

THE KINGDOM GIVEN : THE KINGDOM TAKEN

Good Morning; today we are looking at the parable of the wicked tenant farmers and their actions towards the landowner. This parable is placed at the end of some significant events that affect how this story is heard by the crowd, priests and elders and just before we look at this parable it's useful to have understanding where it is set in the Bible and the events that lead up to Jesus telling this story. (So let's all turn Matthew 21)

The day before Jesus told this story in V12-17 Jesus clears the temple of those who were buying and selling. The next day in V18-21 Jesus curses a fig tree that is not producing fruit. Then in V23-27 when Jesus is teaching in the Temple the priests and leaders question his authority and the basis for his teaching and miracles. This is interesting and in order to understand today's parable we need to have a quick look at what happened. Jesus asks the priests and elders by what authority John baptize, was human or did it come from heaven. The priests and elders knew that the audience regarded John as a prophet so they couldn't say human and if they were to say his authority was from God they would be asked why they didn't believe and so they answered Jesus by saying they didn't know and Jesus refuses to tell them where his authority comes from. At this point you can see that the priest and elders were not very happy. (This is important to note)

All these events are a cascade of events that lead to the two parables that Jesus told. Both Parable go together and work hand in hand and before we move onto the parable of the wicked farmers I want to briefly talk about this first short parable:

²⁸ "But what do you think about this? A man with two sons told the older boy, 'Son, go out and work in the vineyard today.' ²⁹ The son answered, 'No, I won't go,' but later he changed his mind and went anyway. ³⁰ Then the father told the other son, 'You go,' and he said, 'Yes, sir, I will.' But he didn't go. ³¹ "Which of the two obeyed his father?" They replied, "The first." Then Jesus explained his meaning: "I tell you the truth, corrupt tax collectors and prostitutes will get into the Kingdom of God before you do. ³² For John the Baptist came and showed you the right way to live, but you didn't believe him, while tax collectors and prostitutes did. And even when you saw this happening, you refused to believe him and repent of your sins. Matthew 21: 28-32 NLT

In the short parable a father asks his sons to go out and work in the vineyard. One of his sons says no I won't go but goes anyway. The other son says yes I will go and doesn't. When Jesus asked the priests and elders who obeyed the father they answer the one who went to work and then Jesus tells them that prostitutes and tax collectors will enter the Kingdom before they will. We already know the priests and elders were unhappy with Jesus over the previous conversation about his authority and now to publicly say that tax collectors, prostitutes and the scorned and hated of society would get into the kingdom before them only insulted them further. The elders and priest were probably starting to get angry and then Jesus adds injury to insults and takes it one step further in the next parable of the wicked tenant farmers.

So let's look at this parable:

³³ "Now listen to another story. A certain landowner planted a vineyard, built a wall around it, dug a pit for pressing out the grape juice, and built a lookout tower. Then he leased the vineyard to tenant farmers and moved to another country. ³⁴ At the time of the grape harvest, he sent his servants to collect his share of the crop. ³⁵ But the farmers grabbed his servants, beat one, killed one, and stoned another. ³⁶ So the landowner sent a larger group of his servants to collect for him, but the results were the same. ³⁷ "Finally, the owner sent his son, thinking, 'Surely they will respect my son.' ³⁸ "But when the tenant farmers saw his son coming, they said to one another, 'Here comes the heir to this estate. Come on, let's kill him and get the estate for ourselves!' ³⁹ So they grabbed him, dragged him

out of the vineyard, and murdered him. ⁴⁰“When the owner of the vineyard returns,” Jesus asked, “what do you think he will do to those farmers?” ⁴¹The religious leaders replied, “He will put the wicked men to a horrible death and lease the vineyard to others who will give him his share of the crop after each harvest.” ⁴²Then Jesus asked them, “Didn’t you ever read this in the Scriptures? ‘The stone that the builders rejected has now become the cornerstone. This is the LORD’s doing, and it is wonderful to see.’” ⁴³I tell you, the Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation that will produce the proper fruit. ⁴⁴Anyone who stumbles over that stone will be broken to pieces, and it will crush anyone it falls on. ⁴⁵When the leading priests and Pharisees heard this parable, they realized he was telling the story against them—they were the wicked farmers. ⁴⁶They wanted to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowds, who considered Jesus to be a prophet.

