

## **“What Will the Owner of the Vineyard Do to Those Tenants?”**

**Matthew 21:33-46**

Let me show you an old riddle and you can explain how it is possible. [ppt]

“A father and son are in a car crash and are rushed to the hospital. The father dies. The boy is taken to the operating room and the surgeon says, “I can’t operate on this boy, because he’s my son.” HOW is this possible?

If you are puzzled, it means that you have unconscious gender bias. The surgeon is the boy’s mother. If you didn’t imagine that the surgeon was a woman, that’s o.k. It means you are part of a surprising majority. Only about 25% of people correctly solve this riddle. What I would like to say is that our unconscious biases influence our interpretation of texts and the world.

We believe that the Bible is the Word of God so the Bible has some authority over us. But it is also true that, good or ill, we read the Bible from our own perspective with unconscious bias. Unfortunately, some interpretations are unhealthy and harmful.

Have you ever heard the word, “Supersessionism?” [ppt] I am glad that I can teach you new English vocabulary. Supersessionism is a Christian belief that the Christian Church has replaced the nation of Israel assuming their role as God's Chosen people. So Supersessionism is also called replacement theology or fulfilment theology. You may not have heard this word, Supersessionism before, but you may have already heard about this notion that the church has replaced Israel in God’s plan and thus, the church is the new Israel and Jews are excluded from salvation. Today’s scripture reading is one of the texts which is used to support this replacement theology. Jesus said to religious leaders, “Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom.” (21:43) The problem of Supersessionism is that it is inherently anti-Semitic, excluding Jews from salvation and even justifying unjust violence against Jews. Some anti-Semites have falsely drawn parallels between the wicked tenants in the parable and the Jewish people, suggesting that Jews were responsible for Jesus' crucifixion and so they deserve the fate of these wicked tenants. The Bible is the Word of life, but we humans can misuse it to harm and even kill other people. That’s why we should be careful and serious about interpreting biblical texts.

### **An Absurd Parable and An Absurd Conversation**

Responding to the religious leaders’ questioning of Jesus’ authority, Jesus told this parable of wicked tenants, but we have to admit that today’s parable is enigmatic and even absurd to comprehend for contemporary readers.

“There was once a man, a wealthy farmer, who planted a vineyard. He fenced it, dug a winepress, put up a watchtower, then turned it over to the farmhands and went off on a trip. When it was time to harvest the grapes, he sent his servants back to collect his profits.” The story is quite simple and clear until this point, but the story soon turns absurd because of unexpected violence by the farmhands toward the servants. What did they do to the servants? The farmhands grabbed the first servant and beat him up. The next one they killed. And they threw stones at the third. Their actions do not make sense to us. Why would they do something like that? I don’t know. They might not have wanted to pay rent or they just wanted to keep the fruit of their labor for themselves.

Then, the story gets more interesting. Instead of sending armed men, the owner of the vineyard sent another delegation of servants to collect the rent. Does this make sense? This is not normal! What did the tenants do to them? They did the same to them. The owner was at the end of his rope. He decided to send his son. ‘Surely,’ he thought, ‘they will respect my son.’ Does his decision make sense to you? Not really. What kind of landowner would choose to send his own son to these greedy, bloodthirsty, out of control tenants after sending two sets of servants to their death? But he sent his son to them and as you might guess, another tragedy occurred in the vineyard. “When the farmhands saw the son arrive, they rubbed their hands in greed. ‘This is the

heir! Let's kill him and have it all for ourselves.' They grabbed him, threw him out, and killed him." Their action is completely absurd for us to comprehend.

However, there is an explanation for their actions. Dr. Jason Edwards argues, "In the Jewish world, there were laws that indicated possession could lead to ownership." If the owner died without a proper heir, the tenants of the land could claim ownership. So "it's possible the tenants killed the absentee owner's servants to keep him at bay and then assumed the son's appearance meant the landowner was dead. If they killed the only heir, then, they could fully claim ownership of the vineyard."<sup>1</sup> This interpretation helps us understand the motivation for their absurd actions, but their cruel behavior can never be justified.

What then will the Lord of the vineyard do? Jesus asked the question and it's up to us to answer. If you were God and had to deal with rebellious people like these, how would you handle them? From their unconscious bias and false identification with the owner of the vineyard, the religious leaders shouted "those wretches" deserve a miserable death! An eye for an eye, a life for a life. Hard punishment for rebel sin! That's justice! Perhaps, we are familiar with this logic. From our perspective, this parable should have ended with violent punishment.

## **Second chance**

The parable ends but the living word of God continues. To the furious religious leaders, Jesus said, "Have you never read in the scriptures: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes'? Does it make sense? The wicked vineyard tenants and the cornerstone... it's hard to make a connection between them. Jesus' words do not seem to fit the circumstance. If this was a term paper I was grading, I would give it a 'D-.' How about you?"

But, according to David Buttrick, these absurd words of Jesus add a different ending to the story. "By our logic the story has ended with a massacre, with the servants slaughtered and the vineyard turned over to the new workers."<sup>2</sup> The conclusion is grim. But Jesus Christ was the only Son whom we killed and he was raised from the dead and he now becomes Lord of our lives. He is the cornerstone that holds our lives together and give shape to them. A new ending of the parable has been written out of resurrection faith. This story of wicked tenants is not just about judgment, rather it is the story of God's mercy and unwavering grace for us. Sometimes, we may rebel against God and even set up a cross to crucify Christ. But God's power is greater than our rebellion. God's faithful love is greater than our wickedness. God's patient love bears all our brokenness and sinfulness and becomes the cornerstone on which our lives are built. This is the second chance we live in.

As I have shared in my calling story, I was a rebellious son to my father and heavenly father. For many years, I was angry at God and tried to prove God did not exist. At the nadir of my life, I was able to hear that God has always loved me and still loves me. That became the cornerstone of my faith and my ministry. I believe many of you have similar stories to share. My friends, the parable of the tenants is another story of God's grace for all. Be grateful for God's love and generosity and let us do the same for others. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://blogs.baylor.edu/truettulpit/2017/09/26/matthew-21-33-46/>

<sup>2</sup> Speaking Parables, David Buttrick, 84.