



Preach **Matthew** notes

(Year A Proper 22)

RELATED

Isa 5:1-7
Psalm 80:8-16
Phil 3:4b-14

CONTINUOUS

Ex 20:1-4,7-9,12-20
Psalm 19
Phil 3:4b-14

Matthew 21:33-46 (NIV) Parable of the Rented Vineyard

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

"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. 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.

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

"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."

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 marvellous in our eyes?"

"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. He who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed."

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew he was talking about them. They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet.

This parable is the middle of three for which the central theme is criticism of the Jewish leaders. Matthew draws the substance of the parable from Mark, which is of particular interest in that it contains a specific reference to the killing of the landowner's son. Matthews own concerns are shown in the way he edits his Markan material and in what he adds to his source.

Matthew's specific emphasis is upon judgement. In verse 34 Matthew elaborates Marks simple phrase "in

time" into the much more forceful, "when the time of the fruits (i.e. the harvest) had come...." The verb here is *engisen* the same verb used in Matthew of the dawning of the Kingdom in 3:2, 4:17 and 10:7. Most importantly Matthew adds the specific reference to the removal of the kingdom from the Jews and their replacement by another people (*ethnos*), which will bear fruit. This is found only in Matthew's version of the parable. The parable has allegorical form, the two sets of servants representing the former and latter prophets, the son representing Jesus and God as the



landowner. Matthew's editing of his source even notes that the son was taken outside of the vineyard (which Rabbinic interpretation identified with the city of Jerusalem) before he was killed.

An earlier parable, the workers in the vineyard (20:1-16) drew on an OT allusion to Israel as the vineyard of God. Here the same imagery is much stronger.

Verse 33 quotes the vineyard passage in Isaiah 5:2 almost verbatim. The Isa 5:2 vineyard passage emphasises God's loving and faithful provision for Israel; indeed 5:3 asks, "What more could I do

for her?". The emphasis is on the contrast between the fullness of God's provision and his gracious choice of Israel and the self seeking and self serving of those who would accumulate everything to themselves and pay no honour to the owner of the vineyard. God's choice of Israel and the fullness of his provision form the background of a parable that ends ultimately in the removal of the kingdom from Israel.

The hard message of this parable is that grace, calling and gift are not incompatible with judgement. There are consequences in failing to attend to the obligations of service created by the gift itself. Matthew underlines the sovereignty of the landowner by the repeated use of "his" (*autou*) in relation to the vineyard. He also refers to him as "house master" (*oikodespotēs*) in verse 33, a favourite phrase that he adds to Mark's version and later in the story refers to him as "lord of the vineyard" (*ho kurios tou ampelōnos*). The move to collect the fruits of harvest

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is a legitimate assertion of lordship over the produce of the vineyard.

Stewardship reflections

In the parable the owner fully provides for the vineyard and then leaves it in the care of tenants. This is a lovely picture of stewardship; that the God who provides what we need also extends his trust to us. An earlier parable, the workers in the vineyard, the disgruntled workforce have to deal with a generous employer who is very much present and whose gracious actions they resent. In this parable the emphasis is on how we are to live with a landlord who is absent. Failure to honour God with the all that is due to him as Lord, the decision to accumulate and take to ourselves is not so much the breaking of a rule as a betrayal of the trust shown to us by a God who amply supplies our needs.

Core

This passage is a statement of who and what we are before God: stewards of all God has given. It is the truth behind David's words prayed at each Eucharist: "Lord all things come from you and of your own do we give you". The reality of the human heart is that what we are called to steward we desire to possess. Over time we can be seduced into a tyranny of needing to own, to possess what we hold on trust. The sadness is that in the desire to possess we can lose our liberty; a cage is a cage even if the bars are made of gold. Albert Schweitzer once wrote, "if we have something that we cannot give away it is not a possession any longer – it possesses us".

The parable goes further and we cannot escape its force. Our decision to withhold has consequences.





The kingdom is taken and given to others. The reality is that parish ministries can be hindered, made ineffective, even ended due to a failure to be adequately resourced.



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Congregation

The servants may have been sent to collect the rent as part of a lease agreement or collect the entire produce of the vineyard. Whichever interpretation is right the tenants are asserting their ownership of the produce of the vineyard. Failure to give is more than a dereliction of religious duty it is an implicit statement of ownership. As Jesus himself said, what we do with our money says something about what is in our hearts. If the parable is about collecting the rent then due payment is an acknowledgement of true ownership, even if the tenants reap their own rewards. Our giving, even our tithing, does not mean the rest is ours but a reminder that everything we have comes from God.

Fringe

We are called to be stewards of what God has given to us. Stewards do not own but they do benefit from what is entrusted to them. The vineyard was fully provided for and then entrusted to tenants. The words around money should be joy, blessing, privilege and celebration. Words such as guilt, embarrassment, rules or anxiety have no place in our discussions of financial discipleship. If we withhold from God what is due to him it is not a matter of breaking a rule but a breach of God's trust. ■

