

# KINGDOM.

# LESSON 5

<b>1</b>	<b>PRAYER</b>
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*Group leader. Pray* for God's guidance through his Spirit, for awareness of his presence and for listening to his voice. Commit your group and this lesson about preaching God's kingdom to the Lord.

<b>2</b>	<b>SHARING</b> (20 minutes) <span style="float: right;"><b>[QUIET TIMES]</b> <b>DEUTERONOMY 4 - 7</b></span>
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*Take turns and share (or read* from your notes) in short what you have learned from one of your quiet time with God out of the assigned Bible passages (Deuteronomy chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7). Listen to the person sharing, take him serious and accept him. Do not discuss what he shares. Take notes.

<b>3</b>	<b>MEMORISATION</b> (5 minutes) <span style="float: right;"><b>[THE KINGDOM OF GOD]</b> <b>(5) DANIEL 2:44</b></span>
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*Review* two by two.

**(5) The triumph of the kingdom. Daniel 2:44.** In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure for ever.

<b>4</b>	<b>TEACHING</b> (85 minutes) <span style="float: right;"><b>[THE PARABLES OF JESUS]</b> <b>THE WICKED TENANTS</b></span>
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**“The parable of the wicked tenants” in Matthew 21:33-39 is a parable about  
THE MESSENGERS OF GOD IN GOD’S KINGDOM.**

“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.

We will study this parable by using the six guidelines for studying parables (See manual 9, supplement 1).

*Read* Matthew 21:33-46, Mark 12:1-12; Luke 20:9-19.

## **1. Understand the natural story of the parable.**

*Introduce.* 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.

*Discuss.* What are the true-to-life elements of the story?

*Notes.*

**The landowner and his land.** The landowner planted a new vineyard. There was nothing and he had to build up the whole estate, before he could expect to gain a profit from it. He planted the vines, built a wall around the vineyard, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. The wall was to protect it against thieves and animals. The winepress generally consisted of two holes in the earth and lined with stones or it was completely dug out of a single large rock. The upper hole was wide and shallow. In it the ripe grapes were placed and tread out with the feet of those treading the winepress (Isaiah 63:2-3). The grape juice would flow through a pipe or over a lower sidewall to the lower hole. This hole was deep and narrow. Afterwards the labourers scooped the grape juice into jars (Haggai 2:16). By fermenting in the jars, the grape juice turned into wine. The watch-tower was probably constructed from the many stones, which were gathered out of the field when it was cleared for the vineyard (Isaiah 5:2) A watchman was stationed in the watch-tower to warn of any danger from thieves, jackals and foxes (Song of Solomon 2:15). The tower could also be used as a storage place. The story thus makes it very 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 tenants and the agreement with the owner.** The owner leased his vineyard to tenants or sharecroppers. As the parable clearly indicates, these tenants had to give the owner a definite amount or share of the vintage as payment of the rent (Matthew 21:34; Mark 12:2; Luke 20:10). The vineyard did not belong to the tenants, but remained the possession of the owner!

**The servants.** When the time arrived to harvest the grapes, the owner sent his servants to the tenants to collect his share of the fruit. They were invested with authority and made their demand or request in the name of their master, the owner of the vineyard.

**This story goes beyond the boundaries of reason.** The tenants or sharecroppers 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 a 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 own son to the wicked tenants. Mark 12:6 says, "He had one left to send, a son, whom he loved. He sent him last of all, saying, 'They will respect my son'." It is clear that the owner had only one son and he loved that son very much. Besides that son, there was no one else he could send. This was the last word of the owner to the tenant! 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 hatched a plot to murder the son and so take possession of the vineyard. How stupid of them to think that they could take it into possession, because the owner 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!

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## **2. Examine the immediate context and determine the elements of the parable.**

**Introduce.** The context of "the story" 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 story of the parable and the explanation or application is usually found *after* the story of the parable.

