

The Wicked Tenants



Matthew 21:33-46; Mark
12:1-12; Luke 20:9-19

Year A Proper 22

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Parts by scene

■ = large part ▲ = medium sized part ● = small part

		1	2	3	4
▲	Elder - a member of the ruling council who's honestly undecided about who and what Jesus is	▲		▲	
▲	Priest - another highly ranked priest of the Temple concerned mostly with his own power	▲		▲	
▲	Caiaphas - the high priest, a suave and amoral politician whose primary goal is the survival of the nation	▲		▲	
▲	Nicodemus - a member of the ruling council who's a secret follower of Jesus	●		▲	▲
▲	Judas - possibly the deepest thinker and best organizer, the one who usually sees the big picture most clearly, and also the disciple with the best sense of humor		▲		▲
▲	Joanna - a wealthy woman with a perceptive and agile intellect who abandons her life as the co-manager of King Herod's household to follow Jesus		▲		
▲	Thomas - the skeptic, who really wants to believe because of his emotional bond with the others, but can't simply ignore his doubts		▲		
▲	James - the most officious disciple, often the most frustrated with Jesus' unconventional decisions (such as his allowing women to join the group)		▲		
▲	John - the gentlest and most caring of the disciples		▲		

Scene 1

Caiaphas , Elder , Nicodemus , Priest

{Two Council members come to Caiaphas and another priest to report Jesus' latest words.}

Elder Your eminence! Your eminence! He appeared at the Temple again and preached another sermon!

Priest The nerve! After we warned him!

Caiaphas *[dryly]* You mean, after he showed us up in public and turned our feeble attempts to entrap him back on us?

Priest But we got him in the end. We got him to make that treasonous threat to destroy the temple!

Nicodemus That's not what it was! The high priest said so himself!

Caiaphas *[calmly but firmly]* What I said was that it was far from clear exactly what he was talking about, but that it could easily be used to incriminate him - *if* the need were to arise.

Priest And you don't think it has?

Nicodemus He's done nothing wrong!

Priest *[angrily]* He's attacked the priesthood! Maybe if he was badmouthing the Council you'd be singing a different tune!

Elder Please, let's not fight among ourselves. The good of the nation should be our only concern, and we should work together to that end. As for me, I would see myself cast out from the Council - I would see the Council itself disbanded - if that was what it took to guarantee the safety and prosperity of Israel. And I'm sure you feel the same way about yourselves and the priesthood.

Caiaphas It's hard to imagine the nation being served in any good way by the destruction of the Council or the priesthood, but it's possible. More likely, it's criticism and ridicule we'll have to endure for the nation's sake.

Priest *[stubbornly]* It's just wrong for the people to disrespect their leaders!

Caiaphas True - in normal times. But these are far from normal times. We stand between the nation and the might of Rome. The people take their frustrations out on us.

Nicodemus *[quietly]* They look to us for hope, too.

Elder And to help them discern the true nature of teachers like this Joshua of Nazareth.

Priest *[impatiently]* Then tell us what he said already! Or are we going to continue the civics lesson for the rest of the afternoon?

Elder Very well. He preached another parable, which we didn't understand at all. Here's how it went...

Scene 2

James , Joanna , John , Judas , Thomas

{Joanna, Thomas, and James tell John and Judas about the parable Jesus preached.}

Judas He preached another parable? How did it go?

Joanna Not very well, I think. The crowd seemed confused by it.

Thomas So was I, to tell you the truth. I mean, I followed the story just fine - it was very moving - but I had no idea what the lesson was supposed to be.

James Really? It was perfectly clear to me.

John Good. Let's hear the parable, and then you can give us your interpretation.

Joanna Well, it was about a landowner who planted a vineyard and then rented it to some farmers.

Judas So, the vineyard is the Kingdom?

John If so, then in what sense has the Kingdom been rented to others?

James The vineyard is the nation.

Thomas Really? I didn't think of that. I thought his parables were always about the Kingdom.

James Well this time, it wasn't. God is the landowner, and the vineyard is the nation he planted on this very ground.

John That makes sense to me. The nation is often called a vineyard or a vine in the scriptures.

Joanna But if that's the case, we're faced with the same question: is what sense is the nation rented, and who are these farmers it was rented to?

Judas The Romans!

