

The Wicked Tenants – Give God his Due

Mark 12:1-12

Turn to Mark 12 please. Jesus told the parable of the wicked tenants two days after the triumphal entry, which is what we remember today, which is Palm Sunday.

This parable is in Matthew and Mark and Luke, but I am telling it from Mark because Mark does not have as many parables as Matthew and Luke, so I wanted to use Mark when I can.

As Mark tells the story, it seems that it was a Sunday when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, and they waved palm branches and shouted “Hosanna!” That Sunday evening, Jesus went to the temple and looked around, then left. But trouble was brewing. Mark 11:1-11.

Monday (11:12) Jesus went back to the temple, chased out those who were buying and selling, and turned over the tables of the money exchangers, and those selling doves, and he would not let anyone carry their goods in the temple courts. He preached against what they were doing.

The chief priests and law teachers were not there when Jesus did this. But it says in Mark 11:18 that when they heard about this, they wanted to kill Jesus. On Monday evening, Jesus and his disciples went back to Bethany, a couple miles outside of Jerusalem, where they were spending the nights.

Tuesday (11:20) is when Jesus told the parable of the wicked tenants, the evil renters. Jesus went back to the temple again, on Tuesday.

The chief priests, the law teachers, and the elders came to him and asked him by what authority he had cleared out the temple and preached against what was happening. Where does he get his authority? What gives Jesus the right to decide what happens at the temple?

Jesus basically told them that his authority came from the same place as John the Baptist’s authority. When they figured out John’s authority, they would understand his authority, too. And at that point he told them this parable, the parable of the wicked tenants. Mark 12:1.

The Parable begins and Isaiah’s Vineyard Parable

12:1 - *Jesus 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 moved to another place. ² At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants to collect from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. ³ But they seized him, beat him and sent him away empty-handed.*

Isaiah, the OT prophet, told a similar parable about the people of Judah, and Jesus begins much like Isaiah began. Isaiah told about God planting a vineyard, and building a watchtower, and digging a winepress for his vineyard. That vineyard had a wall, too.

Isaiah said clearly that the LORD planted the vineyard, and the vineyard was the house of Israel, the people of Judah. In Isaiah's parable, the problem was the vineyard itself. God had been good to his vineyard, but it would not produce good grapes. God got only wild grapes, small and sour. So the LORD was going to tear down the wall and destroy the vineyard. A judgment parable.

So back to Tuesday of Jesus' last week. Jesus was talking to the Jewish leaders, and they were angry enough to kill him, and Jesus was trying to show these people what was really going on, without making them even angrier.

The Jewish leaders will have recognized right away that Jesus was using Isaiah's parable. It starts the same way, with someone planting a vineyard and there is a tower and a winepress and a wall. So the Jewish leaders know that the man who planted the vineyard is God, and that the vineyard itself is the people of Judah. They will know this immediately.

They also know that it is a judgement parable. God is being good to his people, the vineyard, but they are not responding, they are not giving God his due, which is worship and obedience.

But in Isaiah, the vineyard itself is the problem. In Jesus' parable, the vineyard itself seems fine, so they are trying to figure it out. In Isaiah's parable, there are no renters at all. Now, let's read the story again, and think about Jesus speaking to these angry Jewish leaders:

12:1-9 - *"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 moved to another place. ² At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants to collect from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. ³ But they seized him, beat him and sent him away empty-handed. ⁴ Then he sent another servant to them; they struck this man on the head and treated him shamefully. ⁵ He sent still another, and that one they killed. He sent many others; some of them they beat, others they killed.*

⁶ *"He had one left to send, a son, whom he loved. He sent him last of all, saying, 'They will respect my son.'*

⁷ *"But the tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.'* ⁸ *So they took him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard.*

⁹ *"What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others.*

Many servants were sent to the farmers renting the vineyard. The first they beat, the second they humiliated, the third they killed. And the owner sent many more after that, all who got the same kind of treatment. But the owner never got what was due him. Any that came back, got back empty-handed. God treats his people very well, and has a right to a warm response from us.

God was patient with these people not giving him his due. These renters knew what they owed. They knew it was fair. They just refused. But God kept sending reminders and messages.

Finally, he sent his loved son. The owner sent a more important messenger, “surely they will respect my message this time.” But they don’t. The farm renters treat the son like all the rest. They kill him and throw his body outside, like so much garbage. They do not even respect the body of the son they just killed.

Jesus: What will the owner do? He will come and kill those renters, and give his farm to others.

How much do the Jewish leaders understand at this point? That is hard to say. According to Matthew’s version, they don’t get it yet, they don’t understand what Jesus is doing until the next part, from Psalm 118 about the rejected stone.

As the story ends, the son is outside the vineyard and dead. How would the Jewish leaders have understood the loved son of the parable?

In 2 Samuel 7, God said to David, speaking about the sons and grandsons of David, that would be king after David, “I will be like a father to him, and he (your descendant, David) will be like a son to me.” So Jews sometimes used “son of God” as a title for the Christ.

The Jewish leaders knew that God was the vineyard owner, but they did not think son as the Eternal Son of God, Father and Son and Holy Spirit. It does mean that some places in the NT, but not here. No Jew listening to Jesus would have thought that.

They might have wondered if he meant the messiah, but it could have been someone else with a particularly close relationship to God. Others are called “sons of God” a few times in the OT. It was probably not clear to them that Jesus was speaking about himself, or about the messiah.

If the vineyard was the Jews, the tenants could perhaps have been the Romans, who refused to honour the God of Israel. It is hard to say what they understood at the end of the parable.

Then Jesus quoted to them from Psalm 118: ¹⁰ *Haven’t you read this part of Scripture: ‘The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; ¹¹ the LORD has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes’?* The key line: *The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.* The rejected stone has become the most important stone.

So the stone in the psalm is the son in the parable, and the builders are the farm renters, the tenants. As the farm renters rejected the owner’s son, so the builders rejected the stone. In Hebrew, there is a word play that helps this. “Son” is *ben*, and “stone” is *eben*. Even though they mostly spoke Aramaic, the Jewish leaders certainly got this.

This Scripture takes the parable farther. The loved son does not stay dead outside the vineyard. He was rejected, but, in some marvelous way, God defends the son and puts the son in the most important place. We're talking about God raising Jesus and exalting him, though those details were not known when Jesus told this.

Once Jesus quoted about the rejected stone from Psalm 118, the Jewish leaders got it all. God is the vineyard owner, and the Jews are the vineyard. They knew that from Isaiah 5.

Now the Jewish leaders understand that Jesus means they are the evil renters who killed the son, and they are also the builders who rejected the chosen stone. They now know that Jesus is telling them that, because they reject him, God will destroy them, and give their leadership to others.

God was patient with their failure to give him what he had a right to, as long as he was sending servants, but that changed when God sent the son. Then it was time to repent, or it was over. That's what Jesus was telling them. They will have gotten this.

And Jesus was telling them that he is the Christ, the Messiah, and that by rejecting him they are putting themselves under God's judgement.

This is in Mark 12, we assume some time on Tuesday of the last week. In Mark 14, very early Friday morning, the high priest said to Jesus, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?" What made the high priest think that Jesus thought he was the Christ? Mostly this parable, which Jesus told a crowd of leaders on Tuesday.

All Jesus had actually done was tell a story about a loved son who was murdered, and then he quoted two verses from a psalm. He has said nothing openly. They could not arrest for that.

But he did not leave much doubt, and they knew it. As I said earlier, Jesus was trying to show these people what was really going on, without making the situation worse.

As it stands, it is a warning, a stern warning. Jesus was telling those leaders where they were heading. I can almost feel the electricity in the air as Jesus finished, and those leaders realized what he has just told them about who he was, and who they were. Very tense. Very hostile.

