

Matthew 21:23-22:14 • Three Parables for Israel

Introduction

Walk with the Word focuses on the Inductive Study Approach with the goal of not just understanding the meaning of Scripture, but to determine how God is telling us to put it into practice personally, what we often refer to as “application”. However, we must not confuse “application” with the original, historical context of any given passage. It is important to understand that many passages had a specific meaning for their day, may have alluded to a future prophetic meaning, and it is only after understanding these that we should seek a personal application. In other words, we do not want a personal application for us today to negate the original meaning at the time a biblical event or teaching took place. In their original context these parables specifically targeted the nation Israel and, as Christ’s earthly ministry was winding down, what was going to happen to Israel and why. They are a rich source of personal application, but we also need to understand the original, literal meaning in order to understand the greater prophetic significance as well.

²³When He entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to Him while He was teaching, and said, “By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?”

²⁴Jesus said to them, “I will also ask you one thing, which if you tell Me, I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. ²⁵The baptism of John was from what source, from heaven or from men?”

And they began reasoning among themselves, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ He will say to us, ‘Then why did you not believe him?’ ²⁶But if we say, ‘From men,’ we fear the people; for they all regard John as a prophet.” ²⁷And answering Jesus, they said, “We do not know.”

He also said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.

[Read v.23-27]

Q: Why does Jesus make the issue of John the Baptist’s ministry the central focus where these leaders are concerned?

A: John’s ministry was “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins”. (Mk. 1:4; Lk. 3:3) Those who embraced this message and repented were the ones whose hearts were prepared to accept the Messiah.

When all the people and the tax collectors heard this, they acknowledged God’s justice, having been baptized with the baptism of John.

— Luke 7:29

Q: How would the way they accepted or rejected John reflect the way they accepted or rejected Christ?

A: Even the people acknowledged the authority of John’s message when they said, “While John performed no sign, yet everything John said about this man is true”. (Jn. 10:41) Jesus is first and foremost testing their faith in God’s Word. For everyone it is the same: signs and wonders make no difference if the greater message accompanying them is not first accepted.

So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.

— Romans 10:17

Application: God does not reveal new truth until we obey what has already been revealed.

²⁸“But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, ‘Son, go work today in the vineyard.’

²⁹And he answered, ‘I will not’; but afterward he regretted it and went.

³⁰“The man came to the second and said the same thing; and he answered, ‘I will, sir’; but he did not go.

³¹“Which of the two did the will of his father?”

They said, “The first.”

Jesus said to them, “Truly I say to you that the tax collectors and prostitutes will get into the kingdom of God before you.

[Read v.28-32]

Q: What is the “moral of the story” to this parable, so to speak?

A: The primary one is probably that obedience cures disobedience. Another is the age-old adage, “Actions speak louder than words”.

Q: How is Jesus actually providing the answer to the question they refused to answer regarding John the Baptist in the previous section?

A: He is stating categorically that they did **not** accept John’s ministry as coming from heaven.

Q: What should have been a powerful testimony to the religious authorities confirming the authenticity of John the Baptist’s ministry?

A: It was characterized by the repentance of sinners even of the worst kind. Additionally, it contrasts who the **real** sinners are, those who refuse

³²For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him; but the tax collectors and prostitutes did believe him; and you, seeing this, did not even feel remorse afterward so as to believe him.

to accept God's Word and repent, even if they are purported to be religious.

Q: How is John characterized by Christ in v.32? Why might this have been a particularly powerful statement to the authorities of the day?

A: John is said to have come "to you in the way of righteousness", in other words someone calling others to repentance. Peter used the same description of Noah as "a preacher of righteousness". (2 Pe. 2:5) They are both messengers of God trying to prepare people for what is to come. The religious authorities of the day, for the most part, believed themselves to be righteous through their own efforts and position.

Q: What does it say about the authorities who witnessed John's ministry and "did not even feel remorse afterward so as to believe him"?

A: It is a picture of a hardened, prideful heart willfully unresponsive to God's Word. They could neither acknowledge what God was doing in others through either John or Christ much less allow it to be accepted personally. Although they spoke at length about God's Word, they did not actually put it into practice and therefore could not acknowledge it when confronted personally with it.