James Exactly.

Thomas How do you figure that?

Judas The Romans currently occupy the land, the way tenants occupy a vineyard they're renting. They have control over it right now, but they don't ultimately own it.

John I think you've got it.

James I had it from the start!

Thomas Hold on, though. It gets tougher. The next part of the story is that around harvest time, the owner sends a servant to collect rent from the tenants. What's *that* supposed to be?

Joanna That was the part that threw me. He sends a servant to collect the rent, and the tenants, not wanting to pay, kill him. Then he sends more servants, and they're all either killed or beaten and sent away.

James [*scornfully*] Don't you think the Romans have killed many of our people?

John They have, but not in a way that fits the parable. The servants are special representatives of the owner, sent directly to treat with the tenants. And they come one after the other. They aren't just random people.

Judas [*with disappointment*] It's true, unfortunately. If they had killed the high priest or the governor, and then their replacements, and then *their* replacements, or liquidated the Council or something like that, then it would fit better. But still, who else could the tenants be besides the Romans?

John Was that all there was to the parable?

Thomas No. The owner finally sends his own son, who was all he had left to send, and tenants killed him, too, thinking that if they did, the

inheritance might fall to them. Then the rabbi asked the crowd what they thought the owner would do when he finally returned to the vineyard himself.

- Joanna** And the answer was: he'll have those tenants killed themselves, and the rent the vineyard out to others who'll be more forthcoming with the rent.
- Judas** I think that's the death of the Roman interpretation for sure. What kind of ending is it for God to remove the current tenants - the Romans - only to replace them with some other set of tenants?
- James** Hmmm. I guess you're right. It would be better if the residents of the vineyard - the workers and their families - rose up and drove out the renters.
- John** Or if the owner returned and drove them out. Or...if his son did. *[thoughtfully]* His son. That was an interesting change. Not just another servant, but his son at the end. I wonder if that could be a clue?
- Thomas** The rabbi calls himself the Son of Man. And if he really is the Messiah, then he's definitely something more than just another servant of God.
- Joanna** Yes, but in the parable, the son is killed just like the others.
- Thomas** *[reluctantly]* Well...you know...the rabbi *has* talked about that...
- James** *[ignoring him]* If the rabbi is the son, then who are the servants?
- John** *[suddenly figuring it out]* Other spokesmen for God who came before! Judas' former master John, for example, who was killed. And the other prophets before him!
- Joanna** Were the prophets really killed, though? I mean, John certainly was, and some of the others, but didn't most of them die natural deaths?
- John** They all faced hostility to their messages, though. Maybe that's enough to fit the parable.
- Thomas** Hostility from who? I still don't understand who these tenants are.

John *[somberly]* They're us. The people. So the vineyard's not the nation, after all, but the land. We occupy it, but it's not ours. We're just renting it from God.

James *[brightly]* I do believe we have it!

Judas *[darkly]* Except for one thing. If we're the tenants, then the message of the parable is exactly the opposite of what the rabbi ought to be preaching!

Joanna *[humorously]* Well, this won't be the first time!

Judas *[harshly]* This is serious! Think about it! Here we are in Jerusalem, preparing for the great Day of the Lord, working toward the liberation of our people. We ought to be focusing their thoughts on the oppression of the Romans, but what are we doing instead? Picking fights with the Temple priests, and preaching parables that suggest we might not even be worthy to remain in the land, much less gain our freedom from Rome!

{There's a long pause while the group takes this in.}

James *[uncertainly]* Damn. Well, then it can't be right. We're getting the parable wrong. Maybe I was right in the first place.

Thomas Here comes the rabbi. Let's ask him.

John *[calling out]* Rabbi! Can you come over here? We have a question about this morning's parable.

Scene 3

Caiaphas , Elder , Nicodemus , Priest

{Back to the priests and elders.}

Priest *[angrily]* Damnation! Curses and damnation! Didn't I tell you he was dangerous? Didn't I tell you he needed to be arrested? But no, you dawdle and delay...

Elder Oh dear! Then the parable was indeed seditious or blasphemous?

Priest Of course it was! Isn't it obvious?

Nicodemus It's not obvious at all! *[pleading to Caiaphas]* Your eminence...

Caiaphas *[calmly]* Let's consider this. The vineyard is the nation, and the servants and the son the prophets sent by God to claim what was due to Him. But the tenants?

