

IDENTIFYING AND UNDERSTANDING BIBLE WORD PICTURES

Track 5 – Putting Together the Word Picture Trilogy in Matthew 21-22¹

Introduction/Context

Jesus' final week begins with Him entering Jerusalem with crowds of people welcoming Him and proclaiming Him to be the *Son of David*. This title shows that at least some of the Jews recognized Him as God's King Who was sent to establish the promised Jewish kingdom. It is Passover week and the city is overflowing with Jews taking part in the celebration. Jesus immediately enters the temple and drives out the money changers and those who were profiting from the Passover crowds. Many blind and lame come to Jesus while He is in the temple, and He heals them all. The chief priests and scribes have watched Jesus enter the city and they had observed *"the wonderful things He did, and the children crying out in the temple and saying, 'Hosanna to the Son of David.'"* They approach Jesus and ask Him if He had heard what the children were calling Him. Jesus answers by quoting Psalm 8:2 to let them know that He was worthy of their praise.

These events marked the first time the Lord had openly accepted praise as God's Anointed, and this greatly concerned the Jewish religious establishment. These Jews considered Jesus a risk to their position and to their authority. So they rallied all the religious groups in Jerusalem, and confronted Jesus the next day as He was teaching in the temple. They asked, *"By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave you this authority?"* Jesus refused to answer their questions, but relates three parables concerning the kingdom of heaven. These three parables are directed at the Jewish leadership to expose their rejection of Jesus and His offer of the kingdom. They also reveal the future judgment the Jews will receive for their rejection and unbelief.

Parable of the Two Sons

Jesus shares a story about a man who tells his two sons to go and work in his vineyard. The first son refused to go, but later repented of his decision and went to work. The second son agrees to work, but then did not go. Jesus asks the chief priests and elders, *"Which of the two sons did the will of the father?"* They correctly answer *"the first"* (the one who initially refused, but then decided to obey the father). What they did not realize was that, in giving their (correct) answer, they were condemning themselves. At least some in the Jewish leadership initially responded to John's message (which Jesus called the *"way of righteousness"*), but their actions made it clear that they rejected the message (and the messengers!).

- **Matthew 21:28-32:** *28 "But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, 'Son, go, work today in my vineyard.' 29 He answered and said, 'I will not,' but afterward he regretted it and went. 30 Then he came to the second and said likewise. And he answered and said, 'I go, sir,' but he did not go. 31 Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said to Him, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Assuredly, I say to you that tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you. 32 For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him; but tax collectors and harlots believed him; and when you saw it, you did not afterward relent and believe him.*

¹ This material has been adapted from earlier work done on the Gospel of Matthew.

Jesus tells the chief priests and the elders that even the tax collectors and harlots “enter the kingdom of God before you.” This statement was in stark contrast to the prevalent attitude of the day. The tax collectors and harlots were some of the most despised people in Jewish culture. Jesus’ promotion of the sinners above the Jewish leaders was a stinging rebuke to them. The tax collectors and harlots gained entrance into the kingdom because they “believed” John’s message and repented. The chief priests and elders may have feigned devotion to God, but the true condition of their hearts was revealed through their rejection of God’s prophet. By rejecting John’s message, the Jewish leader’s response to the will of the father was like that of the second son, who disobeyed the father.

Many misinterpret the father’s wishes that his sons work in his vineyard. They relate the father’s instructions to go and work in the vineyard as teaching *works salvation* or *works assurance*. But the parable teaches just the opposite: it is one’s *belief* and not their works that allow them entrance into the kingdom. This parable has nothing to do with works in relation to *entrance* in the kingdom. Jesus’ asks which son did the will of the father. It is the father’s will that is at issue, and his will for them was that they **go** to his vineyard and work. Obviously, for either son to work, they had to first choose to *go*. The second son, by *going* to work in the field (albeit late), indicates his acceptance of the father’s will. Salvation is about accepting the will of God by believing in His Son, and one cannot work for God if they have never put their faith in Him. John 6:29 says, “*This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent.*” The only “work” required for entrance into God’s kingdom is not a work at all. It is faith in Jesus.

