

The Wicked Tenants

Mark 12:1–12

Turn to Psalm 118 please. Today we'll talk about the parable of the wicked tenants, in Mark 12. The evil renters. Matthew and Mark and Luke all record this parable, and they all record it in Jesus's last days in Jerusalem. In this story Jesus speaks directly to the leaders of Jerusalem. They want to kill him. He warns them about the direction they are on.

Last Sunday we were in the beginning of Mark, and this Sunday we are looking at the Lord's final days. We're skipping over the middle part for now because next Sunday is Palm Sunday, and then Easter after that. So today's parable, on the evil renters, is to get us thinking about the Easter story. After Easter, we will go back and cover the middle chapters of Mark.

1 Psalm 118 and the Stone that the Builders Rejected

At the end of the wicked tenants parable, Jesus quotes from Psalm 118. These are important lines in the parable, and important lines in the New Testament, so we're going to spend a few minutes on Psalm 118.

For the first 21 verses, we read the thankful praise of a victorious hero, coming back into Jerusalem after winning an important battle. The psalm does not say who the hero is, so we won't either. Let's read vv10–21. Listen to the hero.

*All the nations surrounded me, but in the name of the LORD I cut them down.
They surrounded me on every side, but in the name of the LORD I cut them down.
They swarmed around me like bees, but they were consumed as quickly as burning thorns;
in the name of the LORD I cut them down.
I was pushed back and about to fall, but the LORD helped me.
The LORD is my strength and my defense; he has become my salvation.*

*Shouts of joy and victory resound in the tents of the righteous:
"The LORD's right hand has done mighty things!
The LORD's right hand is lifted high; the LORD's right hand has done mighty things!"
I will not die but live, and will proclaim what the LORD has done.
The LORD has chastened me severely, but he has not given me over to death.
Open for me the gates of the righteous; I will enter and give thanks to the LORD.
This is the gate of the LORD through which the righteous may enter.
I will give you thanks, for you answered me; you have become my salvation.*

That's the thankful hero speaking, and you can tell how exhilarated and grateful he is.

2 Rejected Stone Becomes Cornerstone – Psalm 118:22-23

In the ancient world they often used cut stones to use in important buildings. The stones were shaped like a brick, only far too large for one man to carry. They could cut these stones accurately, straight sides and perfect 90⁰ corners.

The foundation would be a rectangle or a square, and they began by positioning the cornerstone very carefully, because they used that stone to line up the rest of the building. Ends and sides had to line up with the cornerstone, and they measured level from that cornerstone.

So the people of Jerusalem see their hero return home thankful and victorious, and they say:
*“The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone;
the LORD has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes.”*

This is not the hero speaking. These are the people who welcome him home, describing what happened to their hero. He is the stone the builders rejected.

Who are the builders? The builders are the power people, the ones who decide who the next leader will be. The important people had rejected the hero. They would not use him. To them he was a defective stone, discarded the way builders throw aside material that’s not usable.

But his remarkable victory that day had changed everything. He was obviously the one that God had chosen, the one God put in place, and the people were delighted. Yes, let’s go and give thanks to God. Too bad about the builders. The LORD has overruled. Now back to Mark 12.

3 The Jewish Leaders – Mark 11:27

As Mark tells the story, it was Sunday when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, and they waved branches and shouted “Hosanna!” That Sunday evening, Jesus went to the temple and looked around, then left. But trouble was brewing. Mark 11:1-11.

On Monday (11:12), Jesus went back to the temple, chased out those who were buying and selling. He turned over the tables of the money exchangers, and those selling doves. He would not let anyone carry their goods in the temple courts. He preached against what they were doing.

The chief priests and law teachers were not there when Jesus did this. But it says in Mark 11:18 that when they heard about this, they wanted to kill Jesus. On Tuesday (11:20), Jesus went back to the temple again.

In Mark 11:27 it says that Jesus was in the temple courts, and the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the elders came to him. Chief priests, teachers of the law, and elders. Our parable begins, “Jesus began to speak to *them*.” That is, to the chief priests, law teachers, and elders.

4 Isaiah's Vineyard Parable

Mark 12:1 - *Jesus then began to speak to them in parables: "A man planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a pit for the winepress and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place. At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants to collect from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. But they seized him, beat him and sent him away empty-handed.*

Isaiah told a similar parable about the people of Judah in Isaiah 5, and Jesus begins much like Isaiah began. Isaiah told about God planting a vineyard, and building a watchtower, and digging a winepress for his vineyard. That vineyard had a wall, too.

In Isaiah, the LORD planted the vineyard, and the vineyard was the house of Israel, the people of Judah. In Isaiah's parable, the problem was the vineyard itself. God had been good to his vineyard, but it would not produce good grapes. God got only wild grapes, small and sour. So the LORD was going to tear down the wall and destroy the vineyard. It was a judgment parable.

So back to Tuesday of Jesus' last week. Jesus was talking to the Jewish leaders, and they were angry enough to kill him, and Jesus was trying to show these people what was really going on, without making them even angrier.

The Jewish leaders will have recognized right away that Jesus was using Isaiah's parable. It starts the same way, with someone planting a vineyard and there is a tower and a winepress and a wall. So the Jewish leaders know that the man who planted the vineyard is God, and that the vineyard itself is the people of Judah.

They also know that it is a judgement parable. God is being good to his people, the vineyard, but they are not responding, they are not giving God his due, which is worship and obedience.

