

SERIES: The Good News, as Reported by Matthew
SERMON: **Parables for Pharisees, Ancient and Postmodern**
SCRIPTURE: Matt 21:23-46
SPEAKER: Michael P. Andrus
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Last Sunday our text from Matthew 21 concerned the beginning of *The Week that Was*, Passion Week, the final week of Christ's earthly life. It began with the Triumphal Entry of Jesus into the city of Jerusalem on Sunday, followed by the cleansing of the temple, the cursing of the fig tree, and the challenge to Jesus' authority by the religious leaders of Israel. Each of these events uniquely revealed the authority of Jesus –over people, over animals, over plants, over His enemies, over everything.

You will recall from Last Lord's Day that Jesus silenced His critics by refusing to answer their questions since they refused to answer one of his. But while He won't answer their questions, He doesn't refuse to talk to them altogether. In fact, He tells them two stunning parables, which I have called "Parables for Pharisees." I call them that, not only because their interpretation justifies such a title, but also because the Pharisees themselves acknowledge that the parables are meant for them. Look at Matthew 21:45: "When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they *knew* he was talking about them." He didn't have to say so, it was obvious.

But I have added a phrase to the title: "Parables for Pharisees, *Ancient and Postmodern*." I know the original audience was first-century Pharisees, but there is a strong message as well for Pharisees of today, especially postmodern ones. Our society loves to use the term "Pharisee" for traditionalists, fundamentalists, legalists—and frankly, it's often legitimate. But the fact is that the hallmarks of Pharisaism are hypocrisy and pride, and traditionalists certainly have no corner on either. Twenty-first century postmoderns demonstrate religious hypocrisy and pride with the best of them.

Postmodern skeptics today would like for us to think their unbelief is due to intellectual problems with the Gospel; but I am convinced that the problems are more moral than intellectual. That is, they want to do what they want to do, and they know that if they bow the knee to Jesus, they will no longer be able to call the shots. The problem is not lack of knowledge; it is not ignorance of the truth; it is pride and hypocrisy.

There are Pharisees in our postmodern world, just as there were in Jesus' world.

Let me explain what I mean by postmodernism. Modernism, though often opposed to the views of Christianity, still accepted the objectivity of knowledge, but postmodernism (along with its stepchildren, philosophical pluralism and multiculturalism) rejects even the possibility of objective truth. To the postmodern mind all beliefs are merely personal or at best culturally-conditioned options. Therefore, no views can be dismissed, except the narrow view that some views can be dismissed. Intolerance of someone else's position is the only thing that is intolerable. The notion that a particular ideological or religious claim is true and therefore intrinsically superior to

another is necessarily wrong.¹ Frankly, this is where much of academia is today.

Nearly forty years ago when I was studying philosophy at Southern Methodist University, it was not uncommon to have professors in the fields of science, philosophy, history, literature, the arts, and even religion who argued strongly against Christianity. But in our postmodern society it is far more common for professors to take the position that religious faith is not even a topic that can be intelligently discussed. Religious affirmations are not even about the real world.

The result is what Stephen Carter calls a “culture of disbelief” in which even the Church is quickly becoming spiritually schizophrenic. People are tempted to compartmentalize their faith, to accept the notion that there is a world of facts and a world of faith, and these two worlds don’t really intersect. So long as we keep them separate we can survive. In other words, our faith must be private—it describes who we are at church and it doesn’t particularly impact how we look at the world or even how we behave. Some of the results are bizarre:

1. 74% of Americans strongly agree that “there is only one true God, who is holy and perfect, and who created the world and rules it today,” while fully 64% agree (strongly agree or agree somewhat) with the assertion that “there is no such thing as absolute truth.”
2. We have professing Christians who accept macro-evolution as a legitimate explanation of life as we know it, while they worship God as Creator on Sundays.
3. We have people supporting the woman’s right to choose while they worship a God who clearly forbids the taking of innocent human life.
4. We have people divorcing their spouses without biblical cause to marry someone else while they worship a God who says, “I hate divorce.”
5. We have people tolerating same-sex marriage as a legitimate alternative lifestyle while they worship a God who says homosexual behavior is an abomination.

