49 Mark 12:1-12 The Parable of the Tenants

Discussion: Can you think of examples where a person or group gets something really, wrong, regardless of the evidence to the contrary? Why do we do this?

Mark 12	Matthew 21	Luke 20
The parable of the tenants **1** Jesus then began to speak to them in parables: 'A man planted a vineyard. He put a wall round it, dug a pit for the winepress and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place.	***The parable of the tenants*** **33** 'Listen to another parable: there was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall round it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place.	***The parable of the tenants*** **9** He went on to tell the people this parable: 'A man planted a vineyard, rented it to some farmers and went away for a long time.
2 At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants to collect from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. **3** But they seized him, beat him and sent him away empty-handed. **4** Then he sent another servant to them; they struck this man on the head and treated him shamefully. **5** He sent still another, and that one they killed. He sent many others; some of them they beat, others they killed.	**34** When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit. **35** 'The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. **6** Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them in the same way.	**10** At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants so they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. **11** He sent another servant, but that one also they beat and treated shamefully and sent away empty-handed. **12** He sent still a third, and they wounded him and threw him out.
6 'He had one left to send, a son, whom he loved. He sent him last of all, saying, "They will respect my son."	**37** Last of all, he sent his son to them. "They will respect my son," he said.	**13** 'Then the owner of the vineyard said, "What shall I do? I will send my son, whom I love; perhaps they will respect him."
7 'But the tenants said to one another, "This is the heir. Come, let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours." **8** So they took him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard.	**38** 'But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, "This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance." **39** So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.	**14** 'But when the tenants saw him, they talked the matter over. "This is the heir," they said. "Let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours." **15** So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

Mark 12	Matthew 21	Luke 20
9 'What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others.	**40** 'Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?' **41** 'He will bring those wretches to a wretched end,' they replied, 'and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time.'	'What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? **16** He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others.' When the people heard this, they said, 'God forbid!'
10 Haven't you read this passage of Scripture: '"The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; **11** the Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes"?'	**42** Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the Scriptures: '"The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes"?	**17** Jesus looked directly at them and asked, 'Then what is the meaning of that which is written: '"The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone"?
	43 'Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.	
	44 Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed.'	**18** Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed.'
12 Then the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders looked for a way to arrest him because they knew he had spoken the parable against them. But they were afraid of the crowd; so they left him and went away.	**45** When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew he was talking about them. **46** They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet.	**19** The teachers of the law and the chief priests looked for a way to arrest him immediately, because they knew he had spoken this parable against them. But they were afraid of the people.

Comparison

- All three Synoptics include this parable of a man who plants a vineyard and rents it out to farmers to manage while he is away for a long time. The Gospels of Mark and Luke offer further detail about the man's advance preparations, including placing a wall around it, digging a winepress, and building a watchtower.
- When the harvest was due, he sent servants to collect some of the fruit of the vineyard. On each occasion, the servants were beaten, sent away and sometimes killed by the tenant farmers who wished to keep all the produce for themselves.

- Finally, the man sends his only son in the hope that "they will respect him". The tenant farmers saw this as their opportunity. By killing the heir himself, they would not only keep all the future produce, but they could also gain permanent ownership of the vineyard itself. And so they threw the son out of the vineyard and killed him too.
- The vineyard owner's reaction was to be expected. He would take the vineyard away from the tenants, kill them, and give the vineyard management to others who could be trusted with producing a harvest.
- In all three Synoptics, Jesus speaks of the stone rejected by the builders becoming the cornerstone, an action that God regards as a marvellous act.
- Finally, the Sanhedrin delegation recognised this parable was spoken against them.

Context

- This parable is a pictorial account of God's dealings with Israel through the prophets, which culminated in the sending of his son, who was rejected and killed at the hands of those to whom Israel had been entrusted.[1] The metaphor is that Israel is the vineyard of Yahweh, and it is an adaption of Isaiah 5:1-7.[2,3]

Going Deeper: Agricultural leases in the 1st Century

A vineyard lease was a particular type of agricultural lease. Unlike ordinary farmland which could be sown and produce a harvest in its first year, a newly planted vineyard needed at least five years of tending, ongoing care and irrigation before it became productive.[4] In the 1st century, this was a common form of agreement with an absentee landlord, from whom tenants obtained food and housing for working the land, but to whom they paid rent in the form of produce from the harvest.[5,6,7]

