

Series Kingdom Parables

This Message Parables of the Two Sons and the Tenants

Scripture Matthew 21:23-46

The parables we have thought about in previous weeks were directed primarily to the Apostles. Today we are going to think about two parables which were spoken to the religious leaders of Israel. In order to explain how this encounter came about, let me give some background so you will understand the context.

The nation of Israel had an important responsibility in the purposes of God. The descendants of Abraham were chosen to be special people through whom God would evangelize the Gentile nations of the world. They were to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (*Exodus 19:6*). All the people groups on earth were to be blessed through them. This would have been possible if the Hebrew people had obeyed God fully and kept His covenant (*Exodus 19:5*).

Unfortunately, the Hebrew people did not obey God. Almost immediately after God, through the leadership of Moses, had organized the refugees from Egypt into a nation with laws and clear sense of identity, they began to rebel. During the following generations they tested the patience of God. This behavior continued until, and even intensified during, the lifetime of Jesus on earth. Jesus had frequent run-ins with the religious leaders of Israel. Jesus made clear on numerous occasions that the righteousness of the religious leaders was unacceptable to God. They were declared to be unqualified to enter the kingdom of God (*Matthew 6:20*).

The final encounters between Jesus and the religious leaders occurred during Passover week, just a few days before the crucifixion of Jesus. At the beginning of that week, on Sunday, Jesus made His triumphal entry into Jerusalem riding on a donkey. A large crowd of people accompanied Him, waving palm branches and shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David. Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!”

The next day Jesus entered the temple area, overturned the tables of the money changers and drove out all the people who were buying and selling there. He explained His actions with a quotation from the Old Testament, “My house will be called a house of prayer, but you are making it a ‘den of robbers’” (*Matthew 21:13*). Later, when the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him, they asked, “By what authority are you doing these things? And who gave you this authority?” Those questions were the beginning of a not very pleasant encounter between Jesus and the Jewish leaders.

In His response, Jesus said, “I will also ask you a question. If you will answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John’s baptism — where did it come from? Was it from heaven or from men?”

Jesus’ question was a very clever way to highlight the hypocrisy of the religious authorities. Jesus put them in the awkward position of either acknowledging or denying the evidence that John was a prophet of God. They couldn’t say that John’s ministry was from heaven because they had previously publically rejected the teachings and actions of John. And they couldn’t say that John’s ministry was merely human because the lives of many people were changed by his preaching.

After discussing this question among themselves, the religious leaders concluded, “If we say, ‘From heaven, he will ask, ‘Then why didn’t you believe him?’ But if we say, ‘From men,’ we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet.” So they answered Jesus, “We don’t know.”

Then Jesus said, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.”

The implication behind Jesus’ question was that His authority was the same as John’s. Both of them had come to show “the way of righteousness” to the people of Israel. The religious leaders had not been willing to accept the preaching of John. The differences between them were so strong that on one occasion, when the Pharisees and Sadducees came to the place where John was baptizing, John called them a “brood of vipers,” and exhorted them to “produce fruit in keeping with repentance.” Needless to say, the religious elders did not take lightly to such challenges to their behavior.

Neither were the religious leaders willing to accept John’s announcement that Jesus was the Messiah.

The leaders said, “we don’t know.” However, Jesus did not let His conversation with the religious leaders end so inconclusively. He immediately presented a parable to them, which we will now read. At the end of the parable, you will notice that Jesus supplied the answer that the religious leaders refused to give.

Read Matthew 21:28-32

This parable was a rebuke of the Jewish leaders. In His explanation of the parable, Jesus identified the first son with tax collectors and prostitutes. When John preached to the crowds at the Jordan River, tax collectors were specifically mentioned as among those who came to him seeking baptism as a sign of their repentance (*Luke 3:12*). Nothing specific is written about prostitutes, but according to Jesus they were also among those who repented of their sins.

