

“The Irony of Unbelief”

Series: Jesus and His Gospel: Studies in Mark – Part 45

Mark 12:1-12

Congregational Prayer:

Introduction: Take your Bible and turn with me to Mark 12, Mark chapter 12.

In 2011 the country of Libya was turned on its head through revolt against the despotic dictator Muammar Gaddafi. Only the God of Heaven knows how many horrific things Gaddafi is responsible for, but there seems to be no limit to the claims detailing his wicked acts. For 8 months the country found itself in civil war as revolutionary fighters sought to take over control of the country. Near the end of the 8 months Gaddafi was finally discovered hiding out in a storm drain and as he was dragged from his hideout he was crying out to his captors who used to be his subjects – “what you are doing is wrong. Do you not know what is right or wrong?”

How ironic for the man who had supreme power in the country, a man who had powerfully seized the right to do whatever he wanted to do and had used it over and over again to do what was despicably wrong – how ironic for him to now be saying to others who are about to kill him – do you not know right from wrong?

The religious leaders of Jesus’ day had seized the lion share of authority and power. They were the self-described experts of the Law of God. If you had a question about the application of an Old Testament passage to everyday life you went to the Scribes and Pharisees to find the answer. If you had a question about a practice in the Temple you went to the High Priests and the Sadducees. And yet, it is these very men whom Jesus confronts on the very grounds of the Temple complex to expose their unbelief. These who are experts in the Law and have authority over the public worship of God are men who have rejected God and His Word, and who in a matter of days will publicly reject God’s Son. There is great irony wrapped up in the lives of these men.

As we come to Mark 12 remember that this takes place on Tuesday of Jesus’ final week of life and ministry. On Friday morning he will be nailed to a Roman Cross and by Friday afternoon he will breathe one of his last breaths with the cry “It is finished!” Sunday had been a day of Messianic proclamation as he had entered the city to cries of Hosanna – blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Monday was a day of Messianic Authority as he possessed the Temple and threw out the money changers and merchants. On Tuesday morning Jesus returned to the Temple and it will prove to be a day of Messianic Controversy. So, Jesus was proclaimed to be the Messiah on Sunday, He acts like the Messiah on Monday as he overwhelms the religious leader’s hold on the Temple, and now on Tuesday his claims and authority as Messiah are under

question. We saw this questioning begin at the end of chapter 11 when a delegation from the chief priests and the scribes and the elders came to Him to question his authority. You remember that Jesus answered their question by asking them a question about John's baptism – whether it came from heaven or from men. And by doing this Jesus essentially answered their question without directly answering their question. Just like John his authority was from Heaven.

In Mark chapter 12 now we are going to see a series of 4 questions or controversies between Jesus and the religious leaders. They are trying to trip Jesus up and publicly humiliate him, but He instead will successfully expose their unbelief. Matthew tells us in his Gospel account that right after the question about Jesus' authority Jesus spoke a parable to them about two sons – one who did what his father told him to do and one who didn't. The point of that parable was to make known the scribes and Pharisees rejection of John the Baptist and his ministry. Now in Mark 12, which chronologically follows right on the heels of that parable of the two sons, Jesus is going to speak a parable about a landlord and some wicked tenants. This parable is going to make clear to everyone that Jesus is the Beloved Son and the rejected stone. So, not only have the religious leaders rejected John the Baptist, but now Jesus makes known that they have rejected him as well.

Parables are like good jokes – the hearers get “caught” by the punchline. Jesus speaks these words in these 12 verses to catch the religious leaders with this intriguing story of a landowner and wicked tenants. This intriguing story packs a powerful punch as the point is made by Jesus in verses 10-11. Let's read Mark 12:1-12.

As we digest Jesus' words on this day of Messianic Controversy let's look this morning at the parable in verses 1-9 and then the point in verses 9-11 and then the response in verse 12.

