

Mark 12:1–12 — Is Jesus My Cornerstone Or My Crushing Stone?

February 9, 2020

Some people claim Jesus was nothing more than a good teacher, a spiritual guru. He had great ideals. He wanted to lead people toward morality and virtue, but his plans fell apart. They ended in tragedy. Some claim Jesus went into Jerusalem hoping to achieve his dreams, but things didn't go according to plan. Jesus was killed. Jesus' death was the end of a well-intentioned life. Is this true? Was Jesus' death an unexpected end to his life?

In reality, nothing could be further from the truth. As we have seen in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus was not surprised by his death. He came to die. He knew exactly how he would die and when he would die long before it took place. Nothing about his death took Jesus by surprise. We have seen this with great clarity earlier in this Gospel. Three times Jesus gave specific details about his death months before it happened.

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. Mark 8:31 (ESV)

...for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise." Mark 9:31 (ESV)

...saying, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles." Mark 10:33 (ESV)

Neither the Jewish leaders nor the Romans knew details about Jesus' death ahead of time, but Jesus knew all the details. As far as Jesus was concerned, his death, and the way he would die, was prewritten history.

Today, we come to Mark 12. We find that not only did Jesus know all the details about his death before it happened, but he also knew exactly what would happen to him after his death. He knew about his resurrection, the church, and the role he would play as the head of it. Turn in your Bibles to Mark 12 where we will find these details.

While you are turning, let me remind you of the context. Jesus was in a debate with the members of the Sanhedrin — the religious leaders in Jerusalem. They were furious with him. They claimed he had no authority to be hailed the king of the Jews by the people. They claimed he had no authority to clear the temple courtyards of money changers and animals sellers. They claimed he had no authority to teach the people. They claimed that they were the ones who held all the authority, not Jesus.

Last week, with one question, Jesus unmasked the religious leaders of the people, revealing they were not spiritual authorities over the people who were God's mouth piece of truth. In actuality they were politicians adrift in the political winds trying to maintain popularity with the people. They were cowards, not courageous.

In Mark 12, Jesus continued to unmask the supposed religious authorities in Jerusalem. With a parable and a prophecy Jesus revealed that God was done with them. He would destroy them and set up Jesus as the new head of the people of God. Let's read these verses, then in our study, find how Jesus revealed this truth.

And he began to speak to them in parables. "A man planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a pit for the winepress and built a tower, and leased it to

tenants and went into another country. When the season came, he sent a servant to the tenants to get from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. And they took him and beat him and sent him away empty-handed. Again he sent to them another servant, and they struck him on the head and treated him shamefully. And he sent another, and him they killed. And so with many others: some they beat, and some they killed. He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But those tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' And they took him and killed him and threw him out of the vineyard. What will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others. Have you not read this Scripture: " 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes'?" And they were seeking to arrest him but feared the people, for they perceived that he had told the parable against them. So they left him and went away. Mark 12:1–12 (ESV)

Jesus began with a parable. What is a parable? It is a fictional story intended to convey spiritual truth in a subtle way. It is a way of speaking truth through a story without needing to directly convey that spiritual truth. Let's examine this parable, then we will come back and interpret this parable so we can see the spiritual truth behind it that Jesus intended to convey.

The Parable

And he began to speak to them in parables. "A man planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a pit for the winepress and built a tower, and leased it to tenants and went into another country. Mark 12:1 (ESV)

It begins by telling us that at this time, Jesus spoke to them in parables. Notice that is plural. The Gospel of Matthew tells us Jesus spoke at least three parables at this time. Mark only chosen to tell us one of them. That is why parables is plural but there is only one singular story in the Gospel of Mark.

This parable is known as the parable of the tenants. It found in other Gospels. We can find it in Matthew 21:33ff and Luke 21:9ff. I will bring in relevant data about this parable from the other Gospel accounts as we work our way through the story.

This parable is a story about a wealthy land owner who planted a vineyard. Right away, we see he did everything needed to make it a raging success. He built fences around it, made a winepress, planted it with the choicest of vines, and built a tower so there was a lookout for animals and robbers. This vineyard was built to be a success. No expenses were spared.

