

Evil Farmers

Mark 12:1-12

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For the last several weeks, we've been looking at the events of the last week of Jesus' life. We've seen His triumphal entry, the cursing of the fig tree, the clearing of the temple, and then last week we looked at His encounter with the religious leaders who demanded to know by what authority Jesus did these things.

Our story this morning is a continuation of that encounter. The religious leaders questioned Jesus' authority and Jesus turned the question back on them by asking where John's authority came from. The religious leaders did not believe John to be authoritative, but refused to answer because they knew that denying John's authority as a prophet would upset the crowd. Jesus told them that since they wouldn't answer His question, He would not answer theirs. But that wasn't the end of the encounter.

After this, Jesus told a story designed to help the religious leaders see the error of their ways, but it made them more determined to kill Jesus. This morning, we're going to unpack this story, look at the response of the religious leaders, and also ask what lessons we might need to learn from it as well.

Jesus' Story

We find this encounter in chapter 12 of Mark. Mark seems to indicate that immediately after the Pharisees questioned Jesus' authority, He began teaching.

Then Jesus began teaching them with stories: "A man planted a vineyard. He built a wall around it, dug a pit for pressing out the grape juice, and built a lookout tower. Then he leased the vineyard to tenant farmers and moved to another country. ² At the time of the grape harvest, he sent one of his servants to collect his share of the crop. ³ But the farmers grabbed the servant, beat him up, and sent him back empty-handed. ⁴ The owner then sent another servant, but they insulted him and beat him over the head. ⁵ The next servant he sent was killed. Others he sent were either beaten or killed, ⁶ until there was only one left—his son whom he loved dearly. The owner finally sent him, thinking, 'Surely they will respect my son.'

⁷ "But the tenant farmers said to one another, 'Here comes the heir to this estate. Let's kill him and get the estate for ourselves!' ⁸ So they grabbed him and murdered him and threw his body out of the vineyard. ⁹ "What do you suppose the owner of the vineyard will do?" Jesus asked. "I'll tell you—he will come and kill those farmers and lease the vineyard to others. ¹⁰ Didn't you ever read this in the Scriptures? 'The stone that the builders rejected has now become the cornerstone. ¹¹ This is the Lord's doing, and it is wonderful to see.'" ¹² The religious leaders wanted to arrest Jesus because they realized he was telling the story against them—they were the wicked farmers. But they were afraid of the crowd, so they left him and went away. (Mark 12:1-12, NLT)

Jesus told the crowd a story about a man who had planted a vineyard. He had done everything to ensure the vineyard was well-supplied and protected. He leased the vineyard to some farmers, with the arrangement that when the time for harvest came, he would be entitled to a portion of the proceeds.

This was a common arrangement in Israel at the time. Many in the crowd may have even been engaged in such arrangements, as people from far away may have purchased or claimed land for themselves and hired Israelites to work the land for them. While this arrangement was quite common, conflict between the landowners and the tenant farmers was common as well. There are many recorded instances of tenant farmers rebelling against the landowners and fighting for a larger share of the harvest. So, this would have been a story that resonated with Jesus' audience. They could have easily imagined such a situation.

One of the keys to understanding what Jesus was saying in this story is to understand that each character in the story is symbolic of something greater. What each character represented would not be made completely clear until the end, but every good Jew would have immediately understood what the vineyard represented. Throughout the Old Testament, a vineyard was used as a symbol of the nation of Israel. Jesus was making this very clear by the way He described the vineyard because it sounds very similar to the way Isaiah described it in Isaiah 5,

My beloved had a vineyard on a rich and fertile hill. ² He plowed the land, cleared its stones, and planted it with the best vines. In the middle he built a watchtower and carved a winepress in the nearby rocks. Then he waited for a harvest of sweet grapes, but the grapes that grew were bitter. (Isaiah 5:1b:2, NLT)

You can see that Jesus was using the same imagery as Isaiah. This is because Jesus' vineyard represented the same thing Isaiah's did. The vineyard represented the nation of Israel. Most of Jesus' listeners would have immediately made this connection. The religious leaders certainly would have made the connection.

What did the other characters represent? The owner of the land is God. The symbol is pointing to the fact that God has provided for Israel, protected it, and given it every opportunity to thrive. It is also a reminder that God is the owner of the vineyard, and everyone must ultimately give account to Him. The identity of the landowner, however, doesn't become clear until the end of the story. As Jesus began the story, the religious leaders may have viewed themselves as the landowners, believing that God had given them the responsibility to care for Israel. As such, they may have sympathized with the landowner, disgusted at such evil tenants.

As the story progresses, it becomes clear that the servants sent by the owner symbolized the prophets God had sent to the Israelites throughout history. Notice the escalation that happened to these messengers. The first was beaten and sent away. The next was beaten over the head (a more significant injury). The next was killed, and

the others were either beaten or killed. This coincides with what happened to the prophets God sent to the nation of Israel.