I. The Parable – vs. 1-9a

- a. The power of a parable is not found in our ability to creatively assign allegorical meaning to each element of the story. Rather, the power of a parable is found in the points of reference. If we can get the points of reference right then we can understand the point that was being made by the story. Before we get to the definitive naming of these points of reference it will be helpful to simply make some observations about the story. The basic story is that a man owned land and decided to plant a vineyard on the land. After getting everything ready he leased it to vinedressers or farmers who would work the vineyard in his absence. According to historical and rabbinical record this was a pretty common practice in Israel in that day. Absent landowners who would lease their property to tenant farmers who would work the vineyard and as part of their agreement would give some of the harvest to the landowner. From the little I understand of current farming practices there is some of this that happens in our area as well. So, Jesus

is using an everyday common reality and using it to illustrate a condemning point. Now, to the Jewish listener in the Temple on that Tuesday morning you can almost imagine their confidence that the point of the parable is going to somehow condemn the landowners. Most in the crowd that morning were probably not the rich landowners, but more likely they were the hard-working tenant farmers. You can imagine there is some tension between the landowners and the tenants. The tenants feel there is injustice in the agreement or simple disgust in the fact they have to be tenants rather than landowners. So, Jesus draws the crowd in with this story relating to very common life.

- b. But notice in verse 1 that the landowner has done everything possible to make this vineyard a success. He has put a fence around it, dug a pit for the winepress, built a tower for its protection and hired competent vinedressers to care for the vineyard. And yet, as the owner sends his servant to gather some of the fruit of the harvest from the vineyard the tenants pay the rent price with punches to the face rather than grapes in a basket. The servant is forced to limp back to the owner with empty hands and a bruised body.
- c. As the owner sends more and more servants to collect the rental price notice that the violence increases in each instance. The first servant is beat up, the second is struck on the head and treated shamefully. The third is killed. And yet the landowner continues to send servants. Some they beat and some they kill. And so, after sending everyone else, there is but one left – his very own beloved son. Notice in verse 6 that this son was the only one left. All the rest had been servants that he had sent. Only one remains who hasn't gone and that is the son. This son is a beloved son. He is the only son and he is a beloved son. So the landowner sends the son with the hopes that someone bearing the same name as him will demand the respect of the wicked tenants.
- d. The tenant farmers however, see the son coming and recognize him as the son – and that is a super important point in the parable. They are not confused about who this man is. They do not mistake him for another slave of the landowner. They know who he is and because he is the son they determine to kill him so that they can seize the inheritance of this man. The inheritance most specifically to this situation would be the complete control of the vineyard. If the heir was taken care of through murder then there would be no more threat to these tenant farmers. They would finally send the message to this landowner that they are not going to give up possession of this vineyard. They may also have assumed that since the son was coming to them that the father had died and the son was coming to them to reclaim possession of the vineyard as his inheritance. So, killing him took care of all other claims on the land and then it could be theirs. And so they did – they took the beloved son and they killed him and threw him outside the vineyard.

- e. The whole parable is brought to a head by the question Jesus then asks the religious leaders at the beginning of verse 9. “What will the owner of the vineyard do?” This is the question that is intended to catch the religious leaders in their unbelief and in the rejection of Jesus. The word in the original that is translated “owner” in verse 9 is the word Kyrios, or Lord, Master. The one who owns the vineyard is the one who is the Lord or master of the vineyard. There is nothing subjective about that. This is unalterable and objective fact. If you own the vineyard you are the lord or master of the vineyard. So, what will the lord of the vineyard do in response to these wicked tenant farmers who have beaten many, killed some, and now killed the beloved son?

II. The Point – vs. 9b-11

- a. Up to this point in the conversation the crowd and the religious leaders are tracking with Jesus. It is a real-life situation that they can readily see in their mind’s eye. But Jesus isn’t simply interested in drawing them into the story, he is interested in calling them to see and understand some truth about him and about themselves. Jesus takes it from a simple story to a parable that teaches truth by asking and answering this question in verse 9 and then by quoting a passage from Psalm 118 in verses 10-11. His parable is so effective that by verse 12 the religious leaders are looking for a way to arrest and destroy Jesus. So, we know the parable is effective. Jesus made his point. The question for us this morning is – what was his point? You’ll remember from our study in Mark that we haven’t come across too many passages where Jesus uses parables to teach. He does it in chapter 4 and in chapter 7, and each time he does the crowd and the disciples do not truly understand the main point Jesus was trying to make with those parables. But here, the point is obvious to all. They got what Jesus was saying.
- b. They got it because they understood the points of reference. They easily equated the different parts of the parable to their current situation. But the question you have to ask is – how do they know? What is the interpretative key that unlocks this parable for them so that they have the “aha” moment and are forced to respond to the forceful teaching of Jesus? Well, the answer to that question is found in verse 10-11. So, Jesus has told them this parable that relates really well to situations they are familiar with and then he asks them the penetrating question of what will the owner of the vineyard do and then the answer is given – the owner will come and destroy the tenant farmers and lease out the vineyard to others. If we stop there the parable is just a nice story that relates to some aspect of First Century Jewish life and proves to be fairly innocuous. But Jesus gives the interpretative key in verses 10-11 and thereby brings the full weight of the parable crashing down upon the heads of the religious leaders. It’s like when you are riding that log flume ride at your favorite amusement park and you are coasting along in a gentle current and all of a sudden the bottom drops out of the river and you are suddenly speeding down a steep descent into what appears to be a

