

Title: The Cornerstone  
Text: Matthew 21.33-46  
Theme: We are humble stewards  
Series: Matthew #103  
Prop Stmt: When we forget we are humble stewards, disaster awaits.  
Aim: I aim for my people to grasp

Read Text:

In Tolkein's book, The Return of the King, much of the attention is placed upon the city of Gondor where Lord Denethor II rules as a steward of the city. He is not the King. He rules as Steward. He is entrusted with keeping and protecting the city until the rightful king returns to reign. In the story, Denethor forgets that he is a steward and because of that he not only makes decisions that are destructive for the city, but when rumors reach his ears that the rightful king is returning, he is threatened.

He is threatened because as a steward, he has failed to carry out his task. The return of the king threatens to expose his failure to everyone, and threatens to subject him to his true authority. So he is determined to do everything that is in his power to hold on to his power, even if he has to destroy the city in the process.

A steward is "one who looks after or manages another's property or finances."

In the beginning, Adam was the first steward. He was charged with looking after and managing the Garden of Eden. It was not his to own, but his to manage. Adam was to be an example for us. Everything that we have, we do not really have. We only steward them. God is the ultimate owner. Whatever you have has been entrusted into your care so that you will, as a steward, look after them and manage on behalf of God. Whatever you have is not yours to keep, but yours to manage. The day will come when the Owner will come and ask for a reckoning and on that day you will give an account of your stewardship.

Now, let's say that a local automotive executive was assigned to Europe for a temporary job assignment and he asked you to look after his 10,000 square foot estate. You could drive his cars, swim in his pool, use his country club memberships, and his season tickets to the Tigers, Red Wings and Lions games. Your job was to live in his home and make certain that it was safe, secure, clean, and kept in working order. Sound like a deal? So, if you move with your family. Sound tough? Not really, right? It is easy to get used to moving from coach to business class. It is easy to get used to people assuming that the car you are driving or the home you are living in is yours. In fact, it is so easy to get used to it, it is easy to start believing it yourself. If you forget who you are, and who is in charge, you will make assumptions about yourself and others that are not just wrong, but are devastating.

We are studying the last major section of Matthew's gospel. It is the holy week. It is the Passion Week. It is the week of Passover. The first part of the week focuses upon the

conflict that Jesus has with the leaders of the Jews. The conflict centers on the issue of authority. The leaders refuse to acknowledge the right and authority of Christ to rule. They are supposed to be stewards who represent the real king, but instead, their hatred and rejection of Christ is undeniable evidence of their hatred and rejection of God. Sin is blinding. That is why I say that sin causes brain damage. The problem is obvious to others, but it is not obvious to the one who is trapped in the sin. The one who is trapped in sin is trapped, primarily because of the lies that he has told others so much that he believes those very same lies. What Jesus does is tell a story that exposes the problem not only to others, but also exposes the problem in a very obvious way to the very people who believe their own lies. Their two reactions are very telling. Let's dig in.

### I. A Shocking Story (33-40)

This is a shocking story. It is shocking on so many levels: First of all, the owner is personally invested in the entire estate. He not only owns the house and the grounds, but he planted a vineyard. It is obvious from the fact that he eventually leases it out to tenants (plural), that this vineyard is large. This is a big project. When you plant something, you tend to feel connected to it. And planting a vineyard is different than planting corn, soybeans, tomatoes or green peppers. If you plant corn in May you can harvest corn in September or October. If you plant tomatoes in May, you can have tomatoes by July or August. The same thing is true with green peppers. But if you plant a vineyard, those plants will not yield grapes until the 5<sup>th</sup> year. That is a long time to wait.

This owner anticipates the day when the vineyard will be productive and vulnerable. So, he builds a fence. Then he builds a winepress (pic). Then he builds a tower, presumably in the center of the estate so someone can look out for the entire property and oversee it. Now, after all of the hardest work is done, he leases the property out to tenants and goes to another country. My grandfather owned a farm in Iowa. He lived near the farm, but not on the farm. When we would visit my grandparents in the summer, I would always spend several days on the farm. Like this account, my grandfather owned the farm, but leased it out to tenants. So, I was interested to find out in my study this week that it was customary then for a tenant to get 50% of the crop as his payment. That was the same arrangement that my grandfather had with his tenants.

Now, since the first few years of the vineyard did not yield any crop, the owner was probably paying the tenants their wages out of his pocket. Needless to say, this owner has a lot invested in this. It is not just his own money; it is his own work. Now, he entrusts all of this to tenants. Jesus says that he "leased it to tenants." There is an arrangement. There is an agreement. There is an understanding, a contract, perhaps a covenant (hint) that has been established. The owner has every right to expect that these tenants will do what they have agreed to do. And when the time came for the vineyard to produce its harvest he sent his servants to get his fruit. There is nothing unusual at all about this story so far.

Jesus is telling the story from the perspective of the master of the house. And even though most of us do not live on farms, we can relate to this story. Jesus' audience could relate even more so. Growing and harvesting grapes was a major part of Jewish life then.

