Stumbling Block or Stepping Stone?
Matthew 21:33-45
May 25, 2014

Pastor Troy Dobbs
Grace Church of Eden Prairie

Our collective knowledge of the past doesn’t go back very far when it comes to quantifying the worst things humans have done on MICRO and MACRO levels.

And instead of recounting for you an exhaustive list of those atrocities – let me say this for your consideration:

“Killing Jesus Christ is the worst thing the human race has ever done.”

Think about our situation as humans:

- **DEAD** in our sins
- **DISOBEDIENT** in our lifestyles
• DEPRAVED in our thinking
• DOOMED from the get-go

And yet God still sent us His only Son – and we not only rejected Him – we also killed Him.

It is unthinkable!

And today – our text of study shows how wicked and foolish it is to take the life of the only one able to give life…

Matthew 21:33-45

33 “Hear another parable. There was a master of a house who planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a winepress in it and built a tower and leased it to tenants, and went into another country.
34 When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit.

35 And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another.

36 Again he sent other servants, more than the first. And they did the same to them.

37 Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’

38 But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.’

39 And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

40 When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?”

41 They said to him, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard
to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons.”

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

“The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes’?

43 Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits.

44 And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.”

45 When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them.

Let’s assign parts here:
THE MASTER = God
THE VINEYARD = Israel
THE TENANTS = Religious Leaders
THE SERVANTS = Prophets/John the Baptist
THE SON = Jesus

Now the storyline is simple:
- The master of the house planted a vineyard
- put a fence around it
- built a tower (for protection)
- leased it out to tenants
- and then went to Florida

When harvest time came – he sent his servants to get the fruit.

But the tenants revolted and went on a murderous rampage killing the master’s servants.
The master (again) sent more servants and got the same tragic result: rejection & murder!

Finally – the extraordinarily patient master sent his son – thinking the tenants would at least respect him. **But they didn’t** – they killed the master’s son (too) because they were greedy for the inheritance.

Finally the master / owner of the vineyard had enough (look at what it says vv.40-44)

40 **When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?”**

41 **They said to him, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons.”**

He basically says:
They will be held accountable for their ACTIONS!

Jesus then jumps into the story with a Daniel 2 / Psalm 118 scriptural reference.

Verse 42:

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

“The stone that the builders rejected
   has become the cornerstone;
this was the Lord's doing,
   and it is marvelous in our eyes’’?

These references speak to the fact that although “religious” Israel rejected Jesus – God made him the centerpiece of His plan of salvation.

The stone that the builders rejected
   has become the cornerstone.
The cornerstone is the most important / valuable stone in the building.

You see here firsthand that God is going to vindicate the one Israel rejected.

As well Jesus goes on to say – time’s up for you “religious Israel” – the kingdom has been taken from you and given to the ones demonstrating repentance by producing fruit.

Moreover, don’t miss the fact that in (v43-44) the ones

- who trip over Jesus (which is another way of saying “reject Jesus”)

- will be broken to pieces

- and (in the end) Jesus will crush those who reject Him

In that way – Jesus is either a stepping stone or a stumbling block for people.
He’ll either be the stone you step upon to come to God OR the stone you trip over that keeps you from God.

Either way – you are going to face Him.

Jesus cannot be avoided.

And then the parable closes with this statement:

45 When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them.

Now at the 30,000 ft level this parable chronicles Israel’s history of rejecting God’s attempts to rescue them.

Here Matthew borrows “the vineyard imagery” from Isaiah 5:4 where it asserts God has “bent over backwards” for Israel.

Listen to what it says:
What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it?
When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?ii

Don’t miss here that Israel’s failure to “get it” was their fault – not God’s.

They continually rejected God’s attempts to redeem them.

Think about it:
God sent John the Baptist to call them to repentance but they threw him in prison and cut off His head! (Matthew 14:10)

As well Hebrews 11:32 goes back in history and says:

32 And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophetsiii
Regarding the prophets, Hebrews 11:36-37 says:

36 Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. 37 They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated—

Tragically, God sent prophets to Israel and they not only rejected the message but they also slaughtered the messengers…

And yet God did not stop loving and entreating them.

He even sent His Son Jesus to them.

In this passage Jesus actually predicts his own murderous death – exposing the religious leaders plot to kill him.
Moreover - Jesus then reminded them of His unique role in God’s economy – “He is the cornerstone of building.”

He is undoubtedly the most important person who has ever lived!

So this parable - with “high-def” clarity lays out the gospel via 4 truths:

The 1\textsuperscript{st} Gospel truth we see in this parable is:

\begin{itemize}
  \item[1. \textbf{The long-suffering love of God!}]
\end{itemize}

The patience of God is illustrated in this parable by the many “sendings” of the Master.

