

The Prophetic Parables of Matthew 13

Lesson 11- The Parable of the Tenants

Matthew 21:33-46 (Par. LK 20:9-18)

April 20, 2025

Introduction

As we arrive now at Matthew 21, and before we get to the confrontation between Jesus and the Chief Priests (Sadducees) and elders, Matthew records the Triumphal Entry (vv. 1-11); Jesus cleansing the Temple (vv. 12-13); the chief priests and elders challenge Jesus' authority to draw this much attention from the people, to heal the blind and lame, and to disturb the Temple courtyard (vv. 14-16); and then Jesus goes to Bethany to lodge at Lazarus', Mary and Martha's home.

The next day as He journeys back to Jerusalem, He seeks figs on a fig tree that should at that time hold ripe fruit, but it has none (Note vv. 19-22). This is a symbol of Israel being a nation whom He will describe as not providing fruit to God in our parable in this same chapter. Jesus, as He arrives back at the Temple, challenges the leaders (vv. 23-27) with a theology question about John the Baptist, which they refuse to answer because it would expose their hypocrisy and anger the people against them. Jesus then gives them a brief parable in vv. 28-32 ① – The Parable of the Two Sons, once again a serious rebuke of their theology which has knowledge of God's requests and laws, but they refuse to allow it to compel them to obey it. This parable plays off the context of the question He had posed to them about John the Baptist. Note v. 32.

Then having bested them twice already that day, He presents them with a parable that is actually a history lesson that will supply us, the reader, with more information about the postponement of the Kingdom of Heaven.

The Master of the House

vv. 34-35

Arno Gaebelein provides us with a comment:

"The parable needs but little comment. They despised the tax gatherers and harlots, but the Lord proves that these polished, cultured, educated, religious priests and elders were far worse, far more obnoxious. The tax gatherers and harlots are meant by the son who said he would not go and repented and went. The second who said, I go, and does not go, nor does he repent, is the proud religious Pharisee, the high priest and elders. Thus, the righteous Judge lays them bare with His mighty sword. Self-righteous, they repented not. Convicted and condemned the Sanhedrin stands in the presence of the King."¹

¹ Arno Gaebelein; The Gospel of Matthew; Loizeaux Brothers, 1961 / 1977 pg. 434

So, it is in light of Jesus having bested the Sanhedrin (elders) and Sadducees with His preceding parable that He now delivers this parable in order to humble them, rebuke them, expose their hearts and warn them. We know this as The Parable of the Tenants (vv. 33-46).

It is important first of all to recognize that these leaders of Israel had no answer they were willing to give regarding the Parable of the Two Sons or to the origin of John the Baptist. So, possibly following a brief pause to allow them to comment, Jesus delivers this important parable. This parable we will see, reviews the history of leaders of Israel and their wickedness, predicts the postponement of the Kingdom – removing the possibility of it for this particular generation of Israel – and the re-offer of it to a future generation of Israel in the future.

In vv. 33-34, Jesus lays out the main premise. As in all parables, it is critical, in interpreting it, to accurately identify who is who, or you will never get the truth of it.

The “master of the house” is God.

The “tenants” are Israel (in this case, chiefly the leaders of Israel. They are ‘renters’ but think of themselves as ‘owners.’

“the vineyard” is the land of Israel, given by God to His people (it could also be Jerusalem representing Israel, but it is Israel either way).

The “servants” are God’s prophets, sent to His tenants to bring them back in line with God’s expectations for them as His people.

