

STEWARDS OF GOD'S VINEYARD

Mark 11:27-12:12

If you are familiar with farming practices, you probably have an idea of what share cropping is. Share cropping is a legal agreement between a landowner and a farmer where the landowner leases the land to a farmer in exchange for a share of the crop. It's a common practice today, like when farmers retire but keep the land. They rent it out by a fixed cash-rent or take a little more risk by share cropping.

Now imagine being a landowner who share crops with an individual for a season. You are going to be gone all year traveling the country like many retired folks do, leaving in the spring and won't be back until harvest. And your farm is ready to go. The land is in great shape. The irrigation system is in place. Grain bins for storage are there. All they need to do is what they said they would – plant, cultivate, water, harvest, etc. But imagine coming back to your farm in the fall to check things out, and seeing that the farmer hasn't done anything. The ground hasn't been worked. Weeds haven't been sprayed. Nothing's been planted. The irrigation pivots haven't moved. The grain bins are filled with last year's dust. The only harvest is a harvest of weeds! You'd be pretty upset, wouldn't you? Needless to say, you would never rent out your ground to that individual again and would be looking for someone new. In fact, after that you'd pry switch to doing only a fixed cash-rent only next time so you don't get burned like that again!

Well, that's sort of what we're going to be looking at this morning. God is the landowner who has rented out His vineyard to some vine-growers and they haven't taken care of it so He will be using His authority to give it to new vine-growers who will produce the fruit of it, as we see in this verbal exchange between Jesus and the religious leaders. One of 5 major questioning exchanges in chapter 12.

*“And they came again to Jerusalem. And as He was walking in the temple area, the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders came to Him, and began saying to Him, “By what authority are You doing these things, or who gave You this authority to do these things?” But Jesus said to them, “I will ask you one question, and you answer Me, and then I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Was the baptism of John from heaven, or from men? Answer Me.” And they began considering the implications among themselves, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ He will say, ‘Then why did you not believe him?’ But should we say, ‘From men?’”—they were afraid of the people, for they all considered John to have been a real prophet. Answering Jesus, they *said, “We do not know.” And Jesus *said to them, “Neither am I telling you by what authority I do these things.”*

And He began to speak to them in parables: “A man planted a vineyard and put a fence around it, and dug a vat under the wine press and built a tower, and leased it to vine-growers and went on a journey. And at the harvest time he sent a slave to the vine-growers, in order to receive his share of the produce of the vineyard from the vine-growers. And they took him, and beat him, and sent him away empty-handed. And again he sent them another slave, and they wounded him in the head, and treated him shamefully. And he sent another, and that one they killed; and so with many others, beating some and killing others. He had one more man to send, a beloved son; he sent him to them last of all, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ But those vine-growers said to one another, ‘This is the heir; come, let's 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 put the vine-growers to death, and give the vineyard to others. Have you not even read this Scripture:

‘A stone which the builders rejected, This has become the chief cornerstone; This came about from the Lord, And it is marvelous in our eyes?’” And they were seeking to seize Him, and yet they feared the people, for they understood that He told the parable against them. And so they left Him and went away.

Alright, so our portion of Mark for today can be divided into 2 segments. The first is the question concerning Jesus’ **authority** (the key word for understanding our text) and the second half is Jesus’ parable of the vineyard which sustains and explains how He’ll use His authority in relation to the religious leaders.

I. THE QUESTION OVER JESUS’ AUTHORITY (11:27-33)

The passage opens with Jesus walking around the temple teaching and the religious leaders confront Jesus and ask by what authority He is doing “*these things*”. And if you remember from our last passage in Mark, these things is talking about **His authority to come into the temple and to cleanse it and now start teaching in it**. Jesus was furious with a righteous anger over the way the Court of the Gentiles (non-Jews) was being treated. People had come from all over to celebrate the Passover and learn about God, only to realize they were being taken advantage of through a marketplace set up in their area of worship. So instead of the temple being a fruitful blessing to the nations as Israel’s leaders were supposed to using it for, a house of prayer for the nations, it had become a robber’s den (11:15-17).

