

THE PARABLE OF THE TENANTS

Mark 11:27-12:12

Key Verse: 12:1

He then began to speak to them in parables: "A man planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a pit for the winepress and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey."

Today's scripture is called the parable of the tenants. This parable teaches us about the basic relationship between God the Creator and all mankind. It tells us how God has endowed us with many resources and he wants us to be fruitful in this world. May God plant his word of truth in our hearts!

I. "WHO GAVE YOU AUTHORITY?" (11:27-33)

The author Mark tells us what had happened before Jesus told the parable of the tenants so that we can understand it in a proper context. After entering the city of Jerusalem, Jesus spent his time in the temple, teaching the people about the purpose of God for them. He reminded them that the temple should be a house of prayer for all nations (11:17). Jesus knew that on that very week he would be arrested, tortured, and crucified for the sins of the world. But he didn't think much about himself. He took care of God's sheep to the end. He taught them the word of God. This is an image of the Good Shepherd Jesus we should remember.

The religious leaders, on the other hand, had only political agenda on their minds. They were supposed to be the shepherds for his people, but were not interested in taking care of their sheep. Luke 19:47-48 contrasts Jesus and the Jewish leaders during the Passion Week in this way: "Every day he was teaching at the temple. But the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the leaders among the people were trying to kill him. Yet they could not find any way to do it, because all the people hung on his words." The Jewish leaders were supposed to set a good example for the chosen people of God. They were supposed to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. But they had turned the temple into "a den of robbers." When they saw Jesus cleansing the house of God, they should have repented their materialistic desires. But they were upset because they lost the lucrative source of income and because their authority was undermined by the country preacher. They came to Jesus and asked him, "By what authority are you doing these things? And who gave you authority to do this?" (28) They accused Jesus for clearing the temple without a license.

How did Jesus help them? Jesus said, "I will ask you one question. Answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John's baptism—was it from heaven, or from men? Tell me!" (29-30) The chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders turned around and discussed how to answer his question. They reasoned: "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will ask, 'Then why didn't you believe him?' But if we say, 'From men'.... (They feared the people, for everyone held that John really was a prophet)" (31-32). So they answered, "We don't know." As usual, they were not interested in the truth. They

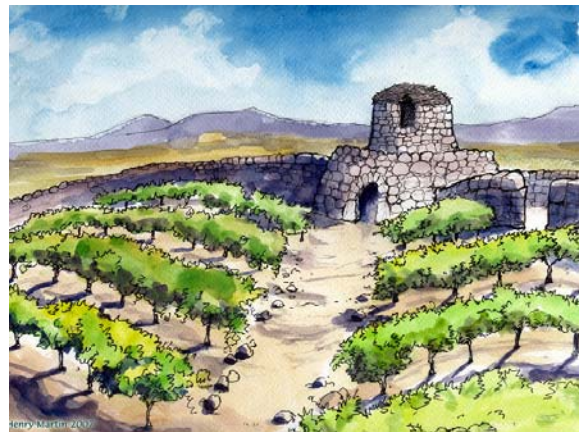
calculated the political impact of their possible answers and decided to say, “No comment.” Jesus said, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things” (33). The Jewish leaders knew that John was doing the work of God. They should also acknowledge the work of God Jesus was doing. But they hardened their hearts and suppressed the truth. They were just like some politicians today. (“Senator, you are charged with accepting a bribe. Did you do it?” “I don’t know. I don’t recall.”)

II. THE PARABLE OF THE VINEYARD (12:1-9)

Look at verse 1. *He then began to speak to them in parables: “A man planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a pit for the winepress and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey.”* Jesus told this parable to the Jewish leaders who had questioned his authority to cleanse the temple and to teach the truth of God. They had abandoned the purpose of God for them to be a shepherd nation for all people of the world. Now they were plotting to kill Jesus because they were jealous of him. It was in this context Jesus told them the parable.

This parable begins with a poetic description of the Creator God and his people Israel. In the parable, the owner of the vineyard is God, and the tenants his people Israel. Broadly speaking, God created this world, the vineyard, for all mankind. The parable teaches us that God made everything for us as an expression of his great love for us.

The last part of verse 1 says: *Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey.* He “rented” the vineyard to the farmers. This tells us that God is the Creator and Owner of this world. God made a beautiful vineyard and gave it to his people. He took a great care in preparing the vineyard. He did not just plant a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a pit for the winepress and built a watchtower. He created a good environment in which they could be fruitful. Then he went away on a journey, giving them the autonomy to manage the vineyard with freedom and creativity. Not only did God provide all necessary things for his people, he also gave them all the privileges to manage his world.



