

*“Jesus: Deliverer and Destroyer”*

Matthew 21:33-46

November 29, 2020

After an Olympic career as a runner, Eric Liddell turned his passion to the mission field in China where he served many years until, in the midst of WWII, he was captured and imprisoned in a Japanese internment camp. There Liddell would continue to his ministry among the captives until his death just 6 months before the camp was liberated by the US military.

On August 17, 1945, the remaining prisoners heard the buzz of a B-52 bomber overhead and when they saw US paratroopers jump from the plane, they went wild with joy and rushed toward the gates where the Japanese guards simply stepped back and let them run to their rescue only moments later.<sup>1</sup>

Everyone in the camp knew that the end had come the moment they saw the American troops. For the prisoners the US military meant sweet deliverance, but for the Japanese guards it meant sober defeat.

As we are going to see in Matthew 21 today, Jesus also brings about very different ends for those who are either for or against Him. For some His salvation is sweet. For others, His defeat will be devastating and eternal. Today’s message could be summarized in this way: ***Because Jesus will save those who receive Him and crush those who reject Him, we must love the truth that requires us to repent and forsake our self-indulgent lusts which oppose His rightful reign.***

**THE PARABLE [Matt 21:33-41]**

The landowner has made every provision for a fruitful and productive vineyard. He planted it, put up a wall and tower to protect it, and even built a winepress on sight for optimum production. And as a result the landowner expects to make a profit—a percentage of the crop will be given to the workers as pay and the rest will be his profit.

But vine-growers turn out to be thugs and thieves. Instead of giving the owner’s proper share of the crop to his servants who were sent to collect it, they beat and kill the servants so they can keep the whole profit for themselves. When the owner sends another delegation of more servants, they beat and killed them too.

Finally, the landowner sends his son who bears his own authority and is deserving of the highest respect. Yet the vine-growers are so greedy and deluded in their thinking, that they kill even the son out of a desire to not only keep the full crop, but also in attempt to take the land for themselves.

This of course is the climax of their rebellion and injustice. Notice that they knew exactly what they were doing when they killed the son. They didn’t mistake him for another mere servant. They said to themselves, “this is the heir.” (vs 38). In the blindness of their evil greed, they pulled the trigger that would certainly ignite the landowner’s full wrath.

Now, instead of finishing the story, Jesus (in typical rabbinical style) poses a question that invites his listeners to draw a conclusion and complete the story themselves. Jesus asks the Pharisees, “Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vine-growers?” (vs. 40).

The Pharisees who love to give answers and display their knowledge and wisdom, say, “He will bring those wretches to a wretched end, and will rent out the vine-yard to other vine-growers who will pay him the proceeds at the proper season” (41). Notice how strongly the Pharisees react to the injustice of the situation: “He will bring those *wretches* to a *wretched end!*” In other words, the punishment should be severe enough to fit the crime—they should be destroyed, most likely capital punishment for murder.

Blinded by their self-righteousness and pride, the Pharisees have walked right into the trap that Jesus has set for them. Why does Jesus set a trap? Because self-righteous people are blind to their own pride and the only way to help them see it is by catching them with their own words. Jesus’ intent is

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<sup>1</sup> Janet and Geoff Benge, *Eric Liddell: Something Greater Than Gold*. Pg. 197-198.

to reveal the Pharisees' hypocrisy, the very same hypocrisy that we ourselves struggle with—the *tendency to judge others differently than we judge ourselves*. The Pharisees could quickly identify the injustice of the vine-growers in Jesus' parable, but will they acknowledge the same injustice in themselves?

#### DECODING THE PARABLE

Before we look at how Jesus turns the tables on the Pharisees, let's decode the parable so that we understand exactly where the story is going.

The landowner is God, and the vineyard that He plants is the nation of Israel, a people created for Himself and a people for whom He provides all that is necessary to live a fruitful life that brings glory to God. It was not uncommon in the OT for God to refer to His people as a vineyard. In fact, Jesus's parable draws such a close parallel to the language of Isaiah 5, that vs. 33 is capitalized in our Bibles. The difference between the two is one of emphasis. In Isaiah 5, the vineyard of Israel failed to produce fruit whereas in Jesus' parable the emphasis is on the corrupt workers or leaders of the people.

So the vine-growers are Israel's leaders, those who were supposed to be stewards of God's people. The servants who are sent by the landowner are the prophets who over the centuries not only spoke on behalf of God's people, but also were often mistreated and even killed by those who despised their message. God sent the prophets to call His people to repent so that they would produce fruitful lives for God. Yet how did Israel respond? John MacArthur summarizes the historical record for us:

“Jewish tradition held that Isaiah had been sawed in two with a wooden saw (cf. Heb 11:37)....We know that Jeremiah was thrown into a pit of slime, and tradition held that he was eventually stoned to death. Ezekiel was rejected, Elijah and Amos had to run for their lives, Micah was smashed in the face by those who refused to hear

his message (1Kings 22:24), and Zechariah was actually murdered in God's own temple (2 Chron. 24:20-22; cf. Matt 23:35).”<sup>2</sup>

Certainly, the Pharisees would have thought themselves more righteous than those who persecuted and killed the prophets of old. Yet Jesus is preparing them to see that they would not only do the same, they would even kill God's Son, Jesus Himself. Listen to the opening words of the book of Hebrews: “*God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things...*” (Heb 1:1-2).

By telling this story, Jesus is calling on the Pharisees to render an objective judgment on those who would crucify the Son of God. And now He turns the table to reveal that they themselves are the wicked tenants who will be deserving of condemnation.

