

THE PARABLE OF THE TENANTS

Mark 11:27-12:12

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."

In the last passage we heard Jesus' voice to his disciples, "Have faith in God." We also heard his voice in 11:23, "I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him." In the last passage Jesus clearly taught us the concept of faith. Faith is hope that we do not see, but it will be done for us. Faith is also experiencing the power of God. If we have faith, we can have undying hope. We also can have the power of faith in our daily lives. In this time of despair, by having faith we must have an undying hope. In this generation, people who cannot overcome themselves must meet Jesus and learn mountain-moving faith. Most people say, "Christians are weaklings, so I don't want to believe in Christianity." But those who have true faith can move a mountain and throw it into the sea. In short, true people of God can have the power of faith. Those who have the power of faith always experience one victory after another victory.

Today's passage has two parts. One is the religious leaders' question about Jesus' authority. The other is the parable of the tenants. The parable of the tenants seems to be easy to understand. But it is very difficult to understand, because it is the summary of Bible history. 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 emphasis 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 religious leaders ask about Jesus' authority (11:27-33)

When Jesus and his disciples were in Jerusalem, Jesus was walking around in the temple courts in order to fish one-to-one sheep. We are amazed by Jesus teaching [the Bible](#) to the people. Jesus' situation seemed to be that he was in the slaughterer's place. But he didn't think much about himself. He was looking for sheep to teach the Bible to. We are again amazed by Jesus teaching the Bible to the people in that particular situation. We also find Jesus' efforts to teach the Bible to the people during the passion week in the other gospels. Luke 19:47-48 says, "Every day he was teaching at the temple. But the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the leaders among the people were trying to kill him. Yet they could not find any way to do it, because all the people hung on his words." On the other hand, the chosen people, who were supposed to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, envied Jesus'

power and authority from heaven. They asked, "Who gave you authority to do this?" (28) It means two things. First, to their eyes, Jesus' clearing the temple was illegal. Second, his teaching the Bible to the people was illegal because he did not have a license to teach the Bible. They were mad because Jesus did not teach their traditions, but the word of God—because it gives life to man. Jesus answered their question in question form. Jesus said, "I will ask you one question. Answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John's baptism—was it from heaven, or from men? Tell me!" (29-30) The chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders turned around and discussed what to answer. They were in trouble. They said, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will ask, 'Then why didn't you believe him?' But if we say, 'From men'.... (They feared the people, for everyone held that John really was a prophet.)" (31-32) So the religious leaders answered, "We don't know only about this question." Jesus said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things" (33). The religious leaders clenched their fists and gnashed their teeth and retreated.

II. The owner and the tenants (12:1-9)

First, God gave his people the privilege of taking care of the vineyard (1). Look at 12:1. "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 a poetic description of the relationship between the Creator God and his people Israel. Verse 1 also tells us that God made the beautiful vineyard and gave it to the people to take care of according to their free will to bear much fruit. Let's see what happened.

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. This part of the parable tells us God made the world and made his people the stewards of God's world. And God gave them freedom to take care of the vineyard. In other words, God honored their human rights and their doing the mission that God gave them. A certain father had a beautiful dream that his son would receive a Nobel prize in physics. The boy was good. He was number one in his entire school. But he became famous among girls. He became proud. He thought that he could be the best without studying so much. Finally his honor of being number one was taken away by another student. He could not fulfill his mission to study hard as a student. Likewise, when God made such a beautiful vineyard and gave it to his people, he had a dream and specific purpose. Here we learn that the love of God is not the mere fruit of affection; it involves taking care of the vineyard with a sense of mission. It also involves his divine purpose and divine duty for his people. This is the reason God made the beautiful vineyard and gave it to his people.

Not only did God provide all necessary things for his people, he also gave all the privileges and rights 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 for several months. 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. Our God gives all the privileges and rights to use

everything that he has made free of charge. We cannot but say that this privilege is divine love. It is different from human affectionate love. The privilege of using what God has made is indeed a wonderful grace. Therefore we should not treat this privilege as a light matter or take it for granted. First and last of all, we must thank God that he has given 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 God's life endowed to us. We must thank God that we live to take care of God's vineyard entrusted to us. If we do not have this basic attitude, we cannot have a right relationship with God. If we do not have a right relationship with God we become like animals, maybe worse than animals.

