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Matthew 21:28 - 22:14

Jesus Christ is the Dividing Line

It was a beautiful summer's day and a group of us were sitting on the porch, having a conversation. We were talking about all kinds of things, but as opportunity arose in the conversation, I tried to steer it towards talking about the gospel and the Bible. I shared what I thoroughly believe the Bible proclaims: Jesus Christ truly is the only way to salvation, and no one who does not put their complete trust in Him will be saved. The man I was speaking with was very respectful, but then shared his alternative opinion: he agreed that many people shouldn't be saved, but can we really say that *no one* outside of Christ can be saved? "After all," he asked, "what about the Jews?" He went on to share that he's always known Jewish people to be very good, morally decent, and upright people, all in the name of obeying God. Surely GOD wouldn't judge them and send them to Hell, would He? Just because they don't believe Jesus is the Messiah? After all, he continued, the Jewish people are God's chosen nation, aren't they? Wouldn't it be wrong for God to condemn them just because they don't believe in Jesus?

Responses and questions like this are very common when we wade into conversations about the implications of the gospel - not only in evangelism, but even among professing Christians, inside our churches. Someone might say, "Look, I believe in Jesus. But what about people who are morally decent people and live good lives? Or what about those who have devout faith to their different religion - like Jews or Muslims? Or what about those who've never heard? Surely God wouldn't send them to Hell in judgment, would He?"

The way we answer these questions is *critical*. It's crucial for our own salvation and discipleship. It's crucial for our evangelism and discipleship of others. It's crucial for the mission of the church and a right understanding of the Bible. And it's crucial for the *glory of God in the centrality of Jesus Christ*.

You see, such thoughts and questions miss the *centrality of Jesus Christ*. Jesus is the very center of human history - indeed, of the story of all of Creation. He is the dividing line, and everything else revolves around Him. We're reminded of this even by our calendar here in the West, aren't we? The way we talk about time and history is divided around the birth of Christ - time before that is B.C., Before Christ; time after that is A.D., an abbreviation of the Latin

meaning, “the year of our Lord.” But whether mankind recognizes it or not, all of history revolves around Jesus; all of time is leading up to the day when Christ will return in glory and every knee will bow to Him. And so it should be no surprise that the whole Bible is centered around Jesus - the whole storyline, the main point, even the ultimate purpose of every passage of scripture, points us to Jesus Christ. It all builds up to the gospel - and the gospel centers on the life, person, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ in the place of sinners.

Therefore, it should be no surprise that your life, your identity, your fate, your *eternal salvation*, wholly depends upon how you respond to Jesus Christ. He is our only hope. He is the center of it all. And He is the dividing line. He divides all of humanity into two groups: those who believe in Him and are saved; and those who reject Him and receive GOD’s wrath against Sin, which we all deserve. There is no hope outside of faith in Christ. Jesus Christ is our only hope; ***everything hangs in the balance upon how we respond to Christ.***

And that’s exactly what we see in *Matthew 21:28 - 22:14*. This passage picks up where we left off last week, with Jesus standing in the Temple complex, being confronted and challenged by the chief priests and elders - the religious leaders in Jerusalem. Jesus turns the confrontation back on them by sharing *three parables* that suck the listener into the story, then flips the script, showing: this story is actually about you! Each of these three parables draws a dividing line: first, we see those who *obey God* and *those who do not*. Then, we see those who are *truly God’s people, part of His kingdom*, and those who are *outside of God’s people and Kingdom*. Finally, we see *those who receive salvation by grace* and *those who receive God’s wrath and judgment*. And in each parable, Jesus is the center: He is the dividing line, and how one responds to Him is the distinguishing mark between those who enter judgment and those who enter salvation.

So let us get sucked into these parables, one by one, and let the Lord show us which group we’re part of.

