

JESUS, THE CORNERSTONE

Mark 11:27-12:12

Key Verse: 12:10

“Haven’t you read this passage of Scripture: ‘The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone...?’”

In today’s passage Jesus teaches the Jewish religious leaders through a parable. While most parables describe the kingdom of God, the parable in today’s passage well summarizes God’s salvation history. This parable tells us who God is, who Jesus is, and who we are, as well as what God has done for us, and what attitude we should have toward God. This parable reveals the wickedness of sinful human nature and God’s great patient love. God’s love is revealed in sending his servants and his son. After telling the parable, Jesus quoted from Psalm 118 in verses 10-11 to explain further who he is. Jesus was rejected by men, but God made him the cornerstone. The cornerstone is the sure foundation of the entire building which all other stones rely on. We all need a strong foundation upon which to build our lives and community, so that we are not shaken regardless of the situation. Let’s learn how Jesus became the cornerstone and why he can be our sure foundation.

First, God sent his servants (11:27-12:5). 11:27-33 tells us Jesus’ motive in telling this parable. When Jesus saw that the temple, which should be a house of prayer for all nations, had become like a den of robbers, he was furious and cleared the temple. Then the religious leaders began looking for a way to kill him, but they were afraid of the people who were amazed at his teaching (11:18). They tried to find some way to discredit Jesus and alienate the crowd from him. While Jesus was walking in the temple courts, the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders—that is the Sanhedrin—approached him (27). Realizing that Jesus had no priest’s license and no teacher’s license, they asked him, **“By what authority are you doing these things?”** and **“Who gave you authority to do this?”** (28) They insinuated that Jesus had acted illegally and recklessly, in order to make people suspicious of Jesus. Jesus countered with a question of his own: **“John’s baptism—was it from heaven or of human origin? Tell me!”** (29-30) The Sanhedrin members were surprised and called an emergency, on-the-spot secret meeting. Discussing it among themselves, they said, **“If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will ask, ‘Then why didn’t you believe him?’”** John had testified that Jesus was the Messiah. If they publicly acknowledged John’s ministry as being from heaven, they could not but accept Jesus as the Messiah. So this was not an option for them. But they dared not

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suggest that John's baptism was of human origin, for John was admired by people as a prophet, who testified to Jesus at the cost of his life. So they were caught in a dilemma. Their reply was one of the most popular answers in court, **"We don't know"** (31-33a). Jesus exposed their wicked motive. They were not interested in the truth, but only in keeping their power. Jesus did not fall into their trap. He said, **"Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things"** (33b). Nevertheless, he answered their question by telling them a parable. This would help them remember what God had done for them, realize who Jesus is and who they were, so that they might repent.

Jesus began his parable by saying, **"A man planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a pit for the winepress and built a watchtower"** (1a). Vineyards may not be so familiar to us, but they were to the people of Israel. Vineyards were found all over Israel, except in the wilderness and arid desert regions. Grapes were one of the main crops produced in the land, together with grain and olives (Dt 7:13). People could understand the vineyard metaphor which explained God's relationship with Israel. Isaiah 5:1-7 tells how God planted a vineyard on a fertile hillside. He dug it up, cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He put a wall around it in order to protect it from wild animals and robbers. He dug a pit for the winepress. He built a watchtower to be on guard against enemies. In other words, God did his best to make an environment for a fruitful harvest. Isaiah 5:4a says, **"What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it?"**

Verse 1b tells us that the owner rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place (1b). Historically, God led the Israelites from bondage in Egypt into the Promised Land. Though they had been miserable slaves, God set them free by his mighty power. God gave them vision and hope to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. God provided every spiritual blessing. God adopted them as his own children, lived among them—revealing his glory, made covenants with them, gave them the law to discipline them in holiness, granted them regular fellowship with him through temple worship, made promises they could hold on to, raised spiritual leaders to guide them, and even sent the Messiah through them (Ro 9:4-5). He also entrusted them with a land flowing with milk and honey. Joshua 24:13 says, **"So I gave you a land on which you did not toil and cities you did not build; and you live in them and eat from vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant."** The blessing of renting the vineyard was God's amazing grace to the Israelites. They were like vagrants who suddenly became wealthy businessman. The owner did not micromanage

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them. They were free to run the vineyard according to their own initiative, ingenuity, and creativity. All they needed to do was care for the vineyard and produce its fruit in order to maintain this blessing.

