

A Trilogy of Provocative Parables Matt. 21:28-22:14

Intro. In our previous study, we considered the ultimate authority of Jesus Christ. For the time being, human beings have liberty to submit to Christ's authority or reject it. Yet a day is coming when each person will be held accountable for the decision we've made. In the text before us, Jesus gave what I've called a trilogy of provocative parables. Unlike some of His other parables, each element can be interpreted with certainty because of how clearly they correspond to historical facts and other statements of Scripture. This trilogy of parables portrays God's gracious Gospel invitation / His patience / how human beings often respond with indifference and arrogance / and His ultimate authority. The parables conclude with a warning of judgment...the destiny of all who refuse the God's invitation.

Before we look at the parables themselves it's helpful to be reminded of the context. **Chap. 21** opens with the Palm Sunday event when Jesus officially offered Himself to Israel as their Messiah and King. Despite the unmistakable ways Jesus fulfilled the OT prophecies and despite the authority of His teachings and miracles; Israel's leaders were blind to His identity. They despised Jesus and denied His authority. They were determined to destroy Him at the earliest possible opportunity.

Starting at **v. 28**, Jesus gave three parables to the chief priests and elders inside the Temple courts. Each parable took careful aim at the unbelief of these religious leaders and they knew it. Though there's a slight variation in the meaning of these parables, each parable portrays Israel's rejection of God the Father in the past / God the Son in the present / and God the Holy Spirit in the future.

1. The sin of rejecting God the Father - 21:28-32 - "What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.' 'I will not,' he answered, but later he changed his mind and went." Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go. "Which of the two did what his father wanted?" "The first," they answered. Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.

This parable emphasizes the necessity of an active response. This is illustrated by the son who said he wouldn't go to work in His father's vineyard, but later changed his mind and went. This first son illustrates that repentance is a verb...an active change of mind. It's a 180 degree about face. It's the response God is looking for and the change of mind He demands of every sinner.

The **tax-collectors and prostitutes** who repented at the preaching of John the Baptist were like the son who at first said "no." By their lifestyle they initially rejected the God's righteous standards. To the religious elite, **tax collectors and prostitutes** were the scum of the earth. They were unsalvageable. They lived carelessly and without law as though there is no God we must give account to. They were doing their own thing and ignoring God's standards when John the Baptist showed up. When they heard his message, their hearts burned with conviction. The Holy Spirit exposed their sin, raked them over the coals and drew them to God. They repented and God mercifully saved them.

On the other side were the self-righteous religious leaders. They were like the second son who professed to obey God but really didn't. Their actions didn't support their claims. They had *faith without works* and leaves without fruit. Unmoved by John's preaching, their hearts were cold and indifferent. They felt they had no sin to repent of...no need to get right with God. They sang, "*It is well with my soul*" but they were farther from God than the tax-collectors and prostitutes they despised. In **v. 31** they condemned themselves.

When Jesus asked them which son actually did his father's will, they said, *the first son...*the son who refused to go but then changed his mind and went. You'd have to be mentally challenged to get the question wrong. But answering correctly and applying the meaning were two different things. The self-righteous were shocked to hear that tax-collectors and harlots would get into the kingdom ahead of them. Even though the point of the parable was crystal clear, only a small minority believed and repented of their sin.

The lesson here is this...It's not terrible, heinous sin that keeps people out of Heaven. God's grace is greater than the most horrible sins. People are kept out of the kingdom of God by unbelief and an unrepentant heart. It's not a wretched past that condemns people...it's their indifference here and now. God's mercy is wide and persistent. It can only be short circuited by the sin of pride and self-righteousness. The Bible says, **God resists the proud but He gives grace to the humble.** A second lesson is that true faith involves an active response. Mental assent and easy believism are invalid. Like so many religious people today, Israel's leaders were blinded by their own self-righteousness. They didn't feel they needed repentance or salvation, but they were eternally wrong!

2. The sin of rejecting God the Son - 21:33-46 - "Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey. When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit. "The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. Last of all, he sent his son to them. 'They will respect my son,' he said. "But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance.' So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. "Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" "He will bring those wretches to a wretched end," they replied, "and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time." Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: "'The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes?" "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. He who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed." When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew he was talking about them. They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet.

