

Under New Management

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Preacher: Joe Hall

[0 : 0 0] Well, we come to the end of Matthew chapter 21 this morning, and we've been thinking about! And we've been thinking about this idea for a few weeks together, that the coming of King Jesus! has changed the way that we come to God for good. The old way that was represented by the temple in Jerusalem is no longer fit for purpose, and so Jesus has said its days are numbered. He has come to clean house and start again, and not with a shiny new building, but rather with himself as the cornerstone or foundation of God's people. And this morning, he continues to impress that truth upon the people back then and upon us as we hear him today, and he does that with a parable or a story about a vineyard. Now, if you've been with us the last few weeks, I hope that you will hear that word vineyard, and you will think, ah, I know what this is about. This is a story about God's kingdom.

We've heard this, haven't we? Jesus is circling back to this theme, this image of the vineyard, God as God's people, his kingdom. But today, Jesus builds up that picture even more for us to grasp his point, and he does that really cleverly in our passage. Here, Jesus is taking a 700-year-old love song about God and his people, and he turns it into a breakup ballad. The chief priests in the temple, Israel and her people, and her people would have been familiar with Isaiah's love song that we had read for us earlier. They knew very well that the vineyard was supposed to be them, God's kingdom, and that the fruit that he wanted from them was righteousness and justice. But now Jesus takes the words, the lyrics of that song, and he says, it's over. It was a bad relationship, even in Isaiah's time. But now it's done. Time to move on. Time to put God's vineyard under new management. King Jesus has come, so change is coming. It's worth saying, I think, before we go on, that one of the downstream effects of that change is that when we're talking about Israel in our passage, or indeed in the Gospels, that's not the same as the modern state of Israel that we've been hearing about in the news. No, it's God's ancient people in the Old Testament who Jesus came to before his gospel spread to the ends of the earth. So, this isn't to be taken as a kind of contemporary political commentary on current news. No, this is the gospel about Jesus Christ, and it's in that way that we should hear these words this morning. And so, we're going to take our time just walking through this parable, and we're going to spot along the way the few things that I've noted down on the sheet for us, and then we'll draw out the two lessons that Jesus gives to us at the end. Let's hear together, then, the tenant's tale. Verse 33, there was a master of a house who planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a wine press in it and built a tower and leased it to tenants and went into another country. Picture it in the news, a multi-million pound investment pledged by world's richest man on new vineyard, work to begin immediately. Plans show no expense to be spared, on state-of-the-art facility. He plants the vineyard. He protects the vines with the fence, the tower. He provides for the vineyard by digging a wine press. I've only visited a few distilleries in my time, but one of the best tours that I've done was Kilcomen. They were very proud to be able to say that all the production happened there on site, from the grain they grew in the fields all the way through to the bottling at the end. Nothing outsourced, minimal purchased in. They were properly chuffed with what they had built. Well, this vineyard is like that wine press on site. It isn't just a vineyard. It is a full-blown winery. Nothing has been spared. The owner tours his gleaming new vineyard, and then he steps outside and hands over the keys to the eager managers whom he has chosen out of the thousands of candidates to run this unbelievable place. Friends, right at the outset of this story,

we are supposed to see the goodness of this master. He loves his vineyard. And if the owner is clearly standing in for God, remember the vineyard is his people, his kingdom. Psalm 80, which we go to sing at the end of our service, speaks of God bringing a vine out of Egypt and planting it in a fertile place. God did not spare any expense in rescuing his people out of slavery and bringing them

into a promised land. He did incredible wonders to set them free. He brought them through the sea to safety.

He fed them in the desert. He met them on the mountain. He fought their battles, and he brought them safely home. You could say that God planted a garden in the east, and there he put the people he had formed.

And like a dad who cannot get enough of giving good things to his kids, God broke the bank, pouring out his goodness on Old Testament Israel. The owner in the story goes away from his vineyard.

