

We turn this morning to the 21st chapter of the gospel of Matthew as we continue in this series on the parables. And this morning this parable comes in the middle of a chapter where Jesus's authority is being questioned by the religious leaders of his day. Jesus was speaking to the church of his day. He was speaking to the leaders of Israel in Jerusalem, and in teaching this he is challenging them. They were trying to challenge him. In fact, they were trying to trap him. They had designed, they believed, a question that could say: By what authority are you doing these things? in hopes that they would catch Jesus in a trap. But Jesus is very wise and doesn't answer their question directly. He answers their question by turning it back on them and doing it in the form of parable. The meaning and the conclusion of that was not lost on them.

But the question is, do we see our place in the parable? So that's what we want to discover this morning, and so let's do that together. Matthew 21:33-46.

“Hear another parable. There was a master of a house who planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a winepress in it and built a tower and leased it to tenants, and went into another country. When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit. And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other servants, more than the first. And they did the same to them. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ When the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.’ And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” 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.”

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 marvelous in our eyes’? Therefore, I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits. And the one who falls on this stone will be broken into pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.”

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them. And although they were seeking to arrest him, they feared the crowds because they held him to be a prophet.

This is the word of God. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me. Lord, open our eyes that we may see wondrous things in your Word. That we may see down deep to the very center of our hearts and our beings to see what you have done. We thank you and we praise you. May you receive all the glory. In Jesus' name. Amen.

So this morning what I want to do is to walk us through this passage, and you will see in your outline that it is meant to do just that. You'll see that Jesus first gives *A History Lesson*, verses 33-36. Secondly, he gives us *The Zenith of Sin* in verses 37-39. And then he demonstrates *The Victorious Stone*. And then finally *The Paradox of Divine Power*.

So let's look together at the history lesson that Jesus gives in this parable in verses 33-36. And I want you to see that we need to first understand the first level of meaning. The first level of meaning is the people to whom Jesus was speaking, the religious leaders of his day. And then secondly, I want you to see that in fact what Jesus is doing is not just giving a history lesson for this particular group of people. He's giving a history lesson to all of us. In fact, he unpacks something that says a truth about every human heart. So see if you can see that with me in verses 33-36.

What Jesus does in these verses, he says he has this parable, because he's saying to them to their question by what authority is he doing these things. And so what he does is Jesus tells about a relationship between an owner of a vineyard, and tenants to whom he leased the land. And that's the first level of meaning. Now very early on in the parable the religious leaders would've understood exactly what Jesus was talking about because the phrases that he uses---where he says there was a master of a house who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a winepress in it, and built a tower, and leased it to tenants and went into another country---that set of verses is specifically borrowed from Isaiah 5:1ff.

And in those verses what we learn is that God is saying through the prophet Isaiah that the vineyard is the nation of Israel, that the tenants, the ones who are to care for this vineyard, are the religious leaders. They were called on to care for these vines, the people of God, and at due season, they were to produce beautiful fruit, beautiful grapes. But in fact, if you go back to Isaiah 5:1-7 it tells, in using this very same language, that in fact what happens is that bitter fruit is produced, not good fruit. And therefore, the tenants are judged. So here Jesus is going back and he's unpacking for these religious leaders: Guess what, I'm coming in, and I'm giving you a parable---you've asked me by what authority am I doing these things. Let me tell you a story, and you may be familiar with it. In fact, it's the history of all of Israel. And that history is God has made you a vineyard. And I have given you leaders who are tenants who are to care for you, to produce good fruit. As in Isaiah, so Jesus means to bring it here. Instead of finding beautiful fruit that pleases the owner, what he finds is bitter fruit. And in Isaiah we learn, in fact, that what has caused the bitter fruit is the sin of idolatry, the replacing of God as the only one to be worshiped, with false gods.

Now Jesus continues on in the parable---in fact, he unpacks it. He says in verse 34: When the season of fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit. And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. He sent other servants, more...and what did they do? They did the same thing to them. So what Jesus is doing there is: Guess what? I've been doing this since the foundation of Israel. I called you out as a nation unto myself---which by the way, where we get the word church from is from the Greek word *ecclesia*, meaning the 'called out ones.' Well that's what Israel was, he called them out, but they refused to follow the Lord. They continued through a cycle of obedience to idolatry, and God would rescue them. And the means by which he would rescue them, he said, is that he sent to them messengers. He sent to them servants. Those servants were the prophets like Isaiah, like Jeremiah. But what did they do to the prophets? They ignored the prophets. They liked to listen to it, in fact at times they would hear it, but it wouldn't go down deep to their hearts. And what it would end up is they would disregard the prophets, they would take their lives, they would throw them out, they would do whatever they could to avoid the message. This is the history of Israel given to us in the Old Testament.

