

THE PARABLE OF THE VINEYARD OWNER
AND THE MURDERED SON
MARK 11:27-12:12

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Richie grew up in the church. He was involved in the church youth group for several years. His parents were Christians. He attended a good public school. He had just a tremendous youth pastor--- I won't tell you who he was. He had a lot of things going for him.

But Richie had a rebellious streak. He picked bad friends. He got involved with drugs. He got in trouble at school. He pushed the limits at church. He had brushes with the law. He eventually dropped out of school and out of church activities. He turned his back on the spiritual opportunities that had been offered to him.

How does God view someone like Richie? How does God view an individual who has known the truth of God and yet resists it? How does God view a church that strays away from the Bible? And how does God view a nation that has been greatly blessed by Him and yet strays from the godly principles upon which it was founded?

In our passage today Jesus provides us with the divine perspective on a nation and its leaders who stray away from the blessings of God. By examining this story we can learn about how the Lord views our own unresponsiveness when we resist the truth of God and what we should do about it.

I.

First, in vv. 27-33 of Mark #11 we are exposed to THE BACKGROUND OF THE PARABLE: THE PUGNACITY OF THE TENANT FARMERS. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE BACKGROUND OF THE PARABLE...) "Pugnacity" means "quarrelsomeness" or "contentiousness." I had to find a "P" word that would fit my outline.

It is the week preceding the crucifixion of Jesus. Tensions are mounting in Jerusalem. Jesus made His Triumphal Entry into the city on Palm Sunday. On Monday He threw the money changers and merchants out of the temple courtyard. Now it is Tuesday.

In v. 27 we are told, "**And they--- Jesus and His disciples--- came again to Jerusalem. And as he was walking in the temple, the chief priests and the scribes and the elders came to him...**" (TEMPLE 02) Jesus spent most of His time during this last week in the temple courtyard. He taught here every day.

It was in the outer court of the temple, the Court of the Gentiles, where Jesus had kicked the money changers and animal sacrifice sellers out. Were they back in business in this area? We are not told. My suspicion is that they were not. Jesus was teaching in

this outer courtyard area (COURT-OF-THE-GENTILES), and there were probably large crowds of people who were listening to Him. The holy zeal of this popular Galilean rabbi combined with the unhappiness of the religious pilgrims about the corrupt business in this market may have kept the money changers and merchants out. But this also fueled the anger of the religious leaders who benefited financially from this market.

So the religious leaders confronted Jesus. The chief priests and scribes and elders were the three groups that constituted the Sanhedrin--- that 71 member high council of Judaism that met in the colonnaded area nearby. Probably this was an official delegation sent from the Sanhedrin. The scribes were the rabbis who were educated interpreters and teachers of Jewish law. The elders were laymen who headed up the dominant Jewish families of the region. They were men of power and influence and money. (PROJECTOR OFF)

These three groups were sometimes at odds with each other. But here they were united against what they perceived to be a common threat. Jesus had alienated each of these three factions. In cleansing the Court of the Gentiles in the temple compound Jesus had angered the family of the high priest in particular, because it controlled the temple and the market that Jesus had just ejected. Jesus had out argued and embarrassed the scribes on several occasions. He had also denied, and acted against, the tradition of the elders. All three groups were concerned about Jesus' popular support.

Thus in v. 28 they confronted Jesus about His credentials and authority to do and say what He had been doing and saying: **“By what authority are you doing these things, or who gave you this authority to do them?”** Credentials and authority were a big deal in Judaism. Where you got your education and who ordained you said much about your religious position. To be a rabbi, or teacher of the Law, one had to be ordained by a group of at least three rabbis. Ultimately this authority of ordination was seen as coming from the Sanhedrin. Jesus presented Himself as a rabbi. He had been ordained by God at the baptism of John, but He had not been ordained by what this group regarded as proper authorities.

Besides needing to be properly ordained, if someone was going to teach about the Law and what it meant, the right way to do it was to appeal to the teaching of other rabbis, or to the rulings of the Sanhedrin. This Jesus taught about the Law. But He didn't quote other rabbis. He quoted only the Old Testament and spoke often from His own authority. Mark earlier recorded that the crowds were amazed at Jesus' teaching, because He was not teaching like the scribes did.

Then, too, Jesus had done miracles that were inconsistent with the tradition of the scribes. He healed people on the Sabbath, which the scribes and Pharisees were certain involved work, which was not permitted on the Sabbath. The previous day Jesus had thrown people out of the temple without any authorization from the chief priest or the Sanhedrin.

So in confronting Jesus before the crowds in the temple, the religious elite hoped to discredit Jesus. They hoped to gain an admission from Him that He had no authority to

do and say what He had been doing and saying. If He claimed that it came from God, or that He did it on His own authority, then He opened Himself up to the charge of blasphemy.

