

THE BOOK OF MATTHEW

Lesson 71, Chapter 21 Continued 2

In Matthew chapter 21 Yeshua's journey to the cross is gaining speed as the proverbial snowball rolling down a steep hill. We find Him having now arrived at the place of His foretold and impending death: Jerusalem. In many ways it is ironic, or perhaps unfathomably tragic, that of all places for the divine Messiah of the Jewish people to suffer and die it would be the historical and spiritual capital of the Hebrew people.

As His popularity and recognition as a miracle healing Holy Man, a *Tzadik*, who has come in the spirit of the Son of David... Solomon... has become greater among the common people of the Jewish Holy Land, so has the wariness and dislike of Him become greater among the Jewish religious leadership. Essentially by coming to Jerusalem trailed by a large following and entering the Eastern Gate with much pomp and fanfare, Jesus has invaded the Jewish religious leaders' territory. His mere presence in Jerusalem threatens everything they stand for and control. Worse, every time they try to trap Him in some kind of theological debate, or try to say He doesn't properly obey the Law, or try to diminish His Jewishness, it backfires and exposes the leadership for their flimsy aura of righteousness that has little authentic foundation.

In our previous lesson, we found the religious leaderships of the Temple system and the Synagogue system joining forces to challenge Yeshua's authority to interpret and teach the Torah and the Prophets, and thus His right to lead a growing flock of disciples. In Matthew 21 verses 23 - 27 we read of this encounter and how, interestingly, it revolved around John the Baptist... a name that we hadn't heard in a while. While the Jewish religious leadership hoped to discredit Yeshua by revealing His lack of credentials that they considered mandatory,

Christ said His credentials were publicly, and undeniably, given to Him by John the Baptist. By making this claim Yeshua shifted the core of the dispute to whether or not John had the needed credentials, because if he didn't then John certainly didn't have the standing to ordain Yeshua for ministry. Trapped again, the religious authorities knew that no matter what answer they gave regarding John it would cause them an impossible dilemma. If they agreed that John had the proper credentials and they were given to him from Heaven, then it made Jesus credible. If they said that John was given his credentials by a committee of humans, it did the same. But if they said that John did not have the proper credentials then the people would rise up against them because they revered John as a Prophet. Naturally, when any of us lose such a public argument we also lose face; we don't usually accept our defeat and let it go. So this public humiliation only firmed the resolve of the Jewish religious authorities to dispose of this Galilean reformer that threatened their power base and perhaps even their abundant livelihoods.

Let's re-read a little more of chapter 21.

RE-READ MATTHEW CHAPTER 21:28 - 32

This passage is regularly called a Parable. In fact, the next passage that begins in verse 33 says: "Now listen to another Parable". So it seems undeniable that Yeshua is classifying what He just finished saying (and we just read) as a Parable. Or is that really the case?

The Greek word for Parable is ***parabole***. I've explained on numerous occasions that a true Hebrew Parable has several characteristics beginning with the opening words that make it clear that what is about to be said is a comparison of like to like. So, Jesus has started His Parables with words such as: "The Kingdom of Heaven is like". Or "To what we can we compare the Kingdom of Heaven?". As fairly recent research of ancient Jewish documents reveal... documents mostly containing the sayings of Rabbis from shortly after Christ's day to hundreds of years later... it is that the way that Yeshua began His Parables was the standard format and that Parable as a teaching method was rather common in Jewish culture. However other characteristics of a true Hebrew Parable are that they are fictional stories that seek to communicate a single moral point while making a like-for-like comparison. The so-called Parable of verses 28 - 32 doesn't meet most of these characteristics. So why is the term ***parabole*** used to describe the story, even by Jesus? But more, why is this

important to all students of God's Word and not just to academics or Theologians? Because if this is a true Parable as the Hebrew culture thought of it, then we are forced to search for but a single moral of the story and discard all other elements of the story as irrelevant. On the other hand, if what Yeshua is saying is something of a different kind of literary form, then we are freed to find several morals or instructions or comparisons tucked within it.

