

Matthew 21E

- Which is easier? To look righteous or to be righteous?
 - We can look righteous externally by what we say and do, but the person we are inside is our true self
 - And the conflict over external behavior vs. inward righteousness was at the heart of the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees
 - And that issue was most evident during the encounters between Jesus and the religious authorities on the Tuesday before He died
 - Jesus is in the temple teaching and preparing to give His life as the Passover Lamb, and the religious leaders are trying to discredit Him
 - We're studying this conflict which lasts through Chapter 23
 - And we return to a tense moment between Jesus and the Pharisees and Sadducees in the morning of that day
 - Jesus has just told a parable where He compared these men to a son who said he would obey the father but in reality had no desire to obey
 - And now Jesus tells a second parable to explain why the religious leaders were so set against Jesus as their Messiah
 - It was external righteousness vs. internal righteousness

Matt. 21:33 "Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who PLANTED A VINEYARD AND PUT A WALL AROUND IT AND DUG A WINE PRESS IN IT, AND BUILT A TOWER, and rented it out to vine-growers and went on a journey.

Matt. 21:34 "When the harvest time approached, he sent his slaves to the vine-growers to receive his produce.

Matt. 21:35 "The vine-growers took his slaves and beat one, and killed another, and stoned a third.

Matt. 21:36 "Again he sent another group of slaves larger than the first; and they did the same thing to them.

Matt. 21:37 "But afterward he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.'

Matt. 21:38 "But when the vine-growers saw the son, they said among themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance.'

Matt. 21:39 "They took him, and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

[Matt. 21:40](#) “Therefore when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vine-growers?”

- Jesus’ asks His accusers to consider another parable of a vineyard owner
 - A moment earlier, Jesus had presented these same men with the parable of the two sons
 - In that parable, Jesus compared the religious leaders to a son who had only external righteousness
 - The son said he wanted to do his father’s will but in reality, he was all hat and no cattle
 - He gave His father lip service when in reality he never intended to do what the Father wanted
 - The hero of the story was the other son, who disobeyed initially and openly but in the end he repented and obeyed
 - That son represented the prostitutes and tax collectors who flocked to Jesus
 - They were different than Jesus because they never pretended they were righteous...they knew they were sinners
 - So because they repented, they were forgiven
 - Now Jesus moves the conversation along with a second parable and it’s one of the most important in the Gospels
 - This one parable explains Jesus’ contentious relationship with the religious leaders of Israel
 - It’s built on several Old Testament pictures and almost every detail in the parable has allegorical significance
 - Let’s start by reviewing the context of the events, and they are somewhat unique to ancient Israel
 - The parable is about a man who owned a vineyard, and in ancient times, much like today, land value was determined by what it produced
 - People put their land to work so that they could receive the value of it

- But if a landowner possessed a large tract of land and couldn't farm it all himself, he would hire others to work the land
- Then the land would still produce income for the landowner, and he shared that income with those who worked the land
- So as the story goes, this landowner invests his time and money into preparing his land to produce grapes
 - He digs irrigation channels around it, plants the best vines, removes stones, installs the needed equipment and builds a watch tower
 - The landowner did everything he could to create the optimal circumstances for his land to produce fruit
 - And then the owner leaves on a journey and places the land in the care of custodians hired to work the land
 - These custodians have invested nothing and they own nothing...they simply received a stewardship to manage
 - Their responsibility is to produce fruit and ensure a great crop, which has value to the vineyard owner
 - If these workers do their job properly, then not only would the owner profit but so would they
 - The owner will share proceeds of the harvest with those who worked the land, so they have incentive to do well
 - But soon these custodians become self-deceived by their positions of responsibility and they come to see the land as their own
 - They decide they would rather have the entire harvest for themselves rather than settling only for their share
 - They come to believe they owned everything and owed no one anything
- So when the time came for the harvest, the landowner sends first one slave and then another to collect his rightful produce
 - But time after time the custodians of the field beat and abuse and even kill these slaves
 - And in response to this outrageous behavior, the landowner shows extreme patience and mercy

