

**Matthew 21:33–43**

<sup>33</sup> “Hear another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a hedge around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a tower. Then he leased it to tenants and went on a journey. <sup>34</sup> When vintage time drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to obtain his produce. <sup>35</sup> But the tenants seized the servants and one they beat, another they killed, and a third they stoned. <sup>36</sup> Again he sent other servants, more numerous than the first ones, but they treated them in the same way. <sup>37</sup> Finally, he sent his son to them, thinking, ‘They will respect my son.’ <sup>38</sup> But when the tenants saw the son, they said to one another, ‘This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and acquire his inheritance.’ <sup>39</sup> They seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. <sup>40</sup> What will the owner of the vineyard do to those tenants when he comes?’ <sup>41</sup> They answered him, ‘He will put those wretched men to a wretched death and lease his vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the proper times.’ <sup>42</sup> Jesus said to them, ‘Did you never read in the scriptures: ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; by the Lord has this been done, and it is wonderful in our eyes’? <sup>43</sup> Therefore, I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that will produce its fruit. <sup>44</sup> [The one who falls on this stone will be dashed to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.]’ <sup>45</sup> When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they knew that he was speaking about them.



*The Parable of the Wicked Tenants, Maarten Van Valckenborch, c. 1585, Kunsthistorisches Museum | Public Domain PD-US*

In the background, the son, dressed in flowing robes, bids goodbye to his Father. In the foreground the evil tenants spy the son and begin their plot to kill him and seize the vineyard for themselves. Like the story, the painting descends from the tranquil scene of harvesting grapes to the killings below.

**Context**

In this section of the Gospel according to Matthew we encounter Jesus in the midst of an on-going dialogue with the chief priests and elders. These folk are not happy with Jesus as just the day before he had upset the tables of the moneychangers in the Temple area. When Jesus returned to the Temple the

following day, the leaders of Judaism were there with questions about the authority with which Jesus takes such bold and prophetic actions (and interrupts the commerce of the Temple).

Last week's gospel (parable of the Two Sons) occurs in the shadow of Jesus' question to the leaders about the bold and prophetic ministry of John the Baptist. Jesus asks "by what authority" did John baptize? Was it of heavenly or earthly origin? As mentioned in a previous commentary the leaders are revealed by their lack of an answer and in their reasoning for their silence. They do not answer because they do not want the on-lookers to question their authority. Their silence is not to advance or retard the Kingdom of God, but to preserve the status quo. They will not change their status, their minds, or their hearts.

Embedded in the prophetic actions and calls of John and Jesus is exactly that – a call for change. The call for a change of heart comes from a heavenly authority. In their silence, the leaders abdicate not only their authority from "the chair of Moses," but also their own entrance into the Kingdom. Boring (*Matthew*, New Interpreters Commentary) suggests this outline for this dialogue. Our gospel (The Lord's Vineyard) follows immediately upon the parable of the Two Sons and it is in the same setting with the same leaders/crowd attending.

A Jesus' response: a question (21:24-27)

B Three parables

The Two Sons (21:28-32)

The Lord's Vineyard (21:33-46)

The Great Supper (22:1-14)

B' Three controversy stories

Taxes to the Emperor (22:15-22)

The Resurrection (22:23-33)

The Great Commandment (22:34-40)

A' Jesus' question (22:41-46)

One should also note, as Boring has pointed out, that there is a strong structural parallel between the parables of the "Two Sons" and that of "The Lord's Vineyard."

