

For the 'upright' or outcast?

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Date: 07 October 2018

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[0 : 00] Well, we're going to turn to our Bibles this evening and we're reading together in Matthew's Gospel. And it's Matthew chapter 21. And if you have one of the church Bibles, I think it's page 826.

Andy Ritson's been leading us through some teaching in the parables of Jesus. Searching parables, searching teaching. It's certainly no different this evening. And we're going to read together three parables, beginning at Matthew 21 and verse 28.

What do you think, says Jesus? A man had two sons. He went to the first and said, Son, go and work in the vineyard today. And he answered, I won't.

But afterwards he changed his mind and went. And he went to the other son and said the same. And he answered, I go, sir. But he didn't go. Which of the two did the will of his father?

They said the first. Jesus said to them, truly I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you.

[1 : 13] For John came to you in the way of righteousness. And you did not believe him. But the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him.

And even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your mind and believe him. 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.

When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit. And the tenants took his servants and beat one and killed another and stoned another.

Again, he sent other servants more than the first and they did the same to them. Finally, he sent his son to them, saying they will respect my son.

But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, this is the heir, come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.

[2 : 23] And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?

They said to him, he'll put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons.

And 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.

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

And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces. And when it falls on anyone, it will crush him. When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them.

[3 : 24] And although they were seeking to arrest him, they feared the crowds because they held him to be a prophet. And again, Jesus spoke to them in parables saying, the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son and sent his servants to call all those who were invited to the wedding feast, but they wouldn't come.

Again, he sent other servants saying, tell those who are invited. See, I've prepared my dinner, my oxen, my fat calves have been slaughtered. Everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast. But they paid no attention and went off, one to his farm, another to his business.

While the rest seized his servants, treated them shamefully and killed them. The king was angry. And he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.

Then he said to his servants, the wedding feast is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you can find.

And the servants went out to the roads and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good. So the wedding hall was filled with guests. But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment.

[4 : 47] And he said to him, friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment? And he was speechless. And then the king said to those attendants, bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness.

In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. For many are called, but few are chosen. Amen.

May God bless to us his word. Well, please do you have your Bibles open at Matthew chapter 21. The three parables we are going to look at this evening are all about who will be part of God's kingdom and what is required of people who belong to his kingdom.

And the big shock of these three parables that Willie read to us is that those who you would have thought would have been part of God's kingdom had disqualified themselves.

[5 : 55] And those who you would never expect to be part of it found themselves welcomed in with open arms. All through Matthew's gospel, Jesus has been getting kickback from the religious leaders.

And as Jesus arrives in Jerusalem at the start of chapter 21, with only one week left of his earthly ministry, that conflict escalates.

In chapter 21, Jesus warns of the judgment that will fall upon the religious establishment in Jerusalem because of their failure to guide Israel properly and welcome Jesus as the longed for Messiah.

They will face judgment from God rather than admittance to his kingdom. How does he show that judgment? Well, firstly, Jesus clearly identifies himself as the longed for Messiah as he arrives in Jerusalem on a donkey, fulfilling that messianic prophecy in Zechariah.

The crowds recognize the implications of what's happening before their eyes and they cry out, verse 9 of chapter 21, Hosanna to the son of David, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

[7 : 09] They recognize that Jesus is the Messiah who has come to restore Israel. But part of that restoration process was not just going to involve dealing with the external enemies to Israel, but rather also dealing with the evil that lurked within the heart of Israel in the religious establishment.

And that is seen as Jesus makes his first trip to the temple in verse 12. Jesus aims a warning shot at the corrupt religious institution who has plagued his people for far too long.

Jesus' act of overturning the tables was a foretaste of the impending judgment that would come upon the corrupt religious establishment, also in keeping with what the prophets had prophesied 400 years ago, that the Messiah would come upon an end to Israel's corrupt religious practices and restore true worship.

And secondly, he gives further warning by cursing the fig tree in verse 19, showing his disciples what will happen to the hypocritical religious establishment that has failed to produce fruit and fulfill its purpose.

