

STUDY ON THE PARABLES OF JUDGMENT

The Parable of the Wicked Vinedressers

Read Matthew 21:33-46

The Parable of the Wicked Vinedressers appears in three of the gospels (Matthew 21:33-46; Mark 12:1-12; Luke 20:9-19), with Matthew's account being the most complete. It is wise to study all three accounts to achieve the greatest understanding especially the addition in Luke's rendition:

“He will come and destroy those vinedressers and give the vineyard to others.” And when they heard it, they said, “Certainly not!”” (v16)

To get the context of what is happening, we need to look from Matthew 21:23. Early in the morning, Jesus goes to the temple courts to teach (21:23). While He is teaching, the chief priest and elders confronted Him, wanting to know by what authority He is teaching. Not allowing them to control the conversation, Jesus answers the question by first asking a question. Let us read the conversation:

“But Jesus answered and said to them, “I also will ask you one thing, which if you tell Me, I likewise will tell you by what authority I do these things: The baptism of John—where was it from? From heaven or from men?” And they reasoned among themselves, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ He will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ But if we say, ‘From men,’ we fear the multitude, for all count John as a prophet.” So, they answered Jesus and said, “We do not know.” And He said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.” (vv24-27)

What Jesus inferred is that John the Baptist and He received their authority from the same source. This was important because they never recognised John the Baptist authority, but the people received him as a prophet from God and they knew that. Jesus did not end the conversation there, instead, Jesus further frustrates the priests by telling two parables: the first one is the Parable of the Two Sons, and the second is the Parable of the Wicked Vinedressers, sometimes called the Parable of the Wicked Tenants.

The Parable of the Two Sons:

““But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, ‘Son, go, work today in my vineyard.’ He answered and said, ‘I will not,’ but afterward he regretted it and went. Then he came to the second and said likewise. And he answered and said, ‘I go, sir,’ but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said to Him, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Assuredly, I say to you that tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him; but tax collectors and harlots believed him; and when you saw it, you did not afterward relent and believe him.” (vv28-32)

The basic story is of a man with two sons who told them to go work in the vineyard. The first son refused, but later obeyed and went. The second son initially expressed obedience but disobeyed and refused to work in the vineyard. The son who ultimately did the will of his father was the first son because he eventually obeyed. Jesus then likens the first son to tax collectors and prostitutes—the outcasts of Jewish society—because they believed John the Baptist and accepted “the way of righteousness” (v. 32), despite their initial disobedience to the Law. The Pharisees and elders became the symbol of the second son who publicly look obedient but disobedient.

In our walk with Christ today, it raises the question of obedience. Are we of the camp that appears obedient but, in our actions, we are disobedient? Are we of those who say yes to the service of our Father and in action, we are saying no?

Jesus's parable of the Two sons reveal the "spirit of the pharisee" – to reveal what governs the mindset of the Pharisees of Jesus' day. They are those who publicly look like it, speak like it, and instruct people to do like it, but they themselves do not live it. They are privately vindictive, disobedient, and cannot celebrate what would not profit them.

"In the meantime, when an innumerable multitude of people had gathered together, so that they trampled one another, He began to say to His disciples first of all, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy." (Luke 12:1)

The Parable of the Wicked Vinedressers

This next parable is like pouring salt on a wound. Just in case they did not fully understand (which they did), Jesus gives a much clearer picture of what He means. Obviously, this further infuriates these Pharisees, but it also gives the others who were present an opportunity to hear Jesus fully explain the implications of the disobedience of the Jewish people throughout the ages.

Background: There are 6 main characters in this parable: 1) the landowner—God, 2) the vineyard—Israel, 3) the tenants/vinedressers—the Jewish religious leadership, 4) the landowner's servants—the prophets who remained obedient and preached God's word to the people of Israel, 5) the son—Jesus, and 6) the other tenants—the Gentiles.

When Jesus began His story by telling how a landowner planted a vineyard, put a wall around it, dug a winepress, and built a watchtower, He was pressing the parable home upon His Jewish audience. Israel was the "vine" of God, and everything Jesus said in that opening picture was known to have been applied to Israel in the Old Testament. Isaiah had written,

"My Well-beloved has a vineyard on a very fruitful hill. He dug it up and cleared out its stones and planted it with the choicest vine. He built a tower in its midst, and also made a winepress in it; So, He expected it to bring forth good grapes, but it brought forth wild grapes." (Isaiah 5:1-2).

Jeremiah had recorded, *"Yet I had planted you a noble vine, a seed of highest quality. How then have you turned before Me into the degenerate plant of an alien vine?" (Jeremiah 2:21).*

Ezekiel declared, *"Your mother was like a vine in your bloodline, planted by the waters, fruitful and full of branches because of many waters." (Ezekiel 19:10).*

The psalmist had written beautifully, *"You have brought a vine out of Egypt; You have cast out the nations and planted it. You prepared room for it, and caused it to take deep root, and it filled the land. The hills were covered with its shadow, and the mighty cedars with its boughs." (Psalm 80:8-10).*

That imagery was well known to Christ's hearers. So, when He told the story of the landowner's vineyard there could be no doubt in their minds that He was speaking of them i.e., Israel.

Explanation: Verses 34-36 tell us the landowner sent his servants to collect his portion of the harvest and how they were cruelly rejected by the tenants; some were beaten, stoned, and even killed. Then he sent even more the second time and they received the same treatment. The servants sent represent the prophets that God had sent to His people/Israel and then were rejected and killed by the very people who were claiming to be of God and obedient to Him. Jeremiah was beaten (Jeremiah 26:7-11; 38:1-28), John the Baptist was killed (Matthew 14:1-12), and others were stoned (2 Chronicles 24:21).

