

## **“Kingdom Secrets: The Tenants”**

**March 7, 2021**

### **Matthew 21:33-46**

**SI:** We’re studying Jesus’ kingdom parables, which he explains are the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven for believers.

In other words, these parables are about things the Lord Jesus wants us to understand and expect as we live in God’s invisible kingdom in this world.

What sorts of things?

Mostly spiritual principles or spiritual dynamics that are operative in the kingdom.

He doesn’t want us to be ignorant of these spiritual dynamics and run afoul of them. As we’ve seen so far, in a good number of these parables, Christ presents these things as warnings.

Warnings against unforgiveness, for example.

Or warnings about self-righteousness, as we saw last week.

This parable is yet another gracious warning.

**INTRO:** There was an Italian restaurant in St. Louis that Allison and I liked. There were two beautiful things in this restaurant. The first was a 30 inch pizza. It wasn't available for take-out, dine in only. And the way it covered the whole table was beautiful.

One time we went there with Allison's brother Dan, just the three of us, and he wanted to get the 30 incher.

We told him we wouldn't be able to eat the whole thing but he insisted.

He claimed that he could polish the thing off.

Dan could eat a lot. Allison's nickname for him growing up was

Nad (Dan spelled backwards N-a-d) Nad Pig.

So we got the big pizza. Allison and I ate all we could.

Nad Pig kept eating but he got slower and slower and then gave up.

The other truly beautiful thing in this restaurant was that all the interior walls were covered with antique stained glass windows.

They were mounted in wooden frames and backlit, so the whole place was aglow with colors.

These stained glass windows were obviously from old churches.

Some of them had Christian symbols, crosses, anchors, open Bibles.

Some of them had images of Jesus and other Bible scenes.

I was in seminary at the time and whenever we would eat there I would find myself wondering: What happened to these churches?

A long time ago these churches were alive.

They had grown enough and reached a size that the congregation had decided to build a building.

The members made financial sacrifices, they gave their money and resources.

They talked about how their children and children's children would worship in this place.

On a special Lord's Day they dedicated their new building with hymns and prayers.

There was a spirit of expectation and gratitude.

So here's the question:

How did stained glass windows purchased with the tithes and offerings of God's people end up decorating a pizza parlor?

What happened?

Maybe they grew so much that they ran out of space.

So they had to tear down their old churches to build bigger ones.

But I doubt it.

I think something bad happened to those churches and I think I know what it was. I think at some point Jesus Christ came to those churches and he said:  
“I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.”

The reason those churches closed was fruitlessness.

The Bible often speaks of spiritual fruit.

Spiritual fruit is the outward evidence of spiritual life.  
If there is no fruit, there is no life.

And when a church or a person goes on year after year with no fruit then eventually the time comes when the Lord cuts them off.

Do you think that is far-fetched?

That the Lord sometimes closes churches?  
That he removes them from his kingdom?

The point of this parable is clear.

Jesus is addressing the religious leaders of Jewish nation  
He reminds them: God honored you above all nations.

You were chosen to be the cradle of the Savior of the world.  
God gave you centuries to prepare for the Messiah’s coming.

But instead of producing spiritual fruit you squandered it and resisted me.  
So I am removing you from your place of prominence in my kingdom.

In your place I am putting the nations of the Gentles.  
And through them I am going to work out my plans

You may think, Jesus is talking to the Jewish religious leaders.  
This parable doesn’t have anything to do with me. But it does.

His warning against fruitlessness is also spoken to us.  
In order to serve in God’s kingdom, you must produce fruit.

Let’s look at this under two headings:

1. The history of fruitlessness
2. The fruit of the kingdom

## **MP#1 The history of fruitlessness**

If you don't like history, or if you think history is unimportant, then you're always going to have a hard time understanding the Bible.

Because 40% of the Bible is history and our faith is based on things that God has done in history through people and nations.

In this parable Jesus summarizes, in a masterful way, a very important thread of Old Testament history—the history of fruitlessness in Israel.

This is not the only story in the Bible, or even the main story.

The main story is God's faithfulness.

But it is a thread of Old Testament history Jesus calls attention to in this parable.

And it's a history that every Christian needs to know.

Jesus presents this history of fruitlessness by telling a story about a vineyard.

Now right away, when he starts talking about a vineyard, his Jewish audience understood he was talking about Israel and God's purposes for Israel.

The prophets often used this word picture as we read earlier in Isaiah 5.

When did God plant his vineyard?

When he saved Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt and brought them out and gave them a home in the Promised Land.

In the parable and in Isaiah there is a wall and a watchtower.

This was typical of vineyards then, to keep out animals and people from stealing. But what are the wall and watchtower symbolically?

The law of God. The Ten Commandments.

That's how God sets a protection and boundary for his people.