The Old Testament is filled with the accounts of prophets sent by God to get Israel's attention and turn them from sin. Each one of them faced hardship and feared for their lives from the leaders of the nation. Some prophets were even killed by the leaders of Israel. Jewish tradition said that Isaiah was sawn in two. 2 Chronicles 24 records how the prophet Zechariah was killed at the order of King Joash. And John the Baptist had recently been beheaded by King Herod. The religious leaders of Jesus' day may not have directly been involved in John's death, but they had opposed him and rejected him as God's prophet. The servants of the owner symbolized what had happened to God's prophets.

The son is clearly an allusion to Jesus Himself. Jesus does not merely list himself as one of the servants; because Jesus was not merely a prophet, He was the Son of God. We see that Jesus had a clear sense of what lay ahead for Him. He knew that He would be killed by the evil tenant farmers, even though He had done nothing wrong.

So, who do the farmers represent? By the time Jesus finished the story, the religious leaders had figured that one out. They realized they were not the landowners in the story, Jesus was painting Israel's religious leaders as the evil farmers. Throughout history, the religious leaders of Israel had failed to guide the people as they should, and had been complicit in the deaths of God's prophets. Jesus was saying that the religious leaders standing before Him right now were no different. They too had been complicit in killing God's prophet (John the Baptist), and they would soon also kill the Son. Jesus was painting them not as the heroes of the story, but the villains. When the religious leaders realized Jesus was telling the story against them, they wanted to have Him arrested! But they realized they couldn't because the crowd would revolt if they did.

This reaction shows they were exactly who Jesus said. The farmers in the story rebelled against the owner of the vineyard because they wanted to have control. They wanted the power and the payoff from the vineyard. In the same way, the religious leaders had come to love the power they had and were enjoying the fact that they could enrich themselves on the backs of the people they were supposed to be serving. Jesus was a threat to them because if people followed Jesus, then they wouldn't follow them. Jesus was a threat to them maintaining their power. This was why they wanted to arrest Him. This was already happening, because though they hated Jesus, they didn't have the power to arrest Him because the people would revolt. Clearly they would need a different plan. We'll see their plans play out in the coming weeks.

Lessons

This story about the evil farmers was intended to get the attention of the religious leaders and to awaken the people to what was going on in front of them. Unfortunately, the religious leaders were unwilling to listen to Jesus' rebuke. This is the danger that faces each of us.

When people are confronted by their sin, they can respond in one of two ways. The first is what we see in the religious leaders. When Jesus said something they didn't like, they moved to silence Him instead of looking inward and dealing with their own culpability. They concluded that the real problem was Jesus, not with themselves.

Contrast that with David, who had a similar experience with the prophet Nathan. David had sinned with Bathsheba, impregnating her while she was a married woman. When David discovered Bathsheba was pregnant, he made arrangements to have her husband, one of David's most loyal soldiers, killed. While David thought he had gotten away with this sin, the prophet Nathan came to him and told him a story, much like the story Jesus told to the religious leaders. Nathan told a story about a poor man who had a single ewe lamb, and a rich man who, despite having vast flocks at his disposal, stole the poor man's beloved lamb for himself. David was rightly incensed at what the rich man had done, and demanded that justice be served. It was then that Nathan told David that he was the man in the story. He was the rich man.

Unlike the religious leaders, when David realized the story was being told against him, he responded by immediately acknowledging his sin and repenting. He couldn't undo what had been done, but David turned back to the Lord and pleaded for His forgiveness.

One of the dangers of reading this story is that we correctly conclude that Jesus was condemning the religious leaders but assume the same rebuke doesn't apply to us. We must carefully examine whether we are committing the same sins as the religious leaders were committing. The essence of the charges Jesus leveled against them was that they were more concerned with their own power, their own comfort, and their own agendas than they were with the Lord's. When push came to shove, the most important thing was for them to maintain their power, position, and influence.

Don't we face the same temptation today? Many churches today are afraid to speak the truth of the gospel because of how it will affect their ministry. They are afraid that if they speak the truth, people will leave in droves. Many pastors equivocate on clear, but unpopular teachings of scripture because they fear they will "lose market share" or cease to be a relevant voice in our society. This is a danger that everyone who stands in a pulpit or in a position of leadership faces. We all want to be liked and to be seen as influential and wise, but we must remember that we answer to the Lord, not to the masses. The vineyard does not belong to us, it belongs to Him. If we try to maintain our power and influence by going our own way, it will slip through our fingers, because it was never ours to begin with.

But this is not just a danger for those in positions of leadership, it is something that every believer must carefully look for in their own lives. Each of us faces the question of whether we will stand on the truth of God's Word, or whether we will cave to the pressure of our society or our own desires. This is not just about the things we say, but the way we live. The religious leaders consistently ignored Jesus' instructions challenging their hard hearts, pride, and greed. We must be careful not to do the same.

