

Mark 12:1–12

Workers of Wickedness

North Center || Aug 31, 2025

Pastor Jeremiah Knoop

- Matt 21:33–46
- Mark 12:1–12
- Luke 20:9–19

Context: this is the final week of our Lord's earthly ministry. And this is something like a final showdown in the temple between Jesus and the Sanhedrin. These corrupt religious leaders are seething with anger at Jesus because He has effectively reduced them to a bunch of fools in the eyes of the people: *He's overturned the tables of their crooked dealings, brought their legalized robbery to a crashing halt, dismantled their authority, exposed their hypocrisy, turned their trap question around so that they were the ones who fell into it...and they have been powerless to stop him.* And now (**Mark 12:1–12**), He begins to tell a parable which pointed directly at their wicked hearts.

It's a story about a vineyard, and the people would have immediately been drawn into the story for a couple reasons: **1.** A vineyard is an agricultural image, and they were an agrarian society. **2.** It would have instantly reminded them of the famous vineyard story in Isaiah 5. In **Isaiah 5:1–7**, God describes His people as a vineyard (**5:7**). It was *His* vineyard. He did the work of planting it. He did the work of cultivating it, protecting it, putting a hedge around it, building the winepress, constructing the tower... He ensured that His vineyard had everything it needed to grow & thrive & (ultimately) be fruitful. *"What more could He do?"* But, instead of producing good grapes, it produced wild grapes¹ = heartbreaking. It starts out as a love story (**5:1–4**), and then it turns into a story of judgment (**5:5–6**).

Jesus picks up this story of the vineyard as He teaches in the temple (**12:1**). In Jesus's parable, the landowner does all the work in preparing a vineyard and ensuring its protection, and then He leaves it in the care of hired tenants as He departs for a far country. These workers (vinedressers) weren't owners; they were stewards. They were caretakers.

Years go by (see **Lev 19:23–25**), and when time comes to harvest the grapes and make the wine (vintage-time), the owner dispatches one of His servants to go collect some of the production and bring it back to him (**12:2**). Instead of welcoming the one who was sent by the landowner, the workers abduct him, beat him, and then send him back empty-handed (**12:3**). *Absolutely shocking.* Why? Because they wanted the vineyard for themselves (**12:7**).

Jesus is giving them a history lesson. As with the parable in Isaiah, the vineyard is a picture of Israel – God's chosen people. The owner is a picture of God; He is the one who created, cared, and provided for His people. And then, when the time was right, God sent His servants (which is a picture of the prophets) to His people. But, instead of welcoming the prophets as God's appointed messengers, the religious leaders of Israel had a long history of treating them badly. The prophets came with messages from God—and Israel's leaders did all they could to silence them.² The prophets were opposed, rejected, hunted, captured, imprisoned, beaten, and often killed.³ It started with the prophet Abel (Luke 11:49–51) and continued all the way to the present day with John the Baptist (Mark 6:27).⁴

Moses was consistently **opposed**.⁵ Samuel was **rejected**.⁶ Elijah was **hunted**.⁷ Micaiah was **beaten** and **imprisoned**.⁸ Zechariah was **stoned to death** in the temple court.⁹ Uriah was **captured** and **killed**.¹⁰ Jeremiah was **beaten** (stoned?), put in **stocks**, and **cast into a well**.¹¹ Ezekiel faced constant **opposition**.¹² Amos was **sent away**.¹³ Zechariah was **killed**.¹⁴ John the Baptist was **beheaded**.¹⁵

¹ בְּשָׂדֶה: "stinking or worthless things; wild grapes."

² 2 Chr 36:15–16; 14; Neh 9:26; **Matt 5:12; 23:29–37**; Acts 7:51–52.

³ 1 Kings 19:10; **Matt 23:29–37**; Acts 7:51–52.

⁴ Abel (Gen 4:8; Matt 23:35; Luke 11:50–51) and John the Baptist (Matt 14:3–10; Mark 6:17–29; Luke 7:26–27).

