

- *Read through some newspapers and read some news on-line to try and track down information about what God's people are doing in the world to make a difference to major world issues. Support them if you can.*

Final Prayer

If you were to show us the full consequences of the things we do, Lord Jesus, we would never understand. We do not see the full effects of what goes wrong, and we can never see the implications of all that works well. Help us therefore to make sense of our lives as we place all we do into Your hands. Thank You Lord Jesus; AMEN

Prayer

God and Father of all, who gives His children what they need; help, strengthen and provide for all who find it hard to live with the little they have, and impress upon all who have the good things of life the obligation to use their gifts in the service of Him who gave them everything. May Your justice and mercy prevail throughout the world, God of power and of love. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Broken Families

Pray for those such as social workers and the police who deal with broken families. Pray for the legal process by which the future of many families, and many children, are decided.

On-going prayers

- *Give thanks for the many acts of kindness shown to you*
- *Pray for those who are troubled and consider suicide*
- *Pray today for the ongoing civil strife in parts of Sri Lanka*

Meditation

(speaking to oneself about priorities)

Keep going, my soul, keep pressing on:

When Satan disrupts your life and tempts you with desire,
Fall back on the Word, the grace of God and your faith.

When others seek more of your time than you can honestly give,
Put Christ and family first, and work from sure foundations.

When the church of God appears all too dull, and uninvitingly slow,
Remember it is the Bride of Christ, prepared to meet the Lord.

When Christ gives you more to do than you've ever done before,
Fear nothing, pray in faith, act in wisdom, and trust Him.

When you become enthused by the glory of earthly success
Give it all back to God; no tithe will do, give it all.

Keep pressing on, my soul, the future always comes;
For what lies ahead is in God's hands; and He is good.

Bible Study - Matthew 21:33-41

³³ *Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a fence around it, dug a wine press for it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and left home. ³⁴ When the harvest time drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his produce. ³⁵ But the tenants seized his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned a third one. ³⁶ Again he sent other servants, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. ³⁷ Finally he sent his son to them, thinking, "They will respect my son." ³⁸ But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, "This is the heir; come on, let's kill him and get his inheritance." ³⁹ So they assaulted*

him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. ⁴⁰ Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?' ⁴¹ They replied, 'He will destroy those wicked men in shame, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him his produce at harvest time.'

Review

The parable of the tenants of the vineyard is the second of three parables given by Jesus in response to the challenge of the chief priests and the elders on his second day in Jerusalem (21:23f.). A crowd was still present as Jesus taught, and we can imagine that some, at least, would have realised that Jesus was tying the leaders of Israel in intellectual and spiritual knots!

The parable Jesus gave is highly significant. It describes the failure of the leaders of Israel to cooperate with God's plan and the consequent handing over of this to the disciples, and therefore to the Church after the death of Jesus Christ. Drawn together for this story are a significant number of important themes from Jesus' teaching: the people of God as the vineyard (see also 20:1-16 and 21:28-32), the idea of the harvest as the end of the age (9:37,38; 13:30,39), the persecution of the servants of God (5:10,12,44; 11:12; 13:21), and the coming of the 'Son' of God (3:17; 17:5). The crowds who had been following Jesus with the disciples would have easily worked out that the chief priests and the elders were the tenants, and the teaching of the parable is essentially against them.

The Parable Jesus started with a strong word, 'listen'. This would have made people take notice because it was the first word of the great prayer said by all Israelites, the 'Shema' (meaning 'hear' or 'listen') found in Deuteronomy 6:4; 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone ...'. This introduction immediately suggests that what comes next is important, and connects strongly with the Old Testament.

The beginning is in fact remarkably similar to the 'song of the vineyard' in Isaiah 5:2, and it was typical of Jesus to use a well known scripture from the prophets to challenge the authorities. Isaiah 5 describes Israel as a vine, but is not the only Old Testament scripture to do so, there are many others (e.g. Ps 80:9-14; Is 27:2-5; Jer 2:21; Ho 10:1). It is largely a prophetic description, strongly critical of Israel and identifying God as the owner of the vineyard. Here in Jesus' parable, He is missing from the vineyard not because He has neglected the land, He has simply given it to others (Israel's leaders) to 'do His work', requiring them to be 'fruitful'. Fruit, as ever, is what the Lord wants from His vineyard!