Jesus watches and waits. (12:12) - *Then the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders looked for a way to arrest him because they knew he had spoken the parable against them. But they were afraid of the crowd; so they left him and went away.*

Jesus told this on Tuesday. Thursday evening those leaders arrested Jesus. By Friday evening Jesus was dead and buried. And on Sunday, God raised him back to life.

In the parable of the wicked tenants, Jesus warned the leaders. On Monday when he cleared the temple, he was angry. Now he is not angry, he's urging them to think about what they are doing, and where they are heading. They still have time. The son is not dead yet, nor the stone rejected.

In my imagination, God the Father told Jesus that morning, "you need to warn those leaders again where they are heading, you need to be clear, but try not to make them angrier." So Jesus spoke this way, but it did not work.

What can we learn from the parable? How might it shape our lives now? The Isaiah 5 parable and this parable of Jesus are both about people giving God what he has a right to from us.

In Isaiah, God was good to the vineyard, but it gave him only small sour grapes, the kind of grapes one would expect if he had done nothing at all. In the parable of Jesus, the focus is on leaders. The owner of a farm has a right to a certain part of the crop, that's how Jesus told the story, and the leaders would not give it to him.

God was not asking anything heroic, just garden variety loyalty would have done nicely. He only asked what was easily in their grasp to do. But they refused and refused and refused.

God understands himself to have been very good to his people. We get lost in our private troubles, but from God's view the big picture for his people is excellent, because God in his love and generosity has made it so for us, and he only asks what is entirely in our ability to do.

God has forgiven our sins, and given us eternal life. He has promised us the resurrection of our bodies, and an indescribable inheritance. He has put his Spirit in us, to guide us and help us every day. He has given us each other, bound us to each other, so that we can help and encourage each other, and pray for each other.

He has given us the Bible, he's shown us what he is like and what kind of world we live in, and how we should think and live. And he has promised to provide us with food and clothing. We read last week that God richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. 1 Tim 6.

So, what is God's due. To what does he have a right? To boil it down to one word: "thanks." "Thanks, God." Would it be too much to say that to God a few times every day? "Thanks, God, you've given me lots." Is he asking too much? That would be the start.

Here is a bigger line, from 2 Corinthians 5. *Christ's love compels us ... Christ died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for him who died for them and was raised again.*

Paul is talking about what is due Christ. To what does Christ have a right? First, why does he have any right at all? *Christ's love compels us. Christ died for all.* He loved us and died for us.

That is his generosity to us. How shall we respond? *So that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for him who died for them and was raised again.*

This is Christ's due: that we should live for him who died for us and was raised again. "Live for him." So that we should live for him.

"Live for Christ" can sound impossible to us, but again, Paul is not asking anything superhuman. What does Paul want from the Corinthian church?

Here are the basics in 1 and 2 Corinthians: "Be careful which Christian leaders you follow. Don't follow Christian leaders who are impressive in the world, follow Christian leaders who are servants of Christ. Flee from sexual immorality. Flee from idolatry. Stop fighting with each other. Forgive each other. Respect everyone in the church. Encourage each other."

That's called giving God his due. Why would we do these things? *Christ's love compels us ... Christ died for all, so that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for him who died for them, and was raised again.*

Give God his due. Don't think about what's too godly or spiritual for you. What the vineyard owner wanted from the renters was entirely possible for them to do. They just didn't want to. Start with "Thanks, God," a few times a day. And see how that might shape the next thing you do. Amen.

Father, thank you. You have forgiven our sins, and given us eternal life. You promised to raise our bodies from the dead, and promised great inheritance. You put your own Spirit in us, to guide us and help us every day. You gave us each other, you bound us to each other, so that we can help and encourage each other, and pray for each other.

You gave us the Bible, you've shown us what you are like and what kind of world we live in, and how we should think and live. You provide us with food and clothing. You richly give us many things for our enjoyment. Thank you. Thank you for Jesus your Son, who loves us immensely, and died for us, so that we would no longer live for ourselves but for him who died for us, and was raised again.

By your Holy Spirit, lead us to live this way every day. Amen.