

KINGDOM RESPONSIBILITIES

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Scripture: Matthew 21: 33-46

“Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard and put a wall around it and dug a wine press in it, and built a tower, and rented it out to vine-growers and went on a journey. When the harvest time approached, he sent his slaves to the vine-growers to receive his produce. The vine-growers took his slaves and beat one, and killed another, and stoned a third. Again he sent another group of slaves larger than the first; and they did the same thing to them. But afterward he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ But when the vine-growers saw the son, they said among themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance.’ 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 vine-growers?” (That’s the question Jesus posed to them, and they responded). They said to Him, “He will bring those wretches to a wretched end, and will rent out the vineyard to other vine-growers who will pay him the proceeds at the proper seasons.”

Jesus said to them, “Did you never read in the Scriptures,

*‘The stone which the builders rejected,
This became the chief corner stone;
This came about from the Lord,
And it is marvelous in our eyes’?*

Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people, producing the fruit of it. And he who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust.”

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard His parables, they understood that He was speaking about them. When they sought to seize Him, they feared the people, because they considered Him to be a prophet.”

A little over a month back, the last Sunday in August, we looked at the preceding verses from this passage, and it started with the scribes and the Pharisees, the priests asking Jesus with what authority He did all these things. Jesus then posed a counter question to them when He asked them, “First you tell me, with what authority did on the Baptist baptize, with authority from heaven or from men?” They thought about it; it kind of caught them in a bit of a quandary, because if they said from heaven, then Jesus would counter and say, “Well, then why didn’t you listen to him?” Remember, John the Baptist had, at one point, said, “Behold the Lamb of God who takest away the sins of the world,” acknowledging that Jesus was the Messiah. But if they said from man, then they would incur the wrath of the people who had flocked in hoards to hear John the Baptist, and were baptized by him. So they chose to remain quiet and they said, “We will not answer,” and Jesus also responded and said, “Then I won’t answer your question.”

He then told them the parable of the two sons: the father had said to go work in the vineyard. One said, “I will go,” and didn’t. And the other said, “I will not go,” and then went. Then Jesus said, “Which one did the will of the father?” And we looked at that in some depth.

But now Jesus continues on and He says, “Listen to another parable.” So, in a way, He is still engaging with the Pharisees about their question about the authority that He has, and this ongoing

strife and tension that Jesus has with the Pharisees. I'd like for us to also look behind the scenes to see why there was so much of angst. Why did they come against Jesus so strongly, and why did Jesus not back away? Why did He continue to confront them? But we look at that as we look through this parable.

A landowner builds a winepress, gives it to wine growers on rent, and goes on a journey. At the time of harvest, he sends his slaves; the wine growers kill, beat some, stone the others. Then he sends another group. They do the same thing to them. Then the king thinks: Okay! If I send my son, they will respect my son. But they think, "Here comes the son. If we kill him, then the inheritance is ours," and that's exactly what they do. Then Jesus asks what will the owner do now? They respond of course, that he will treat them badly. In fact, they are called wretches. They also say that this would be taken away and given to somebody else.

Then Jesus finishes that and He says to them, "Did you never read in the scriptures: 'The stone which the builders rejected, this became the chief corner stone'?" This came from the Lord, and Jesus is quoting from Psalm 18 here. He is saying indeed that He is the chief corner stone. So He is moving the story away from a parable, and He is interjecting Himself as the Son who is coming to the Pharisees, the scribes, the elders, the teachers of the law who haven't recognized Him, and who have been given a mandate by God to be teachers to people around them, a job that they have not done.

So I want us to pull back a little from this story and go back to the point that I was making at the beginning, where I said: Let's understand a little about the tension between the Pharisees. For that, we need to go back all the way to Abraham, when God said, "I'll give you a son and then, through Him, all the nations of the world would be blessed."

Then we move from there to Moses and how Moses then goes in and gets the children of Israel out and they meet at Mount Sinai. Now at Mount Sinai, God meets Moses and He says, "I want to make a covenant with the children of Israel. I want them to be a holy people, a nation of priests, my prized possession, and if they will obey my commandments, then all of this will be true." so Moses takes it to the people and says, "This is what God says that you would be His prized position, a nation of priests, a holy people, if you will obey all that God is saying to you." And the people respond and say, "All of this we will do." Now notice, he wasn't talking at this point only to the Aaronic priesthood that would ensue, because that was not yet in place.

Then in Exodus 19:20-23 God then lays out for them the Ten Commandments, and all the other things that they must keep in mind as a covenant people, as a community who reflect and showcase the Living God. The mandate for them is that they would be a priestly nation. In other words, that all the people would so imbibe the behavior of being God's chosen people that they would be a light to people all around. That was the mandate that they were originally given – to be a city on a hill, that they would, through their lives and behavior and their allegiance to Yahweh, be able to showcase Yahweh to the world, something that they failed to do.

So, the allusion is to prophets who have come there, who have been spurned, who have constantly told them, "Come back to God," and them not doing it. And God constantly saying to them, "You've got to be my people. I love you!" bringing prophets to them, trying to change them. And we see that they just began to be a part of the world, that they were immersed in their own cultures. That was the problem that Jesus was confronting – that these people, the Pharisees, the scribes, the elders, all of them were priestly people. They were a people who needed to be a shining light to a world around them. Instead they had disconnected from the King, and had begun to have their own kingdom in which they were the main people. They were the ones who commanded respect. They

were the ones who walked around with great pride portraying authority without any allegiance to the King of kings, and in whose kingdom they were supposed to be operating in.

