
Rejecting the Father

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 4 October 2026

Philippians 3:4b-14 • Matthew 21:33-46



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

Sometimes I wish I were a fire-and-brimstone kind of preacher. The tenants in today's parable are so wicked and the message of what will happen to them in the end is so strong that it seems just made for a "you're-all-going-to-hell" kind of message! That there is evil in this world seems undeniable — so many tragic events provide proof of that. Does God ever give up on his creation? Do we get a second chance?

In the Parable of the Tenants, it's pretty clear who the landowner is. They tell us in theology school not to be too quick to assign roles in Jesus' parables, but I think we can agree that the landowner is God, and the poor unfortunate son whom the tenants seize and kill is Jesus Christ. Jesus reinforces the message

after he relates the story, telling the chief priests and the Pharisees (the usual suspects) that “the kingdom of God will be taken away from” them and given to others; and the chief priests and the Pharisees “knew he was talking about them” (Matt 21:43, 45). They had indeed rejected God’s messengers, the prophets who told of Jesus’ coming. They had failed to understand, when they read their own Scriptures, that God was planning a new thing, and had spoken through Isaiah and Micah and the other prophets in order to alert the Jews. They waited for a Messiah, but were not ready when he came. Most recently, they rejected the testimony of John the Baptist, Jesus’ own cousin, whom they had actually heard speak. And ultimately, they were going to kill the Son himself, the last one God would send.

For Jesus is, as far as we know, our last chance for salvation. God wants us all to repent in our hearts and come to him — every one of us. God is waiting to take us all home to his heart. Many there are today who accept Jesus’ message, who never had the chance to see Jesus in person. These scribes and Pharisees did see Jesus, and they saw his last prophet, John, and still rejected what God was saying to them.

Jesus speaks of this last chance at the end of our passage today. “The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.” The Pharisees have lost their chance — it passed them by. God will give his grace and his favour to other people, who will believe and trust and grow God’s kingdom on earth. And indeed God did just that, passing on the great blessing and the great responsibility to the apostles, people like Paul and Peter and Barnabas, who picked up the torch and ran with it. Through their initial efforts, the word of Christ has spread around the world, into every country on earth.

Notice that, in the parable, the landowner plants the vineyard, digs a winepress, and builds a wall and a watchtower. God then gives this to the tenants to tend — not a barren piece of ground, but one which is ready and able to produce grapes. In just this way, God gives us the wherewithal to grow his kingdom: our gifts, our intelligence, the knowledge of God’s nature through the Bible, and so much else. And the giving continues. For we too are given this great chance and opportunity to grow in God’s grace.

But we have to do a little work. We have to tend the vineyard. And we have to accept Jesus when he comes again. Will we be ready?

There is another side to this story, and it comes in through Jesus’ question to the Pharisees and scribes at the end of the story. Jesus asks them what the owner of the vineyard will do to the cruel slaves. They are ready with an answer:

He will bring those wretches to a wretched end, and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time.
(Matt 21:41)

And thereby they prescribe their own just reward. The tenants who will not acknowledge their landlord will no longer share in the bounty of the vineyard. Jesus continues,

Have you never read in the Scriptures:

‘The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; 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. Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed.

(Matthew 21:42-44)

Jesus speaks of the vengeance of God on the tenants for their wrongdoing in rejecting God’s prophets and God’s son. Not only is the burgeoning vineyard to be taken away from them, but they themselves will be broken in pieces. Notice who does this. It is not other people; it is not a judicial or police action; it is the vineyard owner: it is God who avenges. This is an important point. In God’s world, we try to do our best to live according to God’s laws. We are our brothers’ keepers, and so we try to help each other to follow the right path; but we are not responsible for the correction of those who fail to do so. When we do our best to bring a brother or sister to Christ, and that one instead rejects Christ, we have done our duty. Leave that one to God.

I met a fellow once who stopped to talk to me when he saw my collar. He had had a fairly hard life; perhaps he had not made good choices along the way; he had done some bad things to other people, and others had done bad things to him. But he had trust in the Lord, and he understood that it was not for him to take revenge on those who had hurt him. The depth of his faith surprised and cheered me. “‘Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord,’” he quoted, “it’s not up to me.”

What happens to those tenants? Are they thrown into the outer darkness, where there is weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth? In our society, we throw them in jail. This should not be for vengeance, but for rehabilitation, or protection of future victims, or both. There was a few years ago the case of the Las Vegas gunman, who was shot dead by the police after he killed many people. In this case, the evildoer is dead, and so there is no question but that his fate is up to God. What do we wish on such a person? As we look at the murdered concert-goers and shattered families left behind, do we want him to suffer eternal torment? I doubt that most of us would be ready to forgive him. Yet God, in his endless mercy, may well do just that, in the end.

Perhaps that is the strongest reason why we leave vengeance to God. We will never have the depth of understanding and mercy which God has. We cannot, for we are limited in our perception. We do not know the wrongdoer intimately, as God knows each one of us intimately. We do not know how he was put together. So we end on a rather unsatisfying note, perhaps; yet consider this: would we not ourselves want as our judge the one who ultimately knows us better than any of our fellow humans possibly can? For all our faults, and all the wrong things we might have done, big or small, we have to thank God that it is God's judgment which matters. We are safe in the hands of our loving Father. Amen.