

“The Renter Rebellion”

Mark 12:1-12; Matthew 21:43; Romans 9-11 ¹

As we continue to make our way through Mark’s account of Holy Week, in today’s text we’re still in the Temple on Tuesday. The disciples have seen the withered fig tree, a parable of the withering destruction that would soon fall upon Jerusalem, and the leaders of the Temple have challenged Jesus’ authority to do such things as turning over tables in the Court of the Gentiles the day before. Jesus has put the leaders in “checkmate” with His question about whether or not John the Baptist got his authority from God, and now Jesus is going on the offensive with a pointed parable about tenant farmers.

The story begins with a landowner spending a lot of money to plant and outfit a vineyard, which he then leased to tenant farmers and returned to his home, apparently in another country, or at least far away. The situation was not at all far-fetched. In New Testament times, the whole of the upper Jordan Valley and most of the Galilean highlands were in the hands of foreign landlords, and there was a persistent tension between those landlords and the tenants who farmed their lands.

While most of Jesus’ teaching stories, or parables, had a single point, this story is perhaps the most allegorical of any of Jesus’ parables.² In an allegory, every aspect of the story represents something else; and, while not every aspect of this story is symbolic, five symbols don’t require much interpretation in this story:

The Vineyard is the nation of Israel.
The Owner is God.
The Tenants are the leaders of the Temple.
The Owner’s Servants are the Prophets.
The Owner’s Son is Jesus.

When the owner sent servants to collect the rent, those servants were beaten, treated shamefully, and even killed. Finally, the owner sent his son to collect the rent, and he, too, was killed. In the end, the owner shows up, has the tenants executed, and rents the vineyard to other tenants. Jesus ended the story by quoting Psalm 118:22-23:

*The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.
This came about from the Lord and is wonderful in our eyes.*

The leaders of the Temple understood exactly what Jesus was saying. They knew that Jesus was the beloved Son in this story, they knew that they were the wicked tenants, and they knew He was claiming divine authority for His actions. But because they were afraid of the crowds, who adored Jesus . . . at least for now . . . they bit their tongues and left Him alone for the present.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on September 23, 2018. Parallel and related passages include: Matthew 21:33-46; Luke 20:9-19.

Sources for this sermon include: Barclay, William, “The Gospel of Mark,” *The Daily Study Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954); Culpeper, Alan, “Mark,” *The Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007); Garland, David E. “Mark,” *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); Lane, William, “The Gospel According to Mark,” *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); Turlington, Henry, “Mark,” *The Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman, 1969); Wessell, Walter, “Mark,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke*. Digital Version; Williamson, Lamar, Jr., “Mark,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching*, digital version.

² See also Mark 4:13-20.

While there are significant differences, there are also many parallels between Jesus' parable and the *Song of the Vineyard* in Isaiah 5:1-7. The leaders of the Temple knew their Bible, and they knew the references Jesus was making. Here's the Song of the Vineyard:

I will sing about the one I love, a song about my loved one's vineyard: The one I love had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He broke up the soil, cleared it of stones, and planted it with the finest vines. He built a tower in the middle of it and even dug out a winepress there. He expected it to yield good grapes, but it yielded worthless grapes.

So now, residents of Jerusalem and men of Judah, please judge between me and my vineyard. What more could I have done for my vineyard than I did? Why, when I expected a yield of good grapes, did it yield worthless grapes?

Now I will tell you what I am about to do to my vineyard: I will remove its hedge, and it will be consumed; I will tear down its wall, and it will be trampled. I will make it a wasteland. It will not be pruned or weeded; thorns and briars will grow up. I will also give orders to the clouds that rain should not fall on it.

For the vineyard of the Lord of Armies is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah, the plant he delighted in. He expected justice but saw injustice; he expected righteousness, but heard cries of despair.

