

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 ...;"

One Sunday in 1799, a boy was playing and fishing in the Little Meadow Creek, North Carolina, and found a rock, the size of a shoe. As any little boy would do, he was proud to show it to his father. His father, John Reed, thought that the rock did not have any value and used it as a doorstep for three years. Later John found out that the rock was in reality 17 pounds of pure gold. He began to find more gold in that stream and mines started popping up all over North California, which became America's first gold rush. The rock was recorded as the most expensive doorstep in the world. Today's passage teaches us that the stone the builders rejected became the cornerstone. Jesus was rejected by people, but God raised him as the cornerstone of the house of God.

Today's story happened on Tuesday of the final week of Jesus' life. My message covers two events: The authority of Jesus questions, and the parable of the tenants.

I. The Authority of Jesus Questioned (11:27-33)

While Jesus was walking in the temple courts, the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders came to him (11:27). These three groups of religious leaders constituted the Sanhedrin, the highest Jewish council that had control over social and religious lives of the Jews. They asked Jesus, "By what authority are you doing these things? And who gave you authority to do this?" (28) 'These things' refer to the temple cleansing that Jesus had done the day before. Jesus drove out merchants and money changers who were buying and selling under the permission of the religious leaders. Jesus taught them saying, "Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.'" (17) Consequently, the religious leaders were furious at Jesus who challenged their authority. Hence, they came to Jesus to raise questions about his authority.

'Authority' (in Greek 'exousia') refers to the rightful and legitimate exercise of power. All authority can be characterized as either intrinsic or delegated. Intrinsic authority is innate whereas delegated authority is derived from one whose authority is intrinsic. Because God is the Creator of the universe, only the triune God has purely

intrinsic authority and all other authority is derived from God. Jesus possesses the same intrinsic authority as God the Father because all things were created in him, through him, and for him (Col 1:16). Jesus' authority was manifested through forgiving sins, providing salvation, teaching the word of God, healing sickness, casting out demons, cleansing the temple, and so on. However, the religious leaders did not want to accept and recognize the intrinsic authority of Jesus, due to their arrogance and wickedness.

Jesus understood that their intention was not to know about his authority, but to incriminate him. Hence, Jesus did not respond directly, but gave them a counter-question, "John's baptism—was it from heaven, or of human origin?" (30) It was a very disturbing question for the religious leaders. They discussed it among themselves saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will ask, 'Then why didn't you believe him?' But if we say, 'Of human origin,' ..." They feared the people for everyone held that John really was a prophet (31-32). Accordingly, their answer was: "We don't know." This answer demonstrated that they did not have truth in their heart and lived for their own interest and benefit. By giving an evasive answer to Jesus, they failed in accusing him. Jesus told them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things" (33). This event shows again the great wisdom of Jesus in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col 2:3). Jesus has the authority of the Son of God and taught it to the religious leaders through a parable.

II. The Parable of the Tenants (12:1-12)

In the parable, a man planted a vineyard (12:1). Have you seen a vineyard? When I lived in Los Angeles, sometimes I had a road trip to Northern California and saw big and beautiful vineyards and wineries beside the road. Unfortunately, I did not have any opportunity to visit one of them though I wanted to taste an exquisite California wine. The owner of the vineyard of this parable put a wall around it for the protection from wild animals. Also, he dug a pit for the winepress where the farmers could make wine from grapes. In those days, the winepress was usually cut out of rock and connected by channels to lower rock-cut vats where the juice was allowed to collect and ferment. It was a big job; however, the owner made it to produce the best wine. Additionally, he built a watchtower to monitor the vineyard from stealing or looting. When we read Isaiah 5:1-2, we can realize that the owner planted the choicest vines on a fertile hillside. It seems that the vineyard was one of the best vineyards of the world that could produce the best grapes and wines.

Imagine that we have one of the best vineyards of the world. What will we do? We will employ some laborers, produce the best grapes and wines, and enjoy its fruits. Can you imagine that you are enjoying your life at a beautiful hillside drinking the most delicious wine of the world? But surprisingly the owner rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place. An unusual thing is that he planted the best

vineyard to rent it to some farmers. If we build a house with the purpose of renting it, we will not invest a lot of money to install the best kitchen, bathroom, furniture, etc. But rather, we will equip it to an acceptable condition for rent because it is not we who will live there. When I was looking for a house to buy, my real estate agent told me that some built houses to live in and others to sell them. The quality of material and construction differs a lot depending on the purpose of each house. Therefore, my question is: if the owner of the vineyard had a plan to rent it from the beginning, why did he plant the best vineyard with a big investment? My answer is that the owner was a very generous man and loved his tenants so much.

