

The Parable of the Vineyard

Mark 12:1-12

Mark 12:1-12 – *“Then He began to speak to them in parables: “A man planted a vineyard and set a hedge around it, dug a place for the wine vat and built a tower. And he leased it to vinedressers and went into a far country. ² Now at vintage-time he sent a servant to the vinedressers, that he might receive some of the fruit of the vineyard from the vinedressers. ³ And they took him and beat him and sent him away empty-handed. ⁴ Again he sent them another servant, and at him they threw stones, wounded him in the head, and sent him away shamefully treated. ⁵ And again he sent another, and him they killed; and many others, beating some and killing some. ⁶ Therefore still having one son, his beloved, he also sent him to them last, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ ⁷ But those vinedressers said among themselves, ‘This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.’ ⁸ So they took him and killed him and cast him out of the vineyard. ⁹ “Therefore what will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the vinedressers, and give the vineyard to others.*

¹⁰ Have you not even read this Scripture: ‘The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.

¹¹This was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes?’” ¹² And they sought to lay hands on Him, but feared the multitude, for they knew He had spoken the parable against them. So they left Him and went away.”

Background Notes

Verse 1 says that Jesus *began* to speak to *them* in parables. The “*them*” mentioned here can’t be the disciples or the people who had been following Him, because the Lord had spoken in parables to them before. Mark 4:2 - *“Then He taught them many things by parables...”* The Lord had certainly used parables in His teaching before, so therefore the “*them*” must be the religious leaders. In Mark 11:27, notice who the Lord was addressing: *“...the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders came to Him.”* The Lord was beginning to speak in parables to the religious leaders of the nation, the ones who were rejecting Him. This parable was addressed to them. It was against them, and they knew it was against them! *“...they knew He had spoken the parable against them” (v12).*

The setting for this parable: in that day, the Roman Empire was in power. Wealthy foreign landlords owned large estates in Israel and leased the land to Jewish tenant farmers or vineyard keepers. At harvest time a portion of the crop was to be paid to the absentee landlord as rent.

The wealthy landlord built a tower. What was that all about? Why build a tower in a vineyard? The tower was a watchtower, so the farmer could keep watch over his farm and guard the vineyard. Sometimes the harvested crop and wine would be stored in the base of the tower. The remains of ancient watchtowers are still visible in the Israeli countryside today.

Doctrinal Points

A parable is a story with a deeper meaning. This parable is quite straightforward, and it's not difficult to interpret. The man who planted the vineyard is, of course, God. He's the "absentee" owner, the landlord who had gone into a "far country." The vineyard is the nation of Israel. In Mark 11 (and throughout the Bible), Israel was likened to a fig tree. In the Old Testament, Israel is also likened to a vineyard - in fact, the Lord in this parable was building on the parable of the vineyard in Isaiah 5. And the religious leaders listening to the Lord would certainly have made the connection. As in Isaiah's time, when the nation of Israel did not produce good fruit, so also in our Lord's day the nation did not produce fruit. This parable indicates that in large measure the religious leaders were to blame.

In the parable, before the owner went on his journey, he did everything he could to create favorable conditions for a productive vineyard. He built a wall and a watchtower for protection and security. The wall may represent the Law that God gave to Israel for protection - it certainly distinguished Israel from the evils of the surrounding pagan Gentile nations. God gave Israel every advantage. The owner built a winepress and dug a vat to catch the juice, so obviously the owner expected fruit. But there was no fruit.

The servants who were sent to receive the fruit represent the prophets that God sent throughout Israel's history. But the political and religious leaders of the nation sent the prophets away empty-handed - not only because there was no fruit, but also because they hated the Landlord. They hated God, and they didn't want to give obedience, allegiance or respect to Him. The prophets were beaten and killed—and not just one or two: *"And again he sent another, and him they killed; and many others, beating some and killing some."*

At last there was only one more representative to be sent - the landowner's beloved son. This is clearly a reference to the Lord Jesus Himself. At His baptism the Lord was described as "the beloved Son": *"This is My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased"* (Mark 1:11). And also at the Mount of Transfiguration: *"This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him."* (Mark 9:7). And the religious leaders who were listening to Jesus *knew* that He was not only claiming to be the Messiah, but he was also claiming to be the Son of God!

But in the parable, even the owner's son was rejected and killed: *"But those vinedressers said among themselves, 'This is the heir, Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' So they took him and killed him and cast him out of the vineyard."* The tenant farmers possibly thought that the owner had died, and if they killed the only son and only heir, they would be able to claim the vineyard. Under the Jewish Law, tenant farmers could claim ownerless land.

