Commentary on Matthew 21:28-46

by Dr. Knox Chamblin


I. INTRODUCTION.

A. The Parable in Context.

1. Relation to the foregoing context. The dialogue of 21:23-27 continues. Jesus' opening question, "What do you think?" is addressed to the chief priests and elders. The ensuing parable is directed specifically to them (cf. v. 45). Observe how Jesus, in applying the parable, continues to speak of John the Baptist (v. 32). We therefore come to the parable expecting it to address the issue raised by the question of v. 23. This parable also, with its reference to workers in a vineyard, recalls the parable of 20:1-16.

2. Relation to the following context. This parable, together with the two that follow (21:33-22:14), forms a trio of parables voicing God's judgment against Israel - especially her leaders - for their rejection of Jesus. These three parables in turn provide a bridge between the first controversy and the remaining four (see opening comments on 21:23-27).

B. The Original Form.

There is a complicated textual problem associated with vv. 29-31 (see Metzger, TC, 55-56; Carson, 449). Of the three major options, two are viable. The first is represented in NASB: The first son agrees to go, yet does not; the second son refuses to go, yet does go. It is thus the latter who does the father's will. The other alternative is represented in NIV: The first son refuses to go, yet does go; the second son agrees to go, yet does not go. It is thus the first who does the father's will. It is very difficult to choose between the two alternatives. Some interpreters appear to favor the NASB reading because it accords better with the parable of Lk 15:11-32 (the "first son" of the present parable most likely being the "elder brother"). Yet textual attestation slightly favors the NIV option. With Metzger, 56, I conclude that this is "more probably the original"; so the following discussion follows the NIV. But the interpretation offered here rests equally well on the NASB.

The parable is succinct and straightforward. For the actual situation reflected here, see the discussion of 20:1-16.

Two additional notes: (1) The sons are not expressly identified as "elder" and "younger." We might infer that the father first approaches the elder. But determining the relative age of the two sons is not decisive for interpreting the parable. (2) Nor does the parable imply that the father approaches the second son only because the first has refused. I thus side against Gundry ("This [NIV] reading has in its favor the probability that the asking of the other son depends on the initial refusal of the first son," 421), and with Carson ("There is nothing whatsoever to suggest that only one son was needed in the vineyard," 449 - a conclusion supported by the story of 20:1-16).


A. The Author of Truth.

The father in the parable represents God - the One who authorized John's ministry in order to show Israel the appointed way for "entering the kingdom of God" (v. 31; cf. 3:2).

B. The Recipients of Truth.

Corresponding to the fact that the father asks both sons to work in his vineyard, John's message of the kingdom was intended for Israel as a whole - both the leadership ("John came to you to show you the way of righteousness...," v. 32a) and the populace as a whole, including its most disreputable members ("the tax collectors and the prostitutes," v. 32b). Cf. the comments on 22:1-14.

C. The Responses to Truth.

"Like the first son, the publicans and prostitutes repented at the preaching of John the Baptist after exhibiting carelessness toward the law. Like the other son, the Jewish leaders refused John's message despite their claimed allegiance to the law" (Gundry, 424). And even after the leaders witnessed the amazing grace of God to the spiritually disinherited, they "did not repent and believe" John (v. 32c). They are therefore doubly condemned; for they remain impervious to grace as evidenced both in John's ministry and in its effects upon John's audience. (The closing words of v. 32 remind us of Jesus' purpose for telling the parables of Lk 15. The behavior of the elder brother exhibits his callous insensitivity to the father's demonstration of love and compassion toward the prodigal. See Lk 15:1-2.)
D. John and Jesus.

The focus of 21:31-32 is the ministry of John the Baptist. Yet as already indicated by vv. 23-27, attitudes toward John reveal attitudes toward Jesus. At this point it is helpful to compare Lk 7:29-30, the closest Synoptic parallel to Mt 21:31-32. The placement of this Lukan saying is most instructive: it comes just after John's inquiry from prison, and Jesus' words both to and about John (7:18-28), and just before the sayings about the children in the marketplace, and the story of Jesus' anointing by the sinful woman in the home of the Pharisee (Lk 7:31-50). In other words, the materials joined together in Lk 7 demonstrate that responses to John and to Jesus are inextricably bound together. This is already clear in Mt 21; it is further evidenced by the placement of the parable of the tenants immediately after the parable of the two sons.


The opening appeal, "Listen to another parable," shows that the audience remains the same; Jesus still addresses the Jewish leaders (cf. 21:45). The first words of the parable, "There was a landowner who planted a vineyard," links this parable with those of 21:28-32 and 20:1-16.

