

# Meeting With Christ

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Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

Yves I-Bing Cheng, M.D., M.A.

Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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## THE PARABLE OF THE WICKED TENANTS

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### Matthew 21:33-46

The Parable of the Wicked Tenants has the characteristic of being both historical and predictive. It is historical because Jesus told the history of Israel as God sees it. It is predictive because the Lord revealed precisely what was going to happen to Israel: the nation was going to reject the Son of God. And because of their rejection, God will transfer the responsibility of the kingdom to other people.

The parable is found in three gospels: Matthew 21:33-46, Mark 12:1-12 and Luke 20:9-19. Instead of reading the biblical text, I will tell the story in my own words. It goes like this.

### The story

There was a man who had a plot of land on which he decided to plant grapevines. After the planting, he built a fence around it, dug a wine press and erected a watch tower. Then he rented his vineyard and went away on a journey for an extended period of time. In his absence, the tenants would take care of the vineyard and were to hand over the portion of the crop which had been set as their annual rent.

When the harvest time approached, the landowner sent his servants to collect the income of the vineyard. But the tenants had no intention of paying anything to the master. At the arrival of the master's servants, the tenants grabbed them, beating, killing and stoning them. Later the landowner sent more servants with the same request. And the tenants received them in the same manner as the predecessors. They grabbed the servants, beating, killing and stoning them.

The picture is thus of a vineyard owner, living abroad and trying to assert his authority from a distance, but being thwarted and getting back nothing except stories of atrocities.

As a last resort, the landowner sent the one person he has left, his son. He was playing his last card. He calculated that the tenants would recognize his authority when they were confronted by his son. 'They will respect my son,' he thought. That did not happen. The tenants saw the son's coming as their chance to finish the story and to secure the vineyard for themselves. 'When the son came, they said to each other, *'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance'* (Matthew 21:38).' And the son was killed.

Then the owner, having been extraordinarily patient so far, intervened forcefully. He returned to his vineyard, killed the tenants and appointed other tenants to care for the vineyard.

## The legal background

In those days, there were many foreign owners of land in Israel. They were, you can say, absentee landlords. While they lived abroad, they owned a piece of land, and with this piece of land, they provided jobs for the local people and also made some profit for themselves.

Knowing the legal background of this parable will help us to understand the story better. For example, it was necessary for the owner to send representatives to his vineyard every year. If he failed to do so, then under the Jewish law, he would lose the right to claim the fruit of that vineyard. So the landowner had to establish his rights of ownership by sending his servants year by year.

On the other hand, the attitude of the tenants was this. You can see from their actions that they wanted to take possession of the vineyard. They wanted to dispossess the owner and take the vineyard for themselves. This is the reason why they set about killing the servants, and finally also the son.

The reason why the son was sent as the last resort can also be understood legally. Because after the third year, if the fruit was not given, the owner had to take legal action. And the only way he could take legal action was by sending a representative that had the power to take legal action. A servant or a slave does not have such right. But the son, being the heir, had the right to act on his father's behalf in a court of law.

It may seem very strange that the master, seeing that the tenants killed his servants, would risk the neck of his son. Now you know why. He had no alternative. Only his son had the right to act legally on his behalf. And that is also the reason why he said that the tenants will respect his son (Matthew 21:37: *Then last of all he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.'*). They will respect him because the son has the power to take legal action against them.

The tenants were also trying to use the law in such a way that would favor them. If they could show, for example, that the vineyard was unfruitful and therefore that they could not produce any fruit to give to the owner, they could pass the blame to the owner and say that he had entrusted them with an unproductive vineyard. It put them in a position of bankruptcy, being unable to pay their rent. They could in fact sue the owner and ask for compensation for making them work vainly in a bad vineyard.

And more than that, they could kill the heir in a sort of 'legalized way.' For example, they could claim that the son arrived with a body of men to forcefully evict them from the vineyard without legal proceedings. They resisted the attack. In the skirmish that followed, the son was killed. This would be a very convenient story to tell in a court of law because then they would be in a position to say that they acted in self-defense. And of course, we cannot condemn someone who acted in self-defense.