Application: God measures righteousness not by what one says but by what one does. Nothing cures disobedience except obedience.

[Read v.33-46]

³³Listen 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. ³⁴When the harvest time approached, he sent his slaves to the vine-growers to receive his produce. ³⁵The vine-growers took his slaves and beat one, and killed another, and stoned a third.

³⁶Again he sent another group of slaves larger than the first; and they did the same thing to them. ³⁷But afterward he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.'

³⁸But when the vine-growers saw the son, they said among themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance.'

³⁹They took him, and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. ⁴⁰Therefore when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vine-growers?"

⁴¹They 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."

⁴²Jesus said to them, "Did you never read in the Scriptures,

'THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS
REJECTED,

Q: What is similar about the setting of this and the previous parable?

A: They both take place in a vineyard and both involve being sent to work in accordance with the wishes of the owner.

Q: How does this parable escalate the issue described in the previous parable?

A: Whereas in the previous parable the issue was limited to whether or not one actually listened and obeyed, the issue here is outright rebellion. It foreshadows the fact that they do not merely reject God's Word by rejecting the Messiah and all the Prophets sent to them, but that they actually mistreat and kill them just as they will kill Christ the Son of the Father literally sent to them. This is not an allegory as they have been plotting Jesus' death for nearly the entire 3-1/2 years of His ministry. (Jn. 5:18; 7:16-25; 8:37, 40; Jn. 11:53, etc.)

Q: What is ironic about their conclusion in v.41 of what will happen to "those wretches"?

A: They articulated their own judgment which God brought about because of what they did by taking away their spiritual privileges, destroying Jerusalem and its associated institutions, and giving their blessings to the Church.

Q: Why might it be particularly powerful that Jesus quotes Psalm 118 and describes Himself as "the stone which the builders rejected"?

A: The religious authorities of the day were called by Peter "the builders" when he again quoted this Scripture to them in Acts 4:11. As further articulated by Paul in Rom. 9:33 and by Peter in 1 Pe. 2:4-8, Christ was a stumbling stone to Israel but the foundation stone to the Church.

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THIS BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER
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⁴³“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. ⁴⁴And he who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust.”

⁴⁵When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard His parables, they understood that He was speaking about them. ⁴⁶When they sought to seize Him, they feared the people, because they considered Him to be a prophet.

¹Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying, ²“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son. ³And he sent out his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding feast, and they were unwilling to come. ⁴Again he sent out other slaves saying, ‘Tell those who have been invited, ‘Behold, I have prepared my dinner; my oxen and my fattened livestock are all butchered and everything is ready; come to the wedding feast.’”
⁵But they paid no attention and went their way, one to his own farm, another to his business, ⁶and the rest seized his slaves and mistreated them and killed them.

⁷“But the king was enraged, and he sent his armies and destroyed those murderers and set their city on fire. ⁸Then he said to his slaves, ‘The wedding is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy. ⁹Go therefore to the main highways, and as many as you find there, invite to the wedding feast.’ ¹⁰Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered together all they found, both evil and good; and the wedding hall was filled with dinner guests.

¹¹“But when the king came in to look over the dinner guests, he saw a man there who was not dressed in wedding clothes, ¹²and he said to him, ‘Friend,

And coming to Him as to a living stone which has been rejected by men, but is choice and precious in the sight of God, you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For this is contained in Scripture: “BEHOLD, I LAY IN ZION A CHOICE STONE, A PRECIOUS CORNER stone, AND HE WHO BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED.” This precious value, then, is for you who believe; but for those who disbelieve, “THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS REJECTED, THIS BECAME THE VERY CORNER stone,” and, “A STONE OF STUMBLING AND A ROCK OF OFFENSE”; for they stumble because they are disobedient to the word, and to this doom they were also appointed.

— 1 Peter 2:4–8

Q: How does Christ’s nature as the stone spoken of here have a dual effect for those both accepting and rejecting Him?

