

Parable of the Vineyard (Luke 20:9-18 cf. Matthew 21:23-46)

“God will surely Judge!”

Hindrances to the work of God are not only common throughout the ages but will gain momentum in the last days. The LORD Jesus Christ was preaching the gospel of salvation to lost souls but the religious leaders came to challenge His authority. They were the authority in religious matters in the days of Christ. They had not given Christ any licence or authority to preach. They confronted Him and demanded that He reveal the authority behind His preaching!

The LORD Jesus Christ refused to answer them on their terms. He asked them to tell Him by what authority John the Baptist baptized, whether it was from man or heaven. The Jewish authorities did not dare reply Christ. They reasoned among themselves that if they said that it came from man, then the people might stone them because they (the people) believed that John the Baptist was a prophet. If they said that he came from heaven, then why did they not believe Him and his ministry? Either way the religious leaders were “stumped”. It was a choice between the proverbial rock and a hard place! They had only one answer to the LORD’s question. They lied and said that they could not tell. Because they did not answer Christ’s question, Christ said that He would also not answer their question.

Before the LORD gave this parable of the vineyard, the gospel of Matthew records for us (cf. Matthew 21:28-32) another parable of the two sons. In this parable was a direct rebuke against the stubborn and hardened hearts of the religious leaders. This parable describes the rejection and futility of giving God lip service. The father asked the first son to go and work in his vineyard. This first son said that he would not go but later repented and went. The second son said that he would go but in the end did not go at all. After the parable, Jesus Christ asked the religious leaders which of the two sons did the father’s will. The reply was that of the first son. The reply of Christ was clear and direct. Jesus said to them in Matthew 21:31b-32, “. . . *Verily I say unto you, That the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you. 32 For John came unto you in the way of righteousness, and ye believed him not: but the publicans and the harlots believed him: and ye, when ye had seen it, repented not afterward, that ye might believe him.*”

Then the LORD gave this parable of the vineyard.

Elements of the Parable – The vineyard refers to the world; the husbandmen refer to the religious leaders; the servants of the landlord or householder refer to the prophets of the Old Testament including John the Baptist; The landlord or householder refers to God the Father; The Son refers to Jesus Christ.

Explaining the Parable – The description of the vineyard is found in the account of Matthew’s gospel. He planted it and hedged it and dug a winepress in it and

provided it with a tower before it was leased to the husbandmen. In other words, the vineyard had been carefully built and prepared for the husbandmen. They did not have to do anything but to work on it and reap the benefits from it. The tower was for protection. The winepress was for the stomping of the grapes after harvest to sell or store the fruits of the vine. The hedges were for protection against wild animals and thieves. It was a very well protected vineyard. The husbandmen did not own the vineyard. It belonged to the householder who was the master of the vineyard. The husbandmen were to pay a rental or a percentage of the crops that yielded from the vineyard. This was a common practice in Palestine in the days of Christ.

“At the season” refers to the time of harvest when the householder would send his servants to collect from the husbandmen what belongs to him. From the account in Luke, the householder sent three batches of servants. Each time, the abuse upon his servants got worse. They beat the servant the first time and sent him away empty. In the second instance, they also beat him and entreated him shamefully i.e. they humiliated him badly. He also left empty handed. The third servant was badly wounded and thrown out of the vineyard. He probably died by their evil hands (see Matthew 21:35). The sequence of events started from a rebuke to humiliation to death. The actions of the husbandmen were evil and unlawful. Conversely, the actions of the householder were lawful, patient and longsuffering. Instead of punishing them after the third revilement, he reasoned that these husbandmen would not hurt his son. Therefore, he decided to send his beloved¹ son instead to collect what was rightfully his. Perhaps they would revere or show more respect to his beloved son!

Alas! The evil of man’s heart! They plotted and planned to kill him and rob the householder of the vineyard. They killed the son and cast him out of the vineyard.

Jesus asked the religious leaders the obvious question, “*What therefore shall the lord of the vineyard do unto them?*” The religious leaders replied correctly, “*They say unto him, He will miserably destroy those wicked men, and will let out his vineyard unto other husbandmen, which shall render him the fruits in their seasons.*” (Matthew 21:41) The record in Luke has the Lord Jesus Christ confirming and agreeing with their righteous conclusion! (see Luke 20:16a). The reply of the religious leaders after that was, “God forbid.” They were obviously not disagreeing with what they had just answered the Lord in relation to punishing the wicked husbandmen. They had by now understood the meaning of the parable which was directed against them. Their answer of “God forbid” was with reference to God’s rejection of the religious leaders and replacing them with others.

¹The word for “beloved” used here is the same word used by God when He called out from heaven at the baptism of Christ, “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.” (see Matthew 3:17; Mark 9:7; Luke 3:22)

Applying the Parable – The application of this parable like all other parables can be found at the end of the parable. The words of Christ in Luke 20:17b-18, “*What is this then that is written, The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner? 18 Whosoever shall fall upon that stone shall be broken; but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder.*” The meaning of this judgement from the LORD is that even when sinful man rejects the Son of God, He will inevitably become what God had always intended Him to be. Any denial, rejection, or wicked deed of sinful man can never thwart the will of God. It is absolutely supreme and will be fulfilled according to His sovereign will. The head of the corner is the marker stone from which the entire building takes its reference. It is the first stone to be laid in any construction. Every point of the building begins from this point.

The meaning of this parable does not stop there. Anyone who fights against this corner stone will find himself destroyed. It is futile for sinful men to fight against God and His holy and perfect will. When this corner stone falls on anyone, it will grind that person to powder. The wrath of God will crush any resistance, even against Satan and his hosts. The supremacy of God in His all-consuming and final judgement is the warning to all sinful wicked men who try to stop God’s work, or attack God’s Word. They will surely receive their just punishment from God.

Matthew 20:43 adds, “*Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof.*” Israel had been God’s representatives on earth since God called Israel out of Egypt in the days of Moses. Joshua brought them into the Promised Land and the visible national witness of God’s grace and mercies began. With the Jewish rejection of Christ, this visible witness had been given to another. This refers to the “Gentile” nation vis a vis the local church. Every local church throughout the ages from the time of Pentecost in Acts 2 to the present has become the visible manifestation of God’s grace and mercies. The ecclesiastical witness has replaced the national witness.

The reaction of the religious leaders was expected as we have seen it many times before throughout the ages even till today. It is one of rebellion and murder. They wanted to kill Christ because He told them the truth! They were fulfilling God’s prophecies by their evil acts which stem from a deceitful heart and seared conscience. May God be merciful to us as this parable of the vineyard is a warning to all, and we are not excluded if we do not truly know Jesus Christ as our LORD and Saviour! Christ will rule and reign supreme whether we acknowledge Him or not as LORD. God is not asking Man for permission to do His holy and perfect will. He warns that this is what He will do and Man must take notice or pay the price!