The chief priests and elders would have known right off the bat that Jesus was referring to Israel. Israel as a vineyard is an OT depiction. The concept is based on passages such as Isaiah 5:1-7; Jeremiah 2:21; and Psalm 80:8, and other passages. The Lord, through His Holy Spirit had spoken these words by the Prophets, and now, He Himself had come to present this message of severe rebuke to the nation’s leaders, revealing their shameful past and now much more heinous current sin, the worst part of which is pending, and is on their hearts and in their counsel together. They intend to do exactly what Jesus is saying in this parable at v. 38 to these wicked leaders. ②

So God had given them the land, and had continuously blessed it and His people often, despite their rebellious, idolatrous nature. They were not acknowledging that they were stewards of God’s gifts to them, but instead acted as independent owners of their land and everything else. So verse 34 clearly tells them that God required only a reasonable response to their blessings – He wanted the fruit of His vineyard of which they were renters (in a sense). The fruit God required was obedience and their love and glory for Him. See Micah 6:6-8.

In v. 33c, where the text says “*and went into another country,*” this is not in the same sense or timing as the nobleman in LK 19:12 “*went to a far country.*” In Luke 19, this parable describes Christ going to a “far country” (heaven) to receive His authority to reign. But here in Matt. 21:33, He went into another country in the sense that He (God) was not in their visible presence as they were rejecting His

legitimate request to receive what was due Him – the fruit represents their love, worship per Micah 6:6-8 above. Note Deut. 6:5, cited in Matt. 22:37-40. But as His final plan, He sends His Son (Matt. 21:37) – expecting they will honour Him, but it is this very Son they reject and will ultimately murder.

The Violent Tenants and the Servants MT. 21: 35-36

The vineyard owner (God) sends His faithful servants time after time to try to get His tenants (Israel) to “pay the rent” – i.e.) to honour God as God. There are so many examples in the OT of this that we could spend hour upon hour looking at passages – but let’s just look at one typical example, an example that immediately precedes the 400 silent years – see Malachi 1:6-14 and then God’s final warning to Israel in 4:1-5.

Malachi was written to those Jews who had returned to rebuild Israel and Jerusalem after their captivity. It is therefore a post-exilic prophetic book. My point is – they still had not learned how God wanted them as His people to respond to His covenant requirements. Even after being punished by deserved destruction and captivity, they were still refusing to give God the honour that was His due.

They consistently, from Exodus to Malachi and into the 4 Gospels, rebelled against God , so what Christ is saying in the parable here rings true. The rebellion, according to v. 35 says that they beat His servants, killed some, and stoned others. When He sent more (v. 36), they continued to do the same. They were consistent only in their wickedness. Note Matt. 23:29-26 & Heb. 11:36-38. ③

Killing Jesus vv. 37-39

You can see the progression from the servants being sent, till finally, God sends forth His Son, which He did at the start of the Gospels in the NT. Even so, they had plenty of Scripture to tell them who this Son being sent would be – “*Emmanuel, God with us,*” and so on (Micah 5:2; Daniel 7:13-14). It would be giving them too much undue credit to say they were ignorant of who Jesus was, to say that He was not the Messiah!

We see God’s thinking in v. 37 – “*They will respect my Son.*” This implies they knew who He was. But we know they did not respect Him, by and large. Some of the people accepted Christ for who He said He was (a mere remnant), but the Pharisees, Sadducees and Scribes flat out rejected Him out of jealousy, which was obvious even to Pilate – cf. Matt. 27:18. Even as He presenting this parable to them, they are in that very moment, rejecting Him! So ironic!

V. 39 – It is interesting to consider that, based on “*This is the heir...*” that they knew Jesus was exactly who He said He was – the Messiah. They add, “*let us kill Him and have His inheritance.*” They wanted to keep their cushy positions – cf. John 11:47-48. They were not going to allow Him to overshadow them! They hadn’t

done it yet, but soon, they would finally be able to kill Jesus. They could just about taste it. They were used to their ‘subjects’ knuckling under when they applied their pressure – cf. John 9:13-34 – but here was One who was their theological superior in every way who did not fear them in the least!

Jesus knows their intentions as v. 39 continues on – “*So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard.*” Jesus was crucified outside of Jerusalem, and although the Romans technically carried out the execution, the Jews were solidly behind it. Note: JN 11:49-53; 19:4-16; Acts 2:22-36; 4:26-28.