I. Only Those Who Believe in Christ Truly Obey God (21:28-32)

The first parable Jesus tells is about a father who owns a vineyard and has two sons. He asks the older son to go work in the vineyard, but the son says, “No.” But, he eventually repents; he “changed his mind and went” (v.28). The father told the same command to his second son, who initially responded with obedience; he gave a commendable, “yes, Sir,” - but it was just a

front. He did not go and do as his father commanded. So Jesus asks: “Which of the two did the will of his father?” (v.31). The religious leaders Jesus was speaking to - the chief priests and elders of the people - answer correctly: “the first.”

The first son initially disobeys by saying no; but he repents and finally obeys, going into the vineyard to work. He “does the will of the father” and represents the “tax collectors” and “prostitutes” who believe the message of repentance preached by John the Baptist. These groups of people - “tax collectors and prostitutes” represent vile groups who are seen as obvious, public sinners who lived in outright sin. Tax collectors were seen as traitors in Israel, doing the dirty work of Rome, who also exploited and robbed Jewish people by taking more than they were supposed to, to keep for themselves. We probably don’t need an explanation for what prostitutes are or what they did that was so wrong - even today, we know such a practice is clearly sinful and wicked. But here’s the thing: these obviously, publicly wicked and sinful people *heard the message of John the Baptist, repented, and believed*. The message of John was a call to repent and look to Jesus, the Messiah, believing in Him. They obey the will of God the Father by repenting and believing in Jesus Christ.

So who, then, does the second son represent? Well here’s Jesus’s scathing point of the story: he blatantly tells the religious leaders that *they* are the second son, not the first. The younger son initially seems obedient by answering the father with a “yes, Sir.” But despite giving the appearance of obedience, he does not go to the vineyard. He disobeys his father. This group represents the Jewish religious leaders. They give the pretense of obedience, claiming to believe and obey God; but instead, they disobey God because they do not receive Christ by faith. Sure, they keep many commands, and do much in the name of obeying and worshipping God. They claim to obey the will of God the Father. But God’s will is for us to repent and believe in Christ. The religious leaders absolutely refused to do this; they thought they were righteous in their obedience, unlike the tax collectors and prostitutes. Therefore, unlike such public sinners, they refuse to repent and believe in Christ. Though they claim to obey and be righteous, they are not righteous enough. Though they claim to obey the will of God, they reject God’s Son - thereby refusing God’s will.

The will of God, for each of us, is that we believe in His Son, Jesus Christ. It is absolutely impossible for anyone to obey God without receiving the grace of Christ by faith. It is absolutely impossible for anyone to be good, righteous, and pleasing to God apart from faith in

Christ Jesus. Someone might claim to believe; but unless they truly trust Christ, it is meaningless, mere lip-service. Someone might seem to live as a good person - every single person is a sinner, no one is truly good, and everything done apart from faith is sin; no matter how morally decent someone looks, if they are not putting their faith in Christ alone, then they are disobeying God and will face His judgment. They will not be apart of the Kingdom of God; they will not be saved. Absolutely no one will ever be good enough in God's eyes apart from faith in Christ; absolutely no one will ever obey God's will, enter His Kingdom, or be saved outside of personal faith in Christ!

That is a sobering warning to us. But if we flip it around and look at the positive side of what Christ is saying here, it is actually *incredibly encouraging good news!* The flip-side of this passage is this: anyone who trusts in Christ alone for salvation and receives Him as Lord, by faith, *obeys the will of God!*

This means this is true *for you!* No matter who you are! *No matter how messed up and sinful your life is right now, or has been in the past; no matter how unholy and rebellious you've been; no matter how far you've fallen from grace; no matter how many mistakes you've made; no matter how many times you've disappointed and failed the ones you love most; no matter how many times you've fallen flat on your face in failure; no matter how many times you've shaken your fist at God and told him "NO" - no matter if you're considered a public sinner - a tax collector! A prostitute! A drug dealer! An alcoholic! A porn addict! An adulterer! An abuser! A judgmental pharisee! No matter how sinful, messed up, and broken you are, it is never too late for you to be considered holy and righteous enough in God's sight!* It is not too late for you to obey the will of GOD! And here's God's will for you; here's the command for you to obey to be considered good enough: *believe that you're not good enough, repent from your sin, and look to Jesus Christ in faith; believe that Jesus Christ is God's promised savior, that He came and lived a perfect life in your place, died on the cross to pay for your sins, and rose again!*

