

“Teaching in the Temple”
Matthew 21:28-22:22 Mark 12:1-17 Luke 20:9-26

If we could portray the events of this lesson as a movie, music would start playing in the background as the camera pans to Jesus and His disciples ascending the hill to Jerusalem and walking into the temple.

It's Tuesday morning of Jesus' last week on earth. The chief priests and elders, irritated by His popularity with the people, demanded to know what authority He had to say and do the things He did. As the tension between Jesus and these leaders grew worse, and with His execution just days away, Jesus took the offensive.

The time had come for Him to explain His mission as the Messiah and declare Himself the Son of God. Using emotionally charged parables, He warned religious leaders God's patience with their lack of repentance and rejection of Him as Messiah would not last forever, and, as with all disobedience, there will be consequences.

Jesus used parables to make difficult truths easier to understand. He often painted a picture in the listener's imagination. Jesus used parables to teach eternal, spiritual truths but not every detail has a specific meaning. The main points and ideas are what explained His message.

Warren Wiersbe described the power of the parable this way: “A parable starts off as a picture that is familiar to the listeners. But as you carefully consider the picture, it becomes a mirror in which you see yourself, and many people do not like to see themselves. This explains why some of our Lord's listeners became angry. But if we see ourselves as needy sinners and ask for help, then the mirror becomes a window through which we see God and His grace.”

Jesus held up a mirror and forced these leaders to take a long, hard look at themselves. To say they didn't like what they saw is an understatement.

Jesus delivered three penetrating parables to address His authority, to expose unbelief and to warn of the consequences of rejecting God. Throughout His ministry, Jesus had questions thrown at Him.

In the Parable of the Two Sons, Jesus asked the questions. He began the parable by asking, “What do you think?”

In the parable, a father gave both his sons the same command – to work in their vineyard. There was no prejudice or favoritism on the father's part - both sons had an opportunity to obey or disobey, but their responses were completely different.

The first son said, “Nope, don't want to” – or something equivalent to what a son in ancient Israel might reply. Later he changed his mind and obeyed.

The second son said, “Sure, Pop!”, but never did obey. The sons ended up doing opposite of what they said they would do. Jesus asked His audience another question, “Which of the two sons did what his father wanted?” They replied, “The first.” Hey, Jesus opponents got something right! Yes, the one who eventually obeyed did what his father asked, not the one who said he would obey, but didn't.

The parable was unmistakably pointed toward the religious leaders who represented the second son – the one who said yes, but refused do God's will. They had all the privileges of

God's chosen people yet they spoke empty words because they didn't obey – they didn't keep the covenant of serving God as He intended.

The first son represented sinners and outcasts, but when confronted by their sin through John the Baptizer's message, they repented and obeyed.

Jesus told the hypocritical religious leaders, "Tax collectors and prostitutes Are going into the kingdom of God before you." (Matthew 21:31). Jesus didn't pull any punches, did He?

Unclean sinners who are repentant and saved, will be welcomed into the kingdom but hypocrites who pretend to know God, will not be because they give God lip service; not repentance.

Jesus said, "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." (Matthew 15:8).

Like the second son, the religious leaders said yes, but their lives said no. They said they followed God, but they wouldn't follow His Son.

How does this parable relate to us today?

There's no exclusion from the kingdom when repentance is demonstrated by obedience. Jesus said: "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples." (John 8:31)

Actions speak louder than untrue words. Jesus said, "Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching." (John 14:23)

The leaders didn't want the kind of kingdom Jesus was offering. The next parable will tell us what they did want.

Before the leaders could catch their breath, Jesus moved seamlessly into the Parable of the Vineyard Tenants.

Vineyards were something familiar to Jesus' listeners both as a physical feature on their landscape and as a symbol of their nation. Isaiah 5:7 says, "The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the nation of Israel." A vineyard story resonated with the people and would have grabbed their attention.

The Parable of the Vineyard Tenants is far different from the Parable of the Two Sons. Only days away from its prophesy, the adversaries in this parable plan a murder.

Jesus began, "Listen to another parable" (Matthew 21:33). A landowner established a vineyard complete with a fence, a winepress, and a watchtower. He cared deeply about his vineyard and prepared it before renting it to tenant farmers. They were to tend his land and produce fruit while he was away and were to pay the owner part of the harvest. So far, so good. Then, everything came apart when the landowner sent his servants to collect his share of the harvest.

