

Matthew 21:28-46

The Messiah, LORD of the Vineyard

As we come to the twenty-first chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, we find Jesus at the end of His public ministry. He has come south through Samaria from Galilee, and is residing with Mary, Martha and Lazarus in the village of Bethany, a short distance south of Jerusalem. They had recently experienced the raising of Lazarus, the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem at the beginning of the Passover celebration to the praises of His disciples, the people of Bethany, and others. The procession into Jerusalem brought the attention of the entire community.

After entering the city, Jesus went to the Temple and removed the merchants and money-changers from the Court of the Gentiles, restoring its purpose of a place of learning, and worship for both Jews and interested Gentiles. He immediately began to teach, drawing the ire of the religious leaders who were more than indignant concerning Jesus' demonstrating spiritual authority by taking over the Court of the Gentiles, and by His acceptance of praises from the people that are reserved for the true Messiah. He spent the remainder of the day in the Court as He ministered to the people, teaching them and providing healing for those who desired it. He then returned to Bethany for the night, returning the next morning.

Jesus' crucifixion is only a few days away. It is now Tuesday, and He will be arrested on Thursday evening. Jesus has three days to prepare the Apostles, the disciples, and others in the City of Jerusalem (1) for what is about to take place, and (2) for what they should do in His absence. Like a General who is addressing his troops for the last time before a great battle, there is a tremendous gravity and importance to Jesus' words.

It was on this morning that the religious leadership thought that they could diminish Jesus' authority by demanding from Him where it came from. Jesus' response was a question that called upon them to state by who's authority John the Baptist ministered. When their hypocrisy prevented an honest answer, they refused to provide one. Jesus, then stated that He would not answer, either. However, He went on to answer their question by teaching the people through parables.

Matthew 21:28. *But what think ye? A certain man had two sons; and he came to the first, and said, Son, go work to day in my vineyard.*

If the chronology of this passage is immediately following the last, Jesus is responding to the question from the religious leaders concerning the source of His authority. His answer is a question, "What do you think." Intended as rhetorical, it is an introduction to a series of sequential parables that provide the answer for those who are willing to listen and seek to understand.

The parables have a common theme: the interaction between one who has authority, and those who are in submission to it. The only authority that the religious leadership will state that they are submissive to is that of God, so the context is set for them to take the place of the submissive characters in these parables.

The first is a story of a father who has two sons. His command to the two sons will be the same: "Go work in my vineyard." The LORD desires all His children, those who express faith in Him, to demonstrate fruitful obedience.

Jesus' selection of a vineyard as the scene for His story is significant. The Old Testament, particularly the ancient Hebrew Bible, often used the metaphor of a vineyard to describe Israel.¹ For example, Isaiah writes, "For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah his pleasant plant: and he looked for judgment, but behold oppression; for righteousness, but behold a cry."² Because of this, the religious leaders would already be thinking about Israel as a nation as these stories are told.

Matthew 21:29. *He answered and said, I will not: but afterward he repented, and went.*

The first son was initially rebellious. He was in a state of enmity with his father, with little or no thought of obedience.³ He did not accept his father as a central authority figure in his life. However, there was a point where he had a change of heart. He made the decision to honor his father, and respond in obedience.

Matthew 21:30. *And he came to the second, and said likewise. And he answered and said, I go, sir: and went not.*

Given the same question, the second son responded in an opposite manner. This son feigned his acceptance of his father's authority. While in his father's presence he made all manner of promises of obedience. However, once he believed he was out of his father's presence, he denied the promise that he made to his father, demonstrating his true state of rebellion that showed no signs

¹ Psalm 80:15; Song of Solomon 8:12; Isaiah 1:8; Isaiah 5:4-5; Jeremiah 12:10.

² Isaiah 5:7.

³ Romans 8:7; Ephesians 2:15-16; James 4:4.

of repentance. He had permanently broken the covenant he made with his father.⁴

Matthew 21:31. *Whether of them twain did the will of his father? They say unto him, The first. Jesus saith unto them, Verily I say unto you, That the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you.*

Interrogation is one of the most effective teaching tools, and Jesus used it frequently. By asking the religious leadership which of these two sons was the one who was doing the will of the father, he was allowing them to identify with one of them. Of course, considering themselves the most righteous people in the community, they identified with the first, who decided to do the will of his father.

Jesus then made a statement that would cause them to question. They think that they have the lead when it comes to righteousness, and think of themselves as first in the kingdom. They are considered first in their culture, the most respected in both the political and theological arena. They consider the publicans (those who profit by working for Rome) and the harlots (those who profit through illicit behavior) to be at the far opposite end of their righteousness spectrum. There are none who they consider more unrighteous than publicans and harlots. Yet, Jesus states that they will enter the kingdom of God “in front” of them, and they will be left out. It is likely that their response would be one of anger and indignation.

