Welcome back to our study of the parables! We pick up this morning right where we left off in the middle of November. Then, we considered the parable of the two sons, Matthew 21:28-32. And the point there was that God expects faith-filled obedience from His people to please Him. We used that theme to springboard into our Christmas season, highlighting the faith-filled obedience of the various characters in the birth narratives of Jesus.

And now we return to that exact spot, Matthew 21, picking up the text at v.33, another parable, the parable of the wicked tenants. This parable is quite easy to understand and clear in its implications. What makes this parable stand out is the harsh message it conveys and how the intended audience received the news. In essence, the Jewish leaders around Jesus end up hearing the story, agreeing with the point of it, recognize that it is referring to them, and then plotting to make it happen. In other words, they heard the warning and charged right ahead regardless. That is not good.

Listen to this parable, remembering that application is not limited to the past, but continues on as well. In other words, we must hearing the warning, and heed it, not fulfill it. READ Matthew 21:33-46.

Main point: Judgment awaits those who fail to produce the fruit owed to the Master.

This parable is not nice and sweet. It is harsh and critical. It puts things in terms of renters, owing rent, and instead of paying what is owed, they kill the
ones sent to collect the rent, even to the point of killing the Son of the owner. But the genius of the parable is that it puts in perspective what God expects from His people, whether then or now. He is the owner of a vineyard, and rightfully expects a return on His investment. We are in the position of renters needing to pay rent. How we respond to that will determine whether judgment is something to fear or anticipate excitedly. Yes, this parable applies to us as well.

We will return to our usual way of examining the parables, considering first the setting, then taking apart the parable, then applying the parable to the setting. I hope it has been clear already that we must not simply conclude that the Jews of Jesus’ day got what they deserved, but that we need to heed the warning ourselves, lest we too face the same judgment.

I. The setting: The Jewish religious establishment was rejecting their God as evidenced by their rejection of Jesus.

The setting for this parable in not necessarily the verses right before it, but rather where this unfolding drama has come. I would like to begin in an unlikely place, Isaiah 5. I trust, having heard the parable, you will immediately see how this fits in. As I read this, remember that this is the great prophet Isaiah, writing some 800 years before Christ. This text (as is true of the whole book of Isaiah) is even now on public display in Jerusalem. Here is what the prophet Isaiah wrote:

I will sing for the one I love
a song about his vineyard:

My loved one had a vineyard
on a fertile hillside.

2 He dug it up and cleared it of stones
and planted it with the choicest vines.
He built a watchtower in it
and cut out a winepress as well.
Then he looked for a crop of good grapes,
but it yielded only bad fruit.

3 “Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and men of Judah,
judge between me and my vineyard.

4 What more could have been done for my vineyard
than I have done for it?
When I looked for good grapes,
why did it yield only bad?

5 Now I will tell you
what I am going to do to my vineyard:
I will take away its hedge,
and it will be destroyed;
I will break down its wall,
and it will be trampled.

6 I will make it a wasteland,
neither pruned nor cultivated,
and briers and thorns will grow there.
I will command the clouds
not to rain on it.”

7 The vineyard of the LORD Almighty
is the house of Israel,
and the men of Judah
are the garden of his delight.
And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed;
for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.

Sound familiar? Same topic? Same imagery? Same warning? Of course. In fact, if we had gone on to read the rest of the chapter, you would see woe after woe pronounced on the Jews of Isaiah’s day, woes which aptly describe the Jewish leaders before Jesus.

So, the Jews had this warning. They knew it. They knew the words of Isaiah and ignored them. In fact, I love what Isaiah says later in the chapter, (v.26) “He lifts up a banner for the distant nations, He whistles for those at the ends of the earth. Here they come, swiftly and speedily!” Isn’t that great! Isaiah says this 800 years before Jesus. People from distant lands are running toward
Yahweh. The Jews are not, but these distant people are. That’s us! Here they come!

