

Jason Upchurch - Mark 12:1-12 - The Good News of the New Tenants

Well, it has been a little while since we've seen Jesus use parables and this one we come to is an absolute doozy on a number of levels. It's brilliant, damning, clever, historic and memorable all at the same time.

There is so much going on here it's hard to nail everything down. But let me give you the big picture and then we'll dive in. Big picture here is: If you don't bear fruit for God you will be judged by God. That's true with these religious leaders, it's true for everyone.

When God does a work in someone's life - a genuine work of salvation and regeneration - there is always change. That change is not something we have to manufacture, it's something that just happens naturally as a result of being reborn.

Just like when we're born we naturally breathe air, when someone is born of the Holy Spirit they naturally do good works.

The Bible often refers to this change and the good works that follow as "fruit." Just like a fruit tree bears fruit to eat, so too the people of God are to bear fruit for God.

What's the fruit we are supposed to bear? I think we can answer that in a few ways. I think part of the fruit is the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self control. These qualities should be growing in the life of a believer. And there's a sense in which they should spring up naturally over time.

There is also the peaceful fruit of righteousness which is living a godly life. It's not just our demeanor or attitude, but our actual lives should look different. Righteousness should be more and more obvious in private and in public.

John the Baptist calls people to bear fruit in keeping with repentance. So there's a fruit of repentance where we begin noticing our sin, feeling more sorrow for our sin - not the consequences but the sin itself - and we desire to make right what has been affected by our sin.

The problem is that many people can appear to be saved, appear to be part of the people of God, yet they produce no real fruit for God.

That's the problem with these religious leaders and therefore the problem in the parable. The tenants were given the vineyard and the owner expected there to be fruit. He expected a harvest and there was nothing. There was no fruit. In fact rather than fruit there was death and bloodshed. And so God would judge them. We'll unpack here in a minute.

Here's where we're at. Remember this is Tuesday morning of Passion week. This is the long day of Jesus going back and forth with the religious leaders. In the previous section, Jesus just had the showdown about "where does Jesus get the authority to clear out Temple" and the sinful money laundering operation going on there the day before? "Who gave you the authority to do that?" The religious leaders wouldn't answer Jesus's question about authority so he doesn't answer their question about authority.

And the very next thing Jesus does is to actually take a shot at their own corrupted authority. And he does so through this parable. And it is a warning to them and to all who wield any kind of religious authority wrongly to be very careful because God knows what is in our hearts and God will judge.

The parable is a condemnation of the corrupted Jewish leadership and all of sinful unbelieving Judaism. Jesus lumping these guys in with all the corrupt Jewish leadership throughout the ages. And condemning them all.

Now, just so we're all on the same page, let's quickly identify the characters in the parable. The vineyard owner and maker is who? God.

The tenants are the Jews and really the unbelieving Jewish leaders and all those who reject Jesus.

The different servants that get beat up or killed are the prophets God sent over the millennia. And the Son is Jesus. And it is a parable about the rebellion of the unbelieving Jewish people throughout the generations of God's patience and kindness toward them.

Now, I want to begin in an unlikely spot, but this will help us understand the historical connection Jesus is making.

1. The history. One thing you need to know about this parable is the historical nature of it. Jesus is borrowing this parable and tweaking it a little from the book of Isaiah. **Turn to Isa. 5:1-7**

In the opening chapters of the book of Isaiah we see a parable of a vineyard. Israel was often referred to as a vineyard and many places in Israel are incredibly fertile. So it was a very apt metaphor. Jesus even says that he is the true vine, we are the branches. So that picture exists even to this day for us.

But here in Isaiah the prophet is warning the people that God is going to judge them for their sin. And he does it using a song about a vineyard. The song is a lament song. A sad song of a beautiful vineyard and the utter destruction of that same vineyard. **Read 1-7**

So we understand that the vineyard is Israel. Israel was a vineyard prepared by God. He put them in a fertile land, God slowly removed their enemies like a farmer would slowly remove stones from a field. A vineyard would often have a watchtower in the middle for safety and security - and Jerusalem is likely what is being referred to as the watchtower. Jerusalem was the stronghold in the middle of the county that was the rallying point for not only religious activity, but safety and security in times of war.

