

Lesson 9

Proper 22

Gracious God, You gave Your Son into the hands of sinful men who killed Him. Forgive us when we reject Your unfailing love, and grant us the fullness of Your salvation; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 21:33–46

Most parables are not allegories and should not be interpreted in an allegorical manner. They generally have one point to get across, so you should not force every aspect of the story to have a symbolical meaning. In this parable, however, all of the principals in the story represent historical figures, and their actions relate to historical happenings. Isaiah's imagery in today's Old Testament Lesson pictures Israel as the vineyard that disappointed the Lord. Jesus' parable revolves around the tenants of the vineyard and their dishonest and abusive interaction with the landowner and his representatives.

136. The tenants were the religious leaders who were given responsibility for caring for Israel. It is they, not the vineyard (Israel) itself, who are the focus of judgment.

137. The landowner, of course, is the Lord Himself, who sent His prophets to guide and correct Israel's leaders and who was in the very act of sending His own Son to get His fruit. The parable was saying the rejection of the Son by Israel's leaders truly was rejection of the Lord Yahweh Himself.

138. Jesus quoted from Scripture to give His words God's own impact. He had harsh words for them as He applied their own judgment against them. He told them bluntly, "The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruit." He wanted the Scripture itself to speak to them and to validate that what He said was true.

139. The leaders' rejection of the "stone" that God chose to be the Cornerstone of His building is similar in effect to their rejection of the "servants" and the "son" whom the "owner" had sent to get his due from the "tenants." Jesus' talking about the rejected stone becoming the cornerstone surely forced the leaders to recognize that He was claiming to be the "son" of the parable as well as the surprising Cornerstone. The ones receiving the Kingdom are all from any and all peoples who accept Jesus as God's Cornerstone, put their faith in Him, and are built into God's temple of living stones. "One who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces" refers to people who stumble at the Gospel and as a result miss out on real life. "When it falls on anyone, it will crush him" refers to the judgment the unbeliever and rejecter of the Gospel will bring upon themselves.

140. Jesus told the parable as a warning to make these self-willed men recognize what they were doing in rejecting Him and plotting to do away with Him. He surely desired that they turn from their willfulness to become the kind of "tenants" the "landowner" wanted them to be, but He knew this would not be the case. God's Word, also the Gospel of Jesus, often falls on deaf ears and does not penetrate stubborn hearts, but then its very proclamation becomes God's judgment against

those who reject it. (See Isaiah 6:8–13; 2 Corinthians 2:14–17.) The effect of Jesus’ parable on the religious leaders was that “they were seeking [for a way] to arrest Him.” As we consider this parable, we cannot content ourselves with just understanding its implications for the Jewish leaders and people in their rejection of the Son of God. We are the “vineyard” today, and our spiritual leaders are the Lord’s “tenants.” We are to be good stewards of the Gospel, aligning the Church with the Cornerstone, building on the foundation of His person and His saving work, and producing fruit to His glory.

The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 5:1–7

141. “He built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it” speaks of the long-term commitment of the Lord to Israel as His vineyard. The picture describes not a temporary effort on the Lord’s part but a continuing investment intended to cultivate full productivity over a long period of time.

142. It was only appropriate that the Lord expect a good crop of “grapes” after all His loving investment in His covenant people. In all sincerity He could say, “What more was there to do for My vineyard, that I have not done in it?” He had chosen them to be His own, had rescued them from slavery, had cared for them in the wilderness wanderings, had fought for them in the conquest of Canaan, had established them in their own homeland, and had provided the ceremonial law as a continual reminder of His covenant of grace and blessing. They surely should have been demonstrating their love for Him in their service in word and deed.

Because they produced only “wild grapes,” they were to become like a wasteland instead of a cultured vineyard that has been pruned and hoed. Briars and thorns would grow up and drought conditions would prevail. The comparison to Moses’ words about curses for disobedience is significant.

