

Kingdom Rejection

Matthew 21: 18-46

Sunday, November 7, 2021 am

Pastor Dale Evans

Introduction

Most of us are uncomfortable with change. We are at least often skeptical and even fearful of “things” changing around us. We begin this attitude early in our lives, we cry when we are held by a person other than our mother when we are infants. We become anxious when “forced” to play with new friends. And it can be a near meltdown to go into a new classroom at school or church. We have our favorite stuffed animal or blanket and are sad if not completely distraught if it is lost or beyond repair. We continue this well into adulthood. Some like change in houses, cars, clothes, jobs, or vacation destinations. Others are paralyzed when challenged with newness. Especially when it comes to church or religious issues. “Someone is sitting in my seat/pew.” “We used to do it this way.” “Sister Doe put that there in 19 something.” These are common concerns in churches. But are we not to see life as a journey? One of the Bible’s favorite metaphors for living is that of walking. If we are walking, we are moving. If we are moving, our position is changing. If our position is changing, we are seeing and experiencing something further along and heading perhaps toward a destination. I think that is the primary reason that walking is that important to understanding life as God wants us to see it. We are to be going somewhere and our experiences are preparing us for the goal. We really should never be satisfied or complacent that we have arrived. He is constantly bringing us to newness. In a conversation recently I used the phrase, “If it is not broken, we ought not worry about fixing it.” I want to ask for forgiveness for that statement. We should always be moving forward, looking to grow, change and move. That is the essence of our mission statement here at the Chapel. By God’s grace and through his Word, we will cultivate in the hearts of God’s people a passion for the supremacy of the Lord Jesus Christ; magnified in love for Him, manifested in love for one another, and multiplied by love for the lost. Cultivate implies change. God’s people will grow, to use the agriculture metaphor. We must change to reflect the likeness of the Son.

Now, Matthew’s gospel is in a very real sense “the” gospel of change. It sits at a position in our Scriptures that is the hinge between what we call the Old Testament and the New Testament. It announces God’s presence with us in the incarnate Son, Jesus the Christ-the Messiah. It shows us the proper reading of the Old Testament literature and the purpose of the old covenant. Matthew highlighted how Jesus brought a new and better way that was not in opposition to the old but was the fulfillment and intention of it. He presents Jesus’ words and works in such a way that dispelled the myths of Jesus’ day, his own readers and even to our day. He challenges his readers to see the nature of the Kingdom as being antithetical to the operations of the culture around them both then and now. He calls his readers to see how the power of the good news of the kingdom changes (yes that ugly word) hearts and lives, attitudes and expectations, even desires and practices.

In passage before us this morning we find ourselves in the middle of a literary unit that began in verse 1 of chapter 21 and extends to the end of chapter 22. Chapter 23 then begins the final discourse section. Remember, one of Matthew's organizational strategies was to group extended "Jesus-teaching" into 5 extended discourses. These were found in chapters 5-7, the sermon on the mount that explains the basis of kingdom life; chapter 10, the sending and warning of the disciples of the opposition to the kingdom; chapter 13 where we have several parables about the value and pursuit of the kingdom; chapter 18 where Matthew presented the opposition that will inevitable occur within the kingdom's subjects; and then chapters 23-25 where we see Jesus, eventually again on a mountain presenting a vision of the extent of the kingdom. The narrative units in between were not devoid of additional teaching but exemplify and illustrate the main points found in the discourses. Chapters 21 and 22 are leading us to this last great discourse, preparing us for the finality that is described in what God is doing in the work of Jesus, the Christ.