A: The sinner “*who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces*” – meaning they will be reconciled by their old life being shattered and become a new creation in Christ, but the rebel who resists Christ “*on whomever it falls, it will scatter them like dust*” – they will be irreparably crushed by the stone in judgment. The issue of Christ is always the deciding factor.

Application: *It always comes down to a matter of what one personally does with Christ. God the Father can never be reached without coming to Him through God the Son.*

[Read v.1-14]

Q: When this parable was originally spoken to its original audience, who did the king, the son, the slaves, and the wedding guests represent?

A: The king was God the Father, the son was His Son Jesus the Messiah, the slaves were the Prophets and Apostles (Mt. 10), and the wedding guests depicted Israel.

Q: Why is Israel described as “unwilling to come”?

A: Time and time again they rejected God’s Word through the Prophets, His messengers, the Apostles, and even the Messiah Himself. Rejecting the verbal invitation in this parable mirrors their repeated rejection of the Word both written and given through various messengers.

“You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it.”

— Acts 7:51–53

Q: How do the reactions in v.5-6 depict the two basic categories of unbelievers?

A: One is simply indifferent, the other openly hostile. Throughout Scripture they express themselves on the one hand as contemptuous scornors, on the other as bitter persecutors.

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how did you come in here without wedding clothes?’ And the man was speechless. ¹³Then the king said to the servants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

¹⁴“For many are called, but few are chosen.”

Q: What is v.7 most likely referring to?

A: The literal judgment of God in 70AD when Jerusalem and the Temple would be destroyed in the course of the Roman invasion and subjugation of Israel.

Q: How could there still be a wedding, so to speak, if Jerusalem, the Temple, and the nation of Israel were all destroyed?

A: The Jews had come to believe in things like the city of Jerusalem and the Temple more than the true spiritual meaning they represented. Their righteousness was measured not by their obedience to God's Word, but in maintaining a religious institution. Here the King of Heaven destroys them and still proceeds with the wedding, a picture of Jesus the Bridegroom and His Bride the Church, showing that those things did not and could not save anyone in and of themselves. In v.7-10 we see the invitation extended to the entire world through the Church.

Q: What do you suppose is the greater spiritual significance of the wedding clothes in v.11-14?

A: Although all are originally called (“*both evil and good*”), a new Creation in Christ is someone who has been clothed by the King in garments **He** has supplied, a teaching that we could never attain our own righteousness (symbolized by our own dirty clothing) but the imputed righteousness of Christ (symbolized by clean, pure clothing provided by the King). This speaks of the gift of righteousness that God provides through Christ for all who believe.

He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

— 2 Corinthians 5:21

Application: *This is a warning to false professors of the faith not to respond to the invitation outwardly without first receiving Christ inwardly.*

Q: What might be particularly disturbing about this parable where the mis-clothed guest is concerned?

A: He was actually present at the wedding feast long enough to see what he could have had before being thrown out. This is why Scripture speaks so seriously about those who at one time embrace the faith but fall away from it. (Heb. 6)

Application: *Rejection of God's Word is rejection of Christ Himself and comes with permanent, eternal consequences.*

Overall Application

Herein is contained the spiritual history of Israel:

- *She was chosen by God to be fruitful as expressed in the vineyard and the fig tree but failed to bear fruit.*
- *She disobeyed the Father. (Parable of the Two Sons)*
- *She crucified the Son. (Parable of the Vineyard)*
- *She resisted the Spirit. (Parable of the Marriage Feast)*

Today she is set aside and the Church the Bride of Christ has been raised in her place.

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But does this mean God is through with Israel? Scripture clearly indicates that in the Last Days He will again turn to Israel, that the time of Israel's separation is not permanent:

*For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery—so that you will not be wise in your own estimation—that a partial hardening has happened to Israel **until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in**; and so all Israel will be saved;*

— Romans 11:25-26a

In fact, Paul warns us that just as God removed the unproductive Jewish branches and grafted Gentile (the Church) branches in their place, those who do not learn the lessons experienced by Israel will themselves suffer the same consequences.

*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.** Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God's kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. **And they also, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again.** For if you were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these who are the natural branches be grafted into their own olive tree?*

— Romans 11:19–24

The three parables for Israel can be applied to all believers.