But in Isaiah, the vineyard itself is the problem. In Jesus' parable, the vineyard itself seems fine, so they are trying to figure it out. In Isaiah's parable, there are no renters at all. Now, let's read the story again, and think about Jesus speaking to these angry Jewish leaders:

5 The Tenants, the Servants, and the Son (Mark 12:1–9)

"A man planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a pit for the winepress and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place. At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants to collect from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. But they seized him, beat him and sent him away empty-handed. Then he sent another servant to them; they struck this man on the head and treated him shamefully. He sent still another, and that one they killed. He sent many others; some of them they beat, others they killed.

“He had one left to send, a son, whom he loved. He sent him last of all, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ “But the tenants said to one another, ‘This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.’ So they took him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard. “What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others.

Many servants were sent to the farmers renting the vineyard. The first they beat, the second they humiliated, the third they killed. And the owner sent many more after that, all who got the same kind of treatment. But the owner never got what was due him. Any that came back, got back empty-handed. God treats his people well, and has a right to a warm response from us.

God was patient with these people not giving him his due. These renters knew what they owed. They knew it was fair. They just refused. But God kept sending reminders and messages.

Finally, he sent his loved son. He sent a more important messenger: “surely they will respect my message this time.” But they didn’t. The farm renters treated the son like all the rest. They killed him and threw his body outside, like so much garbage. They didn’t even respect the body of the son they just killed.

Jesus asks the Jewish leaders: What will the owner do? He will come and kill those renters, and give his vineyard to others. How much do the Jewish leaders understand at this point? That is hard to say. According to Matthew, they don’t get it yet, they don’t understand what Jesus is doing until the next part, from Psalm 118 about the rejected stone.

At the end of the parable, the son is outside the vineyard and dead. How would the Jewish leaders have understood the loved son of the parable? If the vineyard was the Jews, the tenants could perhaps have been the Romans, who refused to honour the God of Israel. It is hard to say what they understood at the end of the parable.

6 Jesus: Have you Not Read about the Rejected Stone? – Mark 12:10–11

Then Jesus quoted from Psalm 118: *Haven’t you read this part of Scripture: ‘The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone: the LORD has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes’?*

The key line: *The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.* The rejected stone has become the most important stone, and God did it.

So the stone in Psalm 118 is the son in the parable. The builders in the psalm are the farm renters, the tenants. As the farm renters rejected the owner’s son, so the builders rejected the stone.

This Scripture completes the parable. The beloved son does *not* stay dead outside the vineyard. In some marvelous way, God defends the son and puts the son in the most important place. We're talking about God raising Jesus and exalting him, though that was not known at the time.

Once Jesus quoted from Psalm 118, the stone that the builders rejected, the Jewish leaders got it. God is the vineyard owner, and the Jews are the vineyard. They knew that from Isaiah 5.

Now the Jewish leaders understand that *they* are the evil renters who killed the son, and *they* are the builders who rejected the chosen stone. They now know that Jesus is telling them that because they reject him, God will destroy them, and give their leadership to others.

God was patient with their failure to give him what he had a right to receive, as long as he was sending servants. That changed when God sent the Son. Then it was time to repent, or it was over. That's what Jesus was telling them. They got it.

Jesus was telling them that he was the Christ, the Messiah, and that by rejecting him they were putting themselves under God's judgement. He did not actually say that he was the Christ, but he didn't hide it very deep.

This is in Mark 12, Tuesday of the last week. In Mark 14, very early Friday morning, the high priest said to Jesus, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?" What made the high priest think that Jesus thought he was the Christ? Probably this parable, which Jesus told a crowd of leaders on Tuesday.

All Jesus had actually done was tell a story about a loved son who was murdered, and then he quoted two verses from a psalm. He has said nothing openly. They could not arrest for that. But he did not leave much doubt, and they knew it. As I said earlier, Jesus was trying to show these people what was really going on, without making the situation worse.

As it stands, it is a warning, a stern warning. Jesus was telling those leaders where they were heading. I can almost feel the electricity in the air as Jesus finished, and those leaders realized what he has just told them about who he was, and who they were. Very tense. Very hostile.

7 Leaders' Reaction – Mark 12:12

*Then the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders looked for a way to arrest him because **they knew he had spoken the parable against them**. But they were afraid of the crowd; so they left him and went away.*

Jesus told this on Tuesday. Thursday evening those leaders arrested Jesus. By Friday evening Jesus was dead and buried. And on Sunday, God raised him back to life.

In the parable of the wicked tenants, Jesus warned the leaders. On Monday when he cleared the temple, he was angry. In the parable he was urging them to think about what they were doing, and where they were heading. They still had time. The Son wasn't dead, nor the stone rejected.

I think the Holy Spirit told Jesus that morning, "you need to warn those leaders again where they are heading, you need to be clear, but try not to make them angrier." So Jesus spoke this way, but it did not work.

8 What Should We Take Away from This?

Today, God has given us three pictures of Jesus:

1, Here is how the death of Jesus looks to the Father: *The owner had one left to send, a son, whom he loved. He sent him last of all, saying, 'They will respect my son.' "But the tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' So they took him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard. "What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others.*

2, Here's how the death of Jesus looks to us his followers, on Easter Sunday morning:
*The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone;
the LORD has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes.
The LORD has done it this very day; let us rejoice and be glad.*

3, The third picture is our whole text. We watch Jesus tell this parable to the Jewish leaders. That is, he told it to the wicked tenants. He told it to the builders who were rejecting him. We watch Jesus show them who he is, just slightly veiled, and warn them about what they are doing by quoting a psalm. That's our Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER: Father, thank you for showing us our Lord in action. Thank you for showing us how he acted and what he said. Thank you that you made the rejected stone the cornerstone. It is marvelous in our eyes. We rejoice and are glad. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and into Christ's perseverance. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.