

Part 25a – The LORD's Vineyard

The Jewish Nation

The parable of the two sons was followed by the parable of the vineyard.

In the one, Christ had set before the Jewish teachers the importance of obedience. In the other, He pointed to the rich blessings bestowed upon Israel, and in these showed God's claim to their obedience. He set before them the glory of God's purpose, which through obedience they might have fulfilled. Withdrawing the veil from the future, He showed how, by failure to fulfill His purpose, the whole nation was forfeiting His blessing, and bringing ruin upon itself.

“There was a certain householder,” Christ said, “which planted a vineyard, and hedged it round about, and dug a winepress in it, and built a tower, and let it out to husbandmen, and went into a far country.” Matthew 21:23.

A description of this vineyard is given by the prophet Isaiah: “Now will I sing to my wellbeloved a song of my beloved touching His vineyard. My wellbeloved has a vineyard in a very fruitful hill; and He fenced it, and gathered out the stones thereof, and planted it with the choicest vine, and built a tower in the midst of it, and also made a winepress therein; and He looked that it should bring forth grapes.” Isaiah 5:1-2.

The husbandman chooses a piece of land from the wilderness; he fences, clears, and tills it, and plants it with choice vines, expecting a rich harvest. This plot of ground, in its superiority to the uncultivated waste, he expects to do him honour by showing the results of his care and toil in its cultivation. So God had chosen a people from the world to be trained and educated by Christ. The prophet says, “The vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah His pleasant plant.” Isaiah 5:7. Upon this people God had bestowed great privileges, blessing them richly from His abundant goodness. He looked for them to honour Him by yielding fruit. They were to reveal the principles of His kingdom. In the midst of a fallen, wicked world they were to represent the character of God.

As the LORD's vineyard they were to produce fruit altogether different from that of the heathen nations. These idolatrous peoples had given themselves up to work wickedness. Violence and crime, greed, oppression, and the most corrupt practices, were indulged without restraint. Iniquity, degradation, and

misery were the fruits of the corrupt tree. In marked contrast was to be the fruit borne on the vine of God's planting.

It was the privilege of the Jewish nation to represent the character of God as it had been revealed to Moses. In answer to the prayer of Moses, "Show me Your glory," the LORD promised, "I will make all My goodness pass before you." Exodus 33:18, 19. "And the LORD passed by before him, and proclaimed, The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin." Exodus 34:6-7. This was the fruit that God desired from His people. In the purity of their characters, in the holiness of their lives, in their mercy and loving-kindness and compassion, they were to show that "the law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul." Psalm 19:7.

Through the Jewish nation it was God's purpose to impart rich blessings to all peoples. Through Israel the way was to be prepared for the diffusion of His light to the whole world. The nations of the world, through following corrupt practices, had lost the knowledge of God. Yet in His mercy God did not blot them out of existence. He purposed to give them opportunity for becoming acquainted with Him through His church. He designed that the principles revealed through His people should be the means of restoring the moral image of God in man.

It was for the accomplishment of this purpose that God called Abraham out from his idolatrous kindred and bade him dwell in the land of Canaan. "I will make of you a great nation," He said, "and I will bless you, and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing." Genesis 12:2.

The descendants of Abraham, Jacob and his posterity, were brought down to Egypt that in the midst of that great and wicked nation they might reveal the principles of God's kingdom. The integrity of Joseph and his wonderful work in preserving the lives of the whole Egyptian people were a representation of the life of Christ. Moses and many others were witnesses for God.

In bringing forth Israel from Egypt, the LORD again manifested His power and His mercy. His wonderful works in their deliverance from bondage and His dealings with them in their travels through the wilderness were not for their benefit alone. These were to be as an object lesson to the surrounding nations. The LORD revealed Himself as a God above all human authority and greatness. The signs and wonders He wrought in behalf of His people showed His power over nature and over the greatest of those who worshiped

nature. God went through the proud land of Egypt as He will go through the earth in the last days. With fire and tempest, earthquake and death, the great I AM redeemed His people. He took them out of the land of bondage. He led them through the “great and terrible wilderness, wherein were fiery serpents, and scorpions, and drought.” Deuteronomy 8:15. He brought them forth water out of “the rock of flint,” and fed them with “the corn of heaven.” Psalm 78:24. “For,” said Moses, “the LORD's portion is His people; Jacob is the lot of His inheritance. He found him in a desert land, and in the waste howling wilderness; He led him about, He instructed him, He kept him as the apple of His eye. As an eagle stirs up her nest, flutters over her young, spreads abroad her wings, takes them, bears them on her wings: so the LORD alone did lead him, and there was no strange god with him.” Deuteronomy 32:9-12. Thus He brought them to Himself, that they might dwell as under the shadow of the Most High.

