

(T) Welcome to **Discipleship training On The Air**. In this teaching series, you will have the opportunity to learn how to understand and teach the parables of Jesus Christ. By using *the guidelines for interpreting parables*, two teachers will study **the parable of the wicked tenants in Matthew 21:33-39, Mark 12:1-12 and Luke 20:9-19**. Remember that the application of this parable speaks about God's kingdom. This is a parable concerning **THE MESSENGERS OF GOD'S KINGDOM**. As you listen to this programme, make notes in a notebook or record the programme.

A parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. It is a true-to-life story or illustration designed to teach a spiritual truth. Jesus used the commonplace and the events of everyday to illumine the mysteries of the kingdom of God and to confront people with the reality of their situation and their need for renewal. Please read Matthew 21:33-46, Mark 12:1-12; Luke 20:9-19 by yourself, or take turns in the group to read a few verses each.

(S) Matthew 21:33-41 says, "Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a wine press in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey. When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit. The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. Last of all, he sent his son to them. 'They will respect my son,' he said. But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance.' So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" He will bring those wretches to a wretched end," they replied, "and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time."

(T) **POINT 1. UNDERSTAND THE NATURAL STORY OF THE PARABLE.**

The parable is told in figurative language and the spiritual meaning of the parable is based on that. Therefore we will first study the words and the cultural and historical facts of the background of the story.

What are the true-to-life elements of the story of this parable?

(S) A certain landowner planted a new vineyard from scratch. He planted the vines, built a wall around the vineyard, dug a wine-press in it and built a watch-tower. The wall was to protect it against thieves and animals. A watchman was stationed in the watch-tower to warn of any danger from thieves, jackals and foxes. The tower could also be used as a storage place. The story makes clear that this man is not only the owner of the vineyard, but that he himself planted it and built it up for himself.

The owner leased his vineyard to tenants or share-croppers and made an agreement with them. The tenants agreed to give the owner a definite amount or share of the vintage as payment of the rent. The vineyard did not belong to the tenants, but remained the possession of the owner!

When the time arrived to harvest the grapes, the owner sent his servants to the tenants to collect his share of the fruit. These servants were commissioned by the owner to collect and carry their master's share of the fruit back to his home. They were invested with authority and made their demand or request in the name of their master, the owner of the vineyard.

(T) But now this story goes beyond the boundaries of reason: The tenants or share-croppers were wicked, dishonest and cruel. They did not keep their part of the agreement. Instead of giving the servants the share of the owner's fruit, they maltreated these servants. One servant was beaten up, another was killed outright and a third was slowly stoned to death. The bad treatment of his servants was at the same time an insult to the owner and rejection of the owner! In normal human relationships, one might have expected that the owner of the vineyard would have punished these wicked tenants immediately and severely. But the story takes an unexpected turn. The owner did not punish these wicked tenants immediately. Instead, he decided to give them another chance to do their duty. So he sent more servants. However, these servants were treated similarly. Then the story reaches a dramatic climax: the owner sends his one and only son to the wicked tenants. Sending his only beloved son to the wicked tenants was the last word of the owner to them! He knew that these tenants were wicked and cruel, and yet he sent his only beloved son to them! *The sin of the wicked tenants was most unreasonable*, and yet *the love of the owner was completely incomprehensible!* In spite of the fact that the tenants had so rudely trampled upon the rights of the owner, he still gave them another chance. In spite of the fact that the wicked tenants had killed his servants, he still sent them his only beloved son. This story can go beyond the boundaries of reason, because it is the story of *a parable*.

What the wicked tenants did to the son of the owner was not a matter of impulse. On the contrary, it was deliberate plotting and premeditated murder. They thought that if they killed the only heir, the vineyard would become their

property. How stupid of them to think so, because the owner of the vineyard was still alive and would come and punish them severely. Compare this with Psalm 2:1-4, where the kings on earth plot against God and his Anointed One, but God laughs at them from heaven!

**(S) POINT 2. EXAMINE THE IMMEDIATE CONTEXT AND DETERMINE THE ELEMENTS OF THE PARABLE.**

The context of the parable may consist of *the setting* and *the explanation or application* of the parable. The setting of the parable may state *the occasion* for telling the parable, or describe *the circumstances* at the time of telling the parable. The setting is usually found *before* the parable and the explanation or application is usually found *after* the parable.

