

“Don’t Stumble Over Christ”
(Matthew 21:33-46)

The world is full of people who don’t believe in Jesus. The Bible indicates that this will always be the case. There will always be more who don’t know Him than do. Why is this? There are many who aren’t Christians because they have never heard the Gospel. There are many countries in which the Gospel has never been preached, where Christian missionaries have never gone. But there are also many who aren’t Christians in places where the Gospel has been preached, because they have rejected it, because they’re not willing to believe in Jesus. All of us know at least one person who isn’t a Christian, most of us know several. Many of us have loved ones who aren’t saved. What will happen to these men and women and children who don’t know Him? What will happen to those who have heard about Jesus, but who still refuse to surrender their lives to Him and trust in Him? The Bible tells us that they will eventually be destroyed. We don’t like to think about this, but it’s true. We don’t like to think about it perhaps because many we love are in this situation. None of us here rejoice at the thought of anyone being destroyed for their sins. As a matter of fact, the Bible tells us that God Himself doesn’t rejoice in the destruction of the wicked, but in their turning from their sins to Christ (Ez. 33:11). He doesn’t delight in the suffering of anyone in hell, at least not as He considers that suffering by itself. But this doesn’t mean that God has not ordained the destruction of the wicked, nor does it mean that there isn’t any sense in which He rejoices in it. He delights in the fact that justice is fulfilled, that the wicked are justly punished for their sins, that they are getting what they deserve. He delights in the fact that His righteousness is upheld, for He cannot overlook sin or forgive the guilty. The Bible warns us that one day all who do not repent and turn to Christ will be crushed by God’s wrath and cast into a lake of everlasting fire. It’s time for us to seriously consider this, if we would have any hope of being the means of saving any of them, before it’s too late. It’s especially time for us to consider this if we should be one of those who need to repent and turn to Christ.

In our passage last week, Jesus reproved the chief priests and elders in His parable for not listening to the preaching of John. He also reproved them for their worship which was nothing more than lipservice: they talked a good talk, but when it really came down to it, their words didn’t advance God’s kingdom at all. They were actually hindering God’s work and His people from entering the kingdom. This morning, He will again reprove them, this time for using the kingdom for their own gain, instead of God’s, as well as for the cruelty they had shown toward His servants. Jesus will tell them that because of this, they will ultimately lose the kingdom and be shut out of it forever.

Our Lord begins by telling them another parable, as I said last week, again to expose their wickedness as it is now time for things to move toward His crucifixion. His powerful indictments will make them so angry, that all they will be able to think about is killing Him. This is what He says: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a tower. Then he rented it out to some vine-growers and went on a journey. But even though he was far away, he was still concerned about the profits from his vineyard, and so when the harvest time came, he sent his slaves to receive the produce. When the vine-growers saw them, they didn’t receive them well, but beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. This didn’t stop the owner, however. He sent a larger group, but the vine-

growers did the same to them. Finally, the owner sent his son, believing that the vine-growers respect for him would not only protect him but also result in his receiving the profits from his vineyard. However, when they saw the son, they thought if they killed him, the vineyard would be theirs. So they took him, threw him out of the vineyard and put him to death. On the basis of this, Jesus asks the priests and elders a question about what the owner would do to these men. But before we look at this, let's take a few moments to understand what the parable means.