When we look at the Greek lexicons as to the meaning and use of that Greek term we find this:

parabolé

- 1) a placing of one thing by the side of another, juxtaposition, as of ships in battle
- 2) metaphorically
 - 2a) a comparing, comparison of one thing with another, likeness, similitude
 - 2b) an example by which a doctrine or precept is illustrated
 - 2c) a narrative, fictitious but agreeable to the laws and usages of human life, by which either the duties of men or the things of God, particularly the nature and history of God's kingdom are figuratively portrayed
 - 2d) a parable: an earthly story with a heavenly meaning
- 3) a pithy and instructive saying, involving some likeness or comparison and having preceptive or admonitory force
 - 3a) an aphorism, a maxim
 - 4) a proverb
- 5) an act by which one exposes himself or his possessions to danger, a venture, a risk

Here's the point: as the lexicons tell us, the Greek word ***parabole*** can be employed to express a wide array of literary forms and uses. It is more of a general word that describes numerous kinds of fictional stories, in a number of

settings, which can be used to make a single point or even several points. So we need to be conscious of the fact that Christ used fictional stories (all of which in Greek are called **parabole**) in more than one way. Some of them are true Hebrew Parables, and others are meant to impart something else. It is for us to discern which way He meant them because it goes a long way towards aiming us in the proper direction of how to interpret those stories. In this case, the **parabole** about the man with 2 sons is NOT a classic Parable in the Hebrew sense of it, which always begins with some version of "to what can the matter be compared?". Rather the man and his 2 sons is a fictional story that is told as a metaphor and meant to illustrate not only one, but several things. It probably rises to the level of allegory. None of this is negative or is it a problem. We just have to know which is which because Yeshua's immediate audience, and those to whom Matthew wrote His Gospel, **do** know the difference. Now that we, too, know, we can better dissect this story and extract the several intended meanings.

Yeshua is instructing and so addresses His audience like a teacher. His main audience remains as some unidentified members of the Jewish religious establishment. He says that when He's done with the story, He would like to hear their opinion about it. What Christ is really doing is continuing His frank indictment of not only these particular men but the Temple and Synagogue leadership in general. The story is rather straightforward. This fictional man goes to each of his 2 sons asking them to do some labor within the family vineyard. Quickly we learn that both sons are rather rebellious, yet they each react to their father's request in different ways. Son #1 is told to go and work in the vineyard. Quite disrespectfully he refuses; however later he thinks better of it and goes to the vineyard to work. Son #2 is then told to go work in the vineyard, he feigns respect (we read that he replies "I will **sir**") deceitfully indicating that he'll obey, but doesn't ever intend to show up. Son #1 at first refuses yet he works. Son #2 at first accepts but does not work. The short story ends and Christ asks: "Which of the two sons did what the father wanted?" His audience... the Jewish religious authorities... answers "the first one" and Jesus says that they answered correctly.

But the mood rapidly deteriorates. Yeshua compares the first son to prostitutes and tax collectors. Prostitutes and tax collectors were seen as inherently outside the scope of the Torah. That is, their lifestyles were so wicked and counter to Jewish values that despite being Hebrew by birth they were considered by normative Jewish society as having made themselves gentile-like in their behavior... born as insiders, but choosing to become outsiders. And yet, says Christ, even these prostitutes and tax collectors will be allowed entry into the

Kingdom of Heaven ahead of these religious authorities He is talking to. The words "insult" and "offensive" are not strong enough. I think it is hard for us to imagine the depth of injury that Yeshua has done to these men who consider themselves as the pinnacles of holiness and righteousness. These men that are widely accepted and held up as the ultimate Jewish insiders are told by this Galilean man to their faces that God sees them as lower than prostitutes and tax collectors. Yikes!

The second son represents the priests and scribes who do not believe in John's credentials, and therefore in their eyes, Jesus has no credentials. Bottom line: they are opponents of John and Jesus, and therefore opponents of God. They are the ones who were clearly shown the path to righteousness by John the Immerser, but they refused to trust in what John was and came to do even though they acted as though they did. But the tax collectors and the prostitutes DID trust in John, and so despite their sin relegating them to the lowest level of Jewish society due to the disgust of their professions, they were invited into the Kingdom of Heaven. Thus unlike the first son that at first refused, but then saw things more clearly and did what was righteous, the Jewish religious leaders acted like the second son that displayed a certain level of obedience to the Law and to God, but then exposed themselves as deceivers and fakes.

Since this story is not a true Parable in the Hebrew sense of it and instead it is a fictional story meant to illustrate a number of things, let me lay it out for you. The father of the sons represents God the Father. The first son represents the common Jewish people... even the worst of them. The second son represents the stubborn and prideful Jewish religious leadership. The vineyard represents Israel. In the end, this is a rather simple story with several rather easily made connections. Although it is also a hard-hitting story that brings a number of ramifications along with it.

The religious leadership (like the 2nd son) that outwardly seems so amiable and approving of John, are inwardly stone-like. They needed to **appear** to be accepting of John because it pleased the people; but it was phony. They never intended to act on John's call to repent from their sin, to adopt a new and holy mindset, and to actually start behaving truly righteously. It is one thing to show up every time the Church opens its doors and to say all the right things; it is quite another to sincerely adopt and act upon God's truth.