Jesus identified the second son in the parable with the religious leaders. They were undoubtedly shocked by the way that Jesus compared them to the tax collectors and prostitutes, whom they considered the scum of the earth. The religious leaders had a history of loudly and publically proclaiming their commitment to God but then never doing what God commanded. As the Scriptures make clear, both belief in God’s word and doing the will of God are essential aspects of gaining entrance into the kingdom of God. As Jesus said during the Sermon on the Mount, the righteousness of the Pharisees and teachers of the law was not enough to qualify them to enter the kingdom (*Matthew 6:20*).

Verse 32 brings the parable to its conclusion. The verse both gives the interpretation of the parable and indicates the link with the earlier question about authority (*Matthew 21:23-27*).

Jesus then invited the religious leaders to listen to another parable.

Read Matthew 21:33-46

When God chose Abraham and his descendants to be His special people, He made them distinct from all the other peoples of the earth. He gave them His law, His covenants, and was prepared to bestow on them countless blessings. In return for His gracious and abundant privileges, the Lord expected the Jews to serve Him, obey His laws, and be His witnesses to all the other peoples of the world. Now let’s compare God with the landowner.

The landowner invested a lot of effort in establishing his vineyard. He planted the vines, protected them with the wall and the watchtower, and equipped the property with a winepress. After everything had been prepared, he left the property to the care of some tenant farmers and went on a journey.

The metaphorical equivalents of the parable are obvious. The landowner is God the Father. The vineyard is Israel. The tenants are the religious leaders; the servants are prophets of God; and the son is Jesus.

The landowner had a right to expect a return on his investment. However, when it was time to collect payment, the tenants mistreated and killed the landowner's servants. The tenants were openly defiant of the owner. Each time the landowner sent more servants, the tenants grew in their determination to have their own way. Their relationship with the owner became increasingly hostile. It was just like the history of Israel.

Those who were gathered around Jesus, listening to the parable, could picture the circumstances. Absentee landowners were not unusual in Galilee, and there were occasional owner/tenant problems. And there was something else about the parable which made it especially familiar and relevant. The listeners would have quickly recognized that Jesus was retelling a well-known portion of the writings of the prophet Isaiah.

Read Isaiah 5:1-7 excerpts

Both Jesus' parable and the writing of Isaiah were a description of Israel's history. In spite of all His investment in His people, God did not receive a due return. The Israelites did not appreciate what God had done for them. They hardened themselves in sin and unbelief. They adopted many of the ways of the nearby pagan nations. They turned aside after idols and rebelled against God's ordinances. They refused to listen to God's prophets and abused and even killed the prophets that God sent to them in His efforts to call them to repentance. They never reached out to the Gentiles as witnesses to God.

In the parable, Jesus described that the landowner finally sent his son to the tenant farmers. The landowner hoped that the murderous tenants would respect his son, the future owner of the property. The tenants were completely irrational in their thinking that they could take over the property simply by killing the heir. No law would have actually granted the vineyard to tenants who had murdered the owner's son. Yet this is exactly what the tenants decided to do. After discussing the matter and formulating their plan, they took the son, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him.

At this point in the telling it was the time for application. Jesus asked His listeners what action the owner might possibly take against the tenants. There were no doubts in anyone's mind about what would be done. The answer was obvious: The landowner "will bring those wretches to a wretched end," they replied. He would remove the original tenants and replace them with others.

Once again, the religious leaders had condemned themselves by their response, although they did not at first realize that they had done so. They understood that the actions of the tenants were wicked. They referred to the tenants as "wretches," and they acknowledged that these "wretches" were deserving of punishment, but they had not recognized that Jesus was talking about them.

Jesus quickly capitalized on their statement that the landowner would "rent the vineyard to other tenants." He introduced the quotation from Psalm 118, thereby linking the rejection and killing of the son with the thought of rejection of the cornerstone. Thus there are two significant images in verses 38 through 42 — the rejection of the Son and rejection of the stone.

Jesus had told His disciples on several occasions that He would suffer and die at the hands of the religious rulers of Israel (*see Matthew 16:21; 17:23; 20:18*). At this time, by means of the parable, Jesus was informing the religious leaders that He knew what they intended to do. They were going to reject and kill Him.

