

Matthew 21:23-46: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Matthew chapter 21 verses 23 to 46. And they discussed it among themselves, saying, So they answered Jesus, We do not know.

And he said to them, What do you think? A man had two sons, and he went to the first and said, Son, go and work in the vineyard today.

And he answered, I will not. But afterward he changed his mind and went. And he went to the other son and said the same. And he answered, I go, sir.

But did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father? They said, The first. Jesus said to them, Truly I say to you, The tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you.

For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him. But the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. And even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him.

[1 : 41] Here another parable. There was a master of a house who planted a vineyard, and put a fence around it, and dug a winepress in it, and built a tower and leased it to tenants, and went into another country.

When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit. And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another.

Again he sent other servants, more than the first, and they did the same to them. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, They will respect my son. But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, This is the heir.

Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance. And they took him, and threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?

They said to him, He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and let out the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him the fruits in their seasons. Jesus said to them, Have you never read in the scriptures, The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone?

[2 : 50] This was the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes. Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you, and given to a people producing its fruits.

And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him. When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them.

And although they were seeking to arrest him, they feared the crowds, because they held him to be a prophet. The second half of Matthew chapter 21 occurs on the day after the triumphal entry, after the cursing of the fig tree.

We should notice the movement back and forth between the Mount of Olives and the Temple Mount. Jesus here is back in the Temple, and being asked concerning his authority, but then he returns to the Mount of Olives later on.

And that movement to and fro between these two mountains is significant. The Mount of Olives is the site from which judgment is declared upon the Temple Mount. The movement between the two mountains then has a theological import.

- [3 : 54] Jesus has entered the city like a king, and has declared judgment upon its temple, has healed within the temple, and there are people gathering around him and behind him, and he is the head of a new movement.

And so the chief priests and the leaders of the people, the elders, try and trap him. They ask him concerning his authority. If his authority is from man, it can be dismissed. If his authority is claimed to be from God, they have other grounds to move against him.

And so Jesus answers their question with a question. And yet the answer to the question that Jesus asks them is the answer to the question that they have asked him. John the Baptist was sent by God, and his prophetic ministry was one through which God authorized and bore witness to his son.

So Jesus traps those seeking to trap him, as he does so on several occasions, by asking a question in response to a question. And had they answered that question, they would be caught in the position of recognizing John the Baptist's witness to Christ.

And yet they knew that they couldn't just dismiss John the Baptist as a prophet, because the people knew that he was a prophet. And so they're caught in a dilemma. And that dilemma is one that shows Jesus' cunning and wisdom as he deals with some of these serpents.

- [5 : 12] Jesus is wiser than the serpents. Having responded in a shrewd way to their opening gambit, Jesus gives a further parable that serves to put them on the defensive.

He asks them about two brothers and the vineyard. And one of the brothers starts off being committed to go out on the vineyard and then ends up failing to do so.

The other originally expresses disobedience and unwillingness and then turns out to do so. Israel may be the vineyard here, but I'd be wary of putting too much weight upon this identification at this point.

It would seem to be a fair identification to make, but I don't think it's the primary point of the parable here. The vineyard is more incidental to this parable, unlike the next. Both of the sons are disobedient in some respect.

Neither of the sons is fully obedient, but neither is fully disobedient either. Peter Lighthouse observes that this puts the chief priests and the elders in a difficult position.

- [6 : 13] Either way they answer, they are caught in an unfavourable comparison. Either they fail to exhibit remorse after rejecting the ministry of John, or they are responsible for their failure to believe John.

Either way, they have neither of the sons' virtues and both of their vices, whereas the tax collectors and the prostitutes have at least one of the sons' virtues. The parable of the tenants that follows is an important one to read in the light of Israel's identity as the vineyard.

Such an identification is found in the Old Testament in places like Isaiah chapter 5 and Psalm 80. In Isaiah chapter 5 we read, Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard.

My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines. He built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it.

And he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem, and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it?

