



Speaker:
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Christ our Cornerstone

Series: The Gospel of Mark • 41 of 41

3/21/2021 (SUN) | Bible: **Mark 12:1-12**

And he began to speak unto them by parables. “A certain man planted a vineyard, and set a hedge about it, and digged a place for the winefat, and built a tower, and let it out to husbandmen, and went into a far country.

“And at the season, he sent to the husbandmen a servant, that he might receive from the husbandmen of the fruit of the vineyard.

“And they caught him, and beat him, and sent him away empty.

“And again he sent unto them another servant; and at him they cast stones, and wounded him in the head, and sent him away shamefully handled.

“And again he sent another; and him they killed, and many others; beating some, and killing some.

“Having yet therefore one son, his wellbeloved, he sent him also last unto them, saying, They will reverence my son. But those husbandmen said among themselves, ‘This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance shall be ours.’

“And they took him, and killed him, and cast him out of the vineyard.

“What shall therefore the lord of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the husbandmen, and will give the vineyard unto others.

“And have ye not read this scripture? THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS REJECTED IS BECOME THE HEAD OF THE CORNER. THIS WAS THE LORD’S DOING, AND IT IS MARVELLOUS IN OUR EYES”

And they sought to lay hold on him, but feared the people, for they knew that he had spoken the parable against them. And they left him and went their way.

Mark 12:1–12

If you weren’t with us last week, we’ve been following Jesus as he makes visits to the temple in Jerusalem.

He had a run-in last time with the Sanhedrin, where in a simple but effective way he silenced them when they questioned his authority. Today’s conversation is between the same parties. So we have Jesus, his disciples, the Sanhedrin, and an unknown number of bystanders.

He starts speaking the language of the parable. And as was his custom, he draws on elements of his own culture to form these parables. This one is about a vineyard. It’s a common

enough set-up in his day. Landowners rent out their land to farmers, who use the land for grazing cattle, planting vineyards or, less commonly, growing crops.

In this story, the owner sends representatives to the vineyard. In real life, these representatives would collect payment in the form of a share of the produce. But the landowner's employees are treated harshly. And he tries again and again to give the tenant farmers the opportunity to do what's right.

In a last-ditch attempt, the landowner sends his own son. *Surely*, he thinks, *they'll show him respect*. But this ends in disaster when the son is killed. Although there are elements to this parable that would be unlikely to happen in real life, there's one point that has its grounds in ancient law. A tenant farmer could claim land that no one else stood to inherit. So Jesus uses this in the story to show how the farmers decide to kill the son so they could have the vineyard to themselves.

Bible students will read this parable and quite naturally begin to attempt to decipher it. I suspect most of you will have formed some conclusions about what the different parts of the story represent. You may have recalled references in the Old Testament where the image of a vineyard is used to portray Israel. You may have recognised the representatives that were treated so badly by the farmers as being God's messengers—God's prophets, in this case.

Of course, the most important character in the parable is the son. If you thought the son represented Jesus, you'd be right. God the Father sends prophets to his people to demand they give God the glory due to him. His ultimate act of mercy to that nation was the sending of his own son, Jesus Christ. But Israel, God's chosen nation, killed its own Messiah.

The whole thing reminds us of the long story of Israel's rebellion against God. And broadening it out a bit more, we can see it as a description of the whole of human history, with man in a continued struggle to rid the world of God.

We might see these tenant farmers as behaving in this way as a direct challenge to the landowner. They're daring him to enforce his legal claim over the land, and they don't think he'll do it. The same attitude continues to this day. The people of this world want to be rid of God. And whether they acknowledge it or not, the shaking of their fists in God's face is a challenge, daring him to stop them in their rebellion.

No doubt it appears to many in this world that God has backed down in some way. Their own sin goes unpunished. They've seen people who put themselves first and profited greatly. They think if God hasn't exacted vengeance by now, he never will. The tragedy of this mass stupidity is beyond words. God HAS set his date for judgement of this world, and he WILL bring the hammer of his fury down on every individual who refuses to bow the knee to him.

Jesus uses parables in different ways. Sometimes, they're so obscure they can only be understood through his explanation. This one was clearer. He intended it to be understood. And it tells us the hearers knew he was referring to the religious elite. They're the tenant farmers of the story. It was their ancestors who persecuted and killed God's prophets, and they themselves would commit the greatest of crimes against God in killing his only begotten Son.