This metaphorical story that Jesus has told and then firmly connected the

religious leaders of the Jews to, has another aspect that we shouldn't overlook. It sort of takes us back a few chapters in Matthew's Gospel to what I have previously said is, to me, the most terrifying passage in the entire Bible. Terrifying not so much for professed **non**-Believers, but rather for those of us who claim allegiance to God and His Son.

^{CJB} **Matthew 7:21-23** ²¹ *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord!' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, only those who do what my Father in heaven wants.* ²² *On that Day, many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord! Didn't we prophesy in your name? Didn't we expel demons in your name? Didn't we perform many miracles in your name?'* ²³ *Then I will tell them to their faces, 'I never knew you! Get away from me, you workers of lawlessness!'*

While this warning applies to all who outwardly say they are Believers, this applies doubly so to the leaders of the Church... including of course Messianic Synagogues... and to all teachers of God's Word. And yet the final words of Matthew 21:32 contain some of the best news imaginable. It is that the worst sort of sinners, and those whom the societies of the world have relegated as their outsiders, have hope. A change of mind, and a new and sincere trust in God brings the happiest of results; the Kingdom of Heaven welcomes you. The past is the past, and your future becomes victorious and glorious. Let's move on to the next story in Matthew 21.

RE-READ MATTHEW CHAPTER 21:33 - end

It seems Christ still was not satisfied that He had sufficiently chastised the religious leadership and so tells another **parabole**. Like the one we just finished discussing, this next one is also more metaphor and allegory than true Hebrew Parable. As much as I am not a fan of allegorical teaching in Church sermons, nonetheless it doesn't mean that the allegories aren't necessarily true. And here Yeshua employs allegory to reveal some important spiritual truths. I'll say upfront (and repeat it later) that once again we find a vineyard at the core of the story meaning that Israel is at the core of the story. Yet there are some other nuances about this narrative that history has preserved and helps us to better understand how Jews in general would have taken the meaning and application.

The tale is actually spun around the beginning words of Isaiah chapter 5 and I think you will immediately see the connection. Here's a few verses of it.

CJB **Isaiah 5:1** *I want to sing a song for someone I love, a song about my loved one and his vineyard. My loved one had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. ² He dug up its stones and cleared them away, planted it with the choicest vines, built a watchtower in the middle of it, and carved out in its rock a winepress. He expected it to produce good grapes, but it produced only sour, wild grapes. ³ Now, citizens of Yerushalayim and people of Y'hudah, judge between me and my vineyard. ⁴ What more could I have done for my vineyard that I haven't already done in it? So why, when I expected good grapes, did it produce sour, wild grapes? ⁵ Now come, I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard: I will remove its hedge, and [its grapes] will be eaten up; I will break through its fence, and [its vines] will be trampled down. ⁶ I will let it go to waste: it will be neither pruned nor hoed, but overgrown with briars and thorns. I will also order the clouds not to let rain fall on it. ⁷ Now the vineyard of ADONAI-Tzva'ot is the house of Isra'el, and the men of Y'hudah are the plant he delighted in. So he expected justice, but look- bloodshed!- and righteousness, but listen- cries of distress!*

Notice in Isaiah how God explains straightaway that the vineyard is meant to represent Israel.

I'll begin unpacking this farmer and the wicked tenants story by reminding you that Yeshua is still speaking primarily to the Temple and Synagogue authorities (although without doubt other ears are listening) and so it is mostly tailored for them, even though it has some elements that speak of Israel in general (the vineyard) as we find in Isaiah 5, which Jesus no doubt modeled this story around. However, we're going to do something in reverse. Rather than our first going through the **parabole** point by point, I'm going to tell you in advance what each element in the story represents.

1) The vineyard is Israel and its meaning can be expanded to include the End Times Kingdom of Heaven.

2) The farmer that owned and planted the vineyard is God the Father.

3) The tenants that the farmer rented the vineyard to are the Jewish religious authorities but in this instance, they can probably be slightly narrowed down to mean the Jerusalem-based religious leaders who were the highest of the leadership of both Temple and Synagogue.

4) The crop or the fruit of the harvest is that portion which is owed to God by the religious leadership. That is, the fruit or crop are those Hebrews that have been prepared and nurtured by the religious leadership... God's representatives on earth.

5) The mistreatment and the non-acceptance of the farmer's servants represent the rejection and hostility towards God's Prophets.

6) The sending and the repudiation of the farmer's own son represents God sending Yeshua to Israel, and the disdain and dismissal the Jewish religious leadership have for Him.