The wealthy landowner then left the vineyard in the hands of tenant farmers to manage the farm when he was gone. They would enjoy a percentage of the crop for their hard work. The owner of the vineyard would enjoy a percentage of the crop for his investment. A wealthy landowner building a vineyard and leaving it in the hands of tenant farmers to be managed was not unusual. At the time of Jesus, most of the countryside surrounding Jerusalem was farmable but it was owned by the wealthy. Many of the landowners had converted their property to farmland to be worked by tenant farmers. This was a common thing in the time of Jesus, just as it is common today for farmers to rent ground to have a harvest from the ground even though they don't own the ground.

Incidentally, when a vineyard was planted it took around four to five years until a harvest was realized. The landowner of this vineyard was likely gone for that long period of time before he returned to receive the portion of the harvest that was rightfully due him. The problem is when a landowner is gone a long time, the tenant farmers start to think and act like they own the place.

Another important piece of background information on this parable comes from the Old Testament. There is a very similar parable told in Isaiah 5. When

Jesus told this parable of the tenant farmers, people would immediately realize that he was intentionally echoing Isaiah 5 and that much of Isaiah 5 is the interpretive key to understanding the spiritual truth behind this fictional story. Let me show you a little of Isaiah 5 and you will see what I mean.

Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. Isaiah 5:1–2 (ESV)

Does that sound familiar? God created a vineyard. He did everything to make it the best he could, but instead of producing wine grapes, it yielded wild grapes. It literally says the vineyard produced sour grapes.

In Isaiah, a few verses later after this, Isaiah told us the meaning of this vineyard story. This interpretive key will help us understand the meaning of Jesus' similar parable in Mark 12.

For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting; and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, an outcry! Isaiah 5:7 (ESV)

We will come back to Isaiah 5 and the interpretive key found in it later this morning. For now, shelve that information in your mind and let's return to the rest of the parable Jesus told in Mark.

When the season came, he sent a servant to the tenants to get from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. And they took him and beat him and sent him away empty-handed. Mark 12:2–3 (ESV)

This is not good. Four to five years after the vineyard was planted, the owner of the vineyard sent a servant to receive his agreed-upon portion of the harvest. The rest of the harvest was for the tenant farmers to keep. It was unbelievable. These tenant farmers did not honor their commitment. Even worse,

they beat the owner's servant and sent him away empty-handed. This was outrageous! You can imagine the shock on people's faces when they heard this story. A tenant farmer not paying their landlord was unheard of in that day.

Beating the landowner's servant was dark and wicked. It gets worse.

Again he sent to them another servant, and they struck him on the head and treated him shamefully. Mark 12:4 (ESV)

The owner of the vineyard was not deterred. He sent another servant asking for the portion due to him. Instead of honoring that servant, it says they hit him in the head. It literally says they bashed in his skull. At this point, nobody wanted to work as a servant for the owner of this vineyard. If he sent you to pick up the portion of the harvest that was rightfully his, you were beaten to within an inch of death by these tenant farmers, who were apparently MS-13 gang members. This was outrageous! It was wrong. It was evil.

And he sent another, and him they killed. And so with many others: some they beat, and some they killed. Mark 12:5 (ESV)

It only gets worse. Now the tenant farmers were not just beating the landowner's servants, they were killing them for absolutely no reason. What is even more amazing than the evil of the tenant farmers is the patience of the landowner who gave these tenant farmers chance after chance to do the right thing. The landowner was even willing to have his servants beaten and killed to give another chance to the tenant farmers to make the right choice.

If we were the landowner, we would have sent an army to these tenant farmers a long time ago. We wouldn't have given them a second chance. This landowner was amazingly patient in the face of great evil and wickedness. I don't think any of us would have had this kind of patience.

In the parallel account of this story in Matthew, we learn one of the ways these tenant farmers were putting the landowner's servants to death. They were stoning them. That is throwing rocks at them until they were beaten to death. That is a horrifying way to go.

And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Matthew 21:35 (ESV)

If you were in Jesus' audience as he was telling this story, what would you say at this point? "Don't send any more servants. Be done with the tenant farmers. They are terrible people!" Maybe you would tell the owner of the vineyard to kill the tenant farmers and hand out justice. That may be what we would say, but the owner of this vineyard was incredibly patient. He was always willing to believe the best of these wicked tenants. Look what it says he did next.