<i>The Two Sons</i>	<i>Common element</i>	<i>The Lord's Vineyard</i>
21:28a	Jesus' introductory word	21:33a
21:28b–30	The parable	21:33b–39
21:31a	Jesus' question	21:40
21:31b	Their self-incriminating response	21:41
21:31c	Jesus' concluding pronouncement of judgment	21:42–43 [44]

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## Commentary

Much like Isaiah 5:1-2 (the reading from the OT accompanying our gospel), Matthew's parable has a vineyard setting (also the preceding two parables: 20:1-16, the workers in the vineyard; 21:28-32, the two sons). What does the vineyard represent? In Isaiah it represents Israel and many have assumed that that is its meaning in the gospel parable, e.g., the vineyard = Israel; the tenants = religious leaders; landowner's slaves = prophets whom they rejected. With this interpretation, we note that the vineyard is not destroyed, but turned over to new tenants. To use another biblical metaphor, the unfaithful,

greedy shepherds are removed (Mt 9:36; Ezekiel 34) and new shepherds are installed to care for the sheep.

**A Matthean Emphasis.** In the context of Matthew's gospel the vineyard takes on a broader, more universal meaning. Rather than simply, "Israel," the vineyard is generally taken to mean the Kingdom of God. Remember that entry into the Kingdom was central to the closing warning in the parable of the Two Sons that immediately preceded our text.

Another theme that continues from the preceding parable is the importance of actions that reflect the value of the kingdom. The chief priests and elders of Jerusalem are criticized for a manner of living out their faith that is inconsistent with God's call; they refuse to change their hearts in the face of the prophetic actions of Jesus. They understand that to acknowledge his authority means to abdicate theirs. They not only say nothing in response to Jesus' question; they do nothing. As seen in the parable of the Two Sons, bearing fruit is expected of all disciples.

In today's parable, four times the word *karpos* ("fruit") appears in the text, although not always translated that way [v. 34 literally "time of the fruits" = NAB's "vintage time;" 34 and 41 literally "fruits" = NAB's "produce;" and in v.43 translated as "fruits"]. By comparison the word *karpos* occurs once in Mark's version (12:2) of this parable. Matthew's use of this theme/image is consistent across his gospel (see also: 3:8, 10; 7:16-20; 12:33; 13:8, 23). It is central to this parable.

There are some significant differences between Mk 12:2 (*At the proper time he sent a servant to the tenants to obtain from them some of the produce of the vineyard*) and Mt 21:34 (*When vintage time drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to obtain his produce*). In Mark the servant is sent "at the proper time" (*kairos*); the implication is that the fruit was ripe and thus the time to harvest the fruit was here. Yet in Matthew vintage time (*kairos*) of the fruits "drew near." In other words, the fruit was almost ripe, but not quite. The expression is the way in which Matthew speaks of the in-breaking of the kingdom (3:2; 4:17; 10:7) and of Jesus' hour (26:45) pointing to the coming (here, but not fully here) sense of God's kingdom breaking into our time (*chronos*).

It is perhaps noteworthy that in Mark the landowner seeks to receive "some of the produce," literally, "a share" of the fruit of the vineyard. Presumably the workers get to keep their share. But in Matthew the landowner seeks to receive "his produce," possibly implying "all," since he owned the entire vineyard. This may well be the meaning when one considers v.41: "give him the produce at the proper times."

**Owning Land.** In the parable of "The Two Sons," when the chief priests and elders remain silent in the face of Jesus' question, in v.41 the leaders of Jerusalem have no problem in answering when Jesus asks: "What will the owner of the vineyard do to those tenants when he comes?" They do so quiet immediately and with some vehemence: "He will put those wretched men to a wretched death." The tone and tenor of the response indicated that this parable has hit close to home. The story of an absentee landowner reflects a familiar economic situation at the time; some of the chief priests and elders to whom Jesus is speaking would probably have owned land away from Jerusalem. The landowner must be a wealthy man, because a newly planted vineyard could not be expected to produce fruit for at least four years, during which he would have no return on his capital outlay. Once the vines began to bear fruit there would be an agreed proportion of the crop due to the owner, leaving the tenants to derive their living from the rest. The fault of the tenants in withholding the due produce is compounded by the violence upon the servants. This fault is massively compounded by their decision to murder the owner's son and so to attempt to take over the property.