[6 : 41] Of course, God never left his people. We have to remember it's a parable, so not every detail corresponds to something in real life. But the good God did give his people leaders, kings, judges, chief priests, tenants, to work and keep his vineyard. Yet how did those tenants repay the good God? Verse 34, when the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit, and the tenants took his servants, beat one, killed another, and stoned another.

This is shocking, isn't it? The owner wants what's his, the produce of the vineyard, but the tenants whom he has put in charge violently refuse. It's hard to imagine, but picture this, the shareholders of a company are meeting with the board of directors to see how the business is going, and the shareholders say, how much money have we made? The board says, well, this is how much profit we've turned over, but you're not getting any of it. Next thing you know, shareholders are running for their lives out of the building, soaked in blood, while others lie dead in the corridors.

It's the owner's vineyard, it's his fruits, but the tenants send his servants back, not only empty-handed, but some not at all. Now, if God is the owner and the chief priests, the leaders of God's people, are the tenants in this story, while the servants are the prophets whom God sent to his people to collect what he was owed. We know that because in a few chapters' time, Jesus is going to look out over the city in tears and say of the city, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who were sent to it. And indeed, that is the sad story of the Old Testament.

They grumbled against Moses. They rejected Samuel. They put Jeremiah in a pit. Isaiah is said to have been sawn in half. The last prophet, of course, John the Baptist, they beheaded. And the one who the prophets preached, they crucified. Some they were content only to ignore, others they murdered.

Only very rarely did they give God what he asked for through the prophets. Israel's leaders should have been in awe of God for his great goodness and generosity to them, full of gratitude to him, eager to serve him. God had chosen them out of every nation of the earth to be his treasured possession.

[9 : 47] But instead, we see the absolute wickedness of the tenants in the vineyard. And of course, it doesn't take a genius to work out what becomes obvious to Jesus' hearers in verse 45.

When the chief priests and Pharisees heard his parables, he perceived he was speaking about them. Brothers and sisters, we are not to feel sorry for these people. The very fact that Jesus is still speaking to them and telling them his parables should amaze us, given the history of violence and rebellion that they are part of, which is what we see in the next two verses, the owner's patience. Again, again, he sent other servants more than at first, and they did the same to them. Friends, see the immense patience of the Lord. How many prophets would have to die before he said enough? They beat and kill and stone the first servant, so he sends even more.

I wonder, have you ever asked, sometimes people ask this, don't they, why is the Old Testament so long? It's the biggest part of the Bible, isn't it? And I think we wonder that because we look at Jesus, who it's all heading towards, and we see in him salvation and rescue and new life, and we think, bring it on, right? We can't get to him quickly enough, can we? But we forget that for God's enemies, and not least the leaders of his rebellious people, Jesus' coming meant judgment. In fact, the very last prophet of the Old Testament, Malachi, warned, the Lord who you seek will suddenly come to his temple. But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears?

[11 : 47] For he is like a refiner's fire. What will happen? He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver. He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the Lord. So if the chief priests are feeling the heat from Jesus in the temple, well, they had been warned, if they hadn't, in fact, ignored God's servant Malachi, just like all the other prophets. Why is the Old Testament so long?

Brothers and sisters, partly it is because God is so unbelievably patient. As Peter would later write to Christians, wondering when Jesus will finally come back, the Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise, as some count slowness, but is patient towards you.

Why? Not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. We wish Jesus had come much sooner, but in God's eternal plan, he did not come a day too soon.

Friends, who would put up with open rebellion for so long, but our long-suffering, patient and good God?

But in the end, the time comes for him to send his son, verse 37, and this is where the story comes to a head. Finally, he sent his son to them, saying, They will respect my son.

[13:30] Now, here Jesus is patently talking about himself, the owner's son, the son of God. We shouldn't think that God actually thought that the leaders of his people would respect Jesus.

Again, it's only a parable. In fact, we know from the rest of the Bible that Jesus was delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God. So, God is under no illusion.

