

The Stone the Builders Rejected (Part I): Mark 11:27-12:12
Ben Reaach, Three Rivers Grace Church
Sunday, March 27th, 2011

Jesus is the stone the builders rejected. The religious leaders of Israel are the builders who rejected the stone. They questioned Him, despised Him, resented Him, and rejected Him. The section of Mark that we're in right now describes for us the final week leading up to Jesus' death on Friday and then His resurrection on Sunday. The passage this morning takes place on Tuesday. Sunday was the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Monday was the clearing of the temple. And now, verse 27, "they came again to Jerusalem." They already passed by the fig tree on their way into Jerusalem, and now they come into the temple.

And who comes up to Him as He walks in the temple? The chief priests and the scribes and the elders. This is the group of Jewish religious leaders. These are the ones who have already rejected Jesus in their hearts and are looking for a way to destroy Him. These are the very ones Jesus identified when He predicted His own death. It says in 8:31, "And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again." Well, here they are, just as Jesus predicted.

Again, we have to remember that all of this is happening according to plan. The opposition from these leaders is not a surprise to Jesus in the least. Jesus expects this, He has planned it, and He knows where it will lead. Jesus knows that this confrontation is part of an escalating hostility that will soon result in Him hanging on a cross.

But that, of course, will not be the end. As He alludes to at the end of this passage, in the Old Testament quotation from Psalm 118, the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. Even though He is despised and rejected by men (Isaiah 53:3), He is the cornerstone. Peter describes Him as "a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious" (1 Peter 2:4). This is the paradox of Jesus' life and ministry that we've been seeing throughout the Gospel of Mark. He is the great Son of Man who will be exalted for all eternity, and yet He came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many (10:45).

We have to understand that these two sections (11:27-33 and 12:1-12) go together. At the end of chapter 11 the religious leaders question Jesus' authority. Then Jesus responds in chapter 12 with this parable that rebukes them for their hard-hearted unbelief. This morning we're just going to get through the first section, and then next week we'll pick it up in chapter 12. But I

hope it's clear that these two paragraphs are integrally related to one another. They are part of the same interaction between the religious leaders and Jesus.

Let's begin, then, by looking in detail at these builders who reject the cornerstone. Or, in the language of the parable, the tenants who reject the Son. And as we examine these things we'll need to be attentive to how we are like these builders, these tenants, these religious leaders who reject Jesus. You might say, Oh, I'm nothing like them. They're the bad guys. They're the prideful jerks who hate Jesus.

I think we may find that we are actually similar to these prideful jerks. I pray that the difference will be that we are repentant, whereas they remained hardened. As we see their rejection of Jesus, and as we are convicted of ways that we, too, have resisted Jesus' authority in our lives and have presumed upon God's kindness and patience with us, I pray that we will humble ourselves and repent.

Romans 2:4-5 sums up the thrust of this passage. Jesus' confrontation with the religious leaders and His parable pronounced against them, this is the essence of the message He is sending. And this is the fork in the road for you and me. Paul writes, "Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed." Friends, are you going to repent? Or are you going to store up wrath for yourself?

There are three things I'd like to highlight this morning about the builders who reject the stone, and I challenge us to examine our own hearts to see how some of these things may be at work in our lives as well. As the Holy Spirit reveals these things to us, and convicts us, let's not be hard-hearted or impenitent, but rather humble and repentant.

They question Jesus' authority

The religious leaders have been questioning Jesus' authority for some time. This is by no means the first time this issue has come up. Jesus' authority has been evident from the very beginning of His ministry. The people were amazed at Jesus' authority in His teaching and in His supernatural powers to heal and cast out demons. And from the start of His ministry this has been a source of tension and has sparked confrontation between Jesus and the religious leaders. You can imagine how the scribes felt when the people were so astonished at Jesus' teaching because Jesus taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes

(1:22). I can just envision the scribes bristling with jealousy and hatred and disgust at this man who was robbing them of the spotlight. They wanted to be the ones wielding authority. They wanted to be the ones in control. And here is this new guy coming on the scene with a depth of authority that no mortal can reckon with. But they, in their foolishness, try to reckon with it. They repeatedly attempt to challenge His authority.

In chapter 2 when Jesus healed the paralytic, and Jesus said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven,” the scribes questioned in their hearts, “Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (2:5-7). Do you remember how Jesus responded? He said to them, “that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he said to the paralytic—“I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home” (2:10-11).