The tenants attacked the servants, beating some and killing others. The landowner had remarkable patience and sent several servants who were treated the same. The tenants persisted in their rebellion in spite of the landowner's repeated opportunities for them to respond as they should.

The king could wait no longer. He finally sent his son. Jesus added powerful drama to the story by including the son was loved deeply by his father. The tenants interpreted the presence of the son to mean the landowner must be dead. Jewish

law allowed that if a landowner left for three years or died and left no heir, tenants could keep the land. The tenants plotted and killed the son so they could inherit the vineyard. They left out one small detail from their plan. The landlord was still alive.

In the parable:

- The landowner – represented God
- The vineyard – Israel
- The tenants/farmers – religious leaders entrusted to shepherd God’s people
- The landowner’s servants – God’s prophets
- The beloved son – Jesus Christ

The analogy was clear. Israel’s leaders were to train the people in the ways of God, but failed to do so. God’s prophets, were sent to correct them and turn their hearts to God, yet they were rejected and killed. And finally, God’s Son was plotted against and murdered.

By this time, the hard-hearted religious leaders were fully aware Jesus was telling them they will play a role in His death. What’s inconceivable is that they made plans to do the very thing He predicted they would do – assassinate Him.

Are you still with me, because the I’m almost to the punch line.

Jesus asked the religious leaders, "What should the owner of the vineyard do?" Instead of waiting for their response, Jesus said the owner would kill the tenants and give the vineyard to "others."

By now, the leaders saw the parallel. They realized they were the tenants – the ones who plotted and killed and stole. They were the ones who would lose the responsibility of caring for God’s people and it would be given to "others." Who are the "others"? The leaders knew Jesus meant non-Jews.

If there was an animated cartoon based on this scene, the priest’s faces would turn red and steam would shoot out of their ears. Besides their blood pressure skyrocketing, what was their response? "May God never allow this!" They could not imagine the privileges of the Jewish nation would be given to Gentiles. God’s covenant with Abraham was theirs.

Jesus looked directly at them and closed His dissertation describing Himself as: "The stone rejected by the builders has now become the cornerstone." (Psalm 118:22). God will take the One they rejected and establish Him as the cornerstone of a whole new structure – the church.

Other Scriptures support this: "Christ Jesus is the chief cornerstone." (Ephesians 2:20) And, in Isaiah, "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation." (Isaiah 28:16) Jesus said, "Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed." (Matthew 21:44) Whoever doesn’t believe on Jesus will face eternity without Him.

Was all this symbolism too much for the religious leaders to understand? Hardly! Yet, their unbelief and hatred for Him blinded them to the truth. They weren’t convicted by this parable - they were infuriated. They knew He was talking about them and they wanted to arrest Him on the spot, and would have done so but were afraid of what the people would do.

After Jesus’ death, resurrection and ascension, the Apostle Peter told these same leaders the same truth about Jesus.

He said Jesus is, "The stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone. Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under

heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:11,12)

How does this parable apply to the world? God's amazing grace is repeatedly extended but the rebellious resist Him. Like a builder ignoring a stone as unusable, there are those who ignore Jesus Christ as totally irrelevant to their lives.

Jesus gave His Father top billing in these parables. In the Parable of Two Sons, God was portrayed as the father. In the Parable of the Vineyard Tenants, God was portrayed as the landowner, and in the Parable of the Wedding Banquet, God was portrayed as the king.

The Wedding Banquet is the third parable Jesus delivered to the religious leaders about His authority, His rejection and their disobedience. In this parable, Jesus also addressed entrance to, and rejection from, the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus began the parable with, "The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son." (Matthew 22:2)

The king invited honored guests to attend and sent servants to tell them the banquet was ready. But, the guests declined his invitation. They didn't have prior commitments; they just didn't want to attend.

The king gave the guests another chance to attend. He sent more servants to tell them everything was ready - dinner was on the table - come celebrate!

Some ignored the second invitation - others seized the king's servants - beating some; killing others.

The servants represented God's prophets - the king's son - Jesus.

