

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – October 8, 2017

[Matthew 21:33-46](#) & [Philippians 3:4b-14](#)

(Click on scripture above to link directly to the passage on biblegateway.com.)

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage in several different translations and/or paraphrases
2. Read the provided commentaries below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Reflect on the provided questions
5. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

Commentary on Matthew 21:33-46 (From the *Homiletics* archive; “No SlumLord” – October 2, 2011)

Matthew 21:33-46 narrates the closing portion of Jesus' dispute in the temple with the chief priests and Pharisees that began in Matthew 21:23. Although this wasn't the first clash between Jesus and the religious leaders after his arrival in Jerusalem, he had not been in the city long (Matthew 21:12-17). The altercation began when the priests and elders approached Jesus and asked, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" In response, Jesus agreed to answer their query provided they answer his: "Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" Despite Jesus' willingness to engage in what might be characterized as amiable repartee, the religious leaders refused to take part. Recognizing that adverse consequences followed either choice, they claimed, "We do not know," to which Jesus said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things" (Matthew 21:23-27).

Undeterred by their evasive reply, Jesus then told a parable about a father and two sons as a way to contrast the religious leaders with the tax collectors and the prostitutes. In Jesus' estimation, these sinners were entering the kingdom of God before the chief priests and elders because they believed John and were willing to change their minds (Matthew 21:28-32). Using the imagery of the parable, the tax collectors and prostitutes were like the first son because they complied with the father's request.

Yet before his listeners could walk away, Jesus also bid them, "Listen to another parable" (v. 33). This time, Jesus tapped into a familiar Isaianic motif -- the Lord's uncultivated and unrighteous vineyard. In Isaiah 5:1-7, a landowner planted and tenderly cared for his vineyard. But the vineyard produced only wild grapes, not cultivated ones. Consequently, the landowner despoiled his own property and turned his unruly vineyard into a feral wasteland.

Even though Jesus drew on Isaiah's vineyard allegory, there are a number of important differences.

For one, in Isaiah there are only two principal protagonists: the landowner who represents God, and the vineyard that symbolizes Israel. In contrast, besides Isaiah's two protagonists, Jesus inserts two minor characters -- the landowner's slaves and the landowner's son. Even with this modification, the identities of the parable's allegorical allusions are unmistakable: God is the landowner, the tenants are the religious leaders, the landowner's servants are the prophets, and Jesus is the landowner's son. Another striking difference is that while the whole nation of Israel is culpable in Isaiah's vineyard fable, in Jesus' adaptation of the parable, the vineyard still denotes Israel, but it is Israel's current religious leaders who are held responsible for the nation's failings.

One final distinction concerns the judgment God renders in each case. In Isaiah, God summons the "inhabitants of Jerusalem and the people of Judah," and directs them to "judge between me and my vineyard" (Isaiah 5:3). Then, he declares what he will do to the unproductive vineyard, "I remove its hedge, / and it shall be devoured; / I will break down its wall, / and it shall be trampled down. / I will make it a waste" (Isaiah 5:5-6a). God is going to do this to "the house of Israel, / and the people of Judah" because "he expected justice, / but saw bloodshed, / righteousness, / but heard a cry!" (Isaiah 5:7). In sum, the whole nation of Israel will be condemned for its complicity.

However, with Jesus' retelling of Isaiah's story in the temple, the vineyard -- that is, God's kingdom people -- is not destroyed. Instead of the entire nation being turned into a wasteland, God will come and condemn only the tenants for two reasons. First, they "seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another." Second, rather than respecting God's son when they saw him, "they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance'" -- a plot that would soon become reality (Matthew 21:35, 38; cf. Matthew 26:4).

Immediately following his reworking of Isaiah's vineyard parable, Jesus asks his antagonists, "Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" Without hesitating, they reply, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death [κακους κακως απολεσει αυτους], and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time" (vv. 40-41).

Contrary to their evasive reply in verse 27, the response of the priests and elders this time is direct and unequivocal. Though they were perhaps unable to recognize the tragic implications of their answer -- how could they? -- they had just condemned themselves by their own rash words (cf. Matthew 12:36-37). They had not only characterized themselves as "wretches," but also had pronounced a curse on themselves -- they were to be put to death "with a miserable death."