In the parable of the wicked tenants, the setting is contained in verses 1-32, the story in verses 33-41, and the application in verses 42-44.

**(T)** *The setting* of this parable is during the last week before Jesus was crucified. Jesus entered Jerusalem in a triumphal procession. He cleansed the temple for a second time (Jn 2:13-16) from all the people who had turned it into a marketplace and he healed the blind and lame in the temple area. Everybody still welcomed Jesus, except the religious leaders and teachers of the Jews. They were indignant and questioned the authority of Jesus to do all this. At this point, Jesus told the parable of the wicked tenants. It is therefore clear that the setting of the parable of the wicked tenants is *the opposition of the religious leaders, the teachers of the law and the elders of the people against Jesus Christ. The leaders of the people of Israel and their followers* rejected Jesus Christ as the Messiah, they regarded his miracles of healing as the work of Satan, and they rejected him as a preacher and teacher of the gospel. As a matter of fact, they had already plotted to kill him (Mt 12:14; Jn 11:53)!

**(S)** *The application* of the parable is in Matthew 21:42-44. Jesus condemns those who have just given a correct reply by saying, “Have you never read in the Scripture: ‘The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes’?” Jesus shows how the prophecy in Psalm 118:22-23 reaches its ultimate fulfilment in “the owner’s son”, that is, in himself! Jesus Christ himself is the stone that was being rejected by the religious leaders and teachers of the Jews and the elders of the nation of Israel. After a few days, they would lead the crowds of Israel to crucify Jesus. John 1:11 would literally go into fulfilment, “Jesus Christ came to *his own people*, but his own people did not receive him! Nevertheless, *the rejected stone* would become *the cornerstone*. The crucified Jesus Christ would rise from the dead triumphantly and become the most important person in the history of the world!

Jesus continued to say, “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.” Luke 20:18 adds, “Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed”. What would happen to the nation of Israel, that is, what would happen to *the unconverted nation of Israel*, to those who rejected the Messiah? Jesus says that the kingdom of God would be taken away from them and given to a people who would produce its fruit! *The kingdom of God* here means the special standing as *the people of God* together with the special privileges, which the nation of Israel enjoyed during the Old Testament period. The kingdom of God would be taken away from the nation of Israel, because the nation of Israel had not lived up to its obligations. The Jews, as represented by their leaders, had been like the wicked tenants. God, who is the Owner of everything, sent his only beloved Son, Jesus Christ, to his own people, the nation of Israel, and they refused to give to him what was his due. Therefore, God would give the kingdom, that is, the special standing as “the people of God” together with all the special privileges, advantages, opportunities to a people who would produce the fruit of God’s kingdom. In the place of *the nation of Israel* as “the people of God” there would arise *a new nation* as “the people of God”. This other nation refers to the Christian Church in the whole world, which consists of both Jews and Gentiles that believe in Jesus Christ. The apostle Peter explains this by saying of Gentiles who had become Christians “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God” (1 Pet 2:9-10).

**(T) POINT 3. IDENTIFY THE RELEVANT AND IRRELEVANT DETAILS OF THE PARABLE.**

Jesus Christ did not intend every detail in the parable to have some spiritual significance. The relevant details are those details in the story of the parable which reinforce the main lesson of the parable. Therefore, we should not ascribe independent spiritual significance to every detail of the parable.

Which of the details in this parable are really essential or relevant?

**(S)** “The vineyard” is a relevant detail. The picture of the vineyard reminds us immediately of the nation of Israel. The parable is clearly based on the prophecies in Isaiah 5:1-7 and Psalm 80:8-16. Because Israel yielded only bad fruit, God prophesied that he would break down its wall, allow the vineyard to be trampled and become a wasteland. Nevertheless, the vineyard does *not* refer to *the nation of Israel* as such, *not to national or ethnic Israel*, but to *the*

*special status of being the people of God together with the privileges, advantages and opportunities that God gave to Israel as the chosen nation.* Jesus did not say that he would give *Israel* to other people, but that he would give *the kingdom* to other people. Israel's special status as the chosen people of God together with its privileges, advantages and opportunities would be taken away from them and given to other people. While the nation of Israel would continue as a nation, national Israel would no longer be the visible people of God. Romans 9:6 says that not all who are descendants from national Israel are Israel as the people of God!

