

“Rejected For You”

*“The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone;
the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes” (Matthew 21:42)*

Rejection is one of life’s most painful experiences and it’s one that we can all understand. Some of us have had to face rejection in our professional lives; others of us have felt this pain in our relationships with friends or family but regardless of how and where it has made its way into our experience, the bitterness of rejection is not easily forgotten. Rejection is the clear and unmistakable message that you are an outsider; worthless, unwanted and unloved. At its root, the word “rejection” means “to throw back” or “to throw out” like something you would do with sewage or trash and, in today’s Gospel reading, Jesus tells a story of painful and violent rejection.

It’s important to know that this account from Matthew 21 took place during the final week of Jesus’ life. The Palm Sunday procession into Jerusalem had already occurred. Jesus had already overturned the tables of the money changers in the temple. In the previous chapter he had confronted the Jewish leaders head-on, promising that the “tax collectors and prostitutes” would enter the Kingdom of before they would. And now, as the Passover celebration drew near, Jesus is under surveillance and the eyes of the Jewish leaders are watching His every move.

The atmosphere couldn’t have been more intense and highly charged and, with the chief priests and Pharisees listening in, Jesus began His parable: “There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey” (Matthew 21:33). Now, when *we* hear the introduction to this parable we take it at face value, but you have to understand that when the Pharisees and chief priests heard these words their extensive knowledge of Scripture would have taken them straight to the language of today’s Old Testament reading which bears a striking similarity to Jesus’ parable. And, as their minds shifted to Isaiah chapter five, they suddenly found themselves in a section of Scripture where God brought harsh words of judgment on the leaders of the people; leaders of the people who had rejected God; leaders of the people who had shown themselves to be an unproductive vineyard; leaders of the people who were ultimately destroyed. In these words, Jesus established the context for His story with words of judgment against the leaders of the people and the chief priests and Pharisees knew exactly what He was saying.

Jesus continued, “When the harvest time approached, (the landowner) sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit. The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third” (Matthew 21:34-35). These acts alone would have been an outrage to His audience, but to further underscore the seriousness of His story Jesus went even further, “Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. Last of all, he sent his son to them. ‘They will respect my son,’ he said. But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, ‘This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him and take his inheritance.’ So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him” (Matthew 21:36-39).

After laying out the details of the dramatic story, Jesus then asked, “when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” Imagine the scene. As the crowds pressed in to listen and as the weight of the silence began to grow, the Pharisees and chief priests realized that they must provide an answer. So, with the crowds eagerly awaiting their “wisdom,” they mustered the only possible answer they could give: “He will bring those wretches to a wretched end...and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time” (Matthew 21:41). In their answer, the Pharisees and chief priests had unknowingly pronounced judgment on themselves and, Matthew tells us, their hatred of Jesus reaches a new and deadly level (Matthew 21:45-46).

In this pointed parable, Jesus delivered a harsh indictment of the Jewish leaders. In veiled language meant specifically for them, He told the Pharisees and chief priests who He was *and* who sent Him, and He predicted in detail the brutal rejection that He would face from them in a few short days.

As we read this parable, it’s clear to see that the Jewish leaders had rejected Jesus and, as we sit here today, it’s easy for us to be disgusted by their political pretense. But if that’s all we see in this parable then we are missing an

important point because Jesus tells this parable not only to accuse and unmask the Pharisees. No, in this story of rejection we see that like the Jewish leaders, we have also rejected the Son. We are like the Pharisees in so many ways. We say we want God's kingdom to come, but we want it to come on *our* terms. We say we want a savior, but secretly we want to save ourselves. The leaders in today's parable are *exactly* who we are. They were the church. They were people who knew better. They were people to whom God had been revealed; and yet they were more concerned about the sins of others, than the sinfulness of their own hearts – and so are we.

If we read this parable and come away only with the conviction that the world around us has rejected Jesus, then we've missed the point. You see, all of us have rejected the Son. All of us have turned our backs on His will for our lives. Every single one of us has denied the Lordship of Christ in our lives and the result of our rejection is that we are separated from God. The fact is that just like the Pharisees, we are naturally opposed to Christ. Paul writes that, on our own, we do not "have in mind the things of God" (I Corinthians 2:14) and the terrifying truth that we must come to terms with is that, just like the Pharisees, we have rejected the Son, and in doing so we have left ourselves to face a "wretched end."

The stern judgment assigned to the tenants in the parable is exactly what our sins deserve and an eternity in hell is absolutely what we have earned and there is nothing we can do to negotiate or work our way out of this ultimate predicament. We are in real and serious trouble. And when we understand this and when our options for saving ourselves have been exhausted and when we are finally broken to pieces by the reality of our situation...then and there the words of Christ bring life: "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes" (Matthew 21:42).

God sent His Son to save us knowing full well that He would be rejected – *that* is how much God loves us! Jesus set His divinity aside and willingly accepted His job as our Redeemer – *that* is how much He loves us! The Son submitted Himself to a life of rejection and endured a wretched end on the cross and He did it all so that we could have eternal life – *that* is how much He loves us! God didn't wait for us to "come around." He didn't wait for us to prove our worth or earn our reward. Jesus came to us at the height of our sin, He assumed the responsibility for our wrongs and He experienced the pain and bitterness of our rejection...but not only that. On the cross, with your sin and my sin, and sins of all the world loaded on His back, He experienced the rejection of God, and He did all of this for us – so that we could be forgiven – so that we could be accepted! *That* is how much we are loved by God!

The Son was rejected – rejected by the world and rejected by the Father – to "bring us to God" (I Peter 3:18). And Scripture tells us that the rejection of the Son is the "reconciliation of the world" (Romans 11:15). And this means that we are right with God. It means that we are accepted and, because we are accepted in Christ, it means that we can accept others. In Christ, there are no outsiders and in Christ no one is rejected or thrown back or thrown away.

The purpose of the Church – *our purpose* – is to proclaim to sinful people that because of the rejected Son, they are accepted! Because of Jesus they are forgiven! And in Christ life now and life forever is theirs. Paul writes, "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God" (Romans 15:7), and because of our acceptance in Christ, we have the power to accept others in ways that would have been impossible for us before. In His Word, God has given us the power to deliver the acceptance we have experienced in Christ. That is the goal of all that we do as a family of faith! As God's people in this place, we have the incredible privilege to share God's acceptance and that message changes lives!

The fruit of the vineyard is repentance. The fruit of the vineyard is faith in the promises of God. And the fruit of the vineyard is a life that reflects the acceptance of God in its acceptance of others. "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God." Amen.

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