So, being God, and by official act of His authority, He cleaned His house. And such an official act moved the leading religious leaders to question His authority and by all means, they should since they didn’t consider Him to have any official status or authority to do so.ⁱ The only thing is, is they’ve already made up their mind about who Jesus is. They think He’s doing what He’s doing by the power of Beelzebub, or Satan (Mk. 3:22). And as Jesus’ counter question reveals, they aren’t sincere in their questioning. They really just want to trap Him and give them an excuse to stone Him or crucify Him for blasphemy, which they never find by the way, but they’re going to try. It’s quite the picture to contemplate. God made flesh is walking around His temple teaching and they’re going to challenge His wisdom – which turns out to be very embarrassing for them.

The **counterquestion** of Jesus is a common rhetorical device for debate among rabbis to bring about agreement or put **the burden of proof** back on the questioner, and I want us to learn from it a wise principle for evangelism. When you are seeking to share the truth claims of Christianity with someone (especially someone defensive), a counterquestion will keep you from looking like someone trying to shove truth down their throat because allows them to express themselves. It also helps you understand their beliefs better and it’s going to make them think critically about what they believe and why, which is often void of any proof.

❖ **Evangelism tip: Shift the burden of proof to the one questioning Christianity.**ⁱⁱ

So here’s an example: So instead of outright answering the question of “*Does God exist?*” why not take some of the burden off of you and learn their beliefs first? The question “*Does God exist?*” really puts all the burden on you and it’s not that you don’t have an answer but it needs to be revealed that they don’t. So if someone says, “*Does God exist?*” say, “*What do you think and why? What do you think better explains reality? The complexity of life/existence? Morals? Good and evil?... Atheism or theism?*” When people are forced to think like that, they often realize they don’t have a foundation for their beliefs. A lot of folks believe certain things, but don’t know why. Why do we say there’s only two genders? Because the **Scripture** says God made them male and female. To top it off, **science** and **nature** itself confirms that. No other hand fits the glove of reality.

This is what Jesus is doing. He's making them think for and decide for themselves. If they're honest and sincere in response to His question, they'll have answered their own question because not only has He proved His deity throughout His ministry the past 3 years but so did John's ministry.

Jesus conditions His response upon their response: *"I will ask you a question, and you answer Me, and then I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Was the baptism of John from heaven or from men? Answer Me."* By referencing the baptism of John, Jesus was **highlighting the entire ministry of John**. To be baptized by John was to acknowledge the credibility of John as a genuine prophetic messenger of God who came with God's authority, who told people to repent and be ready to receive the Messiah who would come after Him and John eventually pointed right to Him – *"Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"* So everyone who believed John should have believed that Jesus was the Messiah. John and Jesus are a package deal. To accept one is to accept the other. He pointed to Jesus – which is great ministry principle to remember by the way – ministry is all about pointing people to Christ.

❖ **Ministry Reminder: Ministry's aim is to direct people to Jesus.**

We point people to Jesus and not to ourselves. We want them to see Him. Focus on Him.

But this put the religious leaders in a pickle. They huddled. *"They began reasoning among themselves"* that if they say *"from heaven"* then He will ask *"Why did you not believe him?"* And they didn't want to do that because that would infuriate the crowd who regarded John to be a true prophet and they didn't. Luke 7:30 says, tax collectors believed John *"But the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God's purpose for themselves, not having been baptized by John."* They didn't think they needed to bear fruit in keeping with repentance because they were descendants of Abraham by physical birth (Mt. 3:7-10). They didn't identify with John, and hence, Jesus.

They couldn't say it was from heaven but then again they couldn't say it was just *"from men"* because they feared the people (12:12). By the way, it's never a good thing when religious leaders start fearing people and even kings more than God. But Jesus has these guys between a rock and hard place. So what they do? They take an intellectual gut-punch and say, *"We don't know."* And all it did was reveal their deliberate refusal to accept the truth. It was the best thing they could say to try and save face. And from this interaction they should have learned a valuable lesson: Don't argue with Jesus! Submit to Jesus.

