

Semicontinuous
Exod. 20:1–4, 7–9,
12–20
Ps. 19
Complementary
Isa. 5:1–7
Ps. 80:7–15
Phil. 3:4b–14
Matt. 21:33–46

Fruitful Followers

Goal for the Session

Tweens will identify ways to nurture the fruits of God's kingdom in response to Jesus' parable of the wicked tenants.

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Matthew 21:33–46

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Susan Grove Eastman

This parable is bracketed by predictions of judgment, drawing on Isaiah 5:1–7 and Isaiah 8:14–15. In Isaiah, God, the Lord of Israel, is the stone of stumbling. Early Christians interpreted the stone as Jesus himself (Acts 4:11; Romans 9:33; Ephesians 2:20; 1 Peter 2:6–8). Such a reference seems implicit in Matthew 21:42–44 as well, given the reaction of the chief priests and elders. Jesus himself is the stone whom they have rejected and over whom they stumble. Jesus' identity as Emmanuel, God with us, nevertheless stands (Matthew 1:23, quoting Isaiah 7:14).

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Andrew Purves

Personal rejection of the son of the landowner (vv. 37–39) is the heart of the parable. The issue, then, is a rejection of Jesus, a refusal to acknowledge him as Lord, as God's anointed, through whom God is given what is due. Embedded within this parable of rejection and deadly violence against the landowner's son is the reminder that the heart of faith is relationship with Jesus. The tenants did not seize and kill an idea, a principle, or a system of doctrine. They seized and killed the landowner's son. The gospel comes to us as a person.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Richard E. Spalding

The transfer of stewardship to “a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom” (v. 43) is a restorative act. As we begin to recognize the messengers who have risked or sacrificed their lives while exhorting us to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly, perhaps the allegory may drill down to the recognition of some all-too-familiar hubris among the current tenants of the vineyard where—in Christ—God has prepared everything we need for fruitful living. It is this same hubris that makes us vulnerable to the violence and judgment we have too often brought down upon ourselves.

NOW WHAT is God's word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Marvin A. McMickle

Anyone who turns away from Jesus will forfeit the abundant and eternal life that God has in store for those who live in faithful obedience. When we turn to that stone that the builders rejected, it will take away our pride and prejudice, our sin and selfishness, our greed and guilt. Once we have been brought down, the stone begins to build our lives upon a strong spiritual foundation. The world God is attempting to shape through the ministry of the church will not be established by chance or coincidence. It will come only when people change how they live—no longer rejecting the will of the God who made them, but striving to live together in peace.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE

Matthew 21:33–46

YOU WILL NEED

- ☐ green cloth
- ☐ battery-powered candle
- ☐ Color Pack 3, 6, 27, 28
- ☐ prepared puzzle pieces (see Resource Sheet 1, September 10)
- ☐ Bibles
- ☐ copies of Resource Sheets 1, 2
- ☐ supplies listed on Resource Sheet 1
- ☐ large, light-colored rock
- ☐ permanent markers
- ☐ serving bowl
- ☐ fresh or canned fruit
- ☐ small cups or bowls
- ☐ spoons
- ☐ *Singing the Feast*, 2023–2024; CD player

For Responding

- ☐ option 2: newspapers, magazines, scissors, glue sticks, poster board, markers
- ☐ option 3: denominational resources or internet-connected device

Have extra plastic bottles on hand for visitors. Ask for help collecting bottles, and/or contact learners before the session and ask them to bring bottles.

Focus on Your Teaching

Early adolescence confronts most tweens with physical changes that are beyond their control. Voices will deepen when they deepen; body hair will grow when it grows. In contrast, spiritual development is not inevitable. Growing up is no guarantee of growing closer to God. But just as tweens can make choices to encourage healthy physical growth, they can make choices to foster their healthy growth in faith. Encourage the tweens in your group to choose attitudes and behaviors that will nurture the growth of God’s fruit in their lives and communities.