The second parable is a painful lesson from history that served to remind Israel of how persistent their unbelief had been. Before the parable ends, it leaps beyond history to expose the same unbelief present in this generation and to reveal Christ's knowledge of the cross that awaited Him. The parable portrays what Israel had done / were doing / and what they were about to do.

The fact that Israel was God's **vineyard** traces it's origin to **Isa. 5:1-7**. Because Israel's leaders were familiar with Isaiah's prophecies, they knew this parable was about them. They knew they were the **vineyard**. God, the vineyard's owner planted his vines to produce fruit. I mean that's why we invest so much in a garden isn't it? The energy and expense is for what the garden will produce. Using the same analogy in the parable of the Vine and branches, Jesus said God's purpose for joining our lives to His is to make it possible for us to be fruitful. Notice how the Lord provided His vineyard with everything necessary for an abundant harvest. God had been good to His people. He rescued them from slavery in Egypt / He planted them in a land of their own / He gave them His Law, which like a wall, protected them from destructive influences.

His commandments separated them from the other nations and made them distinct. The **winepress** refers to the blessings that would flow when the fruit of their vines was harvested and processed. The **watchtower** refers to God's attentiveness and protection of His chosen people. God went to great lengths to insure that His vineyard be equipped with everything necessary for fruit-bearing. The **tenant-farmers** were not owners, but those to whom the care and welfare of God's vineyard was entrusted. They represent the priesthood...Israel's spiritual leaders.

When harvest time came, the vineyard's owner sent his servants to see what profit His vineyard had produced. The servants were met with hostility and violence. One was beaten, the other was killed, and still another was stoned. More servants were sent and they too were rejected. Now let's pause a moment to think about this. The words of Jesus are the best commentary on what this means. In **Matt. 23:37** Jesus said, "**O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.**" Those who were rejected and abused represent the OT prophets...men sent by God. These men were abused and murdered by Israel's leaders. Isaiah was sawn in two / Jeremiah was stoned / and Amos was beaten to death with a club. Most recently, John the Baptist was beheaded. A short time after Jesus was crucified and raised from the dead, the Jews stoned Stephen. Just moments before he died Stephen asked his executioners a question. He said, "**Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One!**" - **Acts 7:52** Israel has a long history of persecuting the servants God sent to them. Since the prophets were God's spokesmen, Israel rejected the Lord each time they rejected someone He sent to them.

Notice the next movement in the parable. In time, the landowner **sent his own son** with this thought in mind...*"surely they will treat my son with respect!"* - **v. 37** But that didn't happen! When the tenants saw the son, they seized him. Casting him outside the vineyard, they murdered him. Now it doesn't require much imagination to figure out who the owner's son represents. This parable exactly portrays what Israel's religious leaders did to Jesus, the Son of God. They ruthlessly seized Him / they shamefully treated Him / and they crucified Him outside the gates of Jerusalem. **Heb. 13:12 - And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood.**

Given before these events unfolded, this parable portrays the rejection of both God's prophets and God's Son...the prophet who was greater than Moses. Here Jesus showed He knew the crime that was conspiring in the hearts of the men He was talking to. Within the week, Israel carried out this terrible crime against the government of God. On Pentecost Peter leveled this indictment against them...**Acts 2:22-23 - "Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.**

So how would God respond to this terrible crime? How would God respond to this flagrant disrespect and rejection? The answer came from the lips of the men Jesus was speaking to. Listen again to **vs. 40, 41 - "Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" "He will bring those wretches to a wretched end," they replied, "and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time."** These men who hated Jesus predicted the landowner's response and their own punishment. They said he would send destruction. And that's what the Lord did. Destruction came 40 yrs. after Jesus was crucified. In AD 70, under the Roman General Titus, this parable was fulfilled. Israel was conquered and Jerusalem was completely destroyed. For centuries, Israel had ignored and rejected the pleas of God the Father. Then that terrible moment in history came when they rejected God the Son.

Because of Israel's unbelief, God had to punish His people. Yet with Israel set aside, a new day of opportunity dawned for a different people group. Gentiles are represented by the **other tenants** who were now given opportunity to be saved and brought under God's covenant of blessing. We are the **other tenants** to whom God has entrusted the business of bearing fruit. **vs. 41** says, **...he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time."** **v. 43** adds, **"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."** That's us! That's why God saved us and left us here. We are **tenants** living on God's planet and given the responsibility to live lives that are spiritually fruitful!