So now let's get to the most important bit of symbolism.

What is the fruit? What did God want Israel to produce?

The fruit he wanted them to produce was a holy life of faith in him.

He wanted them to believe him, trust him, love him, and follow him.

He wanted them to live differently from the surrounding nations as a testimony of his salvation.

That sounds familiar. That's what God wants from us.

We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works.

But here's where the history of fruitlessness begins.

Because Israel refused to be a people set apart.

Not every individual, of course, there were always some faithful believers.

But as a whole, Israel didn't want to be a people set apart.

They wanted to have all the blessings of being God's chosen people such as the

political stability and economic prosperity of the line of David.  
But they wanted to live morally like the people around them.

And that's exactly what they did.

A great many of the Israelites married unbelieving Canaanites.

They adopted their practices, particularly their sexual immorality.

They worshipped the idols of the Canaanites alongside the Lord.

All the while they had a belligerent attitude.

Don't judge us. We're the chosen people. We're blessed.

Did you notice the belligerence and arrogance of the tenant farmers in parable?

The owner of the vineyard wants fruit.

But how do they respond? Don't tell us what to do.

Over and over God sent prophets who would say:

Remember your heritage. Remember the Lord and his covenant with you.

He wants you to live holy lives, set apart morally from people around you.

He wants you to get ready for the Savior of the world.

But they didn't listen and sometimes actually killed the prophets,

just like the tenants kill the messengers of the vineyard owner in the parable.

By the time Jesus came, the Jews no longer worshipped pagan idols, instead they had made morality and religion their idol.

Instead of using the law to obey God and love God and to see their need for a

Savior, they used the law to say: We're good people, God has to bless us.

We're not sinners. We don't need to repent and be saved. Don't judge us.

That's why they hated Christ.

Even so, Jesus was burdened for his people, the Jewish people.

He tried to convince them, especially the religious leaders, to wake up to their self-righteousness, fruitlessness, ingratitude.

But he could not convince them, so they crucified him, just as he said they would.

They killed the son of the owner of the vineyard.

That did not stop God's salvation plan.

God preserved a remnant of faithful Jews who believed in Christ.

You know their names, Peter, Andrew, John, James, Paul, the apostles.

They were the founders of the church.

But from that time, God chose another nation to bear fruit.

God chose the Gentiles, which includes us.

The Jewish people, for the time being, are cut off from significant place in vineyard.

What do you make of this story? What significance does it have for us?

A ready-made commentary on this parable is in Romans 11.  
Paul is talking about God's dealing with Israel for their fruitlessness.

Instead of a vineyard, the image is of an olive tree.  
Paul says that God has cut off the branch of the Jewish nation and he has ingrafted a wild olive branch, which is us, the Gentiles.

But now listen to what Paul says in Romans 11:20, speaking to Roman Christians who were Gentiles like us, with no Jewish blood  
"Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. For if God did not spare the natural branches, He will not spare you either. Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in His kindness. Otherwise you also will be cut off."

"Be afraid. Otherwise you also will be cut off."

Is this true? Does God sometimes cut people off who are professing Christians? Didn't Paul write somewhere else: "Nothing can separate us from God's love?"  
If you can't lose your salvation, how can Paul say that if you are fruitless you will be cut off just as the Jews were?

How do you reconcile these seemingly conflicting theological assertions.

Here's how you reconcile them.

Rest in the assurance of your salvation.

And at the same time fear the warnings against fruitlessness.

The Bible doesn't let you take one doctrine, even one as precious as eternal security and park there and bend all of Scripture to that one truth.

The word of God is living and active, sharper than a double-edged sword.

To the struggling Christian it says: Be encouraged, you are secure

To the complacent Christian it says: Be warned, fruitlessness will get you cut off.

Both doctrines are intended to drive you to Jesus Christ.

What about you? Are you complacent in your Christian life?

Have you been so blessed by God, materially perhaps, that your life is bearing very little tangible evidence of the spiritual life inside, very little repentance, very little holiness, very little forgiveness?

This is a warning to individuals and to churches.

Fruitlessness will get you cut off from the kingdom of God.

The history of Israel proves it.

## **MP#2 The fruit of the kingdom.**

"The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit."

I've said already that spiritual fruit is outward evidences of the inward condition and direction of heart. But can we get more specific than that?

Actually, there are a number of ways we could slice this pie.

We could look at Galatians 5, and the fruit of the Spirit listed there.

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness and so forth.

Allison has been teaching a Bible study on the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5 and she and I have been talking about them with each other.

So that would be one way to answer the question, do a Bible survey.

But I want to focus on this parable. I think there are three fruit in this parable.

You will certainly be able to apply all three of these to yourself personally.

But the thrust of this parable and Jesus' concern is the whole church.

