

October 4, 2020

“God’s Jiu jitsu”

Matthew 21:33-46

**Intro.** There are many lessons to be learned from sports including the martial arts. In martial arts, strength and discipline are used for self-defense.(1) Brazilian Jiu jitsu is an interesting discipline that turns the realities and expectations of a confrontation onto its head. It is an art built around allowing smaller and weaker individuals to overcome larger and more aggressive opponents through the use of proper techniques, misdirection, and leverage. The art teaches you that in order to accomplish this feat you must not do what comes naturally (usually physically resisting strength with strength) but instead using your opponent’s natural tendencies against them.

**Bible passage.** In today’s Bible passage there is tension and Jesus is at the epicenter. The authorities have demanded to know “by what authority” Jesus is performing miracles and teaching about the kingdom of God, hoping to draw him into public blasphemy. (2) Jesus sidesteps the snare with some counter-snares of his own, including three parables — and this week’s reading is the second of those parabolic traps. Why, to what end Jesus is sharing these parables?

Well, in this tale, Jesus asks the temple authorities, “Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” Their answer, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death and lease the vineyard to other tenants”.

Hearing all of this, the temple authorities rightly perceive that Jesus is “speaking about them” and they set out to find a way to arrest him without provoking the crowds who regard him as a prophet. Note the intense irony here: Jesus tells the authorities a parable critiquing greed and

violence and they pronounce judgment on the parable's protagonists. Then, realizing that the parable is actually about them, they set out to arrest and ultimately to kill Jesus.

Boom! Jesus is practicing here a moral Jiu-Jitsu, using his opponent's strength against them!

A Bible commentary states that *This kind of ploy is designed to overcome our tendency to make excuses and exceptions for ourselves, even as we hold others to higher standards. We're lured into judging someone else, only to discover — lo and behold! — that we ourselves are the ones we have judged. It's a powerful form of accountability: being taken to task not by someone else's sense of right and wrong, but by our own.*

### **Theological Reflection.**

(3) As Christians we must confess that many times we have fallen into this trap! For instance, over the centuries, Christians have interpreted this passage with the abhorrent idea that Christians have superseded and replaced Jews as inheritors of God's covenant and salvation sometimes to the point of justifying Christian violence against Jews. This is a grotesque distortion of the parable —and also a pathetic example of falling into the very sin the parable warns against!

**Takeaway:** Is this call to repentance for Jews and not for Christians? By no means! There is nothing in this story that exempts anyone. On the contrary, the prophetic "line" drawn here is not between Jews and Christians, or between Jesus-followers and non-Jesus-followers, (4) but rather between those who "bear fruit" or "produce the fruit of the kingdom" and those who do not.

Indeed, from this point of view, one of the most remarkable things about this passage is that Jesus does not draw the line in terms of "religious affiliation." On the contrary, like the prophets before him, he draws the line in terms of action. God's demand is that we act in ways that bear the fruit of justice, mercy, humility, and so on. God's graceful mercy always has the final word.

Dear church, if in the midst of these unprecedented times, we have fallen into the error of blaming others, if we consider that there will always be people to blame, if we have seen guilt in others, it is time to consider what role we are playing in all of this reality.

The hope and grace that comes from God is for everyone! Jesus is looking for the righteous to bear fruit, to walk with him in God's mission to transform the world, to fight for righteousness, and spread peace and joy to this troubled world. Amen!