The point isn't that God thought Jesus would be respected, and he wasn't. The point is that in a sane world, God's son should have been respected.

But then again, given that the owner knows what's happened to his servants, what incredible grace. And again, extreme patience in sending them, this time, not another servant, but his own son to get what is his.

One last opportunity, he says, to do the right thing. But what do the tenants do to his son? Verse 38. When the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, This is the heir.

[14:47] Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance. And they took him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Rather than respect the owner's son, the tenants see his arrival as an opportunity to take ownership of the vineyard for themselves.

He's next in line, they say. If we get rid of him, we'll have this place all to ourselves. And so they do. They kill him. Interesting, isn't it, that Jesus is saying this on the Monday.

It would happen for real on the Friday. The fact that the chief priests hear this, they know he's talking about them and still do it, shows that this really is what is going through their hearts.

Get rid of Jesus out of Jerusalem. Nail him to a cross, and we can get on with business as usual. No trouble making sons or owners to worry about.

This temple will be properly ours again. Once he's out of the way, we'll get our kingdom back and do it the way we want it to do. Jesus has nailed them in the story.

[16:05] They will nail him to the cross. The irony is that he tells them this, and they still do it. But that only serves to remind us, doesn't it, so strongly that Jesus' suffering, the death of the Son, had to happen.

Jesus will later say, isn't this what the law, the prophets, and the Psalms said about me, that the Messiah must suffer, die, and rise again? Historians love what ifs.

You know, what if history had taken a different turn? But there's no what ifs with the death of Jesus. What if Jesus had been respected? What if Jesus had been made king?

What if Jesus had never been crucified? But friends, there is no world or reality where that could have happened. We're going to Jerusalem, says Jesus, where I must suffer, die, and rise again. He even adds an extra verse to that ancient love song between God and his people to make sure we grasp that. He's saying, my death is part of this long, long love story that God has towards his people that he chose and redeemed.

[17:26] But where does that leave the tenants? Well, Jesus asks then, verse 40, what do you think? Can they get it right first time?

I wonder what you make of this. When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants? They said to him, he will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons.

Again, we've seen Jesus' questions of precision instruments, aren't they? At face value, it's a no-brainer. But of course, he's getting them to pass judgment on themselves.

And they are spot on. Judge the tenants and put the vineyard under new management. Lots of people, perhaps some of us here, struggle with that, don't we?

The idea that God shouldn't judge or that it's wrong for him to punish evil. But friends, that dislike of God's judgment is what we might call a luxury belief.

[18 : 36] That is to say it's a belief that's only easy or even only possible to hold if we've never really suffered at the hands of evil.

Think about it. It's nearly 20 years now since Madeleine McCann went missing. But we read in the news, don't we, that police are working round the clock to find new evidence to pin on the suspect. Why? Because we want judgment to fall on the guilty. No one would read the headline, would they? That day, Madeleine McCann, kidnapper, sentenced and say, it's wrong to judge. He shouldn't be punished. No, we would think at last.

Friends, it is an unspeakably terrible thing that happened to that family. And there are so many things going on now around the world that we will never hear of that are unspeakably wicked and absolutely evil.

[19 : 44] But the attempt to eject Jesus Christ from his kingdom by scourging him, putting him on a mock trial, taunting him, hanging him on a cross to die is the most evil thing that has ever happened in the history of the world.

God sent his son to receive the praise of his people and they murdered him. What should the father do?

It's so obvious that the very people who will do that to Jesus pass the judgment on themselves, put them to a bad death, they say, and give the vineyard to others who will give the owner what is his. It's the only right conclusion. Listen, get rid of these guys. Put God's kingdom under new management. And as we'll see, Jesus fully agrees.

So we've heard the tenant's tale, this potted history of the Old Testament, or the love song turned breakup ballad between God and Israel. But what are we supposed to take away from this?

[20 : 58] Well, Jesus gives us a therefore in verse 43 and two take-home lessons that both flow out of verse 42. So for the rest of our time then, let's step back and consider how we are to respond.