7) The new tenants of the vineyard that replace the destroyed ones equal those religious leaders who sincerely trust in God and His Messiah Yeshua, and act accordingly.

One other thing that I want you to be acutely aware of. The bad guys in this story are NOT Israel (the Jewish people) in general, and the good guys are NOT gentiles in general. Rather this entire story is about the Jewish religious leadership... those God has allowed to be in charge of His people.

So; this farmer plants a vineyard. It was a new vineyard. And, as was rather standard in that era, he built a wall around it to not only mark its boundaries but also to help keep critters out that could eat up the harvest. Next, he builds a wine vat. The vat described is the ancient way of extracting the juice from the grapes, and while still in use in Jesus's day, better more efficient ways were also now in use. The ancient-style wine vat usually consisted of a large rock that had two depressions carved out, one higher than the other. In the first depression the whole grapes were laid where a person would stomp on them. As the juice came out it would stream through a small channel that was cut between the upper and lower depressions. Once the juice reached the lower depression and it filled up, it was removed for further processing and then fermentation.

The farmer also built a watchtower in his vineyard. A watchtower was used as a place for a caretaker to stay for shelter, and also to be on the lookout for larger animals that might come to chew on the grapevines, and also for people who might come to steal from the vineyard. In truth, neither the watchtower nor the wine press play a role in the story other than to say that the vineyard was properly planted, growing, and everything had been set in place for it to be

properly tended and then harvested. In other words, it was fully equipped and complete.

So after the farmer who owns the vineyard establishes it and gets it going, he turns it over to others to run and even to profit from it to some extent. Of course, as the landlord-tenant relationship implies, the landlord is the owner and the tenants are just renters. The renters have no rights beyond whatever the landlord gives to them. As the story continues the grapes mature and it is time for the harvest. The farmer sends 3 servants to collect his portion of the crop that is payment for the tenants being allowed to farm and use the vineyard. However, the ungrateful and criminal tenants not only refuse to give the farmer what is rightly His, they harm His servants. One they beat up; another they kill; the 3rd they stone. Let's pause here before we complete the story to incorporate what each element of this story represents so far.

God establishes Israel as a new group of people set apart as His own. He provides the Torah (God's laws and commands) to them as the protective wall (a fence) around His people, and uses some of the people as warrior-guards to defend Israel both spiritually and physically so that it may produce healthy members for God's Kingdom. He leaves Israel in the charge of leaders whose job it is to see to it that Israel produces Kingdom members abundantly. But, when God decides it's time to check up on His people He sends His Prophets as His representatives, and some are beaten up, others are harmed and run-off, and still others are killed.

Back to our story. The farmer, distressed at seeing what had happened to the servants he had sent decides he'll take the rather serious, even dangerous, step of sending his own son on his behalf to oversee the harvest, certain that these wicked tenants would relent and obey him now. But no, they decide they'll kill the farmer's son as well with the idea that they would take possession of the vineyard and therefore all that it produced. So, they grabbed the farmer's son, threw him outside the vineyard, where they killed him. That's the end of the story.

Let's pause and see how this plays out using the elements that are being represented in the story.

God sees what the Israelite leaders have done to His Prophets that He has sent to Israel... they have been rejected and killed... so later He decides that He'll send His own son, Yeshua, to Israel to check on and oversee God's people.

Jesus, as God's son, who in Middle Eastern cultures is essentially the Father's agent and is to be treated and respected exactly the same way God ought to be treated and respected, was recognized as God's Son but the leaders of Israel didn't want to accept Him because they wanted it all for themselves. They wanted to own and run Israel as they saw fit. So they plotted to kill Messiah Yeshua and steal Israel (Yeshua's inheritance) from Him and therefore from God the Father.

The story completed, Christ asks the Jewish religious leaders what they think such a farmer would do about this horrific and unjust situation. They correctly answer that the farmer will come and destroy those vicious men that He had left in charge of His vineyard and turn it over to others whom he trusts. In other words, the farmer would simply exercise reasonable and lawful judgment upon these irresponsible, negligent, and criminal men to destroy them and give their leadership rights to others that were more loyal and obedient to the farmer.

Now; sometimes it's good to ask ourselves what the reasoning is behind Yeshua picking the subjects He does to mold His many fictional stories around in order to teach some points that He wants to get across. It's not a difficult question to answer, really. He chose situations that people in the Holy Land were familiar with, and social and religious issues that were front and center in His day. So what about the farmer and the vineyard? You see, from a Jew's 1st century perspective, the farmer was an absentee landlord of which there were many at that time. He was rich, he held land in the Holy Land and would turn it over to tenant farmers. Then at harvest season, the absentee landlord would send certain of his servants to collect taxes from the tenant farmers. He really didn't care what went on provided he got his money; and most of the time the absentee landlord was a foreigner.

