

Lesson 9

Proper 22

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 21:33–46

Jesus was interacting with the Jewish religious authorities. He had forcefully cleansed the temple and now was teaching there on Monday and Tuesday of Holy Week. The Jewish leaders challenged Him to declare by what authority He was doing these things. Instead, Jesus told the parable of the two sons, turning the focus on them. His parable exposed their unwillingness to go beyond an outward yes of formal religion in their relationship with the Lord. He followed that parable with this parable of the tenants, in which His incisive judgment moved beyond their spiritual shallowness to their outright rejection of Him as the Promised One—and their resultant loss of the kingdom.

As usual, His story was easy to understand. The practice of renting out vineyards to tenant farmers was well known. In such an arrangement, the tenants gained a place in which to live and work and shared in the harvest at an agreed-on percentage. The landowner benefited by having his vineyard properly cared for and made productive for him. The imagery Jesus used was also familiar, for it was drawn from Isaiah's picture of Israel as the Lord's vineyard, today's Old Testament Lesson.

136. Who were the “tenants” assigned the task of caring for the Lord’s “vineyard”?

137. What was pictured by the “owner” sending his “servants” to collect his fruit and finally sending “his son”?

In telling the parable of the two sons (Matthew 21:28–32), Jesus forced His hearers to interpret it by asking, “Which of the two did the will of his father?” (v. 31). Using the same technique here, He forced them to pronounce the judgment against unfaithful “tenants”—against themselves.

138. Why did Jesus quote Scripture as He moved from their analysis of His story to applying it specifically to them as the “tenants” of the “vineyard”?

Quoting from Psalm 118, Jesus changed His analogy. Cornerstones were key stones in ancient buildings, establishing the line of the walls and tying them together. Stones for this purpose were carefully examined, and flawed stones were rejected. The Greek for “rejected” is from the word used for testing coins to determine if they are genuine. As Jesus applied the words of the psalm to the

Jewish leaders, He was forcing them to see that they had examined and tested Him and had decided that He was a counterfeit messiah. But with the psalm He stated clearly that He would be shown to be the promised Cornerstone.

139. How does the analogy of the rejected stone that became the cornerstone complement the point of His parable? Who are the people to whom the kingdom of God will be given? What is the difference between the results of “one who falls on this stone” and “when the [stone] falls on anyone”?

140. Did the parable and Jesus’ application of it have the effect He desired? How may we apply this parable to the Church today? (See 1 Corinthians 4:1–2; 3:10–15.)

The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 5:1–7

Isaiah was God’s prophet in Jerusalem during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. Politically, the Kingdom of Judah was under the threat of mighty Assyria. Isaiah encouraged confidence in the Lord’s help and discouraged the pursuit of political alliances. The Assyrian conquerors swallowed up the Northern Kingdom, Israel, and then came against Jerusalem. Isaiah encouraged King Hezekiah to trust the Lord, and God’s angel went out and slew 185,000 Assyrians and forced their withdrawal. Isaiah, however, continued to point to Judah’s ultimate doom under God’s judgment, condemning their false confidence that was based simply on the fact that the temple stood in Jerusalem and its worship rituals were being continued. Isaiah 1–39 ends with Isaiah pointing ahead to Babylon as the instrument of Judah’s fall.

The prophecy of Isaiah provides some of the loftiest formal prophetic literature in the Old Testament. Because of Isaiah’s assurances of God’s rescue of the remnant and his detailed description of the Suffering Servant, the promised Savior, Isaiah is called “the evangelist of the Old Testament.” This song of the vineyard is unique in prophetic literature in its use of a parable and its “love song” style. Horace Hummel says in *The Word Becoming Flesh*, “It is widely supposed that Isaiah played the role of a troubadour, singing a sort of love song in order to first attract attention for his judgmental punchline, and that certainly would not be out of character for all that we know of prophetic behavior” (p. 201).

141. Since the song depicted the Lord’s love of Israel, what is suggested by “He built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it”?

142. Why was it appropriate for the Lord to expect it “to yield grapes” from His people? What was going to happen because they yielded only “wild grapes”? (See Deuteronomy 28:15–24.)

The contrast between the “grapes” the Lord expected and the “wild grapes” His people produced is stated in verse 7 in a play on words. The words sound alike in Hebrew: He looked for “justice,” *mishpat*, but found “bloodshed,” *miespah*; for “righteousness,” *sedeqah*, and heard “an outcry,” *se’aqah*.

