

Knowing What You Have While You've Got It

SERMON BACKGROUND STUDY

October 18 & 19, 2008

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Matthew 21:33-46 (NRSV)

³³“Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. ³⁴When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. ³⁵But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. ³⁶Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. ³⁷Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ ³⁸But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.’ ³⁹So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him.

⁴⁰Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” ⁴¹They said to Jesus, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.”

⁴²Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the scriptures:

“The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone;

this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes?”¹

⁴³Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. ⁴⁴The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.”

⁴⁵When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. ⁴⁶They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

How easy is to take for granted the gifts and blessings that we have or even never see them for what they are. Today’s story is about some leaders who not only failed to see how God was working in their midst, but even turned against God in their blindness.

Context . . . context . . . context . . . I fear that I am beginning to sound like a broken record, but these parables certainly drive home the importance of looking at the context when we strive to hear Jesus’ meaning. This will be driven home again next week when we look at the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus.

Today’s parable is part of an extended confrontation between Jesus and the Jewish leadership, represented by the temple priests and the Pharisees. Jesus arrives in Jerusalem to adoring crowds on a Sunday (Matt. 21), which we call Palm Sunday. The first thing Jesus does after his arrival is to head for the temple, where he invokes the words and actions of the prophet Jeremiah, who, 600 years before, had his own confrontation with the temple leadership. The next morning, Jesus returns to the temple where the “chief priests and elders” question his authority. Whose authority underlies Jesus’ words and actions? The leaders know full well that Jesus says and does what only God ought to say and do and they want to know what or whom Jesus claims as his authority.

Jesus replies to this challenge by turning the tables and asking the “chief priests and elders” a question that they refuse to answer: “Who authorized the baptisms performed by John the Baptizer: heaven or humans?”² Then, in the face of their silence, Jesus launches into three parables. The first one is about two sons. The first refuses to work in his father’s vineyard but later changes his mind and heads to the vines. The second son says he will go work, but he doesn’t. Jesus asks which man does his father’s will. The leaders can’t help but answer that it is the first, for, even though refusing at first, the man eventually goes to work. This first parable, like those that follow is a warning about God’s rejection of Israel’s leadership; i.e., the chief priests, the scribes, the elders, and the rest. It is the “sinners and tax collectors” who, though rejecting God at first, now embrace Jesus and his inauguration of God’s kingdom. Conversely, like the second son, the leaders claim to be leading the people to God but are actually leading them away, refusing to do the work of the kingdom brought to them by Jesus. Then Jesus launches right into another parable, ours for today, often referred to as the Parable of the Wicked Tenants.

¹from Psalm 118:22-23. This passage is also applied to Jesus in Acts 4:11 and 1 Peter 2:7.

²The chief priests can’t say “heaven” for that would be an endorsement of John and also Jesus. They can’t say “human,” for John’s movement was popular among the people. Jesus has a real gift for turning the tables on his accusers.

The wicked tenants

The context of this parable, falling in the midst of a direct confrontation between Jesus and the Jewish leaders, then guides our interpretation of the parable. The landowner is God and the vineyard is God's people. Indeed, the parable's first verse is based directly on Isaiah 5, a song about an unfruitful vineyard (an unjust people). Thus, the wicked tenants are not the

The Hope of Israel

The vineyard was a common Hebrew metaphor for Israel; not so much the land as the people. The people, Abraham's people, were the chosen of God, chosen for a purpose, to be the ones through whom God would rescue humanity and all the cosmos. Yet the people knew that they had not done well as God's vineyard, finding it impossible to simply love God and love neighbor every day and in every way. They saw the Babylonian exile as punishment for their sins, and the Roman soldiers were a daily reminder that they continued to live in a very real exile, despite having returned to the land.

Yet, in the midst of exile and alienation, prophets had brought powerful words of hope to the Jewish community living in Babylon and after their return. What were the dimensions of this hope?

Israel's hope was focused on the end of the exile which entailed three expectations: (1) liberation from oppression, (2) the restoration of the land, and (3) the rebuilding of the temple. All three expectations pointed toward the restoration of the people's relationship with the Lord God, to the forgiveness of Israel's sins, and to a new covenant.

It is easy to see why many would have thought that the exile was ending when Cyrus allowed the Jews to begin returning home. But as time went on their hopes would be crushed. Yes, they were back on the land but it was occupied by foreigners. Indeed, the Jews were oppressed by one conqueror after another for centuries. Yes, they were allowed to rebuild the temple, but it was a pale reflection of the temple burned down by the Babylonians. As time passed, the Jews came to realize that the exile never really ended, that their sins had not been forgiven, that they still awaited their homecoming.

All this sets the stage for today's parable, in that it tells the story of Israel's rejection of the prophets' call to return to God and, now, the violent unwillingness of the Jewish leadership to embrace Jesus as Messiah, the one who would usher in the long-awaited kingdom of God.

people themselves, but the leaders, both spiritual and political, who have repeatedly refused to understand God's Law and God's work. Instead, they exile his prophets and rebel against his son.

When the landowner turns the vineyard over to new management, it is God opening his kingdom to those who embrace both God's work and God's son. It is a mistake to see this parable as speaking of God transferring the vineyard from the Jews to the Gentiles.³ Rather, it is the Jewish leadership that is in Jesus' sight. Leadership of the vineyard is going to be given to a new crew, to those who will lead God's reconstituted people forward in a unity built on faith in Jesus Christ.

A message for all

Jesus spoke this parable as a clear warning to those who had been leading Israel toward destruction rather than restoration. Jeremiah had confronted Israel's leaders and was imprisoned for it. Jesus' confrontation with them would lead him to a Roman cross only a few days later.

But it would be a mistake to hear this as a message only for the leaders. Had the Jews done what God had expected of them, loving God and neighbor? Had they embraced and protected Jeremiah? They had welcomed Jesus on Sunday. Would they embrace him on Friday? Would the disciples themselves stand with him before the high priest, Caiaphas, or would they hide and even deny they knew him?

It can be so hard to know what you have when you've got it, much less act on it. How good are we at discerning God's word today and heeding it? Do we strive to learn more so that we can be more discerning? Do we see the world through God-shaped glasses or "real world" glasses? Do we run our lives based on the world's priorities or upon God's? Do we stand up for the weak and oppressed, for those who can't stand up for themselves. Do we really appreciate all that God had given us, even in the high-anxiety of the moment? Questions such as these are not only for the "leaders," they are questions for us all.

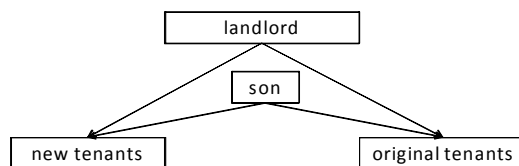
³We always need to remember that the Jesus movement was a Jewish movement and would stay that way for several decades. It was more than ten years after Jesus' resurrection before a Gentile came to faith in Jesus Christ. None of the apostles, all of whom were Jewish, would have seen themselves as leaving Judaism. They simply had come to embrace Jesus as Lord and the very Jewish Messiah.

Interpreting the Parable of the Wicked Tenants

What is the narrative context of the parable?

- It is Jesus' last week in Jerusalem, so it is not surprising that this parable is often referred to as one of the "controversy" parables. Jesus' confrontation with the Jewish leadership has come to a head. Jesus' words and actions are one indictment of the leadership after another. Immediately prior to telling this parable, Jesus tells two brief parables about why the "wrong" sorts will inherit God's kingdom.

What is the parable's structure?



What background information about culture, customs, geography and so on is important?

- The vineyard is a common metaphor for the people of God in Hebrew poetry. The first verse of Jesus' parable is drawn directly from Isaiah's song of the unfruitful vineyard (Isaiah 5:1-7).
- Generally, by the time of the first-century AD, land in the Roman Empire was increasingly owned by the urban class. Thus, those who worked the land, including vineyards were tenants, not owners. It was the job of the Pharisees and Priests to "work" the vineyard, i.e., the people of God.

What is the perspective of each of the main characters?

- The landlord – The landlord has waited a long time and suffered much, waiting for the tenants to bear the fruit that he expects and requires of them.
- The original tenants – The tenants' unwillingness to be good, fruitful tenants has turned violent, culminating in open rebellion against the landlord's son.
- The son – It is hard to say whether the son is intended as a main character. It probably depends on whether you are one of Jesus' first listeners or are reading the parable with the benefit of hindsight. Regardless, the son, who is rejected and killed, suffers the full weight of the wicked tenants' rebellion.
- The new tenants – The new tenants (like the replacement guests in the parable of the great dinner) are the fruit-bearing people who hear and respond to the landlord's wishes.

With whom do we or the first readers identify?

- It is nearly impossible for Christians to read this parable and not see it as an allegory about the Jewish leadership's rejection and the bringing in of the gentiles. However, Jesus probably intends a broader message about the rejection of his kingdom message by many and its acceptance by a few. For ten years, all those who accepted Jesus as Messiah and Lord were Jewish.

Note: The parable diagrams are taken from Craig Blomberg's book, *Interpreting the Parables*.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

One prophet after another. Mostly ignored. Some imprisoned or worse. Then, Jesus arrives and attracts both crowds and disciples. But, in the end, he too is abandoned, as we learn that the crowds are fickle and the disciples are clueless. The people of God seem quite sure about what this Messiah-led kingdom of God stuff is going to look like and they are anxious to get on with it. The one thing they also become quite sure of is that is not what Jesus is selling, as evidenced by his "losing" to Caiaphas and Pilate. In other words, they don't know what they have when they've got it.

You might begin by reflecting on some occasions in your own life when you couldn't see what you have until it is too late. Many of us with families have experienced this as we put work first, missing time with our kids that we cannot get back. What have you learned from such experiences? What might we do to guard against this?

The later New Testament writings have a lot to say about the importance of guarding against wolves who bring false teachings and want to tear the church apart. The writers want the believers to recognize that they've been given a faith that needs defending. There shouldn't be any looking back at what the Christians let slip away. Do you think we recognize what we really have in the apostolic, historic Christian faith? Do we strive to learn it and to defend it? There are always self-proclaimed leaders who want to lead us away, enticing us to something "new" and "relevant." What can we do to equip ourselves so that we can better know the value of what we have, what has been passed on to us?