143. Again and again the Bible teaches us that when God looks for response to His love, He looks to how we are treating one another and helping others in their needs. The people of Jerusalem were “religious.” They were seeing to it that the temple rituals were faithfully carried out and were counting on this to assure their continued security under the Lord’s care. But they were honoring the Lord with their lips while their hearts were far from Him. Injustices and inequities were rampant in their society; the rich were getting richer at the expense of the poor. And all the while they were being “religious” in the temple. It has to be clear to us that God will not accept a veneer of religiosity. He calls for social justice and helpfulness. (See Isaiah 1.) Jesus, too, made it clear that doing the will of God is the necessary concomitant of speaking His name in faith and love. (See Matthew 7:21–27.) If we say “Lord, I love you,” He always asks, “How are you showing this in your interaction with fellow Christians and in helping the poor and needy of the world?”

144. Most scholars point to this song of the vineyard as the Scripture base for Jesus’ parable of the tenants. The thrust is different, though: Isaiah’s picture is focused on Israel herself; Jesus’ words in the Holy Gospel focus on the religious leaders.

The Epistle for the Day: Philippians 3:4b–14

Fill-in Answer: In today’s Epistle, Paul declared that he was born of orthodox parents, who circumcised him on the eighth day, was of the race of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, a zealous Pharisee, obedient to the Jewish laws, faultless as far as legalistic righteousness. He said, “If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more.”

145. Philippi, a colony and extension of Rome, evidently didn’t have ten Jewish families living there, for when Paul came to Philippi, he found no synagogue, but contacted a small group of

Jewish women and Lydia, a Gentile proselyte, at their meeting spot on the riverbank. But the Gentiles of Philippi knew about the Jews—how proud they were at retaining their Jewish identity and the observance of the ceremonial laws of Judaism. The Jews made it a point to be different from the Gentiles and in many subtle ways, let the Gentiles know that “different” meant “better.” So Paul was letting them know that he even had more to brag about than the average Jew. All of this was intended to make the change that Jesus had caused in him all the more dramatic to his Gentile readers. Judaizers were approaching these new Christians with the suggestion that if they wanted to be real Christians, they should become “Jewish” Christians, but Paul strongly defended their freedom from the ceremonial law.

146. Paul’s goal was to “gain Christ and be found in Him,” enjoying the perfect righteousness that Christ won for us and which He alone can give. This righteousness is always a gift of God’s grace, given with no strings attached and with nothing held back. (See Romans 3:21–28.)

147. Paul knew that the righteousness he had attained through dedication to the Law and zealous defense of the traditions of the Jews was always imperfect—both in performance and in motivation. It’s true for all of us: the more serious you are about the Law and about your attempts to keep it, the more it reveals your failures. That’s why Paul now saw as “rubbish” all that he had previously valued. He eagerly embraced his liberation and assurance of salvation in Christ.

148. When we apply Paul’s phrases to our faith and life, we come up with something like this: “I have suffered the loss of all things . . . that I may know [Christ]”—Jesus has come to us, as He did to Paul, to convince us that He is indeed God’s Christ. Like Paul, we want that awareness to permeate all of life. “The power of His resurrection”—The risen Jesus confronted Paul and has called us to faith. With Paul, we find there is victory over sin and death only in relationship with the living Lord Jesus. “Share His sufferings”—Paul’s representing Jesus as His apostle brought suffering into his experience and underscored the fact that he was representing Jesus. When we carry our crosses and meet opposition and animosity, we are experiencing the same. (See John 15:18–25; 2 Corinthians 11:23–27.) “Like Him in His death”—Jesus died praying, “Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit!” (Luke 23:46). In similar faith, with Paul we say, “To live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21). “Attain the resurrection from the dead”—With Paul we look to the goal of eternal life: “The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 15:56–57).

149. A runner can’t be looking at distractions or be content with what has already happened in a race; he needs to focus on the finish line and continue to expend maximum effort to get there. We can’t let all kinds of baggage from our past weigh us down or distract us—neither our own failures nor our having been hurt by others. The past is covered by the grace of God. It is the present and the future that hold both challenge and opportunity to us, which we can meet in assurance of God’s continued love.

150. Note the active and the passive in these statements by Paul. He actively pressed on to take hold of the goal—all the while knowing that he had been called and taken hold of by God in Christ. There is great comfort in our adopting Paul’s attitude toward the Christian life. God has chosen us in His gracious love. He won’t change His mind about us. The challenge is found in our doing our best to live up to the privilege of being His chosen ones, who are to bring forth fruit to the Father’s glory. Paul was saying, “Hold true to what you have already obtained by God’s grace in Christ.”