II. THE PARABLE ITSELF.

A. The Preparation of the Vineyard. 21:33a.

1. The wall. "He put a wall around it," as a protection against wild beasts and other intruders. Perhaps we are to infer that the wall was built of stones cleared away from the planting area (cf. Isa 5:2a, "He dug it up and cleared it of stones..."); so Gundry, 425. Cf. Ps 80:12-13 (of the vine that God brought out of Egypt, v. 8): "Why have you broken down its walls so that all who pass by pick its grapes? Boars from the forest ravage it and the creatures of the field feed on it."

2. The winepress. "He...dug a winepress in it." Cf. Otto Kaiser, Isaiah 1-12, 60, on Isa 5:2b ("He...cut out a winepress as well"): "He also dug out a vat in which to press the grapes, a simple tub press hewed into the stone, from which the raw juice ran down into troughs set on a lower level, in order to settle."
3. The tower. "He...built a watchtower," where one might watch out for fire, thieves, and birds; have some shelter; and store his tools (Kaiser, ibid.; Gundry, 425; Carson, 452). Cf. Isa 1:8, "The Daughter of Zion is left like a shelter in a vineyard."

B. The Leasing of the Vineyard. 21:33b.

"Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey." "An absentee landlord let off a vineyard to tenant cultivators. He made with them a contract stipulating for the payment of rent in the form of a proportion of the produce" (Dodd, Parables, 96); cf. 21:34, 41. Dodd takes the view that the parable realistically describes conditions in Galilee at the time of Jesus, when "large estates were often held by foreigners," and where "agrarian discontent went hand in hand with nationalist feeling" (the Zealot movement was headquartered in Galilee). He concludes: "We can then see that all the conditions were present under which refusal of rent might be the prelude to murder and the forcible seizure of land by the peasantry" (p. 97). So too Jeremias, Parables, 74-76.

C. The Behavior of the Tenants.

That the owner lives abroad, enables the tenants to take far greater liberties than would otherwise be possible. Jeremias explains the murder of the son by reference to contemporary law: "The arrival of the son allows [the tenants] to assume that the owner is dead, and that the son has come to take up his inheritance. If they kill him, the vineyard becomes ownerless property which they can claim as being first on the spot" (Parables, 75-76, q.v. for documentation).

III. THE MESSAGE OF THE PARABLE.

This story is an "allegorical parable" (A. M. Hunter, Parables, 10). On "parable and allegory," see the introductory comments on Mt 13.

A. The Identity of the Figures.

The landowner stands for Yahweh; the vineyard for Israel, the nation of His choice (note the affinities between the parable and Isa 5:1-7, which concludes "The vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the house of Israel...." v. 7); and the tenants for the people of Israel, especially her leaders. The first group of servants sent by the landlord (v. 35), stands for the earlier OT prophets. The second group stands for the later OT prophets. That this group is said to be larger than the first (v. 36), perhaps reflects the fact that in the Hebrew Bible the "latter [writing] prophets" are more numerous than the "former prophets"
(Gundry, 426). The son and heir stands, of course, for Jesus the Son of God - who, as the anointed Messiah, inherits and rules over the Kingdom of God.

B. Israel's Response to God.

1. The tenants and the servants. The tenants' treatment of the two groups of servants, corresponds to Israel's actual response to the succession of prophets whom Yahweh sent to Israel before the coming of Jesus; this the OT amply documents. Cf. Mt 23:30-31 (where Jesus calls the scribes and Pharisees "the descendants of those who murdered the prophets"), 34-35 ("from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah," i.e. from Gen to Chron, or from the beginning to the end of the Hebrew Bible), 37 ("Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you," verbs used in 21:35 and implied in 21:36). The order of verbs in 21:35 is noteworthy: "they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third." As killing is severer treatment than beating, so is stoning severer than killing. For stoning carries connotations of execution on grounds of religious apostasy - in this case false prophecy - and therefore implies disgrace as well as death (Gundry, 426). Cf. the numerous OT references cited by Gundry, ibid.; the order of verbs in 23:37; and the stoning of Stephen.

2. The tenants and the son. The tenants kill the son precisely because they know he is the son and heir. If the exegesis of earlier passages is correct (cf. comments on 12:31-32), then there is perhaps a closer correspondence than is sometimes thought, between the parable and actuality at this point. Could this parable be saying that Israel's leaders, far from acting in ignorance of Jesus' true identity, put him to death precisely because they know who he is? Cf. Rom 1:18-32, where the knowledge of God is willfully suppressed because true knowledge of God is the most intolerable truth of all (since it prevents human beings from enthroning themselves). We read in v. 39, "So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him." Interestingly, the Markan parallel reverses these two actions: "So they took him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard" (12:8). In the Markan form, the tenants kill the son inside the vineyard and then throw his corpse outside to lie unburied (a supreme indignity in Jewish eyes; cf. Ludwig Dewitz, "The Role of the Afterlife in Ancient Israel," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Johns Hopkins U.). The Matthean version corresponds to Jesus' actual experience: he is taken outside the walls of Jerusalem and there put to death (cf. 27:31-32).