Matthew 21:33-45NLT

This parable is one of Jesus’ stories that doesn’t have a happy ending but instead a warning which at the time was to the Jewish priests and elders that the Kingdom of God could be taken away from them. A warning that is quite severe to those who are in the Kingdom to hear that it can be taken from them given to others. This parable contradicts the notion that once you’ve accepted Jesus in to your life ‘that’s it you’re in the kingdom no matter what.’ But as we have seen in other parables we have looked at the Kingdom is not about just accepting Jesus but it’s about the fruit that produced from those who are in the Kingdom.

The story the crowd was hearing on this day was not a new concept and it would have been a story similar to other true stories that they would have probably heard about similar situations. The crowd would have heard stories of how many Jewish farmers had lost the land that had been passed down to them from generation to generation through heavy taxation and domination which came from being under Roman occupation. When the farmer could no longer pay his taxes the Roman authority would seize his land and it would be sold on to a land owner who would have had lots of land throughout the Roman Empire.

The land owner would then take over the land, renovate it and fix it up by planting a vineyard, put a wall around it, dig a wine press for grape juice and build a watch tower. (V33) The landowner would then rent it to the farmers who may have originally owned it or to farmers who used to own land in Israel to look after the land and harvest the crops. At harvest time the tenants would receive a small amount from their harvest for themselves while the land owner would take the largest proportion of the harvest for himself. Now being a tenant farmer in Jesus’ time was very different to today because tenants were effectively slaves to the landowner who probably spent very little time on that land and the harvest the landowner would take was likely to be sold to finance their luxury lifestyle and military adventures.

So let’s look at this story when the landowner sent some of his slaves (no ordinary slave – higher than the tenants – a middleman) to collect his share of the harvest. The tenants decided to rebel, they had probably had enough of being slaves, enough of being deprived of the land they had worked and slaved over. They had enough of being deprived of their livelihood and freedom and wanted to take back the land they were working on. It was the perfect time to rebel, they had a watch tower and could see who was coming and they had a wall around the vine press to protect them, they had everything they needed to stage a mutiny.

* Ps 118:22-23.

So the farmers took the slaves sent by the landowner and one was stoned, one was killed and one was beaten-up sent away. (V35-36) The landowner did not react violently and sent another group of slaves and the same happened again. The landowner still didn't react violently and in my opinion had remarkable restraint; sent his son to try and negotiated with the tenants and sort out this problem thinking that they would respect him. But when the farmers saw the landowner's son they saw the person who would eventually going to be their boss and decided to kill him so that they could get the land. (V7-39)

This story was familiar to Jesus' hearers because there would have been true stories of Jewish farmers who had their land seized by the Roman authorities and sold onto to landowners who would have leased it out to those same farmers. These accounts would show how Jewish farmers would try to take back their land using violence. That's why when Jesus asked the audience (including priests and elder) what would happen to the tenants they all knew the answer. The landowners would bring down the strength of his army on these tenant farmers and they would be killed and the land would be leased to others who would give the landowner his share. (V41)

At the end of the parable the Priests and Elders realised that Jesus was inferring that they were the wicked farmers in the story and you can imagine how angry they really were! In the first parable of the two sons Jesus tells the priests and Elders that corrupt tax collectors and prostitutes would get into heaven before them because they believed John and repented and changed. However, in this parable he takes it a step further and tells them that the Kingdom would be taken away from them and given to a nation who produced fruit.

What His Hearers would have heard

So what does this parable mean? What is this parable trying to tell us about the Kingdom of God? How can we interpret and understand this parable? This parable can be interpreted in two ways and we are going to look at these two ways and what each tells us about the Kingdom of God and how we as agents of the Kingdom to be.

Jesus was quite deliberate in both of these parables to offend the Priests and Elders in Israel! And no matter which way you look at this they drew the short end of the straw. One way of interpreting this story is as the priests and elders as the wicked farmers and the Roman Empire as the Landowners. In this interpretation of the text the Roman Empire are the landowner leasing out the land they conquered to the people who originally owned it.

