

Scripture Readings for October 4th 2020

Isaiah 5:1-7 (NIV)

¹ I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard: My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside.

² He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well. Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit.

³ “Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard.

⁴ What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it? When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad?

⁵ Now I will tell you what I am going to do to my vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it will be destroyed; I will break down its wall, and it will be trampled.

⁶ I will make it a wasteland, neither pruned nor cultivated, and briers and thorns will grow there. I will command the clouds not to rain on it.”

⁷ The vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the nation of Israel, and the people of Judah are the vines he delighted in. And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.

Matthew 21:33-46 (NIV) The Parable of the Tenants

³³ “Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place. ³⁴ When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit. ³⁵ “The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. ³⁶ Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. ³⁷ Last of all, he sent his son to them. ‘They will respect my son,’ he said. ³⁸ “But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, ‘This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him and take his inheritance.’ ³⁹ So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. ⁴⁰ “Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” ⁴¹ “He will bring those wretches to a wretched end,” they replied, “and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time.” ⁴² Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures:

“‘The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes’?

⁴³ “Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. ⁴⁴ Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed.” ⁴⁵ When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus’ parables, they knew he was talking about them. ⁴⁶ They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet.

Sermon: A Parable of Judgement and Hope

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus is now in Jerusalem and the atmosphere is tense. This is for two reasons; first, it's Passover Week and this festival pushes all the buttons of Jewish nationalism given the Roman occupation. And, second, the confrontation between Jesus and the religious leaders is reaching a climax. Indeed, we are told that on the previous day, Jesus provocatively overturned the merchants' tables in the Temple's forecourt.¹ And now Matthew tells us that Jesus revisits the Temple, the focal point of the Jewish faith, and was publicly teaching there. The chief priests and other religious leaders asked him. "By what authority are you doing these things?"² Jesus shrewdly responds by deflecting! He posed them a clever question: "Where did John the Baptist's authority come from? Was it from God or from the people?"³ The religious leaders realized that if they replied, "from God," the follow-up question would be "The why didn't you believe him then?" On the other hand, if they said "from the people," the crowds would object because they – rightly – thought John was a prophet. They refused to answer Jesus' question, so he refused to answer theirs!⁴ Jesus may be from the sticks, but he can handle himself in a sophisticated urban setting – such is his self-evident authority.

You and I might think that, having got the upper hand in this verbal sparring, it's time to quit while you're ahead! Jesus apparently does the opposite; he deliberately escalates the tension. And Matthew presents *three* pointed parables of warning and judgment from the lips of Jesus to the chief priests and pharisees.⁵ This *triple* emphasis is unique to Matthew's gospel and leaves no doubt as to his indictment of the Jewish religious *leaders* to his *readers*. Our reading today is the middle parable, and it's also repeated in Mark and Luke.⁶ We tend to forget that prophets were known to boldly speak truth-to-power and were expected to instigate reform. John the Baptist did that and he was killed for it. And we know the events of Easter week; this confrontation will result in Jesus' arrest, trial, and crucifixion.

What is so inflammatory about this parable? Let's see.

The parable is about a landowner who who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it, and built a watchtower.⁷ These details clearly allude to our Old Testament reading from Isaiah 5.⁸ It too was an oracle of divine judgement and the Chief Priests would immediately understand that link. The parable is an allegory; the landowner is God, the vineyard is Israel, and the first tenants correspond

¹ Matt 21:12-17.

² Matt 21:23. "These things," of course, *includes* the overturning of the merchants' tables.

³ Matt 21:25.

⁴ Matt 21:25b-27. In this exchange, it is clear the religious leaders reject *both* John and Jesus as having divine mandates.

⁵ Matt 21:28-22:14; The parable of the two sons, the wicked tenants, and the wedding banquet. See also Matt 3:10; 23:29–39.

⁶ Matt 21:33-46; Mark 12:1-12; Luke 20:9–19. Note, it is the Jewish *leaders* who are being criticized, *not* the people!

⁷ Matt 21:33.