Israel had everything it needed to thrive. It had the land, the people, the Word of God, and God's blessing. But what happened? **Read 2b**

This is a play on words. There's a couple plays on words here. God expected it to bear grapes - wine producing grapes. But instead it produced small worthless berries. Inedible berries that grew on thorn bushes. Actually the word associated with these wild grapes is "to give off an odor." These grapes were disgusting and stinky to the point of being offensive.

This is what happened with Israel. God had planted the people in the midst of the land, expected them to produce fruit and instead they become offensive, smelly, inedible grapes.

If you look at the history of Israel, the height of the Kingdom was during David and Solomon's reign, shortly after the Kingdom split in two and it was basically one long train wreck of idolatry and sin. God had put the people in the land and the people rejected God.

In verses 3-4 we see that God couldn't have done anything more to help the people. He gave them every opportunity, every blessing, every chance to bear fruit. **Read 3-4**

God is saying "What else could I have done?" We're reading through **2 Kings** in our family devotions right now. And it's chronicling this downward destruction of Israel in the north and Judah in the south. God was so patient and so kind and many times blessed Israel and Judah despite their sin. He did that to keep his covenant to Abraham and David.

There really was nothing more that God could have done to help Israel flourish. And you'd think that for all deliverance from enemies God provided the Jews would have repented and turned to Yahweh, but they didn't. It was almost as though the more he blessed them the more they sinned. So what happened? **Read 5-6**

God gave Israel this amazing land and amazing blessing and God himself would see to it that it was all removed. He would destroy his own vineyard because what he wanted was justice and what he got was bloodshed. What he wanted was righteousness and what he got was outcries from his people.

And that's exactly what happened. God used the Assyrians to haul the northern Kingdom of Israel away into exile - captivity - around 732BC. They would never return to the land.

And in 586 BC God sent the Babylonians to take Judah into captivity. Some of them would return some 70 years later. God wasn't playing when he threatened judgement.

The rest of this chapter are the specific sins that God accused Israel of. Everything from drunkenness to reveling in their sin to slum lords. They had become treacherous and God was going to judge them for it.

This is the backdrop of the parable Jesus tells back in **Mark 12. Turn back there.** So we've got the history.

2. The Kindness of the Father. Read 1-2

So there are enough similarities that it's obvious what Jesus is pointing to. He's point to the Isaiah passage: all the elements are basically the same.

But here the issue is who is running the vineyard. The judgement that will fall here is not on the whole vineyard. It's actually only on those in charge of the vineyard. Those who have authority of the vineyard. The religious leaders.

Now, before we move on, let me just say a couple things about parables as a way of reminder. First, parables aren't told to make a 1:1 connection with absolutely everything. When it says that the season for fruit came and there was no fruit we're not supposed to assume that God only expected righteous living occasionally. He wants it all the time.

But God does expect righteousness and it never came from Israel. They always fell back into the same sins over and over.

Second, we'll see in a bit that the land owner seems a little naive. He keeps sending people to get the fruit and they keep getting beat up. And when he sends his son it's almost as though he has no idea what's going to happen to him.

We know, of course, that God knew what would happen to his son. God sent his son into the world to save sinners. The Father knew and planned the death of his son. This is where parables break down a little. The point here is to get an emotional response; that's often the design of parables. We are to sympathize with the Father: he gave them so much opportunity and so much grace and even sent his son, what else could he do?

You ever see parents or teachers or whoever give their child like a 19th chance at something? And you're like "Can you just spank em already? It's painful for me to watch?" That's the emotional draw of the parable. That's what Jesus wants you to feel. Just spank em already.

So we have the history / the kindness of the Father

3. Persecution of the prophets. Read 3-5

This is the story of all the prophets that God sent to Israel over the years. You remember Ahab who tried killing dozens of prophets at a time? Elijah was persecuted, Elisha was persecuted.

Even Jesus says he has to die in Jerusalem because you can't be a prophet and not die in Jerusalem. It's like an axiom.

