Redeemer Lutheran Church, Edmonton

October 4, 2026

"The Reckoning of God's Mercy" (Mathew 21: 33-46)

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Beloved in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today's Gospel lesson confronts us with a sobering truth: God's mercy is abundant, but it is never to be taken lightly. The Parable of the Wicked Tenants is Jesus' second parable in His trilogy of judgment parables. The first in the series was the parable of the two sons, and the third is the parable of the wedding feast. The context of these parables is clear. Jesus is in His final days of earthly ministry. He revealed Himself to be the Son of God and taught clearly about God's mercy. God's mercy is generous, abundant, and patient; it accepts anyone who comes to Him. But now, through these three parables, He teaches that God's mercy should not be taken lightly; it has a reckoning. This warning comes sharply after priests, elders, and teachers of the law clearly reject Jesus and His word and rebel against Him. After Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem, He demonstrated the paradoxical nature of His mercy when He cleansed the temple and cursed the fruitless fig tree, yet healed the blind and the lame who came for His mercy. However, even after the teachers of the law saw all that Jesus did, they hardened their hearts further and challenged Him, demanding, "By what authority are you doing these, and who gave you this authority?" Without wasting time in a verbal spat defending His authority, Jesus speaks three judgment parables to warn them: God's patience is long—but not endless. If God's mercy through His only Son is rejected, you will be crushed and destroyed by God's Justice. Matthew records that, when the chief priests and the Pharisees heard this parable, they perceived that He was speaking about them.

The parable of the wicked tenants is an adapted version of Isaiah's Song of the Vineyard as recorded in our Old Testament lesson, Isaiah 5:1–7. The characters in this parable are easy to identify. God is the landowner; Israel is the vineyard; the tenants are religious leaders-pharisees, priests and the elders; the servants are the prophets; and the Son is Jesus Himself.

And what does the parable show? It shows a paradoxical tension between two things: God's patient mercy and God's reckoning of that mercy.

In the social world of first-century Palestine, planting a vineyard was one of the most labour-intensive agricultural investments a landowner could make. Vineyards took years to mature before producing usable grapes. So when Jesus describes the landowner's actions, He portrays a committed, patient, and intentional landowner who plants a vineyard. He cleared the stones, chose the best soil, fertilized it, and prepared terraces. He put a fence around it, likely a stone wall, to protect it from wild animals and thieves. He dug a winepress, normally a two-basin system carved into rock, where grapes were crushed in the upper basin and juice flowed into the lower. He also built a watchtower to guard the vineyard, store tools, and shelter workers. Each detail shows how thoughtful and invested the owner was. To ensure ongoing care and attention, he leased it to tenants.

In the Palestinian leasing system, tenants paid rent either in money or in a share of the harvest. When harvest time came, the owner sent servants to collect his fruit — the fruit that rightfully belonged to him.

But the parable says the tenants were not only unfaithful but also wicked. They beat the first group of servants, killed one, and stoned another. This is shocking. Even more shocking is the owner's response. He shows mercy rather than revenge. He sends another group of servants. This is clearly an act of mercy, giving them an opportunity to mend their ways, repent and make things right. But the tenants respond with escalating violence. Their rebellion grows, and their rejection hardens. Then comes the climax—the moment that reveals the depth of the landowner's patient mercy. "Finally, he sent his son." No landowner in ancient Palestine would do this. No father would risk his heir in the hands of violent rebels. Yet he does exactly that. This is mercy stretched to its furthest point, patience extended to its highest cost, and unconditional mercy willing to risk rejection.

But the tenants, in their wickedness and cruelty, turned coldly towards the master. They said, "This is the heir. Come, let us kill him." In doing so, to their own detriment, they rejected

the master's generous mercy and their last and final opportunity to mend their ways and make peace with him. At that moment, Jesus, without speaking his conclusion, asks the religious leaders: “When the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" And they — not Jesus — pronounce the verdict: "He will bring those wretches to a wretched end." They declare God's reckoning in their own words. Jesus then heightens their moment of reckoning and quotes messianic verses from Psalm 118, which say, “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." The message is clear: you who challenge and reject me are under judgment. Anyone who rejects me (God's chosen cornerstone) will be broken into pieces, and it will crush him. And the kingdom will be taken from you and given to a people who produce its fruit.