❖ **Christological Significance: Jesus proves Himself to be the All-Wise God.**

No one could hold a candle to His wisdom as we'll see throughout the rest of chapter 12. He's God and you won't outwit God. It's impossible. Jesus is not intimidated or outwitted. His presence dominates these religious leaders and we should be amazed at His awesome displays of wisdom.

But in refusing to answer His question, they forfeited the right to His answer, so instead He shares this parable with them that explains how He's going to use His authority over them.

II. THE PARABLE OF THE VINEYARD TENANTS (12:1-12)

Remember that a parable (*parabolē*) is an illustrative story used to teach or reveal something. It's like setting to things side by side and to understand one is to understand the other. And in parables, remember, not every little detail has to have some special significance. But like Jesus' cursing of the fig tree revealed the status of Israel before God, so the parable of the vineyard is going to explain what's going to happen between Him and the Jewish leaders as it relates to God's historical redemptive program. **Verse 1** of chapter 12 tells us He is still speaking to *"them"*.

- **Vineyard Owner = God the Father**

The planted vines, the wall around the vineyard for protection, and a vat under a winepress signify an already established vineyard, which means there is no room for excuses for not bearing fruit. It reflects all that Israel had – the land of Israel, the adoption as sons, the glory, the covenants, the Law, the temple service, the sacrifices, the promises, the examples of the fathers of the faith (Rom. 9:4-5). They had all they needed to bear fruit for God like He wanted.

- **Planted vines, wall, watchtower & winepress = an established vineyard & no excuse.**

The vine-grower tenant/servants to whom He rented the vineyard, resembles the religious leaders and Christ-rejecting Israelites.

- **Vine-growers = religious leaders of Israel/Christ-rejecting Israel**

The slaves or servants the owner sends represent the OT prophets and John the baptizer. It's biblical and natural for prophets to be called servants of God (Jer. 7:25; 25:4; Amos 3:7; Zech. 1:6).

- **Slaves/servants = OT prophets/John the Baptist**

The son of the owner represents Jesus, the Son of God.

- **Son of the Owner = Jesus, the Son of God.**

The parable shows us that throughout history, God has been looking for fruit to enjoy from His vineyard, Israel. He has blessed Israel, empowering her with all she need to bear fruit for Him but like the fig tree, He finds nothing due to lazy and greedy and wicked tenants. And thinking in these **vineyard terms** was not only **familiar** because Israel was filled with vineyards, but because it was **biblical**. The key cross reference for it is in a portion of Isaiah 5:1-7 called "*The Song of the Vineyard*" where God is pictured singing a love song to His beloved vineyard Israel whom He planted and established, but the song takes a dark twist:ⁱⁱⁱ

"Let me sing now to my lover, my love song about his vineyard: My lover had a vineyard on a rise in a fertile place. He dug up the ground and cleared the stone. Then he planted choice vines; he built a watchtower in the middle of the vineyard and also hollowed out a wine vat; and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded the stench of sour [we could say, worthless and foul] grapes.

Now tell me, those of you living in Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more could I have done for my vineyard that I didn't already do? When I waited and hoped for it to yield grapes, why did it produce sour [worthless, foul] grapes? So, now I'll tell you what I will do about my vineyard. I will remove its protective hedges and it will be burned down. I'll break down its walls and it will be trampled. I'll make it a wasteland—ground not pruned or cultivated. Briers and thorn bushes will grow up, and I'll command the clouds not to give rain upon the vineyard. For the LORD of Hosts' vineyard is the House of Israel and the men of Judah, my delightful planting. I hoped and expected justice, but instead there was bloody violence. I expected righteousness, but look, there are cries of distress." [emphasis mine]

This was first written long before Jesus to warn Israel of the coming Babylonian judgment and exile that would come in 586 B.C. but the principle still applied in Jesus' day when they're back in the land because they weren't much different in character. In 70 A. D. Jerusalem was sacked again and the temple torn down. When Jesus came to His vineyard, He was walking around the temple and the religious leaders were still sour, worthless berries to **His desired fruit-bearing program.**