143. What does it say to us that God’s expectations of fruit are described in terms of our interaction on the horizontal, human level? (See Isaiah 1:10–17; Micah 6:6–8; 1 John 3:16–18; 4:19–21.)

144. How does this Old Testament Lesson tie in with today’s Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: Philippians 3:4b–14

All of Paul’s letters include warning against the influence of Judaizers, Jewish Christians who insisted that Christianity is a matter of “Jesus plus”—faith in Jesus plus compliance with the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament. They went to Gentile churches and told Gentile Christians that if they wanted to be real Christians, they, in effect, had to become “Jewish” Christians. Paul warned the Philippian Christians to look out for “the dogs,” “the evildoers,” and “those who mutilate the flesh” (v. 2). He insisted, “We are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh” (v. 3).

Then, in today’s Epistle, he declared that he was born of orthodox parents who circumcised him on the eighth day, was of the race of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, a zealous Pharisee, obedient to the Jewish laws, faultless as far as legalistic righteousness. He said, “If anyone else thinks he has reason for ____, I have more.”

145. Why did Paul emphasize his qualifications as a Jew so strongly even though he was writing to this Gentile congregation in Philippi?

146. How did Paul describe his goal in life as a Christian?

147. How could “a righteousness of my own that comes from the law,” to which he had formerly devoted his life, become “loss” and “rubbish” to Paul as compared to “that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith”? (See Romans 3:19–24; 7:18–19.)

148. What is the significance for our own lives when we make Paul's phrases our own: "I have suffered the loss of all things . . . that I may know [Christ]," "and the power of His resurrection," "and may share His sufferings," "becoming like Him in His death," and "attain the resurrection from the dead"?

149. Why does running the race as a disciple of Jesus require that we forget what is behind and focus our attention on the goal before us?

Note the contrasts in Paul's phrases: "I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me His own" and "I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." (Compare John 15:16.)

150. What comfort is there for us in what Paul expressed in this way? What challenge?

Lesson 8

Proper 21

*Almighty God, You exalted Your Son to the place of all honor and authority.
Enlighten our minds by Your Holy Spirit that, confessing
Jesus as Lord, we may be led into all truth; through the same Jesus
Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever. Amen.*

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 21:23–32

119. The point of the parable is that good intentions and right words are not sufficient in themselves. They must be accompanied by obedient actions.

120. The way of righteousness that John pointed to involved a sincere turning to God in repentance and faith and called for a change in behavior consistent with that faith. The tax collectors and the prostitutes had said no to God and disdained His way, but they turned to God in repentance as they heard His call through John. The religious leaders were always saying their outward yes to God in their formalistic religion, but they did not respond to John’s message and give their hearts to God in sincere repentance. This parable says to us that we should not be content with being just “believers” who say the right words and go through the proper religious forms, but should back up our believing with a discipleship that displays in action that we are sincere about our relationship with Christ. It also reminds us that we may be surprised and become resentful when people who have been living sinful lives apart from God and the Church are struck by the Word and turn to God in sincere repentance—and are fully accepted on that basis.

121. We often find it easier to deal with the negatives in our lives, the sins of commission, and bring our behavior under control, than to put the positives of Christian love and service beyond good intentions into appropriate actions. Sins of omission are easily overlooked because “we didn’t do anything wrong.” God’s Holy Spirit, asserting Himself through the Gospel of Jesus, is required both for bringing our negative behavior under God’s control and for warming our hearts to glorify God through acts of Christian service. Only He can turn us from negatives and move us into positives of a responsive love and service that puts good intentions into action. We are easily content to be just believers and not disciples.

The Old Testament Lesson: Ezekiel 18:1–4, 25–32

122. The exiles in Babylon were surrounded by pagan influences. Jerusalem and the temple were in ruins. Their remembrance of and allegiance to the covenant were badly strained. And they were blaming it all on the faithlessness of their fathers. In effect, they were saying, “We can’t be anything but what we are because they brought these circumstances on us!” Through Ezekiel, the Lord countered with the principle of individual responsibility before the Lord. The Lord spelled out

the principle of individual responsibility very clearly and made it as weighty as possible by taking an oath on Himself: “As I live,” He said.

123. The principle takes away all excuses for negative behavior, but it also sets forth the opportunity that each person has to rise above the circumstances he has been given.

124. The attitude of the exiles in saying “The way of the Lord is not just” has been repeated many times when people wonder “Why do I have to suffer just because they . . . ” or “If God is loving, why does He allow them to bring so much suffering into our world?” Such attitudes are an attempt to evade personal responsibility, but the principle of individual responsibility asserts that we are responsible, if not for the circumstances, then for the way we react to and behave in the circumstances.