Jesus' response seems a little bit disconnected in verse 42, but really it's the theological heart of this whole chapter. You might remember we saw the crowd cheering for Jesus, the words of Psalm 118, as Jesus entered the city for the first time, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Well, now in the temple, in the heart of the kingdom, Jesus quotes again from that same psalm, only a few verses earlier. Have you never read in the Scriptures, Psalm 118, the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone?

This was the Lord's doing and it is marvelous in our eyes. What's he saying? The crowd was right to cheer these words for me as I came into my kingdom.

Just like King David who wrote the psalm and just like the owner's son in the story, King Jesus would be rejected by his people like a stone deemed unfit for purpose, good for nothing but chucking on the scrap heap.

[22 : 24] But just like King David, God would bring King Jesus back and put him in the most important place in his kingdom. In a building, the cornerstone would be the first stone to be laid in the foundation and it set the direction for the whole rest of the building.

The corners had to be cut at a perfect right angle, the edges had to be perfectly straight, get the wrong stone in first and the whole building would be compromised.

So here Jesus is saying, I am that true cornerstone of God's kingdom. Without me, there is no kingdom.

In a few decades, the temple would be raised to the ground, but in a few short days, Jesus would be raised from the ground to be this foundation of God's new people, his temple, his church.

The chief priests would try to get rid of him, try to throw him on the scrap heap of history, but God would bring him back. And then what? We've heard it before, friends, haven't we?

[23 : 41] Jesus has come, King Jesus has come, so change is here. Change is coming. The question from now on, says Jesus, will be, are you building on him the cornerstone, or will you be crushed by him?

Therefore, verse 43, I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits, and the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.

And so, friends, the question that Jesus leaves us with from his story is, are we bearing fruit, or are we being crushed? The difference, of course, is in how we respond to him.

Are you bearing fruit in him? Verse 43 makes it clear that that is something that defines those whom he gives his kingdom to.

It was taken away from a people not producing its fruits and will be given to a people who do produce its fruits. Let me be really clear that that is not a condition, as if first we had to have something to show to God for our faith before he'll let us in.

[25 : 02] It's actually impossible when you think about it. You know, how could we grow the right fruits before we're in the vineyard? We can't do God's will before we're in his kingdom.

No, Jesus is saying that what will define those who are in his kingdom is a fruitfulness that grows out of our rootedness in him.

If we're rooted and grounded in Christ, the cornerstone, how can we not bear the fruit that God wants to see in us? And what are those fruits that he looks for?

Well, we've been picking them along the way through chapter 21. I wonder, have you been gathering them and grasping them as we've gone? What fruits does God look for in his people? Praise. Like the crowd on the street, the children in the temple, Hosanna to the son of David. What else? Prayer.

[26 : 05] Like Jesus went to find in the temple and it wasn't there. My house shall be called a house of prayer. What else? Humble submission to him and his royal authority.

Like the chief priest refused to recognize and bow to. I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Repentance.

Changing direction when God says we need to. Like John preached in the wilderness and like the tax collectors and prostitutes did, but the chief priests didn't.

You did not afterwards change your minds and believe him. And of course, underpinning all those responses our belief in him as the Christ and the one true way for us to come to God, the cornerstone of God's temple, once rejected, now raised to the place of honor.

Brothers and sisters, when we think of a fruitful Christian life, so often our thoughts turn straight away, don't they, to our service and our work for the Lord. And of course, that is a wonderful fruit of a changed heart.

[27 : 19] Or perhaps it turns to our evangelism and how many people we've shared about Jesus with. And again, that is a wonderful fruit of a heart that loves Jesus.

But the things above all in this chapter that God sent his Son into the world to receive are these simple fruits of our heart.

Praise, prayer, repentance, obedience, obedience, all rooted in our faith in Jesus as our King and Savior.