Putting the Pieces of the Parable of the Two Sons Together

If we’re going to be sure we’ve understood this parable correctly, we should be able to line up all the pieces so that they make sense, as we did in Matthew 13. The advantage we have in this first parable of the series (as in Matthew 13) is that Jesus gives us the answers... That will help us in the 2nd and 3rd parable. So here are all the pieces:

- Man = While in Matthew 13 the “Man” was *always* Jesus, here Jesus zooms out to a bigger picture, and we find that the “Man” is in each case God the Father. Beyond that, their “call” to “go and work in the vineyard” was given *through* God’s spokesmen. In this context, the spokesman in view is John the Baptist.
- The First Son = The “tax collectors and harlots” (from verse 32). They knew they were guilty and stood in need of a Savior, and so believed John’s message and participated in his baptism of repentance. They were then ready to “work in the vineyard”.
- The Second Son = Israel’s leaders, who gave lip service to John the Baptist’s message, but never believed it, which would have led them to be a part of his baptism of repentance. See John 5:35: “*He (John the Baptist) was the burning and shining lamp, and you were willing for a time to rejoice in his light.*” They were, therefore, never able to “go to work”. Their self-righteousness kept them from seeing their *guilt* and *need* of their Messiah.
- “Go” = *Believing* the message (from verse 32), in this case John’s message of the promised Messiah and His Kingdom. Just like “going” takes us to our place of work, *believing* brings us to the place where we are able to work!
- “Work in the vineyard” = Obey God by serving in the kingdom and caring for the “vineyard”.
- Vineyard = While at this point it might be unclear, when we get to the next parable, it will be obvious that the vineyard is *the nation of Israel*. And we will see the *consequences* of the second son’s unbelief after Jesus shares the second parable of this series.

So let's move on to the second parable, which will help us with a few more pieces of the puzzle that Jesus is putting together for us.

The Parable of the Landowner (one of many names for this parable...)

The Parable of the Two Sons reprimands the Jewish leaders, but it is not all that Jesus has to say to them. He immediately relates another parable about a man who owns a vineyard. This man puts great care into his vineyard. He puts a wall around it, digs a winepress, and builds a watchtower to protect the property. He rents the vineyard out to vinedressers and goes on an extended journey. Then, at harvest time, the owner sends his servants to the vineyard to collect his share of the crops as per his agreement with the vinedressers.

Until this point in the parable, the 1st Century Jew would readily identify the story as a normal farming transaction, but the parable takes an unexpected and violent turn. The vinedressers who had rented the vineyard abuse the servants that had come to collect the owner's share. They seized them, beating one, killing another, and stoning a third. The owner responds by sending other servants and they are abused as well. So, as a final effort to get the vinedressers to adhere to their agreement, the owner sends his son. He thinks they will honor his son, which would be a normal assumption... But the vinedressers decide to kill the son, "the heir," so they can steal "the inheritance." They throw the son out of the vineyard and kill him.

- Matthew 21:33-44:** *33 "Hear another parable: There was a certain landowner who planted a vineyard and set a hedge around it, dug a winepress in it and built a tower. And he leased it to vinedressers and went into a far country. 34 Now when vintage-time drew near, he sent his servants to the vinedressers, that they might receive its fruit. 35 And the vinedressers took his servants, beat one, killed one, and stoned another. 36 Again he sent other servants, more than the first, and they did likewise to them. 37 Then last of all he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' 38 But when the vinedressers saw the son, they said among themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance.' 39 So they took him and cast him out of the vineyard and killed him. 40 "Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vinedressers?" 41 They said to Him, "He will destroy those wicked men miserably, and lease his vineyard to other vinedressers who will render to him the fruits in their seasons." 42 Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: 'The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief cornerstone. This was the LORD's doing, And it is marvelous in our eyes'? 43 "Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it. 44 And whoever falls on this stone will be broken; but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder."*

The chief priests and elders, along with everyone else, are no doubt appalled by this parable and the treachery of the vinedressers. As in the previous parable, Jesus asked the Jewish leaders for their opinion. He asks, "*When the owner of vineyard comes, what will he do to those vinedressers?*" They say that the owner will "*destroy those wicked men miserably*", and lease his vineyard to others who will give him the fruit that he is due. Again, the words of the Jewish leaders *have pronounced their own doom*.

