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**Sermon Final Manuscript**

**Matthew 21:33–45 (The Parable of the Wicked Tenants)**

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**Introduction**

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. In this sermon, I’ll be preaching on the Gospel text, which is Jesus’ Parable of the Wicked Tenants, also known as the Parable of the Vineyard.

**Context: Isaiah’s Song of God’s Vineyard**

Before we look at the parable itself, it’s necessary to look at the context behind it. Jesus was actually basing this parable off of Isaiah’s song on God’s vineyard, which is found in Isaiah chapter 5 (Is 5:1–7).

Isaiah starts by talking about a man who had a vineyard that he cherished on a fertile hillside. He dug it, cleared it of stones, planted it with choice vines, hewed out a wine vat, and built a watchtower in it. But despite the special care and attention that he gave to his vineyard, when he looked for grapes in it, he only found inferior wild grapes.

Isaiah states that this is a metaphor: God is the man who planted and cared for the vineyard, which he did as a free gift, and the vineyard is the house of Israel. When God desired justice and righteousness from Israel, which are key themes throughout the prophetic writings, instead he found bloodshed and an outcry.

So, God asks the Israelites to judge between him and his vineyard: was it God’s fault that the Israelites produced sour grapes, or were they to blame? God put so much care into protecting and providing for them so that they may thrive, and yet they abandoned him. So, no, it wasn’t God’s fault; the only judgement that Israel could render is that they alone are to blame and that they deserve punishment.

In response, God says that he will devote his vineyard to destruction. But later on in Isaiah God promises that he’ll restore Israel, so that it will bear fruit in chapter 27 (Is 27:2–7), which points to what Jesus said about God’s kingdom being given to those who produce its fruits (Mt 21:43).

**Explanation of Jesus’ Parable of the Wicked Tenants**

So now, we get back to Jesus’ parable of the Wicked Tenants. In Jesus’ parable the master of the house who planted the vineyard is God, and the vineyard is Israel. Jesus starts by showing the attention and love that God put into caring for his chosen people, so that they might bear fruits for him. The fact that the master goes abroad represents the fact that God was patient in waiting for his people to bear fruit. It also points to stewardship: God first provides for his people, but then he expects them to go out to make good use of what he has given them.

The servants whom the master sends to collect the fruits from the tenants are the prophets, and the tenants are the leaders of Israel. Jesus shows how God sent the prophets to instruct the people on what they owe God as part of their sacred covenant with him, and instead of heeding God’s Word, his will, and his instructions, the leaders mistreated, persecuted, and murdered the prophets. God rightfully expected good fruits from the Israelite leaders, but they gave him the exact opposite.

The master sends out a second group of prophets, and the Israelite leaders do exactly the same to them. Here, Jesus is highlighting the perfect patience and longsuffering of God. God is so gracious and merciful, that even though his people acted so wickedly and cruelly, he still continued to send them guides to bring them back on the path of righteousness and repentance. And yet, in spite of God’s kindness, which is meant to lead people to repentance, as St Paul says in Romans chapter 2 (Rm 2:4), Israel’s leaders continued to produce the works of bloodshed and outcry, rather than justice and righteousness.

The master then sends out his son, with the expectation that the tenants will respect him, but instead the tenants throw him out of the vineyard and murder him, wanting to steal his inheritance by violence. The son of the master is our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the unique Son of God the Father. Just as Isaiah proclaimed a call to repentance, and as John the Baptist proclaimed, “Bear fruit in keeping with repentance” (Mt 3:8, ESVUK), so too did Jesus come to his own Jewish people, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven [or: the rule of God] is at hand” (Mt 4:17b).

Jesus did this to fulfill his office as prophet; and not just any prophet, but the greatest prophet of all—the only prophet who reveals exactly who God is, because he is God himself, the Second Person of the Trinity and the Word who became flesh (Jn 1:1, 14; Mt 28:19). And yet despite Jesus’ love, despite his call for the people to repent and believe in God, the Jewish leaders handed over to death the very man who came to save his people from their sins (Mt 1:21), and not theirs only, but also the sins of the whole world (1Jn 2:1–2). Just as the tenants threw the son out of the vineyard, so too did the Jewish leaders hand Jesus over to the Roman leaders, who threw Jesus outside of the gates of Jerusalem, and crucified him at Golgotha, which was near the city (Jn 19:17, 20; Heb 13:11–12).

It's at this point that Jesus asks the chief priests and the Pharisees what the master will do to the tenants when he returns from his journey. They say that the master will destroy them—which foreshadows the future destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in the year 70 AD—and give the vineyard to tenants who will give him his fruits in their season.

Jesus then says that the very judgement that they pronounced will be done to them. Because they are the builders who had rejected Christ, the cornerstone, apart from whom the building cannot stand, but will tumble and fall. They are the wicked tenants, who led the people of Israel astray and who failed to give God the fruit that they owed him.

This is similar to when the Prophet Nathan told David a parable, after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba. After the parable, Nathan invited David to respond, in which David condemned himself with the judgement he had pronounced (2Sam 12:1–6). In the same way that Nathan said to David, “You are the man!” who acted wickedly (2Sam 12:7–15), Jesus pronounced upon the chief priests and Pharisees the same judgement that they themselves had rendered. “[T]he kingdom of God will be taken away from you”, that is, the Jewish leaders, “and given to a people producing its fruits” (Mt 21:43).

Now, we should make clear that Jesus is not saying that God is replacing Israel with the predominantly Gentile Church. Jesus is specifically referring to the Jewish leaders who rejected him, not all Jews as a whole—because remember, the first members of the New Testament Church consisted entirely of Jews.

The point of Jesus here is not about ethnicity, but ethics, which indicate either a living faith in a person or a dead faith, as St James says, in James chapter 2 (James 2:17). It’s not about Jews or Gentiles, but who produces fruits for God. Israel and the Church aren’t two separate bodies that either co-exist, or, that replace each other, but rather the same body, in which both Jews and Gentiles have been united in the cross of Christ (Eph 2:14–16). The Church is a continuation of Israel.

**The Law**

So, I’m now going to give you the Law and the Gospel of this text. I’ll start with the Law. The interesting thing about this parable is that Jesus doesn’t say that the kingdom will be given to those who believe—although faith, of course, is included. Rather, he says that it will be given to those who produce its fruits. And in the original Greek text of this passage, the word for “produce” here is a present active participle, which in simple language, means that it’s an ongoing thing. Those who possess the kingdom are those who bear fruits on an ongoing basis.

So, the question is, what are the fruits that Jesus is speaking of? We noted earlier, that in Isaiah, the fruits that God was looking for in Israel was justice and righteousness. While that is a valid understanding, Jesus has a broader scope in mind here. And we know this, because of the previous parable that he preached, the Parable of the Two Sons.

In the parable, the father, who represents God, asks the first son to work in his vineyard, and though he says no at first, he later changes his mind, and does what his father asked him to do. The second son, says yes to his father, but in the end doesn’t do it (Mt 21:28–31). In answer to Jesus’ question, the Jewish leaders correctly said that the first son did the will of his father (Mt 21:31), and so Jesus responds by saying that the tax collectors and prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before them, because they believed in John the Baptist, but the Jewish leaders did not (Mt 21:31–32).

So, according to Jesus, the fruits of the kingdom is obedience to God, which means, of course, believing in Jesus, like the tax collectors and prostitutes did, but also doing the work that God tells us to do, like the first son did, who worked in his father’s vineyard. We obey God the Father, when we hear his commandments in the Bible, and do them. As Jesus said, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Mt 12:48–50, ESVUK).

This parable invites us to do some self-examination. It’s easy to just think that we’re the faithful tenants, and that the Jewish leaders are the wicked tenants, and leave it at that. But actually, if we look deep down in our hearts, we’ll realise that there are certain aspects of the wicked tenants in all of us, is there not? Do we not mistreat God’s people, when we fail to love one another? Do we not fail to produce fruits for God, when we fail to listen to his Word, make excuses for our wrongdoings, and get complacent from the comforts of our riches in this country?

According to Jesus, bearing fruits is not what gets us into the Kingdom. Jesus accomplished that by his merits on the cross alone (Gal 2:21). But rather, the fruits are the signs of faith. They’re the things which point to a true, living faith in a Christian. So, this parable causes us to ask ourselves: what fruits are we producing? It’s not about pointing to other people and saying whether or not they’re producing fruits, because we can’t see inside other people’s hearts. Rather, what fruits are you producing? Only you and God know the answer to that. So, let’s not lose sight of obedience to God, lest in the process, we become the very wicked tenants that we once opposed.

**The Gospel**

Now hear the Gospel, the good news. The wicked tenants tried to get the son’s inheritance through violence. But we receive it as a free gift by God’s grace, which he gives to us through faith, and the inheritance is the kingdom of God, our heavenly dwelling (1Pt 1:4).

When the wicked tenants called the son “the heir” in the parable, that same Greek word is used to describe Christians when we’ve been baptised. Because in Baptism, we’ve become heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, by the adoption of the Holy Spirit, through faith (Rm 8:16–17; Gal 3:26–27). God shares all these gifts and privileges with us as free, undeserved gifts.

The stone that the builders had rejected has become the cornerstone, meaning that Jesus has won the ultimate victory: he is the foundation of the Church. The Gospel is the good news that Jesus lived a sinless life, died for all our sins on the cross, was buried, and resurrected on the third day, in accordance with the Scriptures (Rm 5:19; 1Cor 15:3–4), so that whoever believes in this will not perish, but receive everlasting life (Jn 3:16–17). Jesus bore our sins in his body on the cross, so “that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed” (1Pt 2:24).

The other bit of good news is that we don’t have to stress over whether or not we’ll produce fruits for God. Jesus promised, “I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing” (Jn 15:5). In other words, so long as we abide in Jesus, it’s not a matter of if we’ll bear fruit; we will bear fruit. And we’ll do so by the Holy Spirit, who dwells in our hearts, and makes us the people God wants us to be. So, make sure you continue to abide in Jesus. Because apart from Jesus, there is no life, hope, or sanctification.

Finally, it’s true that we often fail to obey God. But take Jesus’ Parable of the Two Sons to heart: although the first son rebelled against his father, he was still accepted by God in the end, because he repented. And that’s amazing news. This means that we may have done things that we’re ashamed of, but with God, there’s always the opportunity for a fresh start—a new beginning. One that’s defined not by the sinful ways of our flesh, but the Holy Spirit, who loves us and brings us closer to Jesus and his Father in Heaven. With God, there is always a chance to return to him through genuine repentance, just like David did, who abandoned his former way of living to serve God.

Ultimately, this parable serves to point us to the perfect faithfulness, patience, and unconditional love of God. God is faithful in keeping the promises he made about his Messiah, Jesus, in the Scriptures. He’s patient in waiting for people to repent. And he’s loving, because he sent his only Son, Jesus Christ, to save the world, and freely gives his kingdom to those who believe in Christ, who then, by the power of the Holy Spirit, produce its fruits. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.