Later in that chapter the scribes of the Pharisees questioned Jesus about eating with sinners and tax collectors. Then people questioned Him about fasting. Then the Pharisees questioned Him about the Sabbath. And then in chapter 3 the scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying, “He is possessed by Beelzebul,” and “by the prince of demons he casts out the demons” (3:22). This was no friendly debate. This was an all out attack on Jesus’ authority. It was even worse than the political campaigns we witness today. The religious “authorities” were determined to take Jesus down, because His authority was severely infringing on the authority they pretended to have.

In chapter 7 they questioned Jesus about His disciples not washing their hands. In chapter 10 they tried to back Him into a corner by questioning Him about divorce. Continually they are looking for ways to undermine Jesus’ authority.

Here they come again, now, following Jesus’ clearing of the temple. And they want to know, What right do you have to blow through here like you own the place? In 11:28 they say to Jesus, “By what authority are you doing these things, or who gave you this authority to do them?” In other words, they’re saying, We certainly didn’t give you permission to come in here and flip tables and turn over chairs and shut down everything that was going on in the temple. This is our temple, and we’ll run it the way we want to. What makes you think you have the right to interfere?

I love how Jesus responds in these situations. They would have been all in a tizzy—irate and obnoxious. And in their arrogance they think they’re going to put Jesus in His place, according to what they think His place should be. But instead Jesus puts them in their place. And even in the context of this short dialogue it’s abundantly clear who possesses the greater authority. Jesus refuses to submit to their interrogation. Instead,

He interrogates them. He responds with a question, verse 29, “I will ask you one question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things.” They thought they were backing Jesus into a corner, but in an instant they find themselves between a rock and a hard place. All of a sudden they are impaled on the horns of a dilemma.

The question Jesus poses to them in verse 30 is this: “Was the baptism of John from heaven or from man? Answer me.” This leads to a second point about these leaders.

They deny John’s baptism

Look at the beginning of their private discussion in verse 31. “And they discussed it with one another, saying, ‘If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’” This is somewhat humorous, I think, to see this group of pompous politicians silenced by a simple question from Jesus. Surely the chief priests and the scribes and the elders had a well-rehearsed plan of attack in this encounter. Surely they had thought through many of the things that might be said and how they would respond. But this simple question from Jesus sends them back to the drawing board. They have to huddle up and have an emergency powwow before they can even make a statement.

And what is their dilemma? Well, on the one side, they are obviously opposed to affirming the legitimacy of John’s ministry. John was the baptizer. His was a ministry of baptism. He was baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:4). And there was a very tight connection between John’s ministry and Jesus’ ministry. John was the one who prepared the way of the Lord. And John, himself, announced, “After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (Mark 1:7-8). Then Jesus came and was baptized by John. The continuity from John’s ministry to Jesus’ ministry was unmistakable.

Therefore for these religious leaders, they know what will happen if they affirm that John’s baptism is from heaven. If they say that, Jesus will then rightly ask them, “Why then did you not believe him?” Because to believe what John said would be to believe in Jesus’ authority. Thus, they deny the baptism of John. They deny God’s messenger, God’s prophet.

They fear man

We observe a third thing about these leaders in verse 32. “But shall we say, ‘From man’?”—they were afraid of the people, for they all held that John really was a prophet.” This is the

opposite horn of their dilemma. On the one side, they cannot affirm John's baptism, because that would implicitly affirm Jesus' authority. But on the other side, they don't feel like they can publicly deny John's baptism, because they fear the people. The people held that John really was a prophet. And these religious leaders, even though they disagreed with that, didn't want to show their cards on that matter because it would only hurt their public image.

This really gets at a fundamental characteristic of these individuals that is closely tied to their rejection of Jesus. Ultimately they fear man rather than God. They are looking for the praise of man. They want power and control over people. Therefore they fear people. They are consumed with what people think of them. And they ignore God. They do not fear God or respect God's messengers (even His own Son).

Verse 33, "So they answered Jesus, 'We do not know.'" That's a blatant lie. They had a clear conviction concerning the question. But they were paralyzed by the opinion of the people. They couldn't say what they really thought, because it might hurt their approval ratings. The people might turn on them. So the chief priests and scribes and elders end up giving no answer at all. And since they will not answer Jesus, Jesus will not answer them. Jesus had promised an answer to their question if they would answer His question. But they come back with a duplicitous, "We do not know," and Jesus says to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."

