

# The Upside Down Kingdom 4: The Parable of the Tenants

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Good Morning Kurume Bible Fellowship,

Welcome again to church this morning. It is great to be together worshipping in church. I always find it uplifting to be together as a community in worship. I feel like so much of life happens so quickly and to have this moment where we can come together and pause, so we can remember and celebrate all the things that God has done in the week is a great blessing. And, if I was just remembering and celebrating what God has done in my life then church would be over fairly quickly, but the fact that we can celebrate what God is doing in each of our lives. It just magnifies the goodness of God.

Now, some here might have had some great weeks. Awesome we worship the goodness you have experienced. But, some of us may have had some really hard weeks, and here we gather together and we stand with you because;

'Blessed are the poor in spirit,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.  
Blessed are those who mourn,  
for they will be comforted.'

As a church I hope we will continue to be a place where we can be a welcoming community that shares with one another the life giving Word of God, and in doing so, inspires true and earnest fellowship. Maybe just take a quick moment and tell someone around you that you have not spoken to in a while how nice it is to see them here at church this morning.

For those visiting for the first time or those who have been away, we are in the final two weeks of our Upside Down Kingdom series. In this series we have been examining the parables that Jesus taught with. In particular, we are examining the way in which the parables present a 'Heavenly Kingdom' that is arranged in some unexpected ways when it is compared to the way in which humans often think about 'kingdom'.

This morning, I want to begin by encouraging us to think about the peace that Jesus brings. In the Gospel of John, Jesus comforted his disciples during the last supper and told them this in Chapter 14 verse 27:

## **John 14:27**

27 Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. Lovely, I could use some more peace! Praise God!  
But Jesus also says this; *I do not give to you as the world gives..*

This is what I would like us to think of as we turn our attention to this week's parable, The Parable of the Tenants.

## The Parable of the Tenants

### Matthew 21: 33 - 45

33 "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.

Jesus sets the scene here and he is actually using some imagery from the Old Testament. In Isaiah Chapter 5 you can find this:

I will sing for the one I love  
a song about his vineyard:  
My loved one had a vineyard  
on a fertile hillside.

2

He dug it up and cleared it of stones  
and planted it with the choicest vines.  
He built a watchtower in it  
and cut out a winepress as well.  
Then he looked for a crop of good grapes,  
but it yielded only bad fruit.

3

"Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and people of Judah,  
judge between me and my vineyard.

Ironically, Jesus has just entered Jerusalem and it is this entrance that we now celebrate as Palm Sunday. This entrance to Jerusalem would be the final week of Jesus's life before his death and resurrection.

It is interesting here that Jesus begins this parable by bringing our attention to some imagery that his listeners would be familiar with. There is imagery about someone loved, about a vineyard and a reference to judgement. We will see all of these themes as we continue.

In this parable, there are some not so nice things about to happen.

34 When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit.

35 “The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. 36 Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way.

Yikes! This does not sound good. Perhaps there are some people here who own and are renting out a house. This would be a horrible situation. You as the landowner are curious as to whether your land is producing fruit so you send some people to check with the tenants. Man, these are awful tenants!

Beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. Why!? No reason is given. To clarify the matter, the landowner sends more servants. More than three this time. Perhaps he took his biggest, strongest and most trustworthy servants to go check on the tenants but the same thing happens.

So what can the landowner do? The tenants obviously don't care about his servants.

What the landowner does next, is something very interesting;

37 Last of all, he sent his son to them. ‘They will respect my son,’ he said.

If they don't respect my servants, surely they will respect my son. Now, we don't know how old the landowner is, or how old the son is, but, for all we know, maybe the son was strong and healthy. The landowner obviously has a lot of respect for his son and thinks he will be able to sort out the tenants. But then we read this;

38 “But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, ‘This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance.’ 39 So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

This parable is pretty brutal! We already knew from the way they treated the servants that they were violent, but we learn just how evil they are here. They are jealous and wicked. They think that if they kill the son they will be able to receive the inheritance that the landowner was going to bestow to his son.