But backing up to what this says about God’s perspective on His people is important. He calls them His vineyard. He as the landowner has done all to cultivate the land. He invites the people to make a judgment about whether the fault for no crop lies with Him or with the vineyard. The conclusion is clear. He has been faithful. They have not. The Jews of Jesus’ day knew this story, this text.

Now, if we this morning were to take the time to read the entire gospel of Matthew up to this point, the setting for the parable would be clear. Jesus had come, declaring the coming of the Kingdom of God, calling on the people to take heed and follow after Him. He has proven over and over again that He rightly spoke about Himself and His rightful claim to be their long awaited king. By Matthew 21, Jesus had already entered Jerusalem on His triumphal entry. And while the people had lined the road to welcome Him, in reality their support was fickle. They were in the process of being easily persuaded by these same religious leaders to abandon the One they hailed as their Messiah. The religious leaders were becoming more and more bold and determined to find a way to kill Him. We are less than a week away from the culmination of their plotting and planning. Jesus was going to be put to death, soon.

And into this setting, before His foes, Jesus relates this parable.

II. A vineyard owner has a right to judge those who rent His land but don’t pay rent and kill those sent to collect the rent. vv. 33-41

In this case, the point of the parable is given and recognized by those who heard it. The point is clear, the owner of a vineyard has a right to expect rent from His tenants. He has a right to take action when the tenants kill His servants.
v.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.

Again, we are in the realm of agriculture, this time a vineyard. There is an owner of the property and those to whom the vineyard has been entrusted. Here we notice the extent to which the owner has set up the renters for success. He has built not just a fence, but a wall. No varmint is going to sneak in and destroy. No enemy can come in undetected. This property is secure. He has installed the necessary equipment to process the fruit: a winepress. Clearly, the implication is that this is fertile soil. Clearly, there is every expectation of a good crop, the winepress is right there on site. And as an act of overkill, He has built a watchtower so they could keep track of the property and make sure that no one had entered without being noticed. In other words, He has done everything imaginable to assure the success of the tenants. Who wouldn’t want to rent such land?

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

But as a landlord, there is an expectation of fruit. He collects a share of the fruit as the rent. He sends a cohort of His servants to collect the fruit and bring it to Him. Reasonable? You bet!
"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.

This is where things go awry. Not only do they ignore the call for payment of their rent, they attack those sent to collect it. In essence they treat these servants as the intruders on their property. Right? Servants of the owner are treated as intruders. They see His Kingdom as their kingdom. Notice they mistreat them all, repeatedly. They do so using various means. He sends some, they mistreat them. He sends more the next time with the same result. You can already see where this is headed. Their mistreatment of the servants WILL result in action. With each repetition of the cycle, the situation is even more clear. Judgment is coming.

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.

The landowner gives them a huge benefit of doubt. He concludes that they do not respect the servants as representing Him. He determines to send only one the next time, His very own Son. Surely they will respect the Son. Surely they would know that someone as powerful as the landowner would not stand idly by while they harmed His own Son. Right? They wouldn’t be so brazen as to kill the Son, right?

No, they plotted to kill him, thinking that getting rid of the Son would mean that they could own the vineyard. They would possess the Son’s inheritance.
Now, at this point, it must be remembered that their plotting has to assume that the landowner, in His going away, has lost interest in the property, that there is no threat of reprisal, that the killing of the Son will bring them no harm, but only good. That is key. They are assuming that the landowner is either gone, uninterested, or unable to do anything about their crimes. In other words, if the landowner was real, active, and powerful, they had to know they were in deep trouble. But they were assuming their actions would bear no consequences. This is where they were mistaken. They had killed the landowner’s Son!

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

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.”

The conclusion is clear. These tenants are despicable. They will face judgment. They will receive what is due them. They will receive themselves as they had given out. Their end would be wretched.

