

Who Will Receive the Kingdom of God?

Matthew 21:33-46

Let us pray: Gracious Father God, remove the hardness from our hearts and give us soft hearts that receive your word well. May your word lead our lives. In our Lord Jesus' name. Amen.

There is a pastor named Donald McCullough. He was a promising theologian and served as president of San Francisco Theological Seminary. He was an intellectual preacher who spoke eloquently about the grace of God. Yet when a sinful act in his life was exposed, he lost his social position and honor. Only then did he confess that he finally came to understand the grace of God not merely with his mind but with his heart. After losing the vocation that had been his identity, he began to experience the relentless grace of God that held him without any condition or merit. He said that he came to know this grace not as knowledge but as a deep reality in his heart.

Campbell Morgan, the predecessor of Martyn Lloyd-Jones, once said that the greatest word of all is the Kingdom of God. He taught that the Kingdom of God is first a rule before it is a realm. He also said that the Kingdom of God is a transcendent authority that brings real transformation into our present lives. We are meant to experience this Kingdom now.

To receive the Kingdom of God means to accept and submit to the kingship of God. Last week we heard a message about obedience. Yet there are people who lose the Kingdom even though they know about it, and there are people who receive it even though they do not fully understand it. In today's passage, the chief priests and elders appear as those who know about the Kingdom of God but do not receive it. My desire is that all of us may receive this Kingdom. So today, I want us to consider what kind of person receives the Kingdom of God.

The person who receives the Kingdom of God is someone who knows that what he has in this world has been rented to him. Jesus speaks to the religious leaders and says, "Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place" (Matthew 21:33, NIV).

The word "listen" in the original language means to pay careful attention. Jesus had just told them the parable of the two sons. How unwilling they must have been to listen, so he gave them another parable to teach them. It is similar to what Donald McCullough confessed. Even after preaching for twenty-six years, he said the word of God had not truly

reached him at the level of his character and heart. Now, only a few days before his death, Jesus continues to teach and shepherd these leaders. May all of us truly hear the word.

The parable of the tenants is so clear that it hardly needs any complicated interpretation. The landowner represents God. The vineyard represents Israel. The farmers symbolize the Jewish religious leaders. The servants represent the prophets, and the son refers to Jesus Christ. In simple terms, this parable speaks of the judgment of God upon the wicked tenants who ignored the good intention of the owner, mistreated his servants, and even killed his son.

First, we need to see how generously the owner of the vineyard blessed the farmers. He did not give them an empty field full of stones. He surrounded the vineyard with a wall, made a winepress, and even built a watchtower. In today's terms, it is as if he completed all the interior work, provided every necessary tool, and made it ready so that all they had to do was operate it. This symbolizes the gift of love and trust that God has given to us, people who could never have a vineyard on our own.

The owner rented the vineyard to the farmers and went to another country. When the time for the harvest approached, he sent his servants to the farmers to collect the fruit. God never demands before he gives. He does not make unreasonable demands.

In the beginning, God created the Garden of Eden for humanity. He gave them the entire garden and told them not to eat from only one tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Yet by eating that fruit, humanity lost the whole garden. What about Israel? As the people chosen by God, they received countless spiritual blessings. They had Abraham, the father of faith. They received the prophets, the law, and the temple. All of these were given to them first. But they became too accustomed to the immense blessing of the vineyard. Gratitude disappeared, worship and ministry became ritualistic, and their hearts drifted far from God.

What about us? God gives us ten and asks us to return only one, yet even that can feel difficult at times. Even the worship we offer once a week can begin to feel burdensome. Some may wonder why the pastor keeps telling us to read the Bible, and to read it out loud, when Scripture feels hard to understand. We often ask God for many things, but we must consider whether we are listening to his will and following it.

All the wealth, education, abilities, honor, and even our spouses and children are things we prepare to offer back to the Lord when he asks. God has every right to ask for what he has rented to us. Everything has been rented to us by him. He has given these things so that, in his time, we may bear the fruit he desires. Blessing itself is a distinction, and it is given with a holy purpose. We are meant to steward that blessing and become a channel of blessing

to others. But if we become consumed only with enjoying the blessing and forget its purpose, God will hold us accountable.

