

Parable of the Tenants

SCOTT HOEZEE

Parables, we think, are such charming stories, so memorable; and that Jesus person, he was such a good storyteller. People must have loved him, we think. Even today, those who are good at spinning a good yarn rather quickly attract followers and crowds. Sometimes such charming storytellers get their own radio programs, TV shows, podcasts, YouTube channels. The reality about Jesus and his parables, though, is rather different. In fact, if you want to know where parable telling can land you in the end, we get a pretty good hint in Matthew 21. Telling parables can get you killed. It was that way for Jesus. Today we look at the parable of the tenants as one of the last teachings of Jesus. It had an explosive effect. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, this is now program number three in our planned seven-part series, in which we are looking at the things that Jesus taught in his final week of life; basically between Palm Sunday and Good Friday. We already looked at what Jesus was teaching when he cleansed the Temple, drove out the moneychangers; and then we looked at what he taught in a subsequent event when he cursed a fig tree; and today we will get a more overt teaching of Jesus, as he is going to tell a parable.

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly; and we are thinking about this series, really, during the season of Lent in the Christian year; a time when our focus tends to look toward the cross—toward the end of Jesus' life—toward the great thing for which he came, which was to die, of course, for the sins of the world; but it is also significant that much of the Gospel material deals with those last few days of his life. In fact, a big proportion of each of the Gospels is devoted to that last week; so, some of the things Jesus said, in fact we think all the things he said there have maybe special significance, as he knows he is nearing the end and he wants to give these last words to his disciples, and he has a number of encounters with his enemies during that time. So yes, that is the area that we are digging into during these programs, and though we won't maybe hit everything because there is a great deal of material...

SCOTT HOEZEE

There is, yes.

DAVE BAST

To cover, we want to kind of hit the highpoints; and so, as you said, Scott, today we want to look at a parable.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, and we did a series on the parables of Jesus here on *Groundwork*, and you can look that up on our website, groundworkonline.com if you have not heard that series, but we did not do this particular parable in Matthew 21. We mentioned, I think, in that series, Dave, that the great teacher and pastor and author, Eugene

Peterson has called parables “narrative time bombs”...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Because they look innocent enough; they are nice, cute little stories about farmers and seeds and women baking bread and whatnot; and they lodge in peoples’ hearts like a narrative time bomb tick tick tick tick tick...

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And then eventually boom...it explodes and people say: Ooh, wow! That had more meaning than I thought.

DAVE BAST

You know, one of the reasons they function that way is that they are not always understandable on a first hearing...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

I mean, there is a common misconception, I think, that Jesus used parables to make the truth more plain and more obvious...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And in fact, often the truth was sort of hidden or obscured. You really...as you say, you had to think about it for quite a while before it suddenly hit you, like that time bomb; but the parable we want to look at today is quite different, isn’t it?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; this one...if all parables were time bombs, this one, I think, was more like a proximity-fused grenade because it blew up almost immediately for most of the people listening to it. It made them very, very angry. So, let’s listen to it from Matthew 21, beginning at verse 33, where Jesus says: “Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it, built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and he moved to another place. ³⁴When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit. ³⁵The tenants seized his servants, they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. ³⁶Then the owner sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. ³⁷Last of all, he sent his son to them. ‘They will respect my son,’ he said. ³⁸But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, ‘This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him and take his inheritance.’ ³⁹So, they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.”

DAVE BAST

⁴⁰“Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants? ⁴¹“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.” ⁴²Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the scriptures: ‘The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. The Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our

eyes.’⁴³ 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.⁴⁴ Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed.”⁴⁵ When the chief priests and Pharisees heard Jesus’ parables, they knew he was talking about them,⁴⁶ and they looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet.

So, here is a parable where the meaning is all too plain. They get it immediately...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Not much subtle here...

DAVE BAST

And it enrages them.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And one thing that probably tipped them off immediately is something we sometimes as biblical readers today might miss. The first couple verses of this parable have a lot of detail about the set-up of the vineyard and the wall and the watchtower and a winepress; and for people who knew the Bible well, and certainly the Pharisees and the chief priests did know their Bibles, they would have known that this was a reference and allusion to Isaiah Chapter 5, which we talked about also in the previous program in this series as part of the background of the cursing of the fig tree. It seems like the closer Jesus gets to his cross here, the more he has Isaiah 5 on his mind...

DAVE BAST

The rest of Isaiah, too, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, and probably because Isaiah 5’s vineyard clearly stands for Israel, and the chief priests and Pharisees knew that. He is talking about us.