Make me always more fruitful, Jesus, not only as a teacher but also as your faithful follower. Amen.

■ LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, gather materials listed on Resource Sheet 1 (Terrific Terrarium) and cut one soda bottle for each learner. If you are using option 3 in Responding, have denominational resources on the subject available or bring stories from www.persecution.org.

Welcome each tween by name. Gather the group by playing “Amazing Grace” (Color Pack 27; track 1 on *Singing the Feast*, 2023–2024). Invite tweens to sing along as they arrange the green cloth in your learning space and place the candle and Color Pack 3 on it. Light the candle as a reminder of Jesus’ presence.

Prepare and lead the activity and ritual on Resource Sheet 1 from September 10 (In Christ, We All Fit Together).

✠ This week’s question for discussion: “When have you been given the responsibility to care for another living thing?”

EXPLORING

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Terrific Terrarium) and set out the materials. Give each learner a precut soda bottle. Tell students to follow the printed instructions. As they make their terrariums, make your own, but do whatever you can to ensure that seeds will not grow well in it—put seeds on the bottom and rocks on top, “water” your soil with soda, and cut large holes in the bottle’s sides. Deflect any questions about why you’re not following the instructions, but be vocal about telling learners to follow them.

Once the terrariums are finished, ask:

✠ Judging from my terrarium, would you trust me to be your gardener? Why or why not?

Amazing Grace

Amazing grace, how sweet
the sound,
That saved someone like me.
I once was lost but now am
found,
Was blind, but now I see.

Through many dangers,
toils, and snares
I have already come;
'Tis grace that brought me
safe thus far,
and grace will lead me home.

When we've been here ten
thousand years
Bright shining as the sun,
We've no less days to sing
God's praise
Than when we'd first begun.

If learners wonder whether Jesus' story means that God will not save Jews, point out that Jesus, a Jew, directs his story against some religious leaders (v. 45), not all Jews of his day or ours.

Tell learners that today's text is about knowing what will and won't help growth to happen. Have them set their terrariums aside; they can take the projects home after the session.

Show Color Pack 6, and ask tweens to call out words they would use to describe the scene. Encourage them to consider what they might feel, hear, taste, and smell if they were walking in this vineyard.

Invite learners to continue looking at Color Pack 6 as you or a tween who is a strong reader reads aloud Isaiah 5:1–7 from Resource Sheet 2 (Isaiah's Song of the Vineyard). After reading this passage, which is another of the lectionary readings for this Sunday, distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2. Ask:

- ✂ What is your reaction to Isaiah's song?
- ✂ In what ways does Isaiah compare God's people to a vineyard?
- ✂ What does Isaiah's song tell us about the kind of choices God expects God's people to make?

Ask tweens to find Matthew 21:33–41 in their Bibles; assist as needed. Before you or a volunteer reads this passage aloud, remind learners that, being a devout Jew, Jesus knew the Hebrew Scriptures—what Christians call the Old Testament—very well, including Isaiah's song. After the reading, ask:

- ✂ What is your reaction to Jesus' story?
- ✂ How is Jesus' story like and unlike Isaiah's song?
- ✂ What does Jesus' story tell us about the kind of choices God expects God's people to make?

Read aloud Matthew 21:42–46 as learners follow along in their Bibles. Discuss:

- ✂ Why do you think Jesus uses the image of a cornerstone to talk about himself?
- ✂ What might be some "fruits of the kingdom" (v. 43); that is, what things might we see happening when people live in God's ways?

After discussion, suggest that people who will grow "the fruits of the kingdom" (v. 43) are those who choose to acknowledge Jesus as the "cornerstone" (v. 42) on which to build their lives. Show tweens the rock you have brought. Invite them to use markers to write or draw on it one "fruit of the kingdom" they would like to help to grow in their lives.