This parable can be very confusing if the characters are misidentified, but knowing Matthew's Jewish purpose helps us to identify them. The Owner of the vineyard is God, and the vineyard is Israel (see **Psalm 80:8-11**), who God has carefully protected and nurtured to be his fruitful vineyard. The vinedressers are Israel's religious leaders who are charged with the care of the

vineyard. The servants are the prophets of God who were sent to Israel. And finally, the son is of course *Jesus*, God's (the Owner's) Son.²

God could not allow the evil and rebellious Jewish leaders to continue their stewardship of His vineyard. He would judge them, in accordance with their own decision: God would indeed "destroy those wicked men miserably"! Their rejection and resulting judgment is indicative of Israel's rejection of Christ and the judgment they will face. The Lord reminds the religious leaders (supposedly Old Testament scholars) of the prophecy in Psalm 118:22-23. It reveals that "*the stone the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.*" Jesus is the "chief cornerstone" and their rejection of Him was foretold by the psalmist hundreds of years before. The physical fulfillment of this would be the destruction of Jerusalem A.D. 70. God would give the care of his vineyard to others who would return to Him His rightful harvest.

The *kingdom of heaven* is the underlying theme of many of Jesus' parables in Matthew, and this parable has kingdom significance as well. But *notice* that one small detail here has changed. Instead of using "kingdom of heaven" as usual (to focus on the earthly *sphere of profession*), Jesus uses the more specific "kingdom of God", which refers to the *sphere of salvation/belief*. The Jewish leaders' rejection of Jesus (reflecting their *unbelief*) means more broadly that they will not be saved! Jesus is using this parable to show that this generation of Jews will be *doubly* judged (physically in A.D. 70, and spiritually because of their rejection of their Messiah). This is not a permanent rejection of the Jews, however, and the Jews will one day return to God. It is to that future generation that Jesus will return and set up His kingdom on earth. Dr. Barbieri states, "A future generation in Israel will respond in saving faith to this same Messiah (Rom. 11:26-27), and to that future generation the kingdom will be given." Dr. Scofield also shares the same idea:

- **Matthew 21:43** Note that Matthew here as in verse 31 uses the larger word, *kingdom of God*. (Cf. Mt. 6:33, *note*.) The *kingdom of heaven* (Mt. 3:2, *note*; 1 Cor. 15:24, summary) will yet be set up. Meantime the kingdom of God and His righteousness is taken from Israel...³

Jesus had said that "...salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:23), since Israel had been given the responsibility of being "salt" and "light" to the world. Their failure to recognize their Messiah meant that they would no longer be the ones offering salvation (until Daniel's 70th week).

The Pieces of the Puzzle in the Parable of the Landowner

Since this is the second of three parables in a series, we should expect the pieces that overlap to remain the same so that we have consistency. We will see that to be true, particularly with the main agent ("man" in the first parable and "landowner" in the second) and the "vineyard". In the case of the vineyard, however, what it represents becomes crystal clear in this parable (although it might not be so obvious for us two thousand years later). For Jesus' hearers, they would have known the Old Testament prophecies, or at least the leaders would have. And notice what verse 45 says: "*Now when the chief priests and Pharisees heard His parables, they*

² Among other things going on here, this is another place in Matthew's gospel where Jesus *prophesies His own death*.