DAVE BAST

And the key element here is fruit. God is looking for fruit. God has done everything that he could to make a vineyard that should be fruitful—it should be bearing fruit—and yet, when he comes to look for it in Jesus’ parable of the tenants, the fruit is withheld—the fruit is simply not there. In Isaiah 5, the fruit was bad—it was stink fruit—not grapes, but rotten grapes—sour grapes—wild grapes. So, that is the key: the fruitlessness, which is the owner’s due. There is also a sense that we get in a number of Jesus’ parables of the absentee God, and that, of course, is not literally true, but the idea that God gives people time, that God is not evidently there or present; that he has gone away for a while—he has gone away on a journey; and yet, he expects his people to be busy while he is “absent from them.”

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, busy, but also faithful in the end, right?

DAVE BAST

Yes, right. That is the message.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; be busy, but also be faithful—be good stewards of what you have been given; and for these tenant farmers, the renters on the property taking care of the vineyard, for them to mistreat the servants...and that is good point you made just now, Dave, and that is that the owner could have come down hard on these guys and had them arrested after just one servant had so much as his face slapped; but this owner is remarkably patient, sending lots of servants...finally sending his son...and only then, although the parable does not finish it, the crowds predict what will happen; but the point is, the people listening in Jerusalem that day...and remember, this is Passover week, so Jerusalem was packed with Jewish people...they knew he was talking

about Israel; and the implications of what this meant for Israel then is something we will look at in just a moment.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, we just read the parable of the tenants...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Matthew Chapter 21, one of the last teachings of Jesus; and we just said that the vineyard that Jesus sketched stands in parallel to another famous vineyard from Isaiah 5, and both are Israel.

DAVE BAST

Exactly; and one of the points we usually make when we are talking about a parable or studying it or preaching on it or teaching it is that a parable is not meant to be pressed in all its details. There is usually one central point, that is what makes a parable different, say, from an allegory; but in some cases, there were parables Jesus told that were more allegorical—that were more tending toward the allegory; and the great difference is, in an allegory it is another story also, but the details stand for other things, and so the details are often important; and in the case of this parable—the parable of the tenants—there is a good deal of allegory here. So, we know, for example, who the servants are that are sent repeatedly to the vineyard, right, to demand fruit?

SCOTT HOEZEE

And these would certainly be the prophets. For so long, some think Moses actually was sort of the first great prophet. A prophet was the one who stood between God and the people and conveyed God's message to the people, but Moses is the one who helped establish Israel, of course. Once you get into the history of Israel, who are the prophets who come to mind? Well, the early ones in the days of the kings: Elijah, Elisha, and then eventually those who we more formally call prophets: Isaiah, Amos, Jeremiah, Zechariah, Micah, and all the rest. These are the servants of God that God repeatedly sent to his people, who were on, as it were, the rented property of the Promised Land that God owned principally; and he sent them to bring these people, often so wayward, back to God. Metaphorically in the parable they came to collect the grapes...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But the grapes in Israel's history would have been faithful living to the Law.

DAVE BAST

Absolutely, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Being kind to widows, orphans, and strangers, and following the year of the Jubilee and not letting anybody fall into perpetual poverty, and all the things God sketched in his Law, that was the fruit of righteousness that God expected to see; and when he did not see it, he would send his prophets to say: Produce good fruit, and Israel did not treat those prophets very well.

DAVE BAST

So, the fruit is also allegorical. As you say, Scott, you think of a great passage from the prophets: What does the Lord require of you but to love kindness and to do justice and to walk humbly with your God. So, it is the fruit of faithful living; it is the fruit of turning away from idolatry—Israel's persistent sin to embrace false gods—and be faithful and true to the Lord, the God of Israel, to Yahweh. It is the fruit that sees faith blossom into acts of mercy and justice and peacekeeping and all the rest, as you say. So yes, the prophets are there, the fruit is demanded, and it is withheld—it is not found—and then, last of all, we read in this story, the owner says: Ah, I have a better idea. I will send my son. Surely they will respect him. So, it is building up, and I think we can pretty well guess who the son is, too, right?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, well, I think that is pretty obvious, right. So, I mean, the problem, of course, is when the people are *not* producing good fruit those prophets...Elijah and Jeremiah and the like...in calling the people back to God, they inevitably also had to speak words of judgment; and nobody likes being told they are wrong. I don't, you don't, nobody likes it, but the prophets had to say: You are doing it wrong. Here is how to do it right. That did not make them popular. Jezebel tried to kill Elijah. Jeremiah got thrown into cisterns and had other things...he was put in prison. The prophets really were mistreated, and some of them even killed. So, finally God goes for broke and says: Right, I will send my Son. They will listen to him; but of course, that does not work out so well, which is why Jesus is telling this very parable. He is a couple of days away from his cross and he knows it.