Humanly speaking, we could say Jesus was again giving them the chance to repent. When he asks them the question in verse 9, *What will the owner of the vineyard do to those killers?* he invites them to consider that **they** are the culprits. They should've repented on the spot.

But in a demonstration of spiritual blindness the leaders here, who know the parable is about them, can only think of killing the person in front of them, thereby fulfilling the very prophecy they heard just thirty seconds ago.

I meant to say there are other details in this story which you may have been tempted to interpret in some way. For example, in verse 1 there's a tower and a hedge. What we're always trying to achieve with parables is to see what details in them are meant to symbolise other things, and to ignore the details that are merely providing a background. So no matter how tempting it might be, I'm going to assume that the details of the winepress, tower and hedge are not relevant.

Here then, Jesus lays out the climax of Israel's historic rejection of God. He tells them they're going to fulfil prophecy by killing the Son of God, and that's exactly what they did! The main point of this parable is to show the justification for God's decision to replace national Israel.

Now if you hear Christians tell you that this is an error—called “Replacement Theology”—you should politely reason with them. When our text says the vineyard will be given to someone else (v. 9), this is **not** only a judgement on the religious leaders; it's the whole race. Although Jesus's strongest rebukes were against the religious leaders themselves, the history of Israel shows a sad trend of rebellion **that included the common people too**.

There WAS a replacement. God's favour would no longer be towards one nation. It'd now become clear that eternal blessings would be given, not to the children of the flesh, but to the children of *promise*. God still has his elect people among the Jews, but his dealings with them as a unit have ended.

We've said a few things about the parable. But Jesus expands this story out by introducing a quote from the Psalms at the end (v. 10). In effect, he's saying *he is the Son represented by the one the tenant farmers killed, and he is also the messianic stone spoken of in Psalm 118*. It's this last section I want us to focus on today. We're going to look at what it means for Jesus to be the cornerstone. We're also going to see a wider foundation supporting a brand-new temple of God, a construction of a spiritual nature—the Church of God.

The Cornerstone: Jesus Christ

Psalm 118, then, talks of a stone that was rejected by the builders but turned out to be the most important. I'm not entirely sure what the Psalmist had in mind when he used this imagery. But as an example, let's assume it refers to the rebuilding of the temple after its destruction by the Babylonians in the 6th century BC. You may remember Cyrus the king had given permission to the Jews to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the derelict temple. (By the way, if you're lucky enough to live in England, you can go and visit the British Museum in London. There you find an ancient artefact made by order of King Cyrus himself. It describes his decree to allow the Jews to rebuild the temple.)

We can imagine, then, the returned exiles rebuilding the temple. We can picture them using stones from the old temple scattered around. And perhaps the picture the Psalmist intended

for us to see here is of these Jews finding one of the old stones in particular that was not good enough for the new temple. They rejected it. Yet in the new spiritual temple of God, it's a similarly rejected stone which was to become the most important one in the whole edifice. The stone gets a mention in the Acts of the Apostles:

This [this person, Jesus] is the stone which was set at nought of you builders, which is become the head of the corner.

Acts 4:11

None of us, as far as I know, is an architect. So unless you've looked up this word "cornerstone" previously, it's unlikely you'll know what it means. It could refer to one of two things. There was the main stone that formed the beginning of the foundations of a building. Every other stone was laid with reference to that one. Another type of special stone was the one that sat on the very top of an archway, often called the "capstone".

But when we look at how Jesus is described elsewhere in Scripture, it seems clear that the intention here was to portray Jesus as the *foundation* stone rather than a finishing touch to a building.

Like I said, the cornerstone was the beginning of the construction. It was the most important. Every other stone laid had to fit around this cornerstone.

Jesus Christ then is the cornerstone of the Church of God. He's not just another part of the foundation of the church but is *the most important part* of that foundation. Every other person who could be described as a founder of the church had to be like him, and so with the rest of the building. He, Jesus Christ, is the reference point:

- How the church will be built down the centuries is determined by HIM
- Our deeds done in the name of God are carried out with reference to HIM
- Our prayers to God are made in HIS name
- Our worship of God is only acceptable because of HIS merits
- Our evangelism points sinners to HIM
- And when we show kindness to the brethren, it said to be shown to HIM

It's all about him. You could say it's all about God the Father and God the Holy Spirit too. But within the Godhead there's a satisfaction for Jesus to take centre stage. It was a trinitarian choice to place Jesus Christ in his role as the cornerstone of the worldwide church of God.