So, How Should God Respond?

vv. 40-42

Jesus has now laid before Israel’s leadership the hard facts, revealing their own wicked hearts to them, and now asks for their response – v. 40. This question is clearly a warning to them, and an opening for their repentance. Their answer in v. 41 is their own verdict, spelling out their own doom. According to v. 45, it dawned on them that Jesus’ parable here, and the Parable of the Two Sons was spoken against them. Add to that that they were offended by His Triumphal Entry, His cleansing of the Temple, and His entry into the Temple the next day.

In v. 42, Jesus uses a familiar literary formula to challenge their theological acumen by citing Psalm 118:22-23.²

The rejected stone is the Messiah, and in His rejection, He becomes the Chief Cornerstone. The leaders of Israel are the builders, and Jesus’ verdict is about to be pronounced on them. It is a very important aspect of what Jesus cites from Ps. 118:22-23, when He says, “*this was the Lord’s doing and it is marvellous in our eyes.*” Steven Lawson comments on this passage in his commentary on Psalms: “*“It is marvellous in our eyes” means that divine providence has overruled mans’ plans. They rejoice in God’s inscrutable, eternal plan...ultimately, this looked ahead prophetically to the death of Christ on the cross, a day which was the eternal plan of God from before time began (Acts 2:22-23; I Pet. 1:20).*”³

④

The Temporary Removal of the Kingdom From Israel

vv. 43-44

V. 43 is the key verse in this parable, and we have touched on it already briefly in our Sunday School series, and had a good discussion about it on one Sunday last year. But now, we are looking at it in a more contextual, exegetically way.

Matthew 12:22-45 started this issue off for us last January as we observed this passage as the impetus for Jesus to teach in parables in Matthew 13, and the final straw for Israel, as the Kingdom, offered throughout the 3 Synoptic Gospels (M-M-L), is summarily postponed and remains so even today, some 2,000 years later,

² This passage from PS 118:22-23 is also cited in Acts 4: 11-12; Eph. 2:20 and I Pet. 2:4-18

³ Steven Lawson; Psalms 76-150, Holman OT Commentary, Max Anders, General Editor, 2006, B & H Publishing, pg. 230

as God allows the history He foreordained to “play out” building the church and preparing and punishing Israel until “the times of the Gentiles” (Luke 21:24) are complete and Jesus returns to set up and reign over that promised kingdom to a generation of Israel that will finally repent and call on Him to rule over them (Matt. 23:37-39; Ps. 118:26 cited).

Matthew 21:43, as we have discussed, is a controversial verse, used (quite incorrectly in my opinion) by Amillennial and Postmillennial believers. They promote the idea that God has permanently taken the kingdom away from Israel and given it almost immediately to the Church. To these theologians, this means that Israel has been replaced forever by the Church.

Michael Vlach, an expert on this subject, says;

“Supersessionism seems to be based on 2 core beliefs. (1) the nation Israel has somehow completed or forfeited its status as the people of God and will never again possess a unique role or function apart from the church, and (2) the church is now the true Israel that has permanently replaced or superseded national Israel as the people of God. In the context of Israel and the church, supersessionism is the view that the NT church is the new and/or true Israel that has forever superseded the nation Israel as the people of God. The result is that the church has become the sole inheritor of God’s covenant blessings originally promised to national Israel in the OT. This rules out a future restoration of the nation Israel with a unique identity, role and purpose.”⁴

Then Vlach cites Arnold Fruchtenbaum;

“The point is that the kingdom whole taken from the present Jewish generation, will be given (5) to a future generation of Israel. This generation will be the “all Israel” who “will be saved” according to Romans 11:26 and the Israel who will “look on Me whom they have pierced” (Zech. 12:10). Thus, I agree with Saldarini when he claims the theologians who interpret “nation” as the church “are reading second century Christian theology into Matthew 21:43.”

