

Chapter 89: The Rejected Cornerstone

Matthew 21:33–46

When the religious leaders questioned Jesus' authority to do the things that he was doing, Jesus turned the tables on those leaders by exposing their uncertainty about the authority of John the Baptist, whom the people knew to be a prophet (Matt. 21:23–27). Then, in the previous passage, Jesus told a parable about two sons to illustrate the disobedient unbelief of the religious leaders in Israel (Matt. 21:28–32). Now, Jesus extends this logic from ignorance to unbelief to its conclusion in the renegade rebellion of the leaders against the God whom they profess to serve. Jesus makes this point powerfully through the parable of the tenants. Here, Jesus holds before us the closing lines of Psalm 2: "*Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way*" (Ps. 2:12).

Renegade Rulers (Matt. 21:33–41)

For the previous parable, Jesus asked the religious leaders, "What do you think?" (Matt. 21:28). Now, Jesus asks them to "Hear another parable" (v. 33); however, the parallel passages makes clear that the audience of this parable would also have included the crowds ("the people") who witnessed this interchange (Luke 20:9). The setting of this parable—which includes a landowner, the planting of a vineyard, the building of a fence and a tower, the digging of a winepress, and the lease of the land to tenants—is somewhat more elaborate than other parables. Yet, Jesus sets the whole scene up in only "a few simple strokes."¹ In this, Jesus echoes a scene we discover in multiple places in the Old Testament (Psalm. 80:8–16; Isa. 5:1–7), so that the symbolism is quite clear: "the owner of the vineyard stands for God, the vineyard for Israel, the fruit for righteousness, the tenants for the nation's leaders, the slaves for the prophets, while the son, of course, is Jesus."²

This does, however, create one important difference between how the Old Testament uses the imagery and how Jesus uses the imagery, in that the Lord used this imagery to indict Israel as a whole, while Jesus particularly condemns the rulers of Israel.³ That this house master "went into another country" (v. 33) and left the management of the vineyard in the hands of tenants is crucial for establishing this critique of the rulers, since the story reminds us of the fact that "God might indeed of himself, without the agency of men, preserve his Church in good order; but he takes men for his ministers, and makes use of their hands."⁴ The reason God has committed the rule over his people into the hands of leaders he appoints is not that he had better things to do and did not wish to be bothered with their needs. Rather, God entrusted the care of his people to leaders among those

¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 835.

² Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 539.

³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 835–36.

⁴ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:29–30.

people in order to bless the people by involving them in his ministry to them. Then, the master sends servants to collect payment from those rulers for the leasing of the land (vv. 34–36).

Nevertheless, while this arrangement entailed great blessings, it also put his people in a vulnerable position with an opportunity for abuse. In this parable, the abuse depicted is not so much against the people as a whole, as against the servants whom God sends to the rulers. If the tenants represent the religious leaders whom God had appointed to rule over his people (especially the priests and the kings), these servants represent the prophets whom God sent to declare his message to his people: “The slaves are *sent* at this particular time, the vinegrowers are in permanent charge. As the latter are the permanent religious rulers of Israel, so the former are the prophets who are sent at particular times.”⁵

Still today, “while God appoints pastors over his Church, he does *not* convey his right to others, but acts in the same manner as if a *proprietor* were to let a *vineyard* or *field* to a *husbandman*, who would labor in the cultivation of it, and make an annual return.”⁶ In Presbyterian church government, the churches of Christ are overseen by elders whom God has appointed, and who have been chosen freely by the people. In this arrangement, the elders who serve congregations have a serious responsibility before God to return fruit to him; however, they can be tempted to abuse their position to protect their over authority in possessiveness over their turf. It is far better for both people *and* the leaders if those leaders watch over the souls of the people “as those who will have to give an account...with joy and not with groaning” (Heb. 13:17).

Sadly, the tenant-rulers in this parable reject the prophets who have come to collect fruit for God, beating, killing and stoning them, and then repeating the process when God, the landowner, sent more servants (vv. 35–36). This corresponds closely to the abusive treatment that Old Testament prophets received from the hands of the rulers of the people. It is with some surprise, then, when the landowner decides to send the tenants his son, saying, “They will respect my son” (v. 37).⁷ While this may feel like a situation where everyone else knows that this is an awful decision, we should keep in mind what Nolland writes: “The ancient world was very conscious of class. So there is some reasonableness in the landowner’s expectation that his son would be respected. While someone else’s slaves could be mistreated with relative impunity, it would be quite another matter to mistreat someone’s son.”⁸ So, when the tenants opportunistically target the landowner’s son in order to steal his inheritance, their wickedness is all the more appalling (vv. 38–39).

This story is so obviously intended to symbolize the crucifixion of Jesus that many scholars believe that it was written by the early church *after* Jesus’ death, arguing that Jesus could not have known what was about to happen to him. This is a conjecture that is only possible by assuming from the outset that Jesus was not divine and, even if Jesus were merely human, it is likely that he was beginning to see the writing on the wall. In fact, Jesus was fully human *and* fully divine, and he knew exactly what he had come to Jerusalem to do.

Nevertheless, we should keep in mind that the rest of the *people* did not know what was going to

⁵ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 837.

⁶ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:28–29.

⁷ “The secondary meaning is clear: at the end of a long history of revelation to Israel through the prophets, God sends his own Son to his people Israel (cf. 15:24).” (Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 621.)

