and at worst they pave the way for Replacement Theology. What is to stop someone from saying, as replacement theologians do, that Matt 21:43 teaches that the kingdom is taken away from Israel and given to the Church in a spiritual way and that is all God intended all along? Israel was just a type of the Church. Therefore, it is not just exegetically unsatisfying; it is theologically unsatisfying to identify the nation as the Church. Fourth, in 21:41 the expression "other vine growers" is parallel to 21:43 "a people." The Greek has two words for "other," *αλλος* and *ετερος*. Trent, in his *Synonyms of the New Testament* explains that *αλλος* means "differs" while *ετερος* means "different." The significance of this difference cannot be understated for identifying the people. The one from whom it is taken and given *differ* but they are not *different*. A future nation of Israel would *differ* but the Church is *different*. If Jesus had in mind the Church He would have used *ετερος*, but He chose *αλλος*. He did this because the nation Israel at the time of Christ had outward promise only but the nation Israel of the future will differ in that they have both outward and inward promise. The word chosen here is significant. Trent said, "There are not a few passages in the N. T. whose right interpretation, or at any rate their full understanding, will depend on an accurate seizing of the distinction between these words."<sup>5</sup> This is one of them. Fifth, the immediate context of 21:42 and 44, the two verses that surround verse 43 refer to the immediate judgment on that generation in AD70 and the future judgment of the Tribulation, not to the Church. The stone is Jesus, the Messiah, that generation of Israel stumbled over Him and was broken to pieces in AD70; the future nation to whom the kingdom will be given will exist when the stone pulverizes all unbelievers on the planet. Verse 43 refers to both that generation that rejected and the one that is in existence in the future that accepts initiating the return of the stone to pulverize the planet. There is no reference to the Church. Andy Woods says, "the verse when taken in context actually teaches that the kingdom will be taken away from first-century Israel only and instead given to future believing national Israel in the coming Tribulation period and millennial kingdom."<sup>6</sup> Fifth, it is interesting that Israel missing their Messiah the first time around and recognizing Him the second time around fits a well-established pattern in their history. For example, Joseph's brothers did not recognize him on their first visit but only on the second. Moses was not recognized by Israel on his first attempt to deliver but he was on the second. This pattern is consistent with this generation of Israel not recognizing their Messiah but a future generation of Israel recognizing Him. Barbieri states our view most clearly, "...Jesus was simply saying the kingdom was being taken away from the nation Israel at that time, but it would be given back to the nation in a future day when that nation would demonstrate true repentance and faith."<sup>7</sup> In addition to Barbieri, a number of other prominent scholars such as Alva McClain, Arnold Fruchtenbaum, Andy Woods and Michael Vlach also hold this view. Both Dennis and myself hold this view. As an aside, John Walvoord and Dwight Pentecost were non-committal.

In verse 45 **When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard His parables, they understood that He was speaking about them.** What exactly they understood is not clear, but they did understand that He was speaking

about them. They had rejected the King and so they would be rejected and go to judgment. That judgment came in AD70.

In verse 46, **When they sought to seize Him, they feared the crowds, because they considered Him to be a prophet.** They could not do what they wanted to do because they feared men. If they truly feared God and were convinced that Jesus was an impostor, they would have seized and slew Him at that time as Elijah had done the Baal prophets. But they were not men of God. They were a worthless bunch of people pleasers looking for a way to preserve their reputations among the people and crucify the Lord of Glory at the same time.

In conclusion, the three parables all relate to that generation of Israel's leaders. The parable of the two sons shows the very strong rejection of the leadership. The parable of the landowner shows the long history of the Israel's leadership culminating in that generation's leadership crucifying God's Son and losing their opportunity at the kingdom only to have it given to a future generation who produces the fruit thereof. The parable of the wedding banquet will spell out in clearest terms the judgment coming on that generation and their exclusion from the kingdom when the King comes in His kingdom.

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley Toussaint, *Behold the King*, p 250.

<sup>2</sup> John MacArthur Jr., ed., *The MacArthur Study Bible*, electronic ed. (Nashville, TN: Word Pub., 1997), 1433.

<sup>3</sup> Stanley Toussaint, *Behold the King*, p 251.

<sup>4</sup> Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Mt 21:43.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Chenevix Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1880), 357.

<sup>6</sup> Andy Woods, *The Coming Kingdom* (unpublished, 2016), p 167.

<sup>7</sup> Louis A. Barbieri, Jr., "Matthew," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 70–71.