In fact, one famous place that I found in preparation for this Sunday was Ezekiel 33, where God is speaking to Ezekiel and he actually calls Ezekiel 'son of man,' because all the prophets were a type of prophet that would ultimately point to The Prophet, Jesus Christ, the Son of Man. But here we see it in the Old Testament form, in seed form. God says to Ezekiel these words. Ezekiel 33:30. "As for you, son of man, your countrymen are talking together about you by the walls and at the doors of the houses, saying to each other, 'Come and hear the message that has come from the Lord.'" But then God says to Ezekiel these words: "With their mouths they express devotion, but their hearts are greedy for unjust gain. Indeed, to them you are nothing more than one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays an instrument well, for they hear your words but do not put them into practice." This is how they treated the prophets.

In fact, what it would lead to is exactly how they treated Jesus. Many were following Jesus. Many said on that day when he entered Jerusalem, 'Hosanna, hosanna in the highest!' They had words of devotion, but the very same people who would say hosanna, hosanna in the highest and lay down

palm branches will be a part of the same crowd that would say, 'Crucify Him!' Jesus is giving a history lesson and that history lesson demonstrates the longsuffering patience and mercy of God, that every time that his people would fall away from him he would send forth messengers. And yet their response over and over again was to listen to them for a time, maybe be interested in their words, give words of devotion, but their hearts never practiced what the prophets called them to.

And so Jesus is saying this is what you've done. Now that's the first level of meaning. That's the first audience. He's saying this..they asked him by what authority are you doing this? He turns it right back on them and says, I have the authority, not you. Why? Because here's the deal. They thought Jesus was trampling on their territory. Let's go back. The people of Israel, the leaders during the Old Testament. The problem was, even though God was sending forth messengers, they forgot they were just to be tenants. They were not the owners. You see the issue is, those who were called to be tenants to care for the vineyard of the Lord, to give him the fruit according to his purposes, according to his ways, said: Nope. We'll do it our way, we'll walk according to our own understanding.

This, I will tell you, is the first meaning in the parable, but there's a deeper meaning yet. Because now we, with 20-20 hindsight vision, see the finishing of the Scriptures we can now look back and say, guess what, that's been a biblical theme ever since the foundation of the world. For God created man and woman, and he gave them a creation mandate to care for the ground, to take fruit, to be fruitful and multiply, to worship him, to be his people. And yet Adam and Eve were tempted into thinking they are more than just tenants---in fact, they are owners. I want to be like God. And they began to believe the lie: Did God surely say? You see while this history lesson was first and foremost for the leaders of Israel, it is actually a message to all of humanity. At the very heart of all of our issues, of all the brokenness is this issue. God said it is mine and you are to care for it, and we have said, no, it's mine.

And this is what would lead Jesus to them tell them about the zenith of sin. And here's what he says in verse 37. "Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.'" Now what in the world gave them the thinking, the logic that...I know what we'll do. We'll kill the heir. Maybe it's because, remember, the text tells us, that the owner went off into another country. Maybe they thought the owner would never come back again. We don't have to worry about him again. The only thing standing between us and actually being able to say 'Mine' is to kill the son, kill the only living heir. And that's what they did. And what I want to tell you is now Jesus is still very much alive when he's telling the parable, but he's prophesying about what's getting ready to happen.

But Jesus is telling us something deeper. He is telling us first of all to these religious leaders: You're rejecting me. You're about to do this to me. But yet there's a deeper level for us as well---that Jesus' teaching is something very deep about the nature of sin. I'll illustrate it this way. Ask anybody a definition of sin, whether they've ever darkened the door of the church, ask them what sin is. Many will tell you, Oh, don't lie, don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't covet. Somewhere in the back of their minds they've heard this somewhere. And we think of sin as being the Ten Commandments, the breaking of God's righteous laws, and sin is that. But I mean to tell you, that I believe that actually that sin is the low hanging fruit. What do I mean by that. I mean low hanging fruit is the easiest thing to see and to pick. Yes, do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not lie, do not covet. Those are the things that we all just...it's so easy to run to. We get it. We think that that's sin, but in fact that's not the sin that is underneath all that sin. The sin that is underneath all of that sin is indeed this: I don't need you as God. You are not the owner of this heart; I am. This is not your life; this is my life.