Who were the fortunate tenants? The parable says that they were some farmers. It seems that they were not poor peasants because they took organized actions against the owner and did not worry about the authority of their society. More probably they were wealthy commercial farmers who signed lease agreements to supervise large and profitable farms. In Jesus' time, vineyards were often farmed commercially. These wealthy and powerful farmers hit the jackpot when they signed the lease agreements to manage the best vineyard of the world.

But what happened later? At harvest time the owner sent a servant to the tenants to collect from them some of the fruit of the vineyard (2). 'The harvest time' is a proper time prescribed by the lease agreements, probably three to five years. By this time the vineyard should be producing a substantial crop. It was the owner's just right to demand a portion of the fruit from the farmers according to the agreements.

In most cases, the tenants pay rent as they agreed with the landlords. But these farmers were totally different. They seized the servant of the owner, beat him and sent him away empty-handed (3). They refused to pay the rent in an aggressive way by seizing and beating the servant. Can you believe it? Their action was against common sense. It demonstrated clearly that they did not want to pay the rent. When the servant came back beaten and empty-handed, the owner of the vineyard was shocked by the unexpected behavior of his tenants. Then, what did he do? He sent another servant to them (4a). Why? Maybe the owner thought that the first servant had somehow offended the tenants. He wanted to trust in the tenants. Hence, he chose a more humble and polite servant and sent him to the farmers. But what happened? They struck the servant on the head and treated him shamefully (4b). How do you feel when someone strikes you on the head? You feel very offended not just physically, but emotionally as well. It is a great insult. The servant represented the owner. Accordingly, insulting the servant was the same as insulting the owner of the vineyard.

When the second servant came back after being treated shamefully, the owner of the vineyard might want to send his army to destroy the farmers. However, the owner had great patience even though his heart was broken. He did not want to abandon his trust in the tenants. He thought that there must be some misunderstandings and sent

still another servant (5a). What was the result? The farmers killed him! They went too far. It was a declaration of war. Then, the owner had to send his army immediately. However, he sent many other servants; some of them they beat, others they killed (5b). It's very hard to understand this situation. The patience of the owner with his tenants was immense. It seems that he loved the farmers so much that he did not want to break his relationship with them.

The great love and patience of the owner with the farmers was expressed even more when he made a decision to send his one and only 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 decision does not make sense to us. It seems that the owner was so naïve and stupid. If we were him, we would not trust in the wicked tenants anymore. I would never send my son to such a dangerous gangster because most likely they would not respect my son. However, the owner of the vineyard did not want to abandon his faint hope in the farmers. Sending his son whom he loved last of all, he expected that the farmers would repent of their wickedness and respect him. But the wicked tenants did not come up to his expectation. They said to one another, "This is the heir. Come, let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours." (7) So, they took him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard (8). This is such a horrible story! The farmers returned a kindness with ingratitude.

Why did they do this? It was because they wanted to be the owners of the vineyard as they manifested their evil desire saying, "This is the heir. Come, let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours." When they signed the lease agreements with the owner, they were very happy to be tenants of such a beautiful vineyard. Indeed, the vineyard produced the best grapes and wines as they expected. They could earn a lot of money and became rich and powerful. Then, they were enticed by their own evil desire. They wanted to be the owners of the vineyard and made the decision not to recognize the ownership of their landlord. When the servants of the owner came to collect rent, they beat them, insulted them, and killed them as the sign of refusing the ownership of their landlord. When the son of the owner came, they thought that it was the best opportunity to possess the vineyard, so they killed the son and threw him out of the vineyard. They looked down on the owner thinking that he did not have enough power and authority to punish them.

But it was their great mistake. What will the owner of the vineyard do? Now his patience will run out. He will not keep still like a stupid man anymore. He realized that the wicked tenants did not have any intention to repent of their sins. So, he will not give them any more chance. He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others (9).

What does each character of the parable stand for?

First, the owner of the vineyard is God, and the vineyard is Israel. The vineyard often symbolizes the people of Israel as Isaiah 5:7a says, "The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the nation of Israel."

Second, the wicked tenants stand for the Jewish religious leaders who opposed Jesus. Historically, the prophets Isaiah pointed out that Israel's leaders ruined the Lord's vineyard as Isaiah 3:14 says, "The Lord enters into judgment against the elders and leaders of his people: It is you who have ruined my vineyard."

Third, the lease agreements symbolize the relationship between God and the religious leaders. These were not the owners of the vineyard, but stewards who had to take care of it according to the agreements. The rent was the minimum duty for the stewards to recognize the ownership of God.

Fourth, the servants are the prophets sent by God such as Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and so on. 2 Chronicles 36:15-16 describe well the spirit of this parable regarding the prophets: "The Lord, the God of their ancestors, sent word to them through his messengers again and again, because he had pity on his people and on his dwelling place. But they mocked God's messengers, despised his words and scoffed at his prophets until the wrath of the Lord was aroused against his people and there was no remedy."