Isaiah's *Song of the Vineyard* was an announcement of judgment, as was Jesus' Parable of the Wicked Tenants. In Jesus' time, it was well-known that Israel had frequently treated God's prophets shamefully,³ and the word Jesus used for "wounded in the head" may well have referred to the beheading of John the Baptist, of whom they had just been speaking.

While "beloved son" was an idiom for "only son," the term also recalled how God had referred to Isaac when telling Abraham to offer his beloved son as a sacrifice (Genesis 22:2), and it was how God the Father had referred to Jesus at His baptism and at His transfiguration (Matthew 3:17, 17:15).

One part of Jesus' parable that is not allegorical is the owner's expectation that this beloved son would be respected. The killing of the beloved Son was no surprise, because Jesus is the Passover Lamb who was "*slain from the creation of the world*" (Revelation 13:8). God had always known what the price of our redemption would be. Jesus has already told the disciples several times already that his death was approaching,⁴ and now He publicly told the Temple leaders that He knew what they were up to.

By quoting Psalm 118, Jesus acknowledged that the Temple leaders rejected Him, but He also foretold that God would vindicate the Son and give the vineyard to better tenants. In Matthew's account of this parable, Jesus told the Temple leaders, "*Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruit*" (Matthew 21:43).

With this parable, Jesus foretold the coming destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, after which Israel would have no homeland for nearly 2,000 years; and the story was, unfortunately, not a new one. Centuries before, as the Babylonian Exile drew near, *the LORD, the God of their ancestors sent word against [Israel] by the hand of his messengers, sending them time and again, for he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place. But they*

³ 1 Kings 18:4, 13, 22:24-27; 2 Kings 6:31; 2 Chronicles 24:19-22, 36:15-16; Nehemiah 9:26; Jeremiah 26:20-23, 37:15-16, 44:4. For expressions of God's love, see Hosea 2:14-20; Jeremiah 3:11-14.

⁴ Matthew 16:21, 17:23, 20:18

kept ridiculing God's messengers, despising his words, and scoffing at his prophets, until the LORD's wrath was so stirred up against his people that there was no remedy (2 Chronicles 36:15-16). Such a time would soon come again.

At this point, we encounter a problem. In Isaiah's parable, the vineyard represents the nation of Israel. In Jesus' parable, the vineyard represents the kingdom of God. From whom is the kingdom of God being taken? To whom is it being given, and for what purpose?

The New Testament's answer to these questions is that the Kingdom of God has been taken from Israel—specifically, from Israel's leaders, who explicitly rejected Jesus—and it has been given to those who acknowledge Jesus as God's Cornerstone, the Savior of the world. But this raises a problematic question: So what happens to God's covenants with Abraham and with David?

Those covenants promised that God would bless the world through Abraham's descendants forever and that an heir of David would have an everlasting kingdom. Those covenants were unconditional, and they were perpetual, without end. Was God now breaking those promises? And if God can be shown to be a promise breaker, why should those who follow Jesus believe in God's trustworthiness? The problem really is a show-stopper, unless it can be shown that God's promises to Abraham and David are intact.

The apostle Paul understood this problem quite clearly, and he wrestled with it extensively in Romans 9-11. We can't look at those chapters in detail this morning, but I think we can get the gist of Paul's argument.

Some try to rescue the situation by positing a "two-covenant" solution to this problem. By this they mean that Jews find salvation through keeping the Law of Moses, while Gentiles find salvation through faith in Jesus. While such a solution is gracious in its intent, nothing of the sort can be found in Scripture.

When Paul wrote, "*I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart . . . my heart's desire and prayer to God concerning [the Jews] is for their salvation*" (Romans 9:2, 10:1), it was clear that he had no "two-covenant solution" in mind. Paul regarded his unbelieving Jewish kinsfolk as separated from God.

The center of Paul's argument about God's faithfulness is that "*not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Neither are all of Abraham's children his descendants. . . . It is not the children by physical descent who are God's children, but the children of the promise are considered to be the offspring*" (Romans 9:6-8).

