

## 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.