Christ was the leader of the children of Israel in their wilderness wanderings. Enshrouded in the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night, He led and guided them. He preserved them from the perils of the wilderness, He brought them into the land of promise, and in the sight of all the nations that acknowledged not God He established Israel as His own chosen possession, the LORD's vineyard.

To this people were committed the oracles of God. They were hedged about by the precepts of His law, the everlasting principles of truth, justice, and purity. Obedience to these principles was to be their protection, for it would save them from destroying themselves by sinful practices. And as the tower in the vineyard, God placed in the midst of the land His holy temple.

Christ was their instructor. As He had been with them in the wilderness, so He was still to be their teacher and guide. In the tabernacle and the temple His glory dwelt in the holy shekinah above the mercy seat. In their behalf He constantly manifested the riches of His love and patience.

God desired to make of His people Israel a praise and a glory. Every spiritual advantage was given them. God withheld from them nothing favorable to the formation of character that would make them representatives of Himself.

Their obedience to the law of God would make them marvels of prosperity before the nations of the world. He who could give them wisdom and skill in all cunning work would continue to be their teacher, and would ennoble and elevate them through obedience to His laws. If obedient, they would be preserved from the diseases that afflicted other nations, and would be blessed

with vigor of intellect. The glory of God, His majesty and power, were to be revealed in all their prosperity. They were to be a kingdom of priests and princes. God furnished them with every facility for becoming the greatest nation on the earth.

In the most definite manner Christ through Moses had set before them God's purpose, and had made plain the terms of their prosperity. "You are an holy people to the LORD your God," He said; "the LORD your God has chosen you to be a special people to Himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth. . . . Know therefore that the LORD your God, He is God, the faithful God, which keeps covenant and mercy with them that love Him and keep His commandments to a thousand generations. . . . You shall therefore keep the commandments, and the statutes, and the judgments, which I command you this day, to do them. Wherefore it shall come to pass, if you hearken to these judgments, and keep, and do them, that the LORD your God shall keep to you the covenant and the mercy which He swore to your fathers; and He will love you, and bless you, and multiply you: He will also bless the fruit of your womb, and the fruit of your land, your corn, and your wine, and your oil, the increase of your kine, and the flocks of your sheep, in the land which He swore to your fathers to give you. You shall be blessed above all people. . . . And the LORD will take away from you all sickness, and will put none of the evil diseases of Egypt, which you know, upon you." Deuteronomy 7:6, 9, 11-15.

If they would keep His commandments, God promised to give them the finest of the wheat, and bring them honey out of the rock. With long life would He satisfy them, and show them His salvation.

Through disobedience to God, Adam and Eve had lost Eden, and because of sin the whole earth was cursed. But if God's people followed His instruction, their land would be restored to fertility and beauty. God Himself gave them directions in regard to the culture of the soil, and they were to co-operate with Him in its restoration. Thus the whole land, under God's control, would become an object lesson of spiritual truth. As in obedience to His natural laws the earth should produce its treasures, so in obedience to His moral law the hearts of the people were to reflect the attributes of His character. Even the heathen would recognize the superiority of those who served and worshiped the living God.

"Behold," said Moses, "I have taught you statutes and judgments, even as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should do so in the land whither you go to possess it. Keep therefore and do them; for this is your wisdom and

your understanding in the sight of the nations, which shall hear all these statutes, and say, Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people. For what nation is there so great, who has God so nigh to them, as the LORD our God is in all things that we call upon Him for? And what nation is there so great, that has statutes and judgments so righteous as all this law, which I set before you this day?" Deuteronomy 4:5-8.