Matthew 21:32. *For John came unto you in the way of righteousness, and ye believed him not: but the publicans and the harlots believed him: and ye, when ye had seen it, repented not afterward, that ye might believe him.*

Jesus then assigned the two sons in the parable to these two groups of people. The first son was one who was initially rebellious but made a decision to obey his father. These are represented by the publicans and harlots because they, upon hearing of the way of righteousness taught by John responded in belief and repentance. They chose to do the will of the father.

However, the religious leadership are more characterized by the second son who feigned obedience. They are indicative of the entire nation of Israel and their current state of apostasy. When Israel found themselves in the presence of God, they made all manner of promises to honor God and obey His commandments.⁵

⁴ Deuteronomy 31:16,20; Joshua 7:11; 1 Kings 11:11; Jeremiah 11:10, 31:32; Ezekiel 17:16, 44:7; Hosea 8:1; Malachi 2:10.

⁵ Genesis 26:28; Exodus 24:7; Joshua 24:24; Jeremiah 42:6; Nehemiah 9:38;

However, once they thought they were away from the presence of God, they chose to deny those promises and rebelled against God, breaking their covenant with Him, first replacing Him with the mythical gods of the Canaanites, and ultimately through the abuse of the Mosaic Law which they used to proclaim their righteousness when the Law exposed their unrighteousness.⁶

Matthew 21:33. *Hear another parable: There was a certain householder, which planted a vineyard, and hedged it round about, and digged a winepress in it, and built a tower, and let it out to husbandmen, and went into a far country:*

In Jesus' second parable, the vineyard is complete. All the work has been done to make the vineyard productive.

- The vines are planted and cultivated. Much work, planning, and time go into the planting and cultivating of grapes. The vineyard is now at the point of bearing fruit.
- A hedge has been built around the vineyard. The hedge protects the vineyard from damage by those animals that would come to feed on it. Without such protection, the vines would soon be destroyed by those that would consume them.
- A winepress has been built. The purpose of the winepress is to process the fruit of the vineyard. Fruit is being produced, and a profit is to be made.
- A tower is built. Where the hedge protects the vineyard from destruction by predators, the tower is built to protect the vineyard from invasion by those who would steal its fruit.
- The husbandmen, those who are responsible to gather the fruit and process it into wine for the profit of the owner, have been brought in.
- The owner then leaves the vineyard, allowing the husbandmen to do their work. If they are obedient to the commands of the husbandmen, they will enjoy the fruits of their work as well as the praise of their master.

Where the first parable referred to the state of Israel prior to the reign of David, the second refers to the state of Israel since the kingdom of Israel was established and then destroyed, including the present day and future week. All the work to establish the Israel that the LORD would have desired has been done.

⁶ Deuteronomy 31:16,20; Joshua 7:11; 1 Kings 11:11; Jeremiah 11:10, 31:32; Ezekiel 17:16, 44:7; Hosea 8:1; Malachi 2:10.

- The vines are the people of Israel. God called them to be His people, to love and honor Him, and to bear fruit of true righteousness.
- The hedge is the Law of Moses. Like a leash that keeps an animal close to its master, the Law would serve as a hedge of protection as it would always serve to illustrate righteousness, expose sinfulness, and remind the people of the sovereignty of God.
- The winepress is the promise that God made with Israel that, if they would place their faith and trust in Him, they would bear spiritual fruit.
- The tower is the promise of protection that God made in His covenant with Israel. As long as the nation honored God, they witnessed the destruction of their enemies at the hand of God, and this happened on many occasions.
- The owner left the vineyard to the husbandmen. God has given every person the free will to choose whether or not to obey Him. God's purpose is that the Israelites will serve as a nation of priests, bearing spiritual fruit as they draw closer to Him and share the good news of His glory with the rest of the world.⁷

Matthew 21:34. *And when the time of the fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the husbandmen, that they might receive the fruits of it.*

The fundamental purpose of a vineyard is to bear fruit. Since the vineyard represents Israel, the parable is making a reference to the fruit that Israel was to produce: faith in God, shared with the world. God raised up a sequence of many prophets who proclaimed God's purpose to them. These are the servants of the Master.

Matthew 21:35-36. *And the husbandmen took his servants, and beat one, and killed another, and stoned another. ³⁶Again, he sent other servants more than the first: and they did unto them likewise.*

During the twelve centuries from Israel's exodus from Egypt to the coming of the Messiah, the prophets of God did not fare very well as they all brought a message of truth that challenged the apostasy and rebellion against God that characterized the nation.