³ Scofield, C. I., ed. [*The Scofield Reference Bible: The Holy Bible Containing the Old and New Testaments*](#). New York; London; Toronto; Melbourne; Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1917. Print.

perceived (knew) that He was speaking of them.” What about this parable made it so obvious? The answer comes from Isaiah 5, which is also an indictment of Israel in their disobedience:

- **Isaiah 5:** *1 Now let me sing to my Well-beloved A song of my Beloved regarding His vineyard: My Well-beloved has a **vineyard** On a very fruitful hill. 2 He dug it up and cleared out its stones, And planted it with the choicest **vine**. He built a **tower** in its midst, And also made a **winepress** in it; So He expected it to bring forth good grapes, But it brought forth wild grapes. 3 “And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, Judge, please, between Me and My vineyard. 4 What more could have been done to My vineyard That I have not done in it? Why then, when I expected it to bring forth good grapes, Did it bring forth wild grapes? 5 And now, please let Me tell you what I will do to My vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it shall be burned; And break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. 6 I will lay it waste; It shall not be pruned or dug, But there shall come up briars and thorns. I will also command the clouds That they rain no rain on it.” 7 **For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, And the men of Judah are His pleasant plant. He looked for justice, but behold, oppression; For righteousness, but behold, a cry for help.***

As I shared earlier, this should make the meaning of “vineyard” very clear, and Jesus has used the metaphor in both the 1st and 2nd parables. There are simply too many parallels between Isaiah 5 and this parable to ignore! But take a look at all the parts of the parable, and then consider how they line up:

- Landowner = God the Father.
- Planted/Set/Dug/Built = All that God had done for Israel to set them up for success!
- Vineyard = National Israel, as represented by Jerusalem.
- Hedge = A border. In this case, Israel had both national borders and walls around Jerusalem (which represented the nation). The focus here is on the city “hedge”.
- Winepress = A winepress is in a vineyard specifically for the *harvest*, often in Scripture pointing to the *judgment* of evil and the acceptance of the righteous... Both in Isaiah 5 and here in Matthew, God was looking for Israel to “produce” what was expected of them, and in both places, God was disappointed with what He found.
- Tower = “Watchtowers were built in the vineyards of Palestine. From the tower the watchman was assigned to oversee the vineyard, protecting it from wild animals and thieves” (Is 5:2; Mt 21:33; Mk 12:1).⁴ This image would have pointed to the Temple, the place which signified God’s special care for Israel.
- “Leased” = God gave Israel’s leaders responsibility to “cultivate” His people.
- Vinedressers = Israel’s religious leaders.
- Servants = Israel’s prophets, who were sent to speak to Israel and its leaders.
- Vintage-Time = Occurs when the vines are “prepared”, ready for the final harvest. Israel had been called to *prepare the way of the Lord* for many years, and with the arrival of their Messiah, they had been called to be ready again (with the offer of the Kingdom and its Messiah).
- Son/Heir = Jesus, of course!
- “Out of the Vineyard” = Jesus (the Son) was taken outside Jerusalem to be killed. Jesus prophesies His own death.

⁴ Elwell, Walter A., and Philip Wesley Comfort. *Tyndale Bible dictionary* 2001: 1297. Print. Tyndale Reference Library.

This parable, just like the 1st one in the series, points directly at Israel's leaders as failing to accomplish what God expected. They had been given a specific responsibility, and when the time came for harvest (here *in the presence of the Messiah*), they rejected the Son of the Landowner and were therefore guilty! If this were baseball, Jesus has just thrown two strikes; He's about to throw His third...

The Parable of the Marriage Feast

As part of this same teaching, Jesus gives a 3rd parable about a king who arranges a marriage for his son. This parable is often taught as though it is addressed to a different audience (perhaps because it starts a new chapter), but the context makes it clear ("*Jesus answered and spoke to them again...*") that Jesus is speaking to the same group. The parable has two parts and includes three invitations. The first part includes two invitations that are directed solely to the Jews, and having knowledge of the Jewish wedding will aid in interpreting Jesus' meaning⁵. The king plans his son's wedding, and he sends out his servants to tell those who have been invited to come, but they refuse. Not to be deterred, he sends out more servants with a second invitation. In this second invitation, he tells the invitees that he has made elaborate preparation and everything is ready. It is time for them to "come to the wedding." But surprisingly, the invitees pay little attention to the king's invitation, and go about their daily lives. Some of the invitees even "treated the servants spitefully, and killed them." This dishonor enrages the king and he sends his army to destroy those who had murdered his servants and to burn their city (verse 7).