The children of Israel were to occupy all the territory which God appointed them. Those nations that rejected the worship and service of the true God were to be dispossessed. But it was God's purpose that by the revelation of His character through Israel men should be drawn to Him. To all the world the gospel invitation was to be given. Through the teaching of the sacrificial service Christ was to be uplifted before the nations, and all who would look to Him should live. All who, like Rahab the Canaanite, and Ruth the Moabitess, turned from idolatry to the worship of the true God, were to unite themselves with His chosen people. As the numbers of Israel increased they were to enlarge their borders, until their kingdom should embrace the world.

God desired to bring all peoples under His merciful rule. He desired that the earth should be filled with joy and peace. He created man for happiness, and He longs to fill human hearts with the peace of heaven. He desires that the families below shall be a symbol of the great family above.

But Israel did not fulfill God's purpose. The LORD declared, "I had planted you a noble vine, wholly a right seed: how then are you turned into the degenerate plant of a strange vine to Me?" Jeremiah 2:21. "Israel is an empty vine, he brings forth fruit to himself." Hosea 10:1. "And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem, and men of Judah, judge, I pray you, betwixt Me and My vineyard. What could have been done more to My vineyard, that I have not done in it? Wherefore when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes? And now go to; I will tell you what I will do to My vineyard: I will take away the hedge thereof, and it shall be eaten up; and break down the wall thereof, and it shall be trodden down: and I will lay it waste; it shall not be pruned nor dug; but there shall come up briars and thorns: I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. For . . . He looked for judgment, but behold oppression; for righteousness, but behold a cry." Isaiah 5:3-7.

The LORD had through Moses set before His people the result of unfaithfulness. By refusing to keep His covenant, they would cut themselves off from the life of God, and His blessing could not come upon them. "Beware," said Moses, "that you forget not the LORD your God, in not

keeping His commandments, and His judgments, and His statutes, which I command you this day: lest when you have eaten and are full, and have built goodly houses, and dwelt therein; and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and your gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied; then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the LORD your God. . . . And you say in your heart, My power and the might of mine hand has gotten me this wealth. . . . And it shall be, if you do at all forget the LORD your God, and walk after other gods, and serve them, and worship them, I testify against you this day that you shall surely perish. As the nations which the LORD destroys before your face, so shall you perish; because you would not be obedient to the voice of the LORD your God.” Deuteronomy 8:11-14, 17, 19, 20.

The warning was not heeded by the Jewish people. They forgot God, and lost sight of their high privilege as His representatives. The blessings they had received brought no blessing to the world. All their advantages were appropriated for their own glorification. They robbed God of the service He required of them, and they robbed their fellow men of religious guidance and a holy example. Like the inhabitants of the antediluvian world, they followed out every imagination of their evil hearts. Thus they made sacred things appear a farce, saying, “The temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, are these” (Jeremiah 7:4), while at the same time they were misrepresenting God's character, dishonoring His name, and polluting His sanctuary.

The husbandmen who had been placed in charge of the LORD's vineyard were untrue to their trust. The priests and teachers were not faithful instructors of the people. They did not keep before them the goodness and mercy of God and His claim to their love and service. These husbandmen sought their own glory. They desired to appropriate the fruits of the vineyard. It was their study to attract attention and homage to themselves.

The guilt of these leaders in Israel was not like the guilt of the ordinary sinner. These men stood under the most solemn obligation to God. They had pledged themselves to teach a “Thus says the LORD” and to bring strict obedience into their practical life. Instead of doing this they were perverting the Scriptures. They laid heavy burdens upon men, enforcing ceremonies that reached to every step in life. The people lived in continual unrest, for they could not fulfill the requirements laid down by the rabbis. As they saw the impossibility of keeping man-made commandments, they became careless in regard to the commandments of God.

The LORD had instructed His people that He was the owner of the vineyard, and that all their possessions were given them in trust to be used for Him. But the priests and teachers did not perform the work of their sacred office as if they were handling the property of God. They were systematically robbing Him of the means and facilities entrusted to them for the advancement of His work. Their covetousness and greed caused them to be despised even by the heathen. Thus the Gentile world was given occasion to misinterpret the character of God and the laws of His kingdom.

