

Matthew 21:33-46.

Context. Question. Where's your authority? Your dad's a carpenter on minimum wage, you've not been to Bible School, you've got no religious qualifications, you've no official appointment, and yet you've got the temerity to criticise us, the Pharisees. Where is your authority for doing so? Jesus skilfully dodges the question with a counter question about John the Baptist which the Pharisees daren't answer and so they are made to look a bit empty and stupid - so they answered Jesus and said, "We do not know." And He said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things. Matthew 21:27 NKJV.

V28-31. Then Jesus drives home the point; the distinction between those who appear awkward and rebellious but who are then convicted by conscience to do the right thing and those who love to appear obedient and devoted to their father, but it's only lip service. Their good intentions never translate into practical works. The question Jesus poses: which one of these two sons does the father's will?

Can you relate to either of these two sons? Any examples from your life? OK, maybe even both sons.

They said to Him, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Assuredly, I say to you that tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him; but tax collectors and harlots believed him; and when you saw it, you did not afterward repent and believe him. Matthew 21:31-32 NKJV

Jesus then takes the issue in question to a different level with the parable of the bad tenant farmers. Jesus tells a story and the people listen. The characters in this story are -

Vineyard owner; God
The tenants; the unbelieving Jews
Servants; the prophets
Vineyard owner's son; Jesus
New tenants; the Gentiles.

The setting is a vineyard that represents the earth.

The vineyard is planted, with a surrounding hedge, and a wine press, and a security tower is built; everything you need to run a good vineyard. The owner has done all this as an investment rather than as a project for himself to run as a farmer. The owner finds tenants and agrees the rent as a proportion of the harvest, rather than a monthly cash payment.

Harvest time and the rent period comes up due and the owner sends three of his servants to collect his portion of the harvest. However, instead of paying up, the tenants beat up one, kill one and then stone to death the other. The owner tries again but this time sends more servants, but the tenants do the same to them as they did to the first lot of servants. So then the owner decides to send His son, he has more authority, they'll respect him.

When the tenants see the son, they recognise him and conspire together; if we kill him off, then when the old man dies, the vineyard will come to us. So they take the son out of the vineyard and murder him.

So the question to the crowd is, what should the owner do with these tenants? The answer

the Pharisees give: They said to Him, "He will destroy those wicked men miserably, and lease his vineyard to other vine-dressers who will render to him the fruits in their seasons." Matthew 21:41 NKJV

Then Jesus drops the penny; this is not just an interesting anecdote / story, it's a parable or an allegory and it is the audience, the Pharisees, that are playing the part of the baddies. Let's look at Jesus's statement to His audience.

Matthew 21:42 NKJV Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: 'The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief cornerstone. This was the Lord's doing, And it is marvellous in our eyes'?"

Remember, Jesus was addressing Pharisees who were well versed in Old Testament scriptures and would have been familiar with the passage Jesus quoted in Psalm 118:22-23. Let's read that and compare David's and Jesus's situations and their take on it. David was singing the virtues of righteousness, declaring his salvation and attributing it to the stone that the builders rejected. Jesus is saying, He is that stone. This was a Messianic prophecy! Then it dawned on the Pharisees that the polite but disobedient son in the previous parable and the bad tenants in Jesus's stories were they, and they were very uptight. Jesus piles on their annoyance by declaring:

"Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it. And whoever falls on this stone will be broken; but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder." Matthew 21:43-44 NKJV. Jesus was taking David's prophecy further, adding to it the nature of a large foundation stone. If you were to fall on it, you'd likely break some bones, and if it were dropped on you, you'd be splattered! He also warned them that God was going to ditch the religious Jews who didn't believe in Him, in favour of another nation that were not even Jews. They completely forgot about or ignored John the Baptist's warning in Matthew 3:9.

The Pharisees would have known that, eventually, God would extend His grace to save the Gentiles Isaiah 56:6, Isaiah 66:18-19, Hosea 2:23. But the prospect of God wrenching the Kingdom from the Jews and giving it to the Gentiles was unconscionable.

The Pharisees were indignant and wanted to arrest Jesus but, as they moved to do so, the crowd began to turn on them and they were forced to back down.

Is God's patience limitless? Time and again, we read Jesus's warning that God's patience is limited and that they were very close to that limit. How so? They were arrogant enough to disregard John the Baptist's warning -

and do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. Matthew 3:9 NKJV.

Can we draw any lessons from these two parables, or were they only aimed at the Pharisees?

The Pharisees were unable to grasp that God would send His Son to be the saviour of the world, despite having studied the Old Testament and having it explained to them by Jesus. Today, Jewish theology will not accept that God has a son and neither did the Pharisees in Jesus's day. The Messiah they await is a warrior in the same mould as King David. When we read the Bible, we need to open our minds to the leading of the Holy Spirit without

going off piste.

Jesus's frustration with unbelief.

God's patience with the Jews lasted over 3,000 years before He sought and found more profitable tenants. Is there a message to us there? Is God's patience with us limited? Will He ever say enough is enough? What do we have to do to lose our salvation? Does that not partially bring into question the concept that we are not saved by works but by grace? Ephesians 2:8-9,

Jesus was giving the Pharisees a hard, brutal and humiliating lesson and in front of a crowd. Jesus pulls no punches. Is it not sometimes better to have a quiet word with people with whom you disagree, or should we meet them head-on like Jesus did? Which situations need this more confrontational approach? Note - The only times that Jesus took a confrontational approach was with scribes, Pharisees and a heretical sect called Sadducees.