In **v. 41** the metaphor changes. **Jesus** is now **the stone the builders rejected**. By His resurrection from the dead Jesus Christ became the chief stone, the **cornerstone** of His Church. The kingdom first offered to Israel has now been given to people of faith whose lives manifest the kind of fruit that honors God. In **Rom. 11** Paul explains that Gentiles have been grafted into the original vine. So this second parable presents the historic rejection of God the Father and God the Son. It ends with the sober warning that destruction will descend on all who reject Him. **vs. 44** – **"He who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces...(that's what Israel's leaders did...they fell on Jesus to kill Him) ...but he on whom it falls will be crushed."**

Now rejection doesn't have to be as active and blatant as it was in this parable. To ignore Jesus is another way to reject Him. To remain indifferent to God...is the same as rejecting Him. Christ is looking for those who will respond to Him with active allegiance...for people who will turn from sin and self and become His followers. But there's a final parable in this trilogy. This one portrays:

3. The sin of rejecting God the Spirit - 22:1-14 - Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying: "The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come. "Then he sent some more servants and said, 'Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner: My oxen and fattened cattle have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet.' "But they paid no attention and went off--one to his field, another to his business. The rest seized his servants, mistreated them and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. "Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.' So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, both good and bad, and the wedding hall was filled with guests. "But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. 'Friend,' he asked, 'how did you get in here without wedding clothes?' The man was speechless. "Then the king told the attendants, 'Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' For many are invited, but few are chosen."

This parable is similar to the one that precedes it but there's a significant difference. In the previous parable the landowner sent his son and his son was killed. In this parable the king's son is alive and about to be married. Did you notice that? It's not a typo or mistake! It doesn't mean these parables are disconnected. How is it that the Son who was killed is now alive? The King's Son is alive because He was resurrected from the dead! Amen? In this parable, the King is busy preparing a marriage celebration for His risen son and he's inviting guests to come.

The previous parables are historic. They focus on Israel's rejection of God during the OT era that lead up to the rejection and crucifixion of Jesus. The fulfillment of this third parable was entirely in the future at the time it was given. It looks beyond the cross to a resurrected and glorified Christ...

to a Savior who is no longer dead but now from Heaven is building His Church and preparing to be joined to her. This parable portrays the mission of evangelization that began in the first century and continues today. The King's servants are His followers. Their mission is compared to an invitation to a wedding celebration. It's compared to something exciting / festive / and joyful. Unlike a typical invitation...the message the king's servants deliver is more like a summons because of the One who sent it. The one hosting the banquet is the king! Attendance is mandatory, not optional. You don't turn down a king's invitation! It isn't permissible to say, *"I'm sorry, I can't make it...I have a golf outing, thank you very much"*. To respond that way would be insubordinate and insulting to the king.

But notice, in **vs. 1-7**, this is how many responded. Those first called by the servants had already received an invitation. Like a *"save the date"* announcement, the verbs in **v.3** indicate they had already been notified. Instead of accepting the invitation they laughed and made fun of it. They made excuse for not coming and went about their life and business as usual. They turned a deaf ear to the offer. **v.6** says others responded with hostility by shamefully treating the king's servants. Despite the ministry of God's Holy Spirit and the supernatural confirmation of sign miracles, this was fulfilled by the way Israel treated the first century apostles and followers after Jesus ascended. Remember, the Gospel went to the Jew first. The Good News was first preached in Jerusalem and Judea. It then spread to Samaria and the uttermost parts of the earth. But during the first 40 years of the Church Age, the Apostles suffered persecution and most of them were put to death! The Roman authorities were the executioners but the Jews were always the accusers behind their arrest and sentence. Earlier Jesus told His disciples, **"they have hated Me and they will hate you as well."** This literally came to pass in the first century and beyond.

Notice how the King responded to this hostility. **v.7** says he sent His armies to destroy the murderers and burn their city. This reminds us of how the **landowner** responded to the **tenant farmers** in the earlier parable. The same judgment is in view. So, at this point the parables overlap. This parable was fulfilled in AD 70 when Jerusalem was destroyed. The Romans killed more than a million Jews and many others were enslaved or dispersed among the nations. Their day of opportunity had come to a tragic end. God's gracious invitation was withdrawn. The Romans acted as God's army raised up to execute His judgment on those who rejected Him.

