THE PARABLE OF THE TENANTS

Mark 12:1-12

Key Verse: 12:1b

"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 went away on a jour­ney."

To­day's passage is the parable of the ten­ants. It seems to be bet­ter to call the parable, "the parable of the vineyard." But the gospel writ­ers call it "the parable of the tenants." It is certain that the gospel writers put impact on the tenants. Each of Jesus' para­bles gives one specif­ic spiritual lesson. But the parable of the tenants sounds more like a histor­ical poem than a parable. In this parable, God speaks to his people Isra­el. Broad­ly speaking, this para­ble speaks to all man­kind who live in the world. When we study this pas­sage care­fully, we learn that this para­ble teaches us the basic rela­tion­ship be­tween God and his peo­ple and all mankind. Es­pe­cially in this passage we learn God's divine love toward all people. We also learn that when man aban­dons God he becomes useless and heartless.

I. The owner and the tenants (1-9)

**First,** God gave his people all the privileges (1). Look at verse 1. "He 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 went away on a jour­ney.'" Verse 1 is the poetic descrip­tion of the Creator God and his people Isra­el. Verse 1 also tells us that God made everything as the expression of his great love so that his people lack noth­ing.

The last part of verse 1 says, "Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey." God made this beautiful vine­yard and gave it to his people. A certain father had a beautiful dream that his son would receive a Nobel prize in physics. Likewise, when God made such a beauti­ful vine­yard and gave it to his peo­ple, he had a dream and specific pur­pose. The love of God is not the mere fruit of affec­tion; more than this, it is his divine purpose and mis­sion toward his peo­ple. This is the rea­son why God made the beautiful vineyard and gave it to his peo­ple to see if they would man­age the vineyard well.

Not only did God provide all necessary things for his people, he also gave all the privileges to his people to manage his vineyard. Accord­ing to Jean Jacques Rousseau, people are unhappy because human soci­ety is made of con­tracts. Recently a young man did not pay his rent on the first of June. Then the owner of the apart­ment threatened him, say­ing, "I will call the police to cast you out." The young man had no privi­lege of using the apart­ment without paying rent. Our God is different from the apart­ment owner. Our God gave all the privileges to use every­thing that he has made free of charge. We cannot but say that the privi­lege is the same as love. The privi­lege of using what God has made is indeed a wonderful grace. Therefore we should not treat the privi­lege as a light matter or take it for granted. First and last of all, we must thank God that he gave us the privilege of enjoying his life in us. We also must thank God for the privi­lege of living in God's world. Life seems to be constant sufferings and hardships. But we must thank God that we live a life of victory in Jesus in the midst of suffer­ings and hard­ships.

**Second,** God demanded some fruit from his people (2-9). What hap­pen­ed? Look at verses 2,3. "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." The response to the owner is stunning. It is the beginning point for the tenants to abandon God. Thus they lost respect for God.

But we must understand God's inten­tion to collect some fruit of the vineyard. It does not mean that the owner wants to share some of the har­vest with his tenants like pay­ing tax­es. In the Bible fruit has spiri­tual meaning. To bear much fruit means primarily to grow in the image of God. To bear fruit means to have many attributes of God. Galatians 5:22,23 ex­plains the con­cept of fruit very well. It says, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, pa­tience, kind­ness, good­ness, faith­ful­ness, gen­tleness and self-control." God wants his children to be noble and great with the fruits of God. God never wants his chil­dren to be unfruitful and useless. In this para­ble we can also see God's will for world salvation. God wanted his people to be worthy of being a kingdom of priests and a holy na­tion and har­vest much spiritual fruit. In other words, God wanted to make his people Israel a shepherd nation to take care of all people of all nations with the knowledge of God. This is the reason why God de­manded some fruit from his people. As long as we grasp the truth of God's demanding fruit we can recognize God as God.