Absentee landlords were common in Jesus' day, and did little other than seek profit from their land; however in this story, everything possible was done by the landowner for the vineyard. The real problems begin at harvest time, which does not refer to the 'final harvest' but to God's coming into the world through His Messiah at a time of harvest.

The servants and the son In the parable, Jesus described groups of servants sent by the landowner to collect the fruit of the harvest, who are beaten, stoned and killed. These servants represent the Old Testament prophets (e.g. 1 Kings 18,19; Jer. 20:2, 37:15; 2 Chron. 24:21; Neh. 9:26). The fate of these servants reminds us of Jesus' teaching about persecution and violence (5:10,12,44; 11:12; 13:21) and tragically describes the failure of the religious authorities to recognise the authority of God in His Word through the prophets.

When the landowner finally sent his 'son', he was subjected to plots, assault, eviction and slaughter (21:39). How hard it must have been for Jesus to speak in this way about Himself! He had already prophesied his own death and resurrection to the disciples, but now all who followed his parable would understand what He meant. At His baptism, God had called Jesus His 'Son' (3:17) and this was affirmed to the disciples at His transfiguration (17:5). However, the chief priests and elders just wanted Jesus to say about

Himself 'I am the Son of God' so that they could accuse Him of blasphemy, but Jesus only allowed them to see this in the parable, He did not say it directly. This may well have been why Caiaphas challenged Jesus at His trial; 'I put you under oath before the living God, tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God' (26:63).

In their desire to listen for this blasphemy, the authorities had taken their eye off the plot, and now lay open to the main accusation of the parable. Not only did they plot to kill God's Son, they also planned to take His inheritance! But this was not a matter of land, it was an analogy. Jesus accused the religious authorities of attempting to take from God what was not theirs to take. He accused them of going against their own Law, and would return 'the vine' to the 'Son'; in other words, the leadership of God's people would pass from the Jewish authorities to the Messiah!

The authorities condemn themselves All of this would have been relatively obvious, but at the end of the parable, Jesus challenged His accusers to answer a question about what the landowner (God) would do in these circumstances (21:40). As in the previous parable (21:31), the authorities did not possess the wit to avoid Jesus' trap, and they fell headlong into it. They answered Jesus question and thereby condemned themselves (21:41)! They even understood that their tenancy would pass to others who would do what they had not done, which was the will of God!

We do not know, of course, whether the authorities realised what they were saying either at the time or later, but Jesus had made His point using well known imagery to make it clear that God was ready to gather fruit from His work in the world through His Son, the Messiah. Moreover, He knew that the Son would be killed before the work could be completed and the harvest gathered. The whole parable is of course well known to us now, but it would have left those who first heard it with a great deal to think about!

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. What does this parable teach us about the work of God in the world?
2. Why did the tenants want to kill the son, and why did the authorities want to kill Jesus? Are these one and the same, or are they different?
3. What fruit does God want to harvest in His Kingdom, and in what ways do people prevent God's chosen workers from doing their work?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

This is a very challenging parable, and one which we should be prepared to look at carefully. It is relatively easy to make the connections I have made above in this study, but from our point of view today, we should ask ourselves whether fruit is being harvested and offered to the Lord as He requires. Of course, the final coming of Christ in Glory has not yet come, but before then, there is a round of sowing and reaping, a spiritual seasonal cycle which should be fruitful for the Lord. We should at least ensure that in our organisation and running of God's church, we do not act like the leaders of Israel; insular, narrow and blind to the things of God and the need of Him in the world all around.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Identify some of the fruit you can offer the Lord from your 'work in the harvest of the Kingdom', either as an individual or as part of the church of God. Pray about this if you are unsure.*