**Discover and discuss.** What is the setting, the story and the explanation or application of this parable?

**Notes.**

### **(1) The setting of the parable is contained in Matthew 21:1-32.**

This is a part of the "Week of the Passion", that is, the last week before Jesus Christ was crucified.

**Cleansing the temple (Matthew 21:12-17).** It began on Sunday with the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem in the presence of large crowds of people, who shouted that he was the Messiah (Matthew 21:1-11). Then Jesus cleansed the temple for a second time (cf. first cleansing of the temple in John 2:13-16). He chased all the people who made the temple into a marketplace out of the temple and overturned the tables of the money-changers. The chief priests, the teachers of the law and the leaders among the Jews were indignant and began to look for a way to kill him. Yet they could not find any way to do it, because all the people hung on his words (Mark 11:18; Luke 19:47-48). He healed all the blind and lame who came to him in the temple area. The children in the temple area shouted that Jesus was "the Son of David", that is, "the Messiah", but the chief priests and teachers of the law were indignant and rebuked Jesus for allowing this and for not denying that he was the Messiah!

**Cursing the fig tree (Matthew 21:18-20).** On Monday, Jesus was hungry and he went to look for fruit on a fig tree standing in the distance. He found nothing on it except leaves. Because he found no fruit on it, he cursed it. When they passed the tree on Tuesday, the tree had withered completely from its roots to the top (Mark 11:20)! Jesus was not angry at the tree. The event had a deeper meaning. The parable of the wicked tenants gave an answer to this question.

**The parable of two sons (Matthew 21:28-32).** That day, Jesus again taught and preached the gospel to the people in the temple courts (Luke 20:1). The chief priests and the teachers of the law, together with the elders of the Jews, questioned his authority to preach and teach the gospel of the kingdom right in the temple. Because they refused to acknowledge John the Baptist's authority, he refused to reveal to them his authority. Then he told them the parable of the two sons, which stresses the rejection of John the Baptist by the leaders of Israel.

**The opposition of the leaders of Israel and their followers.** It is therefore clear that the setting of the parable of the wicked tenants is the opposition of the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders of the Jews against Jesus Christ. The nation of Israel was clearly divided on the issue of Jesus Christ. Many of the common people of Israel were amazed at his teaching. But 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 (John 11:53)!

**(2) The story of the parable is contained in Matthew 21:33-41.**

Two points need special attention:

**The meaning of “being thrown out of the vineyard”.** While Matthew and Luke say that the owner’s son was first thrown out of the vineyard and then killed, Mark says that he was first killed and then thrown out of the vineyard. There is no essential difference. Matthew and Luke stress the historical sequence, that Jesus was taken outside the gate of Jerusalem and then crucified (Hebrews 13:12). And Mark stresses the fact that they *killed him in a most shameful manner*, casting him out of the vineyard as an accursed one. All three evangelists use this expression (“throw out of the vineyard”) as a symbol of the rejection of Jesus Christ by the (natural) nation of Israel!

**The initial reaction of the hearers.** Among the Jews, teachers often asked questions to their hearers in order to keep their attention and increase their interest in the subject that was being discussed. When Jesus was finished telling his story how the wicked tenants had killed the only and beloved son of the owner of the vineyard, he asked his hearers a question, which elicited from them an initial reaction. He asked, “Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” His hearers, who still consisted of many chief priests, teachers of the law and elders of the Jews, answered, “He will bring those wretches to a wretched end, and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time.” With this reply, the enemies of the Lord Jesus Christ condemned themselves! For in the application, Jesus Christ condemned the people, who had just given him a correct reply.

Compare this with Nathan’s confrontation of king David’s sin of adultery in 2 Samuel 12:1-12: First the parable of Nathan (verse 1-4), then David’s initial reaction of indignation (verse 5-6) and finally Nathan’s explanation and application which came crashing down on king David, “You are the man” (verse 7-12)! While Nathan was speaking, David was unaware that Nathan was speaking about him in a concealed manner. Likewise, the leaders of Israel and their followers were unaware that Jesus was speaking this parable about them!