And he couldn't become the chief cornerstone without doing the will of God. And so it was he resisted all temptation to run away from his responsibility, making that lonely walk to Calvary.

If you're listening today and you think what happened to Jesus was a tragedy or a mistake, you're completely wrong. His offering himself up to be killed was a deliberate act. He had a mission to accomplish. Believe it or not, he was to stand in the place of sinful men and women. All the Christians you know, and all the others in this world, were on Jesus's mind as he was hauled up in the air on a Roman cross. And in those few painful hours, he willingly took the blame for all the sinful stuff that his people had committed. God looked down on him as if *he'd* committed all the most abominable acts that man could ever commit. And being held as the guilty party, he had the wrath of God poured out on him.

All those he died for will eventually come to God in prayer asking for mercy. And when God considers the sins they've committed, fully deserving of an eternal hell, **he will see all that person's sins have already been paid for.** The sentence has already been carried out by Jesus. And so it is that a sinful man or woman can be set free, pronounced innocent of all sins for ever.

The Foundations: the Apostles

There's this other class of people that makes up the rest of the foundation of our building. They're of lesser importance than the cornerstone, but as the foundation they're especially important.

In our parable, we read about the servants of the landowner who were treated badly. Jesus's hearers understood this as a reference to the prophets. Listen to what it says in Israel's history:

And the LORD God of their fathers sent to them by his messengers, rising up betimes, and sending; because he had compassion on his people, and on his dwelling place. But they mocked the messengers of God, and despised his words, and misused his prophets, until the wrath of the LORD arose against his people, till there was no remedy.

2 Chronicles 36:15–16

The parable describes the treatment of the prophets very well. For the most part, they were either ignored, verbally abused, physically assaulted, or killed. And they're not forgotten in the New Testament. As recently as the letter to the church in Ephesus, the prophets are described alongside the apostles as making up the foundation of the church.

Later on though, we see the church likened to a city with huge walls. Let's read what it says in Revelation about the Church of God, the New Jerusalem:

And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and in them the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

Revelation 21:14

In one sense, the prophets *should* be regarded as part of the foundation of the New Testament church. They were urging people to repent. They were encouraging Israel to serve God with their whole hearts and minds. And it's that spirit of submission to God that puts a person in a state that's ready to accept Jesus Christ as the Saviour. And let's not forget that John the Baptist was a prophet greater than all those who went before him, and he directed people to Jesus Christ.

That said, we note the reference in Revelation to the apostles. These were people who had personal encounters with Jesus Christ before his ascension.

- They received instruction directly from him
- They had the privilege of engaging in evangelistic missions with the Son of God himself
- They were given miraculous gifts to use in validating Jesus Christ as The One

- They were honoured with a personal friendship with Jesus experienced by no one else this side of glory

What it must have been like to be part of this team! To have Jesus in your midst as they did.

And as the foundation of the church, they had to fit in with Christ the Cornerstone. They had to *fit around* him. They had to be *sculpted* to be *like* him.

But these were just men. Sinful men. I wouldn't say they were more sinful than us, but let's not forget that they had the privilege of being with the incarnate Christ, yet when it came to it, they all ran away and abandoned their friend.

No, brethren; the real reason they fitted perfectly around the cornerstone in the temple of God was not because they made themselves so through good behaviour. **Their perfect shape and fitness as foundation stones was all in the perfection of Christ himself.** Being "in Christ" MADE them the perfect fit to take their place in the holy temple of God, even if their behaviour didn't reflect that perfection.

The Temple: the Multitude of God's Elect

The vineyard, as I've said, was often used as a classic metaphor for Israel:

For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah his pleasant plant. And he looked for judgment, but behold oppression; for righteousness, but behold a cry.

Isaiah 5:7

But Jesus came to show us the *true* Israel of God. In the past few weeks especially, we've seen him dropping big hints to that effect. God's grand plan was not to be based around the temple or Jerusalem. It was not going to involve animal sacrifices. It was not going to be about the Jews.

This new, spiritual temple of God, that would last for ever, **would be made up of members of the true Israel of God.**

- They'd be part of a superior covenant
- They'd trust in one sacrifice to end them all
- They'd be found in every corner of the globe
- And each one would become a stone in the superb creation of God's everlasting temple:

Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ.

