

“LESSONS TO BE LEARNED”

Sunday, September 27, 2009

Text: Matthew 21:18-46

INTRODUCTION:

(Illustration) THE EVIDENCE OF PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

A bold unbeliever was lecturing a group on the folly of religious faith in general and the Christian faith in particular. At the close of the presentation the speaker invited people to propound any questions they might have. In the audience was the town drunkard, who had been converted to Christ. In response to the invitation the converted alcoholic came up front, took out an orange, peeled it, and ate it without comment.

The speaker asked if he had a question for him. After downing the last segment of orange the convert turned to the infidel and asked, “Was the orange I just ate sweet or sour?” Angrily, the speaker replied, “You idiot, how can I know whether it was sweet or sour when I never tasted it?” To this the converted drunkard retorted, “And how can you know anything about Christ if you have not tried Him?”

I. THE SYMBOLIC REJECTION (21:18-22)

([Mark_11:12-14](#) , [20-25](#))

21:18-22. As Jesus was making **His way back to the city** of Jerusalem the next morning... **He was hungry.** He saw **a fig tree by the road** and noticed it was covered with **leaves.** As He drew closer, He discovered there was no fruit on the tree. Fig trees **bear fruit** first and then the leaves appear, or both appear about the same time. Since the tree was in leaf, figs should have been on it. When Jesus **found** none, He cursed the tree and it **immediately... withered.** Mark indicated that the disciples heard Jesus curse the tree, but did not notice the withered condition till they returned to Jerusalem the next morning ([Mark_11:13-14](#) , [20](#)). **The disciples** marveled (ethaumasan) that the **tree** withered **so quickly.**

Jesus used this event to teach a lesson in USEFULNESS, PRACTICE, FAITH, for if they had genuine faith in God they not only would be busy about doing the will of God in deed not just in word. Also they would be able to move mountains (cf. [Matt_17:20](#)). **If** they truly believed, they would **receive whatever** they prayed **for.** The Lord was teaching the importance of faith rather than doubting or simply marveling. By contrast the nation of Israel had failed to exercise faith in Him.

1. Prayer gives us the ability “....to do!” so we can conclude that prayer is power.
2. Prayer is the ability “...to accept!” And in accepting there is a transformation that can take place.

This event may have meaning beyond the lesson in faith, however. Many believe that Jesus saw this fig tree as a symbol of Israel at that time. They too were professing to be fruitful, but a closer examination of the nation revealed they were fruitless. By cursing that generation, Jesus was showing His rejection of them and predicting that no fruit would ever come from them. Within a few days, that generation would reject their King and crucify Him. This ultimately led to judgment on that generation. In a.d. 70 the Romans came, demolished the temple, overran the country of Israel, and ended Israel’s political entity ([Luke_21:20](#)). Perhaps in cursing the fig tree, Jesus was setting aside that generation. Of course the entire nation was not set aside (cf. [Rom_11:1](#) , [26](#)).

There are two things that we should note about the cursing of the fig tree!

- It teaches us that USELESSNESS INVITES DISASTER - Anything that is useless in on its way to elimination.
- It teaches that PROFESSION WITHOUT PRACTICE IS CONDEMNED - The Jews professed faith in God, but in a few days would call for the blood of Christ.

II. A SERIOUS CONFRONTATION WITH THE KING (21:23-27)

1. Confrontation With The Priests And Elders (21:23-27)

([Mark_11:27-12:12](#) ; [Luke_20:1-19](#))

a. The attack (21:23)

21:23. Jesus returned to **the temple courts** He had just recently claimed for His Father. In these courts He confronted various religious groups in the nation. The debate began as **the chief priests and the elders** asked Jesus, **By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority?** By “these things” they probably meant His Triumphal Entry into the city, His reception of praise from the people, His clearing of the temple, His healing of the blind and the lame (vv. 8-14), and His teaching (v. 23). The leaders understood Jesus was claiming authority as Messiah and wanted to know where He got such authority. He certainly had not received it from them!

The reason Jesus was not answering them, was that He would have to claim His deity and that He and the Father were the same. In doing this there would have been immediate retaliation. His time had not yet come, it would come in about a week.

b. The response (21:24)

(1) The baptism of John (21:24-32).

21:24-27 ([Mark_11:29-33](#) ; [Luke_20:3-8](#)). In response to the religious leaders’ question, **Jesus** asked another **question**, promising that if they answered His question, He would answer theirs. He asked, **John’s baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or from men?** Though this question seemed fairly simple, it prompted a debate among the religious leaders. **If** they answered that John’s baptism was **from heaven**, they knew Jesus would respond, **Then why didn’t you believe him?** On the other hand **if** they responded that John’s baptism was **from men**, they knew **the people** would be upset with them. John was regarded as **a great prophet** by the populace. Jesus thus put them in a position in which *they* had tried to place *Him* on many occasions. **They** finally responded that they did not **know** the answer to Jesus’ question. In keeping with His word, **Jesus** therefore refused to answer their question. Instead He gave a parable.

