

Exegetical Notes, Matthew 21:33-46

“Bad Tenants!”

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Matthew 21:33-46

Verse 33

“Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey.

- This happened on the Monday of Holy Week, the day after Jesus overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the animal sellers. After returning to Jerusalem from Bethany, Jesus went into the Temple again.
- As he taught the people in the Temple, he was approached by the chief priests and the elders, those who were in charge of the place and he began to teach them using parables, short stories designed to highlight a single point.
- The story he told them was about a man who planted a vineyard. He took all of the necessary precautions. He put a wall around the vineyard to keep out unwanted people and animals to protect his crop. He built a watchtower in it, a wooden platform about 15 ft. off the ground that provided shelter and made it even more possible to guard the vineyard against intruders. He dug a winepress so that when the grapes were ripe they could be crushed properly and thus prepared to become wine. This man did everything that he should have done to prepare and protect his vineyard. His intention was to insure a good crop.
- Then the owner of the vineyard rented it to some farmers because he was going away. The farmers did not buy the vineyard. It still belonged to the man who planted it and prepared it. They were tenants who were left in charge of it in the owner’s absence.

Verse 34

“When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit.

- When the harvest time came the rent was due. So the owner of the vineyard sent servants to collect his share of the crop. This was his rent.

Verse 35

“The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third.

- The tenants had apparently become confused. They thought that the vineyard belonged to them and not to its rightful owner. Therefore, they abused and even killed the representatives of the owner. They refused to pay the rent that was due.

Verse 36

“Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way.

- The owner tried to collect what was due him again. This time he sent a larger delegation of servants hoping to impress the tenants of his sincerity about collecting the rent. However, the tenants were not impressed. They still refused to pay rent and mistreated this second delegation just as they had the first.

Verse 37

“Last of all, he sent his son to them. ‘They will respect my son,’ he said.

- Giving it one last try, the owner sent his son to the tenants, reasoning that they would surely respect his son as his personal representative.
- The point of the parable is now becoming obvious. The land owner who built the vineyard is God. The bad tenants are the chief priests and the elder of Israel to whom Jesus is speaking. The servants sent to the tenants are the prophets whom the chief priests and the elders refused to listen to and mistreated as they had John the Baptist. Jesus is, of course, the son.

Verse 38

“But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, ‘This is the heir. Come let’s kill him and take his inheritance.’

- Now the real intention of the tenants is told. They want to steal the vineyard from its rightful owner. They have no intention of paying the owner what is rightfully due him. Their motives and intentions are purely selfish. They intend to take and keep it all.
- In addition, their motives are immoral and unethical. They do whatever they must do to pursue their own interests.

Verse 39

“So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him

- This is shocking behavior. These bold tenants actually killed the son in order to promote their own interests.
- This behavior pictures what Jesus is about to endure.

Verse 40

“Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?”

- Jesus ended the story with a question to the chief priests and the elders. He asks them what they think the owner of the vineyard will do to these bad tenants.

Verse 41

“He will bring those wretches to a wretched end,” they replied, “and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time.”

- Apparently, Jesus’ telling of this simple tale had been so captivating that his hearers got caught up in the story. When he asked them what the owner should do to the bad tenants, they replied without any hesitation.
- They agreed that the bad tenants should be dealt with harshly and that new tenants should be found to manage the vineyard, tenants who would respect the wishes of the owner and honor their contract with him.

Verse 42

Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures:

‘The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes.’?

- Hearing their answer, Jesus then insults them. These are the chief priests and the elders of Israel. They are the most godly men in the

- kingdom. Of course they have read the Scriptures. Jesus' question to them, "Have you never read the Scriptures," is a deliberate insult designed to show the extent of their spiritual ignorance and arrogance.
- He then proceeded to quote to them from Psalm 118:22-23. This is a messianic passage. The stone is the Messiah, Jesus. The builders who reject the stone are the leaders of the Jews. However, what the builders rejected God makes the most important stone of all. The capstone is the keystone in the arch. The stone without which the arch would collapse.

Verse 43

"Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.

- Jesus predicts the "Time of the Gentiles" in which we now live. The time when the kingdom of God will be entrusted to believers, to the Church, who are not Jewish for a time. In essence, the vineyard will be entrusted to other tenants who will honor the intentions of the owner and their contract with him.

Verse 44

"He who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed."

- There is no way to God except through Jesus Christ, the stone, the Messiah. Those who cannot accept this, like the teachers of Israel, fall or trip on the stone and are without hope of salvation. They are, thus, broken to pieces by their inability to accept the truth about the Messiah.
- However, those whom the Messiah judges are crushed by him because no one stands against the judgment of God.

Verse 45

When the chief priest and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew he was talking about them.

- Those who heard Jesus did not miss the point of the story. They knew that the lesson was about them and that they were the bad tenants of the story.

Verse 46

They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet.

- Even though they got the point of the story, they did not believe it to contain any truth. Without giving it any thought, they acted exactly like the bad tenants. They began to look for ways to press their own interest and to abuse the owner's son. Of course, they did not recognize Jesus as God's son. Therefore, they trip over the stone and were broken to pieces.

(These exegetical notes are the foundational study for the sermon entitled *Bad Tenants!* They have been prepared by the Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen, Senior Pastor at Cornerstone Fellowship, Coatesville Pennsylvania. All rights are reserved by *Cornerstone Fellowship & The Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen*. They are used here by permission.)