

## Rejecting Jesus

### Matthew 21:33-46

Sometimes, when we hear a parable of Jesus, it's one we can find an application for in our lives fairly easily. The parable of the Good Samaritan tells us how much Jesus has done for us, and how we should help our neighbors. The parable of the wise man who built his house on the rock reminds us to build our lives on the Lord Jesus Christ.

But the parable we hear today is a little more difficult to do that with, because it's not about us. As we read very clearly, the chief priests and the Pharisees perceived that Jesus was speaking about them. This is a parable speaking against them. What are we to do with it?

We need to look at the context. Jesus is teaching in the temple in Jerusalem after his triumphal entry the first Palm Sunday, when he'd entered like a king with crowds gathering to cheer for him. He's also already overturned the tables of the money changers in the temple. He's shaking things up, and the Pharisees and other religious leaders aren't thrilled about that. The long-simmering controversy between Jesus and the Pharisees that has been building for years is finally reaching the boiling point. Jesus isn't just up in Galilee anymore. He's in Jerusalem, the seat of power for the Pharisees.

We usually think that Jesus tells parables in order to help people to understand his message. The kingdom of heaven is like . . ." and then following with some object or practice that the people knew from their everyday lives. Given the number of times that he has to explain what his parables mean, though, that doesn't always work.

This parable, though, needs no explanation. Jesus and his hearers know that he's telling it against the Pharisees. Throughout the Old

Testament, a vineyard was used to describe the nation of Israel, and what God was trying to do with it. Isaiah uses a vineyard to describe how much God had done for the people of Israel, and how they would be destroyed because they didn't produce good fruit. That came to pass when the people of Israel were taken off to exile in Babylon. Jesus just brings it up to date, talking about how they had continued to persecute the prophets, and how they would soon kill him.

Jesus doesn't tell this parable just to anger the Pharisees. He does it to get them to see the folly of their ways, to see how they were continuing to go against the God they claimed to serve, just as their ancestors had. He does it to call them to repentance, to get their blinders off and see how they had failed to live up to their covenant with God, to see the new way that God was at work through Jesus.

The Pharisees don't see the new thing God is doing. All they see is their power threatened, the status quo on shaky ground, and they react and reject. They start the plots in motion that will send Jesus to the cross. Jesus, the Son of a God who can sometimes seem like an absentee landlord, would be killed by the Pharisees soon after he tells this parable. He'd be killed by the very Pharisees who recognized themselves as the tenants in Jesus' parable. And like the tenants in the parable, they would be punished, as the Romans destroyed the vineyards of Judah, along with Jerusalem and the temple Jesus stands by.

But the greatest punishment of all would go on Jesus. All of the punishment all of the sin and rebellion of the people of Israel deserved, of the punishment all of the sin and rebellion of the Pharisees deserved, all of the punishment all of

our sin and rebellion and rejection was on Jesus on the cross. There Jesus will do a new thing, God taking on the punishment that we deserve. Then, after three days, the new thing God is doing is fully revealed, as death is defeated. Through that, God's vineyard was restored. Through Jesus taking on our punishment, we are forgiven and freed to bear fruit for God.

We think we're past this Pharisaical mindset, that we'd never be bad tenants, that we'd never reject Jesus like they did. It's easy to reject Jesus when doing so allows you to maintain the status quo. The Pharisees and Sadducees, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, the scribes and elders, all had their power threatened by Jesus. If Jesus was really who he said he was, if Jesus really was the Messiah, the Son of God, then they needed to give up their power. They needed to give up who they are. But rejecting Jesus meant they could stay firmly in their places, and didn't need to change.

G.K. Chesterton wrote, "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried." We still reject Jesus when following him would be difficult, when it would affect our identity, when it would affect how others see us. We still fail to live up to God's commands on how to care for the world around us. We fail to care for God's servants, persecuting them when they say something uncomfortable or unsettling. The same Jesus who was a stumbling block to the Pharisees is a stumbling block to us, as well. When we're tempted to see ourselves as holier than others, when we get full of pride, he makes us stumble and fall. When we act like we own everything, instead of realizing that we should be good stewards, good tenants of a world that doesn't belong to

us, he makes us realize that we're not in control. When that happens, we can get offended. We can reject Jesus and his teachings and commands.

But Jesus went to the cross to die for all of that, too. We need forgiveness just as much as the Pharisees and Israelites did. But because we trust not in ourselves but in the vineyard owner and his son, in the Jesus who took all of that rejection to the cross, we have that forgiveness.

God did a new thing in Jesus, bringing life out of death, love out of hate, forgiveness out of punishment. We're then sent out to share that good news with those who need to hear it. As we share the message, though, some will reject the message, some will reject us. Some will stumble over that news, unable to believe that such forgiveness is possible. Others will react harshly, unable to see their need for forgiveness. Just as God kept sending prophets to call his people back to him, so he sends us out and promises to be with us.

When we hear parables like these, it's easy to focus on God's judgment and wrath. What they really point us to, though, is God's mercy. The mercy that kept sending prophets to call the people to repentance. The mercy that sent Jesus into the world to be rejected. The mercy that sent Jesus to the cross. The mercy that expanded the kingdom of God to all people. The mercy that never ends.

Pastor David Beagley  
Memorial Lutheran Church, Ames, Iowa  
October 4, 2020