III. A SOBERING REALITY FOR ISRAEL AND US: (21:28-46)

A. THE VINEYARD OF DISOBEDIENCE: (21:28-32)

21:28-32. In Jesus' parable a man asked his **two sons** to **go... work in the vineyard.** The **first** son said he would **not go but later he changed his mind and went.** The **other** immediately said he would **go** and work but he never showed up. Jesus then asked, **Which of the two did what his father wanted?**

The obvious answer was that **the first** son obeyed. **Jesus** immediately applied this to the religious leaders. While some seemingly accepted the ministry of **John** the Baptist ([John_5:35](#)), their actions ([Luke_7:29-30](#)) proved they were like the second son. On the other hand many **tax collectors** and **prostitutes** received the message of John and did the will of the Father. Therefore they would be allowed entrance into **the kingdom of God.** But the religious leaders who **did not repent and believe** would be denied entrance. These religious leaders stood condemned. They must have been stunned by Jesus' words that despised, immoral people such as tax collectors and prostitutes were entering the kingdom and they, the religious leaders, were not!

1. The Context of the Parable of the Two Sons

- A. The parable comes in response to the question the chief priests and elders asked Jesus as He taught in the temple, "... By what authority doest thou these things? and who gave thee this authority?" ([Matt_21:23](#)).
 1. Jesus refused to answer their question directly since they declined to answer His own question concerning the source of John the Baptist's baptism.
 2. Yet this parable provides an indirect answer, as is shown by the connective "but" which begins it.
- B. This parable is presented as a vivid pictorial challenge to the Jewish leaders.
 1. In [Matthew_3:4-6](#) we find a first group responding to the message of repentance by John. But they came to John after their change of mind and regret for their sinful way of life. They feared that the Messiah would have nothing to do with them. The first son is representative of this group.
 2. In [Matthew_3:7-10](#) are the religious characters which parallel the second son in the parable who said he would obey and yet, in the end, did not.
 3. The specific explanation and application is found in [Matthew_21:31](#), [32](#). These religious leaders saw only too well that Jesus was referring to them ([Matt_21:45](#), [46](#)).

II. The Content of the Parable

- A. A father had two children growing up.
 1. The word used in this parable is τέκνα, "children," not υἱοί, "sons," who are old enough to decide what they are going to do in life, which word is used in the parable for the prodigal son in [Luke_15:11-32](#).
 2. In this parable we have two children who had not yet carved their careers nor made any final choices.

- B. The father invited both sons to go and work in his vineyard. The duty of every father is to instill in his children the necessity and blessing of work.
1. The children must recognize the field is still their father's although they are called to work in it. "Son, go work today in my vineyard" ([Matt_21:28](#)).
 2. As laborers, children at work, we must never lose sight of the fact that it is not our world, it is His. "The field is the world" as Jesus said ([Matt_13:38](#)). The whole world is His vineyard for His children to work in.
- C. These two children were of the same father and yet they were so different.
1. When the second son is introduced, the Greek text in some manuscripts is τῷ ἑτέρῳ which means "the other who was of different makeup and outlook."
 2. The first child said, "I don't want to go" ([Matt_21:29](#)).
 - a) He voiced the instant inclination of his sinful nature. Tell a child to do something or go somewhere and the likely answer will be "I don't want to" (οὐ θέλω) or as the kjv has it "I will not" ([Matt_21:29](#)).
 - b) "Afterward he repented and went." How much afterward? In Greek the adverb is ὕστερον which implies not immediately afterwards, but toward the end of the thought process. It has more the meaning of "finally."
 3. The other child is differently disposed but the challenge of the father was the same. Work is for all. This child said "I'll go," but he did not.

III. The Change of Mind Which Means Repentance

- A. The word most commonly translated "repentance" in the New Testament is μετανοέω , derived from μετά , "after," and νοέω , "to think, perceive."
1. It means to change one's mind, which involves an instantaneous change of heart, a regret for unbelief and sin, and a determination to change direction.
 2. This is what both John the Baptist ([Matt_3:2](#)) and the Lord Jesus preached: "Repent: for the kingdom of God is at hand" ([Matt_4:17](#)). Real repentance (μετάνοια) results in the forgiveness or removal of sin ([Mark 1:4](#) ; [Luke_3:3](#) ; [Acts_2:38](#)).
- B. This is not the word used in [Matthew_21:29](#) : " ... but afterward he repented and went."
1. The Greek verb here is not μετάνοήσης , but μεταμεληθείς , the passive participle of μεταμέλομαι , derived from μετά , "after," and μέλομαι , "to care or show concern for oneself."
 2. It means to regret, not because one feels he has done anything wrong but because something did not turn out to his own advantage. A thief when caught regrets stealing not because he has concluded that stealing is a sin, but because he was caught. Such a person, however, has not become moral if he does not steal anymore.
 3. Μετάνοια represents moral change in an individual while μεταμέλεια is a convenient, selfish change of behavior and regret.
 - a) This verb μεταμέλομαι is the verb used of Judas in [Matthew_27:3](#) , "Then Judas, which had betrayed him, when he saw that he [Jesus] was

condemned, repented himself [μεταμεληθείς] and brought again the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders.”