So Jesus says to them in v. 43, "Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and be given to a nation producing the fruit of it. And he who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust." This is just a little bit of parallelism that has come in, because it comes actually from Isaiah ch. 8. Sometimes we get a little confused with that line trying to see what it means. But really it is just Jesus quoting again from the Old Testament:

Isaiah 8:9

*"Be broken, O peoples, and be shattered;
And give ear, all remote places of the earth.
Gird yourselves, yet be shattered;
Gird yourselves, yet be shattered.
Devise a plan, but it will be thwarted;
State a proposal, but it will not stand,
For God is with us."*

v. 14 *"Then He shall become a sanctuary;
But to both the houses of Israel, a stone to strike and a rock to stumble over,
And a snare and a trap for the inhabitants of Jerusalem.
Many will stumble over them,
Then they will fall and be broken;
They will even be snared and caught."*

Basically, Isaiah was talking about the time when the Assyrians would come. He was prophesying that a time would come when they would be taken into captivity, and this is what would happen when the people rejected God. Then, they would be shattered and broken. And Jesus was alluding to that and saying, "When you reject the Son, it's the same thing. In a sense, you're alienated as they were when taken into captivity, taken away from God. So also, when you reject the King, the Son, it's the same thing. You too will be moved away. So that's the allusion to Isaiah 8.

Coming back to Matthew 21:43, Jesus says, "Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people, producing the fruit of it." The chosen race, the holy nation, a nation of priests, all of that was for the children of Israel. And yet, Peter says in 1 Peter 2 that we, you and I, Christians today are what He calls a holy nation, a royal priesthood. *You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession.* All of those phrases that were used for Israel are now being used for you and for me. But it also ends by saying why we are now this holy nation, a people for God's own possession – *so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.* We then can begin to showcase who God is, what kind of a God He is, what kind of a people we are as followers of the most High God.

I like the way Paul opens it up for us in Acts 13:46

Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and said, "It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you first; since you repudiate it and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles."

He was speaking to the Jews and saying, "You've rejected it, repudiated it. And so now we turn and we offer it to the Gentiles." So you and I are the recipients of it.

But beloved, even as we respond to it and we say: those words that have been used, they are so beautiful – God’s own possession, a kingdom of priests, a royal priesthood – all those lovely phrases that are applied to you and me, along with it also comes the fact that we need to be very careful about the way we handle the kingdom of God as well. Jesus said that because of the way they handled it, it would be taken away from them. You and I who have received it must now be very careful that our allegiance to the King stays strong, that we don’t have small kingdoms without being connected to the Kingdom, that we showcase the qualities of the King in all that we do. The behavior of a Kingdom community must be observed by people all around us, and we need to be very careful that we do.

Paul underscores that for us in Romans ch. 11. I’m giving you scripture because I think this is a serious word that we have today that we shouldn’t take lightly, that we can take joy in who we are as sons and daughters, but make sure that we also have a responsibility in being children of the Kingdom of God.

Romans 11:13-21

But I am speaking to you who are Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle of Gentiles, I magnify my ministry, if somehow I might move to jealousy my fellow countrymen and save some of them. (He is talking about the Jews). For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? If the first piece of dough is holy, the lump is also; and if the root is holy, the branches are too.

But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive, (talking about us) were grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the rich root of the olive tree, (we have been grafted into God, into His kingdom) do not be arrogant toward the branches; but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you. You will say then, “Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.” Quite right, they were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith. Do not be conceited, but fear; for if God did not spare the natural branches, He will not spare you either.

I think that this is a good word of caution for us, for sometimes we can continue to live our lives just doing what we want to do, and not really thinking of ourselves as Kingdom people whose call is to be light in the world. And God has given us that mandate. A chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a prized possession – all of these beautiful words for you and me. But along with it comes the responsibility of living as a citizen of God’s kingdom in such a way that every behavior of ours reflects the goodness of our God, and He is glorified through you and me.

So beloved, as we look at this passage of scripture, while we may look at it in the light of what Jesus was talking to the Pharisees, and then the tendency might be to end it there and think: My gosh! They lost it. They didn’t see it. I think we need to take it beyond that and apply it to our lives and say, “If those words were true for them, it is true for us as well.” For if we are citizens of God’s kingdom, then there must be fruit from the kingdom that we offer up to the Lord. And God expects that from you and from me.

I think this text gives us a wonderful sense of who we are, but also puts upon us a sense of responsibility that we have as ones who are sons and daughters of the Most High God, princes and princesses of the King of kings, and the Lord of lords. We have a duty to showcase the values of our God, of the kingdom to the world around us. That’s our challenge today.

I love this song, an old chorus that says:

Let the beauty of Jesus be seen in me,
All His wonderful passions and purity.
O Thou Spirit divine, all my nature refined,
Till the beauty of Jesus is seen in me.

Beloved, when it is seen in us, God is glorified. May that be our prayer, yours and mine, today.
Amen.