He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, "They will respect my son." Mark 12:6 (ESV)

This owner's son was the highest and most respected person in his household. At this point, if I was in Jesus' audience that day, I would have screamed, "Don't send your son! You can't trust these wicked workers. Protect your son. Get him as far away from these men as you can." Yet, that is not what the owner did. He was still willing to believe the best of these wicked men. Let's see what these tenant farmers did to the owner's son.

But those tenants said to one another, "This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours." And they took him and killed him and threw him out of the vineyard. Mark 12:7-8 (ESV)

As soon as they saw the owners son, instead of respecting his authority, they attacked him and killed him. They hoped they would become the new owners of the vineyard once they killed the heir. Can you see the twisted nature

of their thinking? Killing the owner of the vineyard's son would not get them ownership of the vineyard. It would lead to the owner running out of patience and bringing justice upon them for their wicked management of the vineyard and murderous ways.

That is exactly what happened.

What will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others. Mark 12:9 (ESV)

According to Old Testament justice, the owner of the vineyard should have killed all of these tenant farmers. He should have killed them a long time ago after the way they treated his servants, but he was patient. His patience ran out when they killed his son. I think all of us can understand why the owner's patience finally ran out when they killed his son.

That is the parable. Now, let's look at the interpretation. See if you can see the spiritual truth Jesus was teaching through this fictitious story.

The Interpretation of the Parable

Who was the planter of the vineyard?

It was God. Since this parable parallels Isaiah 5, and God was the planter of the vineyard in Isaiah 5, he is the planter of the vineyard in this parable.

What does the vineyard represent?

The nation of Israel. Earlier we saw Jesus was intentionally echoing Isaiah 5. In Isaiah 5, the vineyard represented the nation of Israel so we should expect the vineyard to also represent the nation of Israel in this story.

Who were the tenant farmers?

They were the religious leaders. They were the ones charged to care for God's people to produce a harvest of righteousness in their lives. As we have seen, the spiritual leaders of Israel were bad tenant farmers. Instead of producing a good spiritual harvest among the people, they were corrupt and producing sour grapes. We have already seen Jesus point out their corruption in the Gospel of Mark as he called them robbers. Look how Jesus described the religious leaders in Matthew 23 and the kind of spiritual harvest they were producing in the lives of people.

But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in. Matthew 23:13 (ESV)

These are strong words. Instead of leading people to the kingdom of God, the spiritual leaders of the people were leading people away from the kingdom of God. They were shutting the door to the kingdom in people's faces. If I was a Pharisee and Jesus said this about me, that would hurt. While it may have hurt, it was true! The spiritual leaders were wicked tenant farmers taking people away from the kingdom of God.

I do not usually recommend movies, but when I read this verse, it reminded me of a movie I watched this weekend. It is called "The American Gospel." It is the story of the health, wealth, and property gospel movement and why it is completely against the Bible. The theme of the movie is how health, wealth, and prosperity preachers are shutting people out of the kingdom of God, just like the religious leaders in the days of Jesus.

Let me show you another way Jesus described the religious leaders.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves. Matthew 23:15 (ESV)

Jesus called the spiritual leaders of the people, children of hell. They were producing people who were twice as much children of hell as they were. Those words stung!

Cindy and I love to have people over for dinner, but I would never invite these guys over for dinner. I wouldn't want them around my children if Jesus called them children of hell. Remember these were the spiritual leaders of the nation!

What does the long journey the owner of the vineyard took represent?

It represents Old Testament history. Beginning with Abraham in the Old Testament, God gave his people priests. Priests were to be the spiritual sherpas to guide his people in knowing him, obeying him and following him. God gave his people the law. The priests were to study the law and teach God's people the law. Faithful spiritual leaders were to teach the Word of God to the people of God so they found joy and life from God. The priests were to keep teaching God's law and leading the people to know God and live a holy life for all of Old Testament history.

Who were the slaves God sent to receive his portion of the harvest?

These were the Old Testament prophets. God sent one after another to remind his people of the law, to call them to repentance of their sin, and to call them to live lives producing spiritual fruit. God did everything to make his people

a raging successful, just as the owner of the vineyard did everything to make his vineyard a success.

What did Israel do to the prophets God sent to them when they wandered into sin? They rejected the prophets, mistreated the prophets, and even killed some of the prophets. Israel's history is full of this stuff.

