

## Stories from the Vineyard

Dr. Chris Alford © October 8, 2023.

Last week we got started with a couple of parables, and we didn't quite get all the way there. So, I want to go back and recap just a little bit and then polish that off if we could. We, if you will recall, looked at what is a parable anyway? What does it mean? And there are several ways to define that, but one of the most common translations comes from its relationship, as I understand it, from two words, *para* and *ballo*, which mean along “alongside” and “to throw.”

So, these are little stories that Jesus would throw along beside his teachings to make them come alive, as it were, and they still do, even for us today. That's something I'm hopeful for, especially as I share a parable a little later of my own that I think helps paint the story that I want to throw alongside the teaching. Sometimes the meaning of the parable is left up to the listener to figure out.

Sometimes, as in the case with the first of today's parable, Jesus says, in effect, “this is the meaning.” There's no doubt. But even though it's clear enough, this particular parable, I think we can get some context by looking at a couple of other places.

Before we get to Matthew 21, I want to add at least one contextual helper, maybe two. Our Isaiah passage for today is Isaiah five. Please grab a copy of God's word— maybe you're looking at it electronically— and let's look at Isaiah 5 while you're turning there.

While you're finding that, I want to mention that the Bible uses several metaphors for Israel. We talked about that briefly last week. For example, they were to be a “Kingdom of Priests” and a “Light to the Nations.”

You remember the way Israel was described in those terms in Isaiah 42, which we're not turning there just now. It says this, “I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness,” so there's a holy task God has in mind. He says, “I will take hold of your hand.”

And then he says this, “I will keep you and make you to be a covenant for the people and a light to the Gentiles.” So, there's one of the metaphors. God says, “You, Israel, I have a special task for you. I'm going to take you by the hand and you are going to be a light to the nations, to the Gentiles.”

As you're still finding your spot in Isaiah 5, let me mention one other metaphor, and, again, we talked about it last week. There are places where God calls his children, his special nation, a fig tree. You would see that in Hosea 9, for example, where it says, “I found Israel like grapes in the wilderness. I saw your fathers as the first fruits on the fig tree in its first season.”

But Hosea goes on to say, but they, the children of Israel, “...went to the false god Baal and dedicated themselves to that shame. They became an abomination like the thing they loved.”

A couple of other spots mention figs:

There's one in Jeremiah eight where the prophet compares Judah to a fig tree that bears no fruit. It says you, Judah, you're a fig tree. And you know what? You've not done very much "figging." Is that even a word? I just invented that word "figging." There's no fruit here. Another one comes along a little later in the same book, in chapter 24.

In chapter 24 of Jeremiah, he compares Judah to bad figs. The word says, in effect, you did produce some fruit, but it's not very good.

The metaphor we're focusing on today is found in Isaiah 5, and hopefully you're there now. That passage is called the "Song of the Vineyard."

Here's verse 7. Focus there if you've got it:

"The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the nation of Israel, and the people of Judah are the vines he delighted in. And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed. He looked for righteousness, but heard cries of distress."

And then that passage goes on to pronounce judgment on the vineyard, and it promises that the vineyard is going to be destroyed.

Let's look at the whole of the chapter. Let's kind of take it in, at least in broad strokes, in a big picture sort of way. The first few verses of Isaiah 5 talk about the loved one who built the vineyard or put the vineyard in. Do you see that? My translation says, "loved one." All right, verse one and two mention the time and the care and the— what would you say— quality of the vineyard. It says what? It's a fertile hillside. They're the choicest vines. So only the best root stock here on this prime location. There's a watchtower. Why would there be? Well, for protection, for fending off enemies of all kinds. And there's a wine press. Why would you build a wine press unless you expected there to be grapes and there will be future production. So, this is a wonderful location. It's absolutely perfect.

But the end of verse two gives a real stunner. What does it say? "You produced bad fruit, you had all of this, and there's bad fruit." Look at verse four. What is it saying? In effect, "I did all I could," says the owner. "I gave the vineyard the best chance, had everything it needed." And then look at verse five and following:

"Now I will tell you what I am going to do to my vineyard. I will take away its hedge." (Did your mamma ever pray a "hedge of protection" around you?) "I will take away its hedge, and it will be destroyed. I will break down its wall, and it will be trampled. I will make it a wasteland neither pruned nor cultivated, and briars and thorns will grow there. I will command the clouds not to rain on it."

