

Historic Commentary

(18th Sunday after Pentecost - Year A)



The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on Matthew 21:33-46 from Selected Church Fathers and John Calvin

[Thomas Aquinas' curated commentary on Matthew 21](#), from a 13th century document called the [Catena Aurea](#) that contains compiled verse by verse commentary on the Gospels from the patristics and others.

[Chrysostom](#): This parable suggests many things: God's providence had been at work toward them from the outset; their disposition was murderous from the beginning; nothing had been neglected of whatever pertained to an attentive care for them, even when prophets had been slain, God had not turned away from this people but had sent them his very Son; it is now clear that the God of both the New and the Old Testaments is one and the same; we know that the Son's death will effect great blessings; we here learn that they were to endure extreme punishment for the crucifixion; here we learn of the calling of the Gentiles and the turning aside of the unbelieving Jews.

[Chrysostom](#): Observe the great care that the owner took with this place and the extraordinary recalcitrance of the people. He himself did the work the tenants should have done. It was he who planted a vineyard, and set a hedge around it, and dug a wine press in it and built a tower. He left little for them to do. All they had to do was take care of what was there and to preserve what was given to them. Nothing was left undone but all accomplished. But they made little effort to be productive, even after they had enjoyed such great blessings from him. For when they had come out of Egypt, he gave a law, and set up a city, and built a temple and prepared an altar. Then he "went into a far country." He was patient with them. He did not always keep a close account of their sins. The meaning of "going into a far country" is God's great patience.

[Chrysostom](#): What then do they do? While they had time to ask for pardon for their offenses and whereas they ought to have run to him to do so, they persist even more

strongly in their former sins. They proceed to add even more to their previous pollutions. They always surpass their former offenses by their later ones. This is what he himself declared when he said, "Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers." For from the first the prophets used to charge them with these things, saying, "Your hands are full of blood,"⁷ and "They mingle blood with blood," and "They build up Zion with blood." But they failed to learn self-control. They had already received the commandment: "You shall not murder." They had already had been commanded to abstain from countless other offenses. They had already been urged by many and various means to keep these commandments. Yet, for all that, they did not put aside their evil ways. What did they say when they saw him? "Come, let us kill him." With what motive and for what reason? What possible charge could they lay against him, either small or great? Is it that he honored you, and being God became a human being for your sakes and worked his countless miracles? Or that he pardoned your sins? Or that he called you into a kingdom? But observe that their disregard for bad was accompanied by great folly, and the cause of his murder was filled with madness. "For let us kill him," it says, "and the inheritance shall be ours." The

Epiphanius the Latin: The householder in this parable is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The vineyard he planted represents the Jewish people who were begotten from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, multiplied like the stars in the sky and the sand of the shore, liberated from the land of Egypt and the yoke of slavery, and led through the sea to the promised land, as the prophet said: "You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it." The Lord planted the Jewish people in the promised land, flowing with milk and honey, so that they would bear the fruit of the commandments of God. "He surrounded it with a hedge" means that God fortified it with the protection of angels. The wine press he dug signifies the holy church, where the fruits of righteousness and holiness are gathered; just as the grapes are pressed only with great toil and effort, so also the holy martyrs are crushed like grapes and shed their blood only through great persecutions and tortures. The tower constructed in the middle of the vineyard is our Lord himself, who appeared like a strong tower in the midst of the holy church through the Virgin. Because of his presence, all the saints and martyrs are protected with spiritual weapons from their most wicked enemy, who is the devil. "When harvest time drew near, he sent his servants," that is, the prophets, "to the tenants," who were the teachers of the law, "to collect the fruit of the vineyard." He had already sent the prophets to them repeatedly to collect his fruit, but they were disdainful and rebellious toward the Lord and greeted his prophets with swords, beatings, stonings and other persecutions. They killed Isaiah, stoned