**The Traditional Interpretation.** This interpretation holds that the parable is a symbolic account of the history of Israel, whose leadership (*tenants* of v.34) has rejected God's earlier prophetic messengers (cf. Jer 7:25–27 seen in *servants* of vv.34-35). In v.37 the parable leaves Israel's past and intuitively the

events of the Passion and Crucifixion that lay in the days to come. Indeed, the leaders of Jerusalem will seize Jesus and crucify him outside Jerusalem (*cf.* v.39). Where the traditional interpretation begins to waver starts in v.43 taking on a different direction from its OT parallel in Is 5:1-7:

*Now, I will let you know what I mean to do with my vineyard: take away its hedge, give it to grazing, break through its wall, let it be trampled! Yes, I will make it a ruin: it shall not be pruned or hoed, but overgrown with thorns and briars; I will command the clouds not to send rain upon it. (Is 5)*

Where the owner seems to abandon the vineyard in the OT telling, here in the Gospel according to Matthew, we are told of a very different outcome: “*Therefore, I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that will produce its fruit.*” (v.43) In a scene reminiscent of the encounter of the prophet Nathan and King David, Jesus confirms what the Jerusalem leaders have already offered: “*lease his vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the proper times*” (v.41)

What does this imply? The whole parable might then be interpreted as a prediction of imminent régime change in Jerusalem. But if the *tenants* are the Jerusalem leadership, the new tenants are a “*people.*” In the Greek text, the word used is *ethnos*, “*nation.*” When a “*nation*” replaces the chief priests and elders there may well be something more radical implied, just as the withering of the fig tree symbolized the destruction of the temple, not merely its reorganization, and that same destruction (“*deserted,*” 23:38; “*not one stone on another,*” 24:2) is the conclusion to which the present confrontation is heading. More on this later.

A further clue to what sort of new régime may be expected is provided by the quotation from Ps 118:22: “*The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; by the Lord has this been done, and it is wonderful in our eyes?*” Psalm 118:22–23, quoted exactly according to the LXX version, is part of the climax to the Hallel psalm which has already featured in Jesus’ royal ride to the city (v. 9, alluding to vv. 25 and 26). The speaker is probably the king, speaking on behalf of the nation, and the vindication of the rejected stone represents Israel’s triumph over the enemies who despised her. Thus the text does not in itself require a messianic application, but we have seen in 2:15 and 4:1–11 how naturally it comes to Matthew (and presumably to the wider Christian tradition within which this parable was handed on) to present Jesus as the personal embodiment of Israel, the “*son of God.*”

After the tenants’ rejection of the son in the parable the builders’ rejection of the stone is not hard to interpret. If the same stone that is rejected will become the cornerstone, then the son who is rejected may also be expected to be vindicated and to replace the present leadership. The addition of this quotation points us beyond the death of Jesus to his resurrection, which is “*wonderful in our eyes.*” The new “*nation*” of v. 43 may be understood as the people who follow the risen Jesus, just as the “*something greater than the temple*” in 12:6 appears to point beyond Jesus himself to a whole new régime focused on him.

**The One Rejected.** The climax of the story comes with the unexpected involvement of the landowner’s son following the servants. If the servants are the OT prophets, it is interesting to note that in Hebrews 1:1–2 “*a son*” as God’s last word follows prophets. Within the framework of the story the sending of the son is clearly a last resort, short of the owner returning himself (as he will eventually do in v. 40). When the son goes as his father’s messenger he goes with all his father’s authority, and so deserves “*respect*” and obedience. To reject the son’s demand is therefore the climax of rebellion. But to kill him is to add injury to insult. As a bid for independence and an attempt to gain possession for themselves it was hardly likely to succeed in a society under the rule of law, and it reads more as a

spontaneous and ill-conceived impulse than as a calculated policy. But a parable does not have to fit into real life, and the points at which it becomes improbable are usually meant to draw attention.