EASY
PREP

RESPONDING

Mark the activities you will use:

- 1. Challenged to Choose** To help learners grow in understanding how Christians must continually choose to follow Jesus, lead them in a guided prayer, modified from the *examen* taught by Ignatius of Loyola. Read aloud these instructions, pausing for a moment between each one:
 1. Make yourself comfortable. Close your eyes and mentally review what you did yesterday in as much detail as possible.
 2. Ask yourself, “When did I choose to act as Jesus would want me to act?”
 3. Ask yourself, “When did I choose to act in ways Jesus would not want me to act?”
 4. Imagine yourself sitting with Jesus, telling him about both your good and bad choices. Thank him for the times he helped you make choices that help you grow in God’s ways. Ask Jesus to help you make good use of the choices you’ll make today.
- 2. Picturing Godly Produce** To help make “the fruits of the kingdom” concrete, have learners review what was written on the rock in Exploring. Together, look through newspapers and magazines for pictures that illustrate people demonstrating these qualities or actions, as well as others the group may think of. Cut out pictures and glue them to poster board to make a collage, adding words as needed with markers. Display the finished collage for others in the church to see.
- 3. Rejected for Faith** There are Christians today who experience rejection for righteousness, as did the landowner’s slaves and the landowner’s son in Jesus’ parable. Spend time as a group learning about persecuted Christians in other countries. Have denominational resources on the subject available or read stories from www.persecution.org. Ask each learner to choose one persecuted Christian or group to remember in prayer during the coming week.

CLOSING

Gather the group around a serving bowl and a selection of fruit. Work together to create a “Fruits-of-the-Kingdom Salad.” Invite learners to name aloud something they can do to nourish their spiritual growth (“I will pray first thing in the morning each day this week”; “I will read the Bible two times this week”; “I will talk about Christians in other countries with my family”). As each one shares an idea, he or she can add some fruit to the bowl. When all have contributed, eat the fruit salad.

Sing “I’m Gonna Live So God Can Use Me” (Color Pack 28; track 11 on *Singing the Feast*, 2023–2024). Lead the closing charge:

Leader: We are ready to live so God can use us.

All: Go with God! Amen!

Extinguish the candle. Tell tweens you will pray for them this week, and ask them to pray for you.

I’m Gonna Live So God Can Use Me

I’m gonna live so God can
use me
anywhere, Lord, anytime!
I’m gonna live so God can
use me
anywhere, Lord, anytime!

I’m gonna work . . .

I’m gonna share . . .

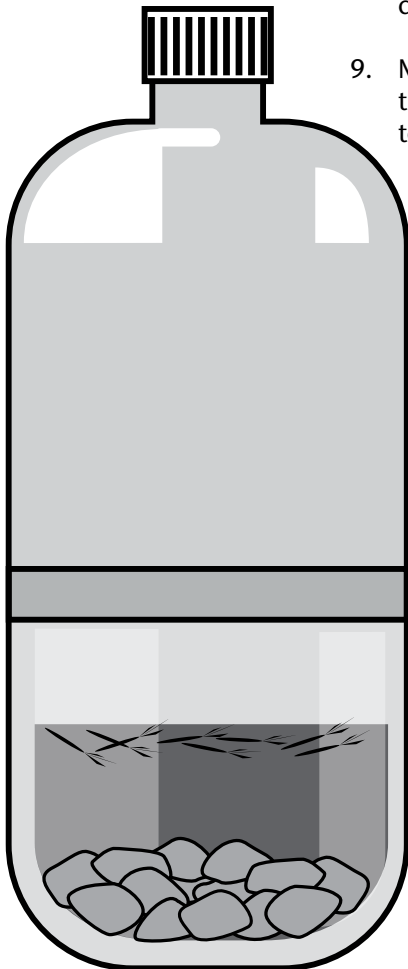
I’m gonna care . . .

