

# Tripping Over an Unimaginable Judgement

*A sermon on Matthew 21:33-46; Exodus 20:1-20 & Philippians 3:4b-14 by Nathan Nettleton, 8 October 2017*

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## Message

When we use the biblical law to reinforce a worldview of sin and punishment, we doom ourselves to live in a judgemental world, a world from which Jesus offers to break us free.

## Sermon

After a couple of weeks of intense and sometimes crazy conversation on social media, I was really hoping that tonight's Bible readings would give me absolutely no possible reason to say anything about the marriage equality debate. So I look up the readings, and what do we have? We have the Ten Commandments, and we have the Apostle Paul saying, "If anyone has any reason to boast about how righteous they are in the flesh, I can trump them all, but it's all a lot of rubbish." Actually, he says it's all a lot of crap, but people get a bit upset if you tell them that the Apostle used language like that. He did though. Quite often.

Of course, neither of those passages say anything directly about marriage equality, but they do have rather a lot to say about the way the debate is being conducted, and especially about the ways that many Christians are using the Bible in the debate. But I am getting sick of talking about it, so I want to follow my first instinct and run away from it a bit. I think by the end of the sermon it will probably catch up with me again and I'll end up saying something, but I'm not going to make it my focus. But where I do want to focus will probably still end up being important as we try to understand what is going on in this debate and why it is dividing Christians so bitterly.

I want to mainly focus on the third reading, the one from Matthew's gospel, but I am going to do so in light of what the other two might contribute to our understanding of it. The gospel reading is a continuation of the story we heard last week. It is part of Jesus's response to the question about his authority. If you heard what we said last week, you will remember that Jesus has just staged a grand prophetic symbolic action by closing down the Temple sacrificial system, overturning tables and kicking out the traders. And then the chief priests and the elders have come and asked him what authority he had to do this.

It is interesting to note that they don't ask him what he thought he was doing. While it may not be so obvious to us, the motive for his actions was perfectly obvious to them. We get fascinated by motives. The news reports about this week's horrific massacre in Las Vegas have focussed much more on the mysterious question of the gunman's motive than on the suffering caused or how to reduce the likelihood of it happening again. What was his motive?

But Jesus's motive was pretty clear at the time. He was symbolically proclaiming that the day had come when the Temple system would no longer be necessary and the people themselves would be the new Temple, just as was later described by the Apostle Peter when he described us as living stones being built into a spiritual temple (1 Peter 2:4-5). This idea was very well known in Jesus's day and his actions needed no explanation. Indeed the closing verse of the Hebrew Bible as it was arranged in those days spoke of this clearly and ended by saying "And there shall no longer be traders in the house of the Lord of hosts on that day." (Zechariah 14:21)

So the question was not “What do you think you’re doing?”, but “By what authority do you do these things?” And as we heard last week, Jesus asks them to first answer a question about what authority John the Baptist had. Was he a prophet from God, or a fake? And when they refuse to answer, he decides not to directly answer their question either, but to tell them some stories that will try to lead them into answering the question for themselves. We heard the first one last week, the story about the two sons, one of whom said yes to his father’s request to do some work, but never got around to it, and one who said no, but then changed his mind and did as he had been asked. It’s the easiest parable Jesus ever told, and there were no prizes for being able to answer that the one who did the work was the one who did what his father wanted, not the one who made agreeable noises but did nothing.

So then Jesus moves on to a much more complex and indeed risky parable, the one we heard tonight, about the landowner who built a state-of-the-art vineyard and winery, and then left it in the hands of tenant-farmers while he travelled the world. Vineyard parables were hardly obscure and mysterious to his hearers. Numerous times in the writings of the Hebrew prophets, a carefully tended vineyard has been used as a metaphor for the people of God. In the prophets, and especially in Isaiah, the message was that God had carefully tended the vineyard, the people of God, but instead of producing good grapes, they had produced a harvest of feral grapes, complete rubbish. Complete crap, Paul would say.

But Jesus takes the familiar image, and gives it a new twist. Now, it is not the grapes that have gone bad; it is the tenant farmers who were given oversight of the vineyard that are the problem. When the owner sends his messengers to collect the rent, the tenants beat them up. People get hurt. Someone gets killed. The owner tries again, and the situation gets worse. More violence. More death.

The third time, the owner sends his own son, believing that the tenants will respect his son, but the tenants say to themselves, “This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.” And they do. Now this is not quite as stupid as it might sound. They could quite reasonably assume that the reason the son turned up, and not the old man, was that the old man had died and that the son was indeed the heir, having inherited the property. If that had been the case, they could have reasonably assumed that secretly knocking him off would mean that ownership of the vineyard would revert to them, possession being nine tenths of the law and all.

Next comes the most important bit. Matthew tells it a bit differently to the other gospel writers. Rather than finish the story himself, Matthew has Jesus turn to his listeners and ask them to finish the story. What do you think happens next? What will the owner of the vineyard do now? And like Paul, Matthew doesn’t shy away from a bit of strong language when he records their answer, a literal translation of which would be something like, “He will put those bastards to a bastardly death.”