C. God's Response to Israel.

1. The coming judgment. Vv. 40-41a relate that when the owner comes, "he will bring those wretches to a wretched end" (the NIV word-play translates that between kakous and kakōs in the Greek text). Jesus underscores the point in v. 43: "Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you...." Jesus here speaks of
the forthcoming destruction of Jerusalem and the temple (cf. 23:36; 24:2; and the commentary on 24:15-25) - God's answer to Israel's rejection of Jesus the Messiah. In the parable it is not exclusively but supremely the tenants' murder of the son that accounts for the owner's action; likewise the judgment of 70 A.D. occurs primarily because of the unbelief of Jesus' own generation ("I tell you that the Kingdom...will be taken away from you") - a judgment corresponding to that of 586 B.C. (when - as prophets foretold - Jerusalem was destroyed because of Israel's unbelief). Observe that God the owner comes to execute this judgment. This, I believe, supports a view taken earlier, namely that 16:28 ("before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom") refers to a succession of events culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple.

2. The coming church. Having condemned the original tenants, the landowner "will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time" (v. 41b). This point too is underscored in v. 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."

a. Jesus here speaks of the church that he is to build (cf. comments on 16:18) - the New Israel (the new tenants occupy the same vineyard).

b. Jesus foresees the mission to the Gentiles and their inclusion in the true Israel.

c. Jews are not thereby excluded. While contemporary Israel was largely unbelieving, yet there were some Jews (beginning with the disciples) who believed Jesus' message and submitted to his Lordship. The New Community that Messiah establishes, embraces both Jews and Gentiles. For a variation on this theme, see Eph 2:11-22, which speaks not of the Gentiles' incorporation into Israel but of the creation of a "New Man" in Christ crucified.

3. The fulfillment of prophecy. Jesus relates the coming judgment (as pertaining to tenants both old and new) to the OT.

a. Psalm 118. In Mt 21:42 Jesus quotes from Ps 118:22-23 (NIV is identical in both places). As this psalm figures prominently in Passover celebrations (cf. comments on 21:9), there is perhaps irony in Jesus' opening "Have you never read in the Scriptures...?" (1) Originally the (.probably proverbial) words of 118:22 spoke of the vindication and exaltation of the formerly despised and oppressed man of God. Once a "rejected stone," he has now become - by Yahweh's marvelous act - the very "capstone," the stone which crowns the building (for this understanding of the term, as against the chief foundation-stone, see J. Jeremias, TDNT 4: 274, s.v. lithos). (2) Jesus, just recently acclaimed as the Coming One of Ps 118:26 (Mt 21:9), now identifies himself as the...
rejected and newly vindicated Man of God of 118:22. (Judaism also applied this verse to the Davidic Messiah; but the earliest attestations are post-apostolic: Jeremias, ibid., 273.) Israel has rejected Messiah, but Yahweh has exalted him - as will be manifested in his resurrection and beyond (cf. Acts 4:10-11). From his exalted position, he will carry out God's judgment upon the Jewish nation (cf. 16:28) and rule over the newly-established People of God. This leads to the next point. (3) "The building of which Jesus speaks is the future temple, i.e., the holy community of the last time" (Jeremias, ibid., 274-75). Jeremias concludes that the placing of the capstone awaits the Parousia (p. 275); but it is far more appropriate to relate the figure to Jesus’ imminent reign from the Father's right hand (NB 28:18), and to the Church established in the wake of the resurrection and ascension, by the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, Acts 2.

b. Daniel 2 and Isaiah 8. Mt 21:44 contains allusions to the first and probably also the second of these passages. (The authenticity of v. 44 is doubtful, though the parallel in Lk 20:18 is not. See Metzger, TC, 58; and, for arguments for authenticity, Gundry 430-431.) The Stone is not only exalted, but also - for that very reason - dangerous (Carson, 454). "He who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces" (cf. Isa 8:14, where Yahweh is "a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall"). Furthermore, "he on whom it falls will be crushed." With this part of the statement, cf. Dan 2: A rock cut out, "but not by human hands" (v. 34; cf. Mt 21:42b, "the LORD has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes"), smashes the great statue and breaks it to pieces (v. 35). Dan 2:44 explains that the rock stands for the kingdom of God that brings all rival kingdoms to an end and itself endures forever. Jesus applies Dan 2 to the Jewish nation! The forthcoming judgment of God will crush this vaunted human kingdom (where the Pharisees' religious humanism and the Sadducees' secular humanism reign supreme; cf. comments on Mt 16), and erect on its ashes the everlasting Kingdom of God under Messiah's rule.

DOUBLE EXPOSURE. 21:45-46.

These verses support two earlier conclusions: (1) If the crowd rejects Jesus out of ignorance, the leaders' rejection is based on knowledge. (2) Jesus and John evoke the same responses (with v. 46 cf. v. 26).