(T) "The owner" of the vineyard is another relevant detail, because the vineyard never belonged to the nation of Israel, but always belonged to God himself! These privileges of the kingdom of God were entrusted to the nation of Israel only for a time, namely, during the Old Testament period. Now, at his first coming Jesus Christ would take this status together with its privileges away from national Israel and give it to the people of God in the New Testament, who consist of all believers of every nation in the world.

(S) "The wicked tenants" are a relevant detail. They represent the unbelieving leaders of the nation of Israel and all Jews who followed these leaders. Hence, the wicked tenants represent national Israel that rejected Jesus Christ.

(T) "The servants" are a relevant detail. They represent the prophets of the Old Testament, who were rejected and killed by the nation of Israel.

(S) "The only son and heir" is a relevant detail. In his explanation and application of the parable, Jesus made it very clear that the only and beloved son of the owner represents Jesus Christ himself. He is the stone, which the builders of Israel rejected and which nevertheless became the most important cornerstone! Just as a cornerstone determines the direction of all the other stones in the building, so Jesus Christ from heaven rules the universe directs the lives of everyone.

(T) **POINT 4. IDENTIFY THE MAIN MESSAGE OF THE PARABLE.**

The main message of the parable is found either in the explanation or application or from the story itself. From the way Jesus Christ himself explained or applied the parables, we know how we should interpret parables. A parable normally has only one main lesson or message, one central point to make. Therefore, we should not try to find a spiritual truth in every detail of the story, but instead look for the main message of the story.

The parable of the wicked tenants in Matthew 21:33-41 teaches about *the messengers of God's kingdom* and the response of the nation of Israel to them.

The main message of the parable is that *despite the most unreasonable sin of the nation of Israel towards God's incomprehensible love expressed in his only beloved Son Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ would finally triumph over his opponents and establish his kingdom* as predicted in Psalm 118:22-23. In spite of the greatest opposition, God's purpose to establish his kingdom on earth cannot and will not fail!

(S) *Responding to the messengers of God* is a fundamental characteristic of God's kingdom. The people of God's kingdom respond to the prophets of the Old Testament and the apostles of the New Testament.

(T) **POINT 5. COMPARE THE PARABLE WITH PARALLEL AND CONTRASTING PASSAGES.**

The cursing of the fig tree in Matthew 21:18-19 is a symbolic and prophetic act of Jesus with a deeper meaning: Just before Jesus told the parable of the wicked tenants, he cursed a fig tree, which had much leaves on it but no fruit. This fig tree was a symbol of the highly privileged nation of Israel (Lk 13:6-9). Like the fig tree, the nation of Israel pretended to be a very religious and holy people bringing many sacrifices to the temple. In reality the Israelites had changed the temple into a marketplace selling animals and its leaders were plotting to kill Jesus, the One apart from whom all the temple sacrifices had no meaning at all. Israel was bustling with religious activity, but there was no sincerity or truth. By cursing the fig tree, which was withered by the next day, Jesus predicted the downfall of the unfruitful nation of Israel. Jesus did not reject the Jews as Jews, but predicted that in the place of the nation of Israel he was establishing God's kingdom. God's kingdom would consist of believers in Jesus Christ from every nation on earth. They would bring forth fruit instead of only leaves (cf. Mt 8:11-12)!

(S) **POINT 6. SUMMARISE THE MAIN TEACHINGS OF THE PARABLE.**

The main message of the parable is that *despite the most unreasonable sin of the nation of Israel towards God's incomprehensible love expressed in his only beloved Son Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ would finally triumph over his opponents and establish his kingdom* as predicted in Psalm 118:22-23.

His kingdom would produce fruit. In Matthew 3:7-12, John the Baptist said, "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance! ... Every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown in the fire." Only those who had the Holy Spirit living in them would be gathered like wheat into God's barn, and all the others would be burned like chaff with

unquenchable fire. Producing fruit does not refer to the good works done by a person's own power, but to the good works done by him, because the Holy Spirit enables him.

**(T)     ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK**

First. Preach, teach or study this parable together with another person or group of people. Next week we will study the parable of the weeds among the wheat. As preparation, please read Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43.

Second. See the workbooks "Go and preach God's Kingdom and [www.dota.net](http://www.dota.net)

Third. Listen every SATURDAY to WEDNESDAY on the radio to "Discipleship training on the air".