Our God is different from the worldly landlords of rental properties whose sole purpose is to generate rental income. Landlords are annoyed if we call them in the middle of the night because of a plumbing problem or a broken washing machine. But our God is different. He is like a father who provides everything for his child and has a dream for him or her to live a life of bearing good fruits. In his great love, God gave all the privileges to manage God’s vineyard freely so that they might produce good fruits. God entrusted his vineyard to his people because he loved them dearly. The privilege of using what God has made is indeed a wonderful grace. We should not misuse this privilege or take it for granted. God has given us the gift of life. He has endowed us with many resources. Our life

is not ours. The world is not ours. The resources belong to God. He appointed us as the stewards of our life and the world. As such, we should work hard to fulfill God's purpose. We should be thankful to God for his grace.

Look at verses 2. *At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants to collect from them some of the fruit of the vineyard.* This verse teaches us that we have a fruit-bearing relationship with God. We must understand God's desire to collect some fruit from his people. God is the owner of everything we have, including our lives. So we must bring our offerings to God as an expression of our love for him. For example, the Bible teaches us to offer to God 10 percent of what we earn. But bearing fruit for God is more than just bring some of our material gains to him. In the Bible, the word "fruit" has spiritual connotation. To bear fruit means to grow in the image of God. Galatians 5:22-23 says: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." God wants his children to bear spiritual fruit in him. God wanted the nation Israel to bear spiritual fruits by becoming a kingdom of priest (Ex 19:6). God wanted his people to become a shepherd nation to take care of all peoples of the all nations with the word of God.

Look at verse 3. *But they seized him, beat him and sent him away empty-handed.* The response of the farmers to the owner's love is shocking. But it illustrates how mankind abandoned God the Creator. The farmers in the parable first worked hard and they had bountiful harvest. They were happy and thankful. But then they took the owner's vineyard for granted. They became greedy. Soon Satan led them to doubt God's love in their hearts. They began to abuse the privileges that God had given them. They became godless. James 1:15 explains this well. It says, "Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death." In this way, the beautiful relationship between God and his people was cut off.

Despite the tenants' terrible deeds, their Master still loved them. Look at verses 4-5. *Then he sent another servant to them; they struck this man on the head and treated him shamefully. He sent still another, and that one they killed. He sent many others; some of them they beat, others they killed.* This is an account of Israel's history. God was mindful of their spiritual conditions and sent many prophets to teach them his ways and to warn them the consequences of their evil behavior. But they became extremely evil. They repaid God's mercy with their contempt and violence. A worldly landlord would certainly evict them from the vineyard and have them thrown into prison. They deserved such punishment. But our God is different. Look at verse 6. *He had one left to send, a son, whom he loved. He sent him last of all, saying, "They will respect my son."* The owner sent his only son, whom he loved, saying, "They will respect my son." The owner had amazing kindness, tolerance, and love toward the tenants (Ro 2:4).

But what was their response to the owner's love? Look at verses 7-8. *But the tenants said to one another, "This is the heir. Come, let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours." So they took him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard.* The farmers had an illusion that if they killed the owner's son and threw him away, the vineyard would become their own possession. They became very foolish in their thinking and killed the owner's son. What happened to them as a result of their foolish thinking? Verse 9 says:

“What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others. They did not take over the vineyard. Instead, they ended up with nothing. They lost all the privileges that God had given them. Their glorious mission was taken from them and given to others.

Now a good question for us to ask here is “How could they become so evil?” And we should also ask, “Could this happen to us?” Let’s think about how they became so evil.

First, they were ungrateful. They took God’s blessings for granted. Instead of thanking God for all the things he provided for them, they tried to find something to complain about. How about us? Do we have a thankful heart toward God who provided all things for us? We don’t live in the Garden of Eden, the paradise God created. Still, we see God’s fingerprints in this beautiful Cumberland Valley. We see beautiful flowers in spring. We enjoy the green trees and meadows in summer. We see beautiful leaves falling in autumn. And how about the beautiful snow in winter? So do we stop to look at the clear blue sky and say, “Thank you, God, for letting me live in this beautiful world! Thank you for the gift of my life! Help me to live a life that bears much fruit in you!” Personally, God also have given us various resources as his blessings. Those who are smart should say, “Thank you, Lord, for the intellectual mind. Help me to use it to expand your kingdom!” Those who have good jobs should say, “Thank you for blessing me, Lord. Help me to use this job to bear spiritual fruit in you!” Those who have good looks should say, “Thank you, God, for making me gorgeous. Help me to use my good looks to invite people to Christ!” If we fail to thank God for his blessings, worse yet, if we use our God-given resources only for our selfish desires, we are no different from the tenants in the parable.

It is very important for us to learn to thank God in all circumstances (1Th 5:16-18). Why does God want us to be thankful in all circumstances? Actually this is for us more than for him. God knows that a thankful heart is essential for our happiness. We cannot be truly happy if we take God’s blessings for granted and complaint all the time.