Thus the Galileans, being mostly farmers and herders, had strong views on the subject of absentee landlords that had no connection to the Jewish people or the land other than to collect money for their coffers. It's doubtful the Jewish religious authority was affected much by such a situation, but the people they lorded over certainly were. Thus the core elements of the story would have been of keen interest to Yeshua's listeners, and also to Matthew's Jewish readers some decades later.

This story of the farmer and the wicked tenants is concluded with Yeshua doing what He often does: quoting Scripture. In this case, it is from Psalm 118 verses 22 and 23. However for the sake of better context, here are a few more verses.

CJB Psalm 118:22-26 ²² *The very rock that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone!* ²³ *This has come from ADONAI, and in our eyes it is amazing.* ²⁴ *This is the day ADONAI has made, a day for us to rejoice and be glad.* ²⁵ *Please, ADONAI! Save us! Please, ADONAI! Rescue us!* **26 Blessed is he who comes in the name of ADONAI. We bless you from the house of ADONAI.**

Perhaps you recall that Psalm 118 is what was known as the Hallel. It had become Tradition to use various parts of it during the celebrations of the 3 pilgrimage festivals that the Law of Moses called for. So Yeshua attached this portion of the widely known Hallel to His story and His open criticism of the Jerusalem religious leadership to make a connection between some of the words of the Hallel and Himself. He makes the cornerstone that the builders rejected equate to the farmer's son that was thrown out of the vineyard and killed. And who can miss the plea to God for salvation and deliverance in the Hallel that is essentially the entire purpose for which Jesus Christ was born, and is now in Jerusalem to bring about. So when we begin to think about all that is happening surrounding Christ, from a 1st century Jewish perspective Matthew's Gospel blooms with beautiful color and meaning.

To sum up what everything He has said is intended to impart to the Jewish religious leaders, Christ says in verse 43:

CJB Matthew 21:43 ⁴³ *Therefore, I tell you that the Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to the kind of people that will produce its fruit!"*

So Jesus's story has turned from fictional, to representative, to a serious threat. The religious authorities finally had their excuse to do away with this Galilean Holy Man.

Some Bible versions have a verse 44 (it is not present in the CJB). The NAB and most others of the most recognized versions do have it.

NAB Matthew 21:44 *[The one who falls on this stone will be dashed to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.]"*

The NAB properly puts brackets around this verse because it is nearly certainly a gloss inserted by some Christian editor from a later period, and it didn't exist in

the early Greek manuscripts. So we'll not deal with it as it really doesn't add anything to the narrative.

The final verse of this chapter says that the religious authorities knew Yeshua was directing this charge towards them and because they were able to take His words as a threat, they intended to have Him arrested immediately. They would have except Jesus was very popular, the city of Jerusalem was bursting at the seams full of Jewish pilgrims that were already operating in a heightened emotional state, and any attempt to arrest this popular **Tzadik** would surely have resulted in rioting.

When we're told that the people thought Him a prophet, we need to not be thinking in Old Testament Prophet terms. Rather in the early 1st century a prophet was thought of as a seer or an astute interpreter of the Torah and dispenser of Wisdom. These 1st century prophets nonetheless were revered and the people would not have stood still for them being harassed by the religious elite.

A final comment. Very sadly and wrongly, mainstream institutional Christianity has for 1700 years said that this story of the farmer and the wicked tenants is about God taking authority away from Israel and handing it over to the gentile Church. That is, it is yet another false pillar used to prop up the Hellish Replacement Theology Doctrine that has God transferring all His blessings from Israel to the gentile-controlled Church, leaving only the biblical curses for Israel to suffer. Hopefully, you have noticed in this last story that only the **leadership** of Israel is being threatened by Yeshua of having their leadership authority removed; and there is no hint that anyone but new and more faithful Israelite leaders that trust in Yeshua would replace them. Gentiles play no role; there is no sudden switch in ethnicity. Nor do the common Jewish citizens play a role (other than as victims); and there is no hint of some kind of new gentile-fashioned faith to replace the Hebrew faith.

So I want to leave you with some food for thought. I believe that one of the most hypocritical and misleading doctrines ever concocted and mouthed throughout Church history is that gentiles have accepted Christ because the Jews didn't. Gentiles have by no means made trust in Jesus a universal characteristic; not in the 1st century and not in the 21st. The high end of the estimates are that only 3 in 10 gentiles in the world today are Believers; meaning that 7 out of 10 gentiles are not.

We'll begin Matthew chapter 22 next time.