

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 10/08/2023



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Revised Common Lectionary Year A

Sunday, October 8th

Matthew 21:33-46

Scripture quotations are from The ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Tenants not owners!

Jesus has entered Jerusalem and is now in open conflict with the Jewish authorities. In last week's text, Jesus' authority was challenged, and He responded with the first of three polemic parables – the Parable of the Two Sons (21:23-32). This week the text continues with the second polemic parable – the Parable of the Tenants. Again, the Jewish leaders convict themselves by their own response. It is only after a further explanation from Jesus that they realize He was speaking about them. In the modern version of the vineyard that is now the Universal Church, this parable has profound application for those given the responsibility to be the nurturers and cultivators of God's people.

Matthew 21:33-46 Commentary

³³ *"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.*

³⁴ *When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit.*

The opening in v.33 suggests this is one continuous discourse. To the original audience, this story would be as familiar and as factual as a story to a modern audience of an investor purchasing a McDonald's franchise, hiring the management and staff, and then leaving the day-to-day operation of the franchise to those hired to do so. The investor would fully expect a return at some point. The original audience would have also been aware of the allusion between the vineyard and the nation of Israel as well as the prophetic implications (Isaiah 5:7).

³⁵ *And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another.* ³⁶ *Again he sent other servants, more than the first. And they did the same to them.* ³⁷ *Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.'* ³⁸ *But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.'* ³⁹ *And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.*

Rather than complying with the absentee landlord's expectation of a rental payment that would have been agreed in advance, the tenants openly rebel. Given the allusion of the vineyard to the nation of Israel, the identity of the other players in this parable thus emerges. The owner of the vineyard represents God, the tenants represent the religious leaders charged with cultivating the vineyard, the master's servants represent the prophets and the master's son represents Jesus. Those responsible for nurturing the faith of God's called out nation end up being in open revolt and killing the prophets He patiently sent. If Jesus' audience could not make

the connection between Him and the master's son, Matthew's audience reading this Gospel after Jesus' death on the cross (and subsequent resurrection) would certainly have made the connection.

⁴⁰ When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" ⁴¹ 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 asks the delegation of Jewish leaders what they think will happen to the rebellious tenants when the master comes himself. Their words of judgment that they speak here are ultimately brought on by themselves.

⁴² 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'?" ⁴³ Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits. ⁴⁴ And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him."

Up to this point, the Jewish leaders do not appear to have 'got' the parable. As members of the Sanhedrin responsible for the religious and civic government of Israel, perhaps they relate to the master of the house and are aghast at the rebellious behavior of the tenants. To that point, stood in front of them is someone who they see as a rebel. Jesus helps them see things differently by citing Psalm 118:22. The imagery of the stone rejected by the builders but ultimately became the most important stone in the building in this Psalm was an allusion to Israel – a nation rejected and despised by everyone, enslaved by many, was the chosen people of God. We move from a rejected son in the parable to a rejected stone as symbol to the rejected Son of God. In Hebrew there is a play on words: *ben* (son) and *'eben* (stone). In solemn pronouncement ("*Therefore I tell you...*"), Christ compares Himself to the stone that is rejected but ultimately vindicated by God. Christ represents the cornerstone of the new chosen people of God.

The other image of stone in v.44 emerges from two Old Testament passages. The first is Isaiah 8:13-15:

¹³ But the Lord of hosts, him you shall honor as holy. Let him be your fear, and let him be your dread.

¹⁴ And he will become a sanctuary and a stone of offense and a rock of stumbling to both houses of Israel, a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. ¹⁵ And many shall stumble on it. They shall fall and be broken; they shall be snared and taken."

The second is Daniel 2:34, 44-45:

³⁴ As you looked, a stone was cut out by no human hand, and it struck the image on its feet of iron and clay, and broke them in pieces.

⁴⁴ And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall the kingdom be left to another people. It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever, ⁴⁵ just as you saw that a stone was cut from a mountain by no human hand, and that it broke in pieces the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold. A great God has made known to the king what shall be after this. The dream is certain, and its interpretation sure."

To those familiar with Jewish Scripture, the comparisons and implications Christ used in this dialog would have been unmistakable. This is confirmed in the closing verses:

⁴⁵ When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them. ⁴⁶ And although they were seeking to arrest him, they feared the crowds, because they held him to be a prophet.

The closing verses of the text indicate the delegation from the Sanhedrin now understands Jesus was speaking of them. They would have arrested him but were in fear of the crowds who perceived Jesus to be a prophet. If not entirely understanding who Jesus was, the crowds were more perceptive than their leaders.

Reflection & Application

Two thousand years later the vineyard is now the Universal Church. The owner of the vineyard has called His people together into this vineyard and placed His Son, Christ, as the Head. The tenants of this vineyard are still the religious leaders of the day, whatever that may look like in each church or denomination. Their responsibility remains the nurture and cultivation of the chosen people of God. A harvest is expected. The vineyard is also expected to grow and multiply in size. Unfortunately, many of such leaders are failing to bear the expected fruit. Some have decided to build an even bigger wall around their part of the vineyard to keep people out. Others have usurped the vineyard for their own social and political agendas. Others have decided to grow their own crops within the vineyard and these wild grapes are strangling the Master's vines. Some have abandoned their tenant responsibilities and their parts of the vineyard are overgrown with weeds.

A recent phenomenon in the church is the growing number of the "Dones" – an exodus of people, often long-time members and lay leaders, who are simply done with church. Unlike the "Nones" who have no religious affiliation, the Dones have not abandoned their faith. Neither are the Dones merely consumer Christians who are tired of church-shopping for one that offers a better portfolio of services to meet their various felt needs. It is rather the opposite. Research shows the Dones are seeking authentic community rather than belonging to a hypocritical private club, opportunities to serve without the bureaucracy, meaningful sermons rather than lectures or trivial stories, engaging rather than passive worship, and a focus on mission and ministry rather than events and programs or extreme political stances. It sounds like the Dones are leaving the church to find the Church. Churchianity is not enough for the *Ekklesia*! Perhaps an even greater irony is that many of those appointed as spiritual leaders to these Dones are blaming the Dones for leaving the church! This is rather like the Pharisees and scribes blaming the crowds for following Jesus!

Is it time to replace these wayward gardeners of the vineyard? The quiet exodus of people from the institutional churches to form smaller, intimate, more vibrant churches, missional communities, and house churches suggests it is already happening. The owner is replacing the tenants. As it has from the beginning, the Church continues to innovate. Sometimes the tenants confuse themselves with being the owners!