That's the will of God for you and me! We obey God by believing in Jesus Christ; by trusting in the gospel. No one is saved outside of doing this - outside of faith in Christ. But *everyone* who trusts in Christ's grace, by faith, *will be saved!* As Jesus says in **John 6:39-40**, "And this is the will of Him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in Him should have eternal life, and I will raise Him up on the last day."

Only one man - Jesus Christ - has ever perfectly obeyed the Will of God completely. Only one man is good enough to earn eternal life. Only one man is good enough to please God. And the God-Man Jesus came and obeyed God *for you and for me - so long as we believe in Him!* The moment you trust in Christ alone, God credits Jesus's perfect obedience to your account! If you're trusting in Christ by faith, then you can rest in this glorious grace: you're obeying God's will! He is pleased with you in Christ Jesus.

II. Only Those Who Believe in Christ are Truly God's People (21:33-46)

In case the religious leaders missed the point - or in case we, as modern day readers, miss the point - of the first parable, Jesus gives a second, similar parable in vv.33-46.

It starts off like this, in verse 33: "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 tenant, and went into another country." This would have been a familiar concept for Jesus's day: a wealthy man buys a field, turns it into a vineyard to produce grapes and make wine, and hires out guys to work it for him, since he lives somewhere else. Now, the interesting thing is, the language used here sounds *remarkable similar* to **Isa. 5:1-7**, where the prophet Isaiah tells his own parable, picturing Israel as a vineyard, planted by God. For this reason, I think we're meant to see, right from the get-go, that the "master of the house" represents God, and that the vineyard and its tenants represent Israel, God's covenant people of the Old Testament.

I think this is confirmed by the rest of the passage. So let us keep going, looking at vv.34-39. When harvest time comes, the landowner sends his servants to collect the fruit he is owed from these tenants. But instead of producing the good fruit and handing it over, these tenants behave with wicked, ruthless brutality. They took the servants and "beat one, killed another, and stoned another" (v.35). Such a response is appalling! But it continues and only gets worse. The landowner, showing an incredible amount of patience and grace, gives them another chance: he sends more servants, yet they respond the exact same way this time as well (36). Finally, with an even greater display of patience and mercy, the landowner gives them one final chance, this time sending his own son, thinking, "They will respect my son" (v.37). Surely they wouldn't stoop so low to kill him! And yet, tragically, that's exactly what they do. They see the son and say to themselves, "This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance." They want to take this vineyard over for themselves and rob it from their master and his son; so

they kill the son, the heir (vv. 38-39). In response to the story, the religious leaders rightly answer Jesus that the landowner will kill the wicked tenants and replace them with faithful servants.

These verses are recounting the history of God and Israel: God sent His prophets to Israel, proclaiming the Lord's righteousness, Israel's sin, the Lord's just wrath that will surely come, but also His gracious love that calls them to repent and receive mercy. But Israel rejected God's Word; just like the wicked tenants here, they responded to God's servants, His prophets, with brutal persecution - beating, stoning, and murdering them, along with many other evil deeds. God continued to send prophets - the earlier prophets, like Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, and Jeremiah, then the later prophets, such as Ezekiel, Daniel, or Malachi. Yet they still didn't listen. This led to the final culmination of God sending His own Son - Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the Son of GOD! Yet Israel would reject and kill him, too. When Jesus was sharing this parable, his death hadn't occurred yet, but he's already prophesied it 3 times in Matthew so far (16:21; 17:22-23; 20:17-19); the very people he was speaking to, the religious leaders of the Jews, were already seeking to arrest him (v.45), and they would succeed, having him crucified.