⁵ Exod 16:2–8; Num 14:2–10.

⁶ 1 Sam 8:7–8.

⁷ 1 Kings 18:10; 19:2.

⁸ 1 Kings 22:24–27.

⁹ 2 Chr 24:20–22; cf. **Matt 23:35**.

¹⁰ Jer 26:20–23.

¹¹ Jer 20:1–2; 26:8–11; 38:6.

¹² Ezek 2:3–7; 3:7.

¹³ Amos 7:10–13.

¹⁴ 2 Chr 24:20–22; cf. **Matt 23:35**.

¹⁵ Matt 14:3–10; Mark 6:17–29; Luke 7:26–27.

As Jesus tells the story, He speaks of a **progression** to their rejection of the messengers. The **first** servant is beaten. The **second** was stoned and shamefully treated. The **third** was killed. And on and on it went (12:4–5). The question is: *why would the owner continue to send His servants to the vineyard when the workers kept rejecting them and mistreating them?* He clearly has the authority and the resources to put every single one of these workers to death; so why does He keep sending messengers? Because of His patience toward His people (2 Pet 3:9).¹⁶ In His love for His vineyard (and in His patience), instead of immediately sending His armies, He sends His messengers.

Lesson: Don't mistake God's patience as powerlessness. There are those who conclude that, because God didn't immediately strike me down with lightning or something as a result of my sin, then He must not really care about it,¹⁷ or He must not have noticed,¹⁸ or He must not have the power to do anything about it, or all of this talk about God's wrath for sin is just *poppycock*.¹⁹ But it's not. It's not powerlessness, and it's not poppycock – it's incomprehensible patience. It's not weakness or disinterest or blindness... it is patience. It is God patiently giving you opportunity after opportunity to repent and turn to Him. This is the picture of God's heart for you.

But their treason doesn't stop with the messengers. Eventually, their rebellion leads them to murder the owner's beloved son (12:6–8). And when Jesus refers to the “*beloved son*,” it is now clear to the religious leaders who all the characters are in this story. God is the owner. They are the workers. Israel is the vineyard. The prophets are the messengers. And Jesus is the beloved Son.

Where else in Mark's gospel have we heard about a beloved son?

- At Jesus' Baptism (**Mark 1:11**) || *in whom I am well pleased*
- At the Transfiguration (**Mark 9:7**) || *listen to Him*

By telling this parable, Jesus is making it clear to them, **I know who you are** (*you are the leaders who reject God's messengers*), and **I know what you plan to do with Me** (*you are planning to kill me*). You can plot and scheme all you want behind closed doors... but I know you, and I know what you're up to. I know what you plot in the darkness.²⁰ And the same is true when it comes to us. You might be able to fool your parents when it comes to what you're doing. You might be able to fool your teachers... your boss... your pastors. But God sees right through you.

Example: When I was a little boy, I used to crawl into the kitchen and “*sneak*” up on my dad early in the morning while he was reading his Bible at the kitchen table. And I thought I was so clever. It wasn't until I became a dad and had toddlers doing the same thing to me that I realized how silly I was to think that I was surprising my dad. I thought I was a basically a ninja, when (in reality) my dad was completely aware of every move I made.

2. Another **lesson** we learn in this story is that **we cannot fool God**. The excuses that you give for rejecting the Word of God might work on the people around you, but they don't work with God because He sees right through them ... just as He sees right through *you*. Your excuses might sound good, they might look good, and they might work on the people around you, but God sees your heart.²¹

WHAT ARE SOME OTHER LESSONS THAT WE LEARN IN THIS STORY?

3. **Our hearts are not indifferent to God.** Your heart either submits to Him as Lord, or your heart secretly wishes that He were dead.²² Either you joyfully submit to Him as Lord, or you wish that you were lord.²³

¹⁶ See also Exod 34:6–7; Neh 1:3.

¹⁷ Zeph 1:12.