**(3) The explanation or application of the parable is contained in Matthew 21:42-44.**

Jesus condemns those who have just given a correct reply by saying, “Have you never read in the Scripture (Psalm 118:22-23): ‘The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvellous 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.” The Gospel of Luke adds, “Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed” (Luke 20:18; cf. Daniel 2:44-45).

“The stone” has reference to different entities in the Old and New Testaments.

**The stone in the Old Testament.** In Psalm 118:22-23, “the stone” is a reference to Israel itself. The leaders and prominent people of the nations around Israel had despised and rejected Israel. Nevertheless, Israel had become the head of the nations in the sense that the Lord had made his covenant with Jacob and had given to Israel his law. He had not done this to any other nation. The other nations did not know God’s laws (Psalm 147:19-20).

**The stone in the New Testament.** Jesus now shows how the prophecy in Psalm 118:22-23 reaches its ultimate fulfilment in the owner’s son, that is, in himself! Jesus Christ is the Son of God and the true Israel (compare Isaiah 41:8-14 and 43:1-7 with Isaiah 42:1-7 and 49:1-7)! The natural nation of Israel has significance only in and through Jesus Christ (cf. John 4:22; Acts 13:23; Revelation 12:1,2,5). Whoever rejects Jesus Christ, no longer belongs to true Israel and whoever accepts Jesus Christ, belongs to true Israel (that is, to the true people of God)! Jesus Christ himself is “the stone” that was being rejected by the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders of Israel. After a few days, they would lead the crowds of Israel to crucify Jesus. John 1:11 would then literally go into fulfilment, “Jesus Christ came to his own people, but his own people did not receive him!”

“The rejected stone” became “the cornerstone”. The crucified Jesus Christ would rise from the dead triumphantly and become the most important person in the universe and in the history of the world!

And what would happen to the old nation of Israel, that is, what would happen to the unbelievers in Israel, to those who rejected the Messiah? Jesus says that the kingdom of God would be taken away from Israel and given to a people who would produce its fruit. “The kingdom of God” here especially means, the special privileges and special standing as “the people of God”, which Israel enjoyed during the Old Testament period (cf. Romans 9:4-5; Ephesians 2:11-12). It also means the blessed words and work of salvation, which Jesus Christ as the Messiah had accomplished and brought to Israel now in the beginning of the New Testament period. The kingdom of God would be taken away from the natural nation of Israel, because the natural nation of Israel had not lived up to its obligations. From now on, the kingdom of God will no longer be limited to people from the natural nation of Israel, but will *expand* to include people from all other nations in the world!

The Old Testament natural nation of Israel, as represented by their spiritual leaders (cf. Romans 5:12), was like the wicked tenants. The Owner of everything in the world, including the kingdom of God and its privileges, is God the Father. He sent his only beloved Son, Jesus Christ, to the world, to his people in Israel, and they refused to give to him

what was his due. “The vineyard” represents the people to whom God gives the privileges and status as “the people of God”. Therefore, God the Father would give the kingdom to a people who would “receive God’s gift” (Romans 5:17) and who would “produce the fruit” of God’s kingdom (Matthew 22:43). That is, he would give all his special privileges, advantages and opportunities to his people that consist of all Christian believers in every nation of the world! In the place of the Old Testament nation of Israel as “the people of God”, there would arise “a new people of God”, the Christian Church that consists of people who believe in Jesus Christ from among the Jews and from among the non-Jews (Gentiles) (1 Peter 2:4-10). In his application of this parable (Matthew 21:43) Jesus Christ used *the second person plural* and directed his application on his immediate audience!

Immediately after Jesus made the application of the parable, the second reaction of his hearers followed (Matthew 21:45-46). The chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders of Israel (Matthew 21:15,23,45) now realised that Jesus was speaking about them! They knew very well that they and their followers had rejected Jesus Christ. Although they wanted to arrest Jesus in order to try him and destroy him, they were afraid of the crowd of ordinary people, because the people held that he was a prophet. A few days earlier, a crowd of ordinary people had welcomed him into Jerusalem as the son of David (the Messiah) and children had praised him in the temple as the son of David.