- **Matthew 22:1-14:** *1 And Jesus answered and spoke to them again by parables and said: 2 "The kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who arranged a marriage for his son, 3 and sent out his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding; and they were not willing to come. 4 Again, he sent out other servants, saying, 'Tell those who are invited, "See, I have prepared my dinner; my oxen and fatted cattle are killed, and all things are ready. Come to the wedding."'" 5 But they made light of it and went their ways, one to his own farm, another to his business. 6 And the rest seized his servants, treated them spitefully, and killed them. 7 But when the king heard about it, he was furious. And he sent out his armies, destroyed those murderers, and burned up their city. 8 Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy. 9 Therefore go into the highways, and as many as you find, invite to the wedding.' 10 So those servants went out into the highways and gathered together all whom they found, both bad and good. And the wedding hall was filled with guests. 11 "But when the king came in to see the guests, he saw a man there who did not have on a wedding garment. 12 So he said to him, 'Friend, how did you come in here without a wedding garment?' And he was speechless. 13 Then the king said to the servants, 'Bind him hand and foot, take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' 14 "For many are called, but few are chosen."*

There are several significant details in the first two invitations. All the parties involved are Jewish, and since the wedding is the king's son, it is expected that the invitations would certainly have included the Jewish leaders. Jesus (as in the two previous parables) uses the parable to reveal their rejection of Him and to forecast their future judgment. The parable begins with the king sending out his servants to invite guests to his son's wedding. A Jewish wedding is an elaborate affair, and to receive an invitation (especially from a king) was a great

⁵ See Prof. Eckman's notes on *The Ancient Jewish Wedding* for full discussion.

honor. The Jewish wedding was not just a ceremony, but a celebration that often continued for several days. The father not only arranged the marriage, but used the event to honor his son. It was an insult for an invited guest to refuse the invitation. Notice another important detail here: the “wife” (or “bride”) is not even mentioned. The preparation of the wife is a significant part of a Jewish marriage, but would not have played a role in this parable because of Jesus’ specific audience...

The second invitation is *even more* telling as it is not simply an invitation to come; the king adds a personal message that everything is now ready for the wedding banquet to begin. There is a sense of urgency in the king’s invitation, and he would no doubt view the indifference shown by the invitees as blatant disregard and disrespect. Some of the invitees went so far as to abuse the king’s servants and kill them. This murderous action required a reaction. The king sent his army and they destroyed the invitees who had dishonored the king and killed his servants.

The identity of the servants giving each invitation aids in understanding the meaning of the parable. The servants in the first invitation represent Israel’s (Old Testament) prophets that God sent to invite the Jews to come into His kingdom. But Israel in general, like those who received the first invitation in the parable, refused God’s message.

The identity of the servants in the second invitation is even more telling. They represent John the Baptist, Jesus, and His disciples. John preached that the kingdom of heaven is at hand (Matthew 3), and Jesus (Matthew 4) and His disciples (Matthew 10) preached that He was the Messiah King sent by God *to establish God’s kingdom on earth*. But like the invitees’ response to the king’s second message telling them the banquet is ready, the Jewish leaders “made light” of the preaching of John, Jesus, and His disciples. They killed them to silence their message, and thereby ended any hope that the current generation would bring in the kingdom. God, like the king in the parable, destroyed that generation of Jews forty years later.

There is a change in who is invited to the wedding (the 3rd invitation) in the second part of the parable. The king tells the servants to “go into the highways, and as many as you find, invite to the wedding.” The servants invite “both good and bad” to come to the king’s wedding. This invitation included both Jews and Gentiles (alluded to by “the highways,” which would lead to Gentile cities). God’s promise of a Jewish kingdom had to be delayed because of the Jewish leaders’ rejection of Jesus, and this opened the kingdom to all who believe in God’s Son. God, like the king in the parable, has made His preparations for His kingdom; all that remains is for people *to accept His invitation and come*.

