

October 23, 2011

Two Cities in One Vineyard

Mark 12:1-12

INTRODUCTION

In the whole twelfth chapter, Jesus stands in the center of God's city and lectures on some of the most basic and biggest parts of the biblical worldview: the reality of two cities in conflict, in the form of a parable about everyday affairs, the relationship between Christ and Caesar, the resurrection, the greatest commandment, the identity of Christ and the nature of true spirituality. Surely He shouldn't have to teach on such basic concepts to the citizens of God's city! This is Christianity 101. But, as we have already seen, there were imposters in the temple.

You have all heard the expression "Moving from the tree to see the forest." Well this is moving in our vision from the single fig tree to the collection of vines with fruit called a vineyard. God uses both pieces of imagery in the Old Testament to speak about his people. Jesus is making the lesson of the fig tree unmistakable by using the exact same kind of imagery in a much more drawn out form. So is this message just going to be a repeat of "The Earthly People of God as a Cursed Fig Tree"? Well, yes and no! The whole day's teaching in the temple is Jesus unpacking this same judgment against Jerusalem; but each paragraph is like the turning of the diamond to see another profound facet of the same truth.

- THE SPACE AND TIME OF THE EARTHLY VINEYARD
- THE CHARACTER OF THE EARTHLY TENANTS
- THE WHOLE PLANNED BY THE VINEYARD'S OWNER

The Big Idea is that every last bit of gathering and scattering in redemptive history is the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes.

And he began to speak to them in parables (1a)—same day, same audience, same lesson.

DOCTRINE

I. THE SPACE AND TIME OF THE EARTHLY VINEYARD

A) The “Spatial Dimensions” of the Vineyard {1}

1. Here’s the lay of the land in the earthly representation of God’s city in the form of a parable: *A man planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a pit for the winepress and built a tower, and leased it to tenants and went into another country (1b)*. So, notice that God planted a vineyard (so **God** is the owner); He put a fence around for protection (those are the national borders of **Israel**); He dug a pit for the winepress (dual imagery of the two **eternal destinies**); He built a tower where overseers could have an eye for the whole (the nation’s religious life, centered in **Jerusalem**); and then He went out and got the people who would be the tenants, or stewards (this is the people of Israel, in general, or its religious leadership, in particular). Now what does it mean that God “went to another country”? The imagery shouldn’t be pressed too far. It just means that God left his people in charge of his holy things down here on earth. God is above and beyond our space and time, but He is involved in and cares deeply about the things He has made, the story that speaks about Him called **history**; and so He saw fit to call out of the world a singular, special people, called Israel, who would be his “good news people.” He says to Israel,

The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine. For you are strangers and sojourners with me [Lev. 25:23].

2. Now let’s notice—on a historical timeline—that running as traffic before Israel and after Israel, God does the same thing with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and God does the same with you and me today. He has a world, orders its spheres, made the materials to fit, and places us in it as image-bearers and stewards to work it and to keep it. So in the New Testament, the basic point of human life is still the same: “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” [1 Cor. 10:31].

B) The Season and End of the Vineyard {2}

1. *When the season came, he sent a servant to the tenants to get from them some of the fruit of the vineyard* (2). There is a special season woven into history that is reserved for God drawing near in order to reap what He has sown. He is collecting what belongs to Him and what He has clearly given his people to do. And of course the ultimate case of this moment is Judgment Day: “For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil” [Ecc. 12:14]; “And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done” [Rev. 20:12]. Our actions belong to God. They were ordained by Him to accurately speak about Him: when we misuse these fruits, producing things that lie about Him we deserve to be judged as trespassers on his property. So, even for the Christian, whose judgment rests in the other book—the Book of Life—and Christ’s performance—we learn to speak accurately of his judgment by saying things like Paul does: “we make it our aim to please him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ” [2 Cor. 5:9-10].

II. THE CHARACTER OF THE EARTHLY TENANTS

A) How Are the Ambassadors Received? {3-5}

1. Verse 3 through 5 represents a history of the interaction between the chief representatives of the two cities. These “servants” refer to the prophets, or messengers, of God. So, to the first prophet, *they took him and beat him and sent him away empty-handed. And they took him and beat him and sent him away empty-handed. Again he sent to them another servant, and they struck him on the head and treated him shamefully. And he sent another, and him they killed.* (3-5a). It would be dubious to try and match up each of these three servant-messengers, before the heir, to specific prophets of the Old Testament. But Jesus does have specific characteristics of the treatment in mind. So, physical abuse and failing to give him what he rightfully came to collect was what happened. As one example, **Joseph** was sent to his brothers, the sons of Israel, in order to oversee the shepherding work they were doing with their father’s flock. “They said to one another, ‘Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits. Then we will say that a fierce animal has devoured him, and we will see what will become of his dreams’” [Gen. 37:19-20].

2. It sounds like that “hall of faith” in Hebrews 11—*And so with many others: some they beat, and some they killed (5b)*, so that, “Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated—of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth” [Heb. 11:36-38].

B) How is the Owner’s Son Treated? {6-8}

1. *He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son’ (6)*. This hopeful statement by the father-owner in the story is not meant by Jesus to suggest that God the Father is unaware of how his Son will be treated. This is meant to show the Father’s generous heart and setting up the backdrop of just how wicked these tenants were. As you read this, the thought and the feeling that should already be assumed is just how much they *should* respect the Son. But, “he came to his own, and his own people did not receive him” [Jn. 1:11].

