THE CORNERSTONE

Matthew 21:33–46

Key Verse: 21:42

“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”?’”

We’re studying Jesus’ final days in Jerusalem just before he was crucified. That week he did and said some important things. He rode into the city on a baby donkey, to show the world that he’s a gentle King. He cleared the temple and cursed a fruitless tree, to show the world that he’s the King of righteousness. He taught his disciples to believe and pray, to challenge the ungodly world. Then, he tells three parables about his authority. All three parables tell us that Jesus is God’s Son. He would be rejected by the religious leaders, just as he predicted (16:21), but God would make him the source of salvation and the new foundation of his world redemptive history. Today, as we think about Jesus’ famous parable of the tenants, let’s learn how we should respond to him.

Look at verses 33,34. In these details we can see the landowner’s expectations. He planted good vines. He built a wall around the vineyard to protect it so that it could grow. He dug a winepress, expecting that all the plants would produce many grapes he could turn into wine. He even built a watchtower to make sure to guard it all. He hired some farmers to go in and work his vineyard. And at harvest time, he fully expected there to be fruit, so he sent servants to collect some for himself. Jesus was using a familiar Biblical allegory. In the Old Testament, the prophets also mentioned it (Isa5; Jer2:21; Ps80:8–19). The landowner represents God, the tenant farmers, the people of Israel, the servants represent the prophets, and the vineyard represents God’s redemptive work in the world. More broadly, Jesus’ parable of the tenants tells us what God also expects from each of us. God is our Creator. He created the world, he created us, and he put us in his world as stewards of his creation. He expects us to use the lives he gave us to do many good things in this world for the glory of God. He is especially expecting good life fruits from us. As we learned in the previous study, God wants us to produce the fruit of growing in his image, in the character of Jesus, and also, the fruit of influencing others’ lives, helping people to know Christ personally. We produce both inner and outer fruit when we live a life of repentance before God (3:8). More than our words, our fruitfulness shows our genuine love for God.

What happened when the owner’s servants came for the fruit? Look at verse 35. They were so violent. They had no respect for the owner or for his servants. Why were they doing this? They were sending a message, trying to say that they were no longer accountable to the owner, that the vineyard was theirs. Look at verse 36. Though their behavior was so bad, the owner kept sending servants. It tells us that our God is slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin (Ex34:6,7a). Our God is rich in kindness, tolerance and patience (Ro2:4). We also can see here that for the owner, it was no longer about the fruit; what he was really doing was trying to have a relationship with these tenants. It’s what God wants most from us.

At the same time, this part of the parable shows that the tenants were not at all interested in having a relationship with the owner. They wanted to be free to live on their own, in their own way. Though the owner had let them live in his vineyard, had given them good jobs working for him and let them keep much of the fruit for themselves, they were so ungrateful. They also became proud, acting as if they owned the vineyard. It was a self-delusion. It is an allegory not only of the people of Israel, but of all human beings. Romans tells us that although we know God, we neither glorify him as God nor give thanks to him. Our thinking becomes futile and our foolish hearts are darkened. We claim to be wise, but we become fools. It happens when we forget who we are before God. God will always be God; we can never be God. We, on the other hand, will always be his creatures, always indebted to him for life and breath and everything else.

We also see in Jesus’ parable how sinful people treat the owner’s servants. In Israel’s history, they beat the prophets and stoned those sent to them. They persecuted those who came to try to help them repent and come back to God. It became their bad habit. In fact, all sinful people in history have treated those who serve God the same way, and it still goes on today. People despise and strongly reject God’s servants. People don’t want to be held accountable or told what to do.

Read verse 37. This is the turning point in the parable. If we stop to think about it, we can’t but wonder what this owner was doing. Doesn’t he remember how violently they treated all his servants? Doesn’t he remember how they never repented? Why would he even *consider* sending his son to them? How could he think they would respect his son? When he planted his vineyard, the owner seemed like a good businessman, but now he looks foolish. Yet the owner believed that if his son appeared to them, the tenants would have a change of heart. He believed they would interpret this as a gesture of great honor. In telling us how the owner sent his son to the tenants, Jesus is telling us of God who sent his one and only Son into this sinful world. He’s telling us that God is love. It reminds us of 1 Corinthians 13:4–7: “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.” This is who God is. And it’s who he wants us to be.