- [7 : 22] When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured.
- I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste. It shall not be pruned or hoed, and briars and thorns shall grow up. I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.
- For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting. And he looked for justice, but behold bloodshed, for righteousness, but behold an outcry.
- And then in Psalm 80, verses 8 following, You brought a vine out of Egypt. You drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it. It took deep root and filled the land.
- The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches. It sent out its branches to the sea, and its shoots to the river. Why then have you broken down its walls, so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit?
- [8 : 24] The boar from the forest ravages it, and all that move in the field feed on it. Turn again, O God of hosts, look down from heaven and see. Have regard for this vine, the stock that your right hand planted, and for the sun, whom you have made strong for yourself.
- They have burned it with fire. They have cut it down. May they perish at the rebuke of your face. But let your hand be on the man of your right hand, the son of man whom you have made strong for yourself.
- Then we shall not turn back from you. Give us life, and we will call upon your name. Isaiah's parable focused upon the failure of the vineyard to produce good fruit, but Jesus focuses upon the wickedness of those working within it.
- The fruit seems to be there, but the workers are rebellious. And so the master is sending his servants, the prophets, and finally his own son, and all are being rejected. And Jesus, we should note, foretells his own death within this parable.
- They will see the son, and they will seek to kill the son when he is sent to them by the father. That reference to the son being seen as he arrives is one that should draw our minds back to Genesis chapter 37.
- [9 : 34] They saw him from afar, and before he came near, they conspired against him to kill him. They said to one another, Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits.
- Then we will say that a fierce animal has devoured him, and we will see what becomes of his dreams. The workers on the vineyard are therefore being compared to the brothers of Joseph, those who attacked the beloved son of Israel.
- Once again, as with the preceding parable of the two sons, Jesus presents this parable as a question. A question that the elders and the chief priests are asked to answer.
- And in answering this question, they are brought to a position where they must judge themselves, and they condemn themselves in their answer. Now, it's important to consider what they would have seen in this parable.
- They would have seen the wicked tenants as some other party. The party of the Romans, for instance. They are oppressing the vineyard of Israel. They are the ones that are preventing God from getting its fruits.
- [10 : 36] But the trap is about to be sprung. Jesus gives a verse that interprets the parable. And this verse makes clear that the parable is about the chief priests and the scribes themselves.
- The verses in question come from Psalm 118, verses 22 to 23. Now, that's in the context of the oppression of the servant of the Lord.

He's calling out to God for deliverance. All the nations are surrounding him. And he calls to God for salvation. The key words are found in these verses. The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.

This is the Lord's doing. It is marvelous in our eyes. And this verse is used on a number of occasions in the New Testament, with reference to things such as the resurrection. In Acts chapter 4, verse 11.

This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.

[11 : 41] And then in 1 Peter chapter 2, verses 4 to 8. 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.

For it stands in Scripture, Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone, chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him. Whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.

So the honour 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.

They stumble, because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. In Acts 4 then, the apostles are using these verses to refer to the resurrection of Christ, the vindication of the rejected stone.

[12 : 42] In 1 Peter chapter 2, the rejected stone is the cornerstone of a new building that's being erected. It's the new temple that God is building. There is a wordplay here between sun, Ben, and stone, Eben, and the fact that the builders are associated with the religious leaders.

This helps to explain that the chief priests and the elders are the ones in view. It brings the temple themes to the forefront. Christ is the rejected stone and becomes the cornerstone of a new temple.

Christ brings this point home by a statement that alludes to Isaiah chapter 8 verses 14 to 15 and Daniel chapter 2 verses 44 to 45.

And he will become a sanctuary and a stone of a fence and a rock of stumbling to both houses of Israel, a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And many shall stumble on it.

They shall fall and be broken. They shall be snared and taken. And then in Daniel chapter 2 verses 44 to 45. And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed.

[13 : 55] Nor shall the kingdom be left to another people. It shall break in pieces all those kingdoms and bring them to an end. And it shall stand forever. Just as you saw that a stone was cut from a mountain by no human hand and that it broke in pieces the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold.

A great God has made known to the king what shall be after this. The dream is certain and its interpretation sure. So Jesus is orchestrating a number of different Old Testament verses and prophetic witnesses to the kingdom and to the establishment of a new temple to the rejection of the Messiah and to the way that the Messiah will be vindicated.

And he's bringing these all together into a powerful statement that springs the trap upon the chief priests and the elders of the people. He is the rejected son. He is the one that was put to death by the wicked vinedressers and he is the one that will become the base of a new temple that's going to be built.

He has declared judgment upon the old temple and he will be the one who is the cornerstone of the new. The riches of the Lord's vineyard will be given to another party. They will be given to a faithful party that will bear the fruits that are supposed to be born by it.

Should be noted that this is not a claim about Israel itself being dispossessed, but about the wicked tenants of the chief priests and the scribes. Their places will be taken by the twelve who are the true tenants of the vineyard of Israel now.

[15 : 23] And this looks forward to fruit from Israel. The vineyard isn't abandoned. It's given into different hands. A question to consider. How do the two parables that Jesus gives here reflect back upon the earlier question about authority?

How do they expose the true character of the authority with which Jesus acts and challenge the authority of those who are questioning him?