Jeremiah, pursued Elijah and beheaded John the Baptist. Every nation that persecutes its teachers and fails to produce the fruit of the gospel is an accomplice to the Jews. “Finally, therefore, he sent his only son to them, saying, ‘surely they will respect my son.’” The “only son” of the householder is the Lord, the Son of God, who came by the will of the Father to his vineyard, which is the Jewish people. “But when the tenants,” who are the teachers of the law, “saw his son, they said to themselves, ‘this is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours,’ and they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.” They also crucified our Lord outside the city, while they shouted, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” Yet they did not in fact come to possess the inheritance of the law; instead, they sentenced themselves to death, for the Lord asked, “What will the owner of the vineyard do to the tenants when he comes?” They responded, “He will destroy the evil tenants and give the vineyard to other tenants who will produce its fruit in a timely manner.” They condemned themselves by their own words, as the Lord implies when he speaks about himself and their faithlessness: “The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; therefore, I say to you that the kingdom of God will be removed from you and given to a people producing its fruits.

Chrysostom: And where do they wish to kill him? “Outside the vineyard.” Do you see how he prophesies even the place where he was to be slain? Well, they did cast him out, and they killed him. And Luke indeed says, “He declared what they must suffer.” When they heard this, they said, “God forbid!” He then asks them to remember the testimony of Scripture: “He looked at them and said, ‘What then is this that is written: The very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner.’ Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces.” Matthew’s account does not contradict Luke’s. They passed the sentence against themselves, as Matthew says, and again, when they perceived what they had said, they added, “God forbid.” By the words of the prophet against them, he sought to persuade them that this certainly would come to pass. He signified only in a hidden way that he would “give the vineyard to others,” not mentioning the Gentiles and not affording his opponents a handle to use to attack him. It was for this reason that he spoke in parables, that they themselves might pass the sentence.

Jerome: Although [the chief priests and the Pharisees] were hard of heart and on account of their unbelief and wickedness blunted in their understanding against the Son of God, nevertheless they were unable to deny Jesus’ straightforward statements and understood that all the judgments of the Lord were directed against themselves. So they determined

indeed to kill him but feared “the crowd, for they considered Jesus to be a prophet.” A crowd is always easily moved, not persisting with their will in their resolution. Additionally they are like waves and opposite winds blown to and fro. The one they now honor and revere as a prophet they later shout against: “Crucify, crucify” such a man.

John Calvin: *Matthew 21:33. Hear another parable.*

The words of Luke are somewhat different; for he says that Christ spoke to the people, while here the discourse is addressed to the priests and scribes. But the solution is easy; for, though Christ spoke against them, he exposed their baseness in the presence of all the people. Mark says that Christ began to speak by parables, but leaves out what was first in order, as also in other passages he gives only a part of the whole. The substance of this parable is, that it is no new thing, if the priests and the other rulers of the Church wickedly endeavor to defraud God of his right; for long ago they practiced the same kind of robbery towards the prophets, and now they are ready to slay his Son; but they will not go unpunished, for God will arise to defend his right. The object is two-fold; first, to reproach the priests with base and wicked ingratitude; and, secondly, to remove the offense which would be occasioned by his approaching death. For, by means of a false title, they had gained such influence over simple persons and the ignorant multitude, that the religion of the Jews depended on their will and decision. Christ therefore forewarns the weak, and shows that, as so many prophets, one after another, had formerly been slain by the priests, no one ought to be distressed, if a similar instance were exhibited in his own person. But let us now examine it in detail.

A man planted a vineyard.

This comparison frequently occurs in Scripture. With respect to the present passage, Christ only means that, while God appoints pastors over his Church, he does not convey his right to others, but acts in the same manner as if a proprietor were to let a vineyard or field to a husbandman, who would labor in the cultivation of it, and make an annual return. As he complains by Isaiah (5:4) and Jeremiah, (2:21,) that he had received no fruit from the vine on the cultivation of which he had bestowed so much labor and expense; so in this passage he accuses the vine-dressers themselves, who, like base swindlers, appropriate to themselves the produce of the vineyard. Christ says that the vineyard was well furnished, and in excellent condition, when the husbandmen received it from the hands of the proprietor. By this statement he presents no slight aggravation of their crime; for the more generously he had acted toward them, the more detestable was their ingratitude.