Even now the people did not honour Jesus for what he really was: the Messiah who had come to lay down his life as an atonement sacrifice for sin (Isaiah 53). The crowd regarded him as “the Prophet” (Deuteronomy 18:18) or as “the King” (Isaiah 9:6), the political messiah that would free Israel from the Roman yoke (Luke 23:2; John 6:14-15; 18:36-37; 19:12; cf. Acts 1:6).

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### **3. Identify the relevant and irrelevant details of the parable.**

**Introduce.** Jesus did not intend every detail in the story of the parable to have some spiritual significance. The relevant details are those details in the story of the parable that reinforce the central point or main theme or lesson of the parable. Therefore, we should not ascribe independent spiritual significance to every detail of the story of the parable.

**Discover and discuss.** Which of the details in the story of this parable are really essential or relevant?

**Notes.**

**The vineyard.** The picture of “the vineyard” reminds us immediately of the nation of Israel. The parable is clearly based on Psalm 80 and Isaiah 5. Psalm 80:8-16 describes the exodus out of Egypt as God bringing a vine out of Egypt and after driving the godless nations out of Palestine, he planted the vine there. The vine grew and spread out from the Mediterranean Sea to the River Euphrates. “The vine” clearly represents the nation of Israel, especially during the time of king David and king Solomon (1000 B.C.) (1 Kings 4:20-21).

Isaiah 5:1-7 describes the planting of “a vineyard”. A wall is built around it, a watchtower and a winepress is built inside it. God expected good fruit from this vineyard. But because the nation of Israel yielded only bad fruit, God prophesied that he would break down its wall, allow the vineyard to be trampled and become a wasteland. “The vineyard” clearly represents the nation of Israel, especially during the time of the prophet Isaiah (700 B.C.). Thus, later, when the nation of Israel turned away from God, God allowed the wall to be broken down, the grapes to be stolen, and the vine to be cut down and burned with fire. This *began* to happen at the exile of Israel to Assyria (722/721 B.C.) and Babylon (587/586 B.C.) and was *completed* at the first coming of Christ. The same picture of Israel as a vine is found in Isaiah 27:2-3; Jeremiah 2:21; Ezekiel 15:1-6; 19:10-14; Hosea 10:1-2.

The picture of “the vine” reaches its ultimate fulfilment in Jesus Christ. In John 15:1-6 he says, “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.” (cf. Romans 11:20-23). Jesus Christ himself is the true vine! The nation of Israel only has significance in and through Jesus Christ! Whoever rejects Jesus Christ, no longer belongs to true Israel (Hosea 1:9) and whoever accepts Jesus Christ, belongs to the true Israel (cf. Galatians 6:12-16)!

God did *not* terminate the physical nation of Israel and he did *not* substitute the spiritual nation of Israel (the true believers within Israel) with the Church, but rather *continued* his Old Testament people Israel (the believers within the physical nation of Israel) on a higher plane (in which the prophecies were fulfilled) (Luke 4:21) (and the shadows became the realities) (Colossians 2:17) and *extended* it to include the believers from all the nations on earth! While the physical or national (ethnic) nation of Israel will continue as a nation, Israel as nation will no longer be the visible people of God! Romans 9:6 says, “Not all who are Israel (the physical descendants of the national nation of Israel) are Israel (the chosen and believing people of God).”

Nevertheless, in the parable of the wicked tenants, “the vineyard” does not refer to the physical or national nation of Israel. “The vineyard” refers to the privilege of the status of being God’s chosen people. It refers to the special privileges, advantages, opportunities and status of being the chosen people of God, which had been given to the nation of Israel during the Old Testament period. These things were given to the nation of Israel as the chosen seed (Genesis 12:3) and in virtue of God’s covenant with them (Genesis 22:17-18).