2. *But those tenants said to one another, ‘This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours’ (7)*. Now why is the Son treated this way? For one thing, the Son is not simply the chief ambassador—which He is that too—but it says, *This is the heir (7b)*. Notice throughout the Bible that the battle between good and evil is most hotly fought, not between theists and atheists—in other words, not between those who believe that there’s a ‘religious inheritance’ and those who don’t—but between those who name the name of the one true God, but have no love or fear for Him, and those who name Him *and* love Him *and* fear Him. There’s a battle over the inheritance from cover to cover. It’s a battle over who God is and how we return to Him; it’s a battle over the question—**What is the gospel?**

3. Notice the specifics of the mistreatment: *they took him and killed him and threw him out of the vineyard (8)*. So the mistreatment of Christ was always designed to be specific. How many times in this Gospel did Jesus say that the Son of Man “must” be handed over and killed and cast out? And Isaiah foretells,

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people? And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth [Is. 53:7-9].

III. THE WHOLE PLANNED BY THE VINEYARD'S OWNER

A) The Obvious Answer to *What* the Owner Will Do {9}

1. *What will the owner of the vineyard do? (9a)* Now remember that this is **God** symbolized as the owner, **his people** symbolized by the vineyard, and the earthly, visible, **imposter leadership**, withering on that same vine, symbolized as the wicked tenants.

2. *He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others (9b)*. One very unpopular truth and one very unknown truth in our day, together—the judgment of God and the movement of the kingdom—both speaking of realities that are constant throughout history, two things which, in fact, move history and make it what it is. When a culture or a civilization is in decline, especially when that culture or civilization has been charged to handle God's holy things, that culture is declining always and only because God is removing the flow of his kingdom from them and giving it to someone else on the globe, in history. And this is a judgment.

3. Now this reaction by the owner is fairly predictable. After all, it was the father's son who was killed; and if this father in the story has any affection for his son, then naturally he will not simply judge these traitors, so that justice will be done, but he will personally see to it that vengeance is done! But that is all "101" level. The Pharisees knew the right answer and they would have done the same for their sons or their vineyards. But this wasn't a story about love or justice or honor or any other thing that could be privatized. Notice Jesus begins with his much used *Have you not read the Scripture...(10a)*.

B) The Deeper Answer to *Why* the Owner Will Do That {10-12}

1. The Scripture that Jesus refers to here comes from Psalm 118:22-23: *The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it was marvelous in our eyes?* (10b-11). Now, taken together, the prophecy is not simply about the person of Christ, but also the way that work of Christ would carry out the Father's eternal plan to perfection. Christ is the **stone**, and, as two apostles would write, "the cornerstone" [Eph. 2:20, 1 Pet. 2:7]. There are builders of God's house. But notice that, though they are the natural builders, they are also shown to be **incompetent builders**. The cornerstone, in ancient architecture, was not simply structurally foundational, but it was also used for the measurement of the whole. A good builder would recognize a good cornerstone when they saw it.

2. Abigail Adams would quote it in a letter the morning after the British warships left Boston harbor following the initial resistance of the Revolution, because she, growing up in a Puritan culture, understood the constant historical meaning of the kingdom of God. American Christians today do not. She understood that there were two cities—both speaking the King's English—moving around in a single vineyard, both together to the naked, natural eye; both separating to destinies infinitely far apart to the eye of the spirit. Supposing that you do see all this in the Bible: is it **marvelous** in your eyes? Or do you keep it safely in the "cage" of the Bible, safe and secure, collecting dust on your shelf?

3. How did the class respond to this third session of teaching in the temple? It says, *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* (12). Well it looks as if they got the deeper meaning, not just the surface meaning. But rather than fear God or wonder what this means about the deception in their own hearts, they go right back to their conspiracy. It also makes the point to say that "they were seeking to arrest him," which is important because this is part of an extended teaching that day. The idea is that many of them were buzzing around, sticking their heads into the crowd here or there to hear a little, but basically whispering among themselves and directing traffic of co-conspirators to put a stop to this. So, very much like the Israelites who were forming the golden calf at the very second that Moses was receiving the commandment to

not make graven images, these guys are off doing the very thing Jesus is saying that the wicked tenants do!

APPLICATION

To All of the Tenants of God's Vineyard – Whether or not we think and talk about such things today, there are still two cities moving through one vineyard. You and I have been charged with the things of God, and citizens of both the heavenly city and the earthly city will have their hands all over it. Jesus and his apostles simply will *not* stop talking about this, no matter how much you want them to. The true church, pursuing the depths of revival, guarding the gospel, proclaiming the gospel, making much of Christ in the gospel, and the false church falling away from that one vineyard. The living thing lives on; the dying thing, that looked just as a live in the summer, falls away, in every generation, at every moment. It's always happening. It's always the story. If you want a different story, you will search in vain. Paul explained to the Galatians that this was the source of their struggles with false teachers who had crept into their churches:

Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now [Gal. 4:28-29].

This is the Lord's doing, but is it marvelous in your eyes?

To the Wicked Tenants – If you are a human, then you are a sinner; and if you are a sinner, then you have been a wicked tenant. It is true that the Owner of the vineyard will return and He will punish those who have mishandled his glory. But it is also true that this Owner will be glorified in the salvation of sinners. And wicked ones are the only ones He saves: “And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness” [Rom. 4:4-5].