The banquet is the Messianic Banquet when God will gather His redeemed and we will experience His presence in complete holiness and joy. The invitation is the call to be saved. There are those who are not interested and those who are outwardly hostile to anyone bringing them the gospel. Rejection of the king's invitation was rebellious disobedience and he was outraged by how his servants were treated.

He sent his army to destroy the murderers and their city. The destruction ordered by the king is believed to be the destruction that occurred to Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

The king told more servants, "This time, go into the streets, fields - everywhere – invite anyone you find to the banquet." They brought many who wanted to share in the festivities for the king's son. Good and evil, slave and free, wealthy and poor – the banquet hall was filled.

The invitation was first extended to the Jews who had the promise of the covenant, but they refused. In God's providence, that rejection was the occasion of the gospel being extended to Gentiles from all nations.

The parable continued. The king entered the banquet hall and saw a man not wearing "wedding clothes." The king asked the man how he got in, but he was speechless. The king had the man forcibly removed and tossed into the outside darkness.

What are "wedding clothes"? Why was the man speechless? What is the "outside darkness"? Inquiring minds want to know.

What are "wedding clothes"? For entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven we are to be clothed in true repentance for our sin and have faith in Christ. It was like the man without the wedding garment was saying, "I wanted to come to the awesome party, but I didn't want to accept that Jesus was the only way I could get in." He thought his own "clothes", meaning his own "works", were good enough for admittance to the feast.

Entrance to heaven requires a “wedding garment” – which is salvation. In Isaiah it says, “For he has clothed me with garments of salvation.” (Isaiah 61:10)

Why was the man speechless? He knew he didn’t belong there. In Romans, it says, “Every mouth will be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God.” (Romans 3:19) No mouth anywhere in the world will be able to raise a legitimate objection against God’s judgment.

What is the outside darkness? It is hell. “Outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” (Matthew 8:12)

The man thrown into the darkness represents: Those who only profess to know Christ but never called upon His name to be saved. These people are wedding crashers - not true guests. “If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” (Romans 10:9)

Those who depend on their own works to be acceptable before God. “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast.” (Ephesians 2:8,9) Those who say, “Oh, I don’t follow any religion, but I’m a spiritual person.” Billy Graham said, “You can have religion but not know Christ. It’s having Christ that counts.” And Jesus said: “I’m the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6)

Jesus concluded the parable by saying, “many are called, but few are chosen.” To be “called” means beckoning of the Holy Spirit to come to Christ through repentance and faith. Jesus calls “chosen” those who respond to the call and receive Him.

Jesus’ said, “You can enter God’s Kingdom only through the narrow gate. The highway to hell is broad, and its gate is wide for the many who choose that way. But the gateway to life is very narrow and the road is difficult, and only a few ever find it.” (Matthew 7:13,14) Many are called, but few are chosen.

Jesus also said, “Not everyone who calls out to me, ‘Lord! Lord!’ will enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Only those who actually do the will of my Father in heaven will enter.” (Matthew 7:21) Many are called, but few are chosen.

Jesus said, “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord’ and do not do what I tell you?” (Luke 6:46) Many are called, but few are chosen.

To summarize the Wedding Feast Parable, God sent His Son into the world - to the very people who should have celebrated His coming - yet they rejected Him, and brought judgment upon themselves. As a result, the kingdom of heaven was opened up to anyone who chooses, by faith, to accept the righteousness God provides in Christ. Those who choose to reject the gift of salvation, will spend eternity in “outer darkness”.

Hey, those of you who are going to be at the banquet with me, let’s live like we know the kingdom of God will be a joy-filled feast! “God is the God of laughter, full bellies, and second helpings”, (Johnathon Bowers, Professor, Bethlehem College). King David said, “In your presence there is fullness of joy” (Psalm 16:11). If you believe that, then look forward to the Banquet in the Kingdom because there will a seat with your name on it.

The self-righteous religious leaders who heard this parable could take no more and they planned to trap Jesus. But, they didn’t know Who they were up against!

You've heard the saying, "the enemy of my enemy is my friend"? Normally, political and religious groups adamantly opposed one another. The ruling body in Jerusalem, the Sanhedrin, convinced these groups to unite against the only thing they had in common – hatred for Jesus.