What is happening is that Christians are divorcing their “faith” from the objective truth upon which it is built. Christianity is, by its very nature, a faith built on facts. If the Bible is not truth as revealed by God, then Christianity is not just wrong—it’s a fool’s religion. That’s what Paul says in 1 Cor. 15: “If Christ has not been raised (literally, historically) . . . we are to be pitied more than all men.”

It’s absurd to take the common liberal church position that there is value in our faith even if the facts upon which it is based are not historical, on the grounds that at least it helps us be better neighbors and husbands and fathers. Poppycock. If our faith is phony, what’s the point of even *being* a good neighbor or a good husband or a good father? That’s weak sentimentality at best. Instead why shouldn’t we be going for all the gusto we can get in as short a time as possible, because when it’s over, it’s over?

Furthermore, it’s absurd to take the position, as many do, that all faiths are of equal value, because if Christianity is true, then Islam *has to be false*. Why? Because biblical Christianity claims that Jesus is the only way. If that’s not true, then Christianity is false. And if it is true, then Buddhism is necessarily false, and Hinduism, and Mormonism, and New Age

gobbledygook. Now that's not a popular position to take today, but it's the only sensible position for a biblical Christian to take.

Now this is a long introduction to my sermon, but please hang with me. The Scriptures tell us that to whom much is entrusted, much is required. The two parables we are about to examine both talk about people to whom much has been entrusted. Their problem is not lack of knowledge, not lack of opportunity, not ignorance of the truth, not intellectual problems with the Gospel. Their problem is human pride, hypocrisy, and a refusal to repent.

The Parable of the Two Sons

Since I preached a full sermon on this parable back in 2005, I only want to summarize it today. Please follow with me as I read Matthew 21:28-32. Jesus starts by asking His listeners to put on their thinking caps. That would be a wise thing for us to do as well.

"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 and went.

"Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go."

"Which of the two did what his father wanted?"

"The first," they answered.

Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John 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.

The parable itself . Presbyterian pastor Earl Palmer paints a picturesque scene of a farm family sitting down to breakfast. The father is planning out his day and turns to one of his sons and says, "Son, I would like for you to go and work in the south forty today." The boy responds, "I will *not*." We aren't told how the father reacts, but he can't be too happy. The father has made his will known and the son has expressed his defiance.

Then the father turns to his other son and says, "Will you go and work in the south forty?" and the son responds, "I *will*, sir!" He not only agrees, but he goes out of his way to show respect. And I suspect, knowing the rest of the story, that he may even have added,

"I will be happy to work in your vineyard, father. I'm not like some other members of this family who like to freeload. When I was having my devotions this morning I was praying that God would give me an opportunity to show my gratitude for all you have provided. Dad, you've made my day! When can I get started?"ⁱⁱ

What we have in this story is one boy who is a pain at breakfast and another who is a joy at breakfast. But the problem for this second boy is that this is not a breakfast parable; it is a supper parable. And the picture that is painted at the supper table is very different. The boy who said "I will not", we are told, later changed his mind and went. The Greek word for "changed his mind"

is the word often translated “repent.” He thought about what he had said, he realized he was wrong, and he went out to the vineyard to work.

The other boy had a change of heart as well. Despite his eager and respectful response to this father, “I will, sir,” he did not go. He got busy. Or some friends called and asked him to go to a party. Or he realized he couldn’t get anymore mileage out of comparing his own behavior with that of his brother. We’re not told why; we are simply told he did not do what he said he would do.

Please recognize that both of these boys are flawed. The one is defiant; the other disobedient. Neither is a paragon of virtue, nor is Jesus presenting either as an example of how people ought to respond to the heavenly Father. What the Father desires is for His children to say, “I will,” and then do it. But though both responses are flawed, they are not equivalent. And this is demonstrated as Jesus questions the chief priests and the teachers of the Law.