- The landowner sends slave after slave hoping to change the hearts of those working his land, but the rebellion continued
- So the landowner gives his custodians one last opportunity to do the right thing by sending his son to represent him
 - Surely the custodians will respect the landowner's son, since the son is the heir of the land and represents the father's interests
 - The owner hopes his son's appearance will communicate to these men the seriousness of the situation
- But when these men see the son coming, they react to him in an opposite way
 - Because he is an heir of the land, they say if they kill the son, then the land will have no heir and will be theirs forever
 - So they throw the son out of the vineyard and kill him
- This is a ridiculous plan and it shows how self-deceived these men are
 - Obviously, a landowner isn't going to turn a blind eye to such treatment
 - And Jesus asks the Pharisees, what should the owner do?
- Before we look at the religious leaders' answer, let's decode the parable
 - The landowner in the story represents the Father, Who created Israel and planted her in the land which God gave to His people
 - The Lord prepared the land for Israel and gave her everything the people needed to flourish in that place
 - He pushed out the land's inhabitants before them, and gave Israel victory over her enemies
 - He brought rain in the appointed day, caused the ground to give forth its produce and blessed the people with abundance
 - In the Old Testament, the Lord makes this same comparison

Is. 5:1 Let me sing now for my well-beloved

A song of my beloved concerning His vineyard.

My well-beloved had a vineyard on a fertile hill.

Is. 5:2 He dug it all around, removed its stones,

And planted it with the choicest vine.
 And He built a tower in the middle of it
 And also hewed out a wine vat in it;
 Then He expected it to produce good grapes,
 But it produced only worthless ones.

- In Isaiah, the Lord tells us plainly that Israel is God's vineyard so the landowner is the Father
- And Isaiah goes on to say the Lord "planted" His nation in the land for the purpose of seeing them producing spiritual fruit
- That fruit was supposed to be godliness and obedience to the Law so the Lord could provide the world a testimony
 - Israel was supposed to be a light to the nations, a beacon beckoning the world to know the Living God
 - But Isaiah says instead Israel only produced worthless grapes
 - They were ungodly, disobedient and rebellious
- Why did Israel fail to produce fruit? From Jesus' parable, we learn where the Lord places the blame for a lack of fruit: on the custodians of the land
 - When the time came for the Lord to receive a harvest of fruit from Israel, the Father received nothing back
 - And why not? Because those left in charge of the vineyard, the custodians, didn't do their job
 - And the custodians in this parable are the leaders of Israel, their kings, their priests and most of all their teachers
 - Throughout Israel's history, the leaders of Israel forgot their place and their purpose and most of all they forgot the source of righteousness
 - Along the way, they started to see the land and the people as their own possession, not God's possession
 - Earlier in Israel's history, the Lord called out these evil custodians through the prophet Ezekiel

Ezek. 34:1 Then the word of the LORD came to me saying,

[Ezek. 34:2](#) “Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. Prophesy and say to those shepherds, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD, “Woe, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock?”

[Ezek. 34:3](#) “You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat sheep without feeding the flock.

[Ezek. 34:4](#) “Those who are sickly you have not strengthened, the diseased you have not healed, the broken you have not bound up, the scattered you have not brought back, nor have you sought for the lost; but with force and with severity you have dominated them.

[Ezek. 34:5](#) “They were scattered for lack of a shepherd, and they became food for every beast of the field and were scattered.

[Ezek. 34:6](#) “My flock wandered through all the mountains and on every high hill; My flock was scattered over all the surface of the earth, and there was no one to search or seek for them.””

- As Ezekiel describes, the shepherds of Israel became arrogant and greedy and abusive of God’s flock
 - The leaders drive the people into idolatry and depravity and all manner of sin to suit their own purposes
 - These custodians used the vineyard for their own purposes rather than for the purposes the Lord had ordained
- But the Lord in His mercy and love for His people gave opportunity after opportunity for the leaders of Israel to repent and return to Him
 - He sent His slaves, the prophets of Israel, and these men told Israel they must give the Lord His harvest of good fruit
 - Isaiah was one of those slaves, and this is what he told Israel

[Is. 5:3](#) “And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, Judge between Me and My vineyard.

[Is. 5:4](#) “What more was there to do for My vineyard that I have not done in it? Why, when I expected it to produce good grapes did it produce worthless ones?”

[Is. 5:5](#) “So now let Me tell you what I am going to do to My vineyard: I will remove its hedge and it will be consumed; I will break down its wall and it will become trampled ground.

[Is. 5:6](#) "I will lay it waste;
 It will not be pruned or hoed,
 But briars and thorns will come up.
 I will also charge the clouds to rain no rain on it."

[Is. 5:7](#) For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel
 And the men of Judah His delightful plant.
 Thus He looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed;
 For righteousness, but behold, a cry of distress.