⁸ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 873.

happen when Jesus poses the question, “When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” (v. 40). As noted earlier, Luke tells us of the reaction of the people to this parable (Luke 20:9, 16); however, Matthew seems to be telling us of the response of the *religious leaders* to Jesus’ question. Although they later realize that Jesus was telling the story about them (v. 45), their response indicates that they do not sense that connection immediately: “They said to him, ‘He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons’” (v. 41). Hendriksen insightfully suggests a parallel in the parable that Nathan told to David in 2 Samuel 12, where David was outraged by the injustice within the story and demanded the death of the rich man who had stolen from the poor man, until Nathan declared, “You are the man!” (2 Sam. 12:7).⁹

Crushing Cornerstone (Matt. 21:42–44)

Like Nathan, Jesus shifts the conversation to direct the full outrage of the injustice within the story against the true targets: the abusive religious leaders: “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 marvelous in our eyes?’” (v. 42)? Here, Jesus quotes from Psalm 118:22, which, notably, comes right before the section the same psalm that the people had shouted when Jesus entered Jerusalem: the phrase “Hosanna!” (“Save us, we pray, O LORD”; Ps. 118:25), and “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD” (Psalm. 118:26).¹⁰ Regardless of how much the leaders despise Jesus’ reign and rule, Jesus is showing that the walls are closing in on them as he puts before them one prophecy from God’s Word after another.

Importantly, the idea of a “cornerstone” is different from calling Jesus the “foundation” (1 Cor. 3:11; Eph. 2:20): “The ‘head of the corner’ is probably to be understood as the highest stone in a corner of a wall, which holds the two sides of the building together. It is thus both conspicuous and structurally indispensable.”¹¹ In other words, Jesus is saying that, no matter how much these leaders may try to marginalize, reject, and, ultimately, to kill Jesus, they will not be able to remove him from the place of highest prominence in the new temple that God is establishing among his people. Far from pushing Jesus out of his place among the people of God, Jesus explains that *they* will be removed: “Therefore¹² I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits” (v. 43). As the rest of the New Testament declares, this new nation would not be a rejection of the nation of Israel altogether, but rather a *renewed* nation where the dead branches of unbelieving Jews are broken off, while believing Gentiles are grafted in—until the day

⁹ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 784.

¹⁰ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:32–33.

¹¹ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 815. See also Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 843.

¹² “The διὰ τοῦτο [*dia touto*], ‘on account of this,’ refers back not to the immediately preceding quotation but to the parable itself. That is, because of their rejection of the Son sent by the Father, just as the vineyard was let out to other tenants who would hand over the fruit of the vineyard, so will...‘the kingdom of God’..., be taken away from the Jewish leaders and given...‘to a people producing the fruit of it [i.e., the kingdom].” (Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 623.)

that the Lord leads Israelites back to faith in their Messiah (Rom. 11:11–24).¹³

Jesus concludes this section with a striking warning: “And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him” (v. 44). That is, both those who actively oppose Christ, as well as those whom Christ actively judges upon his return on the last day, will be destroyed by him. On this warning, John Calvin writes:

There are two things here which we ought to consider. First, that we may not be perplexed by the wicked attempts of men, who rise up to hinder the reign of Christ, God has warned us beforehand that this will happen. Secondly, whatever may be the contrivances of men, God has at the same time declared, that in setting up the kingdom of Christ, His power will be victorious. Both ought to be carefully observed by us.¹⁴

Indeed, let us carefully heed this warning, lest we be caught on the wrong side on the last day!

Hardened Hatred (Matt. 21:45–46)

The language of v. 45 suggests that the chief priests and Pharisees *now* understand Jesus’ point, so that we might translate the verse this way: “Having heard his parables, the chief priests and the Pharisees came to know [ingressive aorist, signifying the beginning of an action] that he was speaking about them.” Where David repented after being confronted by Nathan (“You are the man!”), the leaders have the opposite response: they seek to arrest him (v. 46a)! For the moment, the only thing that prevents them from moving forward with arresting Jesus is that “they feared the crowds, because they held him to be a prophet” (v. 46b). Even though they knew that Jesus was speaking about them, their hatred only hardened to do exactly to Jesus what Jesus had said they would do. Without a trace of self-awareness or reflection, they start to look for ways to destroy this Son who had dared to critique their power.

Discussion Questions

1. How does this parable connect back to the previous two sections (Matt. 21:23–32)? How does this parable echo Old Testament prophetic passages about God’s relationship to his vineyard, Israel (e.g., Isa. 5:1–7)? What kind of responsibility does this parable envision for the leaders of God’s people (v. 33)? Whom do the servants in this parable represent (v. 34)? How does this parable capture the history of mistreatment of prophets in the Old Testament (vv. 35–36)?
2. Why does the landowner in this parable expect that these tenants will respect his son (v. 37)? What does the tenants’ response of the arrival of the son represent (v. 38)? How does the rejection of Jesus culminate a long history of Israel’s rejection of the prophets whom God had sent to his people? Why do you think that the leaders do not recognize right away that Jesus is speaking about them (v. 41)?

¹³ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 816–17.

¹⁴ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:34.

3. What is the “cornerstone” mentioned in Psalm 118 (v. 42)? How does the passage that Jesus cites connect to the words shouted by the people when Jesus arrived in Jerusalem (Matt. 21:9)? What role does Jesus prophesy about himself here? What does Jesus mean when he talks about people falling on the cornerstone, and about the cornerstone falling on people (v. 44)? How does this call people today to repentance and faith in Jesus?

4. How do the religious leaders respond when they finally realize that Jesus had been talking about them (vv. 45–46)? Why do you think that they did not repent? How do they compare to David when Nathan had confronted David about his sin? How are you stewarding your own life? How do you respond when God’s Word confronts you and demands fruit for God? How do you respond to the claims of Jesus Christ, the Son of God?