

Expecting the Kingdom

Part 6: The Peril of Unfruitfulness

Big Idea: God's people will give account for their faithfulness in the mission entrusted to them

PRAY!

READ Matthew 21:33-46 (NIV)

*“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 moved to another place. ³⁴ When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit. ³⁵ The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. ³⁶ Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. ³⁷ Last of all, he sent his son to them. ‘They will respect my son,’ he said. ³⁸ 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.’ ³⁹ So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. ⁴⁰ “Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” ⁴¹ “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.” ⁴² Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures: “‘The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes’? 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.** ⁴⁴ Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed.” ⁴⁵ When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus’ parables, they knew he was talking about them. ⁴⁶ They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet.*

- Today, we begin a new section in this series, examining ***the faithful servant who awaits the King.***
- As we dig into this text, I want us to think about this idea:
What does it mean to be entrusted with the kingdom?
- My three simple points today:
 - 1) Israel Loses the Kingdom
 - 2) Why? Because it failed to be faithful in the mission.
 - 3) Why did it fail? Because of repeated idolatry.

1) Israel Loses the Kingdom

“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.”

- An **astounding** thing is about to happen to Israel: The kingdom of God will be taken away from it.
- In this text, Israel’s religious leaders have fully and finally failed the test of stewardship.
The results are devastating.
 - So, what’s going on in this scene?
 - Jesus is in Jerusalem in the last week of his life, and had just experienced the Triumphal Entry the day before (21:9-10).

- Remember the **party**? The people were so excited because they thought the Messiah would give the Romans the boot and give Israel the kingdom.
- In other words, it's not really *HIM* they're celebrating, but what they think he will **bring** them. We will see that this shows us the root of Israel's problem.

Jesus has come here **knowing he will be crucified** by the people he came to *save*.

- On this 2nd day, he's in the temple courts teaching, and has a series of exchanges with the Jewish leaders.
- In these exchanges, he is confronting them with their unbelief and refusal to repent, in spite of all they have seen (see vv. 28-32).
- So he tells them the parable we just read.
 - o Farmer = God, Vineyard = Israel, Tenants = leaders, Harvest = Mission, Fruit = righteousness & *more* – the nations knowing **Yahweh**, Servants = prophets, Son = Jesus
 - o Note: GOD planted the vineyard, and it was HIS fruit → They were **set up** for success!
 - o All the tenants had to do was be faithful!
- And yet they were **not** faithful. As a result they would **not yield fruit**. → They **refused**.
- A couple things that **astound** me in this passage:
 - 1) It's astounding that in spite of being set up for success, Israel repeatedly failed.
 - 2) It's astounding that the priests and Pharisees realize these parables are about them, and instead of shock, contrition and repentance, they want to *arrest* Jesus (v. 46)!
 - o We also see this in the previous passage (vv. 28-32), where Jesus says this shocking statement: *"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. Even after you saw this [miracle!], you did not repent and believe him."*
 - o A good question to ask is how people get there – to where God stands before their very eyes and they want to kill him.
 - 3) It's astounding that Israel lost the kingdom (2X). That is a *catastrophe*.

- **To whom much is given, much is required.** The King will call us all to account.
- *But you know what is **also** astounding? **Grace**.*
- Jesus said to the leaders of Israel, *"the kingdom of God will be **taken away** from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit."*
- Contrast this with Lk. 12, where Jesus tells his disciples: *"Your Father has been **pleased** to **GIVE** you the kingdom."*
- Jesus was speaking of the **church**, made up of Jews **and** Gentiles – **ALL nations** – who were graciously given the kingdom, based on no merit of our own.
- And Jesus said we **WILL** produce its fruit. And it is happening before our eyes...

2) Why did Israel lose the kingdom? Because it failed to be faithful in the mission.

“When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit. ³⁵ “The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. ³⁶ Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way.”

- Did you know that Israel was supposed to be a **light to the Gentiles**?
- Here are just a couple texts that articulate Israel’s mission of proclamation:

“He is the Lord our God; his judgments are in all the earth.

Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples.

For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the Lord made the heavens.

Ascribe to the Lord, all you families of nations, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; bring an offering and come before him. Worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness.” (1 Chronicles 16:14, 24, 26, 28-29 NIV)

*In that day you will say: “Give praise to the Lord, **proclaim his name; make known among the nations what he has done, and proclaim that his name is exalted.** Sing to the Lord, for he has done glorious things; let this be known to all the world.” (Isaiah 12:4-5 NIV)*

- Think about the **theology of mission** there:
 - A declaration that the religions of the nations are false, and...
 - Yahweh is glorious and King over all the earth, and...
 - A command to *declare, proclaim, and make him known* among the nations, and...
 - He invites those nations to **come** to him and **know** him and **worship** him – to discover their creation purpose.
- Think about the weight of **responsibility**, and what God was **entrusting** to Israel.
- Yet even in Isaiah’s time – 700 BC, when Israel was being judged via Assyria – the failure of Israel was already being recognized:

*Lord, they came to you in their distress; when you disciplined them, they could barely whisper a prayer. As a pregnant woman about to give birth writhes and cries out in her pain, so were we in your presence, Lord. We were with child, we writhed in labor, but we gave birth to wind. **We have not brought salvation to the earth, and the people of the world have not come to life.*** (Isaiah 26:16-18 NIV)
- Here, Isaiah refers to an Israel being disciplined yet still failing to bear fruit.
- In his parable, Jesus portrays the tenants as Israel beating and killing and stoning the prophets.
- And even after Israel and Judah are judged by God, refined, and restored to their land, *they actually turn against the Son – Messiah Himself.*
- **Why?**
- ***It’s incredibly important that we understand this, because we – sitting here today – face similar dangers.***

3) Why did Israel fail? Because of repeated idolatry.

Last of all, he sent his son to them. ‘They will respect my son,’ he said. ³⁸ “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.’ ³⁹ So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

- Jesus’ parable indicates a problem with Israel both in ancient times (killing the prophets) and in his time (killing the son).
- I want to look at the two periods, and the two distinct kinds of idolatry.

READ Jeremiah 7:9-20

“Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, ¹⁰ and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, “We are safe”—safe to do all these detestable things? ¹¹ Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! declares the Lord. ¹² Go now to the place in Shiloh where I first made a dwelling for my Name, and see what I did to it because of the wickedness of my people Israel. ¹³ While you were doing all these things, declares the Lord, I spoke to you again and again [the Prophets], but you did not listen; I called you, but you did not answer. ¹⁴ Therefore, what I did to Shiloh I will now do to the house that bears my Name, the temple you trust in, the place I gave to you and your fathers. ¹⁵ I will thrust you from my presence, just as I did all your brothers, the people of Ephraim.’ ¹⁶ So do not pray for this people nor offer any plea or petition for them; do not plead with me, for I will not listen to you. ¹⁷ Do you not see what they are doing in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem? ¹⁸ The children gather wood, the fathers light the fire, and the women knead the dough and make cakes of bread for the Queen of Heaven. They pour out drink offerings to other gods to provoke me to anger. ¹⁹ But am I the one they are provoking? declares the Lord. Are they not rather harming themselves, to their own shame? ²⁰ Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: My anger and my wrath will be poured out on this place, on man and beast, on the trees of the field and on the fruit of the ground, and it will burn and not be quenched.”