But the king in this parable is king. Circumstances can't change that. Rejection can't change that. His sovereign plan is unstoppable! Because the king was determined that His Son's wedding be furnished with guests, he sent his servants out into the highways and byways in search of **anyone** willing to come. This expanded invitation represents the *"whosoever will may come"* of the Church Age. Notice, they gathered both **"the good and the bad"** - **v.10**. They gathered people whose lives were morally clean (relatively speaking) and those whose lives were a moral wreck. It didn't matter how messed up their lives were. This reminds us of **I Cor. 6:9-11** where Paul wrote, **Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.** It's wonderful to be given an invitation that is this inclusive! The Good News is for every man, woman, boy and girl!

The point is this...the King of the Universe is willing for anyone and everyone to come to this wedding celebration. His gracious invitation is extended to every human being regardless of their moral history or earthly status. Because God's grace is greater than our sin, no one has sinned too often or too terribly! No one is excluded! Whoever hears the word and accepts the Good News may come!

Would you also notice how this parable looks ahead to a day when the ministry of inviting will end and the wedding celebration will begin? The Age of Grace we're now living in will not continue indefinitely. Some day the last invitation will be given and the last guest will respond. Then, that will be it.

The elements of these three parables urge us to consider the diverse group who obeys and accepts the invitation in contrast with those who were self-righteous, proud and hostile. Who is this diverse group of street people? Who are these tax collectors and prostitutes? They are sinners saved by grace. They know they have no right to be in the King's holy presence. They're overwhelmed by how good the king has been just to include them. They're entirely out of their element.

According to the book of Revelation, the marriage of the Lamb is one of the early events scheduled to occur following the Rapture. Everything will be brand new and every eye will be opened wide as those who accepted the invitation try to take in the amazing sights of Heaven. Talk at the table will reverberate with a sense of wonder and amazement. The situation reminds me of an IFCA National Convention Peggy and I attended some years ago. The convention was held at the Wyndham Hamilton Hotel in Itasca, Ill. Let me tell you, this place is no Budgetel or Motel 6 with drive through registration! It's a 12 story luxury Hotel with all the amenities. The typical IFCA pastor and wife had little to no experience in such high class surroundings. We were awestruck. We had to be instructed in the etiquette of tipping bell hops and wait staff. At dinner, conversation frequently focused on which fork to use first. Literature in the rooms directed us to bring any questions to the concierge. That's nice. The trouble was, most of us didn't know if the concierge was a person, place, or thing!

Do you get the picture? Like the Beverly Hillbillies, we were delightfully out of our element. This was a brand new experience for many of us. It was like an exciting adventure full of new discoveries. The NT says not many mighty or noble ones will accept God's invitation and show up for God's banquet. **(I Cor. 1:26)** Yet with wide-eyed excitement, people the world calls foolish and weak are going to feast at this great banquet of God. We'll be overjoyed to see the place Christ has prepared for us for eternity. Nothing about the life after this life will be common or ordinary. We'll pinch ourselves with amazement for the grace that brought us here. And that's precisely the reaction of the tax-collectors and harlots mentioned in the first parable. Despised and rejected by the religious elite, those whose hearts were convicted by the preaching of John the Baptist, found grace and mercy in the Lord Jesus. They knew they were sinners in need of salvation. They knew they had no rights or claims. Having no other hope, they turned to Jesus. He saved them and He continues to do the same today!

The third parable ends with the detail about a guest who tried to get in without the required festive garment. This festive garment was provided by the King for each person who accepted His invitation. It refers to the righteousness of Christ God provides each sinner who trusts Him to save them. God not only invites us to come, but He provides everything we need to be there.

Heb. 12:25 brings this home to our generation. **See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven?** God has spoken to the people of earth. He has spoken to you and to me. He has asked us to repent of sin and serve Him. He has commissioned us to bear fruit for His honor and glory. He has invited (no He has summoned us) to participate in a wedding celebration that defies earthly description or comparison. So what is your response? Have you faced your sin and trusted His grace? Have you found meaning and purpose in fruitful living? Has He clothed you with His righteousness and prepared you for eternity?