That's complete devastation.

And what do we learn from that? What do we learn from those few verses? Well, one thing we learn is that God says that it's "my" vineyard. We learn is that the vines—this may sound silly—but we learn that the vines and the grapes do not belong to themselves. They're owned.

Let that sink in a second. It's "my" vineyard. We learn that the owner can take away the protection. We learn that the owner can choose not to cultivate it. We learn that the owner even has power— listen— this vineyard owner has so much power, he can even withhold the rain. Perhaps some rain would have been at least a passive sort of comfort, there may have been some growth there if he had just left it alone, even after tearing down all the hedges.

We learn that the owner can do whatever he wants with his assets. Verse seven: This tells us, at last, the identities of the owner and the vineyard. If we didn't already know, "the vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the nation of Israel, and the people of Judah are the vines he delighted in. He looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but he heard cries of distress."

And then if you'll just scan verses eight and following, it lists all the woes and the judgments coming to Israel. It's a long list, but I think you could boil all of it down to something like this: "Israel, you were supposed to be different. You were supposed to be something different. You were supposed to be set apart. You were supposed to be a light to the nations. All of this was going to be yours. Beautiful hillside, choice vines, great vineyard watchtower, hedge of protection, all of that. It was going to be yours. It was your inheritance. Oh, there was going to be a wine press, too. Why? Because I was expecting there was going to be a great crop. So that means you would have had choice wine. It was all going to be yours.

"So, you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to call upon the nations whom you despise to come and judge you, and the nations, the ones to whom I had not first given this opportunity, those nations are going to come, and the walls of this vineyard are going to come down. Your hedge of protection will go away, and they're going to do the judging. They're going to do the trampling."

I think the passage says, "I will whistle to the nations" to come. Does your translation have that at some point? Does God sometimes use non-believers to accomplish his will and work? Yes, all the time. And it's sometimes especially painful when he does that.

Now, with all that in mind, I want you to look at Matthew 21 and let's remind ourselves of the overall context of this chapter. We did that a little bit last week, but I want to kind of remind you where we are in the story. We're in God's big story. That's the big book. We're in the part where Jesus has come. We're down to the chapter now where he is arriving in the holy city. And so, the pace of God's story is quickening. What happens first in the chapter? Do you remember? Or you can cheat and look. What's the first thing that's happening there? The Triumphal entry.

Now, what's the big picture with that? What's really happening there? My Bible, by the way, has a little heading that says Jesus comes as king. I think that's a clue. What is it that's happening— big picture— where Jesus is coming in? It's deep irony, because you know what? The owner of the vineyard's coming. The king is coming.

And what's the second thing that happens? You've got the Triumphal Entry. And then what happens next? Cleansing of the Temple. You remember we mentioned in passing last week that

at least in my view, one of the reasons that Jesus is very, very angry is not because he's just upset for no reason. He comes to the Temple precincts and he sees the merchants, and they are crowded in there.

Now, I don't think the big deal is that they're making money. The commerce isn't necessarily the problem, because you have to get a sacrifice when you come to the Temple precincts in order to go do proper worship. The problem is that they were crowding out the Court of Gentiles.

The problem is there's no room there for the nations to come and worship Yahweh. And isn't that also deeply ironic? They were supposed to be a light for the nations, and now Jesus comes and says, my house is supposed to be a house of prayer, and you've just turned it into some, well, if we can change the words a little bit: Bad fruit.

There's some bad fruit here. And you're doing this for your own; you're lining your own pockets. Okay, clearing the temple.

What's the third thing that happens? He curses the fig tree. What's the big picture there? Is he just mad at a bush because it didn't have anything on it? No. This is deeply, highly, importantly, symbolic: You have been weighed in the balance. And you know what? I'm cursing you. Don't miss that.

And then in Matthew 21:23 and following, we see this business and we spent some time on it last week, where Jesus is in the Temple courts and he's teaching. I can imagine in my mind's eye he's on the Southern Steps, the Rabbi Steps. He's teaching.

And the chief priests and the elders of the people come up and they say, "Isn't it marvelous that you are here? Please let us learn something from you."