Jesus makes it very clear that he's talking about himself here when he quotes **Psalm 118:22-23**: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes." On one level, this directly corresponds to the story; the son that is rejected will be vindicated and restored, replacing the wicked, failed leadership. But there's only one problem: the son was killed! I don't think this is hyperbole; I think we're meant to look to the resurrection of Jesus. When Jesus, God's Son, was killed on the cross, he was rejected by disbelieving Israel; he was the stone rejected by the builders. But on the third day, God raised him from the grave, vindicating Him and establishing His kingdom! The stone that was rejected has become the cornerstone, upon which the Kingdom of God and the people of God are built! And this glorious resurrection miracle was "the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes" (21:42).

Jesus is the cornerstone, or "capstone." The whole point of GOD's plan of redemption is meant to exalt Christ, for it centers on Him! THE meaning of this is fleshed out a little more from the original context of Psalm 118 as well: Psalm 118 is speaking of either the King of Israel or the nation of Israel (often times both are connected so tightly that both are likely in view here) being rejected and despised by the enemy nations, but then being raised up and vindicated by God. Here, Jesus proclaims that He is the fulfillment of Psalm 118; Jesus is the true King, and

that means, He is *the True Israel*. And that means, Jesus Christ is the dividing line for whether or not someone belongs to True Israel, the true people of God.

And I think this is exactly what Jesus is saying in his response to the priests and Pharisees in vv.43-44. He tells them, “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.” The nation of Israel, represented by its religious leaders, rejected God’s own Son, Jesus Christ; they did not believe, but put him to death. Therefore, there are grave consequences. Jesus “takes the kingdom” away from them and give it to a “people” or “nation” who produces the fruit of the kingdom - and we know by now that the fruit of God’s Kingdom is faith, displayed by repentance and obedience.

This is a big deal. There’s no salvation outside of the Kingdom. The Kingdom is where God’s people dwell, where they receive salvation. What Jesus is saying here is that the nation of Israel is no longer to be identified as “God’s people” or “God’s Kingdom.” It is not enough to be Jewish; we have to believe in Christ! Jesus is the true King; He is the true Israel. The Kingdom is His; there is only salvation for those who are in Christ by faith! Jesus Christ is the dividing line. As 1 Peter 2:7-8 makes clear, the “cornerstone” here is also a “stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense.” For those who reject Jesus, he becomes a stumbling block; in their unbelief, they trip over Jesus and fall into judgment, so that they are crushed by the wrath of God.

Yet it is the “cornerstone,” the “capstone” for all who receive Christ by faith! This means that *anyone*, in all the world, who believes in Christ is now part of True Israel, the true people of God, in Christ Jesus! The focus isn’t on Israel, or even on us; the focus is on Christ! The centrality and supremacy of Christ Jesus - that’s what’s it all about! There is only one people of God, only one group of people who belong to God’s Kingdom and receive His salvation - and that people consists of *anyone and everyone who truly believes in Christ Jesus!* So if you’re united to Christ by faith, showing the fruit of the Kingdom - genuine, repentant faith - then you’re *part of God’s true Kingdom people, True Israel, in Christ Jesus!*

And this is because we, who do not deserve to be God’s people, have received incredible grace! Which leads us to our third and final point...

III. Only Those Who Believe in Christ are Saved by God’s Grace, while Those Who Reject the Gospel Will be Judged (22:1-14)

The third parable, in chapter 22, verses 1-14, compares Christ's Kingdom to a wedding feast: a king's son is getting married, which would be seen as a public affair and a reason for national joy and celebration. So, he sends out invitations for the wedding feast; such an invitation would be a privileged honor, but also a *command* from the king. One does not simply refuse a King's invitation. But that's exactly what the invited guests do. He even sends out a second wave of invitations, but they "paid no attention and went off, one to his farm, another to his business" (22:5). They refused for petty, selfish reasons. But then, it gets worse, taking the same violent turn as the last parable: the rest of those invited seize the servants, the messengers of the king, and "treated them shamefully, killing them" (22:6). The king responded with anger, sending his army in to "destroy those murders and burned their city" (v.7).