watery grave. These religious leaders are floating along with the gentle current of the parable and then whammo! – Jesus asks them this: “Have you not read this Scripture?”

- c. Remember, these men are the experts in the Law. They have read every Scripture available and they have most likely memorized this particular one from their earliest days. It is a poignant, but rhetorical question. Of course they have read the Scriptures that Jesus quotes from Psalm 118, but because their minds have been darkened by unbelief, they have never actually read these verses. So, in the context of this parable, Jesus is going to read these verses to them for the very first time. In light of the answer to the pressing question of the parable – what will the vineyard owner do – well he will come and destroy these wicked tenant farmers and lease the vineyard to another – it is in this light that Jesus quotes Psalm 118:22-23. “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes.”
- d. In quoting these verses Jesus slams home the point of the parable. He is the rejected stone and the beloved son. Psalm 118 is a crucial psalm in Jewish life. It points the faithful to a deep trust in God while telling the story of his deliverance and salvation of his people. By the end of the psalm it looks to the future with great hope in God’s Promised One to come and save His people once and for all. It is a Messianic psalm. In fact, just 2 verses later, verse 25 of Psalm 118, is the verse that was on the lips of the crowd just two days earlier as Jesus entered the city – Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. So, when Jesus quotes a Messianic psalm in the context of his own Messianic proclamation on Sunday and Messianic authority on Monday, there is no doubt about what he is saying. The message is clear! He is the rejected stone.
- e. So, let’s relate this back to the parable. If Jesus is saying he is the rejected stone, then in the context of this parable he is clearly saying he is the beloved son who was sent and rejected and killed. If Jesus is the beloved son, then we can figure out the rest of the points of reference for the parable, and so can these religious leaders. So, if Jesus is the beloved son, then the owner of the vineyard is obviously His Father, the God of Heaven. The vineyard is Israel and the tenant farmers are the religious leaders who govern the vineyard. The servants who were sent throughout the years are the prophets of God sent to call Israel to repentance and obedience.
- f. Just a note about these servants that were sent to Israel – just like in the story the rejection of the son was the culmination of the rejection of everyone else the owner sent. So to with the Jewish people. The prophets of old that had been sent to God’s people had been overwhelmingly rejected, despised, beaten, and even some had been killed. This was not a new fact that Jesus was levelling on these religious leaders. The Old Testament itself testifies to this very fact.