Let's see how his people were managing God's vineyard. At the har­vest the owner of the vineyard sent a servant to the tenants to col­lect some of the fruit of the vineyard (2). But the tenants seized him, beat him and sent him away empty-handed (3). It is incredible that they did so. But it is obvious that the tenants knew that God was the owner of the vineyard and that they were his people. Probably they worked hard and the harvest was plen­tiful and abun­dant. They were happy and thankful to God for the time being. They even wanted to give some fruit to the owner. But soon they became proud. When they were proud, greed­i­ness came into their hearts. When they be­came greedy, soon the devil caused them to lose the thank­ful mind to­ward the owner. When they abused the privi­leges that God had given, they be­came godless. James 1:15 ex­plains this well. It says, "Then, after de­sire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death." In this way the rela­tion­ship be­tween God and his people was cut off. In this parable, the owner re­fers to God, and the ten­ants to his people.

Despite the tenants' terrible mistake, God honored and respected them to the end and sent other servants. Look at verses 4,5. "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." They did something that is incon­ceivable as humankind. How did God deal with them? Look at verse 6. "He had one left to send, a son, whom he loved. He sent him last of all, saying, 'They will respect my son.'" The owner sent his only son, whom he loved, saying, "They will re­s­pect my son." The owner had no doubt that they would respect his son.

How did they respond? Look at verse 7. "But the tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.'" They thought that if they killed the own­er's son and threw him away, the vine­yard would be their own possession. When they be­came ungodly they became extremely foolish and they killed the owner's son. It is indeed surprising that the tenants killed the owner's son. It is unbeliev­able. But when man abandons God he can be like the devil.

What happened when the tenants wanted to own the vineyard as their own? Look at verse 9. "What then will the owner of the vine­yard do? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vine­yard to others." They only lost all the privileges that God had given them. Their glorious mis­sion was taken away from them and given to the Gentiles. How could they be­come so evil? It was because they abandoned God. When they aban­doned God they became the children of the devil. Sometimes we get sick wondering how such a nice person can do such evil things. It is because he aban­doned God.

**Third,** the cause of miseries. Unthankful mind was a cause of his peo­ple's misery. When we study the Bible, we find that the whole world is God's vine­yard. And according to his own pleasure, God gave each na­tion a vineyard. To Egypt and Babylon God gave huge vine­yards, and to others, medium-sized vineyards. To his chosen peo­ple, Israel, he gave a small vine­yard. From God's point of view, each nation is given the best vine­yard for that nation. The reason God gave Israel a small vine­yard was to make them ma­terially poor so that they might be spiritually rich. God willed them to be a shepherd nation, not a nation of economic ani­mals. This was the best love God could give them. But God's people com­plain­ed in their hearts that God only gave them un­bear­­able suffer­ings and hard­ships in order to fulfill God's will for world salva­tion through them. His people were like a handsome young man. This hand­some young man had been a good encour­age­ment to many woun­d­ed girls because of his hand­someness. Once, some­one said to him, "You are like a sweet bro­ther to girls." Then he be­came very fatal­istic and could not thank God for his handsome­ness. After that, he was very unhappy for three years. There are many things to learn in the world. But when we don't learn how to thank God, we are learn­ing noth­ing. God's choosing Israel was his best love for them. But when they did not know God's deep love they were nothing but piles of com­plaints. They did not know God's choosing them was God's best love for them.

Another cause of his people's misery was their illusion. They fell into the illu­sion that their small vineyard was their own. When God sent the pro­phets to them to ask for some fruits, they mistreated and killed them, thinking that their human rights and individual kingship or queen­ship had been violat­ed. This parable teaches us that we must thank God, be­lieving that God has given each of us the best vineyard. But it is not easy for us to thank God. There's a story about a happy farm­er. He worked hard every­ day, singing joyfully, though he was as poor as a squirrel. It was be­cause God gave him the privilege of living as a farmer. On the other hand, the king of his town who took ev­erything for granted was so unhappy about ev­ery­thing that he could not eat or sleep well. It was because he did not know that he had received the privilege of being the king of his town. In his illusion, the king complained that his territory was too small. His misery was that he did not know that he was a stew­ard of God. His misery was his illu­sion.