DAVE BAST

Here is where the parable gets a little weird maybe, we could say, because of the reaction of the people in the story. The tenants in the vineyard see the son coming and say: Oh, let's kill him and then we can have the vineyard all to ourselves...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, how is that going to work?

DAVE BAST

Which is kind of crazy talk or crazy thinking because, what? The owner is going to turn around if you kill his son and give the vineyard to you? No, Jesus says...in fact, he asks the crowd. He draws them into the story: What do you think is going to happen to those people after they have killed the son? And the crowd replies: Those wretched wretches are going to end wretchedly.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, they triple it up. Actually, in the Greek it is funny: Wretched, wretched, wretched times three. Right; this may be a hyperbole. Jesus liked using exaggeration sometimes; and maybe this counterintuitive thinking that if they kill the heir they will get the vineyard, of course not! As long as the owner lives, you are not going to get the vineyard, you are going to get thrown in jail or killed yourselves, but maybe that was Jesus' way of saying: The rejection of me as God's Son is just as whacky as that weird line of reasoning. It makes no sense, but that is what you are doing; and then, Jesus reaches for the one verse from the Old Testament that gets quoted more often than any other verse in the New Testament...we have noted it on other *Groundwork* programs, as it comes up quite often. It seems like kind of a stray verse from Psalm 118. I have never met anybody who said: Psalm 118 is my favorite psalm.

DAVE BAST

It could be; it is a great psalm.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is a great psalm, but it is not Psalm 23 or Psalm 150 or Psalm 100, right? Psalm 118 and this verse in the middle of it about how a stone that the builders rejected ends up being the cornerstone of the building; and

the New Testament writers, and Jesus himself, latched onto that verse because something about the central dynamic of the Gospel is in that. The weak, rejected one is the key, and that is Jesus. The weak and rejected one becomes the key, and the Pharisees and the chief priests are rejecting Jesus at that very moment, and he is saying: It is not going to do you any good. I am still going to be the head of the corner.

DAVE BAST

Right; so, it is an image, as you say, Scott, for Jesus himself and for the different ways of reacting to him. I mean, when Jesus comes into the world, it is as though he presents every person with a choice: Are you for him or against him? Do you accept him or do you reject him? Do you believe who he is and what he has come to do or do you somehow discredit him or dismiss him or reject? And that is happening before our eyes in this very parable.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And here in the last week of Jesus' life, despite all of his teachings, all of his efforts to reach out to even the Pharisees, sometimes through words of judgment, but nonetheless, it is clear they are rejecting the Son; and so, now Jesus has to say directly: The kingdom of God is being taken away from you and it is being given to other nations. The Greek word there is *ethnos*, which means gentile. It is going to be given to non-Jewish people. This is a bold statement, and if Jesus is the Son of God then he is speaking the utter truth, but if he isn't it is blasphemy in the ears of the Jews, to suggest that the Jews, the covenant people...

DAVE BAST

The people of God; and Jesus says: You know what? There is going to be another people of God, and you are in danger of being out instead of in.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, it is going to be a new Israel, and you are not it. So, like we said, this parable is like a hand grenade that blows up immediately. They know...it says they knew immediately he was speaking against them and they wanted to arrest him right then and there...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But he was still popular.

DAVE BAST

So, they are a little bit leery of it, and we are going to see how events unfold. If you know the story of Holy Week, how they kind of did an end-run in order to arrest Jesus at night, but this was one of the key things that tipped the scales and decided them to say: We are going to get rid of him and we have got to do it now. But, here is the question that we always want to come back to: What does the parable of the tenants have to say to us? Are we part of it, too, or is it just something we look at and we say: Well, Jesus was telling it to them. Maybe he has something to say to me, too, and that is what we want to think about next.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, and this third program in a seven-part series on the last teachings of Jesus—things Jesus taught and did during the last week of his life; and today we have been in Matthew 21 with the parable of the tenants; and Dave, we just looked at the meaning of the parable. The vineyard is Israel, the tenants are the Israelites and the leaders of the Jews. The servants that they reject and kill were the prophets; the Son, who comes at the end, whom they also reject and kill, is Jesus, and we just saw that Jesus said: The kingdom of God is being taken from you and it is going to be given to the gentiles. There is going to be a new Israel and you are not it unless you can come and embrace the Son after all.

So, a parable of judgment. It blew up immediately in the faces of the leaders. They knew immediately he was pointing the finger right at them; and so they are angry; they want to arrest him; that is the story; but as you just said, Dave, what about us?