Second, they were proud. They abandoned God and ignored his words. They thought that they would be happy if they abandoned God. This is what many people say today. They say we are fine without God. But when they strayed from God, they thinking became futile (Ro 1:21-23). They became foolish. Pride is one of the original sins in the Garden of Eden. Almost everyone commits this sin whether one realizes or not. Let us examine ourselves so that we don’t become like the tenants here because of our pride.

Third, they were greedy. They did not want to give even 10 percent of what they earned from the vineyard. Then their greed grew bigger. They wanted the whole vineyard for themselves. But in the end they ended up with nothing. There is a short story written by Leo Tolstoy called “How much land does a man need?” A man was given the opportunity to take a possession of the land as much as he could claim by walking around it in one day. He tried to walk as far as he could, farther than anyone else could, to claim as much land as he could. He indeed walked very far, beyond his body could endure and in the end he had a heart attack and died. He was too greedy. Tolstoy ends his story with a sarcastic remark: “Six feet from his head to his heels was all he needed.” God expects fruit from our lives. Again, this is for us more than for God. God does not need anything from us. He is

already rich. He owns the universe. God wants us to give some of the fruit to him so that we may not be controlled by our desire for money, but be free to give to God and to others.

Fourth, they ignored God's mission for them. This parable is a history lesson for us. God had chosen the Israelites to be his own people to bless them with his mission. He showered them with many blessings and commissioned them to be a kingdom of priests and holy nation (Ex 19:6). He entrusted them with the words of God (Ro 3:2) so that Jerusalem could be the world mission center for his redemptive work (Isa 2:2; Mic 4:1-2). The mission from God was the best privilege for them. Once again, this is for us as much as for God's work. God wants us to have mission for our own sake. Without mission, we tend to live only for ourselves, our desires, our pleasures, whatever we want, ... ignoring what God wants us to do. This is what happened to the tenants in the parable. They only enjoyed God's blessings and abandoned his mission. We learn that we should learn to thank God for his blessings and humbly fulfill the purpose of God for our lives. May God help us to be fruitful in Christ!

III. THE REJECTED STONE (10-12)

Look at verse 10-11. *Haven't you read this scripture: "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes"?* This teaches us that God is indeed the sovereign Ruler of history.

First, Jesus has become the capstone. As told in the parable of the tenants, God had a wonderful purpose for his people. They had turned their backs to him in their history. Still God sent his one and only Son Jesus to them as the Messiah. But his own people rejected him, beat him and killed him. In human eyes, God's plan to use Israel as a kingdom of priests for world mission appeared to have failed when the Jewish leaders (builders) rejected the stone (Jesus). But God never fails. He made Jesus, the rejected stone, the capstone for his world redemptive work. It is indeed marvelous in our eyes. This quotation of Jesus from Psalm 118:22-23 has been a source of encouragement for many Christians throughout history. Once, in the early Christian days, the Jewish religious leaders came to threaten God's servants who were boldly proclaiming the gospel of Jesus. Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, *He is "the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone"* (Ac 4:1). He meant, "You crucified Jesus of Nazareth, but God raised him from the dead and made him the capstone, the sovereign Ruler of history."

Second, we are small living stones. The life of faith of the early Christians was holy before God. Their holy life became a stumbling stone to the hypocritical Jewish leaders and a direct challenge to the immoral Roman people. Finally, Christians were branded as traitors by their own people, and equally despised by the Roman authorities. They were treated like criminals because they lived a holy life. We also live in an unbelieving society. When we try to live a holy life in God, we face subtle but unmistakable pressure from the unbelieving society. We feel we are like rejected stones in construction sites. Sometime we despair, because we cannot fit in. We despair even more when the work of God seems to be too weak. But we must look at Jesus. He was rejected and abandoned by the Jewish leaders, but God made him the capstone. When Jesus was crucified, his ministry with the twelve disciples seemed to have been ended, and the salvation work of God failed. But this

was not the case. God raised Jesus from the dead. God made Jesus the capstone, the sovereign Ruler over human history. St. Peter, who personally experienced this truth, encourages us in 1 Peter 2:4-5: "As you come to him, the living Stone--rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him--you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."

As we look at the world, Satan and his agents seem to become stronger and more vociferous. Materialism and hedonism seem to take over the hearts and minds of people in our society. The redemptive work of God seems to have lost a momentum. But not so. Just as God made the rejected stone the capstone, he accomplishes the work of salvation according to his own time schedule. He gives final victory to the righteous who struggle to live by faith in him.

Like Peter, we must exclaim, "... the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes." (11) Like Peter, we must have a clear view that Jesus is the cornerstone of God's history. Jesus was crucified on the cross by the godless men, but God raised him from the dead and made him the King and Judge for the living and the dead. And he will come again just as the owner of the vineyard will return from his journey.

In this passage, we learn that God is the owner of the vineyard and we are his stewards. God provided all good things for us to be fruitful in his vineyard. God wants us to bear abundant spiritual fruits in our lives. May God help us to realize the hope of God for each one of us!