

Who are the Tenants in the Vineyard?  
Matthew 21: 33-46

The passage I read from Matthew a few moments ago follows immediately after the parable of the two sons which Jesus tells to those of the religious establishment who have confronted him about the source of his authority. It is not unusual for Jesus to respond to a challenge or a question with either a question of his own or a parable, but in this case in Matthew he has done both. He asks a question that the challengers find they cannot give an answer to without incriminating themselves. Then Jesus tells two parables—one right after the other, as if he knows that the first one will not be enough to establish two things. First, although he doesn't state it directly by the question he poses to those questioning him, he is claiming that he and John the Baptist both have received their missions directly from God and are obedient to God. The second point that Jesus is making is the nature of the mission given to them—John came to call the people to repentance and a changed way of living and to prepare them for Jesus' own message: the obedient son is the one who does the will of the father despite what words are said, while the one who promised obedience but failed in the doing God's Will clearly was not obedient. Just in case they have missed the point that Jesus is talking about them as the second, disobedient one they are told the second parable. They are given notice that the coming judgment will not be what they expect for in their religious institutions they have not carried out the Will of the father. With this as background we come to the second parable. This parable is found not only in Matthew, but also in Mark and Luke. It is placed in all three in the same narrative position after the confrontation in the Temple about the source of Jesus' authority. It is an indictment of the chief priests and Pharisees that have challenged Jesus' authority. At the end of the encounter they realize that Jesus has identified them as the wicked tenants. They want to arrest Jesus, but fear the crowds who are also listening to him in the Temple so they do not take action in the open. The most common way this parable has been read is seen in the subtitle often used as a heading for the passage: The Parable of the Wicked Tenants. It is usually assumed that God is represented by the landowner who prepares the vineyard so that it will be productive—setting up a watchtower to protect it, planting choice vines and building a winepress for the harvest to come. In the Isaiah passage which we also read this morning we have an Old Testament illustration of this image of God and the vineyard created with such loving care. It is understood that the people of Israel are represented by the vineyard. In fact, the opening of Jesus' parable draws heavily on this image exactly as it appears in Isaiah as he sets the scene for his story. Isaiah's song expresses God's grief and anger over the failure of the vineyard planted with such care to yield good fruit. Isaiah 5:7: "For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!" For this failure in the vineyard, it will be destroyed. But the parable Jesus' tells differs in the outcome of the vineyard. Within the parable as Jesus tells it, there is a fruitful crop, but the owner who created the vineyard leased it to some tenants and then expected to receive produce from it at the time of harvest. Jesus' implication seems to be the fault is not with the people but with the ones to whom the care of them was "leased". The parable proceeds with an account of the fate of the owner's representative who come to collect the harvest yield. The first ones are beaten, stoned and killed. The various accounts differ in how many times the owner sends

representatives to collect what he is due, but in all the accounts it is more than once. The owner seems to be very patient with these tenants who have failed in their duty. When these representatives fail to collect from the tenants, then the heir is sent on the assumption that surely the tenants will recognize his authority to collect from them. The heir fails no better and is slain. Traditionally this is viewed as an account summarizing the treatment of many of the prophets sent to Israel and Judah and to their crucifixion of Jesus, God's son. When Jesus finishes telling the story, he asks the chief Priests and Pharisees what will be the reaction of the landowner to his heir's death. The Chief Priests and Pharisees convict themselves with their reply that the tenants will receive a miserable death for their actions and the vineyard will be leased to a more worthy group. And truly, it would have made sense that this would have been the reaction of a landowner to the tenant's actions long before the heir was sent. This has often been a scripture used to support a view that the Jewish people were the ones who acted as wicked tenants and were thus supplanted by Christianity. This has historically led to anti-Semitism. So when trying to understand what Jesus is telling us today, we need to be aware of how this passage has been used in the past. Jesus here is speaking to those who are acting as if they are keepers of the faith while failing to live up to those things that are fundamental to God's desire for the human community. They have substituted legalism for the compassion and love which underlie God's ordinances. Looking at the parable as a way of finger pointing and ascribing blame creates a separation between the parable and our current lives. The tenants are read as just those whom Jesus is speaking to there in the Temple courtyard. But what happens if we then try to place our lives into this story? Where do we fit? If we view the wicked tenants as those who resist doing what the owner of the vineyard expects in return for the care that has been taken in preparing a place that will be fruitful we can then see ourselves then as candidates for that role. If the living out of God's will for love for all conflicts with our vested interest in the brokenness of the world, are we not acting as the wicked tenants? Jesus actually does not affirm the conclusion of the chief priest and the Pharisees in the way that you would expect. Instead, he switches his scriptural reference from Isaiah to the Psalms. Psalm 118: 22-23 is verse 42 in Jesus' parable. "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone: this was the Lord's doing and it is amazing in our eyes." In coming to reclaim what rightly belongs to his Father, the Son sets out to restore the world to its divinely created order. One only has to look at Jesus' ministry to see what this looks like: the sick are made well, sinners are restored, and God is praised. In short, Jesus' work brings wholeness to a broken world providing glimpses into what he terms the kingdom of heaven. This restoration of God's creation to what it was meant to be brings resistance from the broken world. The tenants enter. Their role was to protect and maintain the vineyard. As disciples of Jesus Christ, is that not our role—to praise God and to restore the relationships of community envisioned by God and modeled by Christ? Jesus is the cornerstone upon which we build in order to become the type of tenant in the vineyard that God desires. We can only hope and pray that with the guidance of the Holy Spirit that we move toward that goal. Amen.