It will be cursed, die, and ultimately come to nothing. Well, considering Jesus' warning in chapter 21, his identity not being in doubt, how do you think the religious leaders would have responded?

[8 : 39] You would think that because they're the ones who know their Bible so well, that they would repent. But no, verse 15 of 21, they're indignant that people are calling Jesus the Messiah.

And then they question his authority in verse 23. But Jesus, rather than flying off the handle at them or just walking out and having nothing to do with them, surprisingly continues to engage with them. He hasn't given up on them yet. He wants the Pharisees to respond rightly to him and experience restoration rather than judgment. Jesus gets them to think about how they respond to him.

And he starts to do that by questioning how they responded to John the Baptist and his ministry that pointed to him in verse 25. He asks them whether John's ministry of baptism and repentance is from man or from God.

And they get caught in a trap. If they say God, then Jesus could ask them, then why don't you believe what John said? Why don't you repent and believe and follow me, the one who John pointed to?

[9 : 57] And if they say man, well, they would lose the crowd. The crowd loved Jesus at this point. And the little empire that they'd started to build for themselves would slowly crumble and collapse.

And in trapping the religious leaders, Jesus was not doing so to humiliate them. Just out of the fun of it. No, rather, he was being very gracious to them for these very people who'd already decided way back in chapter 12 that they wanted him dead because they threatened him.

He threatened them, sorry. He's prompting them towards repentance. He wants even them to recognize how foolish they are being by not responding to him rightly.

So Jesus tells these three parables we're going to look at to the religious establishment, not his disciples like he normally does, so that they might see themselves clearly and repent.

For that is who these parables are primarily targeted at, not the disciples. These parables are here to confront the entitled religious types.

[11 : 08] Will they carry on paying lip service to God, but not obey him? Putting on a religious facade and preserving their position in an institution that is ultimately going to come to an end?

Or will they heed Jesus' warning of what is coming and do as John the Baptist had called them to do all along? Repent and live a life in keeping with repentance.

So let's look at these three parables. And see what they would have communicated to these religious leaders. Now, these three parables have a lot of similarities, which is why we're looking at them together as a group.

So rather than taking them one parable at a time, we're going to just bring out the main themes in each of the parables that they share in common. So our first point for today. God's kingdom will be closed to religious hypocrites.

Let's look first at the parable of two sons. A father goes to his two sons and asks them to work in his vineyard. One originally says no, but then changes his mind and does the father's bidding.

[12 : 19] Whereas the other son pays lip service to the father, agrees to do his will, but then doesn't follow through. The Pharisees recognize that it is the first son who does the father's will, not the son who says he will obey, but then doesn't.

But to their surprise, Jesus identifies them, the seemingly upright religious leaders, verse 31, as the disobedient son, who give off the appearance of obedience.

After all, they tied the dill and the spices and prayed on the street corners, we read elsewhere in Matthew's gospel, but are actually, at heart, disobedient and self-serving.

And the message is that there is no place in the kingdom of God for those who merely pay God lip service, but carry on living lives of disobedience in private.

Unless the religious leaders heeded John's call, like the tax collectors and the prostitutes were, leaving their life of self-service behind and living for the father's pleasure and being obedient to him, then they had no stake in the kingdom of God, though they likely felt very entitled to it.

[13 : 33] But they were the in crowd, weren't they? They were the religious leaders, the Bible teachers, the spiritual elite of their day. And this point is built on and intensified in the next two parables.

In the parable of the tenants, the tenants that the master leases the vineyard out to fail to produce fruit for the master like they were supposed to. Rather than give the servants of the master the fruit he asked for, in verse 34, they beat, kill, and stone the servants, in verse 35.

The master keeps sending servants, and they do the same to every servant that the master sends. Till finally the master sends his son, saying, surely, surely they will respect my son.

But they don't. Verse 38 and 39. They collude together, throw the son out of the vineyard, and kill him.

It's a damning portrait of the religious leaders. For they likewise did not bear fruit for God. They had failed to lead the people of Israel well, and instead lived selfish and unrighteous lives.

[14 : 49] They were willingly deaf to the master's commands, and murderous towards his servants, and showed absolutely no respect to the master's son when he arrived in the world, who they eventually would put to death.

