

Bible Study Guide: Week of 9-28-2020

1. Read through the passage below
2. Read my notes and commentary
3. Read the questions at the end and ponder or discuss with others

Pastor Andrew

Matthew 21:33-46

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. 34 When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. 35 But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. 36 Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. 37 Finally he sent his son to them, saying, "They will respect my son." 38 But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance." 39 So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. 40 Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" 41 They said to him, "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." 42 Jesus 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"? 43 Therefore 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. 44 The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls." 45 When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. 46 They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

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.

This parable comes on the heels of the parable of the two sons from last week's gospel reading (Matthew 21:28-32). Jesus is still speaking to the chief priests and the elders (the Pharisees are introduced in v. 45 and lumped in with the chief priests, so we may assume there was some overlap between these categories of leaders of the Jewish people either historically or in Matthew's estimation. In other words, some elders may have been Pharisees, as well. Here, "Pharisees," "elders," and "chief priests" together form a representation of some leaders of Jerusalem who were opposed to Jesus' ministry). This parable functions semi-allegorically—the landowner represents God in some sense; the tenants represent those who presented themselves as the leaders of the Jewish people in Jerusalem at that time. The vineyard represents the kingdom of heaven. The fence, winepress, and watchtower do not seem to be part of the allegory, nor does the mention of the landowner going "to another country."

34 When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce.

The phrase "harvest time" here is a readily understood term in English, but in Greek the phrase is *kairos ton karpon*—literally "the season of the fruits" or "the time of the fruits." You might recognize the Greek word *kairos*. Oftentimes, preachers and theologians distinguish between the two Greek words for time: *chronos*, meaning chronological time—the passing of time or the time of day—and *kairos*, meaning the appointed or proper time or

season for something to happen. This distinction between ordinary, secular time (*chronos*) and appointed, sacred time (*kairos*) is worth noting. Here, the *kairos ton karpon* or “season of the fruits” is the appointed time for harvest—the right time to reap the fullness of what was planted and had developed. The real reason to note this phrase is that the mention of “fruits” ties in explicitly with v. 41 (there translated as “produce”) and in v. 43. The main issue in this parable is the failure of the “right and righteous” religious leaders to bear fruit. This is the same main focus as in Jesus’ symbolic cursing of the fig tree (Matthew 21:19) and as in John the Baptist’s message (Matthew 3:8).

35 But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. 36 Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. 37 Finally he sent his son to them, saying, "They will respect my son." 38 But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance." 39 So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him.

The failure of the would-be leaders to bear the fruit of the kingdom is a central focus of Jesus’ ministry, as it was for the prophets who came before him. In this allegory, the slaves represent the prophets of old. They are here divided into two groups, perhaps just as the prophets of the Old Testament are divided into former prophets (e.g. Elijah and Elisha, etc.) and latter prophets (e.g. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, etc.) John the Baptist could certainly stand in this category as well from Matthew’s perspective, as Matthew presents John as a prophetic figure who was killed by the supposed leader (Herod) of the people. The Son, of course, allegorically represents Jesus. This parable functions in part as yet another prediction of his own coming death.

40 Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" 41 They said to him, "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."

Just as in the parable of the two sons, Jesus asks the leaders an open-ended question. Last week it was, “Which of the two sons did the will of the father?” This week, it is “When the owner comes, what will he do to those tenants?” As we saw last week, the religious leaders again indict themselves in their response. Their insistence that a harsh penalty be applied to those who refuse to bear and deliver the fruits of the vineyard reveals their own failure to do just that in their own lives. Their insistence that the vineyard be handed over to others ironically anticipates the coming collapse of the Jerusalem leadership in 70 AD and the rise of the new community of disciples who gather in Jesus’ name.

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In these three verses Jesus issues three proclamations. The second seems to interrupt the other two, making it clear that Jesus believes a change in leadership is coming for God’s people. The first saying is a quotation of Psalm 118:22-23. This psalm became an important early Christian proclamation, as evidenced in the gospels and in the book of Acts. The third saying presents a warning to the leaders that if they attempt to dispose of Jesus they will actually end up harming themselves.

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

Finally, it dawns on the leaders here after two parables that Jesus is not just speaking to them, but also about them. As we read ourselves into this parable, it is worth noticing where we feel convicted or indicted by Jesus’ words—not to condemn us, but rather to help us recognize our own failures to bear fruit and to help us live more fruitful and faithful lives.

Discussion/Reflection Questions:

- 1. What does it mean to produce the fruit of the kingdom? How are we doing this? How are we not doing this?**
- 2. Which character do you most relate to in this parable? Why do you think this is the case?**
- 3. Sometimes this passage (and others like it) are used to support the idea of supersessionism (the belief that Christians have replaced Jews as God's chosen people). This idea was rejected by the early church, but has still come up at various times in the history of the church. Is it possible to read this passage as an indictment of a particular set of leaders without expressing anti-Jewish sentiment more generally?**