There are two great fruits God expects from us. The first is to love God, and the second is to love our neighbor as ourselves. God first desires our worship. If we love God, we will worship him. Every person of faith in Scripture was a worshiper. They did not worship as a ritual, but because they delighted in fellowship with God. Abraham, David, Daniel, and Joseph spent much joyful time with him. God is looking for hearts that burn with that kind of worship. And from that worship, we gain the strength to love our neighbors.

When Israel worshiped God and, through that strength, loved their neighbors, all the nations were supposed to see them and say, "So this is what the kingdom of God is like," and come to God and give him glory. That was the fruit God expected from Israel. But instead, Israel persecuted and even killed the prophets who rebuked them for not bearing fruit. To kill the prophets was to reject the rule of God's word. There is a sinful resistance within us that dislikes the word of God.

We also reveal our inner hearts once strength or authority is given to us. If we do not listen carefully to the word of God at that moment, we become like these religious leaders. We insist on our own will, and when anything threatens what we consider ours, we cannot tolerate it. That is how we ended up killing Jesus. What about our children? What kind of fruit should we present them to God as? They do not belong to us. We are only stewards. From the time they are very young, even before they can read, let them hear the word of God often. Their spirit, soul, and body will all grow in health.

Who can receive the Kingdom of God? Second, it is the one who understands the love of God who sends his son through his word. The landowner sent his servants, but the farmers beat some of them and killed others. So he finally sent his son, hoping that they would respect him. Yet they killed the son. In those days, if an absentee landowner did not return for a long time, the tenants believed that if they killed the heir, the land would become theirs because they had worked it. God sent his son, knowing that he would be killed. In this parable, Jesus reveals his own death on the cross even more clearly.

Third, the people who bear fruit will receive and enjoy the Kingdom of God.

Jesus asks the religious leaders, "Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" They answer, "He will bring those wretches to a wretched end, and will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time." They answer correctly, but their hearts are not touched by the truth. Knowing something and truly receiving it into your heart are not the same.

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Then Jesus speaks to them from Psalm 118:22–23. “Have you never read in the Scriptures, ‘The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. The Lord has done this, and it is marvelous 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.”

In those days, the cornerstone was the most important part of a building. The way the cornerstone was placed determined the entire shape and direction of the structure. Everything was built in alignment with that stone. Sometimes the name of the builder was even engraved on it. Before Jesus became the cornerstone, he had to be rejected. We also have moments when we must be rejected for the sake of the Lord. When that happens, we too become like a cornerstone.

Then Jesus says, “Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but anyone on whom it falls will be crushed.” Jesus is the living stone and the rock that causes people to stumble. Anyone who falls on him will be broken. There are two kinds of people who are broken. There are those who fall on the stone, and those on whom the stone falls. The one who falls on the stone is the person who comes to believe in Jesus. We must fall on Jesus, the stone, and let our old self be broken in order to live. But when the stone falls on a person, it is like those religious leaders who were crushed and judged completely. If someone simply stands still and the stone falls on him, it means eternal judgment.

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus’ parables, they knew that he was speaking about them. But they did not receive his words into their hearts, so their response was to try to arrest him. They resisted letting Jesus’ words touch their hearts. They were determined never to fall on that stone.

Beloved, it is a blessing when you stumble on the stone, who is Jesus, and fall upon him. You become someone who can offer fruit at the proper time. But if that does not happen, and one day the stone falls on you, it will mean eternal judgment. I bless you to be the ones who stumble first and fall upon that stone. Jesus is the word. Therefore, may you fall upon the stone of God’s word every day. When the word becomes the cornerstone that builds your life, your life will become a vineyard of the Kingdom of God, sharing abundant fruit. Amen.

Let us pray: Father God, we thank you that everything we have has been rented to us by you. We thank you for sending your only Son, Jesus, so that he might die for us. Forgive us for letting our gratitude and wonder for that love grow cold, and rekindle that joy within us. Make us a people who bear abundant fruit in its season, so that we may receive the Kingdom of God and reveal that you are alive and reigning. In the name of Jesus Christ, the cornerstone. Amen.