Even today after the growth of many urban centers in this little country, grapes still represent a major factor of agricultural life in Israel. Israel grows 20 different varieties of grapes and sends 140 million pounds of grapes to market annually. Since his audience lived this reality, they understood this story. They connected with it on a personal level. They knew land owners and grape farmers. So, what Jesus says next is very shocking.

The tenants, who have a pretty good deal do not respect or honor the owner in anyway. When he sends his servants to collect what he is due, they beat one of them. Whoa, whoa, whoa! Hold the phone! What on earth would motivate these tenants to beat a servant of the owner who had come to get what was rightfully due to the owner? What made these tenants think that they could do such a thing? Did they convince themselves that they were being treated unfairly? Did they believe that they deserved to be in charge and actually should own the estate? Had they already sold the crop and kept all the money? Or, were they such lazy tenants, that there was no crop at all? Jesus does not say. But they don't stop with just beating one of the servants. They kill another and then they stone the third. The level of atrocity increases with each one. We can only assume that the servant they beat returned to tell the owner what had happened. What these tenants have done is inexplicable and what the owner does is almost equally baffling. We listen to this story and we want justice. We want these guys to get their chops busted, but instead of raining justice down upon them, he sends some more servants. In fact, he sends more servants than he did the first time. In telling this story, Jesus sets up an amazing and enormous contrast. On the one hand you have these unbelievably wicked, ungrateful, and horrifically despicable and disrespectful tenants while on the other hand you have this amazingly patient owner.

How does an owner that generous and kind, get stuck with tenants that are that bad? We all know stories of bad bosses. If you get to work for someone who is kind and patient and encouraging, you are blessed. That is an amazing gift. I love to see it when good workers get to work for good managers and good owners. Everybody wins in that. But this is a grief! This is an enormous grief. It is both sad and shocking and the fact that the owner sent a second round of servants and they are treated as badly as the first only heightens our sense of injustice.

Then (v.37) the owner sends his son saying, "They will respect my son." We would assume that. We want to believe that. We hope that is the case for the owner and now, we are on the edge of our seats as it were. The stakes are now very high. The son of the owner is coming. Our hope is short-lived. The tenants see the son coming and their language is as shocking as their actions. They talk as if they can do whatever they want and get away with it. They talk as if they can actually kill the son of the owner and that nothing is going to happen. They believe that if they kill the son of the owner that they will get to inherit the entire estate. Kill the son and we get the whole thing!

And you want to say, "What are you smoking? Are you out of your mind?! You can't kill the son. But nobody says it and they do just that. They take the son out of the vineyard and they kill him. They act as if they can do whatever what they want without any fear of justice. This is incredibly sad. We are enraged and grieved all at the same time. We hate

it when evil people get away with murder. We hate it when injustice prevails and good people get trampled. We are deeply offended and we are shocked. But, their plan does not work. Jesus says that the owner is coming and now he asks, “What will he do with the tenants?”

## II. Self-incrimination (41)

In our text last week, Jesus asked these guys a question and they had to huddle together in order to figure out how to answer him. They do not have to huddle now. There is no hesitation. The answer is so obvious! And these men blurt it out. They are indignant! They are offended at the sins of these tenants. They feel it. They are enraged. They know what the owner will do. “He will put those wretches to a miserable death...” In fact, in the original language, there is a little play on words with this phrase. The idea being, “These wretches will suffer a wretched death.” The wretchedness of their punishment and death will equal the wretchedness of their evil and their evil is really wretched.

The only thing that is more stunning than the actions of the tenants is the reaction of the chief priests and Pharisees. They totally and completely incriminate themselves. They declare themselves absolutely guilty but these guys do not stop there, do they? Notice what else they say. The owner will “*let (lease) out the vineyard to others tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons.*” Wow! They really get it, don’t they? The owner is going to find others with whom he will establish a new covenant who will steward his property and manage his estate. They get it, except they don’t get it. They see and even feel the sin of the tenants but do not see or feel their own sin. And what is so embarrassing is that I can see their sin. I can see their failure of not seeing their own sin in the tenants, but all too often I don’t see my own sin.

Why didn’t they see their own sin? Why was their judgment of the situation so exact but their perception of themselves so wrong? They could not see themselves in the story. It is obvious to everyone else, but not to them. They could not see themselves in this story because they refused to believe that they were capable of committing the same crime. They presumed that they were better than the tenants, just as I am tempted to presume that I am better than these leaders. That is so convicting. That is so humbling. That is so embarrassing. That is so scary.

It is at these points where I feel like we just need to stop and pray. We need to stop and cry out to God for our eyes to be opened to our own sin. You condemn others for the same sin that you are committing right now! You see your sin in others but cannot see it in yourself. You recognize the coming judgment for others but fail to see it coming for you. Will you pray right now and ask God to open your eyes so that you can see your sin before you see the sin of others? Will you pray that God will awaken your spiritual nerves so that you are highly sensitive to anything that is in your life right now that is grieving the Spirit of God? We need to confess to God that our sin is just as serious as the sin of the worst sinner who ever walked on this earth.

