

Focus on Matthew 21:33–46

WHAT is important to know? — From “*Exegetical Perspective*,” Susan Grove Eastman

What shall we make of this judgment on Israel’s religious leaders? We note that here Jesus does not reject the whole people of Israel; his conflict with the chief priests is preceded and triggered by his healings of the blind and the lame, who come to him within the temple precincts (21:14). The suffering, impoverished, and illiterate common people rightly acclaim him; the educated leaders do not. Thus the accusations against Israel in Isaiah 5:8–30 echo in the background of Jesus’ teaching here: the outcast and the poor suffer, while the wealthy continually enrich only themselves.

WHERE is God in these words? — From “*Theological Perspective*,” Andrew Purves

Calvin has a second point: whatever the contrivances of those who actively reject or betray Jesus, seeking to destroy him, the cornerstone remains secure, holding up the building. The attack on Jesus Christ is ultimately fruitless. Jesus, says Calvin, suffers no loss or diminution when he is rejected or betrayed. In spite of betrayal, he retains the place given to him from the Father. Whatever the honor given to and apparent success of those who attack Christ, the authority and purpose of God will prevail. “This was the Lord’s doing” (v. 42).

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives? — From “*Pastoral Perspective*,” Richard E. Spalding

Our weathering of the challenges to our ethics and convictions posed by responsible stewardship—of the “vineyard” of this earth, of the values we live by, of the soundness of our relationships—begins with the realization that God will maintain at least sufficient distance to enable us to determine our own fruitfulness or to make our own mistakes. Though, of course, God is not an absentee landlord, mature faith means practicing sound values and sound devotion on our own, even when God seems distant.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do? — From “*Homiletical Perspective*,” Marvin A. McMickle

Another way in which we reject God occurs when we reject some of God’s people for reasons of our own. Human beings are capable of doing terrible things to other people whom they are somehow able to define as less worthy, less human, less valuable than themselves. If we can manage to turn another human being into the “other,” there is no limit to what we will do or will allow to be done to them. We can be as brutal to one another as were the men who beat, stoned, and killed people in Matthew 21:35–37. When we reject some of God’s people, we are rejecting the God who made them.

Context and Connection

Part 1 Setting the Context

Matthew's version of the parable of the Wicked Tenants is the second in a series of three parables that Jesus tells in the temple. The setting and context of the parable are crucial to its interpretation. Jesus has entered Jerusalem riding on a colt and been acclaimed as the messianic Son of David, and "the whole city was in turmoil" (Matthew 21:6–10). This acclamation of Jesus as the Son of David continues when he goes to the temple and overturns the tables of the money changers, prompting the chief priests and scribes to ask angrily, "Do you hear what these are saying?" (21:16). Jesus leaves the city for the night. When he returns the next morning, he curses a fruitless fig tree, symbolizing the coming destruction of Jerusalem and disempowerment of the temple leadership (21:18–19; cf. Matthew 3:10). After this he enters the temple and, not surprisingly, encounters a challenge to his authority from the chief priests and elders (21:23–27). The three parables that follow respond to this challenge, and each speaks directly to these Jewish leaders, not to the people as a whole. Thus, when in the first parable Jesus says, "The tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you" (21:31), he judges the religious leaders, not the Jews as a people (21:45).

—Excerpted from Susan Grove Eastham, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 141

Part 2 Connecting Then with Now

The parable of the Wicked Tenants is remarkably helpful for guiding reflection on the life of the church today. While it must be interpreted in its historical context as part of the teaching of Jesus against the religious leaders of his day, and of the reach of the gospel beyond the confines of Israel, the parable must not remain locked within the limitations of past history. As gospel it has contemporary significance. John Calvin, in his commentary on this parable, noted as much for his day. Calvin identified two theological points of continuing relevance: (1) we should expect people, and especially religious leaders, to try to hinder the reign of Christ; (2) whatever contrivances are mounted against the church, God will be victorious.

—Excerpted from Edward Purves, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 140