⁸ See Isa 5:1-2a. In the words of Isaiah, "God was looking for a crop of good fruit, but was presented with bad fruit. . . . He looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress," Isa 5:2b,7.

to the religious leaders.⁹ As harvest time approached, an absentee landowner would typically send his ambassador to come and collect the rent from his tenants who work the land. This aspect of the story is realistic in that Galilee had many such estates belonging to the absentee landlords, who were - in many cases - foreigners living abroad and who were resented. This much was readily appreciated. However, the tenants refuse to honor the contract they have with the landowner. In other words, the religious leaders refuse to honor the covenant they have with God, and despite their alleged loyalty to the Torah, they have failed to give God his due. In the parable, the landowner repeatedly sent his servants and the greedy tenants killed them; this mirrors the repeated rejection of God's prophets who called the people to faithfulness throughout Israel's history.¹⁰

The climax of the story is when the Landowner plays his final card and sending his son.¹¹ He calculates that they will *surely* respect his authority; but he assumes wrongly. The wicked tenants perhaps think the Landowner is dead and the son is the new owner of the vineyard; so, in killing him, that would leave the vineyard ownerless and up for grabs. In Jewish law, possession really was 9/10^{ths} of the law! If they *possessed* a property for 3 years without a legal complaint, they could claim ownership of it. In any case, they throw the son out of the vineyard, and then kill him.¹² Jesus then poses a question to his audience: "When the Lord of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"¹³

Before answering that question, let's pause. You may remember the Old Testament story of the prophet Nathan addressing King David and telling him a story about poor man whose *only* sheep was taken and killed by a rich man with large herds, just so he could celebrate a meal with his guests.¹⁴ The King recognizes a grave injustice has occurred and demands Nathan to tell him who the rich man was so that he could force him to repay the poor man 4 times over. Nathan's story was a parable about how David had taken Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, and committed adultery with her and then tried to cover it up by sending Uriah to the front lines to be killed in battle.¹⁵ Nathan's story was so compelling that David's response results in his own words condemning himself. In the same clever way, Jesus tells a story and it is *his audience* who pronounces judgment. They reply, "The landowner will bring those evildoers to a wretched end and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time."¹⁶ Like Nathan, Jesus has effectively placed a mirror in front of the religious leaders and they see themselves.

⁹ The allegory is evident to us from Matthew's skillful account; Jesus' original version may have been more subtle – at least until the final punchline.

¹⁰ See also Matt 23:29-32, 37-39.

¹¹ See also Heb 1:1-2.

¹² Matt 21:39. Note Matthew changes Mark's order of events (Mark 12:8) to correspond with Jesus dying outside of Jerusalem's walls. Luke does the same – see Luke 20:15. See also Heb 13:12.

¹³ Matt 21:40. The word "Lord," *kyrios*, is used for the first time, as does Mark in 12:9 and Luke in 20:15.

¹⁴ See 2 Sam 12:1-14.

¹⁵ See 2 Sam 11.

¹⁶ Matt 21:41.

Jesus then hammers home his point: “Have you never read in the Scriptures¹⁷: ‘The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.’”¹⁸ (It seems that Jesus is doing some word play in Aramaic here, for the word for “son” is “*ben*” and for “stone” it’s “*eben*.”) He goes on: “Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.”¹⁹

This is an important verse in understanding Matthew. The parable has been about a vineyard, meaning the nation of Israel, and now it switches to being about the Kingdom of God.²⁰ The message is one of judgement to the religious *leaders*²¹ – those wicked tenants – and (emphatically) *not* the Jewish people as a whole. God will take away their responsibility and give it to others²² - the broader community of Jesus followers - who will bear *good* fruit. Matthew continues, “Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed.”²³

Jesus left no ambiguity about how this parable is to be understood.²⁴ Even the chief priests and the Pharisees realized that the parable is about them. Nevertheless, a key point of the story is to *warn* - rather than condemn - the religious leaders and, having self-identified themselves with the characters in the story, for them *to do something about it!* Nathan’s story resulted in David repenting. However, in this case, the hearts of the religious elite are hardened and they look for a way to arrest Jesus.

What might the Spirit be saying through this story to us today?