Terrific Terrarium

Materials:

- ☐ empty 2-liter plastic soda bottle, with cap
- ☐ pebbles or aquarium gravel
- ☐ potting soil
- ☐ 8 marigold or herb seeds or 1 teaspoon grass seed
- ☐ water
- ☐ scissors
- ☐ permanent markers or stickers

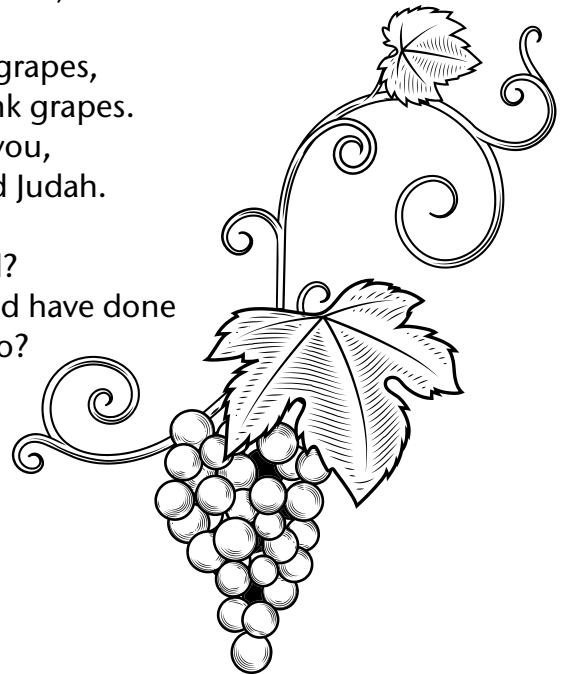
1. Cut the soda bottle into two parts, 6 inches up from the bottle's bottom.
2. Put a 1-inch layer of pebbles or aquarium gravel in the bottom part of the bottle.
3. Put 3 or 4 inches of potting soil on top of the gravel.
4. Plant the seeds in the soil about $\frac{1}{4}$ inch deep, or sprinkle grass seed on top of the soil.
5. Water the soil until just damp. Do not overwater!
6. Put the cap on the bottleneck, and fit the top part of the bottle over the bottom part.
7. Decorate the outside of the bottle with markers and stickers, but be sure to leave plenty of clear plastic through which sunlight can shine.
8. When you get home, put your terrarium in a bright place, but not in direct sunlight.
9. Moisture will condense inside the terrarium to keep the soil watered, but check the soil's appearance daily. If it looks too dry, spray some water inside; if it looks too wet, take the bottle's cap off for one or two days.



Isaiah's Song of the Vineyard

More than seven hundred years before Jesus was born, the Israelite prophet Isaiah sang this song about the nation of Israel, God's chosen people. Isaiah did this just before the Assyrian Empire conquered Israel:

I'll sing a ballad to the one I love, a love ballad about his vineyard:
The one I love had a vineyard, a fine, well-placed vineyard.
He hoed the soil and pulled the weeds,
and planted the very best vines.
He built a lookout, built a winepress,
a vineyard to be proud of.
He looked for a vintage yield of grapes,
but for all his pains he got junk grapes.
"Now listen to what I'm telling you,
you who live in Jerusalem and Judah.
What do you think is going on
between me and my vineyard?
Can you think of anything I could have done
to my vineyard that I didn't do?
When I expected good grapes,
why did I get bitter grapes?
"Well now, let me tell you
what I'll do to my vineyard:
I'll tear down its fence
and let it go to ruin.
I'll knock down the gate
and let it be trampled.
I'll turn it into a patch of weeds, untended, uncared for—
thistles and thorns will take over.
I'll give orders to the clouds:
'Don't rain on that vineyard, ever!'"
Do you get it? The vineyard of God-of-the-Angel-Armies
is the country of Israel.
All the men and women of Judah
are the garden he was so proud of.
He looked for a crop of justice
and saw them murdering each other.
He looked for a harvest of righteousness
and heard only the moans of victims.



—Isaiah 5:1–7, *The Message*