The last detail relates to a man who came to the banquet, but did not wear the appropriate banquet clothing. Since many of the attendees came off the streets, the king gave everyone who attended the proper clothes to wear. When the king asked the ill-clad man why he was not wearing the banquet clothes (which the king would have provided), the man gave no excuse. So, the king commanded his servants to “cast him into outer darkness”⁶ as punishment for dishonoring the king. This parable teaches that God invites everyone into His kingdom, but everyone must enter appropriately (through the blood of the Lamb). Take a look at the martyrs we see in **Revelation 7:13-14**: *13 Then one of the elders answered, saying to me, “Who are these arrayed in white robes, and where did they come from?” 14 And I said to him, “Sir, you know.” So he said to me, “These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and*

⁶ This term, “outer darkness,” will be more fully discussed in a future lesson...

washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Properly clothed... Salvation is not determined by the invitation one receives, but by someone's response to the invitation. This is why Jesus closes the parable by saying "many are called, but few are chosen." Many *hear* the gospel (and may assume that they have a right to enter), but to be a part of God's kingdom one must *appropriate* (receive) what God provides, i.e. *people must believe in His Son who died to pay the penalty for sin* (John 1:12).

The Final Pieces of the Puzzle in this Trilogy of Parables

In this 3rd parable, Jesus' indictment of Israel's leaders could not be more clear! And while a variation of this parable is given in Luke 14:15-24, there is *much* less detail than we see here, and for good reason. Luke's version doesn't mention a wedding *at all*, while Matthew *focuses* the parable on the wedding. The many details that *only* Matthew gives us would have been very clear to his Jewish culture. We, however, often misunderstand Matthew's parable because of his use of "wedding". Let's take a look at the elements of Matthew's "Parable of the Marriage Supper":

- King = God the Father
- Marriage/Wedding = This is where the parable is often misunderstood. While the King plans a wedding, the Jewish wedding has *several* parts. "Inviting" many to a "dinner" makes the *part* of the wedding clear that Jesus is talking about: this is about the celebration which comes at the end of the wedding, *when the Groom and Bride return from their honeymoon*. The focus here is on *Israel and Messiah's feast* (Revelation 19), not the church...
- Son = Jesus, of course!
- Bride = We know from the rest of the New Testament: the bride would be the church. She is not in the parable, however, since the focus here is on Israel's response to the invitation.
- Servants = Old Testament prophets who called Israel to repent in order to see God's blessings.
- Those who were invited = Israel...
- Other servants = John the Baptist, Jesus and His disciples, who called the people to "prepare the way of the Lord".
- All whom they found = Both Jews and Gentiles who believed the message.
- Wedding Hall = The place where the Bride and Groom would celebrate with all their invited guests (Revelation 19) after their honeymoon (John 14). This was offered to Israel, but once the offer was rejected, it was postponed until Christ's return (with His bride) when He will celebrate His wedding feast as He establishes His Kingdom here on earth.
- Man without a wedding garment = Someone who assumed they had a right to enter the wedding feast, but didn't understand the "entry requirement". In this parable, this would point to Israel's leaders, who assumed they would have the right to enter the kingdom, but didn't believe Jesus was the Messiah, so failed to meet the single requirement to enter.
- Outer darkness = The wedding dinner was usually late in the evening, but if you weren't allowed in, you were outside, *in the dark*... In this case Hell, as a result of unbelief.

While this parable is very tightly tied to the 1st and 2nd parables, notice that there is a slight shift in one respect. In the first two parables, people are *called to fulfill their responsibility*; in this parable, people are *invited to participate*. In each case, people are given an opportunity to *appropriately respond* to God's request or invitation. All 3, therefore, also serve as an *indictment* of the Jewish leaders who *rejected* their Messiah's invitation to *believe in Him*.