So I'm going to try to make that connection too.

The three fruit in this parable are stewardship, submission, and love

### **1. Stewardship of the vineyard owner's property**

It's significant that the main characters in the parable are tenant farmers.

They get to work the land and enjoy the fruit of their labor, but the vineyard does not belong to them. They aren't owners, they are stewards of his property.

That's why their arrogance is so appalling. They act like it's theirs.

We've already seen this in the history of Israel.

How over and over they acted like God's blessings were theirs by right.

The Lord is tremendously generous to you.

He gives you much more than the bare necessities of life.

He fills your life with good things for you to work and enjoy.

And what he wants from you is an attitude toward all that stuff that says:

God, I know this is ultimately yours and I am a steward.

I am a steward of your money, this business I own is really yours.

My family, my children, my possessions, my reputation.

Yours, yours, yours for me to use and cultivate and enjoy.

There is a lot of negative talk in American culture right now about privilege.

You should be ashamed if you have privilege.

If you family advantages or financial advantages or supposed racial advantages, then shame on you. Check your privilege.

That is wrong.

Shame about what God has given you is as wrong as arrogance.

God gives privileges. God gives advantages.

They don't originate in the person or belong to the person.

So, your attitude toward them shouldn't be arrogance or shame it should be stewardship.

That means that within your calling, and within your station in life, you are going to do all you can to grow what God has given you, and to help other people do the same.

Stewardship will always express itself in moderation and generosity.

In churches, stewardship will be demonstrated by a heart to spend tithes and offerings on missions and on expanding the kingdom outside the four walls of the particular congregation.

To put it plainly, not wanting to spend all our money on us, but to spend it on other people far away who we will never see until we get to heaven. That's the first fruit.

## **2. Submission to the vineyard owner's messengers**

In the parable, the servants of the landowner who come to the tenants to collect rent symbolize the prophets. I already mentioned this.

If you read the Old Testament prophets, they express many concerns.

Believers marrying unbelievers, sexual immorality, lack of generosity to the poor, empty religious services, refusing to tithe.

The prophets were often treated with hostility because they were putting their fingers on particular areas of life and saying.

That is what God wants you to change. That's where God wants obedience.

The people didn't want to hear that.

I've told you this joke before, so you don't have to laugh. But it makes the point.

A young preacher was called to a church in Kentucky.

The first Sunday he preached about the evils of smoking. Deacons told him:

This is Kentucky, we grow the finest burley tobacco in the country.

The second Sunday he preached on the evils of drinking. Deacons told him:

This is Kentucky, we distill the finest bourbon whiskey in the country.

The third Sunday he preached about the evils of gambling. Deacons told him:

This is Kentucky, we raise the fastest racehorses in the country.

So the young preacher got frustrated and said: Well, what can I preach about?

They said: Why don't you preach about African witchdoctors.

There ain't one of them within 5,000 miles.

No Christian resists when Word of God speaks in an area that doesn't bother you.

How do you respond when it does? Do you murder the prophets?

As a church, this means cultivating an appetite for the whole counsel of God.



Submitting to God's word, especially the hard parts.  
Encouraging the preacher when he preaches the hard parts.

### **3. Love for the vineyard owner's Son**

Fruitlessness of Jewish nation was ultimately seen in rejection of Jesus Christ.

On the other hand, the greatest fruit is love for Jesus Christ

Fruit is outward evidence of inward direction of heart

So how is this love outwardly displayed?

Stewardship fairly obvious in the way you use what God has given you.

Submission to the word of God is also obvious, especially when it is focused on a very particular part of your life.

But love for Christ seems more hidden and secret.

Where does this fruit show itself?

Before I answer, let me point out that entirely possible for a church to be fruitless in this area

In Revelation 2, the Lord Jesus speaks to the church in Ephesus and he says:

"I hold this against you, you have forsaken your first love."

The first love of the church is love for Christ.

Think about that. The Ephesian church was doctrinally sound.

Christ commended them for their good theology.

But he warns them, if you do not repent of your lack of love, I will remove your lampstand. Which is another way of saying: You will be cut off.

So back to the question, where is the fruit of love for Christ displayed.

In your love for one another in the body of Christ.

In your love for your brothers and sisters in the church.

And that is very concrete and visible.

Loving conversations, loving confrontation, deeds of practical service, praying for one another, bearing one another's weaknesses, forgiving one another, refraining from all destructive uses of the tongue, using your words to build one another up in the Lord.

When a church is filled with this fruit, then it is prominent in God's kingdom.

We don't have any stained glass windows, so no worries this church will be taken apart and used to decorate a pizza parlor.

But let's heed the gracious warning of our Lord Jesus Christ against fruitlessness and pursue a life of stewardship, submission, and love.