

September 28, 2008  
Pentecost 20

*"The Rock of Ages Never Changes"*

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### **MATTHEW 21:33-43**

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**L**isten to another 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. <sup>34</sup> When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit. <sup>35</sup> "The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. <sup>36</sup> Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. <sup>37</sup> Last of all, he sent his son to them. 'They will respect my son,' he said. <sup>38</sup> "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.' <sup>39</sup> So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. <sup>40</sup> "Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" <sup>41</sup> "He will bring those wretches to a wretched end," they replied, "and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time." <sup>42</sup> Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes'? <sup>43</sup> "Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.

C.S. Lewis was a great story teller. Take the much loved story of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*." What makes this story so appealing to children and adults? We see ourselves in the story. We can relate to poor Edmund whose love for Turkish delights leads him to do things he should have never done. We can relate to the problem of evil that exists in the land of Narnia just as it exists in our land today. We can relate to the peace and comfort and hope that came to the land of Narnia with the return of the majestic lion Aslan, because we have a greater hope in Jesus our Savior.

C.S. Lewis was a great story teller, but not as great as our Lord Jesus who loved to tell stories or parables about the kingdom of God that put you into the story. When Jesus told stories about the kingdom of God he transported people into a whole new world or realm of exist based on the love that he, the King of kings and Lord of lords, the loving Shepherd has for all lost sheep. He gave his life for us to guarantee personal and eternal love for us in this life and for all eternity.

The story of Jesus about the generous landowner and the nasty farmers launches us into a real world where people hate Jesus and hate the people who follow him and love him. Here is Jesus, the capstone of our salvation, the Rock of Ages, carefully chosen by our heavenly as the rock solid source of our salvation. As long as this world stands this solid Rock will never change, and there will always be people who reject him and people who build their lives on him.

**Some will violently reject Jesus**

What amazes us about this story Jesus told is the level of ingratitude and violence that it contains. We might be inclined to think that our world could never be this way, but it is. "There was a landowner who planted a vineyard." He not only planted the vineyard, he also put wall around it, dug a winepress and built a watch tower to protect it from wild animals and thieves. After spending all this money and effort to make a showcase vineyard, he rented the vineyard to some farmers. It was their responsibility to take care of the vineyard, and he would take a share of the grapes when they were harvested. I cannot imagine a nice vineyard like Bien Nacido offering someone an opportunity to live on the land, take care of the already growing grapes and then get half the profit.

Jesus was a good story teller who wanted the leaders of the Jewish people who were standing in the temple and listening to this story to think of how they were blessed. In Isaiah 5, which we just read to you a few minutes ago, the Lord described his beloved people as a vineyard that he carefully dug and cleared of stones and planted with the choicest vines. In Romans 9 the Apostle Paul said this of the Jewish people. "Theirs is the adoption of sons, theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised." These people did not appreciate the blessings the heavenly Father had provided for them, especially the gift of his Son, Jesus our Lord.

The story Jesus tells goes on. The time comes for the harvest. The grapes are ripe and hanging on the vines, ready to be crushed and made into wine. The owner of the vineyard sends his servants to collect the grapes that were owed him. Instead of gladly handing over half the grapes and keeping the other half for themselves, the farmers grabbed the servants, beat one, killed another, and stoned the third one.

The crowd gathered around Jesus is silent. You can almost hear a pin drop as they wait for Jesus to finish the story and describe how the landowner went after these nasty farmers and carried out swift vengeance and justice. That's not how Jesus told the story. Instead he told them how the landowner sends more servants, even more than the first time, and these were beaten, stone and put to death. Can't you hear the people gasping in horror at the story Jesus was telling? Where was the justice?

The story goes on. The people look at each other in amazement as Jesus tells them how the landowner sends his own son with the confidence these farmers would listen to the son. Listen to shudders of horror and the gasps from the crowd and the heads shaking in disgust as Jesus tells them how these nasty tenants, these farmers, these vineyard workers who had been given so much, took the son and put him to death as well. "This is the heir. Come let's kill and take his vineyard."