Is that what they say? No. What do they do? Another deeply ironic thing.

They question his authority. Isn't that something? Can I say it again? They question his authority. Make sure you get that.

It's as if the grapes and the vines are coming over to the owner and saying, "Hey, what are you doing here in our vineyard? You're acting like this place belongs to you. Who put you in charge?" Questioning his authority.

And this is how Jesus replies. Matthew 21 28 and following: "What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, son, go and work today in the vineyard. I will not, he answered.

"But later he changed his mind, some translations, had a change of heart, and he went. And then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. And that son answered, I will, sir. But he did not go. Which of the two did what his father wanted?" The first, they answered.

Now listen to Jesus' reply with all of what we have talked about and how it so wonderfully and in some ways devastatingly comes together in what he says here:

“Truly, I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.”

Who are the tax collectors and the prostitutes? They're the outsiders. Maybe not Gentiles, but they are the other. They're the outsiders.

Jesus says, you know what? They are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. “For John,” talking about John the Baptist, for John, verse 32 “came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe Him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe Him.”

Wow. If I could change the focus just a little bit there. Go with me on this.

You know what? You didn't do what I asked you in the vineyard. But I've got some other people here, some others who will. They're going to have some really delicious vineyard produce ahead of you.

The parable of the tenants is the one that comes next. We did not get there last week. I want to just say a word about that.

It's also a story about a vineyard. This time you can start scanning it if you want to. This time, the owner plants a nice vineyard.

He leaves it in the care of others, and he sends his servants to go back to the vineyard and collect the harvest. Harvest time has come. He's sending his servants to go over to his property to get the goods and bring them back.

The tenants. What is a tenant? Define tenant. Do they own the apartment that they rent? No. Do sometimes they make mischief in the apartment that they're renting, they're not the owners. And have you ever heard somebody say that people who rent don't take care of the property in the way that people who own? I think we see a little bit of that happening right here. This monstrous idea. The tenants well, the tenants beat up and they stone, and they kill those servants that the owner sent to go get his grapes.

So, the owner sends his own son. The owner sends his own son. What does that mean? That means he's the heir.

It's part of his family and ownership. It's part of his inheritance. It's his land, the son. And you know what they do? They decided to steal the inheritance. At least they thought they were going to. They kill the son.

In verse 43. Look at that one, please. Verse 43, Jesus says, “Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you.”

Wow, that's so powerful. This is the weight of that just hit me. Who's Jesus talking to? He's talking to the elders of the people and the priests, the folks in charge, large and in charge. But they have nice robes, but they have really good houses. Jesus said, "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."

And now look at verse 45. "When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus's parables...;" does it say they were confused about what he meant? No. For those people who might say to you, Jesus never did really reveal who he was: Baloney.

"When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew he was talking about them." Wow. Jesus gives the meaning of the parable.

He tells the chief priests and the elders what the meaning is. He didn't have to, but he told them. They knew exactly what he was saying.

He was prophesying. He was condemning. God himself is standing before them.

God himself, the owner of the vineyard, has come to collect. God himself. The Father reminds and rebukes, and they retreat even further into their comfortable elite cocoons of smug, safety, and superiority. Listen. Israel was created to work in the vineyard. Israel was God's own son. That's another metaphor for the nation, God's own son.

Israel was given sonship and all of its privileges. Israel was given all the tools, all the know-how, all the instruction and goodness. Israel was even given the vineyard itself.

They had everything. And Israel said, yes, we will go, we will obey. But they did not. But they did not. And they did not give light, and they did not bear fruit, and they did not tend the vineyard, and they did not join God's story and go to work. And not only that—and this is the really sad, sad part-- not only that, but they also became wicked and selfish, and they thwarted God's desire to share the vineyard with others.

Wow. What hubris. It's easy to see the plain meaning of the parable.

It's easy to see the Nation of Israel standing there in judgment. But what about us? What about us? We're members of the household. We've been adopted.

Our Father has given us some work in the vineyard to do. What about us? What about you?

Allow me to show you another parable. It's a modern day one. It's also very personal. Jesus gives us a couple of parables about working in the vineyard. He shows us two or three possible attitudes that can be taken when it comes to going to work out there in the vineyard doing kingdom tasks:

We can say we're willing, and we'll go and then don't. We can say we're not willing, and then we can have a change of heart and then actually go and fulfill our tasks. Out in the field where the owner tells us to go.