Though Jesus' immediate focus was on the people of Israel, and in particular the religious leaders, in a broader sense, this parable applies to all mankind. God is the Creator and human beings are tenants in his world (Gen 2:8). Apostle Paul told the men of Athens: **“The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth...he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. From one man he made the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands”** (Ac 17:24-26). No one decided to be born into the world. No one chose which family they would belong to or which nation they would be born into or what time period they would live in. God gave us life and breath and everything else. We should acknowledge that living in America in this time period is God's grace. Having the freedom to worship and serve God is God's grace. Living in the land of opportunity is God's grace. The privilege of studying in a university is God's grace. Our families are God's grace. Our careers are God's grace. The clean air and water in Chicago are God's grace.

What does the owner require of his tenants? Verse 2 says, **“At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants to collect from them some of the fruit of the vineyard.”** God requires fruit. Each person's life is meant to bear fruit for God (Gen 1:28). Then what kind of fruit does God want. In ancient times, usually the owner demanded 50 percent of the crops at harvest time. A generous owner might demand only 30 percent. What did God demand? Ten percent! Just a tithe! When God demands a tithe from people, it is his right as the Creator God. Offering a tithe is the expression of honoring God as God. God wants not only a material tithe, but he also wants us to grow in inner character and bear the fruits of justice, righteousness, mercy and faithfulness (Isa 5:7; Mt 23:23). Love and respect should fill our homes. Children should grow in godly character and deep humanity. Furthermore, God wants us to have a sense of mission as stewards of his world and to be a blessing. Students should master their field of study. Professionals should attain excellence in their fields. We should all grow in love for God and others and be effective gospel workers. If the tenants had welcomed God's servants and offered some of the fruit of the vineyard, they could have kept a good relationship with the owner and continued to enjoy his blessings.

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What did they do? Verse 3 says, **“But they seized him, beat him and sent him away empty-handed.”** This is an unreasonable response. The owner could have sent soldiers right away to punish them. But he did not. He might have considered that his servant was so loyal to him that he became overbearing and irritated the tenants. So he sent another servant, who had received humbleness training. To his dismay, they struck this man on the head and treated him shamefully (4). His servant returned with bandages around his head, limping, using a walker. Again, the owner was patient and exercised restraint. He sent still another servant, perhaps a stronger man who could bear beatings. This time, they killed the servant (5a). Even this did not arouse the owner’s fury. He sent many others; some of them they beat, others they killed (5b).

Historically speaking, God’s chosen people had behaved like the tenants in the parable. Why? They had the disease of sin in their hearts. Romans 1:21 says, **“For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.”** They became proud. They did not honor God as God. They forgot who they were, and how they had been miserable, and how God had mercy on them and blessed them. If we do not remember who we were and how God has had mercy on us, we become just like them. They were also unthankful. God’s will for us is to give thanks in all circumstances (1Th 5:17). We always have many reasons to be thankful to God. So we need to find them and positively thank God. Otherwise, we naturally become unthankful and complain. When we are unthankful, it is easy to become the prey of Satan, who devours us for lunch. They also became greedy. After taking care of the vineyard for a while, they forgot they were just stewards and assumed the vineyard belonged to them. When they saw the fruit of the vineyard, they became crazy and wanted to keep it all for themselves forever. James 1:15 says, **“After desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full grown, gives birth to death.”** When they did not repent, sin grew in their hearts until they could not control themselves.

This parable teaches God’s great love for his people. God does not easily give up on his chosen people. Though they had demonstrated murderous rebellion intentionally, God didn’t immediately cut them off. He tried again and again, sending many servants (2Ch 36:15-16). God loves his servants; the sacrifice of each one evokes his heart response. Psalm 116:15 says, **“Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his faithful servants.”** The blood of

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martyrs cries out to the Lord, demanding justice (Rev 6:10). Why did God sacrifice his servants? Love compelled him. Out of his great love, he wanted to restore his relationship with the tenants for their sake. This love is characterized by long-suffering patience. This love seems crazy, irrational, stubborn and unrealistic. This love is beyond our understanding. Yet we should never take it for granted, for God's love has a redemptive purpose. Apostle Paul said, **“Do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?”** (Ro 2:4). Whenever we realize God's great love for us, it should lead us to repent and bear fruit to God.