- This is a good ***synopsis passage*** of why Israel was judged.
- They repeatedly were guilty of both individual & social sins, political corruption, superficial religion (v. 10), and gross injustice.
- But the big one that kept getting them was **idolatry**. Idolatry in the most basic form: Literally worshipping other gods – in this case Canaanite gods of wood and metal.
- Their God – the true God Yahweh – was not visible or physical. And they were surrounded by pagans who had gods that could be seen and touched. It was more than they could resist.
- The lesson here is that it’s hard to evangelize the pagans when the pagans are evangelizing you. You can’t tell them of the greatness of the true God when you’re lusting after false gods.
- Ironically, after Israel was judged, they tried to fix this problem by “purifying” their religion and completely cutting off all contact with Gentiles.
- This **also** made it *impossible to be on mission* **and** led to *another kind of idolatry*:

READ Luke 4:16-30 (NIV)

[Jesus] went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read,¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:¹⁸ “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free,¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”²⁰ Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him.²¹ He began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”²² All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. “Isn’t this Joseph’s son?” they asked.²³ Jesus said to them, “Surely you will quote this proverb to me: ‘Physician, heal yourself!’ And you will tell me, ‘Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.’”²⁴ “Truly I tell you,” he continued, “no prophet is accepted in his hometown.”²⁵ I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah’s time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land.²⁶ Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon.²⁷ And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian.”²⁸ All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this.²⁹ They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him off the cliff.³⁰ But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.

- Throw him off a **cliff**?!? → What on earth for? What could cause people to be so irrational?
- **You can tell what people’s real gods are by what they get worked up about.**
- Everybody loved him (v. 22) until he insulted Israel.
- He called out unbelief in his people, and even though they saw he was a prophet, they were willing to **KILL** him, just as their ancestors did to the prophets of old.
- So they merely switched idols. → Israel’s problem was worship of Israel.
- Before it was pagan gods, then in an effort to purify Israel of pagan gods *their way*, **Israel** became their god.
- The lesson here is: *your heart must be occupied by the real God or you’ll just find another god*

READ John 11:43-48 (NIV)

When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!”⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, “Take off the grave clothes and let him go.”⁴⁵ Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.⁴⁶ But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done.⁴⁷ Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. “What are we accomplishing?” they asked. “Here is this man performing many signs.⁴⁸ If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation.”

- So Jesus actually **raises a dead man**, and what is the response of the Jewish leaders?
- “My goodness we have to stop him!”
- STOP HIM?!? → **GOD** has showed up! The **Messiah** you longed for is here!
- But they actually articulate their real gods: “*Our Temple and our Nation*”. Their religion and their country became their gods.

- And of course Jesus was a **threat** to this.
- So when the **real** God came, **they could not recognize him**.
- And so they killed him and threw him out of the vineyard.
- Note how idolatry manifested itself:
 - First by **emulating** the Gentiles, then later seeing them as **unclean** and a **threat** to Israel.
 - First, they adopted Gentile idols, then their country & religion became the idol
- In both scenarios, **idolatry made it impossible to do the mission and yield the fruit**.
- The result: What had been entrusted to them was taken away.
- * What's the **lesson**?
 - This expresses a principle: **God holds his people accountable**.
 - While the Church as a whole will not fail ("*a people who WILL produce its fruit*"), **you** might, and **we** (ABC) might.
 - In 1 Cor. 3, works made of wood hay and stubble burn up (1 Cor. 3:12-15)
 - In Revelation, Jesus removes the lampstand of unfaithful churches.
Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. ⁵ Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. (Revelation 2:4-5, NIV)
- * Are there parallels in the church?
 - Yes. Profound parallels.
 - There are Christians who emulate pagan culture...
 - Christians who consider pagans *unclean* and a *threat*...
 - Christians who idolize "faith and country" over Jesus himself – who lost their first love...
 - Christians who will not listen to the prophet, but get angry and rationalize the message.
- The King **WILL** hold us accountable, just as he did with Israel. He will **remove** what was entrusted.
- * What can be done if that's me? If that's us?
 - 1) Ask the Lord and those close to you to expose your idols. Repent of all you find.
 - 2) Seek first the King and his kingdom – rise early, dig deep, go hard, and remove all barriers and hindrances to devotion to Jesus and his cause.
 - 3) Love your neighbor – your loud neighbor, homeless neighbor, Trumper neighbor, socialist neighbor, gay neighbor, Republican neighbor, Democrat neighbor, Muslim neighbor, etc. **THEY** are the harvest.
 - 4) Yield to the Lord the fruit of repentance.

PRAY