Fifth, the son stands for Jesus, the Son of God. Even though the people of Israel rejected and killed the prophets of God, God did not want to abandon his hope for them based on his love and patience. Finally, he made a decision to send his one and only Son Jesus Christ to restore his relationship with them thinking, "They will respect my son." However, the wicked people rejected and ignored their last chance of repentance. They arrested Jesus, beat him, mocked him, spit on him, flogged him, crucified him, and killed him.

Sixth, the coming of the owner to kill the wicked tenants symbolizes the coming of Jesus and the final judgment of God. Some do not believe in God's judgment and live following their own sinful desires. However, Psalm 7:11 says, "God is a righteous judge, a God who displays his wrath every day." Apostle John testified to the second coming of Jesus as the judge of the world: "'Look, he is coming with the clouds,' and 'every eye will see him, even those who pierced him'; and all people on earth 'will mourn because of him.' So shall it be! Amen." (Rev 1:7)

It seems that this parable ends sadly with the judgment of God. But God opened the way of salvation through his Son Jesus Christ who had been killed by the wicked tenants. Jesus, quoting Psalm 118:22, 23, asked them, "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) It is a final big twist that the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. The cornerstone is a stone laid

at the corner to bind two walls together and to strengthen them. It is a symbol of strength and prominence in the Bible. Jesus was rejected by people; however, God raised him up as the cornerstone of the house of God, which means that Jesus is the only sure foundation of faith (Eph 2:20). Through Jesus, who died on the cross and rose again from the dead, we can have eternal life and inherit the kingdom of God. Jesus is the cornerstone who can give the right to become children of God to all who receive him and believe in his name (Jn 1:12). However, the cornerstone will be the stumbling stone to those who do not believe in Jesus (Rom 9:32).

What can we learn from this parable of the wicked tenants?

Firstly, we must recognize that God is the owner of our lives. The main problem of the wicked tenants was that they did not recognize the ownership of the landlord of the vineyard. Because they acted as if they were the owners of the vineyard, their relationship with the owner was broken. Eventually, they were condemned due to their evil desires. Who is the owner of your life? You? Or God? Some may think that they are the owners of their lives. But it is not true because all of us were created by God, believe it or not. Some may think that they can be happier when they are the owners of their lives. But it is not true because we are not perfect and cannot anticipate what is to come tomorrow. If we reject the ownership of God over our lives, we become like orphans without parents. I was an atheist and believed that my life was mine. I studied hard to be successful in the world for myself and my family. However, I did not find peace in my heart. I worried a lot about my future and suffered from my own problems. I felt that my life was so burdensome because I did not recognize that God is the owner of my life. However, when I met Jesus as my Savior by the work of the Holy Spirit, everything changed. I could believe that God is the Creator of the universe and my life. I could identify myself as a steward of the wonderful creation of God including my life through Genesis Bible study. I could realize that the purpose of my life is for the glory of God. When I recognized the ownership of God over my life and tried to live for the glory of God, I could have peace, joy, and confidence in my heart and God has blessed my life so far. I believe that the secret to be happy and fruitful is to recognize that God is the owner of our lives.

Secondly, we must accept the invitation of God to restore our relationship with him. Our God is so patient that he waits for us until we come back to him, as we can see through the parable. He is full of love, patience, and mercy. Psalm 145:8 says, "The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love." The great love and mercy of God for us is demonstrated in Jesus Christ, who died on the cross for us and rose from the dead to be the cornerstone of the house of God. The way of forgiveness of our sins and salvation is open widely to each of us through Jesus Christ, who is waiting for us with patience. Therefore, if we are far from God because of our sins, this is the opportunity to come back to God. We must not ignore the invitation of God

because our God cannot be mocked (Gal 6:7). On the contrary, we must accept the invitation of God right now to restore our relationship with him.

Thirdly, we must be good stewards of our lives, waiting for the second coming of Jesus Christ. As the owner of the vineyard entrusted the farmers with the production of grapes and wines, God entrusted us with our lives to take care of them and produce the best fruits for the glory of God. Therefore, we must be good stewards of our lives. We must not waste our time; but make the most of every opportunity to carry out the mission God entrusted to us. We have been preparing for the coming fall semester to preach the gospel of Jesus to young college students and to raise them as the disciples of Jesus. I am very thankful for our precious coworkers who are ready to do God's mission with sacrifice of their time and comfort. God is still looking for his servants saying, "Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time?" (Mt 24:45) Who wants to be a faithful and wise servant of God that can feed God's flock with the word of life? When we live as good stewards of our lives for the glory of God, our Lord Jesus will give us the crown of victory when he comes again to the world.

Today we learned that Jesus is the cornerstone and the only foundation of our faith. Now Jesus invites us to repent of our sins and accept the invitation of God to restore our relationship with him. May God bless all of us to recognize that God is the owner of our lives and live as good stewards of God's vineyard. Amen.