What this encounter also demonstrates is that Jesus had not openly identified Himself as the Messiah. He had made no public, verbal claim to be the Messiah prophesied in the Old Testament. Of course He was, and His miracles demonstrated that. But the rabbis had charged Him earlier with getting His power from Satan.

Jesus responded to their request with the common rabbinic technique of answering a question with a question: **“Was the baptism of John from heaven or from man?”** By that question He implied that His authority came from the same source as did John the Baptist's authority. It was also the baptism of John accompanied by the visible descent of the Holy Spirit upon Him that marked the inauguration of His power.

If the religious leaders say that John's authority came from heaven, they will open themselves to the criticism of not believing and supporting John whose primary mission was to prepare the way for the Messiah. They would, in effect, be recognizing Jesus' authority. If the leaders say that John's authority came only from men, they will discredit themselves in front of the people. (PROJECTOR ON--- LUKE 20:6) In Luke's account of this story the leaders say, **“...the people will stone us to death.”** Obviously John the Baptist was very popular with the masses.

These guys were trapped by a brilliant question. Their hesitation reflected a deeper problem. (PROJECTOR OFF) Their concern was not for what was right or true. It was for what was expedient, what was safe, what was popular. When spiritual leadership becomes concerned about what is popular or personally beneficial at the expense of truth and righteousness, then there is a problem.

Thus in v. 33 the leaders responded, **“We do not know.”** Jesus added, **“Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.”**

This incident is introductory to the parable that follows. The parable is told for the benefit of these religious leaders. They are one of the two sets of main characters who are symbolized in this parable. They will be the pugnacious tenant farmers. They are portrayed in this little story that Jesus tells as rebellious, as cruel, as hardhearted. That is an accurate description of the true character of the religious leaders. Their question about authority in this encounter with Jesus is really a cover for concern about their own power and position and money. Because of that selfish preoccupation they oppose the will of God, and they are about to kill the Messiah.

There is a warning here, especially to us who are in Christian leadership, whether we are pastors or teachers or elders or deacons or lay leaders. We need to watch out about the attitude that we have toward our positions of spiritual responsibility. We hold them in trust. We don't own them. We are accountable toward God for our behavior in these positions.

There is also a warning to Christians in general. We need to watch out for Christian leaders who become overly concerned about their position and authority and money, especially when they begin to sacrifice their integrity in order to preserve or to improve those things to give them a personal advantage.

II.

In #12 we come to THE PARABLE. In vv. 1-8 what especially stands out is THE PATIENCE OF THE LANDOWNER. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. THE PARABLE: THE PATIENCE OF THE LANDOWNER) Mark says that Jesus spoke to "them" in parables. He records only one of these parables. The "them" is clearly the religious leaders.

The parable itself is based upon the subject of viticulture, or the science of growing grapes. I have a couple of grapevines in my backyard. But I have not been especially successful in making them fruitful. I am limited in my understanding of the broader subject of viticulture. What I know about it comes from reading the Biblical sources.

Growing grapes was an important part of the economy in Israel. Jesus begins the parable by describing what was typically involved in planting a vineyard. (VINEYARD WALL) A wall of stone, or sometimes thorn bushes, was used to keep out foxes, wild boar and people. The wine press was usually a shallow pool cut into the soft limestone rock. (ANCIENT VINEYARD) It was connected by a narrow channel that led to a vat below it that was also cut into the limestone. The tower was built to provide shelter and storage and a vantage point to be used for security purposes.

In many of your Bibles much of v. 1 is capitalized. That is because it is largely a quotation from Isaiah #5 v. 2. (PROJECTOR OFF) Jesus intentionally referred to that Old Testament passage because in it Israel was compared to a vineyard that failed to bring forth grapes. Because of that failure God promised to destroy that vineyard. This parable of Jesus is also going to involve a judgment from God.

The religious leaders were very much aware that Israel in the Old Testament was compared several times to a vineyard. (PROJECTOR ON--- TEMPLE GRAPEVINE) The temple nearby had a sculpture of a grapevine 100 feet high constructed around the main door of the temple proper. It was plated with gold, and jewels were placed where the grapes would be.

Jesus gives the parable about the vineyard a different twist than it had in the Old Testament. Here the landowner rents out the vineyard to other farmers. (PROJECTOR OFF) That was actually a typical situation in the time of Jesus. Much of the Jordan valley and some of the Galilee highland were owned by absentee landlords who had other people work their land. In these situations there were three possible legal arrangements.

The owner might provide the seeds and materials and might give a small wage and a third or fourth of the produce to the tenant farmer. Or the owner might rent out the land

for a set fee. Or he might establish a lease and get a set amount of the produce of the harvest. It was this third legal arrangement that was at work in Jesus' story.

In this parable each of the major elements and most of the action have a symbolic significance. The vineyard, as noted, symbolizes Israel. The landlord is God. The tenant farmers are the Jewish religious leaders.