1 Peter 2:5

Let's not forget though that not all Jews have, or will, reject Jesus Christ as Messiah. God could've condemned the *entire race* of Jewish people to apostasy. He had the right to do that! But the apostle Paul tells us that God has *not* completely extinguished them. Some *have* believed in Jesus. So although this new temple will be made up almost entirely of Gentiles,

some of the stones will be former Jews, taking their place in the temple which has Jewish believers at its very foundation.

It's interesting Peter calls us "lively" stones. Stones are dead, aren't they? We even describe things as being "stone dead". So where does he get the idea of stones that are alive?

I think it's a great image of sinful man made alive. We began spiritually dead. Incapable of performing the smallest act that God would consider good. Unable therefore to even do the one thing that could deliver us from the judgement that was coming our way: repent and believe the gospel.

But we remember the grace of God. For some people, "where sin abounded, grace did much more abound". God took these dead stones and gave them life!

The architectural plans for this New Jerusalem were made before the world existed. The plan was to take some of the stones that make up the race of mankind and to use them in this holy construction. Someone described this world as a quarry from which God cuts and shapes the stones he uses in his new temple, the church.

And this new temple exceeds all that went before it. It's more beautiful than Solomon's Temple. It's bigger than Herod's Temple, and as a project exceeds the breath-taking one seen by Ezekiel in a vision.

I talked earlier about the perfection of the stones being due to their possession by Christ. That is, in that this new temple of God is made up of perfect beings, we're forced to see that perfection coming from the righteousness of Christ that now belongs to every member of his church.

We also know in this life we're to so submit ourselves to God as to make our thoughts, words and actions Christ-like. Our theology shows us clearly all the steps we take towards Christ-likeness in this life are begun and perfected by God himself. Even as a believer, *you can't do a single good thing* without him. But God tells us to do stuff! He tells us to lean on him for the strength to do it, but he tells us to work, and witness, and fight, and all these other things.

There's a danger when people talk about holiness that they could mean "being made more fit for glory". As far as I can see, that is **an abominable thought**. Our acceptance is **wholly** through the merits of Jesus Christ, and whether we do well in our Christian walk or not, our acceptance with God doesn't change.

But it's expected that our behaviour *will* change during our Christian lives. For example, we'll grow in our knowledge of Jesus Christ. We'll come to know about his character more, we'll come to know about his purposes more, and we'll even get to know *him* more as a personal friend and brother.

Although this is a very general rule, and takes into account the many exceptions, there is a trend in the Christian life of improvement in words and actions. Believers are more likely to be wiser when they're sixty than when they were twenty. They have more experience in encouragement and edification. And dare I say it, they're more aware of how sin makes inroads into their lives and so are more on guard.

Let me be clear: **all the seeds of all the despicable sins that have affected them in the past, or have never yet affected them, are lying in wait in the deep recesses of their soul.** Let no man or woman in the church think themselves immune from any type of sin. If you become proud at your immunity to certain sins, God might just give you enough rope to hang yourself. He'll show you how inclined you are by nature to fall into wickedness. He won't cast you off forever, but he'll teach you a lesson you won't forget.

What a privilege it is for us who are believers to be daily sculpted to be more like Jesus Christ our Cornerstone! God pays no attention to all the stones of this world. It's the ones he *loves* he spends time on. Day by day, he shapes us. And it's been said that sometimes it's a tough exercise as God chisels off unwanted characteristics of ours.

But we know that the painful experiences we go through are intended by God. It's easy for me to say this when I'm not lying on a hospital bed dying of some terminal illness. But it's not to be taken as my opinion or my interpretation of the Bible. Bible students should know the word of God is *full* of assurances that God is not only sovereign but always has the good of his people in view.

God's vineyard may have been at one time run by a gang of robbers. They didn't offer up to him what was his due. They despised his messengers. But God's kingdom now is populated by others. *We* are God's true Israel.

The wicked farmers in the parable thought they could kill the heir, and all would be theirs. But not only was God's son raised from the dead, but he's now brought in a multitude of others to become joint heirs with him in the vineyard of God.

And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

Galatians 3:29

You my friends are **heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.** As heirs, you and I are set to inherit all things. All that God has prepared for the eternal future belongs to us now!

It's my hope and prayer that through the encouragements from the scriptures today, you'll be moved to give to God in the week ahead the fruit of the vineyard that's rightly his, that is thanksgiving and praise for all things, and that you'd have a sober attitude to shaping your behaviour to conform to the Great Cornerstone, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.