The leaders of Jerusalem, I would suspect, understand the “*son*” to be a reference to Jesus and draw a conclusion of treasonous rebellion against the leaders of the Temple, as well as Roman rule. However, the Christian reader cannot fail to understand Jesus as the Son of God and the heir of the vineyard of Israel. For the Christian reader, Jesus’ death becomes Israel’s culminating act of rebellion, and may well reflect on how futile it was to try to escape from under God’s rule. To kill the son is an act of defiance to the father that will bring a cry for justice..

**Given to a People.** As mentioned above this expression might point to new people of God arising out of Jesus’ ministry and characterized by faith in him. We previously saw such a motif outlined in 8:11–12 and in the rabble of tax-collectors and prostitutes who “go ahead of” the chief priests and elders into the kingdom of God (vv. 31–32). The term *ethnos*, “nation,” calls for some such understanding, takes us beyond a change of leadership to a reconstitution of the people of God whom the current leaders have represented.

But on the other hand the singular *ethnos* does not carry the specific connotations of its articular plural, *ta ethnē*, “the Gentiles.” We may rightly conclude from 8:11–12 that this new “nation” will *contain* many Gentiles, but we saw also at that point that this is not to the exclusion of Jews as such but only of those whose lack of faith has debarred them from the kingdom of heaven. The vineyard, which is Israel, is not itself destroyed, but rather given a new lease of life, embodied now in a new “nation.” This “nation” is neither Israel nor the Gentiles, but a new entity, drawn from both, which is characterized not by ethnic origin but by faith in Jesus.

Some see an echo of Dan 7:27: “*Then the kingship and dominion and majesty of all the kingdoms under the heavens shall be given to the people of the holy ones of the Most High, Whose kingship shall be an everlasting kingship, whom all dominions shall serve and obey.*” If so, there is a poignant force in the transfer of this image to a different “people” which is not now simply Israel as Daniel had known it but which fulfills the role of the vineyard that is Israel.

What is lost by the current leadership and gained by the new “nation” is “the kingdom of God” represented by the personal authority of the landowner. The quotation in v. 42 has spoken directly of what “the Lord” has done in vindicating his Son. Israel, they have assumed, is where God rules, but they have rejected his will and so will find themselves outside his domain. At the same time, God will rule over a reconstituted “Israel” which acknowledges his sovereignty.

The old tenants lost their place because they failed to produce the required fruit, and it is the distinguishing mark of the new “nation” that it will produce it. The point is not developed here, but this qualification potentially carries a warning also to the new “nation.” If it in turn fails to produce the fruit, it cannot presume on its privileged position. The next parable will contain a sobering final scene to just that effect (22:11–13).

**Reflection** (from Eugene Boring, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 415)

Who is represented by the “you” from whom the kingdom is taken? Who is the “nation” to whom it is given? In the context, the addressees are clearly the chief priests and Pharisees... the Jewish leadership, not the people as a whole. Thus some scholars... have contended that Matthew here and elsewhere claims only that God will replace the present false leadership with faithful leaders. This requires understanding “nation” (ἔθνος *ethnos*, which is also the word for “Gentile”) in an unusual sense, a new group of leaders for Israel. The more natural way is to understand *ethnos* as “nation” or “people,” so that (as in 1 Pet 2:9) those to whom the kingdom is given are the renewed people of God, the church of Jews and Gentiles, who are called by

God in place of unfaithful Israel. Many Christians throughout history have been too willing to understand the text this way, which has fueled the fires of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism. Many Christians today are hesitant to understand the text in any way that encourages a false understanding of supersessionism, that God has rejected Israel and replaced it with the church (Jewish and Gentile) as the people of God. Neither past mistakes nor present Christian sensitivity to Jewish-Christian relations should inhibit our allowing Matthew to mean whatever he meant. If he believed God had now rejected the Jews as the elect people of God and replaced them with the church composed of people called from all nations, including Jews, historical honesty should accept this. Historical exegesis may document this as Matthew's view, even if his situational-conditioned perspective must not be allowed to dominate our own, which must be informed not only by this text but by other canonical perspectives as well, such as that of Paul, another Jew who had become a Christian and who saw a larger plan of God that embraced both Israel and church (Romans 9–11).