Notice in v. 1 that the landowner does everything that is necessary to ensure a good crop. He prepares the soil. He plants the vines. He makes the wall. He builds the tower. He constructs the wine press. He gets the farmers to take care of it.

That is also how the Lord treated Israel. (PROJECTOR ON--- PSALM 44:2) In Psalm 44 v. 2 the author says to the Lord, "**...you with your own hand drove out the nations;/ but then You planted [our fathers]...**" There are many other longer accounts in the Old Testament about God's establishment of, and care for, the Jewish people.

If Israel was a rich vineyard, how much richer a vineyard are we in the church of Christ. In Ephesians #1 Paul says that we have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ. (PROJECTOR OFF) We have been given the permanent indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. We have the entire Bible at our disposal. We have Jesus Christ who leads the church. We have the testimony about Jesus from the New Testament, which was unclear to the Jewish people in previous days. We have the testimony and lessons of the saints from 2000 years of church history.

Our country has been greatly blessed. We cannot claim the specific promises which God made to Israel. But the blessing which we Americans experience comes from the fact that our country was founded upon, and has largely operated upon, Biblical principles.

The parable here focuses upon the human leadership that is entrusted with the care of the vineyard. According to Leviticus #19 a new vineyard in Israel was to go three years without any fruit being collected from it. In the fourth year all of its grapes were to be given to the Lord. Finally in the fifth year its produce could be used by the vine growers. We don't know if this Old Testament principle was still followed in Jesus' day. If it was, it might help to explain why the tenant farmers came to think of the vineyard as their own.

Whenever the first harvest was collected, an agent would typically be sent by the owner to collect the share of the produce that was rightfully his. But there was a problem in this parable. We know from Jewish literature in Jesus' day that there were often problems between landowners and the tenant farmers. Jesus says that the first servant who was sent was beaten and sent home empty-handed. Another one was sent, and he was wounded in the head and treated shamefully. More were sent, and these were either beaten or killed.

These servants, or slaves--- the Greek word can be translated either way--- were intended to represent the prophets of God. The fruit that they came to collect was

righteousness or obedience. A number of times in the Old Testament the prophets were specifically called "God's servants." These prophets had likewise been resisted and cruelly mistreated by the leaders of Israel. (PROJECTOR ON--- JEREMIAH 7:25) In Jeremiah #7 v. 25 the Lord says, **"From the day that your fathers came out of the land of Egypt to this day, I have persistently sent all my servants the prophets to them, day after day."**

What response did they receive? The following verse (JEREMIAH 7:26) says, **"Yet they did not listen to me or incline their ear, but stiffened their neck. They did worse than their fathers."**

In our parable there is an ascending degree of violence by which the landowner's servants are treated. The listeners recognized that no landowner would have tolerated such behavior for so long. Yet that is just what happened in the history of Israel. This parable, in fact, is God's history of viticulture. It is a picture of the patience of God in the face of incredible resistance from His people, especially their leaders. The nation was always going astray. God was always sending His prophets. Those prophets were always getting mistreated, especially at the hands of the nation's leaders.

In Acts #7 Stephen would say to these same religious leaders after the death and resurrection of Jesus (ACTS 7:51), **"You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. (ACTS 7:52) Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered..."**

What stands out in this history is the incredible patience of God in the face of the ungratefulness of Israel, especially its leaders. In the parable the patience of the landowner and the ungratefulness of the tenants both reach their maximum in the sending of the son. Jesus calls him "a beloved son." Several scholars make a case that "beloved" means "only." By what happens in the rest of the story it is clear that this son is the only son. For there are no other heirs to the father's land. The father seems to be taking a great risk in sending his son. Indeed it seems to be a foolish risk. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Verses 7 & 8 describe the son's disgraceful treatment. When the son shows up, the tenant farmers may have assumed that the old man was dead. These tenants knew the law well enough to understand that if the son was gone, there would be no one else who would have a claim on the vineyard. Ownerless property was claimed on a first come first served basis.

These tenants were sure to be first in line to stake their claim. The only thing that seemed to be necessary was to get this son and only heir out of the way. Thus vv. 7 and 8 tell us, **"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." They didn't even bother to see about a proper burial, which was a terrible offense in the ancient Near East.

Jesus was picturing what the religious leaders were about to do to Him. They wanted the inheritance for themselves. They liked the current religious system. They were comfortable and happy in their privileged position. They didn't want a Messiah to come and mess things up. This Jesus was a threat to them. He had to go.