Second, God wanted to see if they were managing the vineyard well (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 astounding. God did not want to demand rent. God only wanted to see if they were taking care of the vineyard well. Here the great illusion of the tenants of the vineyard broke the relationship between God and themselves. God sent his servant to see if they were doing well in taking care of the vineyard. But when the vineyard was prosperous, the tenants were in illusion. An evil spirit came into them and made them think, "This vineyard is not God's! This vineyard is our own! It is precisely my own, registered at the City Hall!" These days people claim human rights out of measure. In a church, a pastor counseled an adulterous woman persistently for her own happiness and to help her render glory to God. Then the woman filed a suit against the pastor on the charge that he violated her human rights. The court decided that the church must pay five million dollars because the pastor violated the woman's human rights. Then the church closed its doors because they did not have such huge money to pay the woman. In this case, the basic mistake was the problem of relationship. The pastor had the right to counsel the immoral woman and the immoral woman had the obligation to listen to her pastor. But the woman did not listen to the pastor and took it to the court. The house of God lost its function.

Any person or any nation can fall into the tenants' illusion. At harvest time God sent a servant to the tenants to collect from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. This clearly tells us that God did not demand rent from them. But God wanted to see if they were taking care of the vineyard well and to see if their vineyard was fruitful or unfruitful. But the tenants, in their illusion, seized God's servant and beat him and sent him away empty-handed. They could have told him, "Well, this year's harvest is not good. So please just take a few boxes of fruit of the vine." It was the wisdom they could apply. But the tenants beat the servants and gave them bloody noses and black eyes and sent them away empty-handed. No person made himself. No person created the world. God is the Creator and men are his precious children. This is common sense. But the tenants were in illusion beyond measure. Each one said, "Well, the vineyard is mine. The abundant fruits are mine. I am going to be wealthy!" But they were as foolish as a woman who divorced her husband and claimed a huge amount of alimony. She knew only money. She didn't think about breaking up the family or that she would have no more husband who could take care of her when she is sick or when she is old. God sent another servant to them. They struck this man on the

head and treated him shamefully. This is treachery to God who made the world. He sent still another, and that one they killed. Their illusion led them to murder. The owner sent many others; some of them they beat, others they killed (5). This is human rebellion against God.

God had one left to send, a son, whom he loved. He sent him last of all, saying, "They will respect my son" (6). But the tenants said to one another, "Yeah! 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 (7-8). Verse 6 reminds us of John 3:16. It says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." God gave them life and all the privileges and mission to take care of God's vineyard. But God's chosen people, who were blessed, were blind before God. They crucified God's one and only Son Jesus Christ on the cross. The tenants disappointed God by killing his one and only Son. When God sent his Son, he hoped that they would honor his Son. But they had already gone too far. They had no way to come back to themselves. They were in deep illusion. What a tragedy it was!

In modern times one who beats another physically out of his anger goes to jail. But anybody can attack others verbally. This is the reason the former President William Jefferson Clinton was verbally abused by his political opponents' errand boy during the time of his two terms of presidency. But President Clinton had no way to defend himself because the freedom of speech is greatly honored in this country. Attacking the president shows that there is no respect for the president. Always, those who are in illusion lose the respect and love relationship. They are beastly. But in God's world, there is a respect and love relationship. We hear God's voice as he sent his only Son to the tenants, "They will respect my son" (6). This tells us that God had a respect for his treacherous tenants. But the tenants had no respect for God. This is the source of all problems in this generation.

Third, the cause of miseries. An unthankful mind was the 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 one handsome young man. This handsome young man had encouraged many wounded girls partially because of his handsomeness. But 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. If they knew they were chosen people, they could do better.

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 he knew God gave him the privilege of living as a farmer. On the other hand, a chief of the town was very wealthy. He took everything for granted and 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 a chief of his town. In his illusion, the chief 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.

III. 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. They 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 Jesus, 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 St. 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. Nevertheless, 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 seemed to have been snuffed out. But it was not. God is working mightily in the hearts of young Americans.

In this passage we learn God's beautiful dream to make his people very faithful tenants. In other words, God wanted to see them become God's chosen instrument. God wanted to use them as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. So God gave them all the privileges and freedom to take care of God's vineyard. But they betrayed God's love for them. They also betrayed the love of God and his expectation that they would be his wonderful tenants as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. We must know that God is the Creator and we are his children with much privilege and honor to take care of his people and his world. But how easy it is to fail in our illusion. May God help us to know God's purpose for us, and who God is, and who human beings are. Especially, we are God's chosen people. Therefore, we must live up to being his chosen people.