Jesus was also announcing what God was going to do. God was going to make the rejected One the most important building block in His kingdom. Jesus would be the "cornerstone." The quotation states very specifically that "the LORD will do this," and it will be "marvelous" in the eyes of everyone. The word "marvelous" means filled with "wonder" and "amazement" and surprise.

Concerning the person of Jesus, people fall into one of two categories. They are either those who reject Him as the only way to God, or those who are filled with wonder at what God has done in accomplishing His purposes through Jesus. There is no neutral position. Men either reject God's way by rebelling against Him and His Son Jesus or they believe and obey Jesus and thereby discover the wonder and amazement of God's way.

[There is an interesting play on two important words. In both the Hebrew and Aramaic languages, the languages of Israel, the word for "son" is "ben." The word for "stone" is "eben." In the passage, we learn that the son and heir of the landowner, who represents God, becomes the "cornerstone" of God's kingdom.]

The quotation in verse 42 is a fore-shadowing of the resurrection. Jesus explained how, after His rejection and death at the hands of the tenants, God will establish Him as the key component in the kingdom. Psalm 118 was an ultra familiar psalm. All the Jews knew this Psalm because it was sung at the Passover meal. Psalms 113 and 114 were sung before the meal. Psalms 115 through 118 were sung after the meal. *[Note: In all likelihood, Jesus sang this Psalm with His Apostles at the conclusion of the Last Supper just before they went out into the night when Jesus was arrested, tried, and crucified.]*

In His explanation of the parable, Jesus informed His listeners that the "kingdom of God would be taken away from them and given to a people who will produce its fruit." The old world order was going to change. God was not altering His purposes, but the method of their accomplishment was about to change. After the death and resurrection of Jesus, the new leaders of the kingdom would be the Apostles, and the new people who would be responsible for the production of fruit would be the members of the Church. Three days after this encounter, the Jewish leaders carried out their murderous intentions — they saw to it that Jesus was crucified. They fulfilled the truth of the parable, and, in effect, discarded the one special stone that God had provided.

However, that stone was soon put into its key position. I'm sure you have heard the verses, written by the Apostle Paul, which describe the position of Jesus in the Church: "the members of God's household are built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building (the Church) is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord" (*Ephesians 3:19-22*).

The first part of verse 44 explains that the person who falls on Jesus, the Stone, “will be broken to pieces.” The interpretation is not clear. The phrase might refer to some verses in Isaiah 8, which state, “The Lord Almighty will be for both houses of Israel a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall. And for the people of Jerusalem he will be a trap and a snare. Many of them will stumble; they will fall and be broken, they will be snared and captured.” That was what was going to happen to the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. They had stumbled on Jesus, the Stone, and they were going to be broken because of their rejection of Him. If this is the interpretation, then both parts of Matthew 21:44 mean essentially the same thing.

On the other hand, the first part of verse 44 might be interpreted differently. It might refer to the person who comes to Jesus and yields his/her life to Him. This would be the person who allows Jesus to destroy the old worldly fleshly life so that the person can be remade into God’s image. Falling on the mercy of Jesus, the Cornerstone of God’s kingdom, with a broken and contrite spirit, is the kind of spiritual experience that God desires for everyone.

There are two possible interpretations for the first part of verse 44. However, there is no doubt about the meaning of the last part of the verse. It describes what will happen to the person who does not acknowledge Jesus as the Savior of mankind, the kind of person who rebels against God and continues to live in worldly ways. That person will be crushed by Jesus Christ at the time of judgment at the end of the age. The literal meaning of “crushing” is “be ground to powder.”

The chief priests and the Pharisees finally realized that Jesus had been describing them in the parables. Sadly, even though there was clear evidence that Jesus was the Messiah, and even though they understood the consequences of their actions — that they were rejecting God’s Messiah and God’s purposes, and would be crushed as a result — they continued to look “for a way to arrest Him” and to remove His influence from Israel. At the time of this encounter, they were hindered by their fear of the people, but three days later they were able to carry out their intentions.

During those three days, Jesus wept over the city of David, saying, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you. How often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’” That last statement is what the crowd had shouted on the day Jesus rode into the city. It also happens to be from Psalm 118 (*verse 26*).