- Manasseh the son of King Hezekiah slew Isaiah with a wooden saw.
- Amos was tortured and killed by the priest of Bethel.
- Micah was slain by Joram, the son of King Ahab

⁷ Exodus 19:6.

- Habakkuk was stoned by Jerusalem Jews.
- Jeremiah was stoned by Egyptian Jews.
- Ezekiel was slain by the King of the Chaldean Jews.
- Zechariah was slain by King Joash and sprinkled his blood upon the altar in the Temple.
- John the Baptist was slain by 'King' Herod Antipas at the request of his stepdaughter.

The husbandmen are the people that were given the task of bringing forth the fruit of the vineyard. Since the vineyard is Israel, the husbandmen are those who have charge over Israel: its judges and kings. Following the godly leadership of Moses, Joshua, and Joshua's contemporaries, there was a dearth of godly leadership in the nation. During the ministry of the prophet Samuel, the people of Israel demanded that the nation would be led by a king in a manner similar to the pagan nations. Samuel decried their demand, prophesying that a king would lead them away from the LORD and place them into bondage. This bondage was initiated towards the end of the reign of King Solomon because of his obsession with building the cities, and exacerbated by his son, Rehoboam. As a result of his arrogance, the nation was split into the northern and southern kingdoms. The northern kingdom never had a godly king, and the southern nation had very few. When each nation reached the point of total apostasy from the LORD, they were destroyed by warring neighbors when they left the LORD's protection. All the prophets stood against the apostasy of the nation, seeking to return them to the LORD by exposing their hypocrisy as they claimed to be children of God, but denied the LORD in their lives. Consequently, the Jewish leadership persecuted and killed many of the prophets when they thought that their authority, their "ownership of the vineyard" was challenged.

Matthew 21:37-38. *But last of all he sent unto them his son, saying, They will reverence my son. ³⁸But when the husbandmen saw the son, they said among themselves, This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and let us seize on his inheritance.*

Jesus' parable has literally covered twelve centuries of Israelite history. Following the killing of the messengers who the Master sent to hold them responsible for their tasks, he sent his son who is worthy of their reverence. Jesus is now face-to-face with the husbandmen who have already been conspiring on how they would capture and kill the Son of God. As the Messiah, YAHWEH in the flesh, He would be wholly honored and revered by the religious leaders if they were godly men. However, they are the husbandmen of this parable who desire to keep the fruit of Israel for themselves.

If the religious leaders were understanding the message behind the parable, they would recognize that Jesus is stating that they are the husbandmen who are trying to keep the vineyard for themselves, and it is they who are desiring to kill him so that they can keep control over Israel. However, they are so convinced of their own righteousness that they cannot place themselves into this parable. They are entirely blinded to their hypocrisy and in denial of their godlessness simply because Jewish doctrine has not focused on the idea of faith in 42 generations.

Matthew 21:39. *And they caught him, and cast him out of the vineyard, and slew him.*

Jesus is now taking the parable into the events of the next few days. The religious leader, surrounded by the temple guards will capture Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane on Thursday night, and after a mock trial they will “cast him out” of the city of Jerusalem, taking Him to Golgatha, the Place of the Skull, where they will use the Roman government to kill him.

Matthew 21:40. *When the lord therefore of the vineyard cometh, what will he do unto those husbandmen?*

After describing in detail the history and future of Israel and the rebellion of its leadership, Jesus simply asks them to be the judge of its husbandmen. What should be done to these wicked people? Their state of utter denial is demonstrated by their answer.

Matthew 21:41. *They say unto him, He will miserably destroy those wicked men, and will let out his vineyard unto other husbandmen, which shall render him the fruits in their seasons.*

Those who responded to Jesus’ question could not identify with the husbandmen, oblivious to the illustration that Jesus was making. They agreed that those who killed the messengers and killed the son of the master should be destroyed, and the vineyard should be turned over to people who will be obedient to the master that hired them.

Matthew 21:42. *Jesus saith unto them, Did ye never read in the scriptures, The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner: this is the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes?*

The religious leaders prided themselves greatly on their perceived knowledge and understanding of the Hebrew Bible that, by the first century, included most of

what we now hold as the Old Testament. Jesus quoted from Psalm 188:22-23, one that was very well-known to these leaders, as it is to students of the Bible today. The idea behind the two verses is that there would be those who “built” the Temple, the Tabernacle of God who would reject the placement of a stone in the Temple, yet that stone that they rejected would become the Cornerstone, the foundation of the Tabernacle of God.