This text does not speak explicitly, however, of Israel's being rejected, but of the "kingdom of God" being taken from "you"; in Matthew's view, the saving activity of God continues in that community where taking up the "yoke of the kingdom" means adherence to the Torah as fulfilled in the teaching of Jesus (cf. 5:17–48; 28:20). Matthew, like the modern reader, here struggles with a difficult problem, one that he perhaps had as much difficulty in resolving with systematic clarity and consistency, as does his modern reader. Even if the objective meaning remains not entirely clear, contemporary readers can still legitimately ask whether they have set up other phony sovereignties in place of the one God, and thus might be addressed in the "you" from whom the kingdom is taken

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## Notes

**Matthew 21:33 *planted a vineyard, put a hedge around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a tower:*** The hedge, wine press, and watchtower are the standard equipment of a first century vineyard and are not allegorized. Nonetheless, the vineyard evokes the image of Isa 5:1–7 in which the elements sum up to point to the allegory of vineyard=Israel. It should also be noted that the targums (Aramaic translations of the OT with additional commentary) indicated that the "tower" represented the Temple in the mind of at least part of 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish thought.

**Matthew 21:24 *when vintage time:*** the Greek expression *ho kairos tōn karpōn* is "the time of the fruit." Such a translation tends to obscure Matthew's repeated reference to "fruits," twice in v.34 and again in v. 41. It is only in v.43 that *karpōn* is literally translated.

**Matthew 21:34 *tenants:*** There are some commentaries that suggest a Roman identification for the *tenants*. This seems to be an effort at ameliorating anti-Semitic sentiments and connecting this parable with the Roman responsibility for the crucifixion. The identification of the tenants as the current Jerusalem leadership is exacted both by the context in which this parable is set (as still part of Jesus' response to the chief priests and elders, which began in v. 27) and by the explicit comment in v. 45.

**Matthew 21:35–36** Mark's series of three individuals' being treated progressively worse, followed by "many," becomes in Matthew two groups of slaves sent by the vineyard's owner. Given Matthew's Jewish audience and thus more astute to the OT parallel than Mark's readers, the two groups probably represent the biblical categories of former and latter prophets.

**Matthew 21:40 *owner:*** Our translation hides an interesting shift in language. In v.33 the text refers to the "landowner" (*oikodespotēs*). In v.40 the text refers to the "owner." Yet the word used is *kyrios* which elsewhere in Matthew is translated as "Lord." The same development occurs in the parable of

the Workers in the Vineyard, 20:1, 8). **Comes: parousia** The “coming” of the owner needs no allegorical interpretation; it is simply part of the story. It is not likely to refer to Jesus’ own coming: Jesus is the son, not the owner.

**Matthew 21:44** [*The one who falls on this stone will be dashed to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.*]: (brackets indicate it may be a later addition). This text, which does not occur in several important MSS (D, 33, it, sys) and is omitted in Eusebius’s quotations of this passage, was once thought to be a scribal gloss imported from Luke 20:18. More recent evaluation tends to consider it a part of the original text of Matthew. It corresponds to the stone imagery of v. 42 and is related to the image of the kingdom of God as a great stone, as in Dan 2:44. If the verse had been added secondarily, a more natural place would be following v. 42. If, however, it is original, its present location would show how important Matthew considered v. 43 to be, since he would have broken the connection between v. 42 and 44 by inserting it. If original, v. 44 functions to intensify the judgment expressed in the parable and in v. 43: the rock/kingdom/Son, who should be Savior and Lord, becomes a terrible threat to the one on whom it falls or who falls against it.

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