Chances are, there are things in your life that you know aren't the way they should be. Maybe it's an area of compromise in your morality—some behavior God is telling you needs to change. Maybe it's an attitude you need to deal with. Maybe God is telling you your priorities are out of whack. Maybe He's calling you to forgive or to reach out to someone or to step out in faith. It is not enough to know what God calls us to do—we must actually do it! When we are confronted with our sin, we should take steps to change it. We learn from the religious leaders the importance of living in obedience to the Lord. We might like to believe that we would never silence God's prophets like the religious leaders did, but when we stubbornly refuse to do what God has told us, that's exactly what we are doing.

This passage reminds us that God will not put up with sin forever. The Lord is patient with people. He shows far greater patience than we are capable of showing. But He does not permit sin and rebellion to persist forever. God's response to the religious leaders was that He would take away their positions in the vineyard and give them to someone else. While we are sinful creatures who are utterly dependent upon the grace of God, we must never *presume* upon the grace of God. When we begin to think we can simply ignore God's commands because God is gracious, we are walking a dangerous road—the same road as the religious leaders. This is a cautionary tale not only for those in Jesus' day, but also for us.

There is still one part of what Jesus said that we have not unpacked yet. Jesus quoted from Psalm 118, saying that the stone the builders rejected would become the cornerstone or capstone.

In the ancient world, when building, it was important to select the right stone as your cornerstone. Since the walls would be built off of that stone, it was important that you selected the perfect one for the job—one that was true. Jesus was pointing out that this prophecy was speaking about Him. Though the religious leaders (and much of the world) would reject Him, He would become the cornerstone of all. No matter how much people tried to silence Him, He would be elevated. That truth hasn't changed. This is a reminder to us that even though our world may criticize, minimize, and marginalize Jesus—He is still the One on whom everything else is built. We should align ourselves with Him, because He will ultimately be proven true and right.

Conclusion

Jesus told this story to the religious leaders as an illustration of their attitude, which was intended to get their attention and to reveal their true hearts to the people around them. But it is also a lesson directed at each of us, calling us to examine our lives so we don't become like these evil farmers. So let's draw some specific applications for our lives.

First, be open to God's correction. It is easy for us to admit that we aren't perfect. Most of us are aware of many of our flaws. It is something else entirely to do something about it. God points out to each of us places where we need to deal with sin. Sometimes it is something no one else will even know about—an attitude or thoughts

that we allow ourselves to dwell on. Our responsibility is to do battle with the things that God shows us aren't right. When we resist God's correction, we distance ourselves from Him, putting ourselves on a dangerous path. Rather than pushing aside things that seem hard or uncomfortable, be open to His leading, and do what He calls you to do.

Second, remember the vineyard belongs to the Lord. Our world today is hostile to the things of God. It is unpopular to stand for truth, to stand on God's Word. As such, it is tempting to find ways to "walk back" the things God has said. It is tempting for us to shy away from the truth because it will make us unpopular, or people will call us names. The people of Israel got in trouble when they just went along with society rather than standing firmly on what God had said. We must stand firm on God's Word, even though it might cause us to lose some of the power or influence that we seemed to have in this world. Compromising on God's Word in order to hold onto power and position never works—because we are in His vineyard.

As we face a hostile world, we must not only speak truth, we must do it in love. Many today claim that Christians speak hatefully about sin. Rather than dismissing these charges, we should ask if there is an element of truth in them. Why do people think we hate them when we speak about sin. We must carefully examine whether we are truly speaking in love and communicating these truths lovingly to our world. Jesus spoke truth, He did not dismiss or overlook sin, but even as He confronted sin, people understood He loved them. This is the balance we must strive for—so we must constantly check our own hearts to ensure we are not only speaking the truth but doing so in love.

Third, remember what is at stake. One important aspect of this story is an uncomfortable truth: though God is loving and gracious and patient, He will not allow sin to persist forever. Though God does not immediately punish sin and rebellion against Him, there does come a point when He will. Jesus doesn't mince words about this fact as He speaks to the religious leaders. We must remember this as well. Many today focus only on God's love, and therefore conclude that God will not punish sin or send people to Hell. That simply isn't true. The question of whether we will trust in Jesus is not a mere academic discussion with no practical implications—there is a great deal at stake. This should drive us to be sure of where we stand with the Lord, and it should give us a sense of urgency in the way we approach others with the gospel message. While we depend upon grace, we must never presume upon it.

Jesus reminds us that what we believe and who we follow is of utmost importance. The religious leaders of Jesus' day had come to love their power and influence and were so concerned with losing it that they were unwilling to hear what Jesus said, because they were afraid of what it would cost them. We face similar challenges today. Following Jesus can cost us many things—but choosing to stand against Him will cost far more. If we take the lessons of this story to heart, we will recommit ourselves to the work of the Lord, remembering that we serve in His vineyard, for His glory.

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