I do not know if Jesus paused before he responded. I would guess that he did. I would guess that he would let their words echo in their minds for a bit before he asks this question. The question is deep. It is personal. It is convicting. It is indicting. It is stunning. But it is only all of these things, if you are really listening.

### III. **Indictment** (42-44)

*Have you never read in the Scriptures?*

Jesus expects us to read and properly interpret the Bible. He is pointing out a text that he expects them to know and a text that he expects them to understand. He is telling them that they are responsible to know and understand this text because this text is all about him. Jesus is the hero of the Bible. It is not enough to know what the Bible says, you must know what the Bible means. The meaning of the Bible is meant to be experienced. It is meant to be applied. It is meant to be felt. It is meant to have great affect upon us. The meaning of the Bible is designed to get under your skin and into your heart. It gets into your very thoughts and into the seat of your affections. The Bible is intended to cause your heart to believe on God and your stomach to hunger for God. It is to cause your soul to sing about God and your affections to long after God. It is to cause your mind to think of God and to ponder his ways and consider his promises and for your will to surrender to God. You understand the true meaning of a text when your feet change direction, when your hands serve, when your eyes behold the King in his beauty and your ears hear his voice and rejoice. I can preach the Bible, but I can't make you feel it like that. I can help you see its truths but I cannot cause you to feel its wonder.

These men knew the content of the Bible, but they did not know the wonder and the majesty of her message. They were so close and so very, very far away. And here, standing in front of them was the hero of the whole thing. And here he is explaining to them the fulfillment of a prophecy by showing them himself. He is the fulfillment of that text. It was written about him. But what it said was both amazing and dangerous. It is amazing to those who accept it, but to those who reject it, it is damning. It is dangerous.

Do you remember that verse, "This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it."? Do you know where that comes from? It is found in the 118<sup>th</sup> Psalm. It is verse 24. But, in verses 22-23, we read, "*The stone that the builders rejected as become the cornerstone. This is the LORD's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.*"

The message is clear. The builders are considering what stones they are going to use for their building. They reject one particular stone, and yet that very stone ends up being the most important stone in the entire building. The one that they don't want is the exact one that they need and that is the one that ends up holding the entire thing together. God sovereignly ordains their rejection of the stone to be the means by which that very stone becomes the chief stone, even the cornerstone. We look at what God does and how he uses even the wrath and rejection of man as a means to advance his own plan and glory and we are amazed. In fact, we are so amazed at this event on this day, that we recognize that this is the day that the LORD has made. He has orchestrated the events of this day in

such an amazing way to carry out his plan that we rejoice in this day and are glad in it. God is sovereign over the free choices of man and uses them for his glorious purposes. There is nothing more amazing than to see the wonder of God's plan in using the rejection of his Son as the means for his Son to die on a cross for our sin. However, to those who rejected the stone, to those who rejected the Son, there is nothing that is more devastating. And now you can see the connection of this story to the previous ones.

Jesus just got done telling these men that they rejected John the Baptist because they would reject Jesus. John the Baptist and the prophets before him (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, etc.) were the servants that God sent to the tenants (Israel) of his property. The servants of God were beaten, abused and some were killed. Now, God has sent his Son. But, they will treat the Son the way they have treated the servants of the owner, because in their heart of hearts, these tenants hate the owner. The tenants are an illustration of the chief priests, scribes, elders and Pharisees. The servants are an illustration of the prophets. The son stands for Jesus, the owner is the Father and the estate is the kingdom of God. These men accuse Jesus of blaspheming God. They claim to be concerned about defending the honor of God and yet their actions reveal that they hate God. (verse 28-31)

Not only is Jesus fulfilling prophecy, but they are fulfilling prophecy. And in an echo of their own words Jesus says, "Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits." He is indicting them with their own words. He is saying to them what they said of the tenants because they are doing what the tenants did. These are the men who are right now plotting the death of Jesus. They see the son and they say to themselves that he has to go. He has to be killed. And they are plotting to do this (v.46 – "they were seeking to arrest him") and their plotting and their plan is predicted in the Scriptures that they claim to believe.

But their plotting, planning and even their killing of the Son will not get them what they think. The stone that they reject will become the Cornerstone. And for those who believe in Christ, he holds all things together. For those who reject him, they will break apart on him or be crushed by him.

#### IV. No change (45-46)

In spite of the gripping story, their own indictment of themselves, the clear warning from the Scriptures including the prophecy about Christ and them, they do not for a second give any consideration to the weight of Christ's warning. They perceived that he was talking about them, but they were utterly blind to the possibility that Christ was right and that they were wrong. They are resolute in their pursuit of the destruction of Christ. It is interesting to note that they feared the crowds, but Jesus did not fear them.

Conclusion: