

# Matthew 21:33-41

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/matt/matt-21/matthew-2133-41/>

*Jesus tells the parable of a landowner who plants a vineyard on his land. He then hires vine-growers to work His vineyard while He is away. When the harvest comes, the vineyard owner sends some slaves to collect its produce, but instead of paying the landowner what was His, the vine-growers beat and kill them. They do the same to the landowner's son. Jesus asks the priests and elders what will happen to the evil vine-growers when the landowner returns. They reply that he will bring them to a wretched end. In the subsequent section, Jesus applied the parable to the Jewish leaders as being like those evil slaves.*

The parallel gospel accounts of this *parable* are found in Mark 12:1-9 and Luke 20:9-16.

This is the second of two parables recorded by Matthew that Jesus told the chief priests and elders in the temple after they questioned His authority (Matthew 21:23).

The first *parable* was about the owner of the vineyard and his two disobedient sons (Matthew 21:28-30). In that *parable*, Jesus compared the Sadducees and Pharisees to a lying disobedient son who said he would work in the *vineyard* but then did not. And Jesus told them that the repentant sinners will enter God's kingdom before they will (Matthew 21:31).

The second *parable* was also about a *landowner* of a *vineyard*.

Jesus told the priests and elders to *listen to another parable*. He began, *there was a landowner who planted a vineyard and put a wall around it and dug a wine press in it, and built a tower*.

The subject and direct object of this parable are respectively *the landowner* and *the vineyard* that *he planted*.

Vineyards were highly cultivated portions of land. Its initial produce was grapes. The grapes were often then crushed in a *wine press* where their juices were collected in vats to be fermented and sold as wine. Vineyards generated much wealth. And *landowners* of vineyards were seen as wealthy.

This *landowner* did not just buy an existing *vineyard*. *He planted* and cultivated it himself. The fact that he was its planter required him to personally invest his time, thoughtful attention, and energy. *He* devoted himself to his *vineyard* and spared no detail. *He* put a wall around it to protect it from animals. *He dug a wine press in it*, and *he built a tower* to defend it from thieves. Once these things were completed, it was time to wait for its vines to *produce* its *harvest* of grapes and wine. It is typical for newly *planted* grapevines to take three years to begin to produce.

While his vines grew, *the landowner* then went away from his *vineyard on a journey*. After focusing on *the vineyard*, *he* possibly had other ventures that required his attention. While *he*

was away, *he rented out his vineyard to vine-growers*. These *vine-growers* were hired to tend, prune, and protect *his vineyard*. They were to ensure that it was productive so that *when the harvest* came there would be good *produce*. And *when the harvest time approached*, the owner *sent his slaves to the vine-growers to receive his produce* for the *vineyard* he *planted*.

The fact that *the landowner* sent his servants (the Greek word translated as *slaves* here is “Doo’los,” which means “*slaves*” or hired “servants”) *when the harvest time approached* may indicate that *he sent* them ahead of *the harvest* in order to make arrangements to collect his agreed-upon return on *his* labor and investment, by virtue of having *rented out his vineyard*. *Produce* could refer to a share of the financial profits or a percentage of the grapes or *wine* that came from *his vineyard*.

Thus far, everything Jesus has shared in His *parable* has matched expectations. It was not unusual for landowners to be away tending other matters as their workers tended their farms or vineyards under the terms of a lease agreement. And if they were away during *harvest-time* it would be typical for them to send someone *to receive his produce*. But what follows in the *parable* is unexpected and most unusual. What follows is a severe and deliberate breach of contract.

When the *slaves* showed up to collect their master’s *produce*, instead of *the vine-growers* treating them as respected representatives of the *landowner* and giving them the *landowner’s* agreed-upon share of *produce* as *they* should have done, *the vine-growers took them and beat one, and killed another, and stoned a third*. They treated the *landowner’s slaves* as enemies. They acted as though *the landowner’s* servants had come to rob or attack *the vineyard*. This was essentially a claim by the *vine-growers* that *they* now owned the land. They would make the rules. They would do all things as they pleased, and no longer recognize their covenant with the *landowner*. They would no longer recognize the *landowner* as lord of *the vineyard*.

This was troubling. *The landowner* persisted; he *sent another larger group of slaves again*. But *the vine-growers did the same thing* to the second group of *slaves* as they did to *the first group*. The *landowner* gave them another chance, but *they* hardened their hearts against him.

*Afterward*, when *the vineyard owner* learned about what happened *again*, *he* knew that the *vine-growers* did not *respect* or receive *his* servants and that *they* would likely continue to treat *his slaves* as enemies. *The landowner* considered *his* options. He thought, ‘*They will have no choice but to respect my son*.’ Thus, he sent his *son* to collect from the *vine-growers*.

*But when the vine-growers saw the son*, *they said among themselves*, ‘*This is the heir; come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance*.’ They took him, and threw him out of the *vineyard* and killed him.