Hearing their candid response, Jesus asks another question and at the same time circles back to their original query regarding the source of his authority (cf. Matthew 21:23). In this way, Jesus interprets Psalm 118:22-23 so that he can reveal his identity and confirm his authority for the things he was doing.

The chief priests and elders had neither believed John nor understood this Scripture, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; / this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes" (v. 42). Consequently, Jesus goes on to say that God would take his kingdom away from them and give it to other people (e.g., tax collectors and sinners) who had believed and would yield righteous fruit (vv. 42-43; cf. Matthew 5:6, 20). In doing so, God promised to make the cornerstone into a stone that humbles those who fall on it and crush those who reject it (v. 43). (While verse 43 may allude to Daniel 2:31-45 [esp. vv. 34-35, 44-45], one thing is certain; it is an enigmatic expression open to interpretation.)

Despite some similarity to and an overlap with Isaiah's vineyard parable, Jesus' reworking of Isaiah's allegory intensified his face-to-face confrontation with "the chief priests and Pharisees" (which is a subtle, but perhaps significant change from the scene's opening when it was "the chief priests and elders" who approached Jesus [v. 45; cf. Matthew 21:23]). Having listened to Jesus speak, the religious authorities recognized the deliberate correlation Jesus had made between the tenant's despicable conduct and their own intentional mindset (v. 45). However, at this point in time, fear of the crowds who "regarded [Jesus] as a prophet" once again dissuaded the chief priests and Pharisees from arresting him (v. 46; cf. Matthew 21:11, 26).

Commentary on Phil. 3:4b-14 (From the *Homiletics* archive; "Limping to the Line" –March 21, 2010)

In recent years, several fine books have encouraged Christian preachers to boldly proclaim their faith and the New Testament Scriptures without "blaming the Jews," "dismissing the Law" or exuding "contempt" arising from even "unintended anti-Judaism." It is likely that a review of the history of sermons on this lectionary passage would do much to underscore the need for these admonitions — and just as likely that Paul would join the effort to turn that unfortunate tide.

The passage opens with Paul asserting his "reason to be confident in the flesh" (v. 4b) on account of his credentials within the Jewish religious community. He was an "Israelite" by birth rather than a convert to Judaism, "circumcised on the eighth day" in accord with the Law of Moses, descended from the same tribe that gave ancient Israel its first king (and Paul's namesake, at least according to Acts where he is initially known by the Jewish name "Saul"). He was, to update the phrasing a bit from the translation in the NRSV, "a Hebrew's Hebrew," invoking the proud appellation the community used for itself rather than the designation "Jew." Already in the first century, "Jew" was bandied about more often by outsiders with tones of derision. Paul identified himself with the pious movement of Pharisees, who zealously guarded its traditions against upstart messianic movements (such as the church), and would have been considered without fault ("blameless") by other members of his community in living out the standards of that tradition (vv. 5-6).

Some older interpretations held that Paul intended to denigrate these reasons for confidence before his Philippian audience. After all, he associates these reasons with "the flesh" (σάρξ), a term he uses in some contexts to refer to people so completely under the influence of sin that no good can live within them (see Romans 7:18). Moreover, in the very next sentence of this letter, Paul says that he has come to consider these reasons for confidence as "loss," (ζημία, that is, things that are actually "damaging"; v. 7).

But to see these reasons for confidence as intrinsically negative is actually to fundamentally miss Paul's point. In the present context, "flesh" means nothing more than the outward trappings of life as seen in normal human terms (see v. 3). Paul's point is one that presses more toward hyperbole. As much as he had every reason for confidence when judged by human standards, he now understands that another standard exists that causes the usual one to so pale by comparison as to make what were genuine "gains" seem like damaging "loss" instead. The only way to properly understand how wonderful Paul considers the confidence one has "because of Christ" (v. 7) is to understand how great his confidence in human terms rightly was. Things were really good for Paul when his confidence was in his Jewish heritage; things are almost unimaginably better for him "because of Christ."