The landowner, of course, is Yahweh, the covenant God of Israel; the vineyard is Israel, or the Lord's covenant people; the vine-growers are the spiritual leaders of Israel: the chief priests and elders; the slaves sent by the owner are the Lord's servants, the prophets; and the son of the owner is, of course, the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. The Lord originally delivered His people out of Egypt and brought them into the land of Canaan. The psalmist, in Psalm 80:8-11, pictures Israel as a vine, and their being brought into the land of Promise and settling there as the planting of that vine. He writes, "Thou didst remove a vine from Egypt; Thou didst drive out the nations, and didst plant it. Thou didst clear *the ground* before it, and it took deep root and filled the land. The mountains were covered with its shadow; and the cedars of God with its boughs. It was sending out its branches to the sea, and its shoots to the River." Isaiah speaks of Israel in the same way, but uses the picture of a vineyard. As a matter of fact, this is the passage that our Lord Jesus quotes in this parable. He writes, "Let me sing now for my well-beloved a song of my beloved concerning His vineyard. My well-beloved had a vineyard on a fertile hill. And He dug it all around, removed its stones, and planted it with the choicest vine. And He built a tower in the middle of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it" (5:1-2a). After the Lord planted His people in the land and had given the care of His people into the hands of the priests and elders, He departed, which means that He withdrew somewhat to see whether or not they would walk according to His Law, but they didn't. Isaiah continues, "Then He expected *it* to produce *good* grapes, but it produced *only* worthless ones" (5:2b). And so the Lord said, "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? Why, when I expected *it* to produce *good* grapes did it produce worthless ones?" (vv. 3-4). He said through Jeremiah the prophet, "Yet I planted you a choice vine, a completely faithful seed. How then have you turned yourself before Me into the degenerate shoots of a foreign vine?" (2:21). The main problem was the leaders. The priests and elders were supposed to teach the people and lead them in the ways of righteousness. But instead, they used their position for their own gain. They did not teach the people God's ways, but their own. While they enjoyed what they saw the people bearing, God did not. And so He sent His prophets to straighten them out, to reprove and rebuke them for their sins, to warn them that the judgment of God was coming, but there was still no fruit of repentance. The leaders beat, mistreated and stoned the prophets. The Lord sent more to them, but they did the same. Finally, He sent His only begotten Son, the Lord Jesus, because here was One they should have respected. But they didn't. God knew they wouldn't. He knew they would only complete their own evil deeds and bring His judgment upon themselves, which is what they did. These men were about to take Jesus and throw Him out of His Father's vineyard, out of the holy city Jerusalem, and kill Him by nailing Him to a cross, hoping that they might then have the vineyard for themselves, once and for all.

Now the priests and elders didn't realize at this point that Jesus was talking about them. On the surface this appeared to be a gross miscarriage of justice. And so when Jesus asked them what they thought the owner of the vineyard would do when he returned, they said, "He will bring those wretches to a wretched end, and will rent out the vineyard to other vine-growers, who

will pay him the proceeds at the proper seasons” (v. 41). Jesus said, You’re right! But don’t you understand that *you* are the vine-growers. “Did you never read in the Scriptures, ‘The stone which the builders rejected, this became the chief corner stone; this came about from the Lord, and it is marvelous in our eyes’? Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you, and be given to a nation producing the fruit of it. And he who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust” (vv. 42-44). This is what the Lord said He would do long ago through Isaiah the prophet. “So now let Me tell you what I am going to do to My vineyard: I will remove its hedge and it will be consumed; I will break down its wall and it will become trampled ground. And I will lay it waste; it will not be pruned or hoed, but briars and thorns will come up. I will also charge the clouds to rain no rain on it.’ For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah His delightful plant. Thus He looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, a cry of distress” (5:5-7). The leaders of Israel had tried to take the kingdom away from the Lord, so now He was going to take the kingdom away from them; and this is what He did in 70 A. D. The judgment that they had pronounced against the vine-growers was going to be carried out against them. But the Lord was going to give His vineyard to others who would produce its fruit -- to the New Covenant Church, to both the Jews and Gentiles who would believe, now to the spiritual seed of Abraham instead of his physical seed. They had rejected Jesus, the corner stone of the building. They were about to crucify Him and do away with Him. But the Lord would raise Him up, make Him the foundation of His church, and bring judgment on these men. Men are like pots of clay. When they stumble over Christ, they fall on Him and are broken to pieces. But when Christ falls on them in His judgment, they are ground into dust (Ps. 2:8-12). This is what He was about to do in 70 A. D., but this is what He would also do on the day of His final judgment, when He would destroy them with everlasting fire.