¹⁸ Psa 10:11; 94:7; Ezek 8:12; 9:9; Isa 29:15; 2 Pet 3:4.

¹⁹ Eccl 8:11.

²⁰ Dan 2:22.

²¹ After a lifetime of pastoral ministry, I have learned that we always have excuses for our spiritual rebellion, and we tend to think that our excuses sound good. Modesty? Nope...**and here are my excuses**. Purity? Nope. Honoring the Lord's Day? Not this time. Tithe? Not this time. Missions? Not yet. Caring for orphans and widows? No. Hospitality? Nope. Staying faithful to my marriage covenant? Nope...

²² This is one of the main features in Mark's gospel – to show that nobody is indifferent to Jesus. “*Whoever is not with Me is against Me*” (Matt 12:30); “*For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law...*” (Rom 8:7).

²³ **Douglas Wilson**: “*Men don't crucify Christ because He was unclear. They crucify Him because He was crystal clear. He came announcing His lordship, and rebels will not stand for that.*” **John Calvin** writes, “*As soon as God appears, men would gladly drive Him far away from them; and if He cannot be driven away, they endeavor, by every possible method, to annihilate Him.*” SEE ENDNOTES

4. **Sin that's allowed to persist will always progress.** Sin doesn't expire; it expands. It starts out small, but it never stays small. And once the muscle memory is there, it becomes a pattern, a habit, a way of life. You eventually get used to ignoring the voice of God. *Give it a closet today – it will take over the house tomorrow.*
5. **Sin never makes good on its promises.** Why did Adam & Eve choose to reject God's Word in the Garden of Eden? Because they were told that they would gain something as a result of their cosmic treason... but instead, their rebellion resulted in a world full of unimaginable pain, sorrow, and death.

The same is true with the vinedressers in Jesus' story: they thought there was something to be gained by putting the beloved son to death. They thought that, with the owner's son dead, they would **inherit** the vineyard (*just as the religious leaders thought that they would obtain an inheritance of sorts through Jesus' death... that they would gain control, gain authority, gain status*). But that's not how the story ends. That's never how the story ends. How does the story end? There will come a day when the owner of the vineyard will return, and His first act of business will be to destroy those wicked men (**12:9**). Judgment – not jollies.

Looking at the religious leaders, Jesus essentially says, "*I know the sin that you are plotting in your heart, and I am telling you that it will not end the way you are hoping it will end.*" This is **a timeless lesson** for the people of God because we entertain the same thoughts that Adam and Eve had – and the same thoughts that the religious leaders had...that our sin will somehow result in our happiness. We steal that thing, we go to that place, we look at those images, we do that activity because we believe that it will lead to our happiness. But it never ends that way. Oh, it's pleasurable for a moment (Heb 11:25), but it doesn't end that way.

Yes, the death of God's beloved Son will be part of the story. This is what wicked people want, and so this is what wicked people will get – but this is not how the story ends. The story ends with judgment for all who reject the lordship of the Son.

6. **God is patient with you, but His patience will not last forever.**

This brings us to the end of Jesus' encounter with the religious leaders in the temple that day. As a result of their wickedness, the religious leaders will lose their stewardship, their whole system of leadership will be destroyed, and the inheritance of God will be given to "others" instead (**12:9**). Who are the "others"? Well, in the story that we read in Isaiah, it's "*the nations*" (56:7). This is both terrifying and glorious – *terrifying* for those who have rejected Christ, *glorious* for the peoples who are grafted in.²⁴

As a whole, the nation of Israel (*following its leaders*) rejected beloved Son of God,²⁵ and so their place was given to *others* – to *the nations*.

