

69 Mark 12:1-12

God & His People

Text

And he began to speak to them in parables. “A man planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a pit for the winepress and built a tower, and leased it to tenants and went into another country. 2 When the season came, he sent a servant to the tenants to get from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. 3 And they took him and beat him and sent him away empty-handed. 4 Again he sent to them another servant, and they struck him on the head and treated him shamefully. 5 And he sent another, and him they killed. And so with many others: some they beat, and some they killed. 6 He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ 7 But those tenants said to one another, ‘This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.’ 8 And they took him and killed him and threw him out of the vineyard. 9 What will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others. 10 Have you not read this Scripture: “‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; 11 this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes’?” 12 And they were seeking to arrest him but feared the people, for they perceived that he had told the parable against them. So they left him and went away.

God's Past Dealings With Israel's Leaders

And he began to speak to them in parables.

"Them" is most likely a reference to the representatives of the Sanhedrin from the previous story. He is speaking to them in parables which were of greater use for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear. If you have shut yourself off to the person of Jesus Christ, then you have just rejected the key to the interpretation of parables. We see at the end that they perceived that he spoke the parable against them, and they are right. But their understanding is very dim. It is doubtful they could discern much else besides a vague notion that he was speaking against them.

“A man planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a pit for the winepress and built a tower, and leased it to tenants and went into another country. 2 When the season came, he sent a servant to the tenants to get from them some of the fruit of the vineyard.

The imagery should be familiar enough to the 1st century Jew. There are many references in the OT to vineyards. Like the fig tree, the vineyard is often used in reference to Israel. The closest parallel in the OT, and likely what Jesus had in mind, is found in Isaiah 5. This morning's parable is a re-telling of Isaiah 5.

Isaiah 5 Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard:
My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. 2 He dug it and cleared it of stones,
and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out
a wine vat in it; and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.
3 And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my
vineyard. 4 What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it?
When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?
5 And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it
shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. 6 I will
make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and briars and thorns shall grow up; I
will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.
7 For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are
his pleasant planting; and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for
righteousness, but behold, an outcry!

The basic elements are, that God established it, and God provided everything necessary for it to flourish. There was every reason to expect good fruit, but none came. Consequently, destruction is the just dessert.

God planted a vineyard. This was God's free and gracious choice. It is God's work. Was Israel greater than all the nations that God chose it? No. Israel did not plant herself, God planted her. Abraham did not call himself, nor was it through Abraham's efforts that the child of the promise came. It was not Israel who delivered herself from slavery in Egypt, it was God. It was God who brought them into the promised land. It was God who caused the walls of Jericho to fall, who caused the Midianites to turn on one another, who brought the storm that mired Sisera's chariots of iron. God planted the vineyard.

God put a fence around it and dug a pit for the wine press and built a tower. He provided security. The wall was to keep the animals out, and the watchtower was to keep an eye on potential dangers that the wall may not have entirely stopped. God established Israel in the promised land, and he gave them peace in the days of David and Solomon. Israel was the envy of the nations. She controlled the major trade routes and enjoyed a massive part of the fertile crescent.

3 And they took him and beat him and sent him away empty-handed.

If the owner seeks his proper share at the proper time according to the agreement and they refuse him, he has every right to take the vineyard away.

The owner of the vineyard has every right to come and take the vineyard away from these wicked tenants. It belonged to him and they were in breach of contract. But for them to attack his servant was reprehensible! For a society that placed a certain value in honor, this was a slap in the face, literally and figuratively, to his right to rule his land. This would have typically begotten a swift retaliation for this kind of treatment.

But what does the owner do? Does he march down with his strong men and drive these wicked tenants out? Does he beat them down as they flee? No. Does he take it away from them? No. He does not even renegotiate the terms of their keeping the vineyard.

4 Again he sent to them another servant, and they struck him on the head and treated him shamefully.

He gives them a second chance to do what is right. Perhaps they acted rashly and have come to regret their actions. So with zero punishment he simply sends another servant to ask for the owners share of the fruit. But they beat him again and treat him shamefully! Surely now he will come and take vengeance on them.

God's Current Dealings With Israel's Leaders

5 And he sent another, and him they killed. And so with many others: some they beat, and some they killed.

Against all expectations he sends another servant. And another and another and another. But these wicked tenants beat them all, and some of them they even killed.

In Isaiah the focus was on Israel, the vineyard proper, but Jesus focuses on the leaders of Israel. These are clearly the tenants in the parable. The owner sought fruit from the vineyard, but received none. Why? What possible reason could be given for the lack of fruitfulness? Corrupt leadership is the answer. Although the tenants are not explicit in Isaiah's prophecy, they are implied. A tower is of no use without someone in the tower keeping watch. The leaders of Israel have often been a source of iniquity.

Isaiah 56:10-12 His watchmen are blind; they are all without knowledge; they are all silent dogs; they cannot bark, dreaming, lying down, loving to slumber. 11 The dogs have a mighty appetite; they never have enough. But they are shepherds who have no understanding; they have all turned to their own way, each to his own gain, one and all. 12 "Come," they say, "let me get wine; let us fill ourselves with strong drink; and tomorrow will be like this day, great beyond measure."