125. Through Ezekiel, the Lord told the exiles that they were to blame neither the past actions of their fathers and grandfathers nor the Lord Himself for their spiritual malaise. The solution for them was to turn to the Lord in repentance and to receive the new heart and spirit He was eager to give them. The *Concordia Self-Study Bible*: “What had been promised unconditionally (11:19; 36:26) is here portrayed as attainable but not inevitable” (p. 1253).

126. That God has “no pleasure in the death of anyone” shows His essential nature as the Life-Giver. God is holy and just and will not coexist forever with evil, but His desire for His creatures is life, not death. His mercy in Christ is His greatest glory, and He wants nothing more than for us to respond to it willingly. He lets people reject Christ and choose death, but He takes no pleasure in it.

127. This lesson emphasizes that we carry personal responsibility before God for our response to Him and its expression in our lives. We cannot blame others, and we surely cannot blame God. It ties in with the Gospel’s warning against saying yes but not living the yes, and its assurance that God is always ready to have us change a no to a yes.

The Epistle for the Day: Philippians 2:1–18

128. The basis of the “ifs” is the Gospel of Jesus. If we have encouragement in Christ, if we have comfort from love, if we have participation in the Spirit, if we have affection and sympathy, then we are to be of the same mind, then we are to have the same love, then we are to be in full accord and of one mind, then we are to do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than ourselves. These phrases describe the sanctified Christian fellowship that is built on the Gospel.

129. Other congregations to whom Paul wrote, like the Corinthian Christians, were divided over various issues. He wanted his dear friends in Philippi to avoid that trauma. When church members act out of rivalry and conceit, the fellowship is put into turmoil; members are reduced to arguing their positions and desires and separating from one another instead of working together toward Gospel goals.

130. In humility you consciously avoid unrealistic assessments of personal gifts or strengths as compared to others. Humble people look beyond themselves for opportunities to serve others and consider it only proper that the service be given. The opposite of looking “to the interests of others” might be “I’d better mind my own business”; “I don’t have time or energy to get involved”; “they made their bed; they’ll just have to lie in it”; and “surely others will be able to help them.” We are to imitate our Lord Jesus Christ both in attitude and in actions.

131. Paul made it clear from the outset that Christ Jesus is in very nature God—“God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made; of one substance with the Father,” as the Nicene Creed puts it.

132. To carry out the saving will of God, the eternal Word willingly “put His crown on the shelf” and lived as one of us. His obedient service as Representative Man took Him all the way to dying for our sins, “even death on a cross.” Jesus, the God-man, was exalted to the highest place

precisely because He had obediently and successfully carried out the saving mission. It is significant that the Christ did not go back to being the fleshless eternal Word. His identification with us as our brother in the flesh was not temporary; it continues even now. It is *Jesus* (His name as a man, meaning “Yahweh saves” or “Savior”) that is now the name above every name. All of the other names by which God revealed Himself teach us something about God, but now it is the name *Jesus* that is the vital name, without which we really don’t know God and can’t live with Him. (See John 1:18; 1 John 2:22–23.) On Judgment Day, every tongue will confess “Jesus Christ is Lord.” Those who knew Him and trusted Him and followed Him in their lifetimes will find that to be the high point of their resurrection experience. Those who rejected Him or neglected Him will do so begrudgingly, but they will do it. Every tongue will make this confession to the glory of God the Father!

133. We will grow in a humble, serving attitude as our determined discipleship is continually nourished by the remembrance of Jesus’ loving servanthood and the realization that He did it for us! It is our continued involvement with Him through the Means of Grace that enables us to imitate Him in willing humility and service. Then, exercising our discipleship in appropriate service that shows love for Christ and for others is its own reward. (See 1 John 4:7–21.)

134. The Greek verb is in present tense, indicating continuing action, “keep on working.” There is always an ongoing emphasis in the requirement to “keep on seeking first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.”

135. Grumbling about what we are expected to be and do as disciples of Jesus will rob us of the joy that comes to those who serve willingly and happily dedicate their service to the One who served them first. Questioning that argues with the Lord about what He has called us to do will generally lead us to simply avoid opportunities for service that He gives us, perhaps telling ourselves, “That kind of service is not right for me. I’ll let others do it.” When we develop an attitude of grumbling and questioning, we surely will not be perceived as “lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life.”