Now when the chief priests and elders heard this parable, as well as the one before it, did they repent? Did they admit that Jesus had exposed the sin in their hearts and turn away from it to Him? No. When they realized that Jesus was speaking about them, they wanted to kill Him. But they didn’t because of the people. The crowd believed Jesus was a prophet, and if they killed Him, the crowd might hurt them. And so they decided to bide their time until they could find a more opportune moment.

In closing, I would like to apply this passage in two ways. The first is to the elders of this church. I believe that we can’t escape the fact that this passage speaks directly to us in our calling as pastors of the flock. The Lord has placed us over His vineyard as vine-growers in order to tend His vine and to make it bring forth the fruits of righteousness. This is the main goal of our ministry, as Paul told Timothy, “But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith” (1 Tim. 1:5). Our responsibility is not necessarily to keep everyone happy, though it’s nice when everyone is, as long as we don’t compromise any of God’s truth to do it. But it is to make sure that everyone of God’s flock is moving in the right direction, by believing and doing the right things. One day each one of them is going to stand before the Lord. We should want them to be able to give a good account of their lives. One day we must stand before Him as well. If we have allowed them to continue in sin without trying to turn them away from it, we will be partly responsible for their sin. May our Lord encourage us through this bad example of the priests and elders to examine our own lives and our own work to make sure that we are giving Him our best, and to make sure that we really care for His flock, that we are praying for them and leading them in the paths of righteousness, so that He might receive the fruits of holiness that He desires in His people. This applies to you who would be

pastors and elders as well. Examine your hearts and see if this is why you are seeking the office and if you are willing to pay the price.

But second, I would apply this to everyone of us here this morning. The chief priests and elders of the people stumbled over Christ and were shattered. They would not believe in Him or submit to what He wanted them to do. Because of this, the Lord fell on them in 70 A. D. with vengeance and ground that nation to powder. The Lord has yet to fall on them in the day of His judgment, as well as on everyone else who has not received the Lord and who refuses to obey Him. First, apply this to yourselves. Have you received Christ as your Savior and Lord? Are you trusting in Him and in His righteousness to save you? Are you submitting to His will, to His commandments, and doing your best to keep them, not only when you feel like it, but also when you don't? Are you repenting of all your sins, and struggling to put on all righteousness? Are you governing your lives by His Word, and even when your emotions and passions seek to lead you into another path, are you fighting to walk in the straight and narrow way? The Bible says that if you stumble over Him, if you won't receive Him or submit to His lordship over you, you will be broken. In the end He will fall on you, and you will be destroyed forever. But if you turn from all your sins and trust in Him and submit to Him, He will forgive all your sins and give you life and the power to live for His glory. If you have not received Christ, receive Him this morning. Don't stumble over Him. He is the only way of salvation. Don't stumble over His commandments. They are holy and righteous and good (Rom. 7:12). If you find that a part of you doesn't want to submit to them, realize that that is sin and repent of it immediately. Trust in God's Word and not in your feelings. His Word is reliable, our feelings are not. This applies to all of us here this morning, children as well as adults. But second apply this to your family members, friends and neighbors who don't know Christ. One day this rock is going to fall on them as well and crush them forever. No one outside of Christ will be saved on the day of His judgment. But today is the day of salvation. Before the Lord comes, while these people are still alive, there is still hope. Do what you can to turn as many as you can to righteousness. This is not only wise, but the loving thing to do. Jesus gave His whole life to proclaim the kingdom of heaven, and He sealed His testimony with His blood. His disciples, for the most part did the same. If we would walk in their steps, we must as well. May the Lord help us while there is still time, may He help us this year to try and reach out to as many people as possible. And may He use our efforts to bless many, as it please Him, with the gift of eternal life. Amen.