Especially in the explanation or application (Matthew 21:43), Jesus makes clear that he is speaking, not of the old covenant people of God (Israel), but of “the kingdom of God”. Jesus did not say that he would give “the vineyard” (the nation of Israel) to other people, but that he would take “the vineyard” (the kingdom of God together with all its privileges) away from the nation of Israel and give it to other people. He says that he would take the special privileges, advantages, opportunities and status of being the chosen people of God away from the physical and national nation of Israel and give it to other people (the Church consisting of Christians Jews and Christian non-Jews) who would bear the fruit of the kingdom of God. Thus, “the vineyard” is an essential or relevant detail in the parable.

**The owner of the vineyard.** Throughout the parable, it is clear that “the vineyard” (the special privileges of the kingdom of God) never *belonged* to the physical nation of Israel, but always belonged to the owner, who represents God himself! These privileges of the kingdom of God were *entrusted* for a period of time (the Old Testament period) to the people of Israel to manage. Now, at his first coming to the earth, Jesus Christ would take these privileges away from the physical nation of Israel and give it to God’s New Testament people (that consists of all Christians, whether they originally are Jews or Gentiles) (Galatians 3:26-29; Ephesians 3:4-6). Therefore, “the owner of the vineyard” is an essential or relevant detail in the parable.

**The wicked tenants.** In the explanation or application of the parable, Jesus makes very clear that “the privileges of the kingdom of God” are taken away from the physical Jewish nation, as represented by their leaders (the chief priests, teachers of the law and elders of Israel). “The wicked tenants” represent the religious leaders, religious teachers and elders of Israel together with all the Jews who followed them (that is, all unbelievers in the physical nation of Israel). The wicked tenants therefore represent the physical (not spiritual) nation of Israel as a whole. The evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke also clearly say that these people knew that Jesus was talking about them. Thus, “the wicked tenants” are an essential or relevant detail in the parable.

**The other tenants, who will give the owner his share of the crop at harvest time.** According to Jesus’ own explanation and application, “the other tenants” refer to another nation that will produce the fruit of the kingdom (Matthew 21:43). The kingdom (the special privileges and status of being God’s chosen people) would be taken away from the physical nation of Israel and given to another people, a spiritual people. Jesus Christ began doing this by giving the kingdom to his disciples and other believers within Israel (“His little flock”) (Luke 12:32). From the first coming of Jesus Christ onwards, the Christians in all the nations of the world together constitute the spiritual chosen people of God. What God had said of the nation of Israel during the Old Testament period (Exodus 19:6), he now says of Christians during the New Testament period (1 Peter 2:9-10). “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.”

By far the majority of these Christians descend from the Gentile nations. From the first coming to the second coming of Christ the nation of God or the people of God is constituted by Christians from every nation in the world (Acts 15:14-18; Romans 9:25; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Galatians 3:26-29; Ephesians 2:11-22; 3:4-6; Colossians 3:11; 1 Peter 2:4-10; Titus 2:14; Revelation 21:3). Not the natural children of Israel, but only the born-again Christians who produce the fruit of the kingdom constitute the children of God or the nation of God (Romans 9:6-16,24-29; Matthew 3:7-10; Acts 26:17-20). Thus, “the other tenants” are an essential or relevant detail in the parable.

**The servants.** The parable does not explain who these servants were, but Jesus was clearly referring to the prophets of the Old Testament. The prophet Elijah had to flee for his life from Jezebel (1 Kings 19:1-3). The prophet Micaiah was thrown in prison and given only bread and water (1 Kings 22:27). The church father, Justin Martyr, in his book “Dialogue with Trypho”, accused the Jews of having sawn the prophet Isaiah in two with a wooden saw (Hebrews 11:37). The Jews repeatedly subjected the prophet Jeremiah to ill treatment. The Jews plotted to kill him (Jeremiah 11). His own family betrayed him (Jeremiah 12). The Jews paid no attention to anything he said (Jeremiah 18). They beat him up and put him in stocks at the city gate (Jeremiah 20). All the false priests and prophets and all the wicked officials and the king wanted to sentence him to death, because he spoke the truth (Jeremiah 26). They arrested him, had him beaten and imprisoned him in a dungeon, where he remained for a long time (Jeremiah 37). They even threw him into a cistern full of mud (Jeremiah 38). The early Christian tradition says that the prophet Jeremiah was finally stoned to death by the Jews who had forced him to go down to Egypt with them (Jeremiah 43). The prophet Ezekiel experienced the persecution of the Jews as the prick of thorns and sting of scorpions (Ezekiel 2:6). He found out that God’s covenant people in the Old Testament listened to his words, but did not put them into practice (Ezekiel 20:49; 33:31-32). The prophet Amos was told to flee and deliver his prophecies elsewhere (Amos 7:10-15).