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Easy for us to look at this parable as a mere historical curiosity, and sort of say: Well, we just understood everything Dave and Scott just said. Those bad Pharisees and chief priests: Shame, shame, shame; and now they are the bad guys, but we are the good guys. We are the other nations that got the kingdom given to them, so we are good, right?

DAVE BAST

Yes; or we might want to be tempted to say: Well, I have accepted Jesus, you know; he is my cornerstone...he is my rock. I am building my life on him. Praise God! I hope you are. I hope I am, too. So, that is all wonderful, and that is certainly part of the message of the parable because we do—we are confronted with a choice about him. We do have to make up our mind: Is he the Son of God? Is he the Savior of the world? Did he die for my sins? Did he rise again, truly, from the dead? If he did, that proves everything about him that was ever claimed. So, yes; he is my cornerstone; he is the center of my life. That is great, too, but I don't think we can so quickly say those tenants...that has nothing to do with me...those people who rejected the prophets and the Word of God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; so, I mean, if the bottom line of this parable is that they are out and we now as non-Jews are in, that is great; but the problem is, you know, there is the old story that the most recent group that finally got admitted to the country club usually becomes the most vocal next time around to keep out the next group, right? Because once you are in, you want to have that be a special status, and one way to keep it special is to keep everybody else out. So, we could ask: Okay, yes, we are that church that Jesus predicted. We are those other nations who received the kingdom of God when God's covenant people rejected him; but what about us today? Are we now shutting out...? I mean, God is still sending us messages—he is still sending us servants—he is still sending us sometimes pointed sermons and messages from his Word. Are we rejecting them the way the people of old beat up the servants of old? How do we treat the pastor when the pastor says uncomfortable things?

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Do we kick him out? Put pressure on him just to preach nice, friendly sermons? When we sense the Bible by the Spirit is pointing a finger at my life do I just sort of say: I will just ignore it, walk away, and think about something else?

DAVE BAST

I have Jesus. You know, there is an old saying, Scott; I know you know this one about preaching: The purpose is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And there is a lot of truth in that. It all depends on where you are coming from. If you are a broken sinner who knows it and are feeling repentant and sorry, there is good news of comfort in the Gospel for you; but if

you are smug, self-righteous, quite self-satisfied, there may be some words that upset you—that bother you. You mentioned Jeremiah a bit ago in this program, Scott, as one of the prophets who was really mistreated and really abused; and the problem with Jeremiah...he was accused of being unpatriotic...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Because he preached a Word of the Lord against the Temple, and the people at that time thought the Temple was their ticket to security—that God could never, ever do anything that would hurt the Temple because that belonged to him; and Jeremiah said: You are wrong. Because of your sin, God is going to destroy the Temple; God is going to take you into exile; and they were so enraged that they wanted to kill him, and his life was only spared because a foreigner in the court somehow protected him, and instead he was put in a pit in prison.

So, often it is politics that get us upset and angry, and we care more about our opinions than we do about the Word of God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And sometimes that means...particularly in maybe North American context, we forget that rejected cornerstone image. The rejected one is the key. The way of weakness and sacrifice is the key; and I think so often in the Church today when we are frustrated with the wider society or if we are frustrated with even our own congregation or denomination, we are so tempted to take the root of power and of strength to force our opinions on people—to force the Gospel down people's throats—to force people to behave; and Jesus said: No, no, no, wait; I am the head of the corner, and I am the rejected stone; don't forget. That is the Gospel way—the Gospel way is weakness, is humility, is sacrifice. Do not forget who you were called to be. So, right; between hearing messages that we do not like, socioeconomically, politically, or spiritually, and the temptation to become a center of power, we too move ourselves further away from the kind of vineyard that God wants us to be, and the kind of spiritual fruit God wants us to produce.

DAVE BAST

When Jesus says in the parable that the tenants threw the son outside: Let's throw him out and get rid of him and kill him, it makes me think of that verse in Hebrews that says Jesus suffered outside the camp—outside the city—like the old sacrifice during the exodus; and we too, Hebrews says, need to be willing to go outside the city with him. We need to be able to stand even ostracism possibly, because he is the cornerstone—the rejected one—and we do build our lives on him. That is the key to me: Are you willing to hear what God has to say about him and build your life accordingly?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Dave Bast, and we hope you will join us again next time as we explore Jesus' answers to some gotcha questions that were designed to stir up trouble for Jesus in that last week of his life. Connect with us at groundworkonline.com to let us know what scripture passages or topics you would like to hear discussed on *Groundwork*.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/parable-of-the-tenants>

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