That's the reality when you peel back to the pious veneer of these religious leaders. And despite the shoe fitting them perfectly, they unwittingly answer Jesus' question in verse 40.

When, therefore, the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to the tenants? They reply, put those wretches to a miserable death.

I guess they didn't see their own unrighteousness, their failure, and selfishness. For it was obscured by their outward piety and fake religiosity.

For they hadn't just failed spectacularly to produce fruit, but were also on course to kill the master's son, to kill Jesus himself. The plots to kill Jesus were now well into motion.

[15 : 55] In just a week's time, these Pharisees, these religious leaders who he was talking to, would have Jesus arrested and crucified. And Jesus explains that because they are offended by him, stumbled over him, verse 42 to 44, not respected him like the master's son wasn't respected in the parable.

He will take the kingdom away from them and judge them. They will fall, verse 43, and be shattered into pieces. When they meet Jesus in judgment, they will be utterly crushed by him.

The judgment intensifies drastically in the second parable, and the profile of these religious leaders broadens. We get a more damning picture of those who won't inherit the kingdom unless some drastic change occurs.

They are now no longer just disobedient hypocrites, but fruitless, willingly deaf. They refuse to give God what is rightfully his, and utterly scorn his son to the point of being culpable in his death.

Well, let's look at how the final parable, the parable of the wedding feast, builds on the point further. In this parable, a king puts on a great wedding feast for his son who is to be married.

[17 : 22] The save the dates were sent out long ago, and now the king sends out his servants to call the guests to this great banquet. But verse 3, they will not come.

Again, he sends servants and tries to entice them to come to this feast with promises of oxen and fattened calves. It's going to be a feast that will put all of a feast to shame.

You'd be a fool to pass up on it. But they pay no attention. Verse 5, they go about their own business, disregard the king's edicts altogether, and some even treat the servants shamefully and have them killed.

Now, refusal to go to a king's wedding feast would have been construed as treason back then. It was a gesture that declared, I do not recognize you as my king.

It was highly offensive behavior. These guests would have known when the wedding feast was well in advance, but chose to bow out at the last minute, trying to bring as much shame upon the king as was possible.

[18 : 32] And that attitude is also shown in the mistreatment and murder of the king's servants. They shamed his servants and killed him. So it was with the religious leaders.

Though they would never say it out loud, Jesus was saying to them that by their actions, their refusal to repent as John commanded them to, they were declaring that God was not their king. In fact, they were publicly besmirching his name. The surrounding nations would have looked at Israel, the life in Israel, and thought very little of Israel's God, because nobody seemed to be honoring him or living like he was king, because those who were meant to be leading them well, weren't leading them.

With that in mind, the king's reaction in verse 7 doesn't look quite as severe as you might have thought at first. The king was angry and sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.

The king will not have his reputation dragged through the mud forever. He will shut those who profane him out of his kingdom and bring them to justice for their crimes.

[19 : 45] Now, I think we often feel quite uncomfortable when talking about judgment and quite squeamish, but we are not to be squeamish about it.

In fact, we should be rejoicing that this is the case. It is wonderful news, wonderful news, that those who have set themselves against God, who have purposefully led his people astray, tried to smear God's reputation in the world, will by no means enter his kingdom and will finally have to face up to what they have done.

When you see the church torn apart and abused all about you at the hands of selfish and exploitative men, you long for justice.

When you see people not giving ear to the gospel because they have seen religious leaders behaving badly, then you rejoice that judgment is coming. I was chatting to the Robries when they were last over and they were telling me about the states of the church in Nigeria.

On the surface, it looks quite strong. Lots of people go to church, but there's a gangrenous underbelly. False teachers peddling the prosperity gospel and other false teaching are slowly dismantling the work and undermining its witness.

[21 : 04] When you see that happening before your eyes, you find yourself praying, come Lord Jesus, bring this great evil and exploitation to an end.

Judge those who have abused and harmed your church for far too long and tried to make something of themselves off the back of your kingdom. Bring judgment and justice. And that day will thankfully come according to Jesus.

