

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 | The Parable of the Vineyard

It’s still Tuesday morning of Holy Week. Jesus is in the temple and was confronted by the Pharisees who challenged the source of his authority. He doesn’t answer their question but rather exposes that they don’t care about authority from God, they care about the approval of the crowds. Jesus then begins teaching in the temple which was of course his custom. He came to preach the kingdom so that is what he continues to do. To those outside of his inner circle Jesus preaches in parables. Parables are a way of spreading the seed of the kingdom but they do not land equally upon all hearers. In some they take root and multiply, in others they bounce off rocky soil of their hearts and bear no fruit.

Parables, like the scriptures themselves, are not something you just hear and then understand. They are something you have to catch. More like learning to ride a bike, than describing the physics of bike riding. So listen closely that we might catch what Jesus is saying and we won’t be found fruitless at the hearing of his word.

1. The Vineyard

Mark 12:1 | 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.

The parable begins with a familiar setting for all who would be listening. It is familiar because they all would have known what it took to make a vineyard. They would have understood the initial investment required and the likely structure of working with sharecroppers to work the land and the owner would receive a portion of their harvest. It would be as familiar as a story of someone opening a restaurant, we've all been to them and we know the just of what's going on.

But there is a deeper familiarity for the listeners of Jesus' parable. When a story of a vineyard was preached they would have known the stakes of the game but they also would have known what the vineyard meant in the context of a teaching in the temple. The vineyard is a frequent image for Israel in the scriptures. In Hosea Israel is described as grapes in the wilderness which the Lord found and tended. In Psalm 80 Israel is described as a vine that was taken out of Egypt and then planted by the Lord. But most similar to this story, and almost certainly the one Jesus is calling to mind for the listeners is the vineyard in Isaiah 5.

Isaiah 5:1-2 | 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.

Vineyards, like the nation of Israel, are meant to bear fruit. But in the story in Isaiah as well as the story in Jesus' parable, the vineyard bears no fruit. So with this context let's return to Jesus' parable.

Mark 12:2-3 | 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.

The end of the season arrived and the owner of the vineyard went to collect on his lease. The terms would have been established and agreed to between the owner and the tenants. The servant had the authority of the owner to collect what was owed to his master, but instead of paying the servant, the tenants (who did not plant the vineyard), took the servant and beat him, and they sent him back to the owner empty handed. The vineyard for the owner produced no fruit.

2. True Authority

Mark 12:4-5 | 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.

The pattern of the first servant is repeated again. This second servant is struck on the head by the tenants and treated shamefully by them. Then the owner sends another servant to

collect the fruit he is owed, and this time the tenants kill the servant. And strangely the owner sends many others to collect the fruit he is owed, some of the servants are beat and others they kill.

The story is already very strange. Why does the owner keep sending his servants to these tenants? Doesn't he see the previous agreed upon relationship has utterly transformed. These are not tenants, they are thieves and invaders. They are not giving the owner the fruit he is due, they are not defending his land, they have conquered his land and taken it from him and acted as though they were the owners of the land. How many servants must you expend before you arrive at the conclusion that is staring you in the face?

It's so clear in the story of the owner and the tenants. But so hidden from the hearers. Let me make it explicit for us. God is the owner, Israel is the tenants. God has placed them in the land to bear fruit. But they bear no fruit. What would their fruit be? Justice, mercy, humility. The servants are the prophets whom God has sent for centuries to return the hearts of his people to the Lord their savior that they might bear fruit in obedience to him. This same speech including this parable as relayed in Matthew and Luke culminates with Christ's lament over Jerusalem.

Matthew 23:37 | "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"

But Christ's parable continues and the absurdity of the landowner reaches unimaginable depths.

Mark 12:6 | He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.'

The listeners gasp, they picture their own children as you do when you hear such stories. They imagine the conversation between the father and the son. "The vineyard has still produced no fruit for us. There is no one else to go. Son you must go." The son is obedient to his father, unquestioning, trusting. He goes. Why would he send his son. This is a fools story. Why would he think they would respect his son? Why is this owner acting like the relationship he has with the tenants is still functioning according to the terms which he had established it?

Mark 12:7-8 | 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 conclusion could have been spotted from a mile away. Why would you send your son to those people. They're not tenants their terrorists. And how foolish they are, have they not realized that in killing the heir the owner is still alive?

3. True Authority

Mark 12:9 | What will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others.

In Mark Jesus is relayed as having answered his own question in Matthew the people answer the question that he asks, but the answers are the same. They answered and Jesus agreed as anyone would agree the owner of the vineyard will destroy those tenants and lease out the vineyard to others who will give him the fruit in its season. The patience of the Lord is on full display here. How many servants and then his beloved son. But the limit is his son. Israel will be destroyed, and a new people will receive the vineyard.

The story stands on its own but the meaning is still elusive. Therefore Jesus provides a key so the meaning of the story might be unlocked. He quotes Psalm 118, a song of praise for the steadfast love of the Lord.

Mark 12:10-11 | “ ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes?’ ”

The owner is the Father. The Son is Jesus. Jesus is the last prophet sent to the house of Israel. He is the stone who is rejected by the builders. But he will become the cornerstone of the new kingdom. This is the Lord’s doing and it is marvelous.

Mark 12:12 | 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.

Do you see them miss it. Jesus just told them, if you kill me you lose the kingdom. And if you kill me, I establish the kingdom that you won’t be a part of. But of course to imagine such a situation would be to imagine something only the Lord could do. It would be to imagine resurrection. The owner of the land looked like the fool. But he laughs at those who plot against him. And the rejection of his son will mean the salvation of the world. So come, kiss the son. The patience of the Lord is real, and nowhere more completely shown than in Christ. He who did not spare his own son but delivered him up for us all how will he not also with him freely give us all things.