In fact, look back at **Matt 23** for a moment. We've seen this before, but it's worth another glance because it's Matthew's inclusion of this same Tuesday. **Read 23:29-36**

This is what the leaders in Jerusalem always do. And ironically what they want to do is make the graves really nice for the prophets. They want to decorate their graves. And Jesus says that actually makes them complicit in their murder. And the longer they go on, the more deaths they are liable for.

This was the lot, as it were, of a prophet. They were destined for abuse. The last prophet - John the Baptist - was no different, was he? He was murdered. Jesus will be murdered. The apostles will be murdered. Some they beat, others they killed.

4. Persecution of Jesus. Read 6-8

So now we come to Jesus. The beloved son of the owner is Jesus.

Jesus knew full well what this week would hold for him. He knew he would be killed. He knew it would be the religious leaders who would do it.

Now if you remember from Isaiah's passage that God says "What more could I have done for my vineyard?" God did everything he possibly could. Here, the connection is that God sent his only Son. What more could God have done to convince people?

This is really how blind they all are. The very Son of God is standing in front of them telling them a parable about the Son of God and they totally miss it. They don't make the connection at all. There really is nothing more God could have done to show them the truth, to show them righteousness than what he did in sending Jesus.

Now, again, this is a parable. It's not as though God actually thought the religious leaders wouldn't kill Jesus. I had a dispensational pastor once say that had the religious leaders actually repented right then and there the Kingdom would have been ushered in. Glory would have been inaugurated. That's not true.

Jesus had to die, he had to suffer and he had to rise. There was never any alternative. According to **Acts 4** that's what God had predestined and planned to do.

Now, in the parable the tenants acknowledge the son as the son and want to kill him. They think if they can just kill the son the control will all be theirs. The actual religious leaders never did that. That's where there aren't 1:1 connections in parables. Jesus is just advancing the story here.

But what is certain is that the Son is murdered by religious leaders who hate him and his Father and all the servants his Father sent. They are the exact same as all the people before.

And here's a point I want to make: very few religious leaders in Israel's history actually loved God. And very few in Jesus's day did either. It was millennia of hatred of God. Not Luke warm, not ignorance, but hatred.

I don't know what you think of when you think back to the OT, but it's not a magical story of worship from a better time and people who were more pure. The final kings in Israel were hauled into exile because they were sacrificing their own children on the altar in Samaria. Grottesque. Really, the OT is not about the faithfulness of the people, it's about the faithfulness of God.

And Jesus is calling them out on this. It's not just hatred toward him. It's hatred toward God as well. God's own people - the ones he chose in the OC - often despised him the most.

What is to happen?

Persecution of prophets / Jesus

5. Self condemnation. Read 9

Jesus tells them exactly what their fate will be. Those who put on a charade of godliness but who inwardly hate the Lord will face the wrath of God. God will execute them in eternal damnation.

Interestingly in Matthew's gospel Jesus phrases this as a question: What do you think he'll do to them? And they answer: He will put those miserable wretches to death. They sign their own death warrant! Here Jesus just affirms the judgment that they will die.

What someone does with Jesus - the Son of God - is crucially important for eternal life. Everything comes down to your view of the Son and his authority.

John 3:36: Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life but the wrath of God remains on him.

See there are some who think you can just worship God generically but not Jesus specifically. Just some sort of cookie-cutter god that doesn't really have a lot of definition. But that doesn't work. Because to honor the Father is to honor the Son. You can't honor the Father and reject the Son. They are part and parcel because they are the one God.

And Jesus says their fate is the fate of all who reject the Son: death.

Now, here's an important way in which the parable in Isaiah and the parable here are different. Notice what happens to the vineyard when God judges. **Read 9**

In Isaiah the vineyard is destroyed. What happens here? The vineyard is given over to others.

Who are they others? Well if the vineyard has been under management by the Jews - Israel and Judah - since it was established, who might it be given over to? Here's a hint: it's not the Gentiles. But it includes the Gentiles.

It's given over to the church. All those who believe in Jesus both Jew and Gentile together.