Chapters 21 and 22 are a unit that contains 3 groups of 3 "things." First, we have 3 dramatic actions. Jesus rides into Jerusalem triumphantly on a donkey. He then overthrows the tables in the "cleansing" of the temple and then we will see the curse of the fig tree this week. They are all actions against the religion that has usurped the teaching of the Old Testament scriptures. Yes, the old covenant's purpose is coming to an end, but the daily exercise of religion has failed to understand and live out God's intent in them. The old, both as a covenant and as how their hearts have failed to see its truth, is coming to an end. Something better is coming. These actions against the temple and first century Judaism represent actions against the old covenant perspectives and how they have been interpreted and applied in the current time (not to far distant from how they were applied in the past as seen in the pages of the Old Testament). Next, we find ourselves reading 3 parables regarding this new ministry, this new covenant kingdom. We have a parable of two brothers, a vineyard (again) and a wedding feast. Some have suggested that these represent an illustrated court case against the Judaism of the day. The parable of the brothers is the indictment, the story of the vineyard highlights the judgment, with the account of the wedding feast explaining the sentencing. This is an interesting way to look at it. We then find three conflict or "controversy stories" regarding taxes, resurrection, and the intent of the law to lead us to the 5th and final discourse unit of 23-25. Our texts this morning will find us in the 3rd dramatic event and the first two parables all found in the end of chapter 21.

Fruitless (vs 18-22)

When we come to verse 18 of this chapter we find, as we said, the third dramatic statement Jesus performs. Let's read verses 18-22 to see how Matthew portrays this event where Jesus finds a tree that is fruitless.

In the morning, as he was returning to the city, he became hungry. And seeing a fig tree by the wayside, he went to it and found nothing on it but only leaves. And he said to it, "May no fruit ever come from you again!" And the fig tree withered at once. When the disciples saw it, they marveled, saying, "How did the fig tree wither at once?" And Jesus answered them, "Truly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not

doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' it will happen. And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith."

A couple of weeks ago we read some extended Old Testament passages to allow us to hear Jesus' message more clearly. Jeremiah 8 helps us with this text as well. Turn to Jeremiah 8 where we find an oracle describing the nation that is about to see its conquest. Focusing on verses 4-13:

"You shall say to them, Thus says the Lord: When men fall, do they not rise again? If one turns away, does he not return? Why then has this people turned away in perpetual backsliding? They hold fast to deceit; they refuse to return. I have paid attention and listened, but they have not spoken rightly; no man relents of his evil, saying, 'What have I done?' Everyone turns to his own course, like a horse plunging headlong into battle. Even the stork in the heavens knows her times, and the turtledove, swallow, and crane keep the time of their coming, but my people know not the rules of the Lord. "How can you say, 'We are wise, and the law of the Lord is with us? But behold, the lying pen of the scribes has made it into a lie. The wise men shall be put to shame; they shall be dismayed and taken; behold, they have rejected the word of the Lord, so what wisdom is in them? Therefore, I will give their wives to others and their fields to conquerors, because from the least to the greatest everyone is greedy for unjust gain; from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely. They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace. Were they ashamed when they committed abomination? No, they were not at all ashamed; they did not know how to blush. Therefore, they shall fall among the fallen; when I punish them, they shall be overthrown, says the Lord. When I would gather them, declares the Lord, there are no grapes on the vine, nor figs on the fig tree; even the leaves are withered, and what I gave them has passed away from them."

God states that when he would have gathered his people, calling them vines and fig trees, they had no fruit, in fact their leaves were withered. That is why they will be overthrown and punished. That should impact what we just read in Matthew. We should see how Jesus was "fulfilling" an Old Testament passage, even without Matthew calling direct attention to it. Indeed, Jesus came and found...

A Fruitless tree (18-19a)

Jesus comes to a fig tree on his way back into Jerusalem. Matthew edits the story to highlight the core of his message. Fig trees (and vineyards) are frequently used to portray the nation as God's people and are evidence of his care and providence. This tree had leaves and no fruit. A full-leaved tree at this time of year should have an edible, yet not mature fruit on it. Its description makes the reader expect a healthy, prosperous tree. He then brings about...