Paul employs the same argument, when he wishes to exhort pastors to be diligent in the discharge of their duty, that they are stewards, chosen to govern the house of God, which is the pillar and round of truth, (1 Timothy 3:16.)

And properly; for the more honorable and illustrious their condition is, they lie under so much the deeper obligations to God, not to be indolent in their work. So much the more detestable (as we have already said) is the baseness of those who pour contempt on the great kindness of God, and on the great honor which they have already received from Him. God planted a vineyard, when, remembering his gratuitous adoption, he brought the people out of Egypt, separated them anew to be his inheritance, and called them to the hope of eternal salvation, promising to be their God and Father; for this is the planting of which Isaiah speaks, (60:21; 61:3.) By the wine-press and the tower are meant the aids which were added for strengthening the faith of the people in the doctrine of the Law, such as, sacrifices and other ritual observances; for God, like a careful and provident head of a family, has left no means untried for granting to his Church all necessary protection.

And let it to husbandmen.

God might indeed of himself, without the agency of men, preserve his Church in good order; but he takes men for his ministers, and makes use of their hands. Thus, of old, he appointed priests to be, as it were, cultivators of the vineyard. But the wonder is, that Christ compares the prophets to servants, who are sent, after the vintage, to demand the fruit; for we know that they too were vine-dressers, and that they held a charge in common with the priests. I reply, it was not necessary for Christ to be careful or exact in describing the resemblance or contrariety between those two orders. The priests were certainly appointed at first on the condition of thoroughly cultivating the Church by sound doctrine; but as they neglected the work assigned them, either through carelessness or ignorance, the prophets were sent as an extraordinary supply, to clear the vine from weeds, to lop off the superfluous wood, and in other ways to make up for the neglect of the priests; and, at the same time, severely to reprove the people, to raise up decayed piety, to awaken drowsy souls, and to bring back the worship of God and a new life. And what else was this than to demand the revenue which was due to God from his vineyard? All this Christ applies justly and truly to his purpose; for the regular and permanent government of his Church was not in the hands of the prophets, but was always held by the priests; just as if lazy husbandman, while he neglected cultivation, claimed the place to which he had been once appointed, under the plea of possession.

Vs 35. And wounded one, and killed another.

Here Mark and Luke differ a little from Matthew; for while Matthew mentions many servants, all of whom were ill-treated and insulted, and says that afterwards other servants were sent more numerous than the first, Mark and Luke mention but one at a time, as if the servants had been sent, not two or three together, but one after another. But though all the three Evangelists have the same object in view, namely, to show that the Jews will dare to act towards the Son in the same manner as they have repeatedly done towards the prophets, Matthew explains the matter more at large, namely, that God, by sending a multitude of prophets, contended with the malice of the priests. Hence it appears how obstinate their malice was, for the correction of which no remedies were of any avail.

Vs 37. They will reverence my son.

Strictly speaking, indeed, this thought does not apply to God; for He knew what would happen, and was not deceived by the expectation of a more agreeable result; but it is customary, especially in parables, to ascribe to Him human feelings. And yet this was not added without reason; for Christ intended to represent, as in a mirror, how deplorable their impiety was, of which it was too certain a proof, that they rose in diabolical rage against the Son of God, who had come to bring them back to a sound mind. As they had formerly, as far as lay in their power, driven God from his inheritance by the cruel murder of the prophets, so it was the crowning point of all their crimes to slay the Son, that they might reign, as in a house which wanted an heir. Certainly the chief reason why the priests raged against Christ was, that, they might not lose their tyranny, which might be said to be their prey; for he it is by whom God chooses to govern, and to whom He has given all authority. The Evangelists differ also a little in the conclusion. For Matthew relates that he drew from them the confession, by which they condemned themselves; while Mark says simply that Christ declared what punishment must await servants so unprincipled and wicked. Luke differs, at first sight, more openly, by saying that they turned away with horror from the punishment which Christ had threatened. But if we examine the meaning more closely, there is no contradiction; for, in regard to the punishment which such servants deserved, there can be no doubt that they agreed with Christ, but when they perceived that both the crime and the punishment were made to apply to themselves, they deprecated that application.