Another misery of his people was that they did not realize God's mis­sion for them. God chose Israel as his firstborn son so that he might fulfill his purpose through them. God wanted to raise them as a Bible tea­chers' nation so that all peoples of all nations might stream to Zion to study his word. Their mission from God was truly glorious (Ro 3:2; Isa 2:2; Mic 4:1,2). Their mission from God was the best privi­lege for them.

When they aban­doned God's mission, they became servants of the devil. When Jesus healed the sick and preached the good news of the king­dom of God, they despised and rejected him and treated him at ran­dom. In a broad sense, this para­ble applies to all sinful human be­ings. The great trag­edy of man lies not in his human condi­tions but in his ignorance of God's mission as his best love.

II. The rejected stone (10-12)

**First,** the rejected stone, the cornerstone (10-11). This part teaches how Jesus is the sovereign Ruler of history. Look at verses 10,11. "Have­n't you read this scripture: 'The stone the builders rejected has be­come the cap­stone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes'?" These vers­es are a quotation from Psalm 118:22,23, and have been wide­ly ap­plied by Christians when­ever they felt the work of God was too small and the evils of the world too great. Once, in the early days, the reli­gious leaders came to threa­ten God's servants. Peter, filled with the Holy Spir­it, said to them, "He is 'the stone you builders reject­ed, which has be­come the cap­stone'" (Ac 4:11). It meant, "You crucified him, but God raised him from the dead and made him the capstone, the sover­eign Ruler of histo­ry."

**Second,** the children of God are small rejected stones. The life of faith of the early Christians was holy before God. Then they became a stum­bling stone to the hypocritical Jewish religion, and a direct challenge to the immoral Roman people. Finally, Christians were branded as trai­tors by their own peo­ple, and as an anti-Roman force by the Roman authori­ties. The early Christians became like crimi­nals simply because they lived a holy life. In this world, when we live as sincere Christians, the enemies of God reject us and treat us like bums. We become like rejected stones. Sometimes we de­spair and be­come debilitated and enervated be­cause we are afraid of their rejection. We despair even more when the work of God seems to be too weak. But we must look at Je­sus. He was made a rejected stone by the Jews, but God made him the capstone. When Je­sus was cruci­fied, his ministry with the twelve disciples seemed to have been terminated, and the salva­tion work of God was no more. But this was not the case. God raised Jesus from the dead. God made Jesus the capstone, the sover­eign Ruler over all human beings.

In the early centuries, many Christians went to Rome under the lead­ership of St. Peter and Paul. But the Roman government regarded Christians as rebels against the Roman Empire and persecut­ed them mer­ci­lessly. Be­cause of this, the early Christians had no place on the ground. So they went into underground graveyards, called cata­combs. They could not do much while living in underground grave­yards. But they kept their lives of faith abso­lutely. Then God enabled them to con­quer the Roman Empire with the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

**Third,** the rejected stone, the sovereign Ruler of history. These days, Freud­ian psychoanalysis explains away the Chris­tian faith in terms of an uncon­scious substream of the human psyche. Any­thing they cannot under­stand in terms of the psychological matrix is blindly elimi­nated by calling it ultra-con­servative bigotry, or religious fanaticism. But they call on the name of God seriously at fu­neral ceremo­nies. There is a strong im­pres­sion that the world is full of ungodly peo­ple. But it is not true. Look at verse 11. "...the Lord has done this, and it is marvel­ous in our eyes." To God's peo­ple, the fact that Je­sus became the reject­ed stone but that God made him the cap­stone and the sover­eign Ruler of history is truly mar­vel­ous. It is also marvelous to see that there are so many young Ameri­can stu­dents who study the Bible regular­ly. It is mar­velous to see that the number of Bible-believing young American stu­dents is in­creasing. The torch of the gospel seems to have been snuffed out. But it is not so. God is working mightily in the hearts of young Amer­icans.

In this passage we learn that God is the owner of the vineyard and we are his tenants. We also learn that God is our Father who has a beautiful dream for us, and we are his precious children. May God help us not to dis­appoint our Father God who has a beautiful dream for us.