

Who Owns The Church?

Mark 11:12-12:9

By **Bryn MacPhail**

Who owns the Church? Who is responsible for setting its direction?

It seems to me that these are important, and eminently relevant, questions to ask, and to always be asking. And as we ask these questions, we confess that we are talking, in large measure, about 'authority'.

While some of us may be uncomfortable with the subject of authority, we need to recognize that *the theme of authority is central to Christianity*. Our text this morning says a great deal about authority; it says a great deal about who has it, and who thinks they have it.

Our text begins with perhaps one of the strangest stories involving Jesus in the entire New Testament. This entire section depicts Jesus in a very different light than what we are accustomed to. Jesus, the One whom we refer to as 'meek and mild' is seen here being destructive, and condemning the religious authorities—causing them, in turn, to ask, "what *authority* do you have?"

We begin in verse 12, of chapter 11, with Mark telling us that as Jesus departed Bethany for Jerusalem, He became hungry. Seeing a fig tree in the distance, Jesus approached it, but it had nothing but leaves on it. And, in what appears on the surface to be a childish fit of rage, Jesus exclaims, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again!"

What makes this cursing of the tree even more interesting is that Mark writes that it was not even the season for figs (11:13). Surely, Jesus, being a native of Palestine, would have known this. How could He have expected a fig tree to bear fruit out of season? And what kind of response is cursing the tree?

Our first clue to what Jesus was doing comes at the end of verse 14 where Mark writes that the "disciples were listening". Evidently, Jesus was trying to teach the disciples something through His actions.

The scene suddenly shifts back to Jerusalem where Jesus enters the temple, and again, Jesus acts in an extraordinary way. Mark describes for us how Jesus clears the temple. John describes it with even more detail—how Jesus made a whip and drove out the merchants, who were selling animals in the temple. John

details for us how Jesus flipped tables, pouring all the money on the floor shouting, "Stop making My Father's house a house of merchandise!"(Jn.2:14-16).

Jesus, 'meek and mild', with a whip, flipping tables, and yelling at merchants. This is two outbursts in a row. What is going on here? First the fig tree, now the temple. What point is Jesus trying to make?

In part, through the cursing of the fig tree, and in the clearing of the temple, *Jesus is making a statement about His authority*. But for those on the receiving side of Jesus' judgments, the basis of His authority was not yet clear. When Jesus and His disciples return to Jerusalem, the leaders of the temple approach them and Jesus is asked, "By what authority are You doing these things?" and, "Who gave you this authority?" (11:28).

Instead of answering their question directly, Jesus answers their question with a question, "Was the baptism of John[the Baptist] from heaven, or from men?" (11:30).

The temple authorities were in a bind. If they were to say that John's baptism was "from heaven", Jesus will have a case for His saying that His authority comes from heaven. If they answer that John's baptism was "from men", they will risk a riot, for the multitude present considered John to have been a prophet (11:31, 32).

The temple authorities were in a no-win situation, so they responded, "We do not know" (11:33). And Jesus said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things" (11:33).

Jesus refuses to answer their question, "Neither will I tell you", He says. But let me suggest to you that Jesus does answer their question. Jesus answers the temple authorities in the manner he usually does--in the form of a parable: *the Parable of the Vine-growers* (12:1-9).

The cursed fig tree, the clearing of the temple, the authority by which Jesus does these things, are all answered in the parable of the vine-growers.

We have heard this parable read: a man plants a vineyard and rents it out to vine-growers and goes on a journey. At harvest time, the owner sends a servant to collect some of the produce from the vine-growers. The vine-growers, however, beat up the servant and send him away empty-handed. The owner continues to send one servant after another, some are beaten and some are even killed. Finally, the owner had only one more to send, his "beloved son", thinking they would respect him.

Instead of respecting the son, however, the vine-growers said to one another, "Here comes the heir, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours!" Then they

took the son and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard.

Jesus then asks, "What will the owner of the vineyard do?" Answering His own question, Jesus says that the owner will "come and destroy the vine-growers, and will give the vineyard to others".

