The Parable of the Wicked Vine-Growers

By Mark Mayberry
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The Wickedness of Men

The parable of the wicked vine-growers appears in each of the synoptic gospels (Matt. 21:33-46; Mark 12:1-12; Luke 20:9-19), addressing the themes of reward and respect, rejection and recompense, removal and reassignment, etc.

Matthew 21:33–46 (NASB95) — 33 “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. 34 “When the harvest time approached, he sent his slaves to the vine-growers to receive his produce. 35 “The vine-growers took his slaves and beat one, and killed another, and stoned a third. 36 “Again he sent another group of slaves larger than the first; and they did the same thing to them. 37 “But afterward he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ 38 “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.’ 39 “They took him, and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. 40 “Therefore when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vine-growers?” 41 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.” 42 Jesus said to them, “Did you never read in the Scriptures, ‘THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS REJECTED, THIS BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER STONE; THIS CAME ABOUT FROM THE LORD, AND IT IS MARVELOUS IN OUR EYES’?” 43 “Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people, producing the fruit of it. 44 “And he who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust.” 45 When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard His parables, they understood that He was speaking about them. 46 When they sought to seize Him, they feared the people, because they considered Him to be a prophet.

Mark 12:1–12 (NASB95) — 1 And He began to speak to them in parables: “A man PLANTED A VINEYARD AND PUT A WALL AROUND IT, AND DUG A VAT UNDER THE WINE PRESS AND BUILT A TOWER, and rented it out to vine-growers and went on a journey. 2 “At the harvest time he sent a slave to the vine-growers, in order to receive some of the produce of the vineyard from the vine-growers. 3 “They took him, and beat him and sent him away empty-handed. 4 “Again he sent them another slave, and they wounded him in the head, and treated him shamefully. 5 “And he sent another, and that one they killed; and so with many others, beating some and killing others. 6 “He had one more to send, a beloved son; he sent him last of all to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ 7 “But those vine-growers said to one another, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours!’ 8 “They took him, and killed him and threw him out of the
vineyard. 9 “What will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the vine-growers, and will give the vineyard to others. 10 “Have you not even read this Scripture: ‘THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS REJECTED, THIS BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER stone;’ 11 THIS CAME ABOUT FROM THE LORD, AND IT IS MARVELOUS IN OUR EYES’? ” 12 And they were seeking to seize Him, and yet they feared the people, for they understood that He spoke the parable against them. And so they left Him and went away.

Luke 20:9–19 (NASB95) — 9 And He began to tell the people this parable: “A man planted a vineyard and rented it out to vine-growers, and went on a journey for a long time. 10 “At the harvest time he sent a slave to the vine-growers, so that they would give him some of the produce of the vineyard; but the vine-growers beat him and sent him away empty-handed. 11 “And he proceeded to send another slave; and they beat him also and treated him shamefully and sent him away empty-handed. 12 “And he proceeded to send a third; and this one also they wounded and cast out. 13 “The owner of the vineyard said, ’What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.’ 14 “But when the vine-growers saw him, they reasoned with one another, saying, ’This is the heir; let us kill him so that the inheritance will be ours.’ 15 “So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. What, then, will the owner of the vineyard do to them? 16 “He will come and destroy these vine-growers and will give the vineyard to others.” When they heard it, they said, “May it never be!” 17 But Jesus looked at them and said, “What then is this that is written: ’THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS REJECTED, THIS BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER stone’? 18 “Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust.” 19 The scribes and the chief priests tried to lay hands on Him that very hour, and they feared the people; for they understood that He spoke this parable against them.

The landowner represents God, the vineyard is Israel (or more generally, His people), the vine-growers are religious leaders, the slaves of the landowner are the prophets, and His son is the Christ. In this parable, judgment falls upon the vine-growers (cf. Ezek. 34:1-6; Mal. 2:7-9); elsewhere, judgment is pronounced against the vineyard itself (Isa. 5:1-7; Jer. 44:4-6). God expects His people to bear fruit (Matt. 3:8-10; John 15:1-5).

