

The Rejected Stone

Matthew 21:33-46

You may remember from last week's sermon that the Jewish religious leaders had demanded that Jesus explain by what authority he had done His Triumphant Entry into the Jerusalem, by what authority He received praise from the people, by what authority He cleansed the temple, by what authority He healed the blind and the lame (verses 8-14), and by what authority He did His teaching (verse 23). As the custodians of the spiritual life of the nation, they had the right to ask this question of Jesus. However they had witnessed Jesus' three years of ministry, and they still would not face the facts that He was sent from God and received His authority from God.

We also remember that Jesus had pointed them to the one, John the Baptist, who had prepared the way for Jesus. If the rulers had received John's ministry, they would have received Jesus. Then Jesus told the parable of the two sons that the Father asked to go into the vineyard and work and how each responded in a disrespectful way but the son who later obeyed at least did his father's will.

This week's scripture is a follow-up to Jesus' teaching about their lack of faith and lack of follow-through when it came to doing God's will. The scripture is the second in a series of three parables in response to the chief priests and elders.

Jesus told of a landowner who went to great expense to make a vineyard productive. The fence was a thick-set thorn hedge, designed to keep out both the wild boars who might ravage the vineyard, and the thieves who might steal the grapes. Every vineyard had its wine press. The wine press consisted of two troughs either hollowed out of the rock, or built of bricks; the one was a little higher than the other, and was connected with the lower one by a channel. The grapes were pressed in the higher trough and the juice ran off into the lower trough. The tower

served a double purpose. It served as a watch-tower, from which to watch for thieves when the grapes were ripening; and it served as a lodging for those who were working in the vineyard.

He rented out the vineyard to tenants who were to care for it. When harvest time came, the landowner sent his servants to collect what was rightfully his. But the tenants mistreated the servants, beating one, killing another, and stoning a third. Other servants were sent with the same results. Finally the landowner sent his son, thinking they would respect him. The tenants, however, reasoned that if they killed the son, the land would be theirs. Therefore they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

Jesus' audience understood the actions of the owner of the vineyard. In the time of Jesus, Palestine was a troubled place with little luxury; it was, therefore, very familiar with absentee landlords, who rented out their estates and were interested only in collecting the rental at the right time. The rent might be paid as a money rent; or a fixed amount of the fruit, or it might be an agreed percentage of the crop.

Even the action of the tenants was not out of the common. The country was seething with economic unrest; the working people were discontented and rebellious; and the action of the tenants in seeking to eliminate the son was not by any means impossible.

It seems clear that Jesus was speaking of the nation of Israel that had been carefully prepared by God to be His fruitful vineyard (compare Isaiah 5:1-7). Jesus reminded the Jews of God's goodness to them as a nation. God delivered them from Egypt and planted them in a rich land of milk and honey. He gave them material and spiritual blessings and asked only that they bear fruit for His glory.

The care of the vineyard had been committed to the nation's religious leaders. But they had failed to acknowledge the Master's right over them. From time to

time, God sent His servants, the prophets, to the people to receive the fruit. But the people mistreated the servants, and even killed some of them.

What should the householder do? He could have sent his armies to destroy these wicked men. But instead he sent his own son to them. The landowner hoped they would respect his son, as he is “the Heir” (Heb. 1:2). Instead of receiving and honoring the son, the men cast him out of the vineyard and killed him.

The people listening to the parable were caught up in the drama. Jesus posed a natural question when He asked His listeners what they thought the landowner would do to those unfaithful tenants. They did not realize that they passed sentence on themselves with their answer because they said obviously the landowner would not let these tenants continue to operate the vineyard, but he would bring judgment on them. The land would be taken away from them and used by other tenants who would give him his rightful share of the harvest.

Now Jesus quoted Psalm 118:22–23 to explain that He was that Son, that rejected stone which would become the capstone and the religious leaders were the unfaithful tenants (Matt. 21:45). The crowds had quoted from Psalm 118:26 when they had welcomed Jesus into the city, so this Scripture was fresh in the minds of the rulers.