How wrong is that? What father would give transfer his inheritance to his son's murder? It does not make sense! Obviously since the landowner is still alive (because he sent his son) he has not given the son the full inheritance.

Across many interpretations, this parable is said to be an analogy of people have reacted to God throughout history. That God has created a vineyard, land that has the potential to bear

fruit, and everytime that God has sent a servant to check up on those who are meant to look after this land. They have attacked them.

In this way, this parable is often understood as a critique of how God's chosen people rejected the prophets and then how they would reject Jesus. We know that Jesus is the 'Son of God' and so it is quite eerie that Jesus would teach this parable a few days before he died.

Already the parable is really convicting. How could the tenants keep treating people so awfully?

Aren't we supposed to be talking about an upside down kingdom? And didn't I say that we would make reference to Jesus being the one who gives peace? This is all pretty dark so far.

Jesus does paint a very dark picture before he shines a beautiful light. We are being set up here. Verse 40 and 41 are the crux of this parable.

40 "Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"

Now, this is where Jesus turns back this story to us. You have just witnessed a horrendous scene. What will the landowner do? Here is the kicker here, Jesus asks the question and in doing so, he turns the tables.

What would you say?

41 "He will bring those wretches to a wretched end," they replied, "and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time."

Now the Gospel of Matthew directly attributes the reply to those that have listened to the parable. In Luke and Mark it is unclear who answers. Some would say that it doesn't matter, but I think this is where we get the real picture of the upside down kingdom.

Those listening answer in a way that might seem logical. The tenants are wretches so get them out of there and replace them with people who do the right thing.

Ironically, and here is the kicker, by saying those that answer in this way are doing exactly the same thing as those they condemn. What I mean is, by saying that the wretches should come to a wretched end, they are saying that it is ok to use violence to kick out violent people.

In other words. It is ok to do evil to get rid of evil.

I think that this is something that on some level we all relate to, or at least we see it in so many Hollywood movies or read in so many stories. The good guys are the only ones allowed to get away with a little bit of evil, so long as they are using that evil to get rid of people who actually

are the bad guys. Think James Bond, The Fast and The Furious, Romeo and Juliet, Beauty and the Beast, and the list goes on. All of this is just one part of a cycle in which more evil happens. Violence leads to more violence which leads to more violence.

I think that this is a central component of Human Kingdoms. Those who are good, are in, and those who are out are bad. And if the bad people do bad things, it is ok to do a few bad things to stop them. Basically,

41 “He will bring those wretches to a wretched end,”

However, Jesus replies with this:

42 Jesus said to them, “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’?”

43 “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. 44 Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed.”[i]

The stone that the builders rejected has become the corner stone and the Lord has done this and it is marvelous in our eyes.

Jesus was rejected and he became the cornerstone! The very cornerstone of a global church that is still in operation here today!

What is being revealed in this conversation is an alternative way of thinking about Kingdom, Jesus reminds the listeners about the Upside Down Kingdom. One that takes the rejected and the outsider and finds a way to bring them in and make them an important part of the building!

In fact all throughout the old testament you will find examples of people who were outcasts, rejected or violent, who were all used in powerful ways to build and advance God’s kingdom!

Moses killed someone, David acted immorally, Ruth was a foreigner who was brought into the community and whose descendants would become the King of Israel. These are just a few examples.

The Upside Down Kingdom that we are shown through this parable is the Kingdom of Heaven!

It is contrary to the logic that we immediately think of when we hear about these evil tenants. Instead of continuing a circle of violence, it brings an end to violence and finds a way to transform the situation.

In effect, instead of violence, it brings about peace.

### **John 14:27**

27 Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

The Upside Down Kingdom is one that miraculously finds ways to transform violent situations and people into situations and people that build peace. How good is that!