Then Jesus stops and does not finish the story. Instead he asks these people who were listening to him to finish the story for him. "Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to these tenants?" These people finished the story for Jesus. "He will bring those wretches to a wretched end ....and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the share of the crop at harvest time."

They killed the son. They killed the son. We can almost see the tears in Jesus' eyes as he

told this part of the story. These religious leaders in Jerusalem were upset at the farmers for killing the son, but they were not able to see how they would soon cry out for Jesus blood with words such as "Crucify him!" In the past the leaders of God's people had resisted the prophets who were sent to them. Think of poor Jeremiah being thrown into a muddy cistern to die. The religious leaders wanted to worship the Lord and worship Baal. They refused to repent and they stoned and killed the prophets who were sent to help them. When Jesus came, they hated his message that warned them of the judgment to come and called on them to repent of their sin. Here is what Jesus told them in Matthew 23, "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you are hypocrites. You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside, but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness."

As we hear this story from Jesus we realize how much he loved them. He wanted them to think about these words when he was hanging on the cross, and after he raised himself from the dead. He was speaking the truth to them in love just as we are encouraged to do in Ephesians 4 where it says, "Instead speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is Christ." Tough love involves telling people the truth about their lives and their lost condition with the hope and prayer that they will realize how helpless they are and turn to Jesus for help.

Now Jesus brings out the application as he asks the question, "Have you never read in the Scriptures; 'The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this and it is marvelous in our eyes.'" The story was powerful, but the application from the Old Testament is even more powerful. Jesus asks them if they had ever read the Scriptures about the stone that was rejected. These words about the stone being rejected were from Psalm 118. The people sang this psalm when they came to worship in the temple. If I start the words of a song or hymn, I think you can repeat them for me. "Amazing grace how sweet the sound..." Jesus loves me this I know, for ..." If I start a verse from Psalm 118 I know you can complete it, "O give thanks unto the Lord for he is good..." Or "This is the day the Lord has made, Let us...." The Jewish leaders knew exactly what Jesus was referring to when he said, "The stone the builders rejected..." He was accusing them of rejecting him, because with all his heart as the Shepherd who loves the lost sheep, he was reaching out to them.

The farmers in the vineyard were given so much, practically a free vineyard, a free place to live, and free grapes from the vine. All they had to do was share a portion with the landowner. This story of Jesus hits home with you and me today. The Jewish people at the time of Jesus had their advantages being God's chosen people and having the worship at the temple that pointed to Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. I think of how richly we have been blessed here this morning. Yes, I know that some of you probably lost some money in the stock market, or the value of the home has gone down, or maybe your job is not giving you enough money to meet all your bills. But think of how blessed we are with the food we have to eat, the homes we have in which to live, the friends and family we cherish. God forbid that we should ever be ungrateful as these farmers were to the owner of the vineyard. All of these blessings are small compared to the privilege you have of knowing Jesus, not as a Rock or stone that is to be rejected and hated, but a rock of salvation upon which you build your hope of eternal life.

## **Some will confidently build their lives on him**

I want to draw this sermon to a close this morning by having you think about this amazing description of Jesus as the capstone of our faith. "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone, the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes." The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone. When an arch is built the stones are carefully selected and put into place. The final stone that goes in the middle of the arch is called the capstone, or keystone of the arch. It needs to fit perfectly. The arch can stand without mortar, steel bolts, or secret crazy glue. Rocks are piled up to form an arch. They are held together by the weight of the arch, and the careful selection of each stone, especially the capstone.

Jesus was carefully chosen by our heavenly Father from all eternity to get the job done right. We cannot contribute anything to our salvation. We have accumulated a large debt of sin larger than any bankrupt bank. Our Father chose Jesus to do the job for us. No sin ever entered Jesus' life. The sacrifice on the cross was so astounding and so complete. The Father raised his Son back to life again to prove this acceptance. As the psalm says, "It is marvelous in our eyes." This Rock upon which we build our hope of eternal life was not carved by human hands. It was shaped and carved and chosen entirely by our heavenly Father. It enables us to say each day, "This is the day the Lord has made Let us rejoice and be glad in it." This is another day, another week to stand together with other Christians throughout the world on the Rock that never changes. Amen.