Up to this point, Jesus has been simply using a teaching method that can be very effective when dealing with people who are close-minded. Had Jesus simply told them the truth of His identity and the source of His authority as they asked, they would have immediately charged Him with heresy, and been able to discredit Him among the people, and take Him prisoner. When an adversary is closed-minded and unwilling to listen to reason, it is not possible to change their mind using reason. Instead, Jesus engaged them in two stories that would illustrate the fundamentals of what it is He is teaching, giving those who He is teaching an opportunity to listen without retort. They will argue with the facts that Jesus would tell them, but they will not argue with a story.

So, He has told the stories, and the religious leaders are in agreement of the wickedness of the disobedient son and the disobedient husbandmen, and are ready to proclaim their judgment upon them. Jesus then turned the story into reality by first quoting a scripture that the leadership is very familiar with: the prophecy of the rejection of the Messiah by those who built the Temple, or more accurately, those who built the nation of Israel. The leadership is in agreement that the prophecy is true, and there will be a time when there will be those in Israel who reject the Messiah.

The religious leadership is now ready to hear the application of these parables and the prophecy.

Matthew 21:43. *Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof. ⁴⁴And whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken: but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder.*

Jesus now turns the message towards the religious leadership by summarizing the stories and the application of the prophecy with one simple statement: just as the religious leaders agreed concerning the husbandmen in the second parable, the Kingdom of God will be taken away from them, and given to another nation that will bring forth the fruit of the vineyard.

Furthermore, Jesus proclaimed judgement upon the apostate leadership by stating that this Stone, the Messiah is the cornerstone that will bring about their

judgment in one of two ways. First, those who fall on the stone, literally those who fall prostrate before it – these are those who trust in the Messiah. These shall be broken. This word carries the idea of the breaking, or meeking, of a horse. These shall be brought to a point where they will honor the Messiah and be of good use to the Kingdom of God. However, those upon whom the stone would fall, those who have rejected the cornerstone, will experience utter destruction.

Jesus' message stands against everything that the religious leadership believes. They believed that they were beyond criticism. They believed that they were the most righteous and most important people in Israel, and the people of Israel served only to reinforce that belief, at least until now.

Matthew 21:45-46. *And when the chief priests and Pharisees had heard his parables, they perceived that he spake of them. ⁴⁶But when they sought to lay hands on him, they feared the multitude, because they took him for a prophet.*

It is now clear to the religious leadership that Jesus was referring to them as the wicked son and the wicked husbandmen who they agreed should be destroyed, and should lose their stewardship of the vineyard. Still, in complete denial of their guilt, their response was predictable. They were angered at what they perceived to be the product of heresy and an attack on their authority. It is possible that some of them did start to understand, and being quite familiar with Israelite history, they could understand how the leadership of Israel had led the nation away from God. Yet, they thought that their lives were dedicated to bring the people back to God, doing so by demanding obedience to the Laws that they themselves enacted, both oral and traditional regulations that became a burden to the people without bringing them closer to a relationship with God.

It would not be long before Jesus' prophecy would come true. Following His death, resurrection, and ascension, the Holy Spirit would lead a great many faithful Jews under the leadership of the Apostles and disciples to create a nation of faith, a nation of Christians that would then include in their numbers a great number of Gentiles. By 70 A.D., Rome would destroy the Temple, forever ending the legalistic system of sacrifices, and the religious hierarchy that organized it. The Children of Abraham would no longer be known by blood ancestry, but by faith ancestry. It would be the children of faith who would become the children of Abraham, including many who were in the line of Israel and many more who would be adopted into the family as sons by faith.

The same plan of salvation that God offered to Adam, to Noah, to Moses, to the nation of Israel, to the first-century Jews through John the Baptist and finally

through Jesus Christ, has never changed: salvation is found through faith in God. This is the promise that God made to the patriarchs, and it is the same promise He makes today: those who place their faith and trust in Him will be saved, and those who choose to rebel against God and take that rebellion to the grave will have rejected the Cornerstone, and will be destroyed, separated from God for eternity.

Most of the world today is rejecting the Stone that was also rejected by the ancient builders. However, the nation that has been given stewardship of the vineyard is still blessed by the LORD as they put their trust in Him and seek to bear fruit: spiritual fruit that will lead others to salvation.

The first son who initially rebelled against the father but then repented and chose to honor him represents those who have placed their faith and trust in God. We all were in rebellion before turning to God in faith, and many are still in rebellion today. Many consider themselves to be religious, just as the Jerusalem Jews did over two thousand years ago, but like the second son in the first parable, they have not placed their trust in the LORD and fail to bear fruit.

We all have a choice of how we work the vineyard. Let us choose obedience.