There's another option. And it came to me this week. It just smacked me upside of the head from my own life.

So, my words and my story are not canonical Scripture, but the parable has a godly purpose, and I think it's spot on. I want to tell you about a beautiful farm. It's the Alford farm.

It's west of Knoxville, about an hour, and most of the farm has been sold off. Now, there were three brothers who owned the land, my dad and his two brothers.

Now, years ago, my father sent me to go down to the farm and do some work. He and his two brothers had a plot of land there that somebody else, I think, had grown corn.

And my dad sent me to go and do some cleanup work because they were going to take that patch of land and they were going to do some cultivating. I don't remember what they planned to grow, but they were going to sell the produce. Keep in mind that this is Alford property, property that in some ways and, in part, would be mine someday.

So, I said, sure, I'll go. And I went. Takes about an hour to get there.

I was driving at the time, so it was probably early college. My uncle had burned out and then tilled up the remainder of the corn crop, and my task was to dig out those dried up remaining corn stalks, root balls, and all of that. And so, it was very dirty work because there was ash and filthy soot all over the land.

It's probably an acre. It seemed to stretch out for miles. I hated it. I didn't think I had the right tools. I was mad that somebody else would be getting the produce or whatever that would eventually be produced there. I wasn't going to be getting any of the goods, even though I didn't really like vegetables anyway.

I was resentful. I had a bad attitude, and I hit it a lick or two. You know what that means, hitting something a lick or two. I worked at it a little bit, and then I got in my car, and I went home.

Later that night, my dad said to me, hey, did you go down to the farm today? I said yes. He said, "Did you get a lot done?" And I said, "Yeah, I did." I saw by the look on his face that he knew I was lying. He knew— the father knows the son pretty well.

What do you want to do for the rest of your life? I think about that a lot lately.

Life seems to be going by really fast. My dad, recently in one of his lucid moments, he said, "Years ago, as the years passed, it seemed like telephone poles, and now they pass like fence posts."

Life's really going by fast. What do you want to do? I want you to look around you, at least metaphorically, would you? There's a great big old vineyard surrounding you right here, right where you are, right where you live. Right this minute, right now in Sacramento, right now, in this place, in this time.

What do you want to do the rest of your life? What do I want to do for the rest of my life? Sometimes I'm still that kid from years ago who complains that the vineyard isn't very convenient to get to.

Sometimes I'm still that kid who says, yeah, I'll do the work if I can choose a better location. Maybe something a little more convenient.

Sometimes I'm still the kid who thinks the land is dirty. This would be more tolerable if I didn't get ashes all over me.

Boy, that'll preach. Sometimes I still feel like the kid who is complaining that he didn't have the right tools. Boy, that one gets me a lot.

Man, what I could do for your vineyard, lord, if I had a big tractor, if you had just given me this thing, then, man, if I could just go to that place over there in that other state or do this other thing. Vine dressing is not really my spiritual gift.

Sometimes I feel like I'm still the kid where I can't see the results, and I'm frustrated because somebody else is going to get the produce.

Sometimes I'm the vineyard worker who says yes, I'll go and then don't. Sometimes I'm the vineyard worker who says no, but then changes his mind.

But here's what you and I must remember: The land is not ours. The land belongs to the owner, to the Father. The place and the tasks are not ours to choose. That's up to the owner.

But you know what? We are members of the household. We've been adopted into the family, and that property will someday be part of our inheritance.

In the meantime—in the meantime—our Father has given us some vineyard work to do. We need to ask him where and when and send me and then do it and then do it with a glad heart so that when he says later, hey, did you get to that work? Did you complete it? I did. I did it for you.

Let's pray. Father, would you forgive me when I'm not a very willing worker or I complain about not having what I think are the right tools, or I'm frustrated by what seems to be a lack of progress, do the same for all of us, would you?

Someday, Lord—oh, someday there's going to be a new heavens and a new earth. I can't wait.

The years are going by like fence posts. But, Lord, in the meantime, you've planted us in this particular place and this particular time for a purpose. Help us to get to work.

In Jesus name, amen.