Paul's argument was intricate, but his main point was that it had never been the case that all of Abraham's biological children were children of God's promise. Isaac, not Ishmael, was the line of blessing through whom Israel and God's Messiah would come, and similar selectivity appeared throughout biblical history.

Paul emphasized the persistent biblical concept of "the Remnant," the few faithful ones in each generation through whom God's promise passed to generations following;⁵ and it was by means of "the Remnant" that Paul affirmed God's faithfulness to Israel even while he confirmed with today's parable that the kingdom of God had been taken from Israel and passed to those who lift up Jesus as Lord.

⁵ Genesis 45:7; 2 Kings 19:30-31; Ezra 9:8, 15; Isaiah 10:20-23, 11:11, 16, 37:32; Jeremiah 23:3, 50:20; Ezekiel 6:8; Zechariah 9:7; Romans 9:27, 11:5.

Paul argued that, while a Remnant in Israel would continue, always and forever, for the present, God's main thrust for Kingdom advancement would be through the Gentiles. But Paul also warned that we Gentiles need to beware getting a "big head" over all this. He used the metaphor of a great old olive tree to make an important point.

Using the ancient tree to represent God's covenant people, the true inheritors of the covenants with Abraham and David, Paul pointed out that some of the Jewish branches of that tree had been broken off and wild olive branches—the Gentiles—had been grafted in. Here's what he said:

17 Now if some of the branches were broken off, and you, though a wild olive branch, were grafted in among them and have come to share in the rich root of the cultivated olive tree, 18 do not boast that you are better than those branches. . . . You do not sustain the root, but the root sustains you.

19 Then you will say, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." 20 True enough; they were broken off because of unbelief, but you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but beware, 21 because if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either.

22 Therefore, consider God's kindness and severity: severity toward those who have fallen but God's kindness toward you—if you remain in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off. 23 And even they, if they do not remain in unbelief, will be grafted in, because God has the power to graft them in again. 24 For if you were cut off from your native wild olive tree and against nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these—the natural branches—be grafted into their own olive tree? (Romans 11:17-24).

Paul argued that, in the present age, the role of carrying out God's purposes through the Kingdom of God has been taken away from the nation of Israel, and we who follow Jesus currently enjoy both the blessings of the Kingdom of God and the responsibility of taking the Good News of the Kingdom to the world (Matthew 21:43, 28:18-20). But Paul still expected the Remnant of Israel to receive the future fulfillment of the promises of the Kingdom.⁶

We who follow Jesus have received and are receiving some of God's promises to Israel, and for a time, it has been given to us to tend the Master's vineyard, but we neither replace Israel or become Israel. Paul insisted that there is only one Kingdom Tree, and those of us who follow Jesus have been grafted into it, by God's grace.⁷

And grace is precisely the point. Paul contended that the Remnant—both Jew and Gentile—is chosen by grace: *Now if by grace, then it is not by works; otherwise grace ceases to be grace* (Romans 11:6).

Jesus affirmed the concept and the continuity of The Remnant when He told us that He had not come to abolish either the Law or the Prophets. He came to fulfill them (Matthew 5:17). And so, when the disciples saw Jesus for the last time, just before He ascended once more into heaven's glory, they asked Him, "*Lord, are you restoring the kingdom to Israel at this time?*"

⁶ Matthew 23:37-39; cp. Romans 11:25-32; Revelation 7:1-8.

⁷ But living according to the principles of God's Word is not something we do in order to be declared righteous. Living according to God's Word is something we do because we have been declared righteous through faith in Jesus, and we are able so to live because God's Spirit lives in us and makes us able to obey (2 Corinthians 5:21; Romans 8:1-11).

He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:6-8).

I expect that you have recognized that the tree background in this morning's PowerPoint represents The One Tree of the Kingdom. And now you know the background of the radiant centrifugal Spiral of Light. This centrifugal Spiral of Light represents the work that is ours to do in this present age: *to go and to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything our Lord has commanded us (Matthew 28:18-20).*

Let's roll.