Key Points

- This is the only major parable in Mark's Gospel outside chapter 4, and its unique placement alerts us to its significance.[8] It interrupts a series of confrontations between Jesus and the religious authorities to explain the broader meaning of these disputes.[9] In the preceding verses, a delegation from the Sanhedrin challenged Jesus regarding the origin of his authority "*to do these things*". At the conclusion of this scene, they recognise the parable has been spoken against them.[10] This is Jesus' judgement of the Jewish leadership for attempting to confiscate the things of God. It is His vineyard.[11]

Going Deeper: OT Symbols for Israel and the Prophets

A *vineyard* had been used many times in the OT as a symbol to represent Israel (e.g., Is. 5:1-7, Ps. 80:8-13, Jer. 2:21). In this parable, the focus is upon those who tend the vineyard, the leaders given responsibility to care for it.[12] Similarly, the prophets were often represented as *servants* (e.g., Jer. 7:25, 25:4, Amos 3:7, Zech. 1:6) who were *rejected* (2 Sam. 10:2-5, 2 Kings 17:7-20, 2 Chron. 24:20-22, 36:15-16), for which the leaders were *judged* (Is. 3:14, Jer. 12:10, 25:3-7, 26:20-23).[13,14,15]

- The ill-treatment of each servant was incremental, growing in severity over time.[16,17] Those listening to the parable would have understood that the arrival of the son indicated to the tenants that the landlord himself had probably died, so the son had come to take over the vineyard. In Jewish law, when there was no heir (that is, the tenants were able to dispose of the son secretly), the vineyard could be considered "ownerless property", which could lawfully be claimed by themselves as existing occupants of the land.[18] Not content with the owner's produce, the tenants also conspire to obtain his property. The same words were spoken by Jacob's sons (Gen. 37:20), who reasoned that by killing the beloved Joseph, they would become the heirs.[19]
- The parable is not intended to be taken literally as if the father (God) truly expected His son to be respected or with a different outcome. Drawing on the understanding of Is. 5:1-7, the parable was designed to inform the Sanhedrin that they were behaving like the tenant farmers in the story and would be judged accordingly.[20,21] It was a final but deliberate appeal to those plotting Jesus' death to understand the seriousness of what they were doing.[22] The continued existence of the vineyard would be assured by the son's self-sacrifice, not the tenants' actions.[23]
- The son was different to previous servants (the prophets) in several respects:
  - he is unique (all the previous "servants" were hired men serving the owner),
  - he is the heir; they were simply messengers,
  - he is the last and final word from the Father, the vineyard owner,
  - above all, he is beloved.[24]

- Note that Matthew and Luke change the order of events in Mark (**v8**) to reflect the actual sequence where Jesus would be rejected, then thrown out of Jerusalem, followed by his death by crucifixion outside the city.[25,26]
- Unlike the original story from Is. 5:1-7 (which results in the judgement and destruction of the vineyard), this is a judgment only of the tenants. The vineyard will be given over to "others".[27] Those hearing this parable would have probably understood these new tenants to be Gentiles in fulfilment of Is. 56:7 ("a house of prayer for *all nations*") while some years later, Mark's earliest readers could have understood it to mean the new Christian church that was starting to emerge, increasingly populated by Gentiles.[28,29,30]
- Matthew's Gospel inserts two further *displacement* parables here to emphasise the point. In Matt. 21:31-32, the religious authorities are displaced in favour of tax collectors and prostitutes when entering heaven, and in Matt. 22:10, the first-invited wedding guests are displaced in favour of those brought in from the streets.[31] These surround Matthew's account (Matt. 21:43) to underline that a new nation of people would displace the tenant farmers.
- Jesus introduces an OT quotation from Ps. 118:22-24 (in **v10-11**) about celebrating divine deliverance and a reversal of fortunes.[32] Various translations of cornerstone or capstone have been employed, which allow for numerous theological interpretations. However, all point to the central importance of a keystone that, initially rejected, takes precedence over all else to become the most important in the building.[33] Without their knowledge, they are carrying out the will of God, and that God did this is seen as a marvellous act by Him.[34,35]
- The final verse is best understood to mean that the crowd was taking Jesus' side against the Sanhedrin, who therefore could not openly move against him.[36] Those in the crowd who witnessed this confrontation were faced with a choice. It's one or the other, as there is no room for both, which recalls the earlier parable of old wineskins being unable to contain the new wine (Mark 2:22).

Discussion: Are there aspects of your own faith that you have had to re-examine in the light of your Christian journey?