Now, I hope this has not been too technical this morning. I hope that you have been able to follow along clearly and you can see the difference between the Upside down Peacebuilding Kingdom of Heaven versus the Violent reliant Kingdoms that we are familiar with.

As we conclude, I want to try and take this concept of the 'Peaceful' Kingdom and turn it into something practical. Something that we can use.

In Hebrew, the word for Peace is 'Shalom' and the Hebrew term is a little more complex than how we usually use the word 'peace'.

Shalom, refers to a state of completeness. More particularly it refers to completeness that is achieved through an action. Shalom is about restoration to completeness.

Scholar Perry Yoder has gone through the Bible and has identified that Shalom is used in reference to three things:

1. Peace
  - a. Which means ending violence and thus restoring a peace between people
2. Justice -
  - a. Which means restoring the equality between people, particularly atoning for what has been violated.
3. Salvation -
  - a. A restoring or a reconciliation of relationship, harmonizing or bringing together a deliverance from a bad situation between people and God, and between different people.

As I think about Shalom in these three ways, it helps me to understand the parable a little more clearly. Jesus described some evil people and if it was up to those listening to the parable, they would have brought a wretched end to wretched people. No peace, no Shalom, is achieved in this way. The world keeps going and nothing is transformed.

However!

In the Upside Down Kingdom, the rejected becomes the cornerstone. There is opportunity for peace to be built, there is opportunity for justice to be served (Notice the word serve!), and there is opportunity for salvation to be granted.

In the Upside Down Kingdom, true restoration is achieved, which, in my humble opinion, is the most miraculous thing of all.

For me, this is very personal. When I look back at my life, I was a kid in school who made fun of Christians. In grades 8 & 9 & 10 I teased my friends who didn't go to church. Sometimes in some nasty ways. I loved to debate them. Show me your God I would say, where is the proof?

I hate to admit it, but there were instances when I was a bully at school. I was bullied myself, but there were times when I took out my insecurities on classmates or even my siblings.

I have made mistakes that have made loved ones feel hurt and abandoned and I have said and done silly things that have upset strangers.

I hope that I am the only one in the room that can say this, but I think maybe we all can, that if there is anyone who deserves punishment, it is me. If there is anyone who has been wretched, I know that I have been that one.

Praise God, for a Kingdom which is ruled by Jesus who gives us peace. Jesus who says

27 Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

Rather than simply punishing me, Jesus has welcomed me into a kingdom where through his grace I get to work through the wretched things in my life and I get the opportunity to restore peace where there was trouble, I get to serve justice where I caused trouble, and I get to work on restoring salvation, with God first and then others. And praise God that I do not have to do it alone. This, is the power of Jesus;

“The stone the builders rejected  
has become the cornerstone;  
the Lord has done this,  
and it is marvelous in our eyes’?

My prayer for you this week is that we would all find ways to build more peace, justice and salvation in our lives and the world around us. Would we first see Jesus, the cornerstone. Would we see how marvelous he is, and may we be empowered to follow his example. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

## Benediction

17[May] Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, 18 may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, 19 and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

<b>1</b>	<b>Message Title</b>	<i>The Upside Down Kingdom 4: The Parable of the Tenants</i>
<b>2</b>	<b>Scripture Verses</b>	<i>Matthew 21:33-44</i>
<b>3</b>	<b>Verse for the Bulletin</b>	<i>Matthew 21: 42</i>
<b>4</b>	<b>Bio</b>	<i>As previous</i>
<b>5</b>	<b>Sermon Script</b>	<a href="https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ruI0VRfuJdMoZzvXEBpU1bLGyvvGH7pA6u6W1xE21wY/edit?usp=sharing">https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ruI0VRfuJdMoZzvXEBpU1bLGyvvGH7pA6u6W1xE21wY/edit?usp=sharing</a>
<b>6</b>	<b>Benediction</b>	<b>Ephesians 3:17-19</b> 17[May] Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, 18 may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, 19 and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.