Just like the owner kept sending servant after servant only to see them abused, mistreated and persecuted, so God throughout history kept sending Israel His messengers the prophets, that they rejected and persecuted. Just thinking of a few:

- **Isaiah**, who himself wrote the song of the vineyard, many think was sawn in two (Heb. 11:37)

- **Jeremiah** was mistreated constantly. Thrown in a pit. Maybe stoned to death.
- A prophet named **Zechariah** was stoned (2 Chron. 24:20)
- **Micaiah**, imprisoned and fed sparingly for speaking against the false prophets (1 Ki. 22:27).^{iv}

And the leaders in Jesus' day don't think they'd do the same. In Matthew 23:30-33, Jesus says they say, *'If we had been living in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.'* So you testify against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of the guilt of your fathers. You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell?" Jesus is prophetic. What their fathers did to the prophets, they'll do to Him, who is more than a prophet. The Owner says, *"He had one more to send, a beloved son; he sent him last of all to them, says, 'They will respect my son.'*" Jesus wants us to understand the son in the parable is special and unique from the prophets.

❖ **The Son is special and unique from the prophets.**

And at this point you're thinking the owner is crazy. He's going to send these criminally insane people His Son? Yes. He's so gracious He appears to be out of His mind! Incomprehensible grace. And if you're here today and you know you're a sinner who doesn't deserve heaven or grace or mercy, just know that God was out of His mind according to our standards and He sent His Son to die for you and me on the cross and that by believing in Him, you can be saved (John 3:16).

What do they do? They conspire together, saying, *"This is the heir; come and let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours!"* which is exactly what the religious leaders wanted. They don't want Jesus to be the Messiah because it means they'll be removed from power and their hypocritical greed exposed for what it truly is. One Bible student wrote that by the son coming, they may have thought that the owner was dead and killing the son meant there was no one left to claim the land and it would be considered "ownerless property" and by law, after an extended period of time they could claim it as their own.^v

So, *"They took him and killed him and threw him out of the vineyard."* It's pretty graphic and pictures Jesus being crucified outside the city. **Hebrews 13:11-12** says, *"For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy place by the high priest as an offering for sin, are burned outside the camp. Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people through His blood, suffered outside the gate."*

- **The killing of the son = the crucifixion of Jesus.**

And you know, there's a great message in that for Mark's original audience being persecuted in Rome and for us who seek to follow Christ today. If the world hated Jesus, know that it will hate you also when you desire to live godly in Him and stand up against godless legislation like the "Inequality Act". But should we really expect any different from a government that's rejected God?

And today is good day to show you some of the **similar thought patterns between Mark and Peter**. Remember **Mark is basically writing Peter's gospel** as his mentee. In Mark 10:32 remember *Jesus was walking ahead of the disciples to Jerusalem* and they were amazed because He knew He would be crucified. Well, the same thought pattern is smoothly cross-referenced in Peter's epistles (1&2). And to me, this is really amazing. **1 Peter 2:20-21**, *"For what credit is there if when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God. For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to **follow in His***

*steps, who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth; and while being reviled, He did not revile in returns; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but **kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously.***” Correlation: they literally followed in His steps before & after He left.

You and I, we have to remember that when the cultural winds start to shift and bills like the “Equality” Act are being thrown around that threaten religious freedom and our freedom to operate according to conscience, that’s the purpose God has called us to. By the way the “Equality” Act would force businesses and churches to hire LGBT and transgender people even if they aren’t qualified for the job. It would force doctors against their conscience to help people commit suicide or find doctors who would do it. Now you can commit “thought crimes” for thinking differently than them. But **like Moses’ parents and the midwives in Egypt, we won’t fear the king’s wicked edict. We will fear God and be His instruments of faith in our generation** (Ex. 1:15-22; Heb. 11:23). We’ll obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29) and entrust ourselves to Him.

❖ **Cultural Living Tip: Fear God more than the king. When fearing God means disobeying the king, entrust Yourself to the One who judges righteously.**

And pray that this “*INequality Act*” legislation would get shut down for good.

Now, back to the parable, what’s really interesting is these men give themselves a self-indictment in Matthew’s parallel account. When Jesus says, “Therefore when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vine-growers?” this is their response, “*He will bring those wretches to a wretched end, and will rent out the vineyard to other vine-growers who will pay him the proceeds at the proper seasons*” (Mt. 21:40-41). Jesus affirms their self-indictment by saying two things. 1) He will give the vineyard to others and 2) He backs it up with Scripture.

Who are the other vine-growers in verse 9?

- **Other vine growers = The apostles and the Church, comprised mainly of Gentiles.**

Ultimately, the literal kingdom with land and everything is going to be handed to a future Jewish generation in the Millennial Kingdom but as we’ll see, the teaching is also there that the stewardship of God’s vineyard in a sense has come to the Gentiles to make Israel jealous (Rom. 11:11) and He has the authority to make that transfer. It is sobering to think, like we did the last time we were in Mark, that we are now in the blessing place that Israel was – not that we’ve totally replaced Israel – but that we’ve been grafted into *the spiritual blessings* of the New Covenant.

And this is the first of **3 Figures of Every Believer in the Church** that we’ll look at.

1. Every believer is a vine-grower in God’s vineyard.

We all have resources, spiritual gifts, talents, and the gospel to bear fruit for God with (Eph. 3). And the question is now, “*Are we good stewards of His vineyard? Are we cultivating fruit for the Owner to enjoy? Is there a cluster of grapes in our lives to satisfy His hunger? A cup of sweet juice for Him to sip on?*” We are the new vine-growers for this Gentile period who are to bring forth fruit for God and last time we look at the different way we can bear fruit: Physically, vocationally and ministerially/spiritually. God has empowered us to bear fruit in these ways.

In another figurative sense we could also say He’s taking the vineyard **from the chief priests and giving it to a new “kingdom of priests”** made up of all those who believe in Him. Again, a fascinating cross reference between 1 Peter 2 and Mark 12. **1 Peter 2:9-10** says:

“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession so that you might proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for you were once not a people, but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”

So it is biblical to think of believers and the Church as “priests” who have been entrusted in this generation with the gospel of the kingdom. **Israel had a priesthood (Ex. 28:1) but the Church “is” a priesthood.**^{vi} In the OT the high priest and priests interceded between God and men but in the NT, Jesus is our High Priest who gave us direct access to God and we intercede between Him and sinners by proclaiming the gospel – an acceptable sacrifice.

2. Every believer is also a “priest” for God. (1 Peter 2:9-10)

This doesn’t mean that we should all go get robes and tall hats and golden staffs. It’s figurative. There are **7 major figures of the Church in the NT** and this is one: *The High Priest & Kingdom of Priests*. **I dedicated this week’s devotional to this fun and transformative figure of the believer-priest.** The others are: *The Shepherd & the Sheep; The Vine & the Branches; The Head and the Body; The Last Adam and the New Creation; The Bridegroom & the Bride;* and lastly, *The Chief Cornerstone and Living Stones of God’s Temple.*

But Jesus affirms the **vineyard responsibility transfer** by quoting in **verses 10-11**, a portion of the Hallel (meaning *Praise*) which is a portion of the psalms (ch. 113-118). This was sung in connection with **Passover** and it’s fresh in their minds because of that and because this is what they were singing out of at the Royal Entry when they sang Hosannah.

“Have you not even read the Scripture: ‘The stone which the builders rejected, this became the chief cornerstone; this came about from the Lord, and it is marvelous in our eyes?’”

If you don’t know what a cornerstone is, it’s the most important stone in an ancient structure. It holds the structure together and would be laid down first to guide the whole construction project. It’s like the corner post for your fencing. It tells the builders where and how to build and lays the foundation to be built on. Well, Jesus is the cornerstone of God’s “temple” and what you do with this stone determines whether you are part of the temple and building on His foundation.

❖ Jesus is the Chief Cornerstone that guides our lives and what we build our lives upon.

Just like the Jewish leaders stumbled over Jesus and the kingdom was taken away, (Mt. 21:43), so we’ve got to make the decision about Jesus as well that determines whether or not you get into the kingdom of God and become part of His “temple”. As the Chief Cornerstone. Jesus promised judgment in Matthew 21:44 for tripping over or letting the Stone of Himself fall on you, said you’ll be broken to pieces and scattered like dust. So what you do with Jesus is the most important decision you’ll make in your life. You want to accept the Cornerstone or you’ll be separated from God.

It’s not only a matter of eternal destiny, not that that’s not the most important, but folks, **Jesus is the only thing you want to build your life on.** Anything else is sinking sand. It leads to confusion, misery, mess, hopelessness, etc. Just look at the state of our culture today and how far it has fallen from where it began. It started out wise and fruitful because the founding fathers of this country knew the Trinitarian God and founded it on biblical principles. But since then, we’ve accepted manmade philosophies like evolution and we’re seeing the worthless, sour fruition of it. The culture has no foundation for anything because they’ve rejected the Cornerstone. What are you going to do with the Precious Cornerstone?

In conclusion I want you to know that if you've accepted Christ as your Savior, you're part of His temple structure that He's building. **1 Peter 2:4-8.**

*“And coming to Him as to a living stone which has been rejected by men, but is choice and precious in the sight of God, you also, as living stones, are being built up as a **spiritual house** for a **holy priesthood**, to offer up **spiritual sacrifices** acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For this is contained in Scripture: ‘Behold, I lay in Zion a choice stone, a precious cornerstone, and he who believes in Him will not be disappointed.’ This precious value, then, is for you who believe; but for those who disbelieve, ‘The stone which the builders rejected, this became the very cornerstone,’ and, ‘A stone of stumbling and rock of offense.’”*

There's a lot in that but let's just see from this that each of us is a unique, living stone.

3. Every believer is a unique, living stone in God's "temple". (1 Peter 2:4-8)

Israel had a temple (Ex. 25:8) but the Church “is” a temple (Eph. 2:21). Through the Holy Spirit God dwells in His Church temple-believers (1 Cor. 3:9; Heb. 3:6). We're not all the same, shaped like little perfect bricks, but more like the altar in the desert which was made out of uncut stones (Exodus 20:22; Deuteronomy 27:5), like Jesus who Daniels said comes and destroys the Gentile kingdoms during the Tribulation – the “*stone cut without human hands*” (Dan. 2:32, 45). There's so much imagery here folks.

But as living stones, carved by the sovereign hands of God throughout our lives and given gifts by the Spirit that we didn't choose, we are all important to the temple structure. The Church is made up of people who are joined to each other as stones are joined in a building. Just like a building, every Christian “stone” is dependent on the cornerstone and on other “stones”. If one stone is removed, the entire structure is weakened. This is why it's important for you to be here, be involved, and be walking with God. Just like in Jenga, with every piece that is removed, the building just gets weaker.

Lord, thank You for all of the imagery we've experienced today that show us who You are, what You are like, what You desire, what Your overall historical redemptive program is doing, and just how privileged we are to be a part of it as vine-growers, priests, and stones. My prayer is that all of this amazing figurative language between Peter and Peter's spiritual mentee Mark would sink deep into our thought patterns and have a transformative effect on how we view ourselves and how we view the world and the lost generation in which we find ourselves. May we be fruitful vine-growers, interceding priests, and strong, present, supportive living stones.

ⁱ William Lane, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: Vol. 2* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), 413.

ⁱⁱ Frank Turek, *Cross-Examined video: Guess who has the burden of proof!*

ⁱⁱⁱ Dave Wyrzten, *Luxurious Vineyards Wasted*, Truth Encounter devotional from September 25 2020.

^{iv} John MacArthur, *The Rejected Cornerstone*, <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/41-60/the-rejected-cornerstone>, accessed 26 February 2021.

^v Lane, 419.

^{vi} Nelson Miles, *Theology 3: Ecclesiology, the study of the doctrine of the Church*, Frontier School of the Bible.