Jesus finishes His story by asking the religious leaders if they've ever read the Scripture about the rejection that the psalmist spoke about in **Psalm 118:22–23 (Mark 12:10–11):** "*The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes.*" Well, not only have they read this Scripture (*and Jesus knows that they have*), but they've actually heard it recited recently. It was this very Psalm that the crowds were chanting as Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey (**118:25–26**)! He's making sure they know...that psalm is about Him. "*I am the One who comes in the Name of the Lord. I am the One with salvation in My hands. I am the stone that you builders have rejected. And I will become the chief cornerstone upon which the true house of God will be built. All of this is the work of God, and it is a marvelous thing to behold. You rejected Me – thinking that there was no place for Me, when, in reality, everything else in the universe finds its place in Me. I am what gives life its bearings. You thought you could discard me as if I was worthless when, in reality, I am the One who gives to you "life, breath, and all things."*"

*"When God makes Christ the cornerstone,
everything is measured by Him, aligned with Him, and dependent upon Him.
Rejecting Christ doesn't diminish Him—it destroys you."*
~ John MacArthur

²⁴ Read about this in **Romans 9–11**.

²⁵ Mark 15:13–14.

This story of Christ being made the chief cornerstone isn't just about Jesus, it's about us. The Son was rejected so that we might be accepted. Peter says that we are like living stones in the house of God built on and around the cornerstone of Christ (1 Pet 2:1-7; Isa 28:16; Acts 4:11; Eph 2:19-21; 1 Cor 3:11).²⁶ He is our orientation. He is our alignment. He is the starting point by which we measure every other part of our lives.

Well, this scene ends the same way it always ends with the religious leaders... they want to kill him, but they don't because they feared the people (12:12). So, they retreat to finish their plotting in private while Jesus continues to speak the truth of the gospel openly. And we are left with the same question that we are always left with: *How will we respond to Jesus?*

CLOSING

- **When God sends messengers into our lives who speak His Word to us...how do we respond?** Are we quick to listen? Are we quick to receive? Or do we resist the correction, excuse our behavior, and silence the conviction?²⁷
- **What do we do with the Son?** Neutrality is impossible. As **R.C. Sproul** reminds us, "*There is no such thing as mere admiration of Christ. You either crown Him or crucify Him.*" **There is no middle ground.** In the words of **C.S. Lewis**, "*You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse.... You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God.*"

If you are approaching the Word of God and Lordship of Jesus as a buffet where you can take what you like and leave the rest, then it is imperative that you wrestle with the ending of this parable. Jesus is the chief cornerstone, which means that everything else in the universe is measured by Him, aligned with Him, and dependent on Him. You either align your life with Him and with His Word – or you don't...but there's no buffet option. You either submit to Him as Lord – or you reject Him as Lord. For those who reject Him, the story ends in judgment. But for those who receive Him, the glorious of God belong to you forever. Just know that the longer you wait today, the harder it will be for you to submit to Him tomorrow. Yes, He is immeasurably patient with us, but His patience will not last forever. If you hear Him speaking to your heart right now, don't push Him away. Don't wait. Today is the day of salvation. Tomorrow might be too late.

- **John Calvin:**
"As soon as God appears, men would gladly drive Him far away from them; and if He cannot be driven away, they endeavor, by every possible method, to annihilate Him."
- **J.C. Ryle:**
"There is no hatred as great as that of the heart which is determined not to submit to Christ's authority. Men will bear anything rather than be told that Jesus Christ is King."
- **Jonathan Edwards:**
"If men could have their choice, and could be rid of Christ, they would prefer it. Their hearts rise against Him because He claims the throne of their souls."
- **Doug Wilson:**
"When men refuse to have Christ rule over them, their secret wish is that Christ had never been born, that Christ had never spoken, that Christ had never come, and, if it were possible, that Christ might be dead still."

²⁶ We are the priesthood who enter into the presence of God through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

²⁷ Over the years, I've been on both sides of the revealed Word of God. I've been the one who has called out brothers and sisters in their rebellion to the Word of God, and I've had faithful brothers & sisters call me out in my rebellion to the Word of God – sometimes it's indirectly through a sermon or a book, and sometimes it's directly pointed at me. The question is: how do we respond in that moment to the Word of God?