- b) This was mere regret and not true repentance. Judas was not saved at the end, but he proved himself to be what he always was, the son of perdition ([John_17:12](#)). It is this verb μεταμέλομαι that is used in [Matthew_21:29](#) , [32](#) .

IV. The Application of This Parable

A. A prophetic application

1. The first son or child represents the Gentiles who were expected to say “no” at the beginning but in the end said “yes,” and are now ahead of the unbelieving Jews ([Rom_10:18b-21](#)).
2. The second son is representative of the Jewish nation. Jesus was of their own nationality. “Yes” was the immediate response expected, but then they changed their mind about Jesus and this change became disastrous ([Rom_9:1-10](#) , [18](#)).
3. God is not yet through with the second son who will change his mind again and say “yes” ([Rom_11](#)).

B. A personal application

1. Your initial response to Christ may be a “no.” Change your mind and be blessed.
2. Was your initial response a hurried “yes” without sufficient thought? Have you found that no fruit has come from your flippant “yes”? Change your mind by allowing the gospel to take root and bring forth fruit.

B. THE VINEYARD OF MISSED INHERITANCE: (21:33-46)

(2) The Parable of the Landowner (21:33-46; [Mark_12:1-12](#); [Luke_20:9-19](#)).

21:33-39. In **another parable** Jesus continued to demonstrate the response of the nation to His ministry. He told of **a landowner who** went to great expense to make **a vineyard** productive. He **rented out the vineyard to farmers** who were to care for it. When **harvesttime** came, the landowner **sent his servants... to collect** what was rightfully **his**. But the tenant farmers mistreated the **servants**, beating **one**, killing **another**, and stoning **a third**. **Other servants** were **sent with the same** results. Finally the landowner **sent his son**, thinking they would **respect** him. The farmers, however, reasoned that if they killed the son, the land would be theirs. Therefore they **threw him out of the vineyard and killed him**.

It seems clear that Jesus was speaking of the nation of Israel that had been carefully prepared by God to be His fruitful vineyard (cf. [Isa_5:1-7](#)). The care of the vine had been committed to the nation’s religious leaders.

But they had failed to acknowledge the Master’s right over them and had treated His messengers and prophets badly. They ultimately would even kill His Son, Jesus Christ, outside Jerusalem (cf. [Heb_13:12](#)).

21:40-46. Jesus posed a natural question when He asked His listeners what they thought the landowner would **do to those** unfaithful farmers. Obviously he would not let them continue to operate the vineyard, but he would **bring** judgment on them. The land would be taken away from them and used by **other tenants who** would **give him his** rightful **share of** the **harvest**. This was in keeping with the Scriptures, for Jesus quoted [Psalm_118:22-23](#) , which refers to the **rejected** stone which will **become the capstone**.

By way of application Jesus said **the kingdom of God** was being **taken away from** those who heard Him, **and** it would be **given to the people who** would **produce its fruit**. The word for “people” (ethnei) is usually translated “nation.” (It appears here without an article.) Two interpretations of this verse are often presented. One is that Jesus was saying the kingdom had been taken from the Jewish nation and would be given to Gentile nations who would produce the proper fruit of genuine faith. It is argued that since ethnei is singular, not plural, the word refers to the church which is called a nation in [Romans_10:19](#) and [1_Peter_2:9-10](#) . But the kingdom has not been taken completely away from Israel forever ([Rom_11:15](#) , [25](#)). And the church is not now inheriting the kingdom.

A better interpretation is that Jesus was simply saying the kingdom was being taken away from the nation Israel at that time, but it would be given back to the nation in a future day when that nation would demonstrate true repentance and faith. In this view Jesus was using the term “nation” in the sense of generation (cf. [Matt_23:36](#)). Because of their rejection, that generation of Israel would never be able to experience the kingdom of God (cf. [comments_on_21:18-22](#)). But a future generation in Israel will respond in saving faith to this same Messiah ([Rom_11:26-27](#)), and to that future generation the kingdom will be given. By rejecting Jesus **the Stone**, these **builders** ([Matt_21:42](#)) suffered judgment (**he on whom it [the Stone] falls will be crushed**).

The religious leaders (then **the chief priests and the Pharisees**, [v_45](#) ; cf. [v_23](#)) realized Jesus’ remarks were directed toward **them**, and **they** tried their best **to arrest Him. But they were afraid of the... people** (cf. [v_26](#)), who thought Jesus **was a Prophet** (cf. [v_11](#)), so they were unable to act.