As we examine our own hearts we should consider how much of a hold the fear of man has on us. To what extent are we craving the praise of man, and therefore motivated by people-pleasing, terrified by the possibility of people thinking badly of us. If we do not fight fiercely against those sinful tendencies, if we become hardened in those fleshly patterns, we will find that we are also rejecting the authority of Jesus in our lives. It comes down to the question of whether we're going to submit to Jesus' authority or whether we're going to reject that authority and presume to live according to our own authority. Will we bow to Jesus, or will we be like the fools who built the tower of Babel, saying, "Come . . . let us make a name for ourselves . . ." (Genesis 11:4). That kind of self-centeredness and assumed autonomy won't last forever. God won't allow it to. God is patient for a time, but then there's judgment.

So beware, friends, of assuming that you have ultimate authority over your life. Beware of man-centered and self-centered thinking that elevates the importance of what mere humans have to say and minimizes the importance of what God says.

In our culture we are surrounded by a mentality that loves to question authority. The assumption is, It's all about you. You can put your videos on YouTube. You can create a FaceBook page that is all about you. You can put a bumper sticker on your car that says, Question Authority. This is the air we breathe. You don't answer to anybody but yourself. The world revolves around you. You define your own reality. Don't let anyone else tell you what to do or what to be or how to live.

And the irony is that when God's authority is rejected, then the opinions of others becomes an oppressive and cruel authority over your life. Those who think they are autonomous are not. You don't get greater freedom by challenging God's rule over you. You get slavery—slavery to what other people think.

Let's learn from the lesson Jesus has for all of us in this passage. Let us not question His authority. And let us not fear man instead of fearing Him. We have to see the universe as it truly is. We have to acknowledge God's sovereign rule over all that He has made. And when we let go of the foolish aspiration of making ourselves gods, and when we bow the knee to Him who is the true and living God, there is much joy to be found in Him—and peace and contentment and comfort and hope. I pray that's where we will all find ourselves today—relinquishing all claims to autonomy and authority and the praise of people and submitting ourselves to the One who has all authority in heaven and on earth, the One who rightfully reigns over us.

Next week we will return to this passage and look at the second part of it, which is the parable that Jesus tells to these religious leaders as a rebuke to them. I hope this morning we will realize there is a God over us, the God who owns the vineyard, the God who sent His own Son to us, and the God who will set all things right in the end. We would be foolish, therefore, to presume on His kindness and forbearance and patience. We must understand that God's kindness and His patience are meant to lead us to repentance (Romans 2:4).

So as you reflect on this encounter between the religious leaders and Jesus, don't allow your mind to be racing with ways that this applies to the person sitting next to you, or the person sitting in the pew behind you or in front of you. Let your mind be racing with how this impacts your own life. Let your heart be sensitive to what the Holy Spirit is doing in you right now. Are there ways that you are subtly, or not so subtly, shunning Jesus' authority in your life, questioning His authority, challenging His authority? Are there actions and attitudes that reflect a greater allegiance to the opinions of people than to the authority of God?

We need to pray that the Holy Spirit will convict us of these things, and we need to repent of these sins and turn to Jesus

in faith. There's a connection here with the things we looked at last Sunday in the book of Job. Job questioned God. He demanded answers. And how did God respond? He fired back with questions. He put Job in his place. He showed Job who is boss, who is in control. And Job finally got the message and said, "I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth . . ." (Job 40:4). And he said, "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:5-6).

That's the way these Jewish "authorities" should have responded in the face of Jesus' true authority. And that's how each of us should respond. When God brings circumstances into your life that you don't like, or when God's Word confronts you in ways that make you uncomfortable, don't harden your heart like these scribes and say, Who do you think you are? Don't buy into the mentality of our age, the mentality of our sinful flesh, and say, I answer to no authority but my own. That's foolishness.

Open your eyes to see the absolute authority of King Jesus, and open your eyes to see that His authority is not a selfish, oppressive authority. He's not a divine version of Moammar Gadhafi. No, God is a benevolent ruler over the universe. He does hate sin, and He will punish sin. But He gave His own Son to be punished in our place. Oh friends, submit yourself to this good and great God. Turn to Jesus. Embrace His rightful rule over your life. Repent of your selfishness and self-centeredness, and trust in Jesus to forgive those sins. He is the stone the builders rejected, and He has become the cornerstone. This was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes.