

**“Judgment Day”**  
**Matthew 21:33-46**  
**April 14, 2019**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

Today’s passage contains the second of three parables Jesus spoke to the religious leaders who questioned his authority to do what he did in the temple the day before. All three of these parables speak of judgment. These religious leaders were objecting to the same thing people today object to—Jesus’ right to bring judgment. Many today would share the opinion of philosopher Bertrand Russell, expressed in his book, *Why I Am Not a Christian*.

There is one very serious defect to my mind in Christ’s moral character, and that is that He believed in hell. I do not myself feel that any person who is really profoundly humane can believe in everlasting punishment. Christ certainly as depicted in the Gospels did believe in everlasting punishment, and one does find repeatedly a vindictive fury against those people who would not listen to His preaching—an attitude which is not uncommon with preachers, but which does somewhat detract from superlative excellence. . . . I really do not think that a person with a proper degree of kindness in his nature would have put fears and terrors of that sort into the world. . . . I must say that I think all this doctrine, that hell-fire is a punishment for sin, is a doctrine of cruelty. It is a doctrine that put cruelty into the world and gave the world generations of cruel torture; and the Christ of the Gospels, if you take Him as His chroniclers represent Him, would certainly have to be considered partly responsible for that.”

The parable of the vineyard and its tenant farmers speaks of judgment in such a way that by the end of the parable even Jesus’ enemies are acknowledging the complete appropriateness of his judgment. But the surprising thing about this parable is not the reality of judgment, but its delay. We see in that the great love and patience of God, brought to a climax with the words of Jesus after the parable.

**I. Judgment Deserved**

Tenant farming was common in Jesus’ day. In this case, the landlord does all that is necessary for a fruitful vineyard. He puts a fence around it to protect it from animals. He digs a winepress so the workers can crush the grapes on site and not have to transport them a distance to be crushed by others. He builds a tower, which typically served two purposes: providing a place for watchmen to guard and protect the vineyard, as well as providing lodging for the farmers. After everything is made ready, he enters into a lease with the tenant farmers. Such a lease would have been simply an agreement on the percentage of the harvest the landlord would take, typically a third to a half.

Then the landlord leaves, locating himself at quite a distance from the vineyard, all the way into another country.

When the time came for the first harvest to be complete, the landlord did what any landlord would do. He sent his servants to collect the share they had agreed would come to him. They did not receive a warm welcome. Instead, one was beaten, another killed and the third stoned. The landlord then reasoned that the solution was to send a larger number of servants to collect the fruit due him. I suppose he counted on safety in numbers. But it didn't work, as these servants received the same cruel treatment as the first delegation. So the landlord decides to send another messenger, one that he thinks will carry such weight with them that he cannot be ignored or treated poorly. He sends his son, thinking that surely he will be treated with respect. But that would have required a change of heart among these farmers, and no such change had occurred. So they continued along the same path of outright rebellion they had begun when they turned away the first servants. They realized the stakes were higher this time, but, they thought, so was the potential reward. If they could get rid of the son, the heir would be gone. Perhaps the master was too old or feeble to do anything about their rebellion. If so, once the son was removed, the vineyard could be theirs. One-hundred percent of the fruit would belong to them.

Jesus then poses a question to the religious leaders. **“When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?”** Their answer is full of irony because they are describing the punishment they deserve. **“He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons.”** They are tenants who have treated their landlord so cruelly and unjustly. God is the landlord, and he has repeatedly sent to them his servants the prophets. When we read the Old Testament, we discover that the prophets were frequently mistreated. Elijah had to run for his life after the king of Israel put out a contract on him. Jeremiah was thrown into a pit and left there to die. They were widely regarded as enemies of the nation, merely because they spoke God's word faithfully. And now they are about to commit the greatest crime imaginable. God has sent his son, and they are at this precise moment plotting his arrest and execution. Calvin says about this, “It appears monstrous that the Author of our salvation should be rejected, not by aliens but by those of His own house, and not by the dumb mob, but by those very chief men who held the reins of the Church.”

It is an easy thing to see the rebellion of these religious leaders. But it should give us pause when we remember that they didn't see it themselves, though it was quite obvious. Is it possible that we have done the same? Jesus' parable portrays the heart of sinful rebellion. We live in a world where everything has been provided for us by a kind a generous God. But instead of giving him the fruit he deserves, we deny him his rightful place in his own

world. They wanted what the landlord provided, but they didn't want the landlord.

This shows us two features of our monstrous sin. First, we use God's gifts against God. Everything we have is a gift from God, just as this vineyard and everything in it came from the hand of the landlord. But sin works in our lives just as it did in this parable. We use these gifts not to serve God, but to get rid of him. So people who have been given a generous amount of money will often put their trust in the money instead of in God. Those blessed with a good sense of humor use that to get people to like them rather than delighting in God's approval of them. Those blessed with attractive features use those in the same way. People blessed with the ability to accomplish many things use that ability to feel superior to others, instead of boasting in God's approval of them.

The second and related feature of our sin is that we want God's gifts, but not God. These tenants sure wanted what the landowner had provided, the vineyard with all of its features. But the master himself was in another country, and they did everything they could to keep him and his representatives there. They are like the prodigal son, who wanted his father's possessions but not his father's presence. This invites an important application question. Which do you want more, the Father's presence or the Father's gifts? Do you think you would be happy if God just gave you everything you wanted—health, success and money—but withheld himself and never came around? If we are content with God's gifts without his presence, then we are no different than these tenants.

## II. Judgment Delayed

A second truth we see about God's judgment in this parable is the striking delay of its execution. His delay is remarkable, bordering upon unbelievable. Any normal landlord would have taken decisive action after the first delegation was treated so cruelly, reasserting his rights as owner with whatever show of force would be necessary. The tenants would never have had an opportunity to turn away this second group. And in the unlikely event that some owner would not have done so, and would actually have sent a second delegation, surely this third sending would never have occurred. What owner would risk the life of his son to go to a group that had proven itself to be so selfish and callous?

This delay is meant to be striking to us, because it is the way of God. It is God's way because of his love. God has been delaying his judgment now for millennia, in the face of repeated insults to himself. Here's how the apostle Peter interpreted God's delay of judgment. **"The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance"** (2 Peter 3:9). Many misinterpret delayed judgment, thinking it means that judgment is

cancelled. That is a mistake with eternal consequences. God delays judgment not because he is weak or has decided that there will never be judgment, but in order to give time for repentance. There is great hope in this. It means that no matter how monstrous our sin, repentance removes the judgment of God.

### III. Judgment Done

Jesus explains and applies the parable in verses 42-44. He quotes from Psalm 118 to explain what the parable is about. **“The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes.”** The religious leaders are the builders. As they erect this stone edifice, they do what stone masons do—look over the pile of stones and select the ones appropriate for the building. They see this one stone and conclude that it has no place in the building, so they put it in the discard pile. But then their decision is reversed by the great Builder, God himself. He takes that rejected stone and makes it the principal stone in the building he is erecting, the very cornerstone.

This stone is obviously Jesus, rejected by men but made preeminent in God’s work. What is the reference of the pronoun “this” in the sentence, **“this was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes.”** Does it refer just to making Jesus the cornerstone, or also to his rejection? The teaching of the rest of the New Testament says that it refers to both. What is marvelous is that even the rejection of Jesus was the Lord’s doing. Peter was listening to Jesus, because just a few days after this he preached a sermon in which he said, **“This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men”** (Acts 2:23). It was God’s marvelous plan to deliver his Son for crucifixion. These religious leaders, in their conclusion that Jesus must die, were only fulfilling what God had decided should happen.

And why did God determine that Jesus should be crucified? This is where it is marvelous. He did so in order to move the judgment from the future to the past. These leaders spoke correctly when they answered Jesus’ question about what the landowner would do when he comes to his tenants. **“He will put those wretches to a miserable death.”** Judgment is inevitable, but the glorious truth of the gospel is that Jesus’ rejection and death has moved that judgment from the future to the past. For any who will humble themselves and trust Jesus, their judgment has already happened. It happened at the cross, which we remember at all times, but especially during this week, Passion Week.

The application, then, is to repent and trust in Jesus’ death as adequate payment for the judgment you deserve. You and I have been just as guilty as these tenant farmers, wanting God’s gifts but renouncing God’s claim upon us.

Our need is to recognize this and repent. We need to be like King David after he sinned through adultery with Bathsheba and then the murder of her husband, Uriah, in an attempt to cover up his sin. But when Nathan came and told him the parable about the rich man who had selfishly taken the beloved sheep of the poor man, David eventually got the point. It was when Nathan said, "You are the man," that he understood he had done the same as this rich man in taking Bathsheba. That's where these religious leaders failed. They were never willing to put themselves in the place of these wicked tenants. Are you? If not, unimaginable, terrifying judgment awaits.

Let me put it this way. It has been pointed out by many that the grace of God, like water, flows downhill. It comes not to those who think they have earned it by their righteous deeds, but to those who humble themselves. Whenever I am riding my bicycle and come to a river, I know that I am about to start climbing, because water, like grace, always flows downhill. Whenever I am climbing and come to a water tower, I know that I have reached the top of the climb, because the builders of the tower know that water always flows downhill.

The response of the chief priests and the Pharisees should serve as a warning to us. **"When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parable, they perceived that he was speaking about them. And although they were seeking to arrest him, they feared the crowds, because they held him to be a prophet."** They got enough of Jesus' meaning to understand that he was warning them, but not enough to come to repentance. That is a dangerous place to be. Contrast that with those who heard Peter preaching at Pentecost. He was preaching to the ones who had called for the crucifixion of Jesus, who wanted Barabbas released to them instead of Jesus. After Peter made it clear that they had killed God's Messiah, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter, **"Brothers, what shall we do?"** (Acts 2:37). Peter told them to repent. Even after they had killed the Son of God, there was provision for forgiveness through humbling themselves in repentance.

## **CONCLUSION:**

This is a judgment parable. What do you think about God's right to bring judgment? Do you resist it like these religious leaders? Then you are building another building, one that rejects Jesus. The building God is building has Jesus as the chief cornerstone, and that building accepts God's judgment. When you accept God's judgment, you come to understand for the first time the depth and breadth of God's love. He loved you enough to come and be judged in your place. And when that happens, it unleashes all manner of fruitfulness in your life. You come to love God and others.

**Small Group Discussion Questions**  
**Matthew 21:33-46**

1. The sinfulness of the human race is starkly put in this parable. Like the tenant farmers who want to enjoy the master's vineyard, but who renounce his rightful claims to its proceeds, we are often more willing to receive God's benefits than we are to receive God. What are some examples of that in your life or in the lives of those you know? For example, people want the blessing of health or money that God gives, but don't really give any attention to God himself.
2. Another aspect of human sinfulness is that we use God's gifts against God. These tenants were being sustained by what the vineyard owner had supplied to them. And yet they use this to fight against his servants and then his son. What are some examples of the ways we use God's gifts against God? It might help you answer that to recognize the areas of strength God has given you, and then to consider how you might use these strengths so you don't need God in your life.
3. Do you think the acceptance of the reality of hell is increasing or waning in our culture? What evidence do you see for that?
4. Many people view things as Bertrand Russell did (see quote from sermon), seeing the teaching of hell as "a doctrine of cruelty." How would you answer this critique of Jesus and of Christianity?
5. The delay of the vineyard owner in executing justice is striking. That portrays the patience of God in bringing judgment, which Peter says is because God wants to give space and time for repentance (2 Peter 3:9). What makes repentance so hard? Do you find resistance to repentance in your heart? Why?
6. How does the reminder of God's love encourage our repentance?