Vs 42. Have you never read in the Scriptures?

We must remember what we said a little before, that, as the priests and scribes kept the people devoted to them, it was a principle current among them, that they alone were competent to judge and decide as to the future redemption, so that no one ought to be received as Messiah, unless he were approved and sanctioned by their voice. They therefore maintain that what Christ had said is impossible, that they would slay the son and heir of the proprietor of the vineyard. But Christ confirms his statement by the testimony of Scripture, and the interrogation is emphatic, as if he had said, "You reckon it highly absurd to say that it is possible for the vine dressers to conspire wickedly against the Son of God. But what then? Did the Scripture (Psalm 118:22) foretell that he would be received with joy, and favor, and applause; or did it not, on the contrary, foretell that the rulers themselves would oppose him?" The passage which he quotes is taken from the same psalm from which had been taken that joyful exclamation, Save, O Lord. Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord. That it is a prediction of the reign of the Messiah is evident from this consideration, that David was appointed by God to be king, on the condition that his throne would remain forever, so long as the sun and moon would shine in heaven, and that, when decayed, it would again be restored by the favor of God to its former prosperity. Since, therefore, that psalm contains a description of the reign of David, there is also added the perpetuity of it, on which the restoration depends. If the discourse had related to any temporal reign, Christ would have acted improperly in applying it to himself. But we must also observe what sort of reign God raised up in the person of David. It was that which He would establish in the true Messiah to the end of the world; for that ancient anointing was but a shadow. Hence we infer that what was done in the person of David was a prelude and figure of Christ.

Let us now return to the words of the psalm. The scribes and priests reckoned it incredible that Christ should be rejected by the rulers of the Church. But he proves from the psalm, that he would be placed on his throne by the wonderful power of God, contrary to the will of men, and that this had already been shadowed out in David, whom, though rejected by the nobles, God took to give an instance and proof of what he would at length do in his Christ. The prophet takes the metaphor from buildings; for, since the Church is God's sanctuary, Christ, on whom it is founded, is justly called the corner stone; that is, the stone which supports the whole weight of the building. If one were to examine minutely every thing that relates to Christ, the comparison would not apply in every part; but it is

perfectly appropriate, for on him the salvation of the Church rests, and by him its condition is preserved. And therefore the other prophets followed the same form of expression, particularly Isaiah and Daniel. But Isaiah makes the closest allusion to this passage, when he represents God as thus speaking, Lo, I lay in Zion a foundation-stone, a precious and elect stone, against which both houses of Israel shall stumble! (Isaiah 28:16.) The same mode of expression frequently occurs in the New Testament.

The amount of it therefore is, that the kingdom of God will be founded on a stone, which the builders themselves will reject as unsuitable and useless; and the meaning is, that the Messiah, who is the foundation of the safety of the Church, will not be chosen by the ordinary suffrages of men, but that, when God shall miraculously raise him up by a secret and unknown power, the rulers, to whom has been committed the care of the building, will oppose and persecute him. There are two things here which we ought to consider. First, that we may not be perplexed by the wicked attempts of men, who rise up to hinder the reign of Christ, God has warned us beforehand that this will happen. Secondly, whatever may be the contrivances of men, God has at the same time declared, that in setting up the kingdom of Christ, His power will be victorious. Both ought to be carefully observed by us. It appears to be monstrous that the Author of salvation should be rejected, not by strangers, but by those who belonged to his own household, – not by the ignorant multitude, but by the rulers themselves, who hold the government of the Church. Against such strange madness of men our faith ought to be fortified, that it may not give way through the novelty of the occurrence. We now perceive how useful that prediction is, which relieves godly minds from the terror that would otherwise be produced by the mournful spectacle. For nothing is more unreasonable than that the members should rise up against the head, the vine-dressers against the proprietor, the counselors against their king, and that the builders should reject the foundation of the building.