## God's vineyard

Having sketched the legal background of the parable, let's turn now to the spiritual lesson. The story begins in v. 33 of Matthew 21 by speaking about a landowner who planted a vineyard. Then the man did three things: (1) he *set a hedge around it*. He built a wall around the vineyard to keep the animals away from the grapes; (2) he *dug a winepress in it*. This was a vat into which the grapes were pressed in order to produce wine; (3) he *built a tower* to guard and protect the vineyard from thieves.

What is the point of saying this? The point of that sentence is to say that the vineyard was very well laid out. It was not carelessly conceived. If there is a lack of productivity, the cultivators will not be able to blame the landowner since he provided everything to assure growth and fruitfulness.

There is a close parallel between the beginning of this parable and Isaiah 5, especially vv. 1-2. Isaiah 5:1-2 reads like this.

*Isaiah 5:1... My Well-beloved has a vineyard on a very fruitful hill.  
2 He dug it up and cleared out its stones, and planted it with the choicest vine. He built a tower in its midst, and also made a winepress in it; so He expected it to bring forth good grapes, but it brought forth wild grapes.*

This text describes God's loving care for His vineyard. He has denied His vineyard absolutely nothing. But when it was harvest time, the vineyard did not yield good grapes, only sour ones. The vineyard here represents the nation of Israel. It is explicitly identified in Isaiah 5:7 as the 'house of Judah' and the 'men of Judah'.

In our parable, the vineyard is also an allusion to Israel. Jesus explained that when God chose Israel to be His people, He wanted some fruit from them, some spiritual fruit. So He sent His servants. The servants represent the prophets that God sent to the Jews down through the centuries to remind them of their obligations. When you read the writings of the prophets, you can see that the prophets were constantly calling for spiritual fruit, reminding God's people that they are God's vineyard and that they must produce the kind of fruit that God expects. What happened to those prophets? Some had been beaten (Jeremiah 20.2). Some had been killed (Nehemiah 9.26). Some had been stoned (2Chronicles 24:21). This is unfortunately the way the Jews treated the servants of God. And Israel is now on the point of rejecting and killing Jesus, the Son of God.

We read in v. 45, *Now when the chief priests and Pharisees heard His parables, they perceived that He was speaking of them.* The chief priest and the Pharisees perceived that they were being associated with the tenants who killed the prophets. To restrict the tenants to the religious leaders alone would be, in my opinion, an interpretation that is too narrow. No Jewish hearer would fail to recognize that the rejection of God's sovereignty involved not only the leadership but also the nation as a whole.

### **Caring for the kingdom**

There is one further point to observe in v. 33. In the last part, it says that the landowner, having planted the vineyard, went into another country. Now, of course, we cannot say that God went into another country. That would not make much sense. Why then did Jesus include this statement here? The point of this statement is to say that if God were present, He would have Himself the responsibility of the care and the production of the vineyard. But His going away signifies that he entrusted the welfare of His vineyard completely to the care of His people. His people were made fully responsible for it.

Notice how the landowner trusted the tenants. He left them to care for his vineyard as they wished. They were given the privilege of being free to use their own ingenuity and ideas, and not have someone looking over their shoulders and forcing them to work in a particular way. This shows how God trusted His people. Unfortunately they abused that trust.

When we look closely at the use of the word 'vineyard' in the parable, we realize that it represents something else - not just the nation of Israel. What else does it represent? It represents the kingdom of God. To see that, all we need to do is to compare two verses, v. 41 with v. 43.