- The Lord told Israel through His slave, Isaiah, that it was time to pay up, to produce fruit
- But instead of good fruit the Lord only received worthless fruit
- And so the Lord told His people that judgment was coming to them as a result
 - He would break down the walls and trample the ground and hold back the rain
 - The Lord was speaking about the coming invasion of Assyria and later Babylon which resulted in the exile of Israel from the land
 - That was the warning the Lord brought His people through His messengers like Isaiah
 - But the custodians of the land didn't listen to the slaves, and instead they took the prophets and treated them harshly, killing most of them
 - Tradition holds that Isaiah was persecuted to the point that one day he fled from a mob by hiding himself in a hollow tree
 - But the mob discovered his hiding place, and they killed the prophet by sawing the tree – and the prophet – in half
 - So now the Landowner has given His custodians one more opportunity to repent and submit to His authority
 - The Landowner sends His Son, Jesus, to the religious leaders calling on them to produce fruit, but how did they respond?
 - They knew the Messiah would rule the Kingdom, but if Jesus were that Messiah, He would have put them out of power

- Jesus had already declared that their elaborate religious system of external righteousness based in the Mishnah was invalid
- So the custodians, the religious leaders, conspire to put an end to Jesus' claim on the vineyard
 - They want to deny His rule so they can protect their own interests
 - So these men ultimately throw Jesus out of the city and kill Him on a cross at the hands of the Romans
- After Jesus tells the parable, as with His earlier parable, He lets His accusers name their own punishment
 - He asks them how would you have the landowner respond?
 - And without realizing that the parable is about them, they give the logical answer

Matt. 21:41 They said to Him, "He will bring those wretches to a wretched end, and will rent out the vineyard to other vine-growers who will pay him the proceeds at the proper seasons."

Matt. 21:42 Jesus said to them, "Did you never read in the Scriptures,
 'THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS REJECTED,
 THIS BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER stone;
 THIS CAME ABOUT FROM THE LORD,
 AND IT IS MARVELOUS IN OUR EYES'?"

Matt. 21:43 "Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people, producing the fruit of it.

Matt. 21:44 "And he who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust."

Matt. 21:45 When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard His parables, they understood that He was speaking about them.

Matt. 21:46 When they sought to seize Him, they feared the people, because they considered Him to be a prophet.

- The religious leaders say the landowner should bring those men to a terrible end and give his land to someone who would care for it obediently
 - A better English translation of v.41 might be "He will bring those evil men to a severe end"

- I wonder if Jesus stood amazed at how they still could not see themselves in the parable
- Especially given how closely Jesus' parable mirrored Isaiah's
- So Jesus asks these men had they overlooked the Scriptures that foretold how Israel would reject their Messiah?
 - Quoting from Psalm 118, Jesus says the stone that the builders reject would be the chief cornerstone
 - "Builders" is a reference to the custodians of the land, the religious leaders of Israel
- They rejected Jesus as their Messiah, and Jesus tells these leaders they are fulfilling Scripture even as they deny Him
 - But the Lord will use that rejected stone as the cornerstone of the Kingdom
 - And as Isaiah promised centuries earlier, the land would be taken away from Israel and her leaders at least for a time
 - And the land and the people that these men had once ruled over would belong to someone else
- A new group would be "hired" to care for God's people so that they might produce fruit
 - Beginning with the apostles and continuing to the shepherds of today, the Lord has turned to Gentiles to produce fruit
 - Until a day comes for the Lord to return to His people, Israel
- Only at this point do the religious leaders realize that Jesus has been talking about them again
 - And they have just pronounced their own judgment...they said the Lord should deal with them harshly
 - And Jesus assures them that's exactly what will happen to them
- If there was any doubt about the evil in their hearts, it's only confirmed by their response
 - Because of what Jesus says about them, they harden their hearts all the more against Him

- They double-down on their plans to seize and kill Jesus but they don't act in the moment because they fear the crowd
- So which is easier? Is it easier to look righteous or to be righteous?
 - The Pharisees of Jesus' day certainly looked very righteous, and they maintained that appearance through hard work
 - As we've learned from earlier lessons, those men engaged in elaborate rituals of washing many times a day
 - They prayed publicly multiple times a day and fasted multiple times each week
 - They were the epitome of righteousness in Israel, and they worked incredibly hard to keep it up
 - But their righteousness was entirely external, meaning it consisted of behaviors only, and those behaviors masked their true nature
 - Think of external righteousness like an actor playing a role on stage
 - An actor works hard to change his mannerisms and voice inflections to adopt a different persona
 - He carries on in a contrived way for the sake of the audience, and if he's good, he can convince his audience that he's someone else
 - For 2 hours or so, an actor on stage literally becomes someone he isn't, but his transformation is entirely external
 - But when the audience is gone and the actor is alone again in his dressing room, he returns to his true self
 - Who he is underneath never changed...he just changed his external, outward appearance
- My point is that if we work hard enough, we can make ourselves appear to be someone or something we aren't, and that's what Pharisees did
 - They worked incredibly hard adopting mannerisms, habits and styles of living to project a certain image to their audience, the Jewish society
 - But underneath that facade, their true nature was still there, because it was just an act