Often in the Old Testament, God is referred to as a rock or a stone (Deut. 32:4, 18, 30–31; Ps. 18:2, 31, 46). The stone is also a messianic title. To Israel, Jesus was a stumbling stone (Isa. 8:14–15; Rom. 9:32–33; 1 Cor. 1:23). Israel rejected the Messiah, but in His death and resurrection Jesus created the church. To the church, Jesus is the foundation stone, the head of the corner (Eph. 2:20–22; 1 Peter 2:4–5). At the end of the age, Jesus will come as the destroying stone (Dan. 2:34), and establish His own glorious kingdom.

Of course, the Jewish leaders knew the messianic importance of the Scripture Jesus quoted. They were the builders who rejected the stone (Acts 4:11), who would be ultimately judged and crushed to bits.^{1 2}

Did you see from the parable what Jesus said about God? God trusted the tenants and did not stand over them to exercise a police-like supervision. He went away and left them with their task. God pays humans the compliment of entrusting us with his work. Every task we receive is a task given us to do by God. The landowner patiently sent messenger after messenger. He did not come with sudden vengeance when one messenger had been abused and ill-treated. He gave the tenants chance after chance to respond to his appeal. God bears with humans in all our sinning and will not cast us off. But Jesus also tells of God's judgment as in the end the landowner of the vineyard took the vineyard from the unfaithful tenants and gave it to others. God's sternest judgment is when he takes out of our hands the task which he meant us to do. We sink to our lowest level when we have become useless to God, and we reject His Son.

The parable also tells us about humans. It tells of human privilege. The vineyard was equipped with everything—the fence, the wine press, the tower—which would make the task of the tenants easy and enable them to discharge it well. God does not only give us a task to do; God also gives us the means to do it. The landowner left the tenants to freely do the task as they liked. God is no tyrannical task-master; God is like a wise commander who allocates a task and then trusts a person to do it. But there comes a day of reckoning. We are answerable for the way in which we have carried out the task God gave us to do. Unfortunately the tenants carried out a deliberate policy of rebellion and

¹Wiersbe, Warren W.: *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1996, c1989, S. Mt 21:23

²Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 2:70

disobedience towards the landowner. Sin is deliberate opposite to God; it is the taking of our own way when we know it is not the way that God requires, when we reject God's Son.

The parable tells us about Jesus. It shows us clearly Jesus was not just one of the prophets sent by God. Those who come before him were the messengers of God; but they were servants; Jesus was and is the Son. It also makes it clear that Jesus knew what lay ahead. In the parable the hands of wicked men killed the son. Jesus was never in any doubt of what lay ahead. He did not die because he was compelled to die; he went willingly and open-eyed to death.

The parable concludes with the picture of the stone. Jesus tells of the stone which the builders rejected but became the most important stone in the whole building. The picture is from Psalm 118:22: "The stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner." Originally the Psalmist meant this as a picture of the nation of Israel. Israel was the nation which was despised, hated and rejected. They had been servants and slaves of many nations; but they were the chosen people of God.

It also means that humans reject Christ, and refuse him, and seek to eliminate him, but they will find that the Christ whom they rejected is the most important person in the world. It was Julian, the Roman Emperor, who tried to banish Christianity, and to bring back the old pagan gods. But he failed and failed completely. The man upon the Cross has become the Judge and King of the entire world.

But the stone is not passive. In verse 44, we are taught that this stone can break a person, if they stumble against it, and which crushes a person to powder, if it falls upon them. It is a composite picture from Isaiah 8:13, 14, 15; Isaiah 28:16; and Daniel 2:34, 44, 45 where there is a picture of a stone, cut without hands, which broke in pieces the enemies of God. All these Old Testament pictures of a stone

are summed up in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the foundation stone on which everything is built, and the corner stone which holds everything together. To refuse his way is to hit one's head against a wall. To reject Him is to be crushed.³

I was excited that Jesus was talking to and about the religious learners of his day, but then I realized that this message was for each of us. God has supplied us with all we need to do the tasks that God asks us to do. Each of us has to answer the question: will you accept Jesus and give the fruits of our lives to the Master or will we reject God's way of salvation? The answer is in our hands. Let us be wiser than Jesus' original audience and accept and obey our God and His Savior.

³ Barclay, William, lecturer in the University of Glasgow (Hrsg.): *The Gospel of Matthew : Volume 2*. Philadelphia : The Westminster Press, 2000, c1975 (The Daily Study Bible, Rev. Ed), S. 260