

The Parable of the Tenants

This article on Matthew 21:33–46 is edited from the Ligonier Ministries

As we continue to study Jesus' parables we see that Jesus has harsh words for the Jewish leaders. Jesus' rebuke of them is based largely upon their failure to see their need of repentance (Matt. 9:9–13; 21:28–32). The parable of the tenants recorded in Matthew 21:33–46 reveals a further reason for our Lord's condemnation of the chief priests and elders in their unwillingness to bear fruit for the Creator and thus draw the nations of the world unto Him.

Teachers throughout church history have often misused this parable to prove that Gentiles replace ethnic Jews in God's plan. The transfer of the kingdom from one group to another (v. 43) may imply that Gentiles play a prominent role in the present era. Yet the passage is concerned not with the displacement of Jews in general, but with the inclusion of the new covenant community over against the corrupt leaders of Jesus' day. Clearly, the parable is based on Isaiah 5:1–7; thus, the vineyard of Matthew 21:33 is the old covenant community. Jesus does not say that the vineyard is uprooted; rather, the vineyard's tenants, those responsible for its upkeep and care, are judged (v. 43). These wicked tenants are ethnic Israelites, but not every ethnic Israelite. Furthermore, the new tenants are not of Gentile stock alone. Jews like the twelve disciples are also included.

God displaces the first tenants because of their abject failure. By grace alone the Almighty redeemed His people from Egypt (Ex. 20:1–2) and gave them all they needed to bear fruit for His kingdom (Matt. 21:33) — to be a light unto the world (Isa. 42:6). Under the old covenant many failed at this task, especially the religious leaders; even worse, they persecuted those servants (the prophets) who exhorted Israel to fulfill her call (Matt. 21:34–36). But God will be patient until they go past the point of no return and murder His Son (vv. 37–39). By this dreadful deed the evil tenants will earn their own destruction (vv. 40–41).

In fulfillment of Psalm 118:22, the rejected Son is the “cornerstone” — the stone at the corner that joins two walls together. By combining the prophecies of Isaiah 8:14 and Daniel 2:34, 44, Jesus claims to be, as the founder of God's kingdom on earth, the Lord over all earthly kingdoms. As the “stone,” He will crush all opposition to the kingdom of God. (Matt. 21:42–44).

Every professing Christian should read today's passage as a warning. All who are truly in Christ, of course, cannot finally fall away from grace, but only those who bear fruit for the kingdom are truly in Christ. Believers may vary in the amount of fruit they produce, but there is no such thing as a fruitless believer. Consider this day the fruit you are producing in the form of good works of service, progress in sanctification, discipleship, and other such things.