- In fact, Pharisees were so dedicated to this act, that they took it to the extreme
- They learned to stay in character at all times, even in their homes by themselves, to the point that they knew no other way
- They maintained this act of righteousness to the point that they convinced themselves of it also
 - Like an actor who stays in character for too long, these men came to believe they were the person they pretended to be
 - Pharisees truly believed that observing those elaborate religious rituals they invented were their *source* of righteousness
 - Then they went on to teach others that the way to obtain righteousness was to imitate their act
- But God wasn't fooled by their rituals and recited prayers and extreme piety, because God knows the intentions of our heart
 - The things we do externally don't change who we are on the inside, not by themselves
 - God knew who these men truly were on the inside, and it's our inward reality that God judges
 - So appearing righteous requires a lot of work but ironically it achieves nothing in the end
 - And even worse, it deceives us in to thinking we have something we don't
- On the other hand, actually *being* righteous is quite easy, humanly speaking
 - It only requires faith in Jesus Christ, and when we place our faith in Jesus, we receive His righteousness assigned to us
 - As Paul said:

[2Cor. 5:21](#) He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

- True righteousness happens inside us, as our spirit is made righteous by our faith in Jesus, and that's about as easy as it gets

- That's what Jesus was offering the nation of Israel and those religious leaders
- But in order to receive true righteousness by faith, we must first repent of self-righteousness, of any effort to obtain external righteousness
 - To repent means dropping our act, to stop seeking external righteousness and to confess it doesn't work
 - We stop pretending we are righteous at all, and we accept the reality that we need inward righteousness
- That's why the religious leaders of Israel opposed Jesus so strongly in His day
 - He demanded they drop their act, to stop seeking external righteousness and to acknowledge their need for forgiveness
 - Jesus was calling for no less than the dismantling of Pharisaic Judaism and the elimination of the religious leader roles
 - Moreover, they were blind to their predicament and they were convinced they had no sin requiring forgiveness
 - At a point in John's Gospel, Jesus says this to these men:

John 9:40 Those of the Pharisees who were with Him heard these things and said to Him, "We are not blind too, are we?"

John 9:41 Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but since you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.

- The temptation to substitute external righteousness for true inward change didn't die with the Pharisees and Sadducees
 - Billions of people today are still following this same lie
 - They seek ways to make themselves righteous or they think themselves good already
 - And why? Because of what they do...how they live, how they pray, what rules they keep and what rituals they practice
 - It's all an act, one that someone taught them would please God and none of it changes who they really are on the inside
 - But He knows our hearts, and He's not fooled by these external efforts no matter how hard we work at them

- Those who think external righteousness impresses God are like the Pharisees who declare we are not blind
- But Jesus says if you truly want to see, meaning if you truly want to know God and be counted righteous, then you must first realize you are blind
 - And that blindness is only cured by placing faith in Jesus, Who gives us credit for His righteousness
 - Psalm 118 says the One the leaders of Israel rejected will be the cornerstone upon which God builds His Kingdom
 - And in v.44 Jesus says we can either fall on that stone or it will fall on us
- This is the Gospel that Christians believe, and I pray everyone who hears my voice knows this truth
 - When responding to Jesus' claims, we have two choices
 - We can fall on the cornerstone, falling to our knees before Jesus in repentance and falling on Him to rely on His righteousness
 - And as we do, we receive His righteousness which changes us inside, producing spiritual fruit as God intends
 - Or we can stand defiantly like those custodians in the parable and the Pharisees in Jesus' day, and if so we will share their fate
 - The Pharisees said such people should be treated harshly and rightly so
 - So as Jesus says, we will be crushed and become like dust
 - Either we repent of seeking external righteousness and receive His righteousness or else He will crush us at our judgment
 - We know the choice the Pharisees made...what choice will you make?
 - If you are moved today by the word of God to fall on the cornerstone, then pray with me
 - And if you have already fallen on that stone, then pray with me as well for the sake of those who are turning to Him today