And from the very beginning since the fall, man's mind towards God is one of deep and abiding hostility, deep and abiding anger. And we suppress the truth of God to support our anger. We suppress that truth by trying to ignore God. Now please remember he's talking to the religious people. Because here's the kicker. The kicker is they were using their righteousness, their obedience...to do

what? To stand on it. But the deeper sin is they stood on their righteousness to say, I don't need you, Jesus. Flannery O'Connor once wrote, 'The way to avoid sin is to avoid Jesus.' If I can avoid him, if I can reject him, then sin is not my problem. The problem is it's deep and abiding hostility, and they were trying to use their obedience to avoid Jesus. But he won't let them.

And you see, if you don't believe me, Paul says in Romans 1 that we suppress the truth in unrighteousness. Even though we know God exists, we know that all of this is his, but we suppress that truth for the truth that we really want to nurture: mine. And Paul says in Romans 8, he says these words in verse 6 and following: The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace. And then he says these words: The sinful mind is hostile to God. Notice he doesn't say the mind of sinful man has hostility towards God. He says the mind of sinful man is hostile to God. The zenith of sin isn't the breaking of particular, discrete Commandments. It's the whispering in our hearts and telling ourselves, 'If we kill the heir, it's ours. It's mine.'

And I will tell you there's something about anger that is so luscious and yet so poisonous, we fail to see its power. Frederick Buechner writes in one of his many books (a Christian writer, fabulous writer). Here's what he says about anger: "Of the Seven Deadly Sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back--in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you." Jesus is trying to expose the zenith of sin. The problem is you're angry. You're angry at me, you're angry at my Father, and you will try...in fact, you will....kill me. And I will tell you we must all come to grips with the hostility and the anger that so very much is a part of our bloodstream, that is very much a part of our nature. It infects everything: our relationships, our response to our circumstances, our response to ourselves. Why? Because it's been there since the beginning.

And Jesus here is challenging them to see it, but they won't. In fact the text tells us their response. He says okay, well, "When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes back, what will they do to these tenants?" They respond. "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.'" I don't if you see it, but this is an exact replication of what King David's response was to Nathan. When Nathan came to confront David for his sin of adultery, he gives David a parable, if you will. And he says, what do you think should happen to this man? And David says, this is what should happen to that man. And he looks at David and he says, you are that man!

And Jesus paints this parable, this history lesson, he says: What do you think the owner should do? [They say] this is what [he] should do! And he looks at them and says, guess what, have you not read the Scriptures? And then he quotes for them one of the most oft quoted passages of the Psalms. Psalm 118. And here we hear of the victorious stone. 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 marvelous in our eyes.'? Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits." This is what Jesus just told them. He just said that they are the builders. They're the builders. They are the priests and the teachers of the nation of Israel. They are the builders. And he is saying, I'm coming as the stone, and you have taken me like a builder would, a pile of bricks, building his house, and you come upon this stone and you go, I don't need this, I'm going to throw it out. And what would they do? They would throw it out onto a pile of bricks that they don't need. You see, Jesus is prophesying. This is exactly what you're doing and what you're about to do. This is why the writer of Hebrews says in his letter, chapter 13, verse 12 and 13. He says this: "And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore."

He's saying, this is what you're going to do to me. But in your rejection my Father will take your rejection and turn it into a gracious gift, the victorious stone, he tells us, though the stone was rejected. People will stumble on it, and those who refuse to receive it will be crushed. That means the stone isn't [ultimately] thrown out, it becomes the cornerstone. How does Jesus become the cornerstone? By the cross. And the cross will either be a stumbling block or it will crush. Because Jesus is saying I am the cornerstone of God's house that he is building. Will you come in? Will you come into my house? And he claims this for himself.