Second, God sent his Son (12:6-9,12). God did not stop with the sending of many servants to his chosen people, bearing all their wicked behavior. Finally he sent his son. Verse 6 says, **“He had one left to send, a son, whom he loved. He sent him last of all, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’”** This son was his one and only son, and the heir of the vineyard. The owner knew from experience that it was dangerous to send his son to them. Nevertheless, he sent his son, hoping that the tenants would respect him. Here Jesus revealed God's love for people. God has a never-giving up, undying, unconditional love. His love is so wide and long, and deep and high that no one knows the full measure of it. Out of his great love, God took the initiative to send his Son to sinners who had rebelled against him. When God sent his Son, he hoped we would be moved by his great love and return to him. John 3:16 says, **“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”** In this way God demonstrated his love for us. Though mankind has sinned so much, God is willing to forgive all of our sins if we just accept his Son. This is the zenith of God's love. In the parable, it was the last chance for the tenants. This implies that those who accept the Son have all their sins forgiven, but for those who do not accept the Son, judgment is inevitable.

How did the tenants in the parable respond? **“They said to one another, ‘This is the heir. Come, let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.’ So they took him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard”** (7-8). They were under the great delusion that if they killed the son, the vineyard would be theirs. Thus they revealed their deep motive: they wanted the vineyard for themselves and were never going to acknowledge the owner's rightful claim. They misunderstood God's patient love as weakness. It was a great mistake. Jesus said, **“What will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others”** (9). When the religious leaders

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heard Jesus' parable, they knew he was speaking about them. But they did not repent (12). When Israel rejected the Messiah, it was their final rejection of God's sovereign rule over them. As Jesus warned, all their blessings and privileges were taken from them and given to those who accepted the Son regardless of nationality. In A.D. 70 Jerusalem was totally destroyed, including the temple. More than one million people were killed and the surviving Israelites were scattered among the nations. God is the God of love. At the same time, God is the God of judgment.

Third, God made the rejected stone the cornerstone (12:10-11). Jesus concluded his parable by quoting Psalm 118:22-23: **“Haven't you read this passage of Scripture? ‘The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this and it is marvelous in our eyes’”** (10-11). God's plan for his chosen people seems to have failed due to their rejection of the Son. But God never fails. In his quotation, “the builders” refers to the religious leaders and “the stone” refers to Jesus. When Jesus came into the world, they thought he did not fit into their plans. They wanted a glorious Messiah, powerful in battle, routing foreign armies. But Jesus was humble, gentle and poor. He lived as a servant of all kinds of people and became the friend of sinners. He was a man of sorrows and sufferings and not attractive in people's eyes. So they despised and rejected him; finally they crucified him on the cross and threw him outside the city. They thought that was the end of him. But to God it was not the end. God raised him from the dead and made him the cornerstone. In terms of a building, the cornerstone is most important. It is the foundation and the standard for the entire building. All other stones rely on the cornerstone. Jesus is the cornerstone of God's salvation history. Peter understood this. After Jesus' resurrection, he said to the Sanhedrin members, **“Jesus is ‘the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone.’ Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved”** (Ac 4:11-12). Peter also proclaimed that those who trust in Jesus will never be put to shame, while those who reject Jesus will stumble and fall (1 Pe 2:6-8). This great salvation comes from God. Despite man's wickedness, God has done great things in his wisdom. So Paul praised God: **“Oh the depth of the riches of the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgment, and his paths beyond tracing out!”** (Ro 11:33)

When we trust in Jesus, he becomes the cornerstone of our personal lives and our community. He is our sure foundation upon which to build our lives. We

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all need a strong foundation. We need something solid and unchanging that can support us in the midst of trials and challenges, including grave illnesses and even death. Mother Barry's brother Tom, who was a Navy Captain, has been battling skin cancer for a couple of years. Recently he had to have one eye removed. In the course of surgery, he contracted meningitis which was life-threatening. He was on the verge of death. Despite his serious illness and impending death, his first prayer request was for his church pastor. He has a shepherd's heart and resurrection faith. He was full of thanksgiving and praise to God. He likes to sing three hymns. One of them is: "This is my Father's world; the battle is not done; Jesus who died shall be satisfied, and earth and Heav'n be one." He did not lose his sense of humor. His spirit became more and more triumphal. His heart was very joyful and he encouraged others. Instead of worrying about himself, he asked prayer for his wife. When Mother Barry was leaving, he said "See you in the resurrection." He could do that because he trusted in Jesus as his cornerstone. When we trust money, fame, power, education or people we will be put to shame in the end. But when we trust in Jesus the cornerstone we will never be put to shame. Let's trust in Jesus the cornerstone, who is our sure foundation.