

Kingdom Parables: The Landowner

We find this parable in Matthew 21 (with parallels in Mark 10 and Luke 20, but I will be working from Matthew primarily). The similarities and differences are interesting to notice – in Matthew a group of slaves is sent, in Mark and Luke just individuals are. Mark does not contain the end remark on the lips of Jesus concerning the stone. Matthew and Mark contain the Pharisees' reaction to the parable. In Matthew the audience responds in agreement with Jesus about judgment on the vineyard workers; whereas in Luke they are astonished saying, "May it never be." In all three, the plot is basically the same – the owner of the vineyard sends his slaves to collect from those working his field. The slaves are mistreated, beaten, and killed. Ultimately, the owner sends his son, and the workers kill him for his inheritance. Jesus' closing remark of the parable is: "What will the owner do to those workers for killing his son?" The rest of the passage is Jesus' explanation.

First off, let us get some context on the picture Jesus is describing. We must remember the kind of society people of the time live in. The owners do not do their own businesses. There are no telephones; there is no postal service. The wealthy sit at the gates of their houses receiving and sending messages from slaves. These slaves are sent out carrying the authority of their master. Their word is binding. Another master who receives one of these slaves is to act as if they received his master. To mistreat the slave is to mistreat the master. Secondly, the reference to "beloved son" most likely means firstborn. The firstborn son is considered to be the shining star of the family and is certainly focused on. He would take over the family business. He would be married first before any other sons or daughters. Also, he receives two-thirds of the inheritance according to cultural Jewish law – incentive for the murderers.

I want to start with Jesus' conclusion of the parable, and then flesh out the details for it. Jesus asks "What will be done to the vine-growers?" The proper response is that the vineyard owner 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" (Matthew 21:41). This is a pretty simple conclusion. Yet, what are we to make of Jesus' quotation of Psalms 118:22, "The stone which the builders rejected, this became the chief corner stone?" Most Christian commentators would say that Jesus is talking here about acceptance of himself as Christ. However, do we have any internal evidence to think so?

In Matthew 21:43, Jesus says that that Kingdom will be taken away from you and given to those who bear fruit. If we remember from the first article on parables, responding to the Word of God is the first sign of a fruitful person. It was the act that the disciples did that fulfilled the parable as it left the lips of Jesus. We can see the owner of the vineyard obviously is God, and He has sent slaves to collect His due. His workers did not listen to His slaves. Jesus is telling the people to listen to the words of God as they come – or the Kingdom will be taken from you. This is an allusion to 1 Samuel 15:28, in which Samuel says to King Saul, "The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today and has given it to your neighbor, who is better than you." In like manner, Jesus is saying that unless you respond righteously, you will have the Kingdom ripped from your hands as with King Saul. Does this make any statements about Jesus? No.

What about Psalm 118? The psalm opens with corporate statements in verses two, three, and four. We do not have an individual speaking here, we have Israel speaking. The message of the psalm is that Israel, which was rejected, is chosen to be the foundation piece of the LORD's building. Thus, when Jesus quotes this passage, is he saying Israel rejected me, and I am Israel in the psalm? I do not believe so. I think Jesus is saying that Israel was once rejected by the world and chosen by God. Nevertheless, unless they repent and turn, they will be rejected by God. God will remove His election. This is very

much in line with the repentance that John the Baptist called for – “Do you think being the son of Abraham will save you?” Jesus is clearly making a statement that these people, the ones whom God has already chosen, need to listen to Him. Also, in all three versions, to whom is Jesus addressing this parable? The chief elders and scribes in the temple, the governing bodies who are supposed to be shepherding the people. They are the intended audience of the parable. Jesus just uses the crowds that also hear to bring more judgment on them. They are the ones in danger of being removed from the promises because they have not listened to the words of God that have come to them.

In addition, what is the description of the stone; what does it do? Whoever falls on it will be broken, and whoever the stone falls on will be crushed. The very next verse says that Pharisees understand he is talking about them. In the context of the parable, if the Pharisees are being rejected from the Kingdom, one would think Jesus is now using the opposite reference to stone. In his psalm quotation, he emphasizes the good aspect of God's choosing of the stone. Howbeit, here it would seem that God is throwing the bad stones out and that anyone who hits or gets hit by the stone is going to be in bad shape. Jesus seems to be saying anyone who gets caught up with these Pharisees is not going to make it into the Kingdom. Much like he said in Matthew 23:3, they are instructed to do what they say, but not what they do because of their hypocrisy. There is also support for this understanding based on the opening context.

This parable has one other major theme. The opening verse comes from Isaiah 5:1-2.

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. 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 also hewed out a wine vat in it; then He expected it to produce good grapes, but it produced only worthless ones.

God started the vineyard work Himself. He set it all up, as best as He could. He got rid of the rocks standing in the way to a good field and harvest. He only gave the workers the assignment to keep it working fruitfully.

Again, most Christian commentators would say that Jesus was indicating that the Jewish people would no longer have a shot at the Kingdom or that this was Jesus taking the covenant away from them. However, is there any internal evidence for this? The KJV and NLT can be misleading translating “ethnos” as “nations,” where the NASB has “people.” One would think, if that was the case, that Jesus would not have instituted the new covenant with his twelve Jewish disciples. But this parable is directly addressed to the Pharisees and leaders of the people. Would Jesus' conclusion not mean that they were going to be replaced and not the entire Jewish people? There is always this verse that helps us understand Jesus' statement as well: “Truly I say to you that the tax collectors and prostitutes will get into the kingdom of God before you” (Matthew 21:31).

In conclusion, we can see a lot of other statements of Jesus realized in this parable. It does not seem that Jesus is making a parable concerned with himself. Yes, he uses the reference to the son as a reference to himself, but it is not the crux of the parable. The main point is that the characters are not doing anything new – they have always denied the master's messengers. And Jesus takes up where his predecessors have left off, proclaiming judgment. They each came preaching repentance, and no one listened. Isaiah was trivialized and ignored. Jesus came preaching repentance, and no one listened. Jesus was ultimately killed. Those who have heard the call of repentance, the call of the coming Kingdom in judgment, will we go on to mistreat the slaves of the vineyard owner? Or will we repent

and give the owner his due?