That stone is made the head of the corner.

Still more emphatic is this clause, in which God declares that the wicked, by rejecting Christ, will avail nothing, but that his rank will remain unimpaired. The design of it is, that believers, relying on that promise, may safely look down with contempt and derision on the wicked pride of men; for when they have made all their contrivances, Christ will still, ill opposition to their wishes, retain the place which the Father has appointed to him.

This has been done by the Lord, As it is a matter too far removed from the ordinary judgment of men, that the pastors of the Church should themselves reject the Son of God from being their Prince, the prophet refers it to the secret purpose of God, which, though we cannot comprehend it by our senses, we ought to contemplate and admire. Let us therefore understand, that this cuts short every question, and that every man is expressly forbidden to judge and measure the nature of Christ's kingdom by the reason of the flesh; for what folly is it to wish to subject to the capacity of our mind a miracle which the prophet exhorts us to adore? Will you then receive nothing but what appears to yourself to be probable, in reference to the kingdom of Christ, the commencement of which the Holy Spirit declares to be a mystery worthy of the highest admiration, because it is concealed from the eyes of men? So then, whenever the question relates to the origin, restoration, condition, and the whole safety of the Church, we must not consult our senses, but must honor the power of God by admiring his hidden work. There is also an implied contrast between God and men; for not only are we commanded to embrace the wonderful method of governing the Church, because it is the work of God, but we are likewise withdrawn from a foolish reverence for men, which frequently obscures the glow of God; as if the prophet had said, that however magnificent may be the titles which men bear, it is wicked in any man to oppose them to God.

Vs 44. And he who shall fall on this stone.

Christ confirms more fully the former statement, that he suffers no loss or diminution when he is rejected by the wicked, because, though their obstinacy were like a stone or like iron, yet by his own hardness he will break them, and therefore he will be the more highly glorified in their destruction. He perceived in the Jews an astonishing obstinacy, and therefore it was necessary that this kind of punishment should be described to them in an alarming manner, that they might not flatter themselves, while they thus dashed against him. This doctrine partly instructs us to give ourselves up gently, with a mild and tractable heart, to the dominion of Christ, and partly fortifies us against the obstinacy and furious attacks of the wicked, for whom there awaits a dreadful end.

Those persons are said to fall upon Christ, who rush forward to destroy him; not that they occupy a more elevated position than he does, but because their madness carries them so far, that they endeavor to attack Christ as if he were below them. But Christ tells them that all that they will gain by it is, that by the very conflict they will be broken. But when

they have thus proudly exalted themselves, he tells them that another thing will happen, which is, that they will be bruised under the stone, against which they so insolently dashed themselves.

Vs 45. They knew that he spoke of them.

The Evangelists show how little success Christ had, that we may not wonder if the doctrine of the Gospel does not bring all men, in the present day, to yield obedience to God. Let us also learn that it is impossible but that the rage of ungodly men will be more and more inflamed by threatenings; for as God seals his word on our hearts, so also it is a hot iron to wound bad consciences, in consequence of which their ungodliness is the more inflamed. We ought therefore to pray that he would subdue us to voluntary fear, lest the mere knowledge of his vengeance should exasperate us the more. When they are restrained solely by the dread of the people from laying their hands on Christ, let us learn that God had laid a bridle on them; from which also arises a very delightful consolation to believers, when they learn that God protects them, and constantly enables them to escape from the jaws of death.