Perhaps in an effort to be sure no one misses the point, Paul continues to ratchet up the degree of

hyperbole. He has come to consider “all things” — not just his ethnic and religious heritage, but *all* things — a damaging “loss.” Indeed he regards them, in the delicate phrasing of the NRSV, as “rubbish” in comparison to “the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (v. 8). The Greek word the NRSV translates as “rubbish,” σκυβαλον, is not one that translates easily for the niceties of the pulpit. It was a crude word often used for human excrement, a word that demands one of its four-letter Anglo-Saxon counterparts to convey its connotation as well as its denotation (and a four-letter word more crude than even the old KJV translation, “dung”). But again, notice that Paul does *not* say that “all things” have *become* sewage waste “because of ... Christ.” Those things still have all the real, legitimate value they ever had; it is only the “surpassing value” of being in relationship with Christ that causes them to suffer in comparison.

This “surpassing value” stems from the fact that Paul no longer relies on “a righteousness of *my own*” (v. 9, emphasis added). That it was *his own* righteousness identifies the true source of the problem, not that it “comes from the law” — a description that merely serves to link it back to his “reason to be confident” in the earlier verses. Recognizing that also tips the balances in one of the great debates of the moment among Pauline scholars. When Paul celebrates a righteousness that comes *δια πιστεως* (v. 9), does he mean “through faith in Christ” (NRSV) or “through the faith (or ‘faithfulness’) of Christ” (NRSV margin)? The contrast with Paul’s *own* righteousness would suggest it is the latter. Now he relies on Christ’s faithfulness and the righteousness that stems from that, instead of on his own ability to have faith in Christ. That interpretation gains further support from the following phrase that it is “righteousness from God” realized for Paul and for us in a faithful relationship with Christ.

Might it be, then, that Paul’s admission that he had “[n]ot ... already obtained ... or ... reached the goal” (v. 12) of the full knowledge of “Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings” (v. 10) is really an admission that he had not yet completely let go of trying to establish “a righteousness of my own” (v. 9)? That would be why he must “forget what lies behind” (v. 13) — not a Law now somehow discredited, but the discredited attempt to find any righteousness of *his own* — “and strain forward to what lies ahead” (v. 13), namely such full identification with Christ that Christ’s resurrection becomes in a real sense also Paul’s “resurrection from the dead” (v. 11).

After all, leaving behind wretched sewage wouldn’t pose much of a challenge for anyone. Letting go of our own sense of righteousness or at least our self-assurance that we can eventually achieve a righteousness of our own, well, that’s another story. Yet Paul is convinced that if we can truly catch even a glimpse of the “surpassing value” of being in relationship with Christ, then we will join him in responding to the “heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus” and make reliance on his faithfulness rather than our own our “goal” and our “prize” (v. 14). That is good news that we can preach without the need to “blame” or “denigrate” anyone.

Additional Resources

- [“The Text this Week”](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for this week...not all will relate to the Matthew passage we are studying, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Some interesting commentary and reflection at [The Lectionary Lab](#) by the Rev. Dr. John Fairless (originally from 2014).

Reflection Questions on Matthew 21:33-46:

- 1.** This parable has a long history of allegorical interpretation: landowner=God, vineyard=the world, tenants=Jews, slaves=prophets, son=Jesus. Do you see any potential problems with this method of interpretation? Is this the only way we can understand this parable?
- 2.** What happens if we read ourselves into the various characters in the parable?
- 3.** If we understand the landowner/father in this parable to represent God, what do we make of the fact that this character is portrayed so generously in the parable that immediately precedes this one (which was read last week), but is so vindictive in this one?

Reflection Questions on Philippians 3:4b-14:

- 1.** Have you read the context of this passage? The verses prior to this selection are pretty harsh! Does Paul come across as angry and defensive to you as he does to me? Remembering that this is originally a specific letter to a specific community of faith, does the context compromise or color the content Paul offers here?
- 2.** Writing this letter from prison, and later being executed for his faith, we know that Paul experienced his share of suffering. How do those of us who do not face such persecution for our faith hear and understand Paul's proclamation of sharing in the sufferings of Christ?
- 3.** Paul very clearly articulates here the "trashing" of his old religious beliefs and practices, that he might "know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death" (v. 10). Is this a model for all Christians, or something unique to Paul's life and circumstances? Is there any room for blending of old and new traditions and beliefs? Transformation or reinterpretation of prior understandings?

What questions do you have?

What do you "wonder" about when reading this passage?