

## *The Master's Vineyard*

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on July 12, 2020.

“Hear another parable. There was a master of a house who planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a winepress in it and built a tower and leased it to tenants, and went into another country. When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit. And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other servants, more than the first. And they did the same to them. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.’ And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” They said to him, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons.” Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures: “‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes’? Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits. And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.” When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them. And although they were seeking to arrest him, they feared the crowds, because they held him to be a prophet” (Matthew 21:33–46).<sup>1</sup>

The setting of a vineyard is important to understanding this passage. If you’re keeping track, this is Jesus’ third vineyard parable in Matthew. It’s also the most explicitly connected to Isaiah’s prophecy in which “the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting” (Isa. 5:7).

As the parable retells, God sent his servants, like Isaiah, the Old Testament prophets, to Israel, but the Word of God they carried was disdained. They were beaten, stoned, and killed, messengers of God. The allegory is unmistakable, even for the blind and deaf leaders of Israel, to which Matthew adds, rich with irony, “the chief priest and the Pharisees heard his parables, [and] they perceived that he was speaking about them.” Yes. Yes, he was.

What they seemingly miss, but we see clearly in retrospect, is Jesus’ allusion to himself, the master’s son and heir of the vineyard. As the parable foretells, they would kill the Son, claiming the vineyard for their own. Just as their fathers before them had murdered God’s servants, who carried his Word, they would seek to silence the living Word of God by crucifixion.

But what of the allegorical vineyard? If the tenants are the leaders of Israel, the servants are the prophets, and the son is the *Son*, what is the vineyard? Isaiah refers to Israel as the vineyard, but Jesus completing the allegory and pronouncing judgment says, “Therefore I tell you, the

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<sup>1</sup> Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits.” Is the vineyard Israel or the kingdom of God? In short, yes, yes it was.

### **Privileges of the Vineyard**

To better understand this, consider the manifestation of the kingdom of God on earth, in the beginning in Eden. In the garden, Adam was the first earthly king, serving as a vice-regent under the heavenly king, the one, eternal King. As Psalm 10:16 declares, “The LORD is king forever and ever.” Every earthly king is subservient to One. Adam’s reign was always a subordinate reign under the King of creation.

Adam failed in his dominion, but God did not abandon his plan to rule through an earthly king. We hear this clearly in God’s promise to Abram, to raise up kings to rule over nations: “Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you” (Gen. 17:4-6). Where Adam failed in his commission, God grants through the descendants of Abraham.

However, it is specifically through God’s redemption of Jacob’s descendants from Egyptian slavery that Israel becomes “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:6) and is promised a king chosen by God (Deut. 17:15-20). While God does not grant the nation a king immediately, and while Israel’s propensity to sin is repeatedly evident, God does eventually establish David as king, though a sinner by nature, a man after God’s own heart” (1 Sam. 13:14). God established Israel as a kingdom, God’s kingdom.

Like a beautiful and bountiful vineyard, Israel became God’s earthly kingdom with unique kingdom privileges. Let us consider four of these privileges: First, Israel was chosen by God. As Moses reminded Israel after the exodus, “For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt” (Deut. 7:6–8). Israel was established by God’s choice.

Second, Israel served as the only nation on the face of the earth in which God’s presence resided. In the sanctuary of the tabernacle, the Spirit of God resided, (Ex. 25:8) revealing his glory to Israel (Ex. 40:34). The presence of God was among his people, Israel, in an earthly kingdom.

Third, Israel was given God’s direct, special revelation. Unlike pagan nations, they did not pine for a voice from heaven. God chose to reveal himself to Israel, giving them his Word. Through the Law, they knew the explicit difference between right and wrong. They knew the kingdom requirements of a civil society. They knew the worship practices of a people called by God.

And, through the Prophets, they consistently received God's specific Word to them, warning them, and calling them to repentance and obedience. As the Apostle Paul puts it, Israel was "entrusted with the oracles of God" (Rom. 3:2).

Fourth, they were chosen by God, indwelled by God, had the Word of God to produce fruit radiating God's glory to the world, a light to the nations (Isa. 42:6), that God's salvation might reach "to the end of the earth" (Isa. 49:6). No other nation could say this, nor apart from grace cared to. Only Israel. Israel had the high privilege of shining God's glory to every tribe, tongue, and nation.

Therefore, when we hear Jesus' picturesque description of the master's vineyard, we need not discount it. From the planted vines to the hedge-rowed fence to the pre-dug winepress to the vineyard tower, it was the perfect vineyard. Its privileges were many; its requirements few: work and keep the vineyard to bear fruit for the master. But Israel, like the tenants, did not, inciting rebellion in the vineyard.

### **Rebellion in the Vineyard**

The tenants of the parable rebel against the master of the vineyard in two destructive ways. First, they rebel against the master's servants, specifically beating one, killing another, and stoning another. Why? Why kill the messenger? The answer is in understanding the allegory of the servants as God's prophets to Israel.

