

Parables of the Vineyard and the Wedding Garment

*“Many are called,
but few are
chosen.”
—Matthew 22:14*

IN THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW, chapters 21 and 22, we have recorded the two parables of our title. As was true with many of Jesus’ parables, they were specifically given for the purpose of enlightening those of Israel who had “hearing ears” to the great privileges they had been given as God’s chosen people. They also contained various reprimands and predictions of punishment upon the nation given by the Lord due to a general lack of faithfulness—especially of their religious leaders. In these two parables, however, we also see lessons for the entire Gospel Age church, summarized in the warning of our opening text.

THE VINEYARD

Jesus’ parable of the vineyard is found in Matthew 21:33-46. It is based upon similar words recorded in Isaiah 5:1-7, in which we are told that

“the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel.” In this Old Testament version of the parable, God “looked for judgment” in Israel, but saw “oppression.” He looked for “righteousness, but behold a cry.” (vs. 7) These few words of explanation by the prophet help us understand the meaning of Jesus’ parable on the same subject.

As Jesus related the parable, he said that there was a certain householder who planted a vineyard and hedged it about, dug a winepress in it, and built a tower. He let out this vineyard to husbandmen, and then went into a far country. When the time drew near for fruit, the householder sent his servants to the husbandmen to receive it. However, the husbandmen beat the servants, and slew some of them. Later, the householder sent his own son, but the husbandmen slew him also.—Matt. 21:33-39

After relating the parable, Jesus asked his listeners what they thought the householder would do to those husbandmen when he returned. They replied that he would “miserably destroy” them, and would let out his vineyard to other husbandmen. (vss. 40,41) As we shall see, Jesus agreed with this, and in his explanation indicated that, just as in Isaiah, the application of this parable was to Israel, and especially to the Pharisees.

This vineyard, as explained by Isaiah, was the house of Israel. The fruit which the Lord looked for was justice and righteousness. Israel, however, as a people, failed to produce this sort of fruit, although through the Law Covenant and its arrangements every provision was made to encourage the growth of righteousness.

SERVANTS PERSECUTED

God's servants, who were sent from time to time to those Pharisees and other religious rulers in charge of the "vineyard," were usually persecuted. Sometimes they were even put to death, just as Jesus indicates in the parable. These servants were the prophets. Finally God, the "householder" of the parable, sent his "only begotten son" to look for the fruit of obedience and righteousness, and the keepers of the vineyard had him killed also.

God's purpose in the choice of Israel as his chosen people—his vineyard—was that they would produce fruits of righteousness. By so doing, they would be qualified to be a people associated with the promised Messiah in the kingdom which he would come to earth to establish. God had promised that, if obedient, they would become a "holy nation," a "kingdom of priests," and a "peculiar treasure," or very special people.—Exod. 19:5,6

The final and most crucial test upon the nation of Israel to qualify them for this high position in God's plan was the coming of Jesus as their King and Messiah. "He came unto his own, and his own received him not," although as individuals some did accept Jesus. These few were invited to sonship and to be associated with Jesus in the heavenly phase of his kingdom.—John 1:11,12

GOD'S "STONE" REJECTED

To illustrate Israel's rejection of the "son" of the parable—that is, the Messiah—whom the "householder" sent to look for fruit in his vineyard, Jesus referred to a prophecy in Psalm 118:22,23 concerning the "stone which the builders refused." Evidently

in this prophecy a pyramid-shaped building is visualized, with Jesus pictured as the topstone. Naturally this “stone” would not fit in any other place in this prophetic temple of the Lord. The religious rulers of Israel could see no place for him in God’s arrangement, especially if he was to be considered a topstone, and above them in authority. Consequently, they rejected him and put him to death.—Matt. 21:42

Israel’s rejection of their Messiah thus was at great peril to themselves. Continuing to use symbolic language, Jesus further explained, “Whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken: but on whomsoever it [the stone] shall fall, it will grind him to powder.” (vs. 44) The record states that when the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus’ parables, and this one in particular, “they perceived that he spake of them.” (vs. 45) They were right, and as symbolically prophesied by Jesus, they were ground to powder later as rulers of God’s people.