A very specific question based upon the parable. “Which of the two *did* what his father wanted?” They don’t seem to realize they are being set up, so they readily respond, “the first.” Jesus confirms their answer, but in a way I doubt they appreciate. He says, in effect, “You’re right, and I tell you the truth, the most heinous sinners you can imagine are entering the Kingdom instead of you, because though they messed up big time at first, they repented and believed. And you proud religious types did not.”

Let’s think about Jesus’ answer. He says that tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God. Why does He pick these two classes of people? Because to the Pharisees they represented the worst of the worst, the very scum of the earth. What Jesus is trying to do is to shock them into realizing that some who are very low on the moral pecking order recognize and admit their desperate condition, repent, and turn in faith to Jesus, and thus are gloriously saved.

He also states that even after the religious big-shots saw tax collectors and prostitutes repenting, drunks getting sober, soldiers stop swearing, womanizers becoming faithful husbands, they still refused to follow suit; after all, what did *they* have to repent of?

The application of the parable. What are the chief lessons Pharisees, both ancient and postmodern, should take home from this story? I would like to mention three.

1. Obedience is never judged by what we say but by what we do. This is a common theme of Scripture. Words are slippery things. Words are cheap. Anyone can utter them. True faith is proved by obedience, not by hearing and not by professing.

2. One’s initial response to God or to the Gospel is not always final. This is a glorious truth for some and a tragic truth for others. I suspect if we all had time to share our faith stories here this morning, we would hear quite a few from individuals who resisted the Gospel the first time they heard it; maybe the first 100 times! I never cease to be amazed at the patience and long-suffering nature of God in that He will pursue a person time and again, for months and even

years. What is even more amazing is that God sometimes accepts sinners even on their deathbed, though they have wasted every opportunity He has given them over their entire lifetime.

But this is a tragic truth for others. There are some who once verbally accepted the Gospel glibly, professed faith in Christ, eagerly joined a church, and began to serve with great enthusiasm, but are nowhere to be found today. They have abandoned the church, abandoned the moral standards they once held, and there is no evidence of spiritual fruit in their lives. Jesus doesn't tell us at this point what the tragic result is of such a life, but he will in the next parable.

3. Where we end up is a lot more important than where we start. Friends, the qualifications for the Kingdom have nothing to do with one's past and everything to do with one's present and future. I don't say to you that your past is unimportant, but it is not determinative of your future. Religious claims do not qualify a person to enter the kingdom, and even gross sin, when repented of, will not keep a person out! In other words, it is better to believe what at first you cannot say than to say at first what you do not believe.

But Jesus has a second story for the Pharisees.

The Parable of the Tenants (21:33-44)

Let's read Matthew 21:33-44:

"Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey. When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit.

"The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. Last of all, he sent his son to them. 'They will respect my son,' he said.

"But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance.' So 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 tenants?"

"He will bring those wretches to a wretched end," they replied, "and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time."

Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures:

"The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes?"

"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. He who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed."

The parable itself. Few of Jesus' parables are as obvious in their intent as this one. The

man who planted a vineyard and leased it out represents God. The vineyard is the Holy Land. The farmers who rent it represent the Jewish religious leaders.

Eventually the owner sends one of his servants to collect the rent, which would typically be paid in produce. The message is that God is looking for a return on His investment in the nation of Israel. But the tenants beat the servant and send him away empty-handed. Three times He sends servants and each time they treat him worse than before. These servants clearly represent the OT prophets, who were consistently disregarded, persecuted, and even killed. The tenants are relying on the fact that the owner is out of town and unable to do anything about it.

Finally the owner says, “What shall I do? I will send my son, whom I love; perhaps they will respect *him*.” But the perverse tenants seize him and kill him, (not in the vineyard, of course; they would not want to defile the ground). The Son, of course, represents Jesus Himself, and He shares this story just three days before His own crucifixion, when the same religious leaders hurry up his execution so as not to defile the Sabbath!