In Israel's history through one king in Israel, the kingdom sadly became two: a northern and a southern kingdom were formed, the result of God's judgement upon Israel's sin. Yet God, as the master of his vineyard, sent prophets, calling Israel to repent unto obedience. Rather than listen to God's Word, Israel rebelled against it. And the only way seemingly to silence God's Word was to silence his messenger. The persecution of God's prophets runs through the Old Testament, leading up to and through the exile up to the last and greatest Old Testament prophet, John the Baptist. The servants were beaten, killed and stoned literally.

But, killing the messengers is not the only way the tenants rebelled in the vineyard; they also murdered the master's son. This is, of course, an overt foreshadowing of Jesus' crucifixion at the hands of Israel's leaders. Repeatedly in the Gospels we read that they want to destroy him (Matt. 12:14), and the Gospel of John explicitly states that they want him dead (John 11:53). To murder the master's son is the pinnacle of rebellion.

But Jesus' parable is not merely foreshadowing a rebellion. We are to look through the lens of Jesus' parable to ask: Why do the tenants rebel? They rebel because they want the vineyard and all its benefits without the master. Similarly, Israel wanted to be God's kingdom on earth, enjoying all of God's blessings, without God. The kingship of the kingdom of Israel, despite periodic revivals, is one of consistent failure, rooted in a sinful rejection of God. This runs not only from the exile back to the kingdom division but all the way back to King Adam, whose incitement to sin included a desire to "be like God" (Gen. 3:5).

The history of Israel is no different than our own, all the way back to Adam. By virtue of our sin nature, apart from God's grace we suppressed the truth. Although God revealed his invisible attributes within creation, we neither honored him nor thanked him but relished the darkness, worshiping ourselves and anything else but God. Justifying our definition of truth, we considered right wrong and wrong right, revealing debased minds full of all manner of unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18-32). Without excuse and stored up wrath, we unknowingly awaited God's righteous judgment to be revealed (Rom. 2:1-5).

And, it is to this fact, a state common to ancient Israel and us, "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God" (Rom. 3:10-11), that we hear Jesus' marvelous judgment. Quoting from Psalm 118, Jesus says, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes." The "cornerstone" refers to the highest stone joining two stone walls of a building together. It is, as one commentator describes it, "both conspicuous and structurally indispensable."<sup>2</sup> It is *the* one, essential stone, one not to be rejected, and yet, Christ the Cornerstone was.

In rejecting and crucifying the Son, they sealed their fate *and* secured our redemption. In the marvelous judgement of God, the kingdom of God has been given not to a nation-state but to "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession" (1 Pet. 2:9), one nation under God, transcending the earthly boundaries of one country. It is a kingdom not of the nation Israel but true Israel, of Jew and Gentile from every tribe, tongue, and nation, under one King, who as the second Adam did what the first could not.

We who were once strangers and aliens to the kingdom of God now have "access in one Spirit" to our heavenly Father (Eph. 2:18) through faith in King Jesus. By God's grace through faith, we are now "fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord" (Eph. 2:19-21). As joyful recipients of the grace of God, we can rejoice in the gospel: "this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes."

And because it is the Lord's doing and the Lord's vineyard, the fruit is the Lord's doing too, which he yields through us.

### **Fruits from the Vineyard**

Producing fruit is not optional but evidential in the vineyard of the kingdom of God. It's what we do as tenants of the vineyard, children of God's kingdom. But as it is evidential, the fruit produced through us is by God's grace: "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10). And because the fruit we produce is by God's grace at work in us, God is glorified through us.

Let us consider four privileges of this God-glorifying fruit. First, because we are chosen by God as his children through faith, our salvation is not our own doing. We cannot boast (Eph. 2:9). So, God gets all the glory.

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<sup>2</sup> R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wn. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), 815.

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Second, the proof of our redemption and the guarantee of our heavenly inheritance is the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. He who dwelled in the midst of Israel in the sanctuary of the temple, dwells within the temple of the true Israel, his church. He is actively at work in us producing the fruit of his Spirit. And because he is the One at work in and through us, the fruit that the Spirit produces is to the glory of God.

Third, God has given us a complete canon of Scripture. We do not await the oracles of God through a prophet but look to the inscripturated Word of God. We know God and his will as revealed in his Word, and because it is his special revelation he gets all the glory.

Fourth, we were chosen by God, indwelled by his Spirit, and given his Word to produce fruit radiating the glory of God to the world, a light to the nations, that God's salvation might reach "to the end of the earth" (Isa. 49:6). It is the chief end of our redemption to fulfill our chief end to glorify God and enjoy him forever. This is our work in the master's vineyard.

Let us then guard against the temptation of the tenants. By the master's grace through his Son, let us glorify God through the privileges of his vineyard. Let us with gratitude rejoice in the fruits he produces through us. Let us learn to pray, "Crowns to give I have none, but what thou hast given I return, content to feel that everything is mine when it is thine, and the more fully mine when I have yielded it to thee"<sup>3</sup>. Let us be satisfied that he is glorified through us. And let us praise the stone that the builders rejected, for through his death and resurrection we have been blessed with the Master's vineyard.

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<sup>3</sup> Arthur Bennett, ed., *The Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2002), 359.