*The vine-growers* not only treated *the landowner’s son* similarly to how *they* treated *his slaves*; *they* clearly did so knowing full-well who *his son* was. They reasoned that by killing the *landowner’s son* *they* could seize *his inheritance*—which included *the vineyard*. The *vine-growers* took their insolence and insubordination to the level of full-scale rebellion. They now made an overt play to repudiate their covenant with the *landowner*, and take full possession

under their own authority. By murdering the *landowner's son*, they had fully rejected the authority of the *landowner*.

Jesus then asked the chief priests and elders in the temple, *Therefore when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vine-growers?*

And they answered Jesus correctly: *He will bring those wretches to a wretched end, and will rent out the vineyard to other vine-growers who will pay him the proceeds at the proper seasons.*”

In Jesus's parable of the vine-growers:

- God is represented by *the landowner* (Isaiah 5:1-2)
- *The vineyard* represents the nation of Israel (Isaiah 5:7).
- *The vine-growers* represent the religious leaders in Israel—including the Sadducees and Pharisees (Matthew 21:45).
- *The slaves whom the landowner sent to receive the produce* represent the prophets—such as Jeremiah (Jeremiah 38:6) or John the Baptist (Matthew 14:1-11).
- *The landowner's son* represents Jesus, the *Son of God* (Matthew 16:16).

Jesus's *parable of the vine-growers* description was likely an allusion to the prophet Isaiah.

“Let me sing now for my well beloved  
A song of my beloved concerning His vineyard  
My well-beloved had a vineyard on a fertile hill  
He dug it all around, removed its stones,  
And planted it with the choicest vine.  
And He built a tower in the middle of it  
And also hewed out a wine vat in it;  
Then He expected it to produce good grapes,  
But it only produced worthless ones.”  
(Isaiah 5:1-2)

In Isaiah's passage *the vineyard* was a metaphor for the nation of Israel, and “my well-beloved” who *planted it* was God: “For *the vineyard* of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel...” (Isaiah 5:7).

Like *a vineyard*, Israel did not cultivate itself into a nation. God chose the children of Israel, called them out of bondage in Egypt and established its people into a nation in the land He promised to Abraham. The Lord promised them through Moses that He would bless them and that they would thrive among the nations if they would “keep the commandments... and walk in His ways” (Deuteronomy 28:9).

The people agreed to enter a covenant with God to keep His commands (Exodus 19:7-8). This would be analogous to the rental contract entered into by the *vine-growers*. Israel agreed to a covenant with God whereby they would be blessed if they kept His commands; and cursed if they did not. In large part, the blessing would stem directly from the natural cause-effect of Israel functioning as a self-governing nation, where neighbors loved and cared for one another, told the truth and protected one another. This contrasted with the surrounding cultures where the strong exploited the weak (Leviticus 18). The blessings would be like a share of the crop promised to the *vine-growers*.

Moses delivered the divine warning that many curses would happen to the children of Israel if they violated their covenant, their “rental agreement” and did not obey the Lord (Deuteronomy 28:15-68). The curses of Deuteronomy 28:15-68 sound quite similar to the Sadducees’ description for the proper judgement for the *vine-growers* when they responded to Jesus’s parable, “*He will bring those wretches to a wretched end, and will rent out the vineyard to other vine-growers who will pay him the proceeds at the proper seasons.*”

The children of Israel were not faithful to their God, and they suffered the prophetic curses that Moses foretold. They had repeatedly fallen away from God. And like *the vine-growers* in the parable, they violently abused and killed His prophets. And now God had *sent to them His own Son*.

Jesus’s *parable* proved to be prophetic about what *they* would do to Him. The priests and elders whom He spoke these things to would be the ones who would orchestrate His murder (Matthew 26:3-4). *They* would be the ones who *killed the son of the landowner*. Jesus would be crucified in less than a week of saying this *parable to them*. The Jewish leaders had pronounced their own judgement in their description of what would be appropriate for those who killed the *landowner’s son*. However, in spite of their rejection, Jesus asked God to forgive them while hanging on the cross (Luke 23:34). It seems that God answered that prayer, since Peter made it clear that Israel was given another chance to receive Jesus, after Jesus ascended into heaven (Acts 3: 19-21).

But before the *parable* proved prophetic, it was first a warning. It was a warning to the religious elders of Israel that God was directly speaking *to them*. And that this present moment was an opportunity to accept Jesus as their Messiah instead of shamefully killing him as *the vine-growers* in the parable did. This was their chance to not become as *they* said with their own mouths, *like those wretches* who will face *a wretched end* and have their stewardship of *the vineyard* taken from *them* and given *to others*.

## **Biblical Text**

**21:33-41** “Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard and put a wall around it and dug a wine press in it, and built a tower, and rented it out to vine-growers and went on a journey. When the harvest time approached, he sent his slaves to the vine-growers to receive his produce. The vine-growers took his slaves and beat one, and killed another, and stoned a third. Again he sent another group of slaves larger than the first; and they did the same thing to them. But afterward he sent his son to them, saying,

**‘They will respect my son.’ But when the vine-growers saw the son, they said among themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance.’ 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 vine-growers?” They said to Him, “He will bring those wretches to a wretched end, and will rent out the vineyard to other vine-growers who will pay him the proceeds at the proper seasons.”**