Notice that the Jewish leaders themselves understood the meaning. The parable was clear, the point was made. And not only did they understand what would happen when the tenants found out that the landowner was alive, involved, and very powerful, they went on to describe what would happen to the vineyard: it would be given to someone else who would be more responsible. There are other tenants who would not be so disrespectful of the landowner, nor the privilege of working the vineyard. There are others.

There, that is the parable. The point is clear. The imagery easily understood. What is striking here is how the intended audience responds. Here
we see that they know this is about them...but they determine to go forward with their plan regardless.

III. Judgment and replacement awaits those who do not take their responsibility seriously. vv. 42-46

The unstated, yet clear message is that God as the landowner is alive, does care, expects a return, and will take action against those who shirk their responsibility. Or, said another way, He will not take kindly to killing His Son.

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’?

Don’t you love the wording, “Have you never read in the Scriptures...?” He knew they all prided themselves in their knowledge of the Scriptures, their understanding of the Scriptures, their role in telling everyone else the “true” meaning of the Scriptures. And then Jesus challenges them to the nth degree, “Have you never read the Scriptures...?” This is a scolding.

He then quotes from Psalm 118. The important part of the quote is the fact that the stone was rejected by the builders, but wrongfully so. The stone was not deficient, but was indeed worthy of prominence. Everyone should and would see this stone, even though it was rejected by the builders.
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. 44 He who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed.”

Here we get to the crux. This is the “David, you’re the man.” The parable has been effective. The point is made, and now, Jesus applies the parable. They announced what should happen and Jesus affirms it will happen to them. In fact, they would all trip over, or be crushed from overhead by this precious stone. It matters not that they rejected. This rejected stone would be their demise. The Son was speaking just before His execution what was going to happen to those who would kill Him. The owner was noticing.

45 When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus’ parables, they knew he was talking about them. 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.

Again, we see the irony. Here they had heard the parable. They got the point of the parable. They knew Jesus was referring to them. And then they proceeded to live out the parable. They did not heed the message. They set out to kill the prophet/Son.

Now, let’s briefly identify the characters in the story. Who is the landowner? God. Who are the tenants? The Jews, or specifically the Jewish leaders. The servants? The prophets (like Isaiah). Who is the Son? Jesus. What is the vineyard? You could say the land of Israel, but I see it more as those who have been entrusted the Kingdom of God. “The Kingdom of God will be taken from you.” (v.43) It would be taken from them and given to... the people in distant lands. Here they come!
Okay, we see this as true. And it is true. This is what happened. But it must not stop there. Let's glance at church history. History is littered with spiritual meccas that are no longer such. The golden age of Rome lasted until...500. The Reformation in Western Europe? Empty shell. And how are we doing?

The greatest growth in the Church is not North America. It is anywhere but here. Southeast Asia, Africa, South and Central America. Even here, what has happened to the mainline church? What has happened to many so-called Evangelical churches? Denominations, Mission organizations, para-church organizations, men's organizations, women's organizations, they have all run their course and started to decline.

What is on the way up? Individual Christian communities where the people love each other and others and the gospel is preached. Huh! Imagine that. People are running to that. Surprise, surprise! People are NOT running to tired remnants of what was, but what needs to be, what the current times require. Let me say it this way: our message must never change. This same rejected Cornerstone, the Son of the owner, is still the Capstone. He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father but through Him. Amen? But!!! If we are doing 5 years from now what we did 5 years ago, then we will be decline. God will move on to someone else. We are here because that is what other churches failed to learn. And we will be where they are if we fail to learn. We have no lock on the future. Our landowner expects fruit, this season. He has set us up to succeed. He expects a return on His investment.

If we believe this passage is the Word of God, then what should be different about our lives?

1) We will lift up Jesus as the Son of God Most High.
2) We will not ignore the responsibility of the place we have been given. We will produce fruit and gladly lay it before our Lord.

3) We will read and heed all of the Scriptures, knowing they apply to us as well as to them.

4) We will learn the lessons of church history.

5) We will hang on to Him, not this.