- i. ²⁶ "Nevertheless, they were disobedient and rebelled against you and cast your law behind their back and killed your prophets, who had warned them in order to turn them back to you, and they committed great blasphemies. (Neh. 9:26 ESV)
- g. In fact, the religious leaders of Jesus' day tried to distance themselves from the rejection of God's prophets by going back and giving proper burials or sprucing up their tombs of these prophets. Jesus addresses this in Matthew 23:29 and Luke 11:47. For time's sake I will just read the Luke passage.
 - i. ⁴⁷ Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets whom your fathers killed. ⁴⁸ So you are witnesses and you consent to the deeds of your fathers, for they killed them, and you build their tombs. (Luke 11:47-48 ESV)
- h. Jesus obviously did not see their burial of the prophets as somehow amending the sins of their fathers. How ironic is their unbelief here? As the experts of the Law they do not understand their own complicity in the ongoing national rejection of those God's sends. So, how do we know that they would have done to the prophets what their forefathers had done? We know this by looking at what they did with John the Baptist and with Jesus. They rejected the forerunner's message and in a few days they will openly and completely reject the message of the Prophet of God. The Prophet to whom all others point. To truly honor the dead prophets they would not just have to make them some nice tombs, but they would have to believe them, but they obviously don't because all of these prophets point to the coming Son – to Jesus, and here they are rejecting Him.
- i. Another point to be made here is that just like those wicked tenant farmers, these religious leaders are not ignorant of Jesus' identity as though they have somehow missed all the clues. They know who Jesus claims to be. It is because they recognize him as the Son that they reject him. They reject him because they know he has come to set things in order and reclaim the vineyard for His Father. If they can dispense of the Son then they can dispense of the owner's claim on the vineyard and then it can be completely theirs.
- j. The irony of this is that unbelief assumes the power of the individual or the group to determine what is true or right. So, these religious leaders assume that by rejecting the son they can have the inheritance. But the passage from Psalm 118 makes clear that this is not how it works. The irony of it all is that God will use the rejection of the Son to carry out his plan. So while the leaders think they are getting their way by killing the son they will actually be furthering God's plan. The rejected stone will become the chief cornerstone. The salvation that the crowd cried out for on Sunday would be accomplished through the rejection of the Son on Friday. Unbelief foolishly assumes that its determination of the matter is the end of the matter. So it says – because I think this then it is true and that is the end of the matter. So the atheist says – there is no God and since that is my

judgment then that is what is true. The religious leaders will say – you Jesus claim to be the Son of God sent here to His vineyard to set it in order and save God's people, but we reject this. We do not think you are the Son of God therefore that is the end of the matter. But that is the irony of unbelief – that isn't the end of the matter. It's all a mirage. Just because you choose to not believe something to be true it does not then make it untrue. Their rejection then becomes the tool in the hand of a Sovereign God to bring about His perfect plan of redemption.

III. The Response – vs. 12

- a. So, the religious leaders are here caught by the parable. They get it. Jesus is clearly saying he is the beloved son and they are the wicked tenants. He is clearly identifying himself as the Messiah of Israel and he is clearly telling them that their rejection of Him will only serve the plan of God not thwart it. This should have cut them to the heart. This should have stopped them in their tracks. This should have been like the police spike strips that popped the wheels of their unbelief as it raced to complete destruction. But instead this parable and this interaction with Jesus proved to be the afterburner for their engine of unbelief. They were enflamed all the more to race down the highway of rejection toward the pit of utter destruction. They would not be stopped by the truth. They would not be hindered by a word from God. They would not be caught dead heeding the words of the Greatest Prophet ever to walk the Earth. No, they were determined to have their way regardless of the cost to them or their children.
- b. Verse 12 tells us that they immediately sought to arrest Jesus. They couldn't do it in the moment because of the crowd. The crowd had heard what Jesus had said. They had put it together too. The message of the parable was not lost on them. They saw Jesus as the Beloved Son and the chief priests, elders, and scribes as the wicked tenant farmers. The religious leaders knew that the crowd was more likely to take his side than theirs in that moment and so they didn't arrest him on the spot.
- c. But yet, they sought to arrest him. Why? Because they perceived that he had told the parable against them is what verse 12 says. They knew exactly what Jesus had said. They understood his words. They got the point. And their response? They were emboldened in unbelief. This is the irony of unbelief. It usually takes a “don't confuse me with the facts” frame of mind.
- d. Unbelief isn't completely saturated by ignorance or mistaken identities. Unbelief is ironically clear on the facts. The religious leaders knew who Jesus was. It was because of who he was that they chose to not believe him. This is the lie that the human heart so quickly believes. We like to think that the individual gets to determine what is true. We like to move truth from outside of us to inside of us. That way we can be the determiners of truth and can shape it to our liking.