Ezekiel 34:1–6 (NASB95) — 1 Then the word of the LORD came to me saying, 2 “Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. Prophesy and say to those shepherds, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD, “Woe, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock? 3 “You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat sheep without feeding the flock. 4 “Those who are sickly you have not strengthened, the diseased you have not healed, the broken you have not bound up, the scattered you have not brought back, nor have you sought for the lost; but with force and with severity you have dominated them. 5 “They were scattered for lack of a shepherd, and they became food for every beast of the field and were scattered. 6 “My flock wandered through all the mountains and on every high hill; My flock was scattered over all the surface of the earth, and there was no one to search or seek for them.’ ” ”

Malachi 2:7–9 (NASB95) — 7 “For the lips of a priest should preserve knowledge, and men should seek instruction from his mouth; for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts. 8 “But as for you, you have turned aside from the way; you have caused many to stumble
by the instruction; you have corrupted the covenant of Levi,” says the LORD of hosts. 9 “So I also have made you despised and abased before all the people, just as you are not keeping My ways but are showing partiality in the instruction.

Isaiah 5:1–7 (NASB95) — 1 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. 2 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 produced only worthless ones. 3 “And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, Judge between Me and My vineyard. 4 “What more was there to do for My vineyard that I have not done in it? Why, when I expected it to produce good grapes did it produce worthless ones? 5 “So now let Me tell you what I am going to do to My vineyard: I will remove its hedge and it will be consumed; I will break down its wall and it will become trampled ground. 6 “I will lay it waste; It will not be pruned or hoed, But briars and thorns will come up. I will also charge the clouds to rain no rain on it.” 7 For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel And the men of Judah His delightful plant. Thus He looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; For righteousness, but behold, a cry of distress.

Jeremiah 44:4–6 (NASB95) — 4 ‘Yet I sent you all My servants the prophets, again and again, saying, ‘Oh, do not do this abominable thing which I hate.’ 5 ‘But they did not listen or incline their ears to turn from their wickedness, so as not to burn sacrifices to other gods. 6 ‘Therefore My wrath and My anger were poured out and burned in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem, so they have become a ruin and a desolation as it is this day.

Matthew 3:8–10 (NASB95) — 8 “Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance; 9 and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham for our father’; for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham. 10 “The axe is already laid at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

John 15:1–5 (NASB95) — 1 “I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. 2 “Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit. 3 “You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. 4 “Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. 5 “I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.

The Wondrousness of God

Jesus quotes Psalms 118:22-23, “The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief corner stone; this is the Lord’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes,” a Messianic prophecy repeatedly referenced in the NT (Matt. 21:42; Mark 12:10-11; Luke 20:17; Acts 4:11; 1 Pet. 2:6-8).
A cornerstone may refer to (1) the cap-stone or top-stone, i.e., the last (crowning) stone of a building (or arch), or alternatively, it may refer to (2) the first stone that is laid in the foundation of a building, i.e., the stone that marks the corner of two walls and unites them together. Christ is the chief cornerstone of the church (Eph. 2:19-22).

Psalm 118:22–29 (NASB95) — 22 The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief corner stone. 23 This is the LORD’s doing; It is marvelous in our eyes. 24 This is the day which the LORD has made; Let us rejoice and be glad in it. 25 O LORD, do save, we beseech You; O LORD, we beseech You, do send prosperity! 26 Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD; We have blessed you from the house of the LORD. 27 The LORD is God, and He has given us light; Bind the festival sacrifice with cords to the horns of the altar. 28 You are my God, and I give thanks to You; You are my God, I extol You. 29 Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good; For His lovingkindness is everlasting.

Matthew 21:42–44 (NASB95) — 42 Jesus said to them, “Did you never read in the Scriptures, ‘THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS REJECTED, THIS BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER stone; THIS CAME ABOUT FROM THE LORD, AND IT IS MARVELOUS IN OUR EYES’? 43 Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people, producing the fruit of it. 44 “And he who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust.”

Mark 12:10–11 (NASB95) — 10 “Have you not even read this Scripture: ‘THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS REJECTED, THIS BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER stone; 11 THIS CAME ABOUT FROM THE LORD, AND IT IS MARVELOUS IN OUR EYES’?”

Luke 20:17–18 (NASB95) — 17 But Jesus looked at them and said, “What then is this that is written: ‘THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS REJECTED, THIS BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER stone’? 18 “Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust.”