An abrupt curse (19b-20)

His curse causes it to visibly become what it was. It was all show. The tree withered "at once" at Jesus's curse. That seems a bit petty at first reading. But remember that Jesus is teaching his disciples something. Matthew wants to highlight this even more which is why the story is a bit different from Mark's account. So, to understand what just happened, we must think about what just went before in Matthew's narrative flow and read carefully what follows. Which is...

A confusing explanation (21-22)

I am going to assert that Jesus is teaching them about the forthcoming demise of the old covenant and the failure of those who claim to follow it. Jesus wants his disciples to feel the transition and to have confidence in their role in the coming new covenant ministry. How do we know he is talking about Judaism, Jerusalem, and the temple worship? Because of the next statement. Have you ever thought this was an awkward aside on the power of faith? Well, it is not really an aside. He states they can cast “this mountain” into the sea with faith. The mountain they can see as they are walking forward. The temple mountain at Jerusalem. Remember this is the 3rd object lesson, a new kind of king, a new kind of temple, a new kind of “religion”. The old will be cast away because it has no fruit. The disciples will be required to exercise a faith, one that seems to be lacking most of the time, to demonstrate the newness of the kingdom that is coming. He is calling them to faith that has fruit. And we who are his followers now will have to trust that Jesus is indeed the new and true way. We will have plenty of opportunities to ask to understand how this works even in 2021 even if the same mountain is not in front of us.

Faithless (23-32)

As we move forward in the chapter, we come to the introduction to what is the first of three parables (we will look at two of them this morning). The parable is introduced by a challenge from the authorities regarding Jesus actions of the preceding day. This clearly demonstrates that they are faithless.

And when he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching, and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” Jesus answered them, “I also will ask you one question, and if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?” And they discussed it among themselves, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ But if we say, ‘From man,’ we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a prophet.” So, they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.

“What do you think? A man had two sons. And he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ And he answered, ‘I will not,’ but afterward he changed his mind and went. And he went to the other son and said the same. And he answered, ‘I go, sir,’ but did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. And even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him.

An accusing question (23)

The tone was set by the challenge of the temple leaders as to his “authority”. This lets us know Matthew is linking this parable to the 3 previous events. His object lessons are about the failure of the old and the coming of the new. The temple authorities recognize Jesus as disruptive but

in ways they don't understand. They bring an accusing question. They "want" to know how and why he can speak and act this way. Jesus then responds with...

A silencing answer (24-27)

He challenged them to provide their honest assessment of the role of John the Baptist. Was John's message and action from God? They clearly did not believe it was so, yet were afraid to publicly state this, particularly in the context of this messianically charged crowd. With the standoff clear, Jesus then tells a story that provides...

A caustic accusation (28-32)

This parable is about two brothers. The first, in our translation, refuses to obey his father's wishes. A wish that is even more vivid and pregnant with meaning in that it is a vineyard that is used. He then recognizes his fault and obeys and follows. The second then, claims obedience then fails to carry it out. Jesus asks them, who was obedient. They took his bait; it almost looks too easy. Although neither son obeyed in way that was exemplary, the temple rulers recognized the obvious final obedience of the first son and answered so. Jesus then ties this to his own assessment of John's ministry, by stating that they had the opportunity to recognize God's agenda and yet "you did not believe." Those "sinners;" the tax collectors and prostitutes (both groups associated with Gentile relationships and being unclean as well as sinful), they indeed heard the word, and although they failed to keep covenant and obey initially, responded in belief and repentance. The temple leaders thought they were going to cause Jesus to condemn himself and walked right into their own, as we stated earlier, indictment of their guilt.

Defenseless (33-46)

But before they can get out of earshot, Jesus goes on to pronounce judgment because they indeed are defenseless. Matthew clearly connects this immediately to a previous parable. The thematic link is to be unbroken in our reading and interpretation as well.

"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.' But 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 to 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.