Look at verse 38. These tenants were crooked. They recognized the owner’s son, but they were jealous. They didn’t like it that he was the heir. They were envious of his inheritance. They thought they could kill him and take his inheritance with no repercussions. They had the chance to open their hearts to the owner’s love, but they failed. Look at verse 39. They treated the owner’s son just as they’d treated all his servants—like garbage to be thrown away.

Jesus asked, “Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do with those tenants?” (40) This is the most compelling part of the parable. Jesus is confronting the religious leaders listening to him. Read verse 41. They became furious with the tenants who’d behaved so badly. Most likely, they themselves were landowners who had to deal with unruly and ungrateful tenants of their own. They didn’t realize Jesus was describing them. How often when we’re self-righteous, we get angry with others, not realizing we’re just the same!

Read verse 42. Jesus is quoting from Psalm 118; it was a famous psalm sung every Passover by pilgrims going to Jerusalem. The people had sung part of this psalm when they welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem as King (21:9; Ps118: 25,26). But here, it’s not apparent at first why Jesus is again quoting from this psalm. To understand, we have to think about the two stones he mentions. The first is the stone the builders rejected. Why would builders reject a stone? Maybe it’s not the right color, shape or size. It doesn’t fit in with their plans. So the builders assume they don’t need it. When David was a shepherd boy, he too was overlooked. He was the youngest. He was out in the fields taking care of sheep. He didn’t look impressive. So Samuel didn’t even consider pick him. His brothers didn’t like him, either. Goliath laughed at him. King Saul was jealous of him. Jesus, too, was despised and rejected. He didn’t fit in with the leaders’ preconceptions of who the Messiah should be. Usually, rejection marks the end of things. A rejected stone just gets buried. Rejected people are forgotten.

But not in this case. In this case, the rejected stone becomes the cornerstone. What’s a cornerstone? It’s at the bottom corner of a building, joining its walls together. A cornerstone is critical to the entire building because it becomes like a foundation; it makes everything else level, plumb and flush. A bad cornerstone makes a building unstable and causes it all to collapse. So only a stone cut and polished to the greatest precision is selected. Often the building’s identity is written on its cornerstone. A cornerstone can also be the most important stone in an archway, again, holding it all together.

The verse says that the stone the builders rejected became the cornerstone. It was done by the Lord himself. And it’s marvelous to our eyes. What does it mean? It’s a veiled reference to Jesus’ death and resurrection. Though he would be rejected and killed, God would raise him from the dead and make him the cornerstone of his redemptive history, thus revealing his glory.

Later, the apostles were criticized in Jerusalem for healing a crippled beggar, and they quoted this same psalm to the religious leaders: “…then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. Jesus is ‘the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone.’ Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved” (Ac4:10–12). Jesus is our cornerstone. It means he’s our only source of salvation.

Jesus applies the parable of the tenants directly to the religious leaders. Read verse 43. How humiliating! Jesus rebuked their utter failure as God’s people. God wanted his people to be useful to him in his plan of world salvation. But they only became proud, greedy and rebellious. Despite all his efforts, they rejected his great love through his Son. The greatest sin of all is to reject God’s love. On the other hand, people humble enough to repent are those who produce fruit for God’s kingdom. We can be either like the religious leaders, or like humble people who produce kingdom fruit.

Read verse 44. Here we find that there are only two options in responding to Jesus the Cornerstone. We can either accept him or reject him. To accept him is not easy. We have to fall on him and be broken to pieces, meaning we need to depend on Jesus as my only Savior and let my sinful nature be totally broken in all my pride and self-righteousness. To reject him may seem like no big deal right now. But one day, that stone will fall on us until we are crushed. It means to come under God’s judgment and eternal punishment.

God in his great love is inviting us to build our lives on Jesus the cornerstone. He is a sure foundation. When we trust and obey him, we too will be rejected like he was (1Pe2:4–5). But God entrusts his glorious kingdom to us and enables us to bear fruit for his kingdom.

Today we learned that Jesus is our cornerstone, our only true spiritual foundation. We should open our hearts to his great love and give him the fruit of our sincere repentance.