

Matthew 21—the Parables of the Passion Week

On Monday of the Passion Week of Christ, Jesus left Bethany where they were staying, and returned to Jerusalem from the east. Somewhere on the Mount of Olives, before they entered the city, they saw a fig tree from a distance, and they approached it to have some breakfast fruit for free. From a distance it had the appearance of being full of fruit, but when they got near, they realized it had leaves, but no fruit. At that point, Jesus did the only destructive miracle recorded in the Gospels by cursing the fig tree so that it withered. This miracle was recorded in Matthew 21:18-22 and Mark 11:12-14, and Mark connected this act to the cleansing of the Temple when Jesus went into the Temple and cast out those who were “buying and selling” in the Temple, and He overturned the tables of the moneychangers as well. In explanation of His righteous anger, Jesus said “My House shall be called a house of prayer, but you have made it a robber’s den”. Jesus’ disciples were amazed at all this, and the religious leaders were outraged, and wanted to know on what authority He had the right to do this. I think an important clue to the meaning and connection of the cursing of the fig tree and the cleansing of the Temple can be found about a year earlier in Luke 13:6-9.

The Parable of the Fruit Tree Without Fruit

In Luke 13:6-9, about a year before the Passion Week, Jesus told a parable about a man who had a fig tree that he had planted, and he expected to find fruit on it. At the time, Jesus was teaching about the need for repentance, and this parable further illustrated that point. In the parable the landowner complained to the vineyard-keeper that he had been expecting fruit for three years but the tree still had none. Therefore the owner told the keeper to cut down the tree, but the keeper asked him to give it one more chance. He would pay special attention to it, water it and fertilize it, but if it bore no fruit the following year it would be cut down. The transferable concept here is that God had an investment in Israel, He had cared for it, and given it everything, but He also had the right to expect it to bear fruit. Israel is the fig tree planted in fertile soil, cultivated, watered, and fertilized, yet the result was a barren religion. We see the patience of God in waiting even another year, but at some point in time a tree without fruit must be taken down. We also see the intercession of Jesus to do additional gracious activities to give another chance, but Jesus is God’s final offer of an opportunity to repent. Then about a year later, Jesus acted out this parable by actually cursing the fig tree and destroying it in Matt.21:18-20.

In Mark’s parallel account he organizes these stories as fig tree/cleansing of temple/fig tree making it obvious that there is a connection between the two events. Jesus was passing judgment on Jerusalem figuratively through the cursing of the fig tree and explicitly on the religious leaders by cleansing the Temple. The religious leaders in Jerusalem had been practicing a superficial religion, and had rejected their Messiah sent by God, and Jesus was passing judgment on fruitless Israel.

The Parable of the Two Sons

In Matt. 21:28-32, Jesus taught another parable illustrating God's relationship with Israel. This story flows directly out of the conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders. Jesus was telling this parable in front of His disciples, but it was directed to the religious leaders who questioned His authority in Matt. 21:23. The boys in the parable have the same father, and the father's commands to work went out in order to each boy. Initially the first son agreed to work, but failed to do so. The other son initially refused, but later did respond and went to work. It is easy to see in the context of Jesus' condemnation of the religious leaders, that the first son who said he would but didn't, was the religious leaders in Israel. The second son who said no, but then regretted it and went to work represented the sinners (tax gatherers and harlots) who responded to Jesus in repentance. The set-up question in v.31 forced the priests to indict themselves, and then Jesus reinforced it with, "the tax gatherers and harlots will get into the kingdom of God before you."