Let's go back and read a couple of OT passages that remind us that the idea of vineyard is another metaphor for God's blessing and by extension his people. Again, we find ourselves in Isaiah, this time in the first seven verses of chapter five.

Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and briars and thorns shall grow up; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting; and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, an outcry!

And then of course to Jeremiah in chapter 12 where we were a couple of Sunday evenings ago reading verses 10-13.

Many shepherds have destroyed my vineyard; they have trampled down my portion; they have made my pleasant portion desolate wilderness. They have made it a desolation; desolate, it mourns to me. The whole land is made desolate, but no man lays it to heart. Upon all the bare heights in the desert destroyers have come, for the sword of the Lord devours from one end of the land to the other; no flesh has peace. They have sown wheat and have reaped thorns; they have tired themselves out but profit nothing. They shall be ashamed of their harvests because of the fierce anger of the Lord."

As you listened to these passages you should have made connections to the parable and its application we just read. This event included...

A poignant portrayal (33-40)

Matthew shows Jesus connecting this story intimately to the previous encounter. While the water is still boiling, he not only includes their personal responses to God's working but includes their entire enterprise. Matthew condenses this story a bit, as is his habit, and clearly shows evil in this portrayal of the failed tenants. Even to the killing of the son (don't miss the illusion to Jesus himself that the audience may not have grasped but Matthew's readers and surely, we should see). Jesus then brings them into the story telling to provide the application when he asks, "when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" The temple leaders take the bait again and provide...

A reproaching response (41)

They clearly got the point of the story but failed to anticipate the metaphor that should have been clear from the beginning. Perhaps they were distracted, angry or just blind. We don't know, Matthew doesn't tell us. But they did provide their own condemnation and judgment in their response. Their statement is quite comprehensive, they said; "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.” And that is exactly what God through Jesus is doing, isn’t it? So, Jesus follows their response with...

A definitive declaration (42-46)

We must go back and read the OT passage that is found in the 118th Psalm. I would really like to read the entire psalm, but I am already out of time. The stanza between verses 19-26 have real meaning for this entire chapter in Matthew. It goes like this:

Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD.

This is the gate of the LORD; the righteous shall enter through it.

I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation.

The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.

This is the LORD’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.

This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Save us, we pray, O LORD! O LORD, we pray, give us success!

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD! We bless you from the house of the LORD.

The death of the Son, corresponding to the rejection of the cornerstone, is not a defeat but the source of hope and salvation. Their rejection of Jesus amounts to God’s rejection of them. The vineyard will be given to a new “people.” Judgment and salvation are tightly connected in a passage like this in both the psalm and for Matthew. And the leaders clearly get the message. They understand what Jesus is accusing them of in the presence of the crowds. They reject it and him and begin to plan what to do about it.

Reflect and Respond

This section of the gospel clearly has the temple leaders and teachers, those trusted to guide the flock, to bring fruit from the vineyard and fig trees rejecting the means God has provided to bring about repentance and forgiveness. They have decisively rejected God’s kingdom. And yet in this, hear the message of the promise of the new. God’s plan of bringing in the final and perfect way is actually a rejection of their self-created and compromised kingdom. In these statements, God has decisively rejected their kingdom. So, this section asks at least two things of us. One, read the Bible correctly: from old to new, the old through the new. This is clearly a definitive portrayal of the rejection of both the old as well as the coming of the new. The old covenant had a built-in obsolescence. It was true and glorious. It was grounded in grace and faith but was rejected and recreated in the religion of its followers throughout the centuries of Israel’s existence. Matthew wants us to clearly see “it is time, this is the day.” And two, hear the message in belief, a belief with observable obedience. Be a true follower, a disciple that hears, believes, and brings fruit. Real fruit that will be expounded later in the New Testament in passages like the familiar 5th chapter of Paul’s letter to the Galatians, another text that teaches us about the newness of this kingdom. Don’t reject the kingdom because of your own stubbornness and pride. Come, enter through the gate of the gospel of the Son!