But mercifully, for the religious leaders here's sake at least, it hasn't come yet. Repentance is still an option for those charlatans that Jesus is speaking to.

The very fact that Jesus is still engaging with them when they will soon have him put to death is absolutely incredible. And in each of these parables, the opportunity to repent is held out to these murderous religious fakers.

In the first parable, Jesus says that the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom before them in verse 31. Surely that means that there's an opportunity for these religious leaders to enter after them.

[22 : 19] And in the other two parables, the master sends servants again and again and finally his son. And the king sends servants again and again calling them to repent and join the wedding feast.

Religious charlatans will not enter. But the invitation is still held out to them if they're willing to listen. And mercifully, some did repent and believe, didn't they?

Acts chapter 6 remind us that as the gospel spread throughout Jerusalem, many priests became obedient to the faith. Now, not every single religious leader at the time was corrupt like these people Jesus is speaking to.

I'm sure many of them were. And some of them, who were part of the problem, did repent and became believers. There is hope for all counterfeit believers before judgment comes.

And that is still true today. But judgment will come in the end. The king will send his troops. No frauds will slip through the net.

[23 : 24] No one who secretly opposes Jesus will be let into his perfect kingdom. Well, our second point for today. God's kingdom will be opened to those you might not expect.

In all three parables, the seemingly upright miss out and those you might not expect assume their position in God's kingdom.

In the parable of the two sons, the tax collectors and prostitutes enter before the religious leaders, verse 31, which must have been absolutely shocking for these religious leaders to hear.

The people you would least expect, those who were deemed traitors to Israel and the sexually immoral, would enter the kingdom before those who had conned the world that they were squeaky clean and loved God.

And the reason for that is simple, verse 32. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him. But the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him.

[24 : 29] And even when you saw it, you did not afterwards change your minds. The entrance requirements for the kingdom of God are quite simple. Believe in the gospel and live a life in keeping with repentance.

That's what the tax collectors and prostitutes had done. They had heeded John's call, recognized their sin and their need for forgiveness, repented, and were doing the best they could to honor their heavenly father who they come to love and serve.

Not perfectly, but sincerely and earnestly. But the Pharisees, straight jacketed by their pride and love of status, were unwilling to get their hair wet, unwilling to repent and be baptized.

And in the parable, the tenants, the tenants who didn't produce fruit for the master and hated his messengers and son are replaced by those who will produce fruit for the master.

Verse 41 and 43. God will open his kingdom to anyone who will produce fruit in keeping with righteousness and honor their master like they should.

[25 : 39] That which the religious elites had failed to do. We don't get the surprise factor of the first parable in that we're not told the background of these people.

We're not told that they're sexually immoral or the tax collectors. But we know that they're not the established bunch. They're not those who had had oversight for a long time over the vineyard, but a new blood from outwith that seemingly in group.

And finally, in the parable, the wedding feast, when the original guests decline and are subsequently destroyed, the servants are commanded to go out and find other guests to come to the feast.

Verse 9. Go therefore to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you can find. And those servants went out into the roads and gathered all who they found, both bad and good, so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

On the last day, when we see the kingdom finally consummated, there will be people there who you think would naturally belong to such a grand feast.

[26 : 52] For people from good and bad backgrounds will be invited. The king in the parable invites as many as he can find to the feast. And that is what he continues to do today.

People you would expect to enter God's kingdom reject Jesus. But the invitation continues to go out to others all over the world. God is inviting the nations to his great wedding feast.

People from cultures and backgrounds you would not think would have a natural claim to the kingdom of God are invited. But the point is that status, background, position, well they don't matter one bit to enter God's kingdom.

In fact, those things can actually be a handicap to people as they trust in them for admittance to God's kingdom rather than following Jesus' instructions to repent, believe, live a fruitful and obedient life that honors the Son.

That's what matters. And we should be so incredibly thankful for that. For by nature we had no claim in God's kingdom, did we?

[28 : 03] Unless you're Jewish here today. We were rebels, not ever part of Israel, but God has wonderfully welcomed us in. Let's thank him for that.