This is a great story because we are all aware of rebellious teenagers who say no to everything their parents want them to do, but later they come around and become solid citizens. Also we are aware of the Eddie Haskell's (from Leave it to Beaver TV show) who say "Yes Mrs. Cleaver, I'll be glad to do that", and then they don't. Eddie Haskell was an insincere hypocrite, and we all know plenty of those. The Eddie Haskell's of the world are all about manipulating people and projecting an image in order to get what they want. The religious leaders were always shocked that Jesus spoke to the known sinners and that they responded to Him. In v.32, Jesus used the ministry of John the Baptist to back up His point. I can imagine all the religious leaders standing around scratching their heads trying to figure out the parable of the two sons, when Jesus told them another parable about a vineyard in Matt. 21:33. That a vineyard could symbolically represent Israel was a well-known part of Jewish teaching from the prophet Isaiah 5. Isaiah preached righteous judgment against his people in Isaiah 5 by comparing them to a vineyard that did not produce the expected good grapes. The owner had done everything for the vineyard including fertile soil, the choicest vine, and protection, and he had a right to expect good fruit. In case his audience didn't get the connection, Isaiah bluntly confirmed in Isa.5:7, "For the vineyard of the Lord is the house of Israel...thus God looks for justice and righteousness, but He finds only bloodshed and unrighteousness."

Matthew 21:33-46, the Parable of the Wicked Vine Growers

In the parable, God is represented by the landowner who planted a vineyard, put a protective wall around it, installed a wine press, and built a watch tower; then he rented it out to vine-growers (symbolic for Israel), and then he went on a journey. Therefore the landowner had set up the perfect situation for the vine-growers to produce an excellent crop on his fertile land. He had every right and expectation that the vine-growers would harvest the crop and pay him what they owed him according to their agreement. The landowner sent his servants (symbolic of the

prophets) to collect his part of the crop, but the vine-growers beat one up, killed another, and stoned a third. If you go to the Old Testament and study the prophets God sent, like Isaiah and Jeremiah, you will see that was precisely the treatment they got from Israel hundreds of years before.

If we research the conditions of Israel during the time of Christ we will find the genius of Jesus' stories. Because of the subjugation of Israel to the Romans, the fertile ground of the Jordan River Valley was owned by foreign landlords and worked by Jewish sharecroppers. Therefore there was considerable resentment by the Jews against the landowners. Initially the natural sentiments of Jesus' audience would be on the side of the sharecroppers, and only at the end of the story would they recognize the injustice of welching on their deal and killing the son. In this parable we get to see God's view of His people and His view of their responsibilities, as well as the consequences. Israel was a privileged possession of God who had made a covenant with God. God had always been faithful and true, but Israel had repeatedly broken the covenant, and now was rejecting the Son of God.

In v.36, the landowner patiently sent even more servants asking for his due, but they got the same treatment. Finally, in verse 37, he (God) sent his son (Jesus) to them expecting the respect due his son. But the vine-growers saw their opportunity to take over the land for themselves by killing the heir. In the same way, the religious leaders were taking God's possession, and using it for their own power, wealth, and status. Obviously, Jesus was predicting His own death in this story, and the crucifixion did not surprise Him—He was expecting it.

Truth or Consequences

Jesus was the master of getting people to unknowingly convict themselves. At the point of the story when the vine-growers committed the atrocity of murdering the son, Jesus asked His audience of priests and Pharisees "When the owner comes, what will he do to those vine-growers?" Naturally they said he should bring those miserable wretches to an end, and rent the vineyard to other vine-growers. Little did they know that they were predicting their own fate, and that God would take away their privileges as God's people, and give it to "a nation" or people which would produce the fruit for God. The original Greek word translated in English as nation or people is "ethnos", and was referring to the church made up of Jews and Gentiles gathered from all the nations. Jesus quoted a well-known prophecy from Psalm 118 comparing the rejection of Jesus to the rejection of the chief cornerstone by the builders. Therefore the builders (Israel) would stumble over that cornerstone and be broken to pieces. At that point, the religious leaders knew Jesus was talking about them (v.45), and tried to arrest Him, but couldn't because the large crowd was still on His side. The religious leaders had predicted their own judgment of being brought to a "wretched end", and in 70 AD, Jerusalem, the Temple, and all the religious leaders were brought to a "wretched end" when Rome laid siege to the city and completely destroyed it. God is incredibly patient, but has appointed a day of judgment for all.

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