The allegory here is straightforward: The owner of the vineyard is God. The vineyard represents the people of Israel, and the vine-growers are the religious leaders. The servants sent by the owner are the prophets, and the son, of course, is Jesus.

We are now finally ready to piece this very complicated puzzle together.

First, we have the fig tree. Having the appearance of housing fruit, it was, in fact, barren. Jesus pronounces judgment against the tree and we are told that it "withered from the roots up" (11:20).

Secondly, we have the incident in the temple. Like the fig tree "in leaf", the temple had the appearance of housing spiritual fruit, but when it too was found to be barren, judgment was pronounced against it. And less than a generation after Jesus cleared the temple, it was completely destroyed in 70 A.D.

What was Jesus doing when He cursed the fig tree? And what was Jesus doing when He cleared the temple? In addition to asserting His authority, *Jesus was acting out a prophecy.*

Like many of the ancient prophets who presented their prophecies through eccentric actions, Jesus acts out His prophecy. And, in acting out His prophecy, Jesus communicated the message that *God was going to judge Israel.*

The parable, which follows, explicitly affirms the conclusion that God will judge Israel. Jesus says, "[the owner] will come and destroy the vine-growers" (12:9).

It has already been said that the vine-growers represent the leaders of Israel, yet, we must be careful to not limit our interpretation to Israel. While we confess that Jesus curses the fig tree, clears the temple, and tells this parable in condemnation of the disbelieving Jewish people, we must not limit *our application* of this text.

There is a sense in which the warning to the Jewish leaders of Jesus' day also applies to us. And the reason this warning applies to us is because we, as the church, are often guilty of the exact same sin as the Jewish leaders were.

The key to identifying the underlying sin is in verse 7, "Here comes the heir, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours!"

The sin of the first century Jews, and the sin of many in the church today is the same--we were put in the vineyard as TENANTS, but we often insist on being OWNERS instead. We forget that God is the owner of everything, and that we are only tenants. Like an incompetent actor who wants to play Hamlet, we too, often want to play the role of Head of the Church. We insist on the highest position, but the role is too big for us.

This was the attitude of the Jewish leaders, 'What authority do you have, Jesus, in coming here and ransacking our temple?'

Jesus does indeed answer their question. The temple is not theirs--it is God's. They are only tenants. God has sent His Son to the vineyard--the temple, He turns over tables in disgust. His Father's house has been turned into a "den of thieves". The tenants have forgotten who the owner is. Jesus rebukes them, but they do not recognize His authority--in fact they question His authority and eventually kill Him for asserting that authority.

What authority did Jesus have in dismantling the merchandising in the Temple? He had the authority of being God's only Son.

If you have your Bible's open, look at the last sentence in chapter 12, verse 9. *Who are the vine-growers now?*

The text says that the owner will come and "give the vineyard to others".

That would be us—*the Church*. And who is in charge of the Church? Is it the church leaders, the new vine-growers? No, we are tenants, not owners.

Verse 10 tells us plainly who is in charge of the Church: the rejected Son has become "the chief corner stone".

Jesus Christ, the beloved Son of God is in charge of the Church.

That's easier to say than it is to apply. If the will of Christ is our fundamental concern in this church, we will respond by elevating His Word above all else. If the will of Christ is our chief concern, we will elevate His Word above every human policy, above every subordinate standard, above every business plan, and above every personal preference.

Regardless of how much we have personally invested into the health of this place, we must always remember that we are still tenants.

So, you see, authority has a central place in the life of the Christian Church. And, wherever you find authority, you will necessarily find a call for obedience. In our context, obedience is not to be rendered to the institution of the church, obedience is not to be rendered to church leaders, who are merely the vine-

growers, but obedience is to be rendered to the Son of God. His authority is like no other. And His authority over the church is unrivaled.

*From heaven He came and sought her to be His holy bride;
With His own blood He bought her, and for her life He died.*

Beloved, it is a good thing that all authority belongs to Christ, and it is a blessed thing for us to say: *Jesus owns the Church!* Amen

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