So far, this is very similar to the last parable, isn't it? Clearly, the King represents God, the son Jesus, and the wedding feast symbolizes that Jesus's Kingdom has dawned. But those to whom the promises of the kingdom were given, those invited to rejoice in the Messiah, His Kingdom, and His salvation, reject it. Clearly, this pictures the unbelieving of Israel, once more. And those who reject Christ are given over to judgment.

But the King does not give up on the wedding feast; nor does He become bitter and angry. Instead, He responds by graciously opening up the doors, sending out invitations to those who were not worthy of such a lavish feast! He sends out his servants once more, generally proclaiming an invitation to all, to anyone who would come! Verse 10 tells us the result: "And those servants went out into the roads and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good. So the wedding hall was filled with guests." So the distinguishing mark between these that show up is not that they are morally superior - no, they are both "bad and good." No, the distinguishing mark is simply that they *accepted the call*. This is a call of *grace*. They accept a free invitation, by grace, to enjoy a wedding feast they are not worthy of.

This represents the general call of the gospel. The good news that Jesus Christ came to live, die, and be raised in the place of hopeless sinners is a real offer given to *everyone, everywhere!* This is why you and I must proclaim this gospel freely and boldly to all, to *everyone* we can! This gospel is for you, your kids, your family members, your neighbors. Those who seem morally decent, and those everyone knows are bad! We're all sinners. We all deserve God's wrath and judgment against our sin in hell. That's the default - everyone, even the decent-seeming folk, even the very religious folk, will be cast into judgment for eternity - *unless*

they repent and believe in Christ Jesus! And *anyone*, no matter how sinful, can receive the free offer of the gospel, by God's grace!

But then, at the end, we're given a final warning that reminds us: God's grace is free, but it is not cheap. In verses 11-13, the King comes in and finds a wedding guest who's not wearing the appropriate attire. The man is speechless - he knows he's in the wrong. ANd so he's cast out. But then the language in 13 becomes exaggeratedly dramatic to drive home the theological point: he's bound and cast into the "outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Clearly, this is picturing eternal damnation in Hell. And, just as clearly, this isn't supposed to be some unjust, undeserved punishment against wearing the wrong clothes. Rather, the clothes are meant to be the same picture as trees producing the right fruit, that we're so familiar with by now. Just as a tree is known by it's fruit, so someone who truly accepts the King's invitation is known by wearing the right clothes.

The point is: it's meant to show us that not all who appear to receive the gospel call actually do. Not all who claim to believe in Christ *actually* believe, with genuine, saving faith. Anyone who believes in the gospel of Jesus is saved, by grace! But such belief isn't just, "I believe in my mind God exists, or that Jesus lived, died, and was raised." As James said, even the demons believe! But true belief is to have *faith* - to actually *trust* in Christ as sufficient to save you, to truly put your *faith* in Him. To repent, believe, and follow Him! We're saved by faith alone; but saving faith is never alone. As the final verse says, "For many are called, but few are chosen."

Once again, we see that Christ is the dividing line, between eternal salvation and eternal judgment in Hell. Our only hope is Christ. If you reject Christ, then be warned: you will face His wrath in eternity! But no matter who you are or what you've done: if you rest in Christ's grace, if you believe His death really was to save *you* - then the Lord has chosen to save you! Simply believe in Christ - and He declares that you have obeyed God, that you're part of God's people and Kingdom, and that you will be saved. Brothers and sisters, let us rejoice in His grace!

If you have any questions about this gospel and becoming a Christian, or if you do believe and want to be baptized to make that public, or about joining the church, I would be glad to speak with you. You can come now, or find me after the service. Let us pray.