The rejection of Jesus Christ was predicted in this parable. The nation rejected Jesus and killed the Messiah - God's beloved Son. The nation of Israel was worse than a fruitless vineyard.

2. The Lord predicted the Gentile Church in this parable.

The Lord not only predicted His coming violent death in this parable, but He also predicted His resurrection, the removal of God's chosen people from the place of privilege, and the formation of the Church – a largely Gentile Church. Verses 10-11 contain a quote from Psalm 118, a Messianic Psalm: *“The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This was the LORD's doing and it is marvelous in our eyes.”* This Psalm was quoted in chapter 11 at the time of our Lord's triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The “stone” here refers to Christ. Acts 4:11 and I Peter 2:7 also use this same Scripture, showing that the “rejected stone” refers to Jesus Christ. But before the rejected stone could become the chief cornerstone, the rejected Messiah would have to be resurrected from the dead.

The Lord was resurrected, and He became the Chief Cornerstone. A *Cornerstone*? Of what? A cornerstone implies a building – and the building was the Church. Ephesians 2:19-22: *“Now, therefore, you are... members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, [that is, the Church], being joined together grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling of God in the Spirit.”* So in the parable itself we have a prediction, not only of the Lord's rejection and crucifixion, but also of His resurrection, and of His becoming the Chief Cornerstone - the Head of the Church.

As we know, the Church has been primarily composed of Gentile believers. This was predicted in verse 9: *“Therefore what will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the vinedressers, and give the vineyard to others.”* The parable was teaching that the Church, of which Christ would be the Chief Cornerstone, would not be composed primarily of Jewish people, but of Gentiles. While the Church started primarily with Jewish believers, down through Church history it's been largely composed of Gentile believers.

Practical Applications

1. Let's be willing to talk about the wrath of God and hell.

In verse 9 the Lord addressed the religious leaders who had rejected Him, asking them: *“Therefore what will the owner of the vineyard do?”* And then He gave the answer: *“He will come and destroy the vinedressers, and give the vineyard to others.”* Notice, He didn't skip from verse 8 to verse 10. He didn't just say what they did with the beloved son, and then jump ahead to verse 10 with the Messianic quote. No, He definitely described what would happen to those people who rejected the owner's beloved son. And verse 12 indicates that they knew He was speaking to them. Jesus forced them to think about the consequences of their rejection of Him.

We need to be willing to talk about the wrath of God, and about hell. It's not a pleasant subject, but John 3:36 says: *“He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe in the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of*

God abides on him.” It’s not a pleasant subject, but we need to talk about it. Let’s be willing to talk about the wrath of God and hell.

2. Let’s try to influence society to support biblical values.

Verse 12: *“And they sought to lay hands on Him, but feared the multitude, for they knew He had spoken the parable against them. So they left Him and went away.”* Isn’t it interesting that it was “the multitude” that prevented the religious leaders from taking wicked action against the Lord Jesus? This happened a number of times in the Lord’s ministry—the religious leaders who wanted to take wicked action against the Lord were prevented because of the multitude - because of the crowd of ordinary people.

This crowd was not composed entirely of believers. In chapter 11, the crowd gave a lot of lip praise at the triumphal entry of Christ - but all of those people did not become true believers and part of the early Church. They were just part of the society of the nation at that time. They supported the Lord in the sense that they followed Him and listened to His teaching, and in general they agreed with the values that our Lord was teaching. So in that way they became a buffer. They prevented the hatred of the religious leaders from becoming action against the Lord. God used the popular opinion of the society - of the multitude - to control the leaders, and to keep them from taking wicked action.

God can do the same today. We need to be willing to influence society to adopt and support biblical values. For example: the radicals in our country today are attempting to break down the family structure. But society in general, even today, is opposed to this kind of thinking (praise the Lord!). Even though our society is not composed entirely of evangelical believers, at least the “multitudes” are generally in favor of biblical family values.

So the more we can do to keep that societal attitude going, the better! Write letters to the editors of newspapers. Write to members of Congress. Support boycotts of businesses that advocate unbiblical values. Withdraw support from organizations that are tearing down biblical values. Let’s do whatever we can to influence society to support biblical values. God can use the multitudes - the crowds – our society. He can use popular opinion to stop the wicked actions of some people in our society.

Let’s try to influence society to support biblical values!