Jesus further explained to them that the “kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof.” (vs. 43) As we have noted, it was the opportunity of joint rulership with Jesus in his Father’s kingdom that was given to Israel. However, as a nation they did not bring forth the necessary “fruits” to qualify for this, so this special kingdom prospect was taken from them, and as Jesus foretold, given to another “nation” that would bring forth the proper fruitage.

“SPIRITUAL HOUSE” AND “HOLY PRIESTHOOD”

The Apostle Peter identifies this nation for us. To the faithful followers of Jesus during the Gospel

Age, he wrote concerning a “holy nation” to which the kingdom would be given. His words are in harmony with the lesson in Jesus’ parable of the vineyard in which he refers to the “head of the corner,” or topstone in God’s “spiritual house” which Israel rejected.

Peter says, “Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up . . . sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ. Wherefore also it is contained in the scripture, Behold, I lay in Sion a chief corner stone, elect, precious: and he that believeth on him shall not be confounded. Unto you therefore which believe he is precious: but unto them which be disobedient, the stone which the builders disallowed, the same is made the head of the corner, And a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense, even to them which stumble at the word, being disobedient: whereunto also they were appointed. But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar [purchased] people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light: Which in time past were not a people, but are now the people of God.”—I Pet. 2:5-10

From this it is clear that the “nation” to which the kingdom was to be given when taken away from the natural house of Israel is comprised of the faithful consecrated followers of Jesus during the Gospel Age. At the beginning of the age, many of these were faithful individuals of the Jewish nation who accepted Jesus and became his footstep followers. However, there were not enough of these to make up the number which God had foreordained.

Therefore, the Gospel call went to the Gentiles also. Subsequently, both Jews and Gentiles have had the glorious opportunity, upon the basis of faith in Jesus as their Redeemer, and consecration to do the Father's will, to run for the prize of joint heirship with the Messiah. To these Jesus said, "Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."—Luke 12:32

THE WEDDING GARMENT

The parable of the wedding garment is recorded in Matthew 22:1-14. It immediately follows the verses in the aforementioned lesson. This is another of our Lord's parables in which experiences in connection with a feast are used to illustrate valuable points of truth. The beginning of the parable is similar to the one recorded in Luke 14:16-24, but there are several differences. In the parable recorded by Luke "a certain man" arranges for the feast, whereas in the parable of the wedding garment the arrangements are made by "a certain king" in connection with his son's marriage. In both parables, however, there is the failure on the part of the originally invited guests to appear at the feast, so finally the king's servants are sent into the highways to invite others to the feast.

Although similar in some respects, we believe the parable in Matthew is different from the one in Luke, for other details are given which are not recorded in the Luke parable. The bidden guests in this parable who refuse to attend the feast are again urged by the servants to do so. However, instead of accepting the invitation, they spitefully treat the servants. We are further informed that this results

in their master, the king, sending forth his armies and destroying the murderous guests.—Matt. 22:2-7

It is not difficult to see in these circumstances of the parable that which actually occurred in the outworking of the divine plan beginning with the First Advent of Jesus. The “king” in the parable seems clearly to represent God, and the “son” for whom he made a marriage, his beloved son Christ Jesus. God is indeed the great King of the universe, and we know that in his plan for the redemption and restoration of the human race he has arranged that his beloved son will have a “bride,” and that there will be a “marriage supper of the Lamb”—another name for God’s son.—Rev. 19:7-9; 21:2,9

It is indicated in the parable that it had been predetermined who would be invited to the marriage and have the privilege of participating in it. The Scriptures show that these “guests” were initially the Israelites, particularly those living at the time of Jesus’ First Advent. The record also reveals that the majority of these not only declined the invitation, but evilly entreated those who called it to their attention, bitterly persecuting many of these faithful servants of the Lord, both before and after Pentecost.