Jesus summarises the treatment the prophets of the Lord received in Israel. In Matthew 5:11-12 he says, “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ... In the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” In Luke 6:22-23, he says, “Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. ... For that is how their fathers treated the prophets.” And in Matthew 23:29-32,37, he says, “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. ... O Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you.” (See also Luke 11:47-51; 13:33-35; John 12:36-43). Thus, “the servants” of the owner are an essential or relevant detail in the parable.

**The only son and heir.** 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! References to the cornerstone are made in Psalm 118:22-23, Isaiah 28:16; Matthew 21:42; Acts 4:11; Romans 9:33; Ephesians 2:20 and 1 Peter 2:6. The cornerstone of a building is a part of the foundation and thereby supports the superstructure. But it is more than a foundation stone: it is the cornerstone, which finalises the shape of the superstructure. Being placed at the corner formed by the junction of two primary walls, it determines the lay of the whole building. All the other stones must adjust themselves to this cornerstone.

The relationship of Jesus Christ to the Church is that of a cornerstone. By his glorious resurrection, ascension and enthronement he has become highly exalted. From heaven and through the Holy Spirit, he dwells in the hearts of believers, directs their lives and rules over the entire universe in the interest of the Church (cf. Ephesians 1:22). Luke 20:18 adds, “Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, but on whom it falls will be crushed.” People, who now stumble over Jesus Christ and his words, will be lost, and in the final judgement they will be crushed. Luke 2:34 says, “This child is destined to cause the falling and the rising of many in Israel.” All people (including Jews), who reject Jesus Christ, will be lost forever. And all people (including Jews), who believe in Jesus, will be saved forever. It is clear that “the only son and heir” is an essential and relevant detail in the parable.

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#### **4. Identify the main message of the parable.**

**Introduce.** The main message (the central message or theme) 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 theme, one important message, one central point to make.* Therefore, we should not try to find a spiritual truth in every detail of the story. Instead look for the one main lesson.

**Discuss.** What is the main message of this parable?

**Notes.**

**The parable of the wicked tenants in Matthew 21:33-39 is a parable about “the messengers of God’s kingdom” and the response of the physical nation of Israel to them.**

**The main message of the parable is the following. “Despite the most unreasonable sin of the physical nation of Israel towards God’s incomprehensible love expressed in his beloved Son, Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ will triumph over his opponents and establish his kingdom as predicted in Psalm 118:22-23”. In spite of the greatest opposition and the rejection of God’s messengers, God’s purpose to establish his kingdom on earth cannot and will not fail!**

Responding to God’s messengers is one of the basic characteristics of God’s kingdom. The genuine people of God’s kingdom are responsive and teachable. They accept God’s messengers, like the preachers and teachers throughout the New Testament period, who interpret the Bible correctly and who bring the message of the Bible faithfully to them. Above all, they receive Jesus Christ as Saviour and King into their hearts and lives!

“The wicked tenants”, who refused to give the owner his share of the vintage, abused his servants and killed his only beloved son, represent the physical nation of Israel as represented by their unbelieving leaders and their followers. Their rejection of their Messiah resulted in their own terrible destruction in the sense of the destruction of the physical nation of Israel as the visible people of God on earth. God had entrusted “the vineyard” (the privilege to be God’s people on earth) to the nation of Israel, but they had abused and killed God’s prophets and finally they crucified the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Therefore God gave “the vineyard” to other people who produce its fruit. “The other people” does not *exclude* all the Jews, just as it also does not *include* all the Gentiles. It consists of all Christians from both the physical nation of Israel and all the other physical Gentile nations in the world.

