

The Parable of the Beloved Son

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Mark 12:1-12

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. When the season came, he sent a servant to the tenants to get from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. And they took him and beat him and sent him away empty-handed. Again he sent to them another servant, and they struck him on the head and treated him shamefully. And he sent another, and him they killed. And so with many others: some they beat, and some they killed. He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But those tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' And they took him and killed him and threw him out of the vineyard. What will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others. Have you not read this Scripture: "'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes'?" 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. Mark 12:1-12

In verse 1 Mark writes, "And He (Jesus) began to speak to them (Religious Rulers) in parables." By this time most of us are familiar with what a parable is. A parable is a story or an illustration which is meant to communicate a spiritual truth. It's interesting to note that most of Jesus' parables were meant for the purpose of concealing truth from those who had rejected it. Just 8 chapters ago in Mark 4:11-12 Jesus said, "To you (disciples) has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, so that "they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven." The reason that Jesus spoke in parables was to reveal truth to the hungry and conceal it from the haughty. But this particular parable is unique. It's unique in that instead of concealing truth, Jesus actually uses it to reveal truth to those who had rejected it.

Look back at the text. Jesus begins His parable saying, "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." Let me press pause right there for a moment. Jesus is using very familiar imagery in

His parable. In Jesus' day the hillsides of Palestine were covered with vineyards. You couldn't look in any direction and not see one – they served as a mainstay of the economy. But more than that, throughout the Old Testament, Israel as a nation is referred to as vineyard – the vineyard of God. Turn with me briefly to Isaiah 5:1-7a

Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. 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. And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. 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? 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. 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. For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, Isaiah 5:1-7a

In Isaiah's prophecy, God is angry because the vineyard that He so carefully planted and cultivated didn't produce any useful fruit. The vineyard only produced wild grapes (lit. stinking or worthless things). So God removed its hedge, tore down its wall, no longer pruned it, allowed briars and thorns to grow up in it, and withheld the rain. Isaiah 5:1-7 is a picture of God's judgment of *Israel* for her unfaithfulness. But in Jesus' parable, though much of the same imagery is used, the focus of the judgment is distinctly different. In Jesus' parable, judgment isn't directed at the vineyard, but rather to those who were entrusted with task of caring for the vineyard – but were unfaithful. Jesus' parable serves as a searing condemnation of the very religious leaders that stood before Him in the temple.

There are three things I want us to glean from Jesus' parable this morning:

1. God is kind, patient and persistent – even to those who reject His servants. (vv.2-8)
2. God's kindness will one day turn to justice for those who reject His servants. (v.9)
3. The ultimate Servant, God's Beloved Son, is triumphant to save. (vv.10-12)

1. GOD IS KIND, PERSISTENT AND PATIENT – EVEN TO THOSE WHO REJECT HIS SERVANTS. (v. 2-8)

When the season came, he sent a servant to the tenants to get from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. And they took him and beat him and sent him away empty-handed. Again he sent to them another servant, and they struck him on the head and treated him shamefully. And he sent another, and him they killed. And so with many others: some they beat, and some they killed. He

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

The parable that Jesus is telling is reflective of a common scenario in and around Palestine. He said, "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." Absentee landlords were prevalent in Jesus' day. It wasn't uncommon for a landowner to lease or rent his land to tenant farmers, making an agreement with them to pay a certain percentage of the proceeds to him as rent. The rest would belong to them, as payment for their work in cultivating the vineyard.

Look at verse 2. When the season came - when harvest time had arrived - the owner of the field sent a servant to the tenants to collect the fruit he was due from the vineyard. But verse 3 tells us that instead of giving the servant the owner's rightful portion of the fruit, the tenants beat the servant and sent him away empty-handed. Because the first attempt was unsuccessful, the owner sent another servant to the tenant farmers. Verse 4 tells us that this servant was struck on the head (stoned) and treated shamefully. Verse 5 tells us that the owner sent a third servant to the tenant farmer and he was killed. And so with many others: some they beat, and some they killed. Notice the progression of the violence towards the owner's servants. The tenants beat the first servant, stoned the second, and killed the third.

In the Old Testament, the prophets are frequently referred to as "servants" of God; and these prophets were often mistreated. Elijah was driven into the wilderness by the monarchy (1 Kings 19:1-5). According to tradition, Isaiah was sawn into pieces. Zechariah was stoned to death near the altar (2 Chronicles 24:21). John the Baptist was beheaded. The writer of Hebrews described the prophets saying, "They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated— of whom the world was not worthy— wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth" Hebrews 11:37-38.

Despite the unfaithful tenant's progressive violence toward the servants, and rebellion toward the owner; the owner patiently perseveres in his efforts to get the tenants to honor the terms of their agreement. Instead of sending another hired servant, the owner sends his Beloved Son. Look at verse 6, Jesus says, "He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.'"

What land owner, in his right mind, knowing how the hired tenants of his field had treated the servants that were previously sent to them, would surrender his Son to the same murderous men? This defies human logic, does it not? If you sent a servant and he was beaten, sent another and he was stoned, sent another and he was killed – what would compel you to send your beloved Son to the same wolves? Love would! A love that our finite minds struggle to comprehend. For God so loved the world that He sent His only, beloved, Son (John 3:16). The owner sending his Beloved Son reveals his not only his kindness and patience, but his compassion.

The meaning of the parable is clear. The owner of the vineyard is God. The Vineyard is Israel. The servants were representative of the long line of faithful prophets that God sent to Israel. The tenants were the religious leaders of Israel throughout her history and most recently the very Sanhedrin that stood before Jesus in the temple court. And of course the Beloved Son is Jesus Himself.

One can't help but wonder if the religious rulers surrounding Jesus as He begins to speak about the owners' beloved Son thought back to Jesus' baptism where the God the Father exclaimed, "You (Jesus) are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased" Mark 1:11. Jesus Christ is the last and preeminent messenger that God sent.

How do the tenants respond to the Owner sending His Beloved Son? They certainly don't receive Him. They reject the Owner's Son – and in doing so, reject the Owner's authority and compassion. Look at verses 7-8. Jesus says, "But those tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' And they took him and killed him and threw him out of the vineyard."

The fact that the owner's Son was coming likely caused the tenants to assume that the owner was either too far away to act or that he was no longer living. Under specific circumstances, an inheritance could be regarded as "ownerless property," which could be legally claimed by anyone. If the property wasn't claimed within a specified period of time, the law provided that a tenant could assume possession and ownership of the property.¹ So, here is the religious leaders' devious plan... They think, "If we kill the Son, we will own the property." The tenants wanted all the fruit of the vineyard for themselves. In other words, they wanted all the position, all the power, all the prestige, and all monetary profits from the vineyard. What were they really seeking? They were seeking to be God. Such is sinful humanity. We think if we can do away with God, we can rule the vineyard. We want to rule. We want to be in charge. We want to be God. And so we try and scrub our little kingdoms of God so that we can be the gods of our own little kingdoms.

¹ William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), 419.

Take in for a moment whose breath it is that is speaking this parable – it's the Lord Jesus Himself. How unshrinkingly does the meek yet mighty Jesus disclose to His enemies His perfect knowledge of their murderous plan? Jesus knows it all, and yet He won't lift a finger to prevent it. What resolute humility. Paul reminds us, "But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" Romans 5:8. When God sent His Son, He sent His all. Jesus was God's ultimatum. In other words, if Jesus Christ is refused – nothing else remains.

In the face of humanity's refusal to receive God's love, He persisted and persisted and persisted. We see that clearly in Jesus' parable. What a gracious, kind, merciful, benevolent, longsuffering God we have! Spurgeon once said of Jesus, "If you reject Him, He answers you with tears; if you wound Him, He bleeds out cleansing; if you kill Him, He dies to redeem; if you bury Him, He rises again to bring resurrection. Jesus is love made manifest.² The glory of the gospel is that God is persistent. You might even say relentless. Even when His Son is mocked, rejected, and murdered – He still comes! Jesus persists in reaching out to a person until death.

2. GOD'S KINDNESS WILL ONE DAY TURN TO JUSTICE FOR THOSE WHO REJECT HIS SERVANTS. (v. 9)

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

In light of the rejection of the owner's servants by the tenants, what will God do? How will He respond? What action will He take? Jesus' words are as clear as they are devastating. He says, "He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others." Men might take advantage of or presume on the kindness of God for a time, but judgment and justice will come. Friends, God may, and does, bear long with disobedience and rebellion but in the end, He will act.

In the exercise of His common grace, God displays patience and forbearance with the world. But don't ever mistake God's patience with tolerance for sin. They are wholly different. In Romans 2:4-5 Paul asks, "Do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed."

² R. Kent Hughes, *Mark Vol. 2: Jesus, Servant and Savior* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Publishers, 1989), 97.

Who are the others? Others are understood to mean the Gentiles. This parable contains the gem of Gentile inclusion. As a result of the Jews rejection of Christ, their privileges and responsibilities would be passed to the Gentiles.

3. THE ULTIMATE SERVANT, GOD'S BELOVED SON, IS TRIUMPHANT TO SAVE. (v.10-12)

Have you not read this Scripture: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes?" 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.

"Have you not read the Scripture," Jesus asks. These religious leaders were supposed to be steeped in the Scriptures. They were supposed to be the teachers, but unfortunately they were blind guides. Jesus says, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes."

For many centuries, Israel had been the stone which the rest of the world had rejected as insignificant and despised. But in God's sovereign plan, Israel was chosen to be the cornerstone in the redemptive history of the world - the nation through which salvation would come.³ But the figure has an even greater significance than that. Peter declared in Jerusalem before the religious rulers shortly after Pentecost, "Let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by him this man is standing before you well. This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." Acts 4:10–12

The greater stone than Israel is Jesus Christ. He was despised and rejected by the architects of the Jewish religious system, the very Sanhedrin that stood before Him, but despite this rejection God would highly exalt Him to be the cornerstone! In a marvelous display of His power, God turned the apparent defeat of His final messenger, His Beloved Son, into triumph. After the rejection, after the crucifixion, came glory! Notice that the text says, "This was the Lord's doing (will)." God is *acting*, not *responding*. God's marvelous redemptive plan is right on schedule and just as planned!

Look at verse 12. How did the religious leaders respond to Jesus' parable? The chief priests, scribes and elders again desired to arrest him, but are fearful of the people, for they perceived that He had told the parable against them. You know that feeling when someone is talking and you think to

³ John MacArthur, *Matthew 16–23*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988), 297.

yourself, "Is he/she talking about me?" That's how these guys felt as Jesus was telling this parable – and they were exactly right. So they tucked tail and went away. But it won't be long until they appear again to try and trap him.