- e. Isn't this what is at stake in the homosexual marriage debate that is raging in our country? For over 200 years our country has operated on the basic premise that there is truth outside of us and we are all subject to that same set of truth. Over the last 100 years this foundation has been slowly eroding, and it would seem on this past Friday that the dam finally broke. The tidal wave of cultural change that has deluged America over the past year has overwhelmingly proclaimed truth to be determined by the individual. If someone likes something and believes it to be true then they should not be told by anyone anywhere that they cannot do that. So, if Bruce Jenner wants to change his gender through mutilation masked as surgery and change his name to Catelyn because he has determined God made a mistake when he was formed in his mother's womb, then what our society now says is that no one anywhere can declare that wrong because Bruce Jenner has in his heart declared it right. Or, if a gay couple decides that they want to have the societal mark of marriage on their relationship then they should not only be free to do this, but they should also be free from anyone anywhere telling them that what they are doing is not right because they have determined in their heart that this is right.
- f. But herein is the tragic irony of unbelief. It never changes what is true. Unbelief simply rejects what is true. So, unbelief is not the end of the matter. In the face of the unobstructed facts the heart of unbelief rejects the truth and sets itself on a course to determine its own truth that will never actually be true.
- g. That is why these religious leaders determined to arrest and kill Jesus. He had become a public "threat" to social order and decorum. He was a threat to their leadership and authority and he must be dealt with accordingly. He must be silenced. He must be arrested. Listen, this is modus operandi for the opponents of the truth. This is how it works. When the truth is at stake and by clinging to the truth you directly oppose those who are in control, you will be deemed a threat to society and you will be arrested and silenced. This is how it worked not just for our Lord, but also for his disciples. So, in the early church this very same thing happened. The words of Peter and John were offensive to the religious leaders because they were speaking the truth. The truth was directly opposed to the religious leader's authority so they had Peter and John arrested. This same thing happened as the message of the Gospel spread all over the world. Those opposed to the truth sought to arrest and silence those who brought the truth.
- h. So, on a bit of side note here, let me just say some things about the Supreme Court decision this past Friday.
 - i. Let's be very clear here – no matter who it is that says something is true – if it isn't true, it simply isn't true. Marriage cannot ultimately be redefined. God designed it and defined it and that is the end of the matter – one man to one woman for one life.

- ii. True Biblical love does not celebrate the godless practices of sodomy and homosexuality. Love did not win out last Friday as our President so foolishly tweeted. Rejection of God and disbelief in His Word and His ways won out.
- iii. Truth is true no matter who believes it or adheres to it. Even if everyone else in the United States of America turns from the clear revelation of God's Word on this issue the truth is not changed. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. God has spoken and He does not lie. That is the end of the matter.
- i. Now, if you cling to the truth of God, what you can expect in an aggressively changing culture like ours is that you will be targeted and silenced. That is how this works. It is how it worked for Jesus, for his apostles, for the early church, and for every generation of the church that has lived in a disbelieving culture. What we saw on Friday is that our country is now very clearly a godless and disbelieving society. We have now openly and abundantly made known our view of God and His truth. We don't want it and we won't submit to it. So, now the church has a dissenting voice rather than a majority voice. This is not new to God's people, just new to God's people in America on such a large scale. We can no longer act like Israelites in the Promised Land, we must now think and act like Daniel's in Babylon. And part of this must be a readiness to suffer for the truth, not just the truth about marriage and sexuality, but the truth about everything relating to God and His Word. Our culture's widespread unbelief has not changed the truth. Our culture's rejection of God and His truth does not alter God's plan, it simply serves to advance it.

Conclusion: The rejected stone has truly become the chief cornerstone and this is the Lord's doing and it is marvelous in our eyes. Friend, maybe you are here today and you see in the religious leaders your own heart of unbelief. Maybe you understand the sad irony of this unbelief. Maybe you realize that you have been rejecting God and His truth and resisting His Gospel because you thought if you got rid of God you could have life how you wanted it, but maybe today you have realized that your rejection of God and your unbelief don't change the facts. God is God and truth is truth. Friend, there is still time. May today be the day of salvation for you. Don't be like these religious leaders who should have been cut to the heart and should have repented and believed but instead they carried on in unbelief and perished eternally. Friend – come to Jesus in repentance and faith today.

Christian, inherent in rejoicing in Jesus' rejection by men is an acceptance that I too will suffer this rejection. What if in the next five years the federal government seizes our building and imprisons a few of our leaders? What if you lose your job because you are a follower of Christ? What if we have to meet in a corn field under the cover of darkness for our worship services? Would your faith be ready for this? It is an immature faith that rejoices in Jesus' rejection because of the benefits it brings, while despising any rejection you might have to endure for

being one of His disciples. May the Lord strengthen our faith so that he may find us rejoicing that we may be counted worthy to suffer for Him. Let's pray!