They needed to discredit the Man who claimed to be the Messiah so they devised a scheme against Him. The Pharisees and Herodians sent spies to mingle in the crowd, to get Him to say something they could use to have Him arrested - preferably something that would lead to His death. They wanted the Roman government, who they hated for invading their nation, to do their dirty work and get rid of Jesus.

The spies began their attack with insincere flattery. They addressed Jesus as "Teacher", a title of respect. They pointed out His commitment to truth and for being impartial and forthright in His teachings. They said He was a man of integrity and He taught the way of God. All true! These were probably the only words of truth they spoke in the entire Gospel!

You've heard of a "no-win" question? It's one that no matter how you answer it, you're not going to look good. Like, "Does your neighbor still complain about your body odor?" Regardless of how it's answered, you can't win.

The spies planned to ask Jesus a "no-win" question – one that would trap Him between loyalty to God and loyalty to Rome. The spies carefully crafted their question to require a yes or no answer. They asked, "Should we obey the government and pay taxes?" Jesus answered, but oh, what an answer! First, let's address what was at stake.

There was a legal requirement to pay taxes to Caesar, but the Jews hated Roman rule with its heavy burden of taxation. If Jesus answered, yes, they should pay taxes, the Pharisees would accuse Him of sympathizing with the Romans, upholding the tax system they resented, and it would incite the crowds against Him.

If Jesus answered no, they shouldn't pay taxes, He would be considered insubordinate to the Roman Empire and the Herodians would have Him arrested for treason. Either way He answered, Jesus would show He was biased - either the people would hate Him or the Herodians would have Him arrested.

Jesus said, "Hypocrites! Why are you trying to trap me?". By Jesus saying that, He revealed their true motives.

Then Jesus asked for a coin – a denarius – which was used as the tax money. On it was an image of Caesar with an inscription referring to him as a "god." On the other side of the coin was an image of a woman with the words "high priest." The coin was repulsive to Jews; a man claiming to be a god and a woman a priest! Blasphemy!

Then Jesus asked, "Whose image and whose inscription is on it?" I think Jesus wanted to them to acknowledge who it belonged to. His critics responded that the image and inscription were Caesar's.

Then came the moment of truth. All eyes were on Jesus. His response was nothing short of brilliant: "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's", and for a split second, the spies thought they had Him, but then He said, "and give to God what is God's." The hypocrites never saw that coming! His answer amazed the spies. He didn't avoid the issue and yet spoke no self-incriminating words of blasphemy or treason.

Jesus' response has prevailed over two millennia. Why did Jesus say, "Give to God what is God's"? Perhaps He wanted them, and us, to ask, "What is God's?"

In a sense, we are like a coin because we are made by God: "He made us, and we are his." (Psalm 100:3) "For you [the Lord God] created all things." (Revelation 4:11) "God created mankind in his own image." (Genesis 1:27) God "stamped" His image on us. Give Caesar - the government - the temporary stuff of this world, but give God what is His:

"Offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness." (Romans 6:13)

In the final lessons of this year's study, we'll learn Jesus directed all the events, up to and including His own sacrifice. Opponents were preparing to have him killed. Jesus was preparing to lay down His life. While they plotted His death, Jesus followed the timetable set by His Father in heaven.

Jesus left us a trilogy of parables that were not just indictments against the self-righteous for their unbelief, they were recorded for us to apply to our lives.

In the Parable of the Two Sons, we learned repentance + obedience = life. Words + no action = death. There are "talkers" and "doers.". Which are you?

In the Parable of the Vineyard Tenants, we learned God's amazing patience will not last forever. Jesus, the rejected stone, will be the crushing stone for non-believers and He is the Cornerstone of the Kingdom.

In the parable of the Wedding Feast, we learned God made the invitation for salvation to everyone and exclusion from God's Kingdom will be the result of either rejecting His invitation or crashing the party without a "garment" of salvation.

In giving to God and giving to Caesar, we learned God's people have responsibilities both to God and to the government, but God gets first dibs with our hearts.

So, did you view the parables as a mirror, looking back at an image of your life that needs a bit of sprucing up? Or, did you view them as a window through which you saw God's grace?

Jesus reminded me through these parables that God loves me deeply – even though I am flawed, unworthy, disobedient, sinful. There will be a day of accounting and until that day, I want to live as the kind of person God intended me to be.