In this parable Jesus is not only reminding the religious establishment what they were like, but He was putting in their minds a question: **how could they claim obedience as God's people and still reject His messengers?** We can ask ourselves the same question today.

We do not know how many servants the owner sent, but that is not what is important; the theme is God's repeated appeal through His prophets to an unrepentant people. In next verses (vv37-39), the situation becomes even more critical. The landowner sends his own son, believing that they will surely respect him. But the wicked vinedressers see an opportunity here; they believe that if they kill the son, they will then receive his inheritance. The law at the time provided that if there were no heirs then the property would pass to those in possession. This amounts to conspiracy to commit murder by the Jewish leadership, and it is prophetic in the sense that Jesus is now telling them what they are going to do to Him (Psalm 118:22; Isaiah 28:16). After Jesus' death, Peter would make the same charges against the religious establishment (Acts 4:8-12). The tenants probably thought that the fight for the property was over, but it was not. The owner would now appear on the scene.

Jesus now (vv40-41) asks the question, *"Tell me, what will he do to those vinedressers?"* You render judgment. What is the proper response to such wicked and inexcusable behaviour?

The people rightly replied, *"He will destroy those wicked men miserably, and lease his vineyard to other vinedressers who will render to him the fruits in their seasons."* (v. 41). However, reading Luke's rendition of the same parable, it seems the pharisees had other ideas as they said: "Certainly not!"

"He will come and destroy those vinedressers and give the vineyard to others." And when they heard it, they said, "Certainly not!" (Luke 20:16)

I guess their answer of "Certainly not!" just clearly reveals the heart of these pharisees and elders.

Hear the Lord's own judgment. He concluded, *"Have you never read in the Scriptures: 'The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This was the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes?' 'Therefore, I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it. And whoever falls on this stone will be broken; but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder.'" (vv42 44).*

Jesus is the beginning of and is foundational to the church, and He now stands over the church in His rightful position of honour, guiding the church to fulfil its divine destiny. This verse makes clear prophetically how Jesus will be rejected by the religious establishment and ultimately be crucified (Psalm 118:22-23).

The key to understanding this parable and what it says about the religious leaders is found in verse 43, where Jesus makes their lack of obedience personal. Jesus tells the leaders that because of their disobedience they will be left out of the kingdom of heaven (individually and as a people); that they have let their opportunity for the time being slip away to be given to the Gentiles (verse 41, "other vinedressers").

This will be more than they can tolerate, as we will see in verses 45 and 46. He is saying that there will be a new people of God made up of all peoples who will temporarily replace the Jews so that Jesus can establish His church. This will change the way God deals with man, from the old dispensation of the law to a new dispensation of God's grace. It will usher in a time where man will no longer understand forgiveness of sins as man's work through what he does or does not do or by the sacrifices of animals on the altar, but by the work of Christ on the cross. It will be a time where each person can have a personal and saving relationship with the One and only God of the universe. The exciting part of the verse is the phrase "who will produce fruit"; this gives authority to the church to share the gospel of Christ to the lost of the world.

Fruit-Bearing

Jesus refers to the new or other vinedressers as those who will produce fruit. These new vinedressers is the church today mostly filled with gentile believers. The word “fruit” is the key here. Jesus spoke about fruit in John 14.

“I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit.” (John 15:1-2)

Our Father is looking for fruit. Jesus came, died, and rose again for fruit. Our assignment is to produce fruit in terms of souls.

Jesus continues the stone metaphor in verse 44 to show how a stone can be used to build something beautiful, such as His church, or it can be used to crush and destroy, depending on the situation.

Three Thoughts of this Parable That I stumbled upon:

The greatest privilege is to have the kingdom of God entrusted to us. That is what happens when the kingdom of God is preached. It is placed within our grasp for receiving, feeding upon, and entering into. If someone offered you the privilege of becoming the president of the United States, it would not compare with the privilege of receiving the kingdom of God. If someone offered you the privilege of becoming a multimillionaire, it would not compare with the privilege of becoming a son or daughter of the Most High.

The greatest sin is to reject that kingdom, which is to reject Jesus Christ. Jesus is not here today for us to kill Him. But we do what is just that unless we are made anew by God. We reject His claims, and above all we reject His lordship over our lives.

The greatest doom is to be crushed by the kingdom of that very Christ who is offered to us in salvation. When Jesus refers to being crushed by "this stone", I think He is referring to the vision Nebuchadnezzar had in the days of the prophet Daniel. Nebuchadnezzar had a dream in which he saw a statue representing four successive world kingdoms. At the end of the vision a stone came and struck the statue, grinding it to pieces, and then the stone became a huge mountain that filled the whole earth (Dan. 2). The stone is Christ. The mountain is His kingdom. So, Jesus is saying to the people of His day, "You can be part of that kingdom and thus grow up with Me and fill the earth. That will happen by decree of the Most High God, My Father. Or you can stand against that kingdom and be broken." The judgment of God is not to be taken lightly, because God is not to be taken lightly. The God who offers salvation now is the God who will judge in righteousness hereafter. If you will not have Him now as Saviour, in the day of His grace, you will have Him as your Judge when you stand before His throne at the final judgment. Now is the day of grace. Come to Him. Come now. Even as He spoke those words, the Lord Jesus Christ was on the way to the cross to die for such as will have Him. Come, and be among that believing band.