How do we know that? Notice the OT quote Jesus uses here. **Read 10**

We've all probably read this passage, especially in the NT. It's a quote from **Psalms 118:22-23**. Jesus says: Surely you've read this, haven't you? This is talking about me. It's a messianic psalm.

It's another picture. The very stone that builders rejected - people who you'd think would know what stones to use in construction - is the very one that has become indispensable. It's become the cornerstone, or the head of the corner. That could mean the foundation stone or it could mean the capstone in an archway, the most important piece in an elaborate structure. But either way this stone that those who seemingly knew what they were doing and rejected, has now become the most important part.

That's Jesus. Now, here's a question: If Jesus is the most important part of the building, what's the building? **Turn to Eph. 2** for a minute.

This is one of several passages where Jesus is referred to as a cornerstone. **Read 2:11-22**

The Gentiles were once far off. But Jesus broke down the dividing wall of hostility. Brought us together through faith in him and now he is creating a brand new building. What's the building according to **Vs. 21**? It's the true Temple in the Lord. The foundation is the prophet and apostles, Jesus is the cornerstone, and we're the super structure. And we are the dwelling place for God.

Listen, Jesus has taken away the rights of spiritual authority from the Jews. And he's given it to believers in him: Jew and Gentile together. There is no more racial distinction in the kingdom at all.

And by the way: he's never turning it back over to just Jews. It will always be believing Jews and Gentiles. There are some who think that at some point in the future God will be done pouring out grace on the Gentiles and turn his attention back solely to the Jews or primarily to the Jews and the answer is absolutely not. Because now the church - Jew and Gentile - is what has inherited the covenants and promises God gave to his people.

This is what Jesus is the cornerstone of: The Church. He is the most important piece of this amazing spiritual structure that he laid down his life to build.

And if you go back to Mark, there's one other interesting thing Jesus **Read Mark 12:10-11**

He says this was the Lord's doing. It was God's design and how do the people respond? It is marvelous in our eyes. It is wonderful, staggering, unbelievable.

This is how we should understand what God has done for us in Christ especially as Gentiles. We had nothing, no purpose no trajectory except hell. And God decided to create a whole new proverbial building to dwell in and he brought us into the plan for no reason except his own grace.

I was thinking about rich people the other day. And I was thinking there are some kids who just grow up in families that have a lot of money. Their families own yachts and Fortune 500 companies and that's just all they've known all their lives. That's not wrong all in and of itself. There's a sense in which that is God's providential design for them.

But imagine you're standing in line at the fair for an elephant ear and some guy next to you says "Hey, I'll tell you what: I'm the CEO of a Fortune 500 company and most of my executives are losers. I'm going to fire them all and why don't you come to work for me? I'll give you a billion dollars to start, I'll train you and bring you in as part of the family."

That would be pretty amazing, wouldn't it? That's what God does when he brings us into the Kingdom. He's taken it away from people who think it's theirs, who think they should have some sort of say. And he graciously gives it to us.

It's absolutely amazing. It's a management overhaul that's happened in the Kingdom that was all the doing of Jesus. And we just reap the benefits.

6. Jesus Wins. **Read 12**

So the epilogue here is that these guys get what Jesus has just said about them. They understand that he is telling the parable about them. They're not dumb because Jesus isn't that subtle.

And they would have arrested them but they're cowards. They fear the crowd. They always fear the crowd. They have no backbone, no internal fortitude. They're always worried about what other people think and so Jesus just runs right over them. And they give up. **Read 12**

They go away. Actually the next group to interact with Jesus is the Pharisees and the Herodians. Jesus is just going to line them up and knock them all down. He's going to expose all of them that their authority is all a sham and that he is the only one who has any true authority in the Temple.

This is both a warning to us and an encouragement to us. It's a warning that God will judge all false religion. He knows our hearts and it's only a matter of time before he sorts us out.

At the same time it's an encouragement. A reminder that if you're in Christ it was the Lord's marvelous doing. He's given the Kingdom to people who didn't deserve it made us part of an amazing superstructure that declares his own glory.

Pray