Two things must be kept into mind:

**First. God has not hardened or rejected all the Jews belonging to the physical nation of Israel.** According to Romans chapters 9-11, God has reserved for himself “a remnant” of the nation of Israel. They hear the gospel and they will be saved (Romans 10:17-18; 9:27). All the Jews, who do not persist in their unbelief, will certainly be a part of “the olive tree” that represents “the people of God” that consists of all believers from among the Jews and the non-Jews (Romans 11:23).

**Second. If God rejected the unbelieving Jews, he will certainly reject the unbelieving Gentiles.** Therefore, no Gentile may boast against the Jews, nor persecute the Jews! They should rather pray for the conversion of the Jews and preach the gospel to them, just as they should pray for the conversion of people of the Gentile nations and preach the gospel to them. Only God has the right and power to judge or to save Jew and Gentile alike! Both the Old and New Testaments are not concerned with “racism”, but with “God’s people”, whether they come from the nation of Israel only or from all the nations in the world, including the nation of Israel.

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## **5. Compare the parable with parallel and contrasting passages in the Bible.**

**Introduce.** Some parables are similar to one another and can be compared. However, the truth in all the parables has parallel or contrasting truth taught in other passages of the Bible. Try to find the most important cross-references that help us to interpret the parable. Always check the interpretation of a parable with the direct clear teaching of the Bible.

### **(1) The cursing of the fig tree.**

Matthew 21:18-19. Just before Jesus told the parable of the wicked tenants, he was hungry and he went to look for fruit on a fig tree standing in the distance. He found nothing on it except leaves. Because he found no fruit on it, he cursed it (Mark 11:12-14). The next day, the tree had withered completely from its roots to the top (Mark 11:20)! Jesus was not angry at the tree. This event had a much deeper meaning and the parable of the wicked tenants explained this deeper meaning.

The fig tree had much leaves on it, but no fruit. Luke 13:6-9 says that this “fig tree” was a symbol of the highly privileged nation of Israel. Like the fig tree, the nation of Israel pretended to be a very religious and holy people, bringing many sacrifices to the temple. But in reality the Israelites had changed the temple into a marketplace, where they sold animals. And its leaders were plotting to kill Jesus, the One apart from whom the temple sacrifices had no meaning at all. The nation of 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 as “the people of God”. Jesus Christ did not reject the Jews as such, but predicted that the kingdom of God would no longer be established in the physical nation of Israel. From the first coming of Christ the kingdom of God is established in God’s New Testament covenant people that consists of believing Jews and believing non-Jews (people from the Gentile nations). Instead of only “leaves”, they would bring forth “the fruit” of the kingdom of God (Matthew 8:11-12; 1 Peter 2:4-10)! The appearance of God’s people would make way for the reality of God’s people.

### **(2) The parable of the two sons.**

Matthew 21:28-32. There are resemblances and certain differences between the parable of the two sons and the parable of the wicked tenants. As to the resemblances, both parables mention a vineyard and in both parables Jesus had in mind the leaders of the Jews and their followers, whom he condemned. As to the differences, the second parable is much longer and has more details. Although both have only one main lesson, which is clearly brought out in Matthew 21:40-43, the second parable approaches an allegory far more closely than does the first parable. While the first parable stresses the rejection of John the Baptist by the leaders of Israel, the second parable stresses the rejection of the Old Testament prophets and the Messiah, Jesus Christ, by the entire people of Israel. That is why the kingdom of God would be taken away from them and given to other people.