The reasons for their security, then, are now being overturned. The rug under their righteousness is being pulled out from under them. They thought the way to get into God's building, to get into his temple, be in the kingdom, was by their obedience. But Jesus is saying, absolutely not. There is only one way in, and that is through me. They thought their entrance was based on their obedience and holiness. Jesus says no, it's hinging on where you are in relationship to me, the victorious stone. And only through him is there life.

But here is the paradox of divine power. What happens next is that the text tells us, "When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them. And although they were seeking to arrest him, they feared the crowds because they held him to be a prophet." There's hope here, because the crushing has not happened. The rejection that they have now opened the door to, is actually going to open a door to their salvation, not their judgment. Why? Because there's the paradox of divine power, God has all the power at this moment through his son, to completely decimate everybody. Only he is righteous and holy and can judge them right there in that place. Only God has the wrath and the holiness together to be able to pour out a righteous anger.

But what do you and I do with our anger? How we deal with it? Here's how we deal with it. Miroslav Wolf, another writer who writes about the issue of anger and how we deal with each other in forgiveness. He writes this, he says, "Forgiveness flounders because I exclude my enemy from the community of humans even as I exclude myself from the community of sinners." Here's what we do with anger and our enemies. We call our enemies not human beings, we call them monsters. And at the same time we call them monsters, we remove ourselves from the possibility of being in a community of sinners. We make them out to be monsters and us to be righteous, and we daydream about ways to get even. Back to Buechner: We lick our lips and we salivate over the possibility of getting justice. That's our way. That's what anger does.

But God in his anger, which should have been poured out on us, does something very different. Instead of pouring out his wrath on his enemies, he makes his son the enemy. 2 Corinthians 5: Jesus became sin so that we might become the righteousness of God. God hates sin, he cannot look on it. Therefore he makes his son bear our sin---all of it, all of our anger, all of the sin underneath the sin--- and lays it upon his son and makes his son an enemy so that we might be called his children. He puts Jesus out, that we can be brought in. That is completely opposite of the way you and I utilize anger and righteousness, but that is exactly what Jesus wants to demonstrate for us. Biblically speaking, the only way to defeat an enemy is through killing them with kindness.

There is that which we must understand: The only way we can be free from our anger with each other, anger about ourselves, anger towards God is to allow this fact to finally, truly seep in. That a Father who owns a vineyard looks at us as tenants. And in our anger we say no, we don't need you. We're the owners. And instead of looking at us and pouring out his wrath righteously, he pours it on the righteousness of his son, that we would be brought in. Not just so that we can be reconciled to our Father, not just so we can be forgiven, but so that we can then turn and be forgivers. Do you see the only way we can become a conduit for the grace of God is to allow the grace of God to do it in us first.

A Christian is not one who pretends they are no longer angry at God. No, but they recognize now what it exactly is---it is anger towards God. That all sin is ultimately whispering to God, I will kill the son. But then turns from it in confession and receives the grace that was poured out on us because of the wrath that was poured out on him. And the righteous stone which was raised on the third day has now become the capstone, the cornerstone, the righteousness of God, the one through whom, and only through whom, we can receive mercy, and the only way true reconciliation can happen between us as human beings horizontally, and the only way there can be peace between us and our Father. That he would turn, by God's grace through the work of Christ, our daydreaming about vengeance into daydreaming about how we can bless and love our enemies. That will be impossible and a daydream unless you begin with Christ first. He became sin so that we might become the righteousness of God.

And I will say to you, I know there a lot of angry people here. Maybe you're afraid to speak of it. Maybe you're afraid to call your sin what it is---anger towards God. Maybe you're afraid of what could happen if the grace of God brought reconciliation between you and another person in this room or in this church. But I will tell you, who can resist...who can resist a Father looking at you, and in your anger holding up your fist at him, who takes your fists into his caring hands because he did what he needed to do with his son. Who can resist such grace, so that we, then, can become channels of that grace.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we've already this morning sung of a great truth that all the sin I have committed was placed upon your righteous son, and now you see me through his perfection as if I'd never done anything wrong. Always forgiven, always accepted, no fear of judgment before your throne. Lord, that is the gospel. By your Holy Spirit help us to see the anger that is in us, the anger that is beneath every sin. And may you enable us to receive the power of your goodness that we would finally become ambassadors of reconciliation, because only through Christ is there life. In the mighty name of Jesus we pray. Amen.