What a patient, loving God Israel had. What a patient loving God we have. For that we have much reason to be thankful. Charles Spurgeon once described the love of Jesus in this way: **"If you reject him, he answers you with tears; if you wound him, he bleeds out cleansing; if you kill him, he dies to redeem; if you bury him, he rises again to bring resurrection. Jesus is love made manifest."**

The Lord is patient in exposing us to the truth. So often we reject it the first time and the second time and the third time. We make fun of this born-again business. We criticize the people who present the Gospel. Sometimes we pick on genuine Christians. But God is so patient toward us. He gives us more opportunities.

Most of us here finally have decided to trust in Jesus as our Savior. I hope that you have. It is really very simple. Jesus died to pay the penalty for our sins by dying on the cross. We can experience this salvation simply by placing our trust in Jesus. All that is required is a simple act of faith.

We who are Christians are children of God. But like children we can become rebellious. We can stray away from the Lord,. We can resist God's working in certain parts of our lives. We can harbor sin. We can get mad at preachers or teachers or friends who knowingly, or unknowingly, touch on these sensitive areas. But God is so patient. He desires so much to have a good relationship with us. Like a perfect father He doesn't give up on us.

III.

He will, however, use discipline if that becomes necessary. With those who resist the gospel there comes a time when the Lord's patience does run out. Thus in vv. 9-12 we come to **THE LESSON FROM THE PARABLE: THE PUNISHMENT OF GOD.** (PROJECTOR ON--- III. THE LESSON FROM THE...) In v. 9 Jesus asked the listening religious leaders what the owner of the vineyard would do. According to Matthew #21 v. 41 the leaders themselves responded (MATTHEW 21:41), saying, **"He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons."** From our passage it seems that Jesus summarized their answer and affirmed it.

A landowner in such a situation would have had access to government help to subdue riotous tenants. He could have indeed brought harsh judgment upon such evil farmers. It would have been completely justified. It also would have been appropriate to rent out the vineyard to other tenants. (PROJECTOR OFF)

In answering as they did, these religious leaders pronounced their own sentence. They were the evil tenant farmers in the parable, and they were about to kill the beloved son. Their judgment would soon come. In a few years the Roman armies would come to Jerusalem and tear down the walls of the city and demolish the temple and brutally kill most of these religious leaders. Many of them would be crucified. The privileged position that they had enjoyed in the plan of God would be given over to Gentiles, who would come to be the primary leaders in the church of Christ. It was the just punishment of God.

Jesus continued by referring to Psalm 118. That was the Passover psalm that was chanted and sung often during Passover week. According to vv. 10 & 11 Jesus quoted it, saying, **“The stone that the builders rejected/ has become the cornerstone;/ this was the Lord’s doing,/ and it is marvelous in our eyes.”** This was the psalm that was quoted when Jesus was welcomed into Jerusalem. Now it appears again. This time the passage quoted involves a stone. In its original context the stone was one that was passed over in the building of the temple. But it came to be used as the key stone in the construction of the gate into the temple. There is uncertainty as to whether the reference (PROJECTOR ON--- CAPSTONE/ CORNERSTONE) is to a cornerstone on the bottom of the gate, or to a capstone on the top of the arch.

The stone in view in the original context of Psalm 118 appeared to have reference to Israel, which was despised by the other nations and carried off into captivity. But then it was returned from captivity and reestablished in its own land. Some rabbis in Jesus' day said that the stone in Psalm 118 referred to Abraham. Some said that it referred to David. Some said that it referred to the Messiah. Jesus says here that it applies to Him. He was about to be passed over by the religious leaders of Israel and killed. But He would rise from the dead and become the cornerstone of the church. The next time He would come in judgment. (PROJECTOR OFF)

According to v. 12 in our passage, **“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.”**

The Lord is so patient with us. As unbelievers He seeks us out and offers us opportunities to trust in Jesus. But there is a limit to His patience. There comes a time when He will punish us eternally if we continue to reject the gospel. Sometimes He will even punish people during their earthly lifetimes.

The Lord always remains as a perfect father to true believers. But a perfect father recognizes that there are times when His children need a healthy dose of discipline. Richie claimed to be a Christian. I don't know whether he was or not. But the Lord was very patient in trying to get his attention. Richie was resistant. He turned his back on the Lord and went away. One day Richie had a close encounter of the motorcycle kind. He was going too fast on his bike, and he failed to negotiate a curve. He ended up wrapped around a tree. A paramedic from our church was the first medical person on the scene.

He told me later that when he peeled Richie off of the tree, he was sure that he was gone. But the Lord is so patient and so good. Richie survived. I saw him in the hospital soon afterward, and he was in tough shape. But Richie recovered with very little permanent damage. There was no doubt in my mind that this accident was a wake up call from the Lord. I'm not sure that Richie got the message. The last I knew he had still not straightened out his relationship with the Lord.

Let's not let that kind of tragedy happen to us. God is patient with us. But there are limits to that patience. His righteous and holy character will not tolerate our rebellion forever. We need to respond to the patient love of God, or we will eventually face His judgment or His discipline.