#### A PARABLE WITH A PUNCH (vs. 42-44)

**[vs. 42-44]** “The stone which the builders rejected, this became the chief corner stone.” The imagery here is of the highest stone in the corner of a wall that holds the building together.<sup>3</sup> It could also represent the top stone of a roof parapet which is the low protective wall (like a railing) on the edge of a roof balcony. If it was placed too low, it could actually be tripped on and a person could take a catastrophic fall.<sup>4</sup>

It was not uncommon for builders to reject several stones before the right one was selected.<sup>5</sup> Jesus is saying that He is the cornerstone of God's kingdom that was rejected by the human builders but chosen by God. By the way, His rejection would come by means of death, thus the only way for Jesus to resume His proper place as the chief stone would be through resurrection. And so, God will take the kingdom (or vineyard) away from those human leaders who crucify Him and give it to a people who produce the fruit of it (43).

<sup>2</sup> John MacArthur, *The MacArthur NT Commentary: Matthew 16-23*. Pg. 298.

<sup>3</sup> R.T. France, *NICNT: The Gospel of Matthew*, pg. 815.

<sup>4</sup> D.A. Carson, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew*. Pg. 453, 454.

<sup>5</sup> MacArthur, 297.

What kind of fruit is Jesus referring to here? Remember that in Matthew 3 and 4, John the Baptist and Jesus both came preaching the same message, “repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” and John refused to baptize some the Pharisees, telling them rather to “bear fruit in keeping with repentance.”

The kingdom of God will be taken away from Israel’s leaders precisely because they will fail to repent and it will be given to another people which will be the church, a people of God (both Jews and Gentiles) who enter the kingdom by repentance and lift Jesus, the chief stone, to His proper place designated by God as Messiah and Lord.

Notice how personal vs. 43 is: “The kingdom of God will be taken away from *you*...” This is the NT equivalent of Nathan the prophet who confronted King David after he took Uriah’s wife for himself. He told David a story about a rich man who took a poor man’s only lamb to entertain his guest rather than one of his own lambs. Arousing David’s anger and sense of justice, he demanded that the man was deserving of death. Then Nathan turned to David and said, “you are the man!” (2 Samuel 12:7).

The self-righteous Pharisees will not only trip over this Stone to their demise, but according to vs. 44 they will also be crushed as this Stone falls on them. Jesus’ message could not be clearer. Jesus will either be your Deliverer or your Destroyer. Either you will exalt Christ as Savior and King, or you will reject Christ and be crushed by Him in utter ruin.<sup>6</sup> **[I Peter 2:4-10]**

#### THE MOMENT OF TRUTH (vs. 45-46)

The moment of truth is always how we *respond* to the truth we have been given. The Pharisees have been given truth in a way that has pierced through their self-righteous veneer. When asked objectively (when they think they are talking about someone else), they condemned the wickedness of the vine-growers in the parable. But will they judge their own

hearts consistently with how they judge others? Vs. 45-46 reveal the answer. **[45-46]**

Notice they *heard*, they *understood*, and they understood that He was speaking about *them*. That is, they understood the truth of Jesus message to relate to them personally. And what did they do next? They sought to seize Him, but they were overcome by their fear of the people who consider Jesus a prophet. Let me say it as plainly as I can. *They hastened to do the very thing they had just condemned as wretched, despite Jesus’ warning of utter destruction.* They were so addicted to their greed for power and control, that they became hostile to the truth. Oh, they love to judge others by the truth, but when it exposes their own hearts, they despise it. They refuse to repent and thereby demonstrate that they actually despise the kingdom of God. The fear of God has been replaced by a fear of the people (rather than care for God’s people) because they don’t want to lose their privileged position of self-rule.

This parable signals to us that there is a change of human leadership coming among the kingdom of God which will be reserved for those who repent and own Jesus as their exalted Lord (the stewardship of God’s kingdom will be taken from Israel and given to the church). More acutely, it teaches us that those who reject Christ will ultimately be crushed by Christ. Yet at a personal level, this passage also reveals that ***love for the truth is measured not by our enthusiasm to judge others with it, but by our willingness to personally embrace it when it confronts our own heart. Love of self will destroy our love of truth at the most personal level.***

We have seen the negative example of the Pharisees in Matthew 21. But I want to conclude by setting before you the positive example of the Thessalonians. Unlike the Pharisees, Paul commended the Thessalonians for their response to the Gospel message—a response that involved both God’s hand and the Thessalonian’s hearts. In 1Thess 1:5-6 he says, “for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit

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<sup>6</sup> This is very similar to the image that Daniel gave in Daniel 2 where a statue that represented all the kingdoms of the world was pulverized when it was struck by a single stone which in turn became a great mountain representing the Kingdom of God.

and with full conviction”—that’s God’s part! But he goes on to say that they “*received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit.*” That is, they joyfully embraced God’s word even though it would cost them tribulation in the world.

In chapter two Paul elaborates even further on their response: “*when you received the word of God...you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe*” (2:13). When we joyfully embrace God’s word with faith, we give God His proper place in our lives from which He does His work of transformation in us.

In his second letter to the Thessalonians, Paul describes how many will be deceived in the day of the antichrist, not unlike the Pharisee’s were deceived in Jesus’ day. There Paul says, they will be deceived and perish not for a lack of knowing the truth but “*because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved*” (2 Thess 2:10).

**Beloved, *because Jesus will save those who receive Him and crush those who reject Him, we must love the truth that requires us to repent and forsake our self-indulgent lusts which oppose His rightful reign.***

So my admonition to you today is two-fold:

1. Repent of (war against) anything that resists Jesus’ lordship over your life. He saves those who submit to Him and He will ruin those who reject Him. That’s the essence of Jesus’ parable.
2. Resolve and pray for God to give you a true love for the truth. A love for truth that embraces it even when it says, “you are the man!” Those who love the truth even when it confronts them will be shaped by the truth and saved by the truth.