

Jesus' Greatest Hits

The Wicked Tenants

Part 30 – March 23, 2008

[VIDEO: YACHT]

Have you ever been traveling, and had to hire a house-sitter to watch your things? What if news reached you that they were having a huge garage sale, and selling all of your stuff?! You send your friends, but they're attacked; so you send your lawyers, but they're treated the same. And then you send someone you think they'll respect: your own son. In the parable of *The Wicked Tenants*, Jesus tells his listeners exactly who He is, who has sent Him, and what His fate will be.

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. When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit. The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. Last of all, he sent his son to them. "They will respect my son," he said. 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." So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. - *Matthew 21:33-39 NIV*

Last week we talked about how the religious leaders *refused* to submit to John's baptism, because John demanded that they *repent*. And how, just a few days before the crucifixion, Jesus rode triumphantly into Jerusalem on a donkey, and the crowds praised Him as both their King (*Luke 19:38*) and their Savior (*Mark 11:9*).

Next, He went to the temple and overturned the tables of the crooked moneychangers, and then He healed the blind and the lame.

But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple area, "Hosanna to the Son of David," they were indignant. - *Matthew 21:15 NIV*

The next day He curses a fig tree, signaling that judgment has begun (*see "The Barren Fig Tree"*), and He goes back to the temple.

Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. "By what authority are you doing these things?" they asked. "And who gave you this authority?" Jesus replied, "I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John's baptism — where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or from men?" They discussed it among themselves and said, "If we say,

'From heaven,' he will ask, 'Then why didn't you believe him?' But if we say, 'From men' – we are afraid of the people [Luke 20:6: "All the people will stone us"], for they all hold that John was a prophet." So they answered Jesus, "We don't know." Then he said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things. - Matthew 21:23-27 NIV

Q: Why does Jesus "wiggle" His way out of answering the question?

A: There's a remarkable reason we'll discover in today's parable.

This is the set-up. Jesus immediately launches into the parable of "The Two Sons" (which we examined last Sunday), where He rebukes the religious leaders for rejecting John's baptism of repentance. And then He tells today's parable, and publicly condemns them, in shockingly clear imagery, for the murder they're about to commit ... His own death at their hands! The air in the temple was electrified as Jesus said:

Listen to another parable (21:33a)

Just three days before the cross, Jesus accuses the religious leaders of persecuting God's messengers and executing His Son!

There was a landowner who planted a vineyard (21:33b)

The "landowner" is God, and the "vineyard" is Israel. Everyone in the temple knew this; because the prophet Isaiah had written "The Song of the Vineyard", which includes the line: "The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the house of Israel ..." - Isaiah 5:7 NIV

And then Jesus mentions a wall, a winepress, and a watchtower.

He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower (21:33c)



A wall was usually a hedge of thorns (like barbed wire). It offered a protective perimeter that kept the vineyard from being defiled. The "Law of Moses" was given to keep Israel separate and safe from surrounding pagan nations.



A winepress was hewn into rock. It had two levels: an upper for stamping or pressing the grapes; and a lower for gathering the juice. The winepress means that the owner expects and anticipates a fruitful harvest in his vineyard.



A watchtower provides protection (for when the grapes were ripe), it provides provision (like a shed), and it provides a cool place to rest. The tower symbolizes God's watchful oversight, and His constant care and provision for Israel.

Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers (21:33d)

Shouldn't he have done a background check or something?! It wouldn't have mattered. The "farmers" represent Israel's religious leaders; but, it isn't insinuating that the *Jews* are *especially* dysfunctional or rebellious; just that *we humans* are!

... and [he] went away on a journey (21:33e)

Because the owner wasn't visibly present, the renters came to regard his property as their own.

When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit (21:34)



God rightly expects and joyfully anticipates the *fruit* of worship and obedience from those who are obligated to the True Owner of this world. All we have is a *lease* on this life. Let's not make the same mistake with the people, possessions, and property that have been entrusted *temporarily* to our care.

The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third (21:35)

The O.T. prophets were often referred to as "servants" of God. And their fates certainly match those described here:

[The chief officer in the temple of the Lord] had Jeremiah the prophet beaten and put in the stocks ... - *Jeremiah 20:2 NIV*

[Uriah] prophesied in the name of the Lord; [King Jehoiakim] had him struck down with a sword ... - *Jeremiah 26:20,23 NIV*

... they stoned [Zechariah] to death in the courtyard of the Lord's temple. - 2 *Chronicles 24:21 NIV*

Jeremiah was "beaten", Uriah "killed", and Zechariah "stoned".

Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way (21:36)

The Old Testament prophets are commonly divided into two groups: The Earlier Prophets (*like Samuel, Nathan, Elijah, & Elisha*). And the Later Prophets (*like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, & Daniel*).

Last of all, he sent his son to them. "They will respect my son," he said (21:37)

What an unbelievable willingness to forgive! What an astounding reluctance to punish! What incredible patience God has with us!

Jesus' portrayal of Himself as the Son of God is so clear, that the leaders would've arrested Him on the spot (for blasphemy) if it wasn't for their fear of the crowd.

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." (21:38)

Q: Ever wonder how they'd get his inheritance by killing him?

A: They thought the owner was dead; and by law, a piece of *ownerless* property could be kept by those who first seized it.

If they wanted to keep the owner away, they would've given him some fruit. If they wanted to fool him into thinking that his messengers never arrived they would've killed them *all*. Do you see what prompted these tenants to act so wickedly? They didn't fear the owner! They thought He was powerless.

So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him (21:39)

This perfectly corresponds to how Jesus' was treated. He was seized (*Mat. 26:50*), He was thrown outside the walls of Jerusalem (*Mat. 27:33*), and finally, He was killed. (*Mat. 27:35*) This is where the parable ends; but not where the *story* ends! Jesus turned to His listeners and said ...

"Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" "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." - *Matthew 21:40-41 NIV*

This is why Jesus "wiggled" out of answering their question, when they asked Him by what authority He did the things He did. If He had simply told them, they would've condemned *Him*. By telling this parable, they have condemned *themselves*!



Jesus came to acquit, not to condemn. But some, by their refusal to offer Him the fruit of obedience and worship (that is rightfully His), will end up condemning *themselves*. Less than a week after they had asked Him by what authority He did these things, He answered ... by rising from the dead!

The big question we must ask ourselves this Easter: Do I have a fearful reverence of His overwhelming holiness; or do I live under the delusion that He is absent and powerless?

Let's see how well you've been listening; answer *true* or *false* when I ask the questions. In this passage, we've learned that:

1. Our Landowner will return to claim what's His.
2. In the meantime I can run things however I desire.
3. God's patience with me will *never* run out.
4. My lease on life can expire at any time.