A very specific question based upon the parable. Jesus then asks a question, “What will the owner do to those tenants?” And they answer, “He will bring those wretches to a wretched end, and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants.” But what they fail to realize is that “those wretches” are the unbelieving Jewish people, especially their religious leaders, and the “other tenants” are Gentiles. When Jesus makes that clear, the mere thought of Gentiles being given the vineyard designed for them elicits a horrified reaction from the people listening, as reported in Luke’s account of this same parable (20:16): “God forbid! May this never be!” But it *will* be.

Jesus then takes a verse from Psalm 118 and applies it to Himself. We read in Matthew 21:42, “Have you never read in the Scriptures, ‘The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes.’” The religious leaders may reject Jesus as their Messiah, but God will make Him the foundation stone of the Church. They may reject Him, but God has accepted Him. Not only that, (verse 44), “He who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed.” People may reject and oppose Jesus, but it is *they* who will suffer for it.

The application of the parable. I will mention just two.

1. God will severely judge those who reject His grace and mercy. You see, God is patient, as seen in the fact that He does not strike at the first sign of rebellion; He gives chance after chance for His tenants to do the right thing. But if they presume too long on the His patience, eventually the day of reckoning comes. The tenants are judged severely.

2. He will give the kingdom to those who produce fruit. Jesus speaks these somber words in verse 43: “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.” Friends, this verse in a sense explains the Church. Because Israel rejected their Messiah, He has established a new community of faith. But He expects fruit!

Were you aware that Jesus borrowed this parable? It is substantially the same as one told by the Prophet Isaiah some 700 years earlier. Listen from Isaiah 5:1-7:

*I will sing for the one I love
 a song about his vineyard: My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside.
 He dug it up and cleared it of stones
 and planted it with the choicest vines.
 He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well.
 Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit.
 "Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard.
 What more could have been done for my vineyard
 than I have done for it?
 When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad?
 Now I will tell you
 what I am going to do to my vineyard:
 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 briers and thorns will grow there.
 I will command the clouds not to rain on it."
 The vineyard of the LORD Almighty
 is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are the garden of his delight.
 And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of
 distress.*

Back in Matthew 21 we read in verse 45, "When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew he was talking about them. But instead of listening and paying heed they long for an opportunity to arrest him immediately, but they are afraid of the people.

Conclusion: I believe Jesus aims these parables not only at first century Pharisees but also at Postmodern Pharisees. Israel is the vineyard He speaks of directly, but can we not think of another vineyard to which His words apply just as well—the western Church? As in Isaiah's parable, the question can well be asked today, "What more could God do for His vineyard than He has already done?"

What people in all of history have been blessed more and been given more advantages than we? We not only have divine revelation: we have all of God's written revelation, which not even Israel had. We not only have godly leaders to tell us what God's will is for us, but we have the complete written Word to judge what our leaders are telling us, which they did not have. We have resources, we have spiritual gifts, we have opportunities.

Can you think of any advantage God might have given the church today so that it could be

appropriately productive that He hasn't given? I honestly can't. The only thing that crosses my mind that might help us which we don't have is persecution, and I'm a bit hesitant to ask God for *that*. But that may be what it takes in order for us to get serious about the responsibility we have for holy living and effective service.

Today, just as in the first century, people don't reject the Gospel due to intellectual problems, or lack of opportunity, or ignorance of the truth. They reject it because they don't want God telling them what to do or how to live their lives. They reject it out of pride and hypocrisy.

And friends, one of these days God's patience will run out—on Postmodern Pharisees, just as it did on first-century Pharisees. But there is still a remedy. Romans 6:23 tells us, “The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

i. D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God*, 19.

ii. Earl Palmer, sermon at Beeson Pastors School 2004, tapes@soundword.com.