For example, when an early church father named Justin Martyr was writing to a man named Tripho, he accused the Jews of sawing the prophet Isaiah in half with a wood saw. That is how they killed him. There is a reference in Hebrews 11:37 to a great man of God being sawn in half for his faith. That is likely a reference to the way the spiritual leaders of Israel killed Isaiah the prophet. The prophet Jeremiah was also constantly mistreated. He was thrown into a pit. He was given meager rations. Tradition says he was stoned to death. The prophet Amos needed to flee for his life. The prophet Zechariah was rejected, and according to 2 Chronicles 24, he was also stoned by the spiritual leaders of God's people. The prophet Micah was beaten in the face according to 1 Kings 22. Almost every time God sent a prophet to his people, the spiritual leaders mistreated that prophet and sometimes killed that prophet. This is exactly what the tenant farmers did to the owner of the vineyard's servants in Jesus' story.

Who was the owner's son?

I hope all of you can see this. It is Jesus. Notice it says the owner sent his beloved son. At Jesus' baptism, when Jesus came out of the water, God the father's voice spoke from heaven. What did God the Father say about his son?

And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." Mark 1:11 (ESV)

It is the exact same wording. Jesus is the beloved son of God. He is the heir of all God possesses. He is the heir of the vineyard of Israel. He is the one who deserves all respect, yet we find the religious leaders plan to kill Jesus just like their forefather's killed the prophets of God. The spiritual leaders of that day were not different than their forefathers.

What will God do to the people who murder his son?

We saw this in the parable. The owner of the vineyard was very patient for a long time. He sent many servants who were killed and beaten. Lastly, he sent his son. When his son was beaten and killed, that crossed the line. The owner of the vineyard's patience was over. He sent judgment. That is exactly what God the Father would do to the nation of Israel when Jesus, God's beloved son, was killed.

When did this judgment come? Judgement fell on the religious leaders of Israel and the nation of Israel in 70 A.D. Just as God sent the Assyrians to conquer and destroy the northern kingdom of Israel, and later he sent the Babylonians to conquer and destroy the southern kingdom of Judah, God sent the Romans to conquer and destroy Jerusalem after the Jews rejected and killed his son.

The devastation that happened when Rome conquered Jerusalem in 70 A.D. boggles the mind. First, Jerusalem was surrounded by the Romans. It was cut off from the rest of the world so the people began to starve. The starvation of the city lasted a long time. Everyone who tried to escape the city during the

starvation was captured by the Romans and crucified on a cross that was set just outside the city walls for everyone to watch. The citizens that tried to escape died a gruesome death. When the Romans finally breached the walls of the city, the ancient historian Josephus tells us the Romans killed more than a million Jews. One at a time, they were killed by the sword. The historian Eusebius tells us the Romans hunted down every descendant of King David and killed them so there could never be another king in David's line. After destroying Jerusalem and completely obliterating the temple, not leaving one stone on another, the Romans went through almost a thousand villages around Israel, massacring everyone. That was the judgment of God on the tenant farmers for killing the beloved Son of God.¹

Not only was Jerusalem destroyed and millions of Jews murdered but everyone following those false religious leaders were sent on a one-way trip to hell. They were trusting in their own righteousness instead of the righteousness that can only come from God.

Mark says that not only would God destroy the evil tenant farmers but he would give his vineyard to another who would be the new leader over it. That gives us another question.

¹ One other point of interest is all the riches that were taken from the temple in Jerusalem by the Romans were used to build the Colosseum in Roman. It was named the Colosseum because of the 100 foot tall colossus statue of the Roman sun God that stood in front of it. The statue had the rays of sun coming from its head. When France gave the United States the statue of liberty, she was modeled after the Roman colossus statue with the rays of sun coming from her head. When we see the statue of liberty, it is interesting to know that it was modeled after that colossus statue in Rome that was originally built from the fund obtained by the destruction of temple in Jerusalem. <https://myemail.constantcontact.com/Rome-Destroyed-Jerusalem---What-Happened-Next-.html?soid=1108762609255&aid=tl-59uD1Y>

Who is the new caretaker to whom God will give his vineyard?

Jesus and the apostles. This would have been scandalous to the religious leaders, especially the prideful Sanhedrin. To think that the Jesus they despised and 12 ordinary men would be the new leaders of God's people would have just blown their minds.