This parable needs no interpretation; it clearly shows God's merciful dealings with humanity from the beginning of creation, understood here in relation to the children of Israel.

First, it describes a merciful and patient God who created the world and human beings to live in loving fellowship with Him and to care for His world. They kick God out of the world He created and rebel against Him. Yet God is abundant in His people, sending out His prophets with a call to repent, culminating in John the Baptist. They rejected God's mercy offered to them and even killed some of their prophets. Now, at this time, they are rejecting His own Son, sent into the world for their salvation. So, through these parables, Jesus is once again giving a desperate warning, out of compassion for them, not to reject God's plan of salvation. God's mercy always travels the extra mile.

Secondly, this parable also talks about the other side of God's Mercy. His reckoning. **God's mercy is free — but never cheap. God's patience is long — but not endless. God's grace offered must be received. The son cannot be rejected without consequence.**

Jesus is God's cornerstone of mercy. His death and resurrection for us are God's means of salvation for us. Anyone who rejects Him will be put to shame, to their own detriment. The kingdom will be taken away from them and given to those who receive and cling to God's mercy in Christ.

Apostle Peter later picks up on this theme when he writes: "Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame." So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone," and "A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence." (I Peter 2: 6-8)

For all those who receive and do not reject God's mercy, Peter reminds us of what He has in store for them. Peter writes: As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves, like living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (1 Peter 2:4-5).

In light of this great mercy of God shown toward him, Paul, in today's epistle lesson, writes about how a Christian should live in response. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. (Phil 2:8-11).

D.L. Moody, an American evangelist, once shared a story about a young man he met on the street while preaching. Here was a man who left his village for the city to make a fortune when he was young. He was not a believer and wanted to stay away from God. But his God-fearing mother gave him a bible verse: "Seek first the kingdom of God." After praying for him, she gave parting advice: wherever you are, always remember to put God first in your life. But he brushed it aside, not to hurt his mother's feelings, and said, " Maybe after I make money, after I settle in life, after my ambitions are fulfilled. I will think about God.

But God did not forget him.

He went from village to village looking for work, but to no avail. One Sunday he thought about his mother and stepped into a church, and the minister announced the text: “Seek first the kingdom of God” and preached on it. He felt as if his mother's prayers were following him, but said to himself, I do not have time for God. He left that town, but a few months later he wandered in front of another church. And again — he heard the preacher using the same text. He became irritated this time and said to himself Why is this God following me everywhere I go. He hardened his heart and said to himself I will never turn to God; I am good without Him.

Years passed. He received word that his mother had died. He thought about his mother, and this verse came back to him. He felt that God was speaking to him. But he immediately hushed the thought and said, Not now.

This man, now advanced in age and never able to make it in life, was so depressed that he was on a street corner when Moody met him. Moody called out to him and said: "God loves and cares for you. "Seek first the kingdom of God." He looked at Moody's face and said, "Funny you chose this verse to speak to me," and shared his story.

Years later, when Moody was in the same city, he visited him out of curiosity. He found that this man was now mentally sick and physically weak and was taken to an asylum. Moody visited him; the man couldn't recognize him and muttered unrecognizable words to himself. Moody recognized what he was saying to himself: “Seek first the kingdom of God." God never gives up on people. He is like a relentless hunting dog that keeps coming after us—not to destroy us, but to pursue us with mercy, unashamed, unceasing, and unwilling to let us go.

The reckoning of God's mercy is not meant to terrify us. It is meant to awaken us. It is meant to remind us that God's mercy is meant to be received—and responded to—and never rejected.

For the One who calls you is merciful. And the One who judges you is just. And in Christ, mercy triumphs over judgment.

Amen.