And in Jesus' time this story was quite poignant because the Roman Empire had quite literally enslaved Jews and you can imagine how frustrating and difficult it was to be Jew under Roman occupation and everything that was produced by the Jews was heavily taxed and large proportion of crops and food produced went to them also. The Jews were ultimately tenants in their own land. Leaders such as the Sadducees and even the priests, elders and Pharisees were often trying to work with the Roman Empire so that could look for ways in which the Roman Empire could be overthrown and there were likely to have been revolts against the Roman Empire which swiftly crushed by Roman authorities.

Another way to interpret this story is with Priests and elders still as the wicked farmers and God as the Landowner. And the slaves who were sent by the landowner represents prophets and such as John the Baptist and other prophet sent to Jews and who were beaten-up and killed but were not listened to by the Jewish Leaders and some say that Jesus himself becomes the son in the story who was later to be executed by the Romans. In this sense this is multi-layered but it's not what his

hearers would be understood as Jesus had not yet been crucified and this is a more newer interpretation that maybe this story also pointed to Jesus' story.

So what does all this mean.....The first thing this parable's tells us is that it possible to have the Kingdom of God taken away from you and given to someone else. I have to admit this can be hard to hear but let's think about it a different way. What happened to the farmers to make them have the land taken away from them?

Farmer's Character:

- Greed – they wanted all the produce for themselves
- Negative Anger - at being slaves and the landowner getting most of the harvest
- Rebellion – They rebelled against the Landowner and refused to give his share
- Violence / Aggression – They were Violent towards their slaves the landowner sent
- Murder – They murdered the slaves and the son
- Mutiny – They would do whatever it took to get the land

If these were the characteristics that caused them to have the kingdom taken away what kind of characteristics would those in the Kingdom have? I have put together a list of some of the opposite attitudes (I am sure if we did it together we might come up with some more) and maybe we need to ask ourselves what do they look like in my context?

- Generosity
- Positive Anger
- Obedience / loyalty
- Peace & Justice
- Life – Giving
- Unity & Community

When we think about how the Jews were living in a Hostile Environment under Roman occupation. The farmers were living as slaves to the landowner. Those Jewish hearers and leaders in the crowd believed the only way to end the Roman occupation was through violence. This message would have infuriated them as it took the Roman Empire's side seemingly. Maybe this parable offers us some insight into how we live in a world that does not share our beliefs and values and even insight in the type of characteristics those Kingdom agents have who as Jesus said 'Are in the world but not of the world.'

CONCLUSION

Then Jesus asked them, "Didn't you ever read this in the Scriptures? 'The stone that the builders rejected has now become the cornerstone. This is the LORD's doing, and it is wonderful to see.'* I tell you, the Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation that will produce the proper fruit. ⁴⁴ Anyone who stumbles over that stone will be broken to pieces, and it will crush anyone it falls on. Matthew 21: 42-44 NLT

One commentator stated that to understand these verses you need to understand that Jesus had this way of reversing human evaluations. From all that we have learnt today it's easier to understand that Jesus the one Jews rejected become the ultimate cornerstone for the Kingdom (In

* Ps 118:22-23.

fact in the original location of this scripture in Psalms 118:22-23 stone can be interpreted as son). The Gentiles who Jews rejected have now become agents of the Kingdom. Prostitutes, corrupt tax collectors, sinners, sick people the rejected in society can become part of the Kingdom and it is this what Jesus is referring to wonderful to see. It no longer exclusive club for the just the Jews but all those believe, repent, change, embody the characteristics of Kingdom and work as agents of the Kingdom. As for verse 44 carries the warning that the Kingdom can be a stumbling block as a Well as a sanctuary, depending on people's response to him. Jesus applies that to himself.

I want today with the same warning as Jesus gives in this parable and one commentator states that 'God expects his Kingdom agents, whom he trusts, and whom he equips so richly, to be utterly loyal to him. They must 'bear and keep the fruit' of the kingdom. If God had been compelled to change tenants once, he could, if provoked, do it again!