

The Stone which the Builders Rejected

Matthew 21:33-46

Some of Jesus' parables are a little hard to understand and interpret, and sometimes with good reason. With reference to parables, Jesus actually says he intends to conceal his truth from those whose hearts are far from him.

Mat. 13:10 "And the disciples came and said to Him, "Why do You speak to them in parables?" 11 He answered and said to them, "Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. 12 For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. 13 Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand."

But, on the other hand, sometimes Jesus' parables are just as plain as day, particularly when the point of the parable is to declare and proclaim his judgment upon those whose hearts do not and will not believe in him. This parable this afternoon is one of those, a parable of judgment upon the wicked. And the wicked understood it perfectly well! This parable is meant for the Jewish leaders, the chief priests and the Pharisees. And they knew exactly what Jesus meant.

v.45 "Now when the chief priests and Pharisees heard His parables, they perceived that He was speaking of them."

And we know what they wanted to do in response to this parable, what they wanted to do to Jesus. They wanted to kill him, to silence him permanently. We also know they God in his providence hindered them from doing just that.

v.46 "But when they sought to lay hands on Him, they feared the multitudes, because they took Him for a prophet."

So what did Jesus say to them that provoked such an extreme and violent response? That's our focus this afternoon. What Jesus did was to expose them, he exposed their wickedness and rebellion against the God whom they so hypocritically claimed to honor and worship. So the story of the parable is plainly and clearly intended to be,

I. THE DEMONSTRATION OF WICKED REBELLION.

Again, it's a simple story.

v.33-34

So far so good. Very ordinary. The servants of the owner came to harvest the fruit that belonged to him. But, something happened.

v.35-36

The point is made very plainly. The landowner represents God and thus the vinedressers who had leased the property exhibit,

A. Wicked rebellion against God himself.

We can extend the image of the servants a bit, since God calls his prophets by that name. The prophet Elijah certainly said it well in,

1 Kings 19:9 "And there he went into a cave, and spent the night in that place; and behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and He said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" 10 So he said, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God of hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left; and they seek to take my life."

Jesus himself would lament,

Mat. 23:37 "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the

prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!”

Stephen would later express it just as plainly,

Acts 7:51 “You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. 52 Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers, 53 who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it.”

So the reference in the parable is unmistakable. Jesus is identifying and condemning those whose wicked rebellion against God is so obvious. And then, in the symbolism of the parable, the point is made that the very worst of this rebellion against God himself is,

B. Wicked rebellion against Jesus.

You can’t miss the point.

v.37-39

The vinedressers killed the son! That element of the parable was obviously fulfilled in person, with Jesus. So this condemnation of the chief priest and elders of the people was quite prophetic, and after the fact, after that killing of the son was actually accomplished, we read this as the focal point of Peter’s sermon at Pentecost,

Acts 2:36 “Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.”

Later,

Acts 4:8 Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders of Israel: 9 If we this day are judged for a good deed done to a helpless man, by what means he has been made well, 10 let it be known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by Him this man stands here before you whole. 11 This is the stone which was rejected by you builders, which has become the chief cornerstone.’ 12 Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”

The wicked unbelievers among the leaders of Israel crucified Jesus, they put him to death in the most despicable act of sinful rebellion against God ever committed. That’s the point of the parable. Along with the declaration and proclamation of,

II. THE PUNISHMENT FOR WICKED REBELLION.

In the parable itself, the vinedressers ask the obvious question,

v.40

The answer is not unexpected.

v.41

That destruction would be more fully explained when Jesus speaks to his disciples on the Mount of Olives,

Luke 21:20 “But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation is near. 21 Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those who are in the midst of her depart, and let not those who are in the country enter her. 22 For these are the days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled. 23 But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! For there will

be great distress in the land and wrath upon this people. 24 And they will fall by the edge of the sword, and be led away captive into all nations. And Jerusalem will be trampled by Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.”

The point is,

A. Destruction.

v.41 “He will destroy those wicked men miserably, and lease his vineyard to other vinedressers who will render to him the fruits in their seasons.”

And even more explicitly,

v.44 “And whoever falls on this stone will be broken; but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder.”

The destruction of the nation of Israel will be the appropriate punishment for their wicked rebellion, and that destruction is pictured by the image of rejecting one called the stone. And not only is that destruction called being “broken,” notice the description of the extent of that judgment in verse 44, “on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder.” It’s hard to imagine any stronger words to describe the destruction of the wicked. Ground to powder.

Is. 60:12 “For the nation and kingdom which will not serve you shall perish, And those nations shall be utterly ruined.”

This is what that utter destruction will look like.

Rev. 14:17 “Then another angel came out of the temple which is in heaven, he also having a sharp sickle. 18 And another angel came out from the altar, who had power over fire, and he cried with a loud cry to him who had the sharp sickle, saying, “Thrust in your sharp sickle and gather the clusters of the vine of the earth, for her grapes are fully ripe.” 19 So the angel thrust his sickle into the earth and gathered the vine of the earth, and threw it into the

great winepress of the wrath of God. 20 And the winepress was trampled outside the city, and blood came out of the winepress, up to the horses’ bridles, for one thousand six hundred furlongs.”