*Matthew 21:41: They said to Him, "He will destroy those wicked men miserably, and lease his vineyard to other vinedressers who will render to him the fruits in their seasons."*

*Mathew 21:43: "Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it."*

In the first verse, the vineyard is taken away from those who do not produce any fruit and given to those who do. In the second verse, the kingdom of God is taken away from those who do not produce its fruits and given to others who will. The two sentences express the same idea. The main difference is that the word 'vineyard' in v. 41 is replaced by the expression 'kingdom of God' in v. 43. By this simple comparison, you can see that the vineyard represents the kingdom of God. The vineyard that the landowner planted in the parable is the kingdom of God.

## **Bearing fruits for God**

Now how is this parable relevant to us? Yes, it deals with the kingdom of God. But what do we learn about the kingdom of God that is applicable to us? Here we need to talk about the key idea of this parable. What is the primary idea? I would like to suggest that the key idea in the Parable of the Wicked Tenants hinges on one word, a word which keeps coming back in the NT. It is the word 'fruit.' This story has to do with the matter of fruit and of being fruitful. In the kingdom of God, the Lord looks for fruit from His people.

'Fruit' (*karpos*) is a word frequently used in the NT that describes the life which God requires of His people. It occurs 66 times in the NT. The verb form appears another 8 times.

If you read carefully the parable, you will notice that there is actually an insistent repetition of the word 'fruit'. The word 'fruit' appears four times in three verses.

*Verse 34: When the season of **fruit** drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants, to get his **fruit**.*

*Verse 41: ... and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the **fruits** in their seasons.*

*Verse 43: ...given to a nation producing the **fruits** of it.*

Think about the landowner and ask yourself this question. Why would a person plant a vineyard? A vineyard is a place where people grow grapes. You plant a vineyard in order to reap something. You expect to have fruit. Remember the words in Isaiah 5:1-2: ...*My Well-beloved has a vineyard ... He expected it to bring forth good grapes...* 'The Master has a vineyard. He expected fruit from it.'

Jesus saw Israel as God's chosen tenants, with a responsibility to produce fruit for their master. However they failed to produce the fruit and failed supremely by rejecting the 'son of the owner.' As a result, they forfeited their tenancy. The responsibility of the vineyard was given to another nation - the community of Jesus' followers. These people will produce the fruit of it. *Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it* (v. 43).

Let's come back to my question. Why does anyone plant a vineyard? In order to have fruit. We can translate this question into its spiritual meaning. Remember that the vineyard is God's kingdom. Why does God establish His kingdom? The answer is the same. In order to have spiritual fruit.

Did you realize that God established His kingdom in order to obtain spiritual fruit? Did you realize that if you are in the kingdom of God, God expects fruit from you? If you are in the kingdom, you are in the same position as the tenants of the vineyard who were supposed to look after it and produce the fruit that the master expected. We must understand why we are in the kingdom for. God entrusts His kingdom to our care so that we may produce the fruit that He desires.

The apostle Paul made an interesting statement in Romans 7:4. He said that the whole point of becoming a Christian, and more specifically of the believer's death to the law, is that he may bring fruit for God. *Likewise, my brethren, you have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead **in order that we may bear fruit for***

**God** (Rom 7:4). Why did Jesus make us His own? Why did He redeem us? Why did He die and rise again from the dead? So that we can bring forth fruit unto God.

Why did the tenants fail to produce the fruits and treated God's servants in this cruel way? V. 38 gives us the answer: *But when the vinedressers saw the son, they said among themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and **seize his inheritance**.'* They wanted to have the vineyard for themselves. They wanted to be able to do with the vineyard and with the fruit in whatever way they pleased.

We, as Christians, can be guilty of the same fault. It is possible for the believer to claim the fruit of the vineyard for himself. This can happen when he wants things to go his way, when he lives as he wishes and does things according to his personal interests, and not according to the interests of the kingdom. In other words, it happens when he rejects the lordship of Christ.

The old tenants lost their place because they failed to produce the required fruit, and it is the distinguishing mark of the new nation, i.e. the new Israel, the church, that it will produce it. But notice the implication of Jesus' statement. This qualification carries a warning to the church as well. If the church in turn fails to produce the fruit, it cannot presume on its privileged position either.