Acts 4:8–12 (NASB95) — 8 Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers and elders of the people, 9 if we are on trial today for a benefit done to a sick man, as to how this man has been made well, 10 let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by this name this man stands here before you in good health. 11 “He is the stone which was rejected by you, the builders, but which became the chief corner stone. 12 “And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved.”

1 Peter 2:4–8 (NASB95) — 4 And coming to Him as to a living stone which has been rejected by men, but is choice and precious in the sight of God, 5 you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 6 For this is contained in Scripture: “BEHOLD, I LAY IN ZION A CHOICE STONE, A PRECIOUS CORNER stone, AND HE WHO BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED.” 7 This precious value, then, is for you who believe; but for those who disbelieve, “THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS REJECTED, THIS BECAME THE VERY CORNER stone,” 8 and, “A STONE OF STUMBLING AND A ROCK OF OFFENSE”; for
they stumble because they are disobedient to the word, and to this doom they were also appointed.

Ephesians 2:19–22 (NASB95) — 19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God’s household, 20 having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, 21 in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, 22 in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.

Men may oppose the plan and purpose of God, but all who do so will stumble and be broken (Isa. 8:11-15; 28:14-22; Rom. 9:30-33; 1 Pet. 2:4-8).

Isaiah 8:11–15 (NASB95) — 11 For thus the LORD spoke to me with mighty power and instructed me not to walk in the way of this people, saying, 12 “You are not to say, ‘It is a conspiracy!’ In regard to all that this people call a conspiracy, And you are not to fear what they fear or be in dread of it. 13 “It is the LORD of hosts whom you should regard as holy. And He shall be your fear, And He shall be your dread. 14 “Then He shall become a sanctuary; But to both the houses of Israel, a stone to strike and a rock to stumble over, And a snare and a trap for the inhabitants of Jerusalem. 15 “Many will stumble over them, Then they will fall and be broken; They will even be snared and caught.”

Isaiah 28:14–22 (NASB95) — 14 Therefore, hear the word of the LORD, O scoffers, Who rule this people who are in Jerusalem, 15 Because you have said, “We have made a covenant with death, And with Sheol we have made a pact. The overwhelming scourge will not reach us when it passes by, For we have made falsehood our refuge and we have concealed ourselves with deception.” 16 Therefore thus says the Lord GOD, “Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a tested stone, A costly cornerstone for the foundation, firmly placed. He who believes in it will not be disturbed. 17 “I will make justice the measuring line And righteousness the level; Then hail will sweep away the refuge of lies And the waters will overflow the secret place. 18 “Your covenant with death will be canceled, And your pact with Sheol will not stand; When the overwhelming scourge passes through, Then you become its trampling place. 19 “As often as it passes through, it will seize you; For morning after morning it will pass through, anytime during the day or night, And it will be sheer terror to understand what it means.” 20 The bed is too short on which to stretch out, And the blanket is too small to wrap oneself in. 21 For the LORD will rise up as at Mount Perazim, He will be stirred up as in the valley of Gibeon, To do His task, His unusual task, And to work His work, His extraordinary work. 22 And now do not carry on as scoffers, Or your fetters will be made stronger; For I have heard from the Lord GOD of hosts Of decisive destruction on all the earth.

Romans 9:30–33 (NASB95) — 30 What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, attained righteousness, even the righteousness which is by faith; 31 but Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness, did not arrive at that law. 32 Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as though it were by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone, 33 just as it is written, “BEHOLD, I LAY IN ZION A STONE OF STUMBLING AND A ROCK OF OFFENSE, AND HE WHO BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED.”
1 Peter 2:4–8 (NASB95) — 4 And coming to Him as to a living stone which has been rejected by men, but is choice and precious in the sight of God, 5 you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 6 For this is contained in Scripture: “BEHOLD, I LAY IN ZION A CHOICE STONE, A PRECIOUS CORNER stone, AND HE WHO BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED.” 7 This precious value, then, is for you who believe; but for those who disbelieve, “THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS REJECTED, THIS BECAME THE VERY CORNER stone,” 8 and, “A STONE OF STUMBLING AND A ROCK OF OFFENSE”; for they stumble because they are disobedient to the word, and to this doom they were also appointed.