Jeremiah 6:14 They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace.

Micah 3:11 Its heads give judgment for a bribe; its priests teach for a price; its prophets practice divination for money; yet they lean on the Lord and say, "Is not the Lord in the midst of us? No disaster shall come upon us."

Ezekiel 33:6-8 But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet, so that the people are not warned, and the sword comes and takes any one of them, that person is taken away in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at the watchman's hand. 7 "So you, son of man, I have made a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. 8 If I say to the wicked, O wicked one, you shall surely die, and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked person shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand.

The leaders of Israel have often been a source of iniquity. But beyond their usual sins of abusing power and leading the people astray, there is their additional sin of mistreating the prophets. The prophets were the servants of God, the messengers of God. They came calling the people back to true worship. They came asking for fruit. "And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8). But not wanting to listen to these messengers, the leaders mistreated them. The following are some of the accounts recorded in a work dating to the 1st century titled, "The Lives of the Prophets"

ISAIAH: He was of Jerusalem. He met his death at the hands of Manasseh, sawn in two, and was buried below the fountain of Rogel...JEREMIAH: He was of Anathoth, and he died in Taphnes* in Egypt, stoned to death by the Jews.

MICAH: He was of the tribe of Ephraim. Having given much trouble to King Ahab, he was killed, thrown from a cliff, by Ahab's son Joram, because he rebuked him for the wickedness of his fathers.

AMOS: He was from Tekoa." Amaziah (the priest of Bethel)³⁸ had often beaten him, and at last Amaziah's son killed him with a cudgel, striking him on the temple.

ZECHARIAH: He was of Jerusalem, the son of Jehoiada the priest, the prophet whom Joash king of Judah slew beside the altar,¹

The tenants of the vineyard have repeatedly abused and even killed the owners servants. The leaders of Israel have tested the patience of God again and again. They have defied his right to fruit and have beaten and even killed the prophets that were sent to gather fruits of repentance. Oh the patience of God! And oh how deep is the depravity of man! But God is not quite done - the owner is not yet done.

6 He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' 7 But those tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' 8 And they took him and killed him and threw him out of the vineyard.

Here the story climaxes. The last recourse is to send the Son. He is a beloved Son, he is an only Son, he is the heir. Their reaction to seeing the approach of the son is highly irrational. But such is the nature of sin. Somehow they reason that killing the son will make the vineyard theirs. They do not simply react to his coming, they have a discourse about it. This is a premeditated murder. So they seize him and killed him and unceremoniously dump him over the wall.

God's Future Dealings With Israel's Leaders

Jesus then asks:

9 What will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others.

This is the judgment. This is the condemnation. This is their just dessert. His patience has come to an end. He will destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others. This is an even more explicit reference to the end of the Old Covenant and the beginning of the New. The old system will be destroyed and the leaders will be done away with. God's vineyard will now be given to a nation that will produce fruit. But the story does not end with the destruction of the tenants who killed the son. Jesus quotes Psalm 118 saying:

Have you not read this Scripture:

*“The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;*

*11 this was the Lord's doing,
and it is marvelous in our eyes'?”*

The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. The Son that they killed will yet

1. http://www.summascriptura.com/html/Lives_of_the_Prophets_Torrey.html

triumph. He will rise from the dead. It is doubtful that the scribes and chief priests were really tracking with Jesus at this point. But it is clear enough for us on this side of the New Covenant. Hendricks says that, "The thrust - the one main lesson - of the parable can be expressed in the words of Psalm 2:12, 'Kiss the Son lest he be angry, and you perish in the way; for soon his wrath will be kindled. Blessed are those who take refuge in him.'"

12 And they were seeking to arrest him but feared the people, for they perceived that he had told the parable against them. So they left him and went away.

They were able to track well enough to know that it was told against them, but rather than learning from this parable, they seek all the more to bring it about. The more they try to stop him, the more they fulfill his words. They were blind with rage and did not follow, or did not believe that Jesus, if rejected, would become the chief cornerstone. Either way, they will reject him and kill him outside of Jerusalem. But judgment will come, they will be destroyed, Jesus will rise, and the vineyard will be given to others.

R.T. France says, "The theological question posed by this parable is therefore where the true people of God is now to be found." That was the question with regard to the house of prayer that was going to be destroyed, and that is now the case with the people who will be destroyed. Jesus has specifically the rulers in mind, but the leaders represent the people as a whole. And if that is being done away with, who will the new tenants be?

Application

Dear Christian, you need to see yourself in here. I don't mean that you should see things in the people in the story that may also be true of you. I mean that you should actually see yourself in this story. We are the new tenants of whom Christ spoke. We are the new nation from Matthew that is producing fruit. Once you recognize this truth, you then need to check your life to make sure that you are producing fruit.

This is one of the main difference between the old vineyard and the new vineyard; the new produces good fruit. This is the main difference between the old tenants and the new tenants; the new tenants give to the master the fruit that is his due. Are you producing fruit? Are you giving God what is rightfully his? Is there a real difference between you and the Pharisees and Scribes and chief priests? They went to the synagogue on a regular basis and lived externally decent lives, and yet the kingdom, the vineyard was being taken from them for lack of fruit. How do you stack up?