This description also,

Rev. 19:11 “Now I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse. And He who sat on him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war. 12 His eyes were like a flame of fire, and on His head were many crowns. He had a name written that no one knew except Himself. 13 He was clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God. 14 And the armies in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, followed Him on white horses. 15 Now out of His mouth goes a sharp sword, that with it He should strike the nations. And He Himself will rule them with a rod of iron. He Himself treads the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God. 16 And He has on His robe and on His thigh a name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.”

That’s the destruction that will come upon the wicked, those who rebel against Jesus.

v.42 Jesus said to them, “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 marvelous in our eyes’?”

That stone is Jesus, again back to,

Acts 4:11 “This is the stone which was rejected by you builders, which has become the chief cornerstone.’ 12 Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”

Jesus is the chief cornerstone, and those Jewish leaders who would reject him and kill him will be destroyed! That’s the message of the parable. And with that destruction comes,

B. Replacement.

In other words, the nation of Israel will be replaced as the people of God, replaced by those who, in the words of the parable are identified as,

v.41. "...other vinedressers who will render to him the fruits in their seasons."

Even more clearly,

v.43 "Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it.

In other words, the nation of Israel will be replaced by the Gentiles, those who would believe in Jesus.

Acts 13:46 Then Paul and Barnabas grew bold and said, "It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles. 47 For so the Lord has commanded us: I have set you as a light to the Gentiles, That you should be for salvation to the ends of the earth."

As I read already,

v.45

This replacement is at the very heart of the gospel proclaimed to the New Testament church of Jesus Christ. An outward and external religion would not be sufficient. A claim to ethnic identity would not be sufficient. Paul calls that the "mystery of the gospel." The mystery now revealed. As Paul writes,

Eph. 3:3 "...how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already, 4 by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ), 5 which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets: 6 that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through

the gospel."

So this is the gospel, this is the declaration of the gospel,

Gal. 3:26 "For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. 27 For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."

The nation of Israel as the people of God on earth would be replaced by the church of Jesus Christ. Hypocrites who relied upon their outward and ethnic identity would be replaced by those who truly trust and believe in Jesus, and show forth that faith by the way they live their lives. "The kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it."

Acts 4:11 "This [Jesus] is the stone which was rejected by you builders, which has become the chief cornerstone.' 12 Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

That's the meaning of this parable, along with this concluding focus regarding,

III. THE PROMISE OF JESUS.

In other words, the parable is not simply a condemnation upon wicked unbelievers. Rather, it is a declaration of the promise of the gospel itself. The parable itself, with its message of destruction and replacement, with its declaration of judgment, doesn't leave anyone without hope. So let me read these verses again, not as a condemnation but as an invitation to love Jesus. God is not merely announcing his judgment upon Israel in this parable, he is exalting Jesus.

A. God the Father exalts his son Jesus.

So, verse 42 again.

v.42 Jesus said to them, “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 marvelous in our eyes’?”

Let’s go back to that Psalm, a psalm of thanksgiving.

Ps. 118:1 “Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good! For His mercy endures forever. 2 Let Israel now say, “His mercy endures forever.” 3 Let the house of Aaron now say, “His mercy endures forever.” 4 Let those who fear the LORD now say, “His mercy endures forever.”

The psalm continues,

Ps. 118:14 “The LORD is my strength and song, And He has become my salvation. 15 The voice of rejoicing and salvation Is in the tents of the righteous; The right hand of the LORD does valiantly. 16 The right hand of the LORD is exalted; The right hand of the LORD does valiantly. 17 I shall not die, but live, And declare the works of the LORD. 18 The LORD has chastened me severely, But He has not given me over to death. 19 Open to me the gates of righteousness; I will go through them, And I will praise the LORD. 20 This is the gate of the LORD, Through which the righteous shall enter. 21 I will praise You, For You have answered me, And have become my salvation. 22 The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief cornerstone. 23 This was the LORD’s doing; It is marvelous in our eyes. 24 This is the day the LORD has made; We will rejoice and be glad in it. 25 Save now, I pray, O LORD; O LORD, I pray, send now prosperity. 26 Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD! [And the Psalm ends...] 28 You are my God, and I will praise You; You are my God, I will exalt You. 29 Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good! For His mercy endures forever.”

God the father exalts his son Jesus! That’s what this parable is all about. That is what the gospel is all about. And,

B. God the Father exalts the kingdom of Jesus.

The point is not simply that the kingdom will be taken away from the nation of Israel and given to those who belong to Jesus, but that that kingdom will be a great kingdom.

v.43 “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 a great kingdom it will be!

Ps. 118:14 “The LORD is my strength and song, And He has become my salvation. 15 The voice of rejoicing and salvation Is in the tents of the righteous; The right hand of the LORD does valiantly. 16 The right hand of the LORD is exalted; The right hand of the LORD does valiantly. 17 I shall not die, but live, And declare the works of the LORD.”

So I come to you this afternoon preaching that kingdom. Not a kingdom of this world. Not a kingdom defined by any nation in this world. But a kingdom which has a great king, seated upon his throne at the right hand of the father in heaven. And I invite you to be a citizen in that kingdom by the faith to trust in Jesus for your salvation and for the forgiveness of your sins.

Acts 4:11 “[Jesus] is the stone which was rejected by [the] builders, which has become the chief cornerstone.’ 12 Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”