That he opens his kingdom up to anybody who will answer his call. To those who didn't naturally have a claim to the vineyard or to the wedding feast. He is not like the false god Allah who seems mostly concerned with Arab people, Middle Eastern people, or any of the Hindu gods who are also geographically constrained and are by nature exclusive in all the wrong senses.

Our God is incredibly kind and wonderfully inclusive. exclusive. But let's also remember that he's rightly exclusive to you.

That there are entrance requirements that must be met. And as we do that, let's remember not to fall into the trap of living like the religious leaders did back then.

And that brings us on to our final point. God's kingdom comes with requirements that must be met. We've already talked about what was expected of the religious leaders of Jesus' time.

[29 : 18] That they were to be obedient, not just pay God lip service, but bear fruit, listen to God's messengers like John the Baptist, and to honour Christ. But at the very end of the parable, the wedding feast, we get a shocking warning that is not present in the other two parables.

And it's a warning that is especially applicable to the disciple who is listening in, rejoicing in the judgment coming upon all those religious fakers, and rejoicing that they are personally being granted admittance.

So it's a warning, I think, that's especially applicable to all of us in this room today. Verse 11 onwards. The wedding hall is filled with guests from all over, but then we read this.

But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment. And he said to him, friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?

And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place, there'll be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

[30 : 33] For many are called, but few are chosen. On the surface, this might seem like really harsh treatment from the king.

I mean, this man didn't get a lot of notice about the wedding, and if he's from the countryside, unlike the city dwellers, he probably didn't have as much spare cash to have a nice wedding garment. So we could even feel sorry for him, couldn't we? But that is to read our wedding culture into the wedding culture back then.

Back then, it was the host's duty to provide the wedding garments for the guests if they couldn't provide those garments themselves. So the guest was completely without excuse.

He could certainly have worn a garment to this wedding and followed the king's command if he'd wanted to. All he needed to do was ask the king's servants when they came to find him, and they would have provided him with the clothes he needed to wear.

[31 : 34] It was a great offense to turn up at a royal wedding feast and make absolutely no effort to wear what the king had commanded. The guest was being so incredibly presumptuous and rude to the king.

He wanted all the perks of the feast without obeying the king's instructions. In our terms, it was a claim to belong to the kingdom without an appropriate change of life.

The exact same sin as the old corrupt religious establishment who claimed to belong to God's kingdom felt entitled to it even, but didn't live lives in keeping with God's requirements.

And we can point the finger at other churches out there who tragically have gone this way, can't we? Want all the perks of being a church without being a church.

Presumed on God's grace, tried to have the perks without obeying God. But let's remember also to put ourselves in the docks. There's a great warning to us too here in this parable.

[32 : 42] We may be the new guests in the parable, the new tenants in the other, and the ones who have entered by repentance and faith in the parable of the two sons, but we mustn't become presumptuous.

We are more than capable of falling into the exact same trap as the faithless religious leaders did back in Jesus' day who presumed on God's grace and carried on living like they were king and that God was only there to serve them, paying lip service to God, putting on a show to the world around us, but not actually honoring him in our hearts.

If we behave like that, then we're on a very, very slippery slope that ends with outer darkness where there is much weeping and gnashing of teeth.

We'll end up where we know the religious hypocrites deserve to be. People will rejoice in us being brought to justice like we rejoiced in the Pharisees being brought to justice when we read the parables.

So we can't keep rejecting God's work in our lives. We can't live as if we are in charge and God is subservient to us.

[33 : 54] We must be what the religious leaders were not, obedient people, fruitful people, busy about God's work, not our own. People who listen to God and honor his son.

And people who have real integrity. People who serve God and his people genuinely rather than using it as a means to serve ourselves. We must be people who what you see is what you get.

No pious facades. But the encouragement is if we do heed his call, repent, believe, live the kind of life I've described, not perfectly, but earnestly, lives that show we have genuine faith and love for him, love for the master, then there will be a place for us at that great wedding feast.

And we'll be surrounded by all those through the ages who have declared God king and loved his son too. We will enjoy the feast that puts all other feasts to shame. and we will worship the one who has graciously granted vagabonds like us a place at the table.

Let's respond together. Let's respond together.