Ultimately, He sent \textbf{servant} after \textbf{servant} after \textbf{servant}. (vv. 34-46)
He even sent His own flesh and blood.

The patience of God towards humanity is absolutely staggering.

- You see God’s patience in dealing with Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel.
- You see it with Israel’s grumbling in the wilderness.
- You see it with the patriarchs.
- You see it with Israel.
- You see it with the Apostles.
- You see it in the ebb and flow of church history.

Over in 2 Peter 3:8-10 it says:

8 But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. 9 The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some
count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. 10 But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.\

Peter says here that the fact Christ has NOT returned yet is a display of His patience.

He goes on to say: God is patient with you because He doesn’t want anyone to perish.

Additionally, God is patient with us as He grows us and refines us.

Listen to some of these verses:

Isaiah 48:9
“For my name’s sake I defer my anger, for the sake of my praise I restrain it for you, that I may not cut you off."vi

Numbers 14:18

18 ‘The LORD is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression

Psalm 86:15

But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.vii

Psalm 145:8

The LORD is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.viii

Acts 13:18
And for about forty years he put up with them in the wilderness.ix

This parable highlights the long-suffering love of God which is foundational to understanding the gospel.

So I can say this: Don’t presume on His patience.

Turn to Him and trust Him while you have the chance!

The 2nd gospel truth you see in this parable is:

2. The mind-blowing sinfulness of humanity.

The sinfulness of humanity is illustrated by the resistance of the tenants to the Masters servants and son!
Over and over again the servants were rejected and ultimately killed.

Think of the audacity here – our ever-patient God lovingly sends us a rescuer we don’t deserve to deliver us from (a demise we do) but we arrogantly declare:

- I don’t want your help.
- I don’t want your rescue.
- I don’t want you.

Sadly, (too) many Christians reduce sin to “a relational tiff” between God and man, where an apology to God will suffice!

But that fails to recognize the enormity of our sinfulness.

That image of sin as “lover’s quarrel” distorts the relationship in which we stand to God.
It suggests:

- no broken law
- no violated justice
- no righteous wrath
- no holy judgment

and therefore, ultimately no need for a substitute to bear that judgment either.

However - the Bible says that sin is not only a broken relationship with God; it is also a broken relationship that exists because we REJECTED His Kingship!

So this is not just saying no to God – this is treason against God.

In that way we are like traitors rebelling against a good and righteous king!

And unless we “grasp” the seriousness of our sin we will never understand why the death of Jesus was required to address it.
Said another way:
If we don’t see our sin like God does – *we’ll never respond like we need to – to be saved!*

The 3*rd* gospel truth we see in this parable is:

3. The centrality and finality of the sending of Jesus.

NOTICE:
Jesus is NOT one of the servants.

**HE IS THE SON.**

As well – don’t miss that there is NO sending of anyone else… servant / prophet / angel after this sending of the Son.
Jesus is the FINAL sending of God.

God is not sending ANYONE else – because NO ONE else is NEEDED.

In that way Jesus is God’s last and ultimate plan for the human race… so embrace Him as quickly as you can!

The 4\textsuperscript{th} gospel truth we see in this parable is:

\begin{center}
4. The urgency and awfulness of the judgment.
\end{center}

Those who oppose / reject – God’s son (past / present / future) will face a wrath-filled judgment.

Now we don’t talk much about judgment in the American church because we don’t want to offend or hinder church growth.
But it is a Biblical reality. Now it’s always interesting to watch what happens when people (who insist that God would never judge them) actually come face to face with undeniable evil.

When confronted with some truly horrific evil, EVERYONE wants a God of justice – and they want Him now.

Right I mean – nobody wants a God who declines to deal with evil.

People just want a God who declines to deal with THEIR evil.

However, Scripture tells us that because God is perfectly just and righteous, He will deal decisively with all evil.

Habakkuk 1:13 says:
God’s eyes are too pure to look on evil; He cannot tolerate wrong. Now you know this but most people have no problem at all thinking of God as loving and compassionate.

We Christians have done a bang-up job convincing the world that God loves them.

But if we’re going to understand:

- just how glorious and life-giving the gospel of Jesus Christ is…
- we have to understand that this loving and compassionate God is also holy and righteous and just…
- and determined to never to overlook / ignore / tolerate anyone’s sin.

Including our own!!
i Matthew 21:33-45
ii Isaiah 5:4
iii Hebrews 11:32
iv Hebrews 11:36-37
v 2 Peter 3:8-10
vi Isaiah 48:9
vii Psalm 86:15
viii Psalm 145:8
ix Acts 13:18