Priest Are us! The priesthood. The Council. Isn't it obvious? He's attacking us again!

Nicodemus There was nothing about the parable that pointed specifically to us. The tenants could just as easily be the nation as a whole. We collectively resisted the word of the prophets in the past.

Priest Maybe you can read the parable that way all by itself, but what about the rest of the sermon after it?

Caiaphas *[to the Elder]* Perhaps you'd better repeat it to us, as accurately as you can.

Elder Very well. *[after a pause to recall]* He said, "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. Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed."

Priest You see? He's not just criticizing us now. He's threatening to remove us from our positions of authority, to crush us!

Elder *[in shocked undertones]* Just as he threatened to destroy the Temple!

Nicodemus No! That's exactly what he *didn't* say about the Temple! The high priest said so himself!

Priest And what about the rulers of this nation? If he wasn't threatening to take us all down, then what was he saying?

Nicodemus *[at a loss]* I...I don't know...but it can't be what you think! *[grasping at straws]* The stone that the builder rejected: that's from the Psalms, isn't it? It's a psalm celebrating the triumph of the nation over her enemies, and the stone is the nation. Which means...which means...

Priest *[forcefully interrupting]* Which means he sees *us* as enemies of the

nation! *[to Caiaphas]* So. Do we move on him now, or what? You said yourself that while we can endure his criticism, we cannot allow the destruction of the priesthood!

Caiaphas *[still calmly, but with a hint of impatience]* What I said was that it was hard to imagine a scenario in which the destruction of the priesthood would be good for the nation. Still, I do see cause for concern here. If only we were free to act.

Elder Surely we have grounds to arrest him based on his words alone.

Priest Yeah, what's stopping us?

Caiaphas *[impatiently]* The opinion of the people! Do none of you understand the first principles of governance? The people love him, in case you haven't noticed! And what do you think they'll do if we try to arrest their hero?

Priest I thought you said we could take criticism.

Caiaphas I'm not talking about criticism. I'm talking about *unrest*. I'm not talking about getting our feelings hurt. I'm talking about how the Romans will feel about any upheaval among the people.

Elder But leaving him to continue his preaching could cause the same thing.

Caiaphas *[grimly]* Yes. We walk a narrow path, with pitfalls on every side. Pray God we negotiate it safely, for the future of the nation!

Scene 4

Judas , Nicodemus

{Nicodemus meets with Judas by night.}

Nicodemus Thanks for meeting me. I wish the rabbi could have come.

Judas That wouldn't have been wise. The authorities are watching him very carefully.

Nicodemus I know. It's what I came to warn you about. The Council and the priests have been talking about arresting him. The only thing keeping them from it is his popularity with the people. They're afraid of causing a riot and bringing the Romans down

on us.

Judas And yet, if they don't, the same thing may happen.

Nicodemus Yes, that's exactly what they said!

Judas It's quite the dilemma.

Nicodemus Tell me, what's the real plan? I haven't been able to understand anything the rabbi's done since he entered the city. And what did he mean by quoting that Psalm?

Judas He quoted a Psalm? I didn't hear about that.

Nicodemus The stone that the builders rejected will become the cornerstone - and crush those who opposed it. It's a psalm celebrating the triumph of the nation.

Judas *[brightening]* Really? He said that? Did he mention the Romans? Were they the opponents who were going to be crushed?

Nicodemus I don't think so. It was very confusing. If anything, he was the stone and the enemies were...well...

Judas *[crestfallen]* The priests.

Nicodemus Yeah, that's what it sounded like. Judas, why is the rabbi taking this tack? I don't understand it.

Judas *[trying to hide his anxiety]* I'm sure we'll know in due time. Meanwhile, are you quite sure the priests are going to do nothing for the time being?

Nicodemus I'm not sure at all! They're divided, and I think the majority of them want to arrest the rabbi at once, except that Caiaphas is on the other side. For now.

Judas *[half to himself]* He's a surprisingly pragmatic thinker. *[to Nicodemus]* Well. We walk a perilous road, and mostly in the dark. Keep me informed of any new developments. I'd better get back to the house now.

Nicodemus God be with you. I'm sure everything will work out. How can it not?

You can read my thoughts about this play and respond with your own at
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