GO INTO THE HIGHWAYS

It is also true that only a few decades later the Jewish nation was destroyed, and thousands of Israelites were killed. This was in the A.D. 70-73 time period. This did not interfere, however, with the King’s plan for the marriage of his Son, for invitations have since gone out into the “highways”—that is, to the Gentiles, giving opportunity

for other guests to prepare themselves for the feast and for the marriage.—Matt. 22:7-9

The parable states that in sending out the call to the marriage and feast both the “bad and good” were to be brought in. (vs. 10) This does not imply that the servants were arbitrarily to bring to the supper those whom they knew to be wicked or unworthy. The thought is, rather, that as the Gospel call has gone forth throughout the world, all sorts of people have responded to it. In most instances, no doubt, those who respond are sincere, but many fail later to measure up to all that is required of them.

The closing verse of the parable, which is our opening text, states that “many are called, but few are chosen.” This is one of the important lessons of the parable. It is a point that is emphasized in many Scriptures. The Apostle Peter speaks of making our “calling and election sure.” (II Pet. 1:10) It is not enough simply to be called. If we are to enter into the marriage of the Lamb, and to the marriage supper of the Lamb, we must make our calling “sure” by faithfulness to its terms. The same thought is mentioned by the Revelator when he speaks of those who are with the Lamb as “called, and chosen, and faithful.”—Rev. 17:14

THE WEDDING GARMENT

In this parable, special wedding garments are provided for the guests by the king. After all the guests are present there is an inspection of them, and it is found that one of them is not wearing “a wedding garment.” (Matt. 22:10,11) It seems that the custom of the time was for hosts on such

occasions to provide a special robe for each guest to wear. It is assumed, therefore, that this one individual must have accepted and put on the robe in order to mingle with the guests, but later removed it.

When the king observed this man without a robe, and “speechless” as to a reason, he gave orders to “Bind him hand and foot,” and to “cast him into outer darkness” where there would be “weeping and gnashing of teeth,” denoting a condition of great chagrin and disappointment. (Matt. 22:12,13) It would seem reasonable to conclude that this one man might well represent some who would remove their robes after appearing at the feast, or in the outer chambers of the king’s home, waiting for the marriage and the feast to take place.

A robe is a covering, and in this case, one which made the individual acceptable in appearance to the host. This symbolism is used in many places in the Scriptures. In Revelation 19:7,8, the entire Christ company, spoken of as the “wife” of the Lamb, is shown to be “arrayed in fine linen” robes, “clean and white,” which are further described as “the righteousness of saints.”

GARMENTS OF SALVATION

Every individual who eventually becomes a member of the “bride” class was once a member of the fallen Adamic race. The inherent righteousness of all these has been but as “filthy rags,” and not pleasing to the Lord. (Isa. 64:6) The imperfections of all the guests in the parable must, therefore, be covered by attire which the King provides. The Prophet Isaiah describes this as “garments of

salvation,” and “the robe of righteousness.” (Isa. 61:10) The “salvation” and “righteousness” of the saints are not their own, but that which has been provided by the Lord—the righteousness of Christ.

It seems clear that none could become even a probationary guest at the Lord’s marriage feast who did not accept Christ as their Redeemer, and upon the basis of this make a full consecration to do the Father’s will. Wearing the robe of Christ’s righteousness would, therefore, denote an acceptance and appreciation of the great ransom feature of God’s plan, that “there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved” and made acceptable in the sight of God.—Acts 4:12

Taking off the wedding garment, after having been clothed with it, would therefore imply a loss of appreciation for the ransom. It could be an outright denial of the fact that Christ gave himself as a corresponding price for our sins and for the sins of the whole world. It could also be a gradual cooling of zeal toward our development of Christian character or of service in the interests of God’s plan. The Lord is, of course, the judge as to all that might be implied in this statement. Our privilege and intent in connection with it is to maintain our keen interest in the ransom, as well as our desire to be faithful to our consecration vows. Let us ever remember that apart from the righteousness of Christ, we could have no part in God’s great plan for man’s salvation, and no hope of being at the marriage and the marriage feast of the Lamb. ■