So is that what is growing in your life? Are you producing the fruits that the King came to find? I trust as a church that we are, and if we're Christians, we will be.

we are going to be. But as we ask that really probing question, you know, I wonder if we're being really honest. Is the fruit in your life looking a little shriveled or a little small?

[28 : 27] is it underfed? Friends, if that's you, the way to change that isn't from here to knuckle down to a really rigorous Bible reading plan or to blast Christian music in your car.

It is first to come back to Jesus, the cornerstone, and root yourself firmly in him again. Renew that intimacy with him through prayer.

Turn in repentance from the things that have been distracting you from him. Feed on his word and place your trust in him fresh. We need to feed the roots if we're to grow the fruits that God looks for in his kingdom people.

But we have to finish where Jesus does today, and it is an uncomfortable place to finish. Are you being crushed? Here's the alternative to fruitfulness, verse 44.

The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him. Of course, Jesus said this first of all to the chief priests who have already confessed that this is what they deserve, a bad death.

[29 : 41] But notice Jesus broadens it out then to anyone the cornerstone falls on. So, it's not just a then-then thing, it's also an us-now thing.

Who does the cornerstone fall on? Well, on the one hand, brothers and sisters, we do have to ask, if we think about the fruit that Jesus came to look for, and we have a look at our own hearts and lives, and we see that there is not just little fruit there, but no fruit, no praise from our hearts, no personal prayer, no lasting repentance, no submission to the parts of Jesus' will that we find difficult, no functional faith in him, then we must ask whether we have not in fact stumbled and fallen on him.

the chief priests in the temple thought that they were green and leafy and in a great place with God, when really at heart, they were spiritually dead and withered.

And so we have to ask, have I tripped over Jesus without even realizing? If you have, and you see that in your heart, and you do not change, turn back, you will be broken to pieces, he says.

Friends, beware of being a fruitless Christian. Beware of being a fruitless Christian. Jesus is clear that that is no Christianity at all.

[31 : 23] And friends, if you know that you're not a Christian this morning and you don't believe in Jesus as the true king from God, well, however respectable your rejection of him seems to you, you are actually treating him like the tenants in the story and like the chief priests did in history.

Here he is to receive the worship and allegiance and faith that is rightfully his. Whoever we are, that is what we owe the God who made us, who's so good to us each and every day.

Jesus has come to collect that gratitude and praise that he deserves. And so today, if we do not give him that thanks and praise, if we reject him, well, we are no different from the tenants who threw him out of the vineyard and killed him, or those who crucified him to get him out of the way of our lives.

The problem as we finish is that that is not only wrong, which it is, it doesn't work. Because God brought Jesus back from the dead, and one day you, like them, will have to stand before him and face his judgment.

What will God do to those who have treated his son like that? Well, Jesus leaves us with no doubt, does he? The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him or her.

[33 : 01] If you know this morning that that is how you're treating him, friend, be warned and turn back. Stop holding back from him. Stop rejecting him and instead give him your faith and praise and obedience today.

For he is the Christ. He is the Son of God. He is the cornerstone of God's new people and he is the one and only true and right way that we might come to God and be saved.

Plant your life in him and begin to bear the fruit of his kingdom people. Let's pray for that for one another. gracious father, we are in awe of your grace and patience.

Father, even as the minutes tick by, we are conscious that you forestall the return of Jesus in judgment for the sake of those who are yet to repent.

Lord, how gracious and patient are you. So you have mercy on us today, we pray. Cast out our sin. Lord, those who are yet to enter in, Lord, would you compel then these dear friends today to put faith in Jesus Christ, no longer to reject him, but to enter into his kingdom and bear his fruit.

[34 : 33] And Father, for those of us, you are in his kingdom today, help us, we ask, to bear fruit that is worthy of you. Father, we thank you that anything that we produce is of you and from you, and so we rely upon you, Lord, to renew our hearts and make us fruitful in praise and adoration of you, in prayer and dependence on you, in obedience of you, and above all, in faith in you and your Son.

Meet our needs, we pray by your Holy Spirit, for we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.