With a father's heart, God bore with His people. He pleaded with them by mercies given and mercies withdrawn. Patiently He set their sins before them, and in forbearance waited for their acknowledgment. Prophets and messengers were sent to urge God's claim upon the husbandmen; but instead of being welcomed, they were treated as enemies. The husbandmen persecuted and killed them. God sent still other messengers, but they received the same treatment as the first, only that the husbandmen showed still more determined hatred.

As a last resource, God sent His Son, saying, "They will reverence My Son." But their resistance had made them vindictive, and they said among themselves, "This is the heir; come, let us kill Him, and let us seize on His inheritance." We shall then be left to enjoy the vineyard, and to do as we please with the fruit.

The Jewish rulers did not love God; therefore they cut themselves away from Him, and rejected all His overtures for a just settlement. Christ, the Beloved of God, came to assert the claims of the Owner of the vineyard; but the husbandmen treated Him with marked contempt, saying, We will not have this man to rule over us. They envied Christ's beauty of character. His manner of teaching was far superior to theirs, and they dreaded His success. He remonstrated with them, unveiling their hypocrisy, and showing them the sure results of their course of action. This stirred them to madness. They smarted under the rebukes they could not silence. They hated the high standard of righteousness which Christ continually presented. They saw that His teaching was placing them where their selfishness would be uncloaked, and they determined to kill Him. They hated His example of truthfulness and piety and the elevated spirituality revealed in all He did. His whole life was a reproof to their selfishness, and when the final test came, the test which meant obedience to eternal life or disobedience to eternal death, they rejected the Holy One of Israel. When they were asked to choose between Christ and Barabbas, they cried out, "Release to us Barabbas!" Luke 23:18. And when Pilate asked, "What shall I do then with Jesus?" they cried fiercely, "Let Him

be crucified.” Matthew 27:22. “Shall I crucify your King?” Pilate asked, and from the priests and rulers came the answer, “We have no king but Caesar.” John 19:15. When Pilate washed his hands, saying, “I am innocent of the blood of this just person,” the priests joined with the ignorant mob in declaring passionately, “His blood be on us, and on our children.” Matthew 27:24-25.

Thus the Jewish leaders made their choice. Their decision was registered in the book which John saw in the hand of Him that sat upon the throne, the book which no man could open. In all its vindictiveness this decision will appear before them in the day when this book is unsealed by the Lion of the tribe of Judah.

The Jewish people cherished the idea that they were the favorites of heaven, and that they were always to be exalted as the church of God. They were the children of Abraham, they declared, and so firm did the foundation of their prosperity seem to them that they defied earth and heaven to dispossess them of their rights. But by lives of unfaithfulness they were preparing for the condemnation of heaven and for separation from God.

In the parable of the vineyard, after Christ had portrayed before the priests their crowning act of wickedness, He put to them the question, “When the LORD therefore of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those husbandmen?” The priests had been following the narrative with deep interest, and without considering the relation of the subject to themselves they joined with the people in answering, “He will miserably destroy those wicked men, and will let out His vineyard to other husbandmen, which shall render Him the fruits in their seasons.”

Unwittingly they had pronounced their own doom. Jesus looked upon them, and under His searching gaze they knew that He read the secrets of their hearts. His divinity flashed out before them with unmistakable power. They saw in the husbandmen a picture of themselves, and they involuntarily exclaimed, “God forbid!”

Solemnly and regretfully Christ asked, “Did you never read in the scriptures, The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner; this is the LORD's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes? Therefore say I to you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof. And whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken; but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder.”

Christ would have averted the doom of the Jewish nation if the people had received Him. But envy and jealousy made them implacable. They determined that they would not receive Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah. They rejected the Light of the world, and thenceforth their lives were surrounded with darkness as the darkness of midnight. The doom foretold came upon the Jewish nation. Their own fierce passions, uncontrolled, wrought their ruin. In their blind rage they destroyed one another. Their rebellious, stubborn pride brought upon them the wrath of their Roman conquerors. Jerusalem was destroyed, the temple laid in ruins, and its site plowed like a field. The children of Judah perished by the most horrible forms of death. Millions were sold, to serve as bondmen in heathen lands.

As a people the Jews had failed of fulfilling God's purpose, and the vineyard was taken from them. The privileges they had abused, the work they had slighted, was entrusted to others.