First, it tells us something about the character of God. He is patient and long-suffering in waiting for us to bear the good fruit which he desires to see in our collective lives. Sometimes I wonder if God is *too* patient; perhaps like a moderator who needs to step in sooner and sort out our squabbles!²⁵ Even so, the parables implies God’s patience is *not* inexhaustible.

Second, this parable indicts traditionists who are convinced they know the scriptures and who therefore see themselves as preserving God’s ways against upstart reformers and heresy. Such people are absolutely certain of their own position but, alas, they don’t recognize the new things God’s Spirit is

¹⁷ This phrase is one of Matthew’s favorites; see Matt 12:3, 5; 19:4; 21:16; 22:31.

¹⁸ Matt 21:42 citing Ps 118:22-23. Matthew adds: “the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes” The implication being that God is at work, despite the human rebellion. (See also: Isa 8:14–15; 28:16; Rom 9:33; Eph 2:20; Matt 12:6; Acts 4:11, 1 Pet 2:7.)

¹⁹ Matt 21:43. Compare carefully Matt 12:43 and Mark 12:9 – “kingdom” and “vineyard.”

²⁰ This is admittedly unusual for Matthew - in that he typically speaks of the Kingdom of heaven.

²¹ See Matt 23:29–39.

²² Literally “a people” or “a nation”; this is traditionally interpreted as non-Jews (Gentiles). Mark (and Luke) has “others.” It is fair to surmise that Matthew understands “a people” as the destruction of Jerusalem (A.D. 70) and the growth of the church of Jews and Gentiles in unbelieving Israel’s place. This is developed further in Rom 9-11.

²³ Matt 21:44. Note v44 has been contested as a scribal inclusion from Luke 20:18, but modern scholarship now generally regards it as authentic and, curiously, being placed *after* v43 (rather than after v42) impacts on the interpretation of v43. It is seen as an allusion to Isa 18:16; Dan 2:34,44. The language has apocalyptic overtones.

²⁴ Regardless of Matthew subtle changes to Mark’s version, all the synoptic gospels are clear on this point.

²⁵ This alludes to the moderator of the first Trump-Biden presidential debate in 2020, a “debate” that was more a *debacle!*

doing in their midst. The parable is therefore a dire warning against religious *leaders* to rightly discern the heart of God and to diligently lead the flock with humility, wisdom, and integrity. I believe God holds shepherds to a higher standard and the Old Testament prophets had their harshest criticism to those in positions of leadership and responsibility.²⁶ We are therefore to be good, faithful stewards of what we have been given as well as watchful as to what new things God is doing today.²⁷ The parable also reassures us that God's purposes will *not* ultimately be thwarted by failed leadership, for he will raise up new leaders with the potential to produce good fruit in season. That is always grounds for hope!

Third, the parable makes it abundantly clear that Jesus saw *himself* as the landowner's beloved son, the last decisive messenger from God to his people.²⁸ That's an audacious thing to say! Evidently, to reject Jesus is to reject God himself! The good news from God does not come as a set of principles, but in a *person* – in Messiah Jesus himself. Alas, Jesus *was* rejected by the religious leaders during that Passover Week in Jerusalem; let no one make the same mistake today.

Fourth and finally, Messiah Jesus is the *cornerstone*. Regardless of those who try to destroy Jesus today, the cornerstone will remain secure and hold up the building, for God himself is at work here. Contemporary attacks on Jesus will ultimately be fruitless; God's kingdom *will* prevail. This is not a call for complacency in the light of opposition and rejection, but a call to stand firmly linked together with the reliable cornerstone, Jesus Christ, in the building God is still constructing.

The writer of Ephesians puts it this way: "You are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of *his* household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, *with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone*. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit."²⁹ He goes on to say, ²⁰ *Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us,* ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.³⁰

²⁶ See, for example, Ezek 34.

²⁷ See also Luke 12:35-48, esp. 48. It is also a warning against faithlessness and willful disobedience to what we know God values.

²⁸ This also means he saw himself as the heir to the vineyard, to Israel – more generally, to the people/family of God.

²⁹ Eph 2:19-22.

³⁰ Eph 3:20-21.