Now I think what Matthew does in taking these words out of the mouth of Jesus and putting them in the mouths of the priests is very important. It is not a contradiction of the other gospels, but it adds emphasis to something that I think all of them intend us to understand. The conclusion to this story – the bastards being put to a horrible death – is not intended to be heard as Jesus telling us how things are in the culture of God. It is intended to be heard as how most people, and the priests and elders in particular, think things are. Jesus is telling a story that illuminates the way they think, precisely so that he can challenge that thinking. He

is saying, “You have heard it said, in fact you think it yourselves, that God is like this and that God’s judgement is like this, but I say unto you ...”

Let me digress to our other readings to underline his point before coming back to the earth shattering alternative that Jesus is pointing to.

The Apostle Paul, when he talks about how he was the pin-up boy for rigorous and zealous obedience to the religious law, is reflecting on the implications of this same world view that informs the answer from the priests and elders. When it comes to measuring one’s own righteousness by the measuring stick of the biblical law, and the ten commandments were seen as the heart of that law, I was the absolute world champion, says Paul. But where did it get me? Just mired in crap. It had turned him into a hostile terrorising crusader, so blinded by his zeal that he was murdering innocent people in the name of God right up until the moment when the risen Jesus knocked him off his horse and showed him what he had become.

And great slabs of Paul’s later letters are taken up with showing how a zealous passion for the biblical law tends to do that to any of us. None of us are immune. I’ve had a number of social media correspondents in the last couple of weeks quoting numerous biblical laws and telling me that I am a purveyor of unrighteousness, and that as a fallen leader I am dancing you lot into the fires of hell where I, being responsible, will be judged most harshly. And while it might be comforting to me to latch onto Paul’s words and point out that he seemed to regard such claims of righteousness as a lot of self-serving crap, if I’m honest, I’ve had my moments of frustration where I’ve wished that God would knock them off their high horses and deal out a bit of harsh judgement too. I’m far from immune to such thinking.

But what Paul is saying, and what Jesus is pointing out to the priests and elders, is that harsh judgement is not God’s doing, it is ours. When we construct a world built on rigid law-keeping and strict measures of righteousness, and harsh mandatory sentencing for offenders, we doom ourselves to live in that world and we will find ourselves judged by that world. It is not God who demands that those bastards be put to a bastardly death, it is us. And when we demand that, we hand ourselves over to be judged by the world we have constructed. This is like the USA demanding a world in which everyone is free to carry guns to defend their freedom, and then having to live in the hellfire that erupts when the sparks of paranoid defensiveness ignite.

This is not God sending anyone to the fires of hell. It is us lighting the fires of hell and then failing to outrun them. It is not that God banishes us from heaven for this. It is that we refuse to enter because we are still demanding a world where those we despise get what they deserve, and the unconditional forgiveness of heaven offends us and scandalises us and sends us fleeing angrily in the opposite direction.

The biblical law is an important part of the unfolding revelation of God’s love and mercy, but if you demand that it be applied as a means of condemnation and judgement against those whose lifestyle or attitudes or behaviour you despise and reject, you will inevitably find that it is only a matter of time before you find that same code of law condemning you, perhaps for your self-righteousness and judgementalism. It has certainly pointed that accusing finger at me this past week.

But back to Jesus. Jesus is not applauding their answer about the owner putting the bastards to a bastardly death. You might think that God is like that, he implies, but you just wait and see what God actually does.

Because what does God actually do when he sends the son, hoping that we will respect the son, but we rise up and kill him instead? Does God put us all to a bastardly death? If the rest of the gospel answer to that question was told as a continuation of this story, it would probably go something like this:

Three days after they had dragged the son out of the vineyard, killed him and secretly buried his body, the owner turned up at the gates of the vineyard, but not with an army or a contingent of heavily armed police. No, it was more horrifying than that. The owner turned up with his murdered son. The son was still obviously fatally wounded, deep wounds still bleeding. There was no way he wasn't dead. But he was simultaneously more alive than ever.

But far from breathing the fire of vengeance, the owner and his murdered son arrive smiling warmly and extending their hands in friendship, affection even. And the owner announces that it had been his plan all along to make the tenants joint heirs with the son, and that their murdering of the son hadn't changed his plans at all. He was here to reconcile the murderous tenants to their murdered victim, and to promote them to joint owners of the vineyard with him. Not because it made any sense under any literal reading of the law, nor because there were any mitigating circumstances that allowed them to be seen as deserving of this inheritance, but simply because the owner's outrageous love and mercy could not be extinguished, even by their violent greed and hatred.

Such a bizarre view of God scandalised the priests and elders, exactly as Jesus said it would. That's what his saying about the rejected stone becoming the foundation stone is all about. And that same rejected stone, that same bizarre view of God, continues to be a stumbling block that trips most of us up today. Whichever side we might be on in the current angry debates over what constitutes righteousness and love and equality, if we fall over this stone and demand the continuation of a world in which those who have attacked us and condemned us and spoken evil of us, or even just got it wrong, get what they deserve, we will find ourselves flat on our faces in the hostile judgmental world we have created, trapped beneath the crushing weight of endless condemnation that we thought we wanted.

My friends, the owner and the murdered son are at the door. They are coming in to spread this table and invite us all to feast with them in celebration of a new world in which all of us are set free from that cycle of condemnation and reconciled to one another around this table. It is so outrageous and so contrary to everything that instinctively wells up within us that all of us will continue to stumble, just as I have a few times this week. But the owner and the murdered son still stand here, reaching out to us with wounded hands and broad smiles, inviting us to get up off our faces and know ourselves beloved and taste the first fruits of a new culture of unimaginable love and mercy and life.