### **(3) The parable of the wedding banquet.**

Matthew 22:1-14. There are resemblances and certain differences between the parable of the wicked tenants and the parable of the wedding banquet. As to the resemblances, both parables portray God’s patience and his providential care with the ingratitude of the Jews. As to the differences, the parable of the wedding banquet stresses the severe punishment of those who are careless in their relationship to God and go to the wedding banquet without the required wedding clothes. The parable of the wicked tenants stresses the rejection of the unbelieving Jews and the calling and acceptance of the believing Gentiles.

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## **6. Summarise the main teachings of the parable.**

**Discuss.** What are the main teachings or messages of the parable? What did Jesus Christ teach us to *know* or to *believe* and what did he teach us to *be* or to *do*?

**Notes.**

### **(1) The main message or central lesson.**

The parable of the wicked tenants in Matthew 21:33-39 is a parable about “the messengers of God’s kingdom” and the response of the physical nation of Israel to them.

The main message is the following. “Despite the most unreasonable sin of the physical nation of Israel towards God’s incomprehensible love expressed in his beloved Son, Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ will triumph over his opponents and establish his kingdom as predicted in Psalm 118:22-23”. In spite of the greatest opposition and the rejection of God’s messengers, God’s purpose to establish his kingdom on earth cannot and will not fail! The privileges of the kingdom of God are given to people, who produce the fruit of God’s kingdom in every nation of the world.

### **(2) The nation of Israel and the Christian Church.**

During the first coming of Jesus Christ to the earth, the physical nation of Israel as the old covenant people of God rejected Jesus Christ. Thereby they condemned themselves and were rejected by God as his covenant people (Matthew 8:11-12). From then on, all people who believe in Jesus Christ, both Jews and Gentiles, are the new covenant people of God (John 10:16; Romans 10:12-13; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Galatians 3:26-28; Ephesians 2:11-22; Colossians 3:11-12; 1 Peter 2:9-10; 1 John 3:4-10). They constitute the Christian Church in the whole world. All the privileges of the kingdom of God are theirs!

**(3) The meaning of producing the fruit of the kingdom.**

In Matthew 3:7-12, when John the Baptist preached the message about the kingdom of God, he 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 people who have been baptised with the Holy Spirit (that is, has been born again by the Holy Spirit) would be gathered like wheat into God’s barn. All the others would be burned like chaff with unquenchable fire.

Producing fruit does not refer to the religious works (duties like praying a number of times every day, fasting at certain times, giving a fixed amount of money, or making pilgrimages, etc.) or good works done by people’s own power, but to the good works which the Holy Spirit produces in them (Matthew 3:8; John 15:16; Galatians 5:22-23; Colossians 1:6).

<b>5</b>	<b>PRAYER</b> (8 minutes)	<b>[REACTIONS]</b> <b>PRAYER IN RESPONSE TO GOD’S WORD</b>
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*Take turns* in the group *to pray short* to God in response to what you have learned today.  
Or divide the group into two’s or three’s and pray to God in response to what you have learned today.

<b>6</b>	<b>PREPARATION</b> (2 minutes)	<b>[ASSIGNMENT]</b> <b>FOR NEXT LESSON</b>
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*(Group leader.* Give the group members this preparation for at home in writing or let them copy it down).

1. Commitment. Be committed to make disciples, build the Church and preach the kingdom.
2. Preach, teach or study “the parable of the wicked tenants” together with another person or group of people.
3. Personal time with God. Have a quiet time from half a chapter of **Deuteronomy 8, 9, 10 and 11** each day. Make use of the favourite truth method. Make notes.
4. Memorisation. . **Review series I: “The kingdom of God”.** (1) Enter into the kingdom. John 3:3,5, (2) Welcome back from serving in the kingdom. Luke 9:62, (5) The triumph of the kingdom. Daniel 2:44.
5. Bible study. Prepare the next Bible study at home. **Romans 2:1-16.**  
Make use of the five steps method of Bible study. Make notes.
6. Prayer. Pray for someone or something specific this week and see what God is doing (Psalm 5:3).
7. Update your notebook on preaching God’s kingdom. Include your notes on quiet time, your memorisation notes, your teaching notes and this preparation.