How do we know Jesus would take over the leadership of God's people after God did away with the wicked religious leaders for rejecting and killing his son? Jesus moved from this parable to an Old Testament prophecy that provides all the details.

The Prophecy

Have you not read this Scripture: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes'?" Mark 12:10–11 (ESV)

This is a quote from Psalm 118:22-23. Jesus told the religious leaders that while they may have read this Scripture, they had not understood it. It was prophecy about him.

Jesus is the stone the builders rejected as unworthy to be part of the house of God. But the rejected stone of Jesus became the cornerstone. That is the most important stone in the house of God. When we see the word cornerstone, this can be used two different ways. In Ephesians 2 and 1 Peter 4, the cornerstone is speaking of the cornerstone in the foundation of the building from which all other stones are measured when they are put in their places. This type of cornerstone is known as a head stone. It is the stone that is at the top of a corner. It would be the highest and most prominent stone in a building, like the star on top of our Christmas trees. So this prophecy says the stone the builders

of God's house — that is the spiritual leaders — rejected, would become the most important and prominent stone in God's house.

How was this going to happen? It would be the Lord's doing and it would be marvelous in our eyes. God set Jesus up as the new spiritual authority over God's people. How did he do that? He did it in a marvelous way. That is, a miraculous way. Does anybody here see a hint of the resurrection? When the spiritual leaders of Israel rejected Jesus, God the Father took Jesus and miraculously set him up as the head and leader of God's people.

Earlier, we talked about how Jesus knew ahead of time that he would die in Jerusalem. He told that to his disciples many times. Here we see Jesus didn't just know he would die at the hands of the Jewish leaders, but he also knew that God the Father would not turn his back on him. He knew he would rise to become the head of God's people, the church. None of this took Jesus by surprise.

The Prophecy's Fulfillment

And they were seeking to arrest him but feared the people, for they perceived that he had told the parable against them. So they left him and went away. Mark 12:12 (ESV)

This would have been a good time to repent. If you were the religious leaders, don't you think that after Jesus told this parable against you and he warned you of God's judgment if you rejected the son, that would have changed your heart?

Instead of repenting, they doubled down on their wicked plan to arrest Jesus and do away with him.

Luke added one last line when he told the parable of the tenants that the other Gospels don't include. It is fitting for us to look at it.

Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him. Luke 20:18 (ESV)

Either everyone will recognize Jesus to be the cornerstone, the most important stone in God's house, or he will be their crushing stone. God the Father has set Jesus up as either our savior or our judge. If Jesus isn't the cornerstone of our lives, he will be our crushing stone.

Application

How do we apply this? We are in election season. Radio, television, and Internet advertising is dominated by politicians asking for your vote. All of them promise that they will serve you. They promise they will make your life better. They promise they are worthy of your trust. I have news for you. All of them are self-serving. Some of them are more self-serving than others but all of them are out for themselves and do not truly have your interests at heart.

How do I know this? If the most religious and godly leaders of Israel were known for their selfishness and leading people astray, I am confident that ungodly politicians are also leading people astray. There is nobody that is truly worthy of following — except one.

His name is Jesus. He is truly worth following with our lives. How do I know that? Jesus set aside all of the rights and privileges of being the Son of God. He took on flesh. He humbled himself to die on a cross and take all of our sins upon him to free us from the eternal consequences of our sin and to give us

eternal life. That is the kind of leader that is worth following. That is the kind of leader that is worth having as the authority over our lives.

By the way, he is not running for office. He does not need your vote. He has been installed as the head of the church and the greatest authority in the universe by God the Father himself. That is why he is worth following.

This week, when you hear the candidates slandering their opponents and promising to be the savior you can trust, know none of it is true. All of them are selfish and not worthy of our full allegiance, except Jesus.

This week, choose to make him the cornerstone of your life now so he will not be the crushing stone of your life later.



Dr. Kurt Trucksess is ordained in the Evangelical Free Church of America. He enjoys reading, writing, and time with his family. Feel free to contact him at www.Christ2RCulture.com (www.c2rc.com)

© You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided (1) you credit the author, (2) modifications are clearly marked, (3) you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, (4) you include the web address (www.Christ2RCulture.com) on the copied resource.