Yet even if the “nation” of Matt. 21:43 refers to the church, this does not prove supersessionism. The fact that the kingdom can be extended to apply to Gentiles in no way rules out a future restoration of Israel to the kingdom program. Both OT and NT passages explicitly state that God’s kingdom program would also include Gentiles, so the inclusion of Gentiles into the kingdom is not proof that Israel is forever removed from God’s kingdom program. What supersessionists need to prove is that Matt. 21:43 and other texts rule out the possibility that a future nation of Israel will experience the fulfillment of the kingdom. But Matt. 21:43 does not do this.”⁵

Could v. 43 mean that the Church has replaced Israel forever? Is the Church a “nation” or “a people”? (These terms are synonymous)

The word “nation” is used in the HCSB, KJV, NKJV, and the Legacy Standard versions. “A people” is used in almost all other modern translations. The Church is not a nation, nor is it “a people” in the sense of the context of this passage.

⁴ Michael Vlach, *Has the Church Replaced Israel?* B & H Publishing ;2010; pg. 12

⁵ Arnold Fruchtenbaum, cited by Michael Vlach. *IBID*, pg. 142-143

Israel had refused not only the kingdom. But their King – the Son they would soon kill outside the city. A complete removal of the Kingdom and Israel’s status as God’s people would not have been unjust of God, and the Church has without doubt been blessed by the NT focus of God (as part of His unannounced in the OT plans for the interregnum), but Israel is, according to OT and NT Scripture, not eternally eradicated. They have been resilient as a recognizable nation/people, surviving against all odds to this day as a recognizable nation again – raised up as (an ungodly) nation on May 14, 1948. The history behind how this came about is fascinating. That’s important of course, and they continue to defy the odds by surviving as a nation with many other nations against them. OT passages make no bones about insisting that Israel will never be permanently set aside or replaced by God – cf. Jeremiah 24:5-7; 30:11,18-22; 31:35-37; 33:14-22; Amos 9:8,15; 9:11-15.

Romans 11:1-36

This amazing and important chapter lays out for us a number of things about Israel. It shows that Paul is convinced that Israel will be around in the end times, and that God’s focus is still on His people Israel. Note some of the points this chapter makes:

- Verses 1-2 – God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew.
- Verses 11-12 – Through Israel’s sin (of rejecting Christ) salvation has come to the Gentiles (the Church), which is a wonderful thing.
- Verses 13-14 – The salvation of the Gentiles is also designed to make Israel jealous.
- Verses 16-21 – The tree is “the place of blessing” (it is not Israel or the Church) – and Paul warns the Gentile Church that God can graft back in the branches that are broken off (i.e., Israel) and break off unfaithful Gentile branches just as easily (cf. v. 21).
- Verses 22-24 – verse 23 – if Israel is no longer unbelieving, they can be grafted back in – they are the natural “branches” of the tree, not wild, but original
- Verses 25-36 – This is an amazing passage. Israel will be restored/saved/re-established – (vv. 26-32). As a result of all this truth about God’s Word, Paul is overwhelmed by God’s grace and mercy, and he quotes Isaiah 40:13 (in 11:34-35) and ends the chapter with v. 36, a beautiful verse that shows Paul’s emotions about God very well.
- Note Amos 9:7-15 which supports what Paul is saying in Romans 11.

⑥

To me, it’s very clear that the people/nation that God will give the kingdom to – “a people producing its fruits,” is the future generation of Israel that will be alive as the Tribulation period unfolds and who will call out to Christ to save them and return to be their King – cf. Hosea 3:4-5; Amos 9:11; Isaiah 54:5-8; and Matthew 23:37-39. Plus note the passages above.

Here is what Alva McClain says about this;

“The Kingdom was taken from a nation of our Lord’s day because of its sin; and it shall be given to a nation which brings forth proper fruit. The difference between the two nations is

spiritual and moral, not racial. The nation on which the Kingdom is bestowed will be the nation of Israel, in harmony with all OT prophecy; but an Israel repentant and regenerated. Just as in the case of a regenerated individual, it is wholly proper to contrast the old man with the new man without any implication of two separate persons; even so the nation which shall receive the Kingdom will be spiritually a new nation, but at the same time, racially and politically the Israel of history. For those acquainted with the language of divine revelation, there is here no conflict of ideas. The confusion is wholly semantic in nature, and attempt to press into a physical and mold language which describes a change which is exclusively moral and spiritual.”⁶

Back in our parable, in v. 44, Jesus again quotes the OT – this time Isaiah 8:14-15 (but not verbatim). The result of what Jesus has been saying in this parable and in the OT quotes and previous parables and actions in this chapter, causes the leaders to respond in v. 45.

The stone (who is Jesus), still in reference to the “*cornerstone*” is “*a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense*”; note – “to both houses of Israel” (i.e., Judah and Israel).

Alec Motyer, in his highly respected commentary on Isaiah points out: “Just as, “God with us” (10) marked off the people from the peoples, so here the holy presence marks off the remnant from the people. But while to some His presence offers a glad opportunity to repent, believe and by the appointed means of grace to enter into His fellowship and peace, to others, His presence spells doom. To them He is a stone of tripping, a rock of stumbling...a trap and a snare. The first pair of words express the people’s attitude to God – they ignore Him and therefore trip over Him; the second pair express His hostility to them. (For “tripping up, cf. Ps. 91:12, for the stumbling block, cf. Jer. 6:19-21; Ezek. 3:20; 7:19). The figure expresses a watchful divine providence whereby the sinner receives exactly what is due but does not do so without a warning having been raised to halt him on his disaster-course. It is as if a rock were put across a road to block the traveller from danger but, in carelessness or scorn, he refuses the warning and stumbles to his death. The stress in the verses is that what gives most offence to the sinner and what at the same time constitutes his greatest danger is the presence of the divine. The same God in His unchanging nature is both sanctuary and snare; it depends on how people respond to His holiness.”⁷

The leaders in Jesus’ time were in danger of proving themselves to be scorers of God and will stumble to their deaths.

Are You Talking About Us? vv. 45-46

v. 45 – Although Jesus’ parables were meant to hide the truth (according to Matthew 13:11-15), but in this case Jesus’ gracious wording ensures that they understand this severe warning. They will not be allowed to commit His murder, to crucify Him without being made aware of their own wicked hearts first.

⁶ Alva J. McClain; The Greatness of the Kingdom; BMH Books, 1968, reprint 1980; pp. 297-298

⁷ J. Alec Motyer; The Prophecy of Isaiah; IVP, 1993; p. 95

Yet, their response made it too late for repentance. Their hearts were completely hardened against Jesus and they remain unmoved by this portrait of their consistent hatred and rejection of Him – cf. John 8:37-47 – which was evident in virtually every opportunity for confrontation they had with Jesus.

V. 46 – They desperately wanted to arrest Him (and kill Him – cf. John 11:50), but they were afraid of the reaction of the people because of the very things Jesus had just told them in parable form. The people held that Jesus was at least a Prophet, and some saw Him as their long-awaited Messiah. The leaders would be hated if they killed Him. Cf. Matt. 26:3-5; John 7:25-31; 7:32,44-52.

The upshot of all this is well summarized by Arnold Fruchtenbaum; “Furthermore, the leadership of Israel recognized that the parable applied to them in 21:45: *“And when the chief priests and the Pharisees hear his parables, they perceived that He spoke of them.”* The point is that the offer of the Messianic Kingdom was rescinded from that generation of Israel, especially the leaders of that day, and it will be offered to another Jewish generation with a different body of leadership. That future leadership will accept